

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

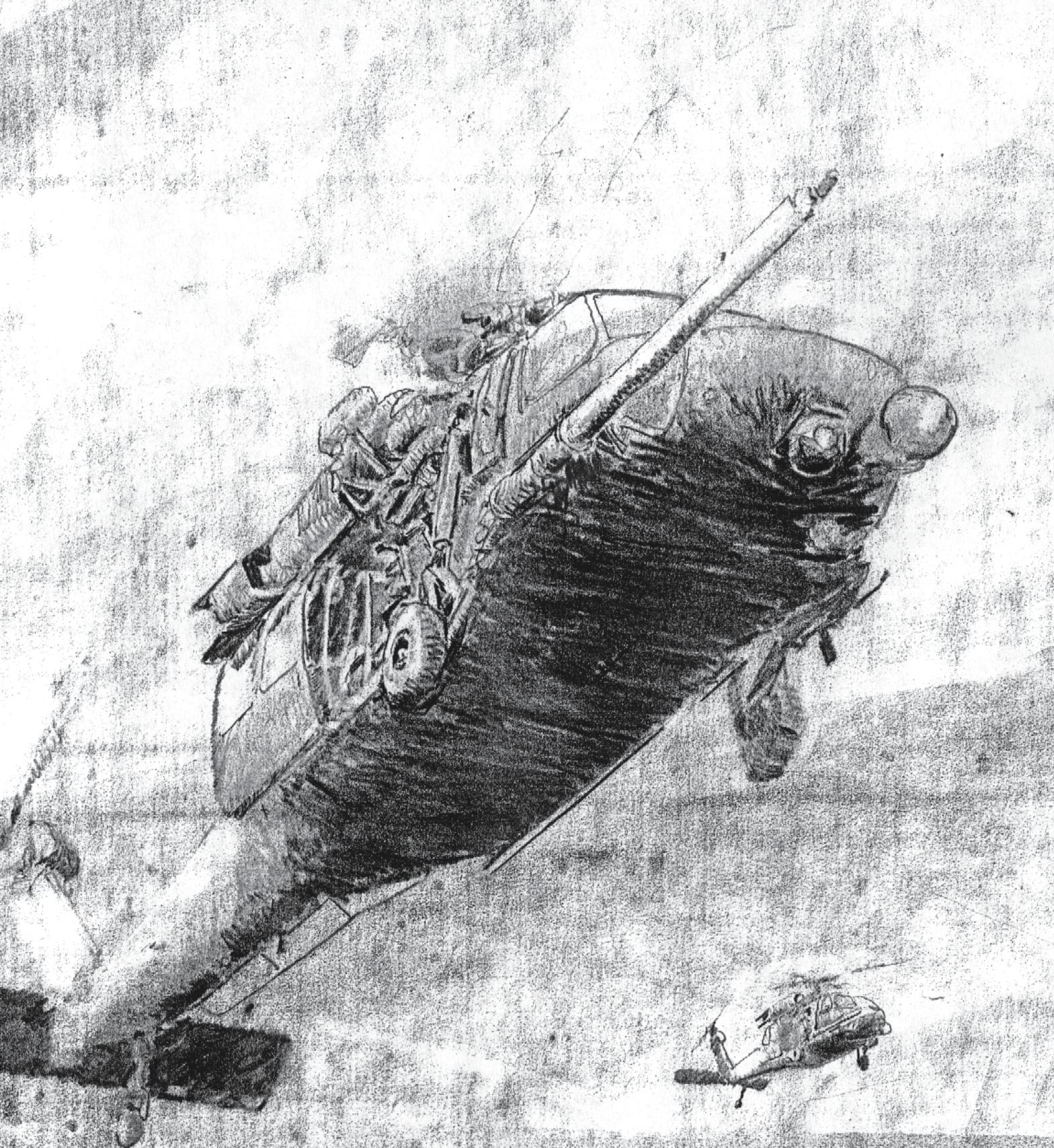
Silver Stars



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

radic efforts to shoot down NATO aircraft meant that for some pilots, routine flights suddenly became high-intensity combat. The courage of airmen was severely tested, and there were moments of selfless heroism.

On the night of May 2, 1999, for instance, with a full moon glinting off scattered clouds, Capt. Adam B. Kavlick was flying one of four F-16s on a mission to find and destroy Surface-to-Air Missile sites near Novi Sad, in northern Serbia. They found some. The Serbs launched three SA-3 missiles from two separate sites at the four-ship formation. One of the missiles caught Kavlick's wingman, knocking his airplane out of the sky near Belgrade. The pilot ejected safely but spent the next two hours fleeing from Serb forces trying to hunt him down.

Kavlick remained overhead and hastily arranged a rescue effort. First, he made contact with his downed colleague. Then he organized a flow plan for tanker aircraft to keep a constant stream of fighters over the crash site. He coordinated the fighter orbits so that aircraft would be available to knock out any SAMs that popped up. The Serbs still managed to get off a few shots, at one point forcing Kavlick's new wingman to jettison his weapons to outmaneuver a missile.

Against the Sun

Meanwhile, NATO had launched rescue helicopters from Bosnia in

a desperate push to reach the pilot before sunrise, which was to arrive in less than two hours. There was no time to wait for the A-10 gunships that typically accompany such a rescue package, so the helicopters flew without them. For more than an hour, Capt. Kent A. Landreth, as flight leader in an MH-53 *Pave Low*, led the three special operations helicopters through sporadic barrages of SAMs, anti-aircraft fire, and small arms fire. One MH-60 *Pave Hawk*, flown by Capt. William F. Denehan, was targeted by an SA-9 missile, which missed by only 100 feet. Later on, the same helicopter took rounds in the fuselage and left engine cowling from small arms fire.

The rescue aircraft went to the initial coordinates, which proved to be 17 miles from the pilot's actual location. From overhead, Kavlick finally directed them to the pilot's true position. With sunrise moments away, Denehan's helicopter touched down, and the pilot clambered aboard. As the rescue aircraft streaked away, the sun winked over the horizon, giving Serb gunners one last chance to claim an American victim. They missed.

For their performance during Allied Force, Kavlick, Landreth, and Denehan each received the Silver Star, the Air Force's third highest award for valor in combat—after the Medal of Honor and the Air Force Cross.

In total, only 10 pilots who flew dur-

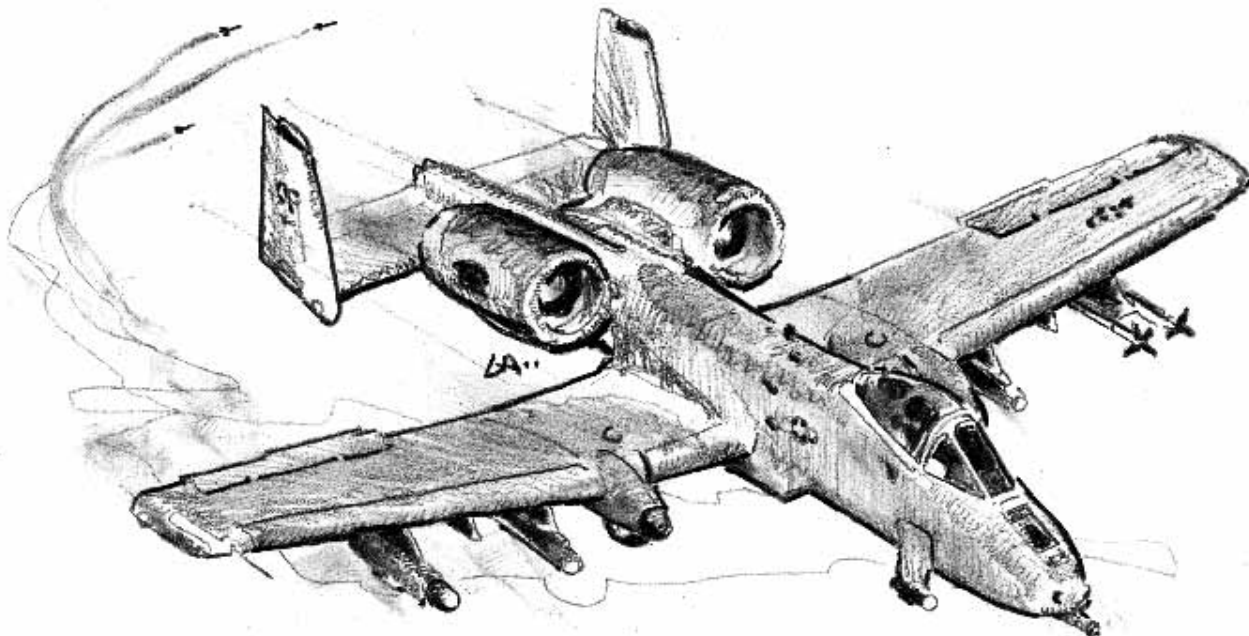
ing Allied Force received the Silver Star. Three of them earned the award during the rescue of the F-16 pilot, and three others earned theirs during the rescue of an F-117 pilot who was shot down March 27, 1999. The four remaining Silver Star recipients were recognized for heroic efforts to protect their comrades or for attacks on the Serbs. Nearly 20 other aviators received the Distinguished Flying Cross—the next highest award for valor—and the Air Force is considering other nominees.

The weather was a soupy mess, with near-zero illumination on the night the Serbs shot down the F-117 stealth fighter. Upon getting word that an American pilot had been downed behind enemy lines, a combat search-and-rescue team headed by Capt. James L. Cardoso, in an MH-53, scrambled to launch from a base in eastern Croatia. Three rescue helicopters were quickly airborne, but they faced an unexpected problem when they got to the Serbian border: Fighters, command-and-control airplanes, and other assets needed for the rescue weren't yet ready for the push into Serbian airspace.

Cardoso's flight package hovered for awhile at the edge of Serbian territory, then landed with engines running—and gunners on high alert—to conserve fuel.



Capt. Kent A. Landreth and Capt. James L. Cardoso piloted MH-53 Pave Lows on the rescue missions for which they received Silver Stars.



Capt. John A. Cherrey was the only A-10 pilot to receive the Silver Star.

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 out 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 illuminated 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.

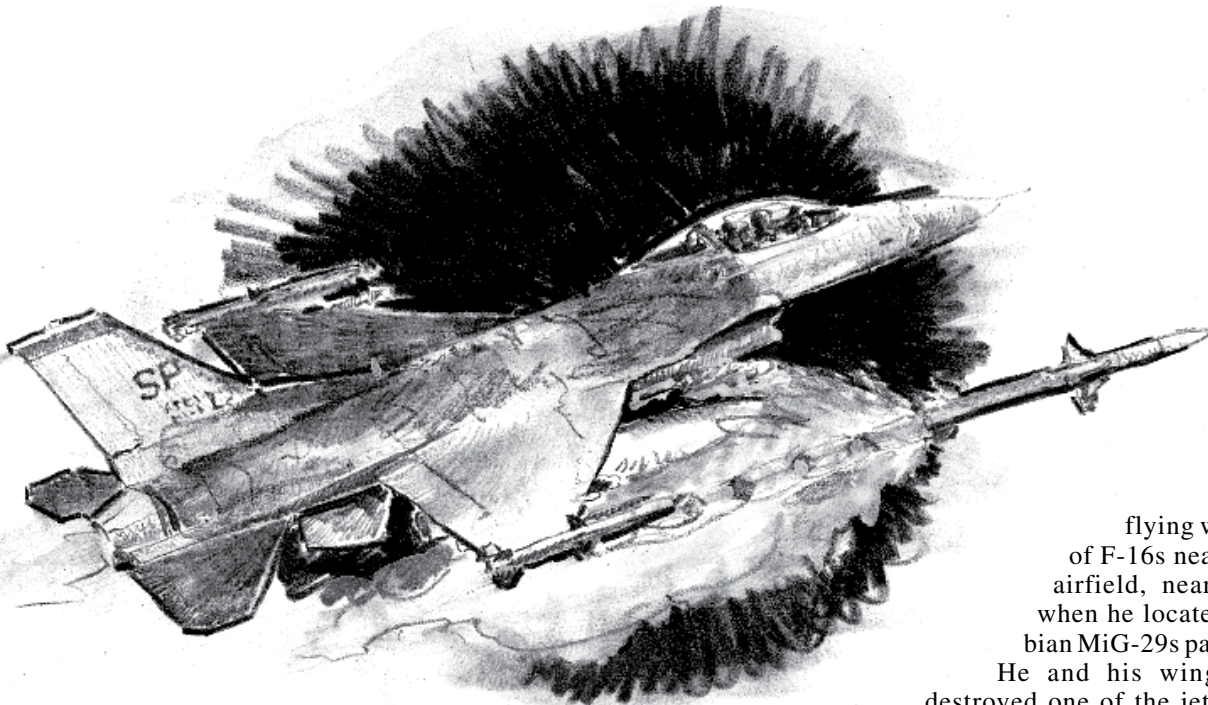
As the helicopters got close to the pilot's reported position, low clouds made it impossible for Cherrey in his A-10 or anyone else overhead to visually spot him. All the rescuers could tell was that the pilot was near a major intersection, where Serb vehicles stopped regularly to unload soldiers and 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 Serb 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



Four F-16 pilots received Silver Stars: Capt. Sonny P. Blinkinsop, Capt. Cary N. Culbertson, Capt. Steve R. Giovenella, and Maj. William L. Thomas Jr.

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.



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