

## Rescue in the Gulf of Tonkin

Burned and wounded, HU-16 navigator Don Price saved the injured F-4 pilot, then found himself alone in the sea, surrounded by enemy sampans.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE  
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

IT WAS late in the afternoon of November 14, 1966. For several hours, the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service HU-16B had been boring holes in the sky over the Gulf of Tonkin, some 200 miles north of the DMZ. Capt. Donald S. Price, navigator of the Grumman amphibian, was a veteran of 150 missions in SEA since he reported for duty with the 33d Air Rescue Squadron at Naha AB, Okinawa, in October 1964.

The lulling drone of throttled-back engines was interrupted by a call to action. A flak-damaged F-4 was heading for the Gulf where Maj. James Peerson and his backseater, Capt. Lynwood Bryant, hoped to eject southeast of Thanh Hoa. Price's pilot, Capt. David Westenbarger, headed north with throttles firewalled, touching down on a choppy sea near Major Peerson, who was closest to shore.

As pararescueman A1C James Pleiman jumped into the water to help Peerson, artillery and some twenty-five motorized sampans opened fire, bracketing the HU-16 as it floated about two miles offshore. Captain Price, after computing a departure heading, ran to the rear of the aircraft to help SSgt. Clyde Jackson pull Pleiman and the downed pilot to the aircraft with a rope attached to the pararescueman.

Seeing that A1C Robert Hilton was having trouble with his M-16, Price ordered the airman to help

Jackson. Grabbing Hilton's M-16, Price began firing at the approaching sampans. The F-4 pilot was half-way into the aircraft when the world went black. An artillery shell had scored a direct hit on the HU-16, setting it afire. Price was thrown against a bulkhead, stunned and bleeding from shrapnel wounds on his head, back, and buttocks and burned by the explosion.

When the haze lifted, Captain Price saw Hilton lying dead on the floor. Sergeant Jackson had been blown out the door, one arm nearly severed. The pararescueman, Pleiman, floated facedown in the water. Near his body, Major Peerson, injured and without a life jacket, struggled to keep his head above water. The HU-16 pilot and his copilot, Lt. Walter Hall, had managed to escape through an overhead hatch, leaving the burning amphibian afloat on a sheet of flame.

Still groggy and bleeding heavily, Captain Price sized up the situation and immediately went to Peerson's aid. Fully clothed and supporting a man nearly twice his weight, Don Price called on all his training as a competitive swimmer and water safety instructor. Pushing the burning gasoline aside with his hands, he towed Peerson 200 yards to temporary safety.

Resting a moment, Price looked up. A Navy helicopter hovered overhead. Price, pummeled by the chopper's downwash, helped Major

Peerson into the hoist. As the F-4 pilot was hauled aboard, an artillery shell hit ten yards from Price, another thirty yards away, and automatic weapons fire from the sampans churned the water. The chopper, leaking fuel from several hits, pulled out while another Navy helicopter picked up the remaining survivors, leaving Price alone on an unfriendly sea.

A hundred and fifty yards away an empty liferaft bobbed on the waves. Barely able to move his legs, Captain Price swam to the raft. The prospect before him wasn't promising. About 400 yards out were several sampans, intent on taking him prisoner. Each time one started to edge in, an A-1 or an F-4 came down, guns blazing. Price remembers seeing a sampan cut in half by cannon fire. That was heartening, but on the other hand, he was drifting toward shore. Once more he slipped into the water and, towing the raft, swam out to sea, his waning strength rekindled by thoughts of his wife and two children back at Naha.

When he could swim no longer, Price—shaking from cold and fatigue—pulled himself painfully back into the raft. There was no response to his calls on the survival radio. Then, after what seemed an eternity, a Navy UH-2B came in low and fast, hovered over the raft, and picked him out of the Gulf. After he received emergency medical treatment aboard a nearby utility ship, doctors on the carrier *Yorktown* spent four hours removing shrapnel and sewing up his wounds. It had been an ordeal of heroism and endurance that few men could have survived.

Don Price, now a retired lieutenant colonel, flew thirty more missions before returning to the States, wearing the Air Force Cross. He is one of only three Air Force navigators who served in Southeast Asia to be awarded the nation's second highest decoration for valor. ■



**Navigator Don Price won the Air Force Cross for valor in Vietnam.**