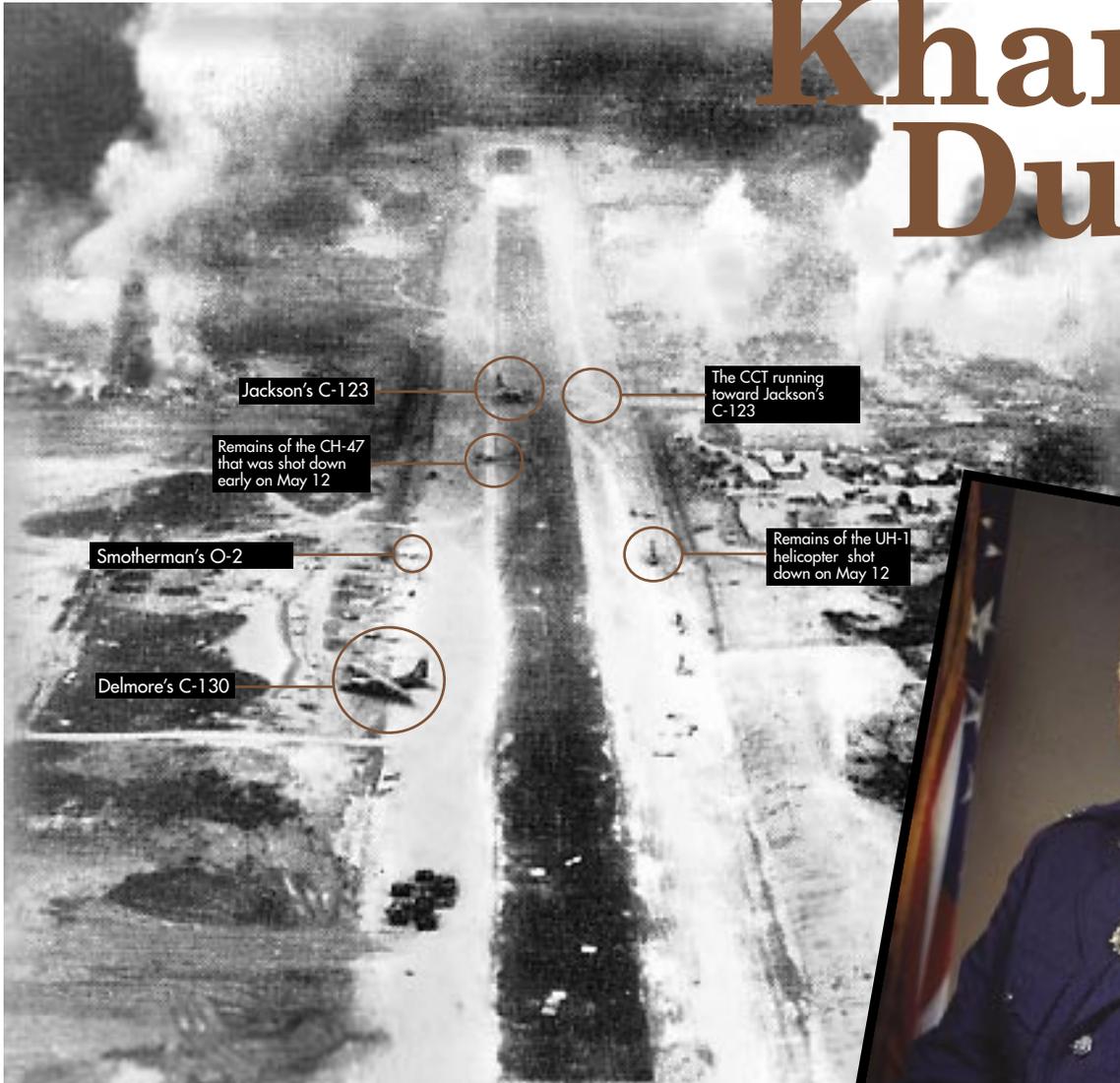




# Rescue at Kham Duc

USAF photo



*This is the only known photo of a Medal of Honor action taken while it was under way. Joe Jackson (inset, right) had just put his C-123 down to pick up three combat control team airmen. Jackson braved close-in enemy fire from both sides of the runway and from the hills above Kham Duc.*

By John T. Correll

**I**n early 1968, the North Vietnamese Army launched a major offensive into South Vietnam. It began in January with an attack on the US Marine Corps base at Khe Sanh, just below the Demilitarized Zone. The siege lasted 77 days, with the marines sustained by air strikes and aerial resupply.

The main blow of the offensive fell on Jan. 31, the Tet lunar new year holiday, when the NVA and the Viet Cong

attacked military bases and population centers all over South Vietnam.

In May, in the second phase of the offensive, two NVA regiments attacked the US Army Special Forces camp at Kham Duc, located in a valley about eight miles from the Laos border and 100 miles south of Khe Sanh.

From there, US Special Forces, augmented by South Vietnamese soldiers and Montagnard irregulars, kept watch on the Ho Chi Minh Trail on the

other side of the mountains. The camp also impeded enemy infiltration of the South Vietnamese highlands.

Kham Duc had a 6,000-foot-long asphalt runway, built in the 1950s to bring in materials to build a hunting lodge for South Vietnamese leader Ngo Dinh Diem. Wooded hills rose on all sides.

The camp was not built to withstand a major assault by artillery and infantry,

obsolete and was scheduled for retirement. It was ideal for missions into short airstrips and remote locations. The K model of the C-123 had two small jet engines fitted on wing pylons for extra power at takeoff.

Also around 8:30, 7th Air Force ordered maximum priority for air strikes to support the evacuation. US airpower pounded the NVA positions throughout the day, beginning with B-52 strikes

the C-123, he arrived at Da Nang on Aug. 28, 1967. His detachment, part of the 311th Special Operations Squadron at Phan Rang, had eight aircraft. They had seen hard duty during the siege of Khe Sanh.

Jackson's call sign for the check ride was "Bookie 771." The crew, in addition to flight examiner/co-pilot Campbell, consisted of the flight engineer, TSgt. Edward M. Trejo, and the

## Joe Jackson put the C-123 into a steep dive toward the embattled airstrip, where three airmen had been left behind.

and it did not hold out long against the large NVA force. The attack began May 6 at a forward operating base, Ngoc Tavak, three miles to the southwest. The casualties were heavy, and two Marine Corps helicopters were lost. Survivors retreated to the main camp.

Kham Duc was reinforced by airlift in the May 10-11 period, but the NVA occupied the surrounding hills, sweeping away the defensive machine gun outposts. The North Vietnamese could shoot down on the camp and on aircraft landing there.

As the attack intensified with heavy fire from artillery, mortars, and recoilless rifles, Military Assistance Command Vietnam changed its mind about reinforcing Kham Duc. Army Gen. William C. Westmoreland, commander of US forces in South Vietnam, decided to evacuate the camp instead.

The US faced the need to bring out about 1,000 people, not only US troops but South Vietnamese soldiers and, in some cases, their family members. Army and Marine Corps helicopters would conduct about half of the evacuation, but fixed-wing Air Force airlifters would be needed as well.

At 8:30 a.m. on May 12, the Air Force's 834th Air Division, which controlled all the C-130s and C-123s operating in South Vietnam, was told to begin an all-out effort to evacuate Kham Duc.

The C-130 was the primary tactical airlifter in Vietnam and was on its way to becoming one of the greatest airplanes of all time. It carried three times the payload of the old C-123 that it was to replace. However, the Vietnam War gave a new lease on life to the C-123, which had been declared

at dawn. Tactical airpower flew about 140 sorties at Kham Duc, 120 of them from Air Force units in Vietnam and Thailand.

### Check Ride Diverted

Since the evacuation wasn't laid on until 8:30 that morning, Air Force units in Southeast Asia had already begun operations for the day before they got the news.

Lt. Col. Joe M. Jackson, commander of a C-123 detachment at Da Nang, had taken off at 7 a.m. for his semi-annual flight check. Maj. Jesse W. Campbell, the flight examiner, was in the co-pilot's seat.

Jackson had scheduled the check ride for a cargo mission, no passengers, to various locations up and down the coast. The flight check involved such things as shutting down an engine, best done without passengers aboard.

This was Joe Jackson's third war. He enlisted in the Army at Newnan, Ga., in 1941, when he was 18 years old. He became a crew chief on B-25 bombers, then earned his commission and wings in the aviation cadets. He flew P-40 and P-63 fighters and, toward the end of World War II, B-24 bombers.

After the war, he returned to fighters and flew 107 combat missions in F-84s in Korea. He was one of the first Air Force pilots selected to fly the U-2 reconnaissance aircraft. Jackson is credited with several aeronautical innovations, including a bomb-tossing method to deliver nuclear weapons from fighter aircraft, later adopted by Strategic Air Command for use by bombers.

Jackson was serving as a war planner in Europe when he got his orders to go to Vietnam. After being checked out in

loadmaster, SSgt. Manson L. Grubbs. The aircraft they were flying was a C-123K, the model with the booster jets under its wings.

Early that afternoon, they were told to return to Da Nang for diversion to the evacuation of Kham Duc. Campbell declared the flight check over (Jackson passed) and stayed on for the air evac mission as co-pilot.

They drew flak vests, extra ammo for their .38 revolvers, and an extra M-16, and were airborne for Kham Duc at 2:55 p.m. The camp was about 45 miles west of Da Nang.

Upon arrival, Bookie 771 reported in to "Hillsboro," the C-130 airborne battlefield command and control center (ABCCC), and joined the other aircraft stacked up over the base. In another one of the airplanes then orbiting Kham Duc was Maj. Gen. Burl W. McLaughlin, commander of the 834th Air Division.

### Evacuation of Kham Duc

A fierce battle had been raging at Kham Duc since daybreak. The first helicopter to arrive, an Army CH-47, was shot down about 7:30. Moments later, an Air Force A-1E was shot down outside the camp perimeter.

The NVA shot and killed the bulldozer driver who was trying to clear away the helicopter, which was blocking the runway. It was eventually pushed to the side, but the runway remained partially obstructed.

In all, seven aircraft—three helicopters, the A-1E, an O-2, and two C-130s—would be lost that day at Kham Duc. When Bookie 771 got there, a good deal of the action had already taken place.

■ The first C-130 in that morning was



flown by Lt. Col. Daryl D. Cole. The crew had not yet heard about the evacuation and was delivering a full load of cargo. Cole drew ground fire as he approached and landed with extensive battle damage. A main landing gear tire was flat, and the wing fuel tanks had been punctured and were leaking. The crew could not unload because panicky Vietnamese civilians and irregular troops rushed aboard and refused to budge. The damaged airplane could not take off with all that weight. Cole taxied off the runway, and the crew hacked away as much of the bad tire as they could with a bayonet. When the aircraft drew mortar fire, the Vietnamese fled. One explosion came so close that it shattered a cockpit window. The fuel leak had thrown the aircraft out of balance, but despite the problems, Cole got it into the air and back to Cam Ranh Bay, where the crew counted 85 bullet and shrapnel holes.

■ At midmorning, Capt. Phillip Smotherman, an O-2 forward air controller working tactical air strikes on enemy positions, was shot down over the base. He made a controlled crash and got his airplane off the runway. He found an abandoned Air Force radio and remained on the ground for five hours, translating the base's needs for close air support to the ABCCC and the forward air controllers. He worked one strike that put ordnance just over 30 yards from his bunker. He left on the last C-130 that took passengers out.

■ Early in the afternoon, Maj. Bernard L. Bucher's C-130 took off with 150 women and children, families of the Vietnamese irregulars, aboard. The aircraft was shot down as it cleared the field and crashed with no survivors.



***It was in this C-123K Provider that Jackson and his crew made their courageous rescue. The K model had small jet engines to assist in max-performance takeoffs. Ignoring safety, Jackson kept them at high power, keeping time on the ground to fewer than 50 seconds. Miraculously, not a single bullet hit the aircraft.***

■ Lt. Col. William Boyd Jr., also flying a C-130, saw Bucher go down. Ground fire was heavy as he approached. As he was about to touch down, a shell exploded 100 feet in front of him. He pulled up, went around, landed, and took 100 people aboard. He took more battle damage on the way out. The aircraft made it to Cam Ranh Bay, where somebody spray painted "Lucky Duc" on the side, referring to its fortune in surviving.

■ As Lt. Col. John Delmore's C-130 came in, the cockpit was riddled with ground fire. The enemy was trying to kill the crew. Delmore crash-landed, but he had no brakes or hydraulic

power and little directional control. The airplane struck the remains of the CH-47, and Delmore wrestled it off the runway, where it hit a dirt mound and stopped.

About 4:30, the ground commander ("Crossbow") reported that all friendly forces were clear and requested air strikes to demolish the base and the equipment left behind.

"The airborne command post then gave an order to the fighters that were in the area to go in and destroy the camp," Jackson said, but "the C-130 that had just taken off said, 'Negative, negative. I let three members of the combat control team off,' and that's when the dead silence was so loud. ... It was just like hitting a guy in the face with a dead fish."

Capt. Robert M. Gatewood, duty controller on the ABCCC, said, "A hush could be felt, literally, over the radio as all agencies realized the implication of this statement."

After a few moments, the ABCCC broke the silence to tell the strike fighters to hold up and to send some O-1 and O-2 FAC aircraft down to look. They weren't able to see anything.

An airplane would have to go in to get the combat control team.

### **The Combat Control Team**

Maj. John W. Gallagher was mission commander of the combat control team, although he was a C-130 pilot,



***Kham Duc was a staging area for Green Berets and Montagnard tribesmen keeping watch on enemy infiltration routes just to its west, in southeastern Laos. Four months after the Tet Offensive, the base was attacked by North Vietnamese regulars. Communications foul-ups put an American combat control team on the ground after Kham Duc had been ordered abandoned.***

not a combat controller. The other two members of the team, TSgt. Morton J. Freedman and SSgt. James D. Lundie, were both fully qualified combat controllers.

They had come to Kham Duc as part of the first contingent of reinforcements May 10. Their job was to control the airlift and coordinate the approach, loading, and unloading to expedite departure of the airplanes and limit their exposure to ground fire.

On the morning of May 12, Gallagher heard that the airlift mission had been canceled. There was room for confusion. According to an Air Force study of the battle by Lt. Col.

Alan L. Gropman, 7th Air Force called off the C-130 evacuation about 10:30 because of the severity of ground fire. Military Assistance Command Vietnam subsequently ordered resumption of evacuation.

Gallagher decided the CCT should pull out, overruling the opinions of Freedman and Lundie, who thought that the team ought to stay. On Gallagher's orders, the CCT boarded Cole's C-130 when it left at midmorning for Cam Ranh Bay.

McLaughlin, learning that the CCT had left before the job was complete, ordered that they go back in. Indeed, Cole's airplane was the first C-130

into Kham Duc. By the middle of the afternoon, seven more C-130s and a C-123 landed at Kham Duc. However, these flights were finished by the time the CCT returned to the camp in the late afternoon.

A great many people were involved in the evacuation, which was a complicated operation. Some of the details—such as the situation of the CCT—got lost in the weeds.

When the CCT got to Cam Ranh Bay, Gallagher was told that the team had to go back to Kham Duc. Maj. Jay Van Cleeff, whose C-130 had been diverted to Cam Ranh Bay, was instructed to fly them to the embattled camp. That seemed strange. Previously, Van Cleeff's crew had understood they would be making a container delivery system airdrop at Kham Duc because it was too dangerous to land. Now they were going to put people on the ground there.

Gallagher and Van Cleeff called "Hilda," the airlift control center at Saigon, and questioned the order. Hilda told them they were "talking too much over the air" and that the CCT should go back to Kham Duc and help with the evacuation. Before they left Cam Ranh Bay, Freedman tried to obtain an FM radio, but was unable to do so. He would have to rely on his survival radio.

Van Cleeff landed at Kham Duc about 4:20, and the CCT got off. The airplane stayed on the ramp for a few minutes, then left.

There was nobody at Kham Duc except the CCT and the enemy. Everybody else had been evacuated. To make matters worse, Freedman's radio wouldn't work, so they couldn't notify anyone of their plight. The NVA had placed three .50-caliber machine guns along the runway. Freedman put one of them out of action, killing the gunners with his M-16.

Lundie had a rifle as well, and they had enough ammunition to fight for a while. "Sergeant Lundie had five clips and I had six," Freedman said.

Several airplanes passed over the field, then a C-123 came in, rolled by, and took off before the CCT could flag it down. The stranded airmen did not know if they had been seen by the airlifter crew.

"The thought of another plane was impossible and illogical because the NVA were moving all around us," Freedman said. "So much ammo was blowing up you couldn't tell 'incom-



**President Lyndon Johnson presents the Medal of Honor to Jackson at a White House ceremony Jan. 16, 1969. Others in the action were awarded an Air Force Cross, Silver Stars, and the Mackay Trophy.**

ing' from our own, and it was throwing debris all over the runway. Even if they knew we were here, no man in his right mind would attempt a landing. I never felt so lonely in all my life."

They were close to despair when Gallagher called out: "There's a 123 on short final."

### **Assault Landing**

The first 123 that went in looking for the CCT was "Bookie 750" from Phan Rang, flown by Lt. Col. Alfred J. Jeanotte Jr. Fighter aircraft escorted him down and strafed the jungle, but the enemy fire was hot.

Rather than reversing engines to come to a full stop, Jeanotte kept moving down the runway, looking for the CCT. He accelerated to full power and took off. The C-123 had broken ground before the crew spotted the CCT waving at them. Jeanotte did not have enough fuel left to land again, stop, and make another maximum effort takeoff.

The next airplane in the queue was Joe Jackson's Bookie 771. Jeanotte briefed him on where the CCT had been seen.

Col. William K. Bailey, commander of the 311th Special Operations Squadron, to which the C-123s were assigned, later described the situation.

"Kham Duc by now was a battleground in hostile hands. It was under heavy ground and mortar attack," Bailey said. "The hostile forces had long since zeroed in on the airstrip with small arms, mortars, light and heavy automatic

weapons, and recoilless rifle fire. Within the immediate vicinity of the runway, manned hostile gun emplacements had been established. The camp was engulfed in flames; its ammunition dumps were continuously exploding and littering the runway with debris. In addition, the remains of an enemy-destroyed ... helicopter reduced the runway length to approximately 2,200 feet."

Jackson was at 9,000 feet when he got the call to go in. He had watched the enemy gunners blazing away at Jeanotte.

"I was not going to make a long, low approach like this other airplane had because I saw the fire that he had drawn from this ridge on the southwest part of the field, and I [didn't] want any part of that," Jackson said. "I decided to make my approach extremely steep, just as straight down as it would go."

(Many published accounts of the mission are in error. They say Jackson applied full aileron and opposite rudder for a "sideslip" descent. Jackson says that never happened.)

On an assault landing, Jackson said, "the airplane more or less slams into the ground, [and] at that point, you normally reverse the propellers ... to reduce your stopping distance."

However, he was not going to do that. Reversing the propellers on a C-123K would automatically shut off the two auxiliary jet engines to prevent damage to the engines from debris and gravel thrown up by the propellers.

"I briefed the guys that I would not

reverse the engines unless necessary because I didn't want to have to take time to start them," Jackson said. "It took about a minute or so ... to get them started, and I figured that was too long.

"I briefed the co-pilot, Major Campbell, [and] I said the only thing I want you to do when we get on the ground is to make sure that the flaps get from the assault position, which is full down, back up to the takeoff position. [I] briefed the loadmaster, ... as soon as this thing touches down, I want the doors opened just as quick as possible."

With that, he closed the throttles, put the landing gear down, put the flaps down full, and set the propellers in a flat pitch. The jet engines were started and idling.

Jackson took the old airlifter down in a dive it was never designed to make, descending at 155 mph. Supposedly, the flaps would not hold at that speed. Around 151 mph, the wind pressure in the "blowup valve" blows the flaps back up to prevent damage to the system. However, the flaps held.

Bookie 771 leveled out 50 feet above the ground and 1,500 feet from the runway. Jackson came in from the southwest and touched down at the very end of the airstrip, some 2,200 feet from the wreckage of the CH-47 helicopter. That much runway, he said, was "adequate to stop in, but you have to clamp on the brakes pretty well."

Jackson's unorthodox descent took the enemy gunners by surprise, but they soon adjusted their aim.

### **50 Seconds on the Ground**

"It didn't seem like there was any possible way for a plane to get in," Lundie said. "The whole camp was burning and exploding. When I looked up and saw that C-123 coming in, it was like a miracle. I couldn't believe it."

The CCT was "in a ditch alongside the runway and they started running toward the runway when I was about halfway down on the landing roll," Jackson said.

Two of the enemy machine gun positions along the ramp were still firing. One was under the wing of Delmore's C-130, and the other was beside the wreckage of a UH-1 helicopter.

Gunners in the hills were shooting down at them. "I saw tracers coming out from under the airplane that had apparently struck the runway and were ricocheting off the runway, under the

airplane,” Jackson said. The C-123 “only sits about two feet off the ground, so they were missing mighty close.”

Jackson figured the hillside gunners “just kinda underestimated the range. That made the bullets drop enough to just hit the runway underneath the airplane and then ricochet out the other side.”

As Jackson was turning the airplane around, Campbell exclaimed, “My God, look at that!”

A 122 mm rocket, apparently fired at zero elevation from the ridge to the north, was coming down the runway toward them. It struck the ground, bounced, and came to rest about 30 feet from the airplane, but it did not explode. It was a dud.

The CCT, having sprinted from the ditch, boarded the airplane quickly. “The loadmaster said, ‘All on board,’ and Campbell made a very astute observation like, ‘Let’s get the hell out of here,’” Jackson said.

Jackson steered around the dud rocket and ran the throttles up. The jet engines reached 100 percent, and they were off. They used only about 1,000 feet of the runway for the takeoff roll.

“I say that we were on the ground somewhere around 40 to 50 seconds,” Jackson said.

Fifteen seconds after the airplane started moving, the spot where it had been stopped erupted with mortar fire. Jackson figured the mortar shell had been in flight something like 40 seconds and that they made it away just in time.

When they got back to Da Nang, they checked the airplane for bullet holes. There weren’t any.

In nominating Jackson for the Medal of Honor, the 311th SOS commander, Bailey, noted that “miraculously, Bookie 771 survived the approach, landing, turnaround, and departure without receiving a single hit.”

Hilda, the airlift command post in Saigon, almost struck again. According to Sam McGowan—a C-130 crew member in Vietnam, now a prolific writer on airpower—after Jackson had gotten the first CCT out, Hilda ordered another C-130, carrying another CCT, to put them on the ground at Kham Duc. The order was not rescinded until the C-130 was about to go in.

### Medal of Honor

The critical moment at Kham Duc was captured for all time in a photo-

graph taken from the air during the 50 seconds that Bookie 771 was on the ground. It is believed to be the only photo ever taken during an action that led to the award of the Medal of Honor.

The picture is fuzzy and the scene is obscured by smoke, but Jackson’s C-123 is clearly visible on the runway, as are the other aircraft shot down earlier in the day. The photo was taken moments before the dud rocket got there. The CCT can be seen running from the ditch. It is not known who took the photo, but a copy of it was attached to the nomination for the Medal of Honor.

Jackson himself received a copy of the photo through regular distribution about two weeks after the battle. It arrived at Da Nang aboard a cargo airplane and was turned in to the airlift control center, which passed it on to Jackson. The photo was between two pieces of cardboard, wrapped in brown paper with Jackson’s name on it.

Shortly after the Kham Duc mission, the wing vice commander from Phan Rang was visiting Da Nang and staying with Jackson. The two of them were together when the vice commander got a telephone call. Hanging up, he told Jackson that he was to be nominated for the Medal of Honor.

While the nomination was pending, Jackson was directed not to fly any more missions. He finished his tour in Vietnam in August with 298 combat sorties.

The Medal of Honor was presented to Jackson at the White House by President Lyndon Johnson on Jan. 16, 1969.

Co-pilot Campbell was awarded the Air Force Cross. The crew members, Trejo and Grubbs, were decorated with the Silver Star. There were other awards for the action at Kham Duc. Bucher, who died when his C-130 went down, was awarded the Air Force Cross, as were Boyd, the pilot of “Lucky Duc,” and Jeanotte, who made the first attempt to rescue the CCT.

Cole, pilot of the first C-130 in, who made it out with the destroyed

tire and leaking fuel tanks, received not only the Silver Star but also the Mackay Trophy for most meritorious flight of the year.

Eight months after the Medal of Honor ceremonies at the White House, Jackson was at the Air Force Association convention looking at the exhibits when he ran into Westmoreland. They talked about the war and Kham Duc, and Westmoreland said, “You know, I was the guy who recommended you for the Medal of Honor.”

He had followed the action at Kham Duc closely as it unfolded. Apparently, the call to the vice wing commander at Da Nang had been the word from Westmoreland, coming down the line, to make the nomination.

Jackson spent three years in the Pentagon in the Directorate of Plans. In 1971, he was reassigned to the Air War College faculty to teach strategic studies. He retired in 1973 after 33 years in the Air Force.

### Reunion in Charlotte

Jackson went to work for Boeing, setting up a training program for the Iranian Air Force, which was using Boeing 707s in a number of roles. He was in Iran for three years, then came back to Seattle to work in Boeing’s training department. He retired for good in 1985.

In the years since then, he has kept busy with volunteer work and other activities.

In May 1997, Joe Jackson was being honored at the observance of the 50th anniversary of the Air Force at a race at the Charlotte Motor Speedway in North Carolina. For one person in the crowd of 185,000, it was a special surprise when Jackson was introduced.

Jim Lundie of Concord, N.C., recognized the pilot who had rescued him at Kham Duc 29 years before. It was an emotional moment as Jackson and Lundie hugged and shook hands.

“You hear about long lost family members being reunited and the emotions they feel,” said Lundie, who had left the Air Force in 1968. “This was the same close family feeling for me.” ■

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*John T. Correll was editor in chief of Air Force Magazine for 18 years and is now a contributing editor. His most recent article, “The Air Force and the Cold War: A Chronology, 1945-91,” appeared in the September issue.*