

## Airlift to Khe Sanh

It definitely was not a day like any other for Howard Dallman and his crew.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE

**K**HE Sanh will go down in history as a great victory for the isolated, surrounded, and outnumbered Marines who, from late January to early April 1968, defended an outpost some ten miles from the DMZ in western South Vietnam. It was a victory made possible by air resupply. Of the more than 1,100 missions to Khe Sanh flown by tactical airlift, one of the most remarkable was that of Lt. Col. Howard Dallman and his C-130E crew.

In his monumental 1983 study of tactical airlift in Southeast Asia, Col. Ray Bowers wrote: "Lt. Col. Howard M. Dallman was an experienced pilot who was admired for his personal qualities by the younger officers serving under him." In World War II, Dallman had flown forty-five missions as a bomber pilot in Italy before he was shot down on October 23, 1944.

The morning of February 5, 1968, Dallman's C-130, assigned to the 345th Tactical Airlift Squadron, left its temporary base at Tuy Hoa for Da Nang, where a load of ammunition and a medical evacuation team awaited. The weather at Khe Sanh, Dallman's destination about thirty minutes' flight time to the northwest, was forecast to be at minimums, which made landing at the mountain-girded strip a challenge. The first of several unpleasant surprises came as copilot Capt. Roland Behnke checked in with Khe Sanh control. The GCA was out for an indefinite period.

Navigator Maj. Gerald Johnson was confident he could find the runway with an airborne radar approach, though none of the crew had landed there before. Dallman and

Behnke started their letdown. At a sweaty 300 feet they broke out of the overcast, the strip directly ahead. Then as the C-130 ground and bucked to a stop, the big bird was hit by a shell that ignited ammunition boxes in the cargo compartment. Johnson and loadmaster SSgt.

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Wade Green immediately began fighting the fire, assisted by Behnke, who had called the tower for a fire truck, and flight engineer SSgt. Charles Brault.

Seventeen tons of ammunition could explode at any moment, closing the runway and flattening the built-up area of Khe Sanh, with many casualties. Dallman began backing the Hercules to a safer area at the far end of the runway, where the five-man crew, with help from the fire truck, finally extinguished the fire and helped offload still-smoking ammo boxes.

All was not yet over. As the last pallet of ammunition was unloaded, one of the tires was blown by a sniper's bullet, and a mortar attack bracketed the C-130. Dallman told the crew to leave the plane, which was drawing most of the fire, but every man remained with the aircraft as it was towed for a short distance, then taxied to a maintenance area. There Brault repaired an aircraft jack and managed to change the damaged wheel, all the

time under fire from mortars, rockets, artillery, and heavy machine guns.

While the wheel was being changed, Howard Dallman agreed to fly a Marine corporal and his out-of-commission bulldozer back to Da Nang. The dozer was loaded and the aircraft positioned for takeoff when one engine, which had ingested debris from an exploding mortar round, quit. The 20,000-pound bulldozer and a disappointed corporal were unloaded and Dallman left the bird to get permission for a three-engine takeoff. In the ten minutes it took to get clearance from Airlift Control Center, Behnke and Brault got the fourth engine started. Dallman sprinted back to the C-130 as Behnke, a qualified aircraft commander, opened the throttles for takeoff. The Herk was hit again as it took off, but without serious damage. Howard Dallman and his crew had saved a valuable transport plane, delivered a load of ammunition to the surrounded Marines, and prevented major damage to a battered outpost.

For dealing heroically with a series of crises that day, Lt. Col. Howard Dallman was awarded the Air Force Cross, the first tactical airlift crewman to be so honored. "I was well aware," he said, "... that an equal part of the award belonged" to the other four crew members, all of whom received the Silver Star.

The tactical airlifters lost 122 aircraft and 230 crewmen while supporting US and allied forces in Southeast Asia. Without them, there would have been few successful campaigns in that long, bitter war. Howard Dallman and his crew set an example of teamwork and valor by their determination to complete a mission under circumstances that would have justified abandoning their aircraft and its perilous but desperately needed cargo.

As the Marines at Khe Sanh would have put it, "Semper fi!" ■