Ten airmen were awarded the Silver Star for their heroic efforts in the Kosovo campaign.

Silver Stars

By Richard J. Newman

In Operation Allied Force, NATO forces flew more than 38,000 sorties, and the Serbs shot down just two aircraft. No airman lost his life in combat. To outsiders, the air operation seemed effortless. In fact, so-called human-rights experts and others criticized NATO for not running greater risks with the lives of its pilots to try to protect civilians on the ground.

Throughout the 78-day war, however, the skies over Yugoslavia were much more dangerous than they appeared to be on the evening news. Unlike the Iraqis during the 1991 Persian Gulf War—who fired and promptly lost most of their air defenses in the first days of bombing—the Serbs used their anti-aircraft weapons sparingly. That left much of the Serb air defense system intact through the end of the war. The Serbs’ spo-
MH-60 Pave Hawks were flown by two Silver Star recipients: Capt. William F. Denehan and Capt. Chad P. Franks.

Artwork by Guy Aceto, Art Director
Capt. Kent A. Landreth and Capt. James L. Cardoso piloted MH-53 Pave Lows on the rescue missions for which they received Silver Stars.
Goggles at 700 Feet

Still, they would need more fuel to get deeply into Serbia and back out again. Cardoso arranged a high-risk aerial refueling from an MC-130P tanker that itself was running low on fuel. Within three miles of the Serbian border, all the aircraft turned off their lights and shut off their communications gear. The pilots wore night vision goggles. To avoid detection by Serb lookouts or early warning radars, they conducted the refueling at an altitude of just 700 feet.

As Cardoso was refueling, Capt. John A. Cherrey, the overall commander of the combat search-and-rescue task force, was streaking toward the crash site in his A-10, trying to fix the exact location of the downed pilot. He was repeatedly illumined by Serb SAM systems as he overflew the area. By the time Cardoso’s package crossed into Serbia, the downed pilot’s location had been determined to within a mile. The pilot was 25 miles outside of Belgrade—but, most alarmingly, was within 10 miles of three Serb army brigades.

As Cardoso was refueling, Capt. John A. Cherrey, the overall commander of the combat search-and-rescue task force, was streaking toward the crash site in his A-10, trying to fix the exact location of the downed pilot. He was repeatedly illumined by Serb SAM systems as he overflew the area. By the time Cardoso’s package crossed into Serbia, the downed pilot’s location had been determined to within a mile. The pilot was 25 miles outside of Belgrade—but, most alarmingly, was within 10 miles of three Serb army brigades.

With the rest of the rescue package coalescing, the three helicopters led by Cardoso crossed into Serbia and headed for their target. They zigzagged around missile threats, flying less than 100 feet off the ground. The pilots wore night vision goggles and kept their lights and terrain-following radars off. At one point, Cardoso, in the lead helicopter, approached a set of uncharted power lines and barely pulled the aircraft over them in time, before issuing a warning to the rest of the formation behind him.

As the helicopters got close to the pilot’s reported position, low clouds made it impossible for Cherrey in his A-10 or anyone else overhead to visually spot him. All the rescuers could tell was that the pilot was near a major intersection, where Serb vehicles stopped regularly to unload soldiers and search dogs. The downed pilot reported enemy movement nearby and at one point said that a search dog came within 30 feet of him. From overhead, Cherrey tried to fool the Serbs on the ground into thinking that the intended pick-up site was elsewhere, by flying his jet away from the pilot’s general position—and into the lethal range of SA-3 and SA-6 missiles. The odds of saving the pilot seemed minimal. “The task of locating the survivor and recovering him safely was formidable at best,” reads Cardoso’s award citation.

The rescue forces decided their only option was a high-risk gamble. They radioed to the pilot, telling him to set off his daytime flare. That would let them spot him instantly—but it would be a race against the Serbs, who would also start to close in immediately. The pilot popped his flare. Cardoso in his helicopter turned out to be just a half-mile away, and he quickly moved his MH-53 and one other into position between the pilot and approaching Serb forces. The third helicopter, an MH-60 piloted by Capt. Chad P. Franks, touched down and within 60 seconds was airborne again with the downed pilot on board. The helicopters flew at treetop level to Bosnia, dodging searchlights, small arms fire, and anti-aircraft guns the entire way. They landed at Tuzla AB five-and-a-half hours after they had taken off.

A Strike at Belgrade

Attacking Serb air defense sites was another mission that was far more dangerous than ever portrayed on the evening news. On April 14, Capt. Cary N. Culbertson was leading a flight of F-16CJs that was providing suppression of enemy air defenses for B-2 bombers on a strike mission near Belgrade. The Serbs fired three SA-3s—presumably at the F-16s and not at the stealthy and much higher B-2s. Culbertson turned his F-16 toward the rising missiles and attacked the SA-3 site with a High-speed Anti-Radiation Missile. Then the Serbs launched two more SA-3s, this time directly at Culbertson’s jet. “At this point,” says Culbertson’s Silver Star citation, “Captain Culbertson would have been justified to discontinue his attack and defend against the incoming missiles, but instead, with total disregard for his own personal safety and [with] the lives
of his flight members foremost in his mind, he continued his attack.” He fired another HARM, which took out the SAM radar. Then he evaded the SA-3s. The Serbs tried one more time from a different site, firing another salvo of SA-3s—and drawing a HARM from Culbertson’s wingman.

Capt. Sonny P. Blinkinsop also took unusual risks to protect his fellow pilots from Serb missiles. While he led a group of F-16CJs against some SAM sites near Obrva, Yugoslavia, on May 2, the Serbs launched several SA-3s at the formation. As one of the F-16s turned to fire a HARM at the SAM battery, another salvo of SA-3s was launched. Blinkinsop turned his aircraft toward the launch site—and into the path of the oncoming missiles—to fire a HARM at the battery. That act silenced the site. Then as the F-16s were reforming, the Serbs launched two more SA-3s at a second wave of NATO strike aircraft entering the area. Blinkinsop fired his last HARM at that SAM battery, shutting it down and letting the strikers escape safely. Blinkinsop’s disregard for his own safety during this mission earned him the Silver Star.

Capt. Steve R. Giovenella was the last pilot to earn the Silver Star for attacking Serbian air defenses. On May 12, he led a two-ship flight of F-16s on a search for an SA-6 missile site near heavily defended Pristina airfield, in central Kosovo. While the F-16s were collecting imagery of the area, Serb gunners opened up with a thick stream of Anti-Aircraft Artillery fire from three different AAA sites. Giovenella controlled his wingman during successful attacks on two of the actively firing AAA sites. With the wingman out of bombs, Giovenella went after the third. “With rounds detonating above and perilously near his canopy,” according to his Silver Star citation, Giovenella guided his bombs directly onto the AAA site. “This mission,” reads the citation, “sent a sorely needed message to Serbian forces that there was a price to pay for shooting at NATO forces.”

The final Silver Star recipient may have done as much to save a colleague as any of the rescue forces. On June 7, Maj. William L. Thomas Jr. was flying with a group of F-16s near Batajnica airfield, near Belgrade, when he located four Serbian MiG-29s parked below. He and his wingman each destroyed one of the jets on a first pass over the airfield. On a second pass Thomas destroyed a third MiG. But the Serbs, meanwhile, had fired two SA-3s, which forced Thomas’s wingman into evasive maneuvers. The plume from one of the missiles temporarily blinded the wingman, who went into a low-altitude dive in the midst of a AAA field. Thomas flew into the AAA zone and dispensed flares, so the artillery barrages would target him instead of his wingman. It worked. Both pilots escaped.

The Silver Star

The Silver Star is awarded by all branches of the armed forces to any person who, while serving in any capacity, is cited for gallantry in action against an enemy of the United States while engaged in military operations involving conflict with an opposing foreign force or while serving with friendly forces against an opposing armed force in which the United States is not a belligerent party. The award is for actions not of a degree to justify an award of the Medal of Honor or the Air Force Cross.