

Badly burned when an explosion set his cockpit afire, Bill Jones refused to quit the mission.

Determination a Sandy



Pictured is Bill Jones, Medal of Honor recipient, in his A-1 at Nakhon Phanom, Thailand. His squadron flew the A-1 for two kinds of missions—interdiction on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and rescue. For rescue missions, the call sign was Sandy.

In September 1968, rows of propeller-driven fighters, bombers, and transports lined the ramp at the air commando base at Nakhon Phanom in northeastern Thailand.

NKP, as the base was called, was on the western side of the Mekong River, which formed the border with Laos. Just beyond the narrow neck of the Laotian panhandle lay North Vietnam.

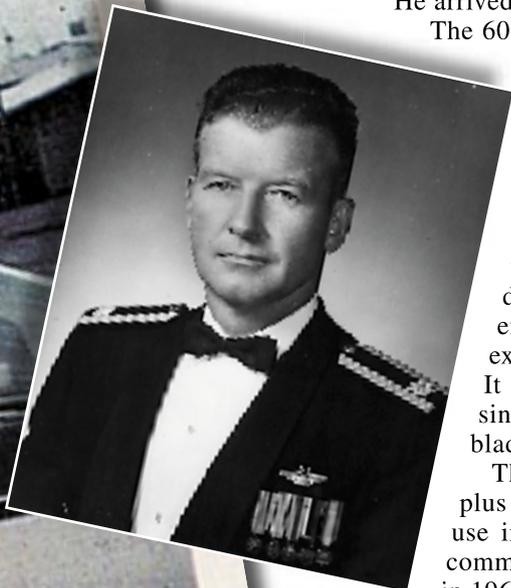
Compared to other bases in Thailand, NKP was remote and austere. The runway was made of pierced steel planking and it was relatively short. No jet aircraft were stationed there. Anyone seeing NKP for the first time would think of it as a scene from Terry and the Pirates.

It was home to the 56th Special Operations Wing, an outfit that had been an air commando wing until its redesignation the month before.

The wing operated a mix of helicopters and vintage airplanes, including several squadrons of Douglas A-1 Skyraiders.

One of the A-1 units, the 602nd Special Operations Squadron, was a recent arrival, having moved from its previous base at Udorn Royal Thai Air Base in July. The squadron's crews were familiar with NKP, though. They had been coming over regularly from Udorn on three-day rotations to sit

of



By John T. Correll

rescue alert with the Jolly Green Giant helicopters at NKP. Rescue missions often launched from there because it was close to the war.

A new commander, Lt. Col. William A. Jones III, had taken over the squadron when it moved from Udorn. Jones, 46, came from a family where military service was a tradition reaching back for several generations. His father had qualified as an aviator and had orders to France when World War I ended.

As a child, Bill Jones lived in Warsaw, Va. His family then moved to Charlottesville, Va., where he finished high school at 16—too young for West Point. He went instead to the University of Virginia, earning his degree in three years. He then went on to West Point, where he was commissioned in 1945. After pilot training, he began a career that encompassed bombers, fighters, and airlifters and included two tours as a B-47 aircraft commander.

There was no requirement for B-47 pilots in Southeast Asia, so Jones volunteered for cross training in the A-1. He arrived at Udorn in April 1968.

The 602nd squadron had 24 Sky-raidiers. Half of them were single seat A-1H and J models and the other half were “fat-face” A-1Es and Gs, with side-by-side seating in the cockpit. The A-1 was a modified version of an attack bomber developed by the Navy at the end of World War II and used extensively in the Korean War. It was driven by a powerful single engine and a big four-bladed propeller.

The Air Force obtained surplus A-1s from the Navy for use in Southeast Asia. The air commandos began flying them in 1964.

Firefly and Sandy

The A-1 was slow, but that was an advantage for such tasks as searching and spotting. Its long loiter time was also useful. It was rugged and heavily armed, with a 20 mm cannon and 15 external stations for weapons and stores. In the air-to-ground role, it was accurate and lethal.

The disadvantage was that the A-1, weaving slowly through a search area, was an easy target for enemy gunners. When working on a rescue, though, the A-1s usually operated in flights of four, and they were very good at making ground gunners keep their heads down.

Jones' squadron flew the A-1 for two kinds of missions. The call sign was Firefly on attack missions to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail or to support the Royal Laotian government ground forces in their war against the Communist Pathet Lao. For rescue missions, the call sign was Sandy.

Rescue helicopters were too vulnerable to operate alone. The preferred

escort was a flight of A-1 Sandys. Their guns, bombs, and rockets kept enemy ground forces at bay, and they performed other services as well.

Sandy's job was to escort the helicopters, conduct a general search for the downed aircrew, talk to the survivors by radio, and determine their exact location. The A-1s also suppressed any hostile forces that were present before the helicopters went in.

In the rescue area, the Sandys usually separated into a low element and a high element. The low element searched for the survivors and directed the rescue, while the high element orbited above, conserving fuel and standing ready to assume a more active role when called upon.

The object of search operations in the early morning hours of Sept. 1, 1968, was Carter flight, two F-4D fighters from Udorn, shot down near the Ban Karai Pass in North Vietnam. The two aircraft, Carter 01 and 02, had been on a predawn strike mission against trucks entering the Ban Karai Pass en route to the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos, on the other side of the mountains.

Carter 01 was brought down by ground fire about 4:40 a.m. Both Carter 01 pilots had ejected. Carter 02 was attacking the North Vietnamese forces closing in on Carter 01 when it was shot down as well. The aircraft commander, Capt. Jack Wilson (Carter 02 Alpha), made it to the ground safely, but he was unable to raise the backseat pilot, 1st Lt. William L. Kinkade, on the radio.

The crew from Carter 01 was picked up, but Wilson was alone in the rough country north of Ban Karai, where karst limestone formations rose up hundreds of feet above the mountain valleys. The jungle canopy limited visibility from the air.

Wilson made radio contact with other aircraft working the area, and they called in a rescue team to retrieve him. (Kinkade was listed as missing in action until 1973, when the Air Force made a presumption of death in his case.)

Search for Carter 02

Four A-1Hs and two HH-3 Jolly Green Giant helicopters responded from Nakhon Phanom. The leader was Bill Jones in Sandy 01, flying his 98th combat mission in Southeast Asia. His wingman, Sandy 02, was Capt. Paul A. Meeks. Maj. Eugene McCormack Jr. was Sandy 03, and Lt. Col. John



Above and right in these 1972 photos, Jones' A-1 Skyraider—No. 738—takes off at Nahkon Phanom. After Jones' 1968 Medal of Honor mission, the airplane was refurbished and remained in service for four years, only to be shot down over Laos on Sept. 28, 1972. It was the last aircraft of its kind to be lost in combat in Southeast Asia.



Carlson, the vice commander of the squadron, was Sandy 04.

When the search and rescue team arrived, a forward air controller on the scene warned Jones of several 37 mm guns and some smaller anti-aircraft artillery that were active in the area. The task was complicated by bad weather, which would force the Sandys to fly low.

Jones and Meeks, flying as the low element in the rescue operation, began the search while the other two Skyraiders and the helicopters stood by in higher orbit.

A single F-4, call sign Liner, had been in radio contact with Wilson. "Liner was able to talk to the survivor," Jones said. "I heard him a little bit on the way in, and he thought he knew where the survivor was. Liner flew over, wiggling his wings, but it turned out this was off about eight miles and we got no more contact for almost an hour. We wasted a considerable amount

of time—almost an hour—searching in the wrong area."

An F-100 Misty forward air controller from Phu Cat, South Vietnam, got a better fix on Wilson, farther to the east. Time was a growing concern. The longer Wilson was on the ground, the less likely the rescue was to succeed. The North Vietnamese were looking for him, too.

Jones picked his way through the karst valleys, searching methodically. On the 10th or 12th pass, Jones' airplane was rocked by fire from a ZPU anti-aircraft gun. Some months later, a statement nominating Jones for a Medal of Honor recounted the next few minutes this way:

"Colonel Jones felt an explosion beneath his aircraft. His cockpit filled with smoke. Even though his aircraft had been hit, he maintained control of it, and, as the smoke cleared, he continued searching. Without regard for the fact that his aircraft might be

on fire, Colonel Jones continued the search for another 10 or 15 minutes.

"At the moment that the survivor radioed that Colonel Jones was passing directly overhead, Colonel Jones sighted a multiple-barrel gun position firing at him from above the survivor near the top of a rock outcropping. The gun position was so close to the survivor that the jets orbiting overhead could not be employed for fear of killing the survivor. Had the enemy known where the survivor was, they could have fired down directly at his location. Attacking the gun emplacement had to be done with extreme caution."

Explosion and Fire

Jones attacked the gun position with his cannon and rockets, broadcasting the newly discovered locations of the survivor and the gun position as he went. On his second pass, before he got acknowledgment of the information he had sent, his aircraft was hit by several

rounds from automatic weapons. The center section of the fuselage burst into flames that engulfed the area around the cockpit. Two-thirds of the windshield was blown away.

A 14.5 mm round had hit and ignited the rocket for Jones' parachute extraction system directly behind his headrest.

Newer fighters had emergency systems that ejected the entire seat of the aircraft with the pilot still in it. What the older A-1 had was the Yankee Extraction System, installed after the Air Force got the airplanes from the Navy. The A-1 was the first aircraft to use it.

It was triggered by a rocket connected by lanyards to the pilot's parachute risers. When the system engaged, the canopy was jettisoned and the rocket behind the headrest ignited. It pulled the pilot upward by his parachute harness and out of the airplane. Once clear, the parachute deployed.

"I looked back over my shoulder and saw fire coming out of the back end of the airplane," Jones said in an interview published in 1970 in *Airman*, the official magazine of the Air Force. "The instrument panel was clouded with smoke. Fire seemed to be everywhere. I knew there wasn't anything for me to do but get out.

"I pulled for altitude and headed for a clear area. Then I reached down and grabbed the extraction handle with my right hand and pulled. The canopy went off immediately, and I waited for the ejection for what seemed like an eternity. But nothing else happened.

"Here I sat in this thing with fire all around and I said to myself, 'This just can't happen to me. This is not the way it's supposed to be. I've got to get back and see my family. This simply can't happen.' I reached down and grabbed the secondary escape handle so I could ... climb out over the side."

The radio channels were flooded with calls telling Jones that he was on fire, which he knew already.

"His attempts to transmit the location of the survivor and the enemy gun position were blocked by other aircraft repeatedly telling him to bail out," recounted the Medal of Honor statement. "Before the fire died out, all of his radio transmitters had been disabled, and he could only receive on one channel."

So far as Jones knew, he was the only one with an exact fix on the downed pilot and the gun.

The statement continued, "As he

reached altitude, Colonel Jones' wingman came alongside, and, through hand signals, Colonel Jones indicated he would fly the Skyraider back to base—approximately 90 miles away—rather than bail out over the first secure area."

It was fortunate that Jones did not try to leave the airplane. As it was learned later, his parachute had been critically damaged by the fire.

Jones Keeps Going

Getting back to NKP was an ordeal. Jones had second- and third-degree burns on his arms, legs, face, neck, hands, and fingers. He looked at his hands and said later, "They looked like mozzarella cheese."

The upper half of the cockpit was burned. All of the plastic knobs had melted and half of the instruments were unreadable. With the canopy and most of the windshield gone, the wind blasting back through the cockpit was severe. Jones did not even have the protection of his oxygen mask. The straps had burned and the mask had fallen away. The wind increased the pain from his burns. It was also making his face swell around his eyes and impeding his vision.

Jones trimmed the Skyraider for uncoordinated flight, holding the nose of the airplane to the right, at an angle to the direction of motion. That positioned the unbroken part of the windshield in front of his face, giving him some relief from the rushing air.

To make matters worse, the weather

was deteriorating. Sandy 02, Paul Meeks, took the lead with Jones following him in close formation. Jones' radio receiver was still working, so he could hear directions from Meeks.

They approached the base on instruments and in heavy overcast and turbulence. Meeks led Jones down. Jones extended his landing gear manually and went straight in for a no-flaps landing.

Jones shut down the engine. The first person to reach the cockpit was Col. Leonard Volet, vice commander of the 56th Special Operations Wing. "I couldn't believe what I saw," Volet said. "Everything was burned to a crisp, including Colonel Jones' helmet, oxygen mask, survival vest, neck, and arms. Yet he kept flailing about the cockpit reaching for his maps as we struggled to lift his nearly 200-pound frame plus equipment out of the aircraft. We got him out, but he refused medical attention until he was satisfied that we knew where the survivor and guns were located."

Back at the Ban Karai Pass, McCormack and Carlson in Sandy 03 and 04 had taken charge of the rescue. Additional A-1s were scrambled from NKP to help, and Air Force and Navy fighters converged on the scene as well. The Sandys wiped out the gun, and an HH-3 picked Wilson up. "However, without the vital information obtained by Jones [earlier] in the day, we could well have lost several aircraft or been unable to rescue Carter 02 Alpha," Carlson said.



In an Aug. 6, 1970 White House ceremony, President Nixon awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously to Jones, presenting it to his wife, Lois, and their daughters. Nixon had approved the honor nine months earlier, but Jones died in an airplane crash before he could receive it.



A Walk of Fame in the outdoor airpark at Hurlburt Field, Fla., recognizes all five Vietnam War air commandos who were awarded the Medal of Honor. Here, Gen. Ronald Fogleman, then USAF Chief of Staff, joins Jones' widow, Lois, grandson Jack, and (l-r) daughters Elizabeth, Mary Lee, and Anne at the unveiling.

Jones was flown by medical airlift, first to Japan and then to San Antonio for months of treatment and rehabilitation. He wanted to go back to NKP to finish his combat tour, but permission was refused. He was eventually restored to flying status and assigned as commander of the 1st Flying Training Squadron at Andrews AFB, Md.

His charred airplane, Skyraider No. 738, also flew again. It was repaired and refurbished and remained in service for years. In its final duty, it was assigned to the 1st Special Operations Squadron, where it had the tail code "TC" in place of the "TT" it wore when Bill Jones flew it on its most famous mission. It was shot down over Laos on Sept. 28, 1972, the last US A-1 Skyraider to be lost in combat in Southeast Asia.

Medal of Honor

On Nov. 14, 1969, President Nixon approved the award of the Medal of Honor to Jones. According to Lois Jones, her husband had "gotten wind" of it, but he did not live to receive the medal.

Jones had recently been promoted to colonel, and a dinner party in celebration was planned for Nov. 15, a Saturday. Earlier that day, however, Jones took off from Woodbridge, Va., in his private airplane, a Piper Pacer. He had arranged for a flyover from Andrews to support the opening of a new airport at Culpeper, about 40 miles from Woodbridge, and he was

flying there in his Piper to check on arrangements.

Soon after he cleared the field at Woodbridge, he radioed that he was turning around. He came in too low, hit some power lines, crashed, and was killed. The investigators could find no problem with the flight controls. Their conclusion was that Jones had suffered some physical incapacity on his way out and that his heart failed and he lost consciousness as he was returning.

In a White House ceremony held on Aug. 6, 1970, President Nixon presented the Medal of Honor to Lois Jones and her three daughters.

Jones did not consider himself particularly heroic. He planned to say exactly that at the ceremony at which he would be given his Medal of Honor. He had already drafted the words: "I consider this great honor and high award to be a tribute not so much to me but to all Sandy pilots who have flown out of the 602nd. I'm honored to represent them in this manner."

There were other honors, too. The Air Force Association chapter in Charlottesville—the town in which he grew up and went to high school and college—bears his name. In 1971, the Air War College auditorium at Maxwell AFB, Ala., was named the William A. Jones Auditorium.

In 1997, a Walk of Fame was dedicated at the outdoor airpark at Hurlburt Field, Fla., headquarters of Air Force Special Operations Command and home of the air commandos. Recognized at this site are all five Vietnam War air commandos who were awarded the Medal of Honor. Four of them—Bernard F. Fisher, James P. Fleming, Joe M. Jackson, and John L. Levitow—were in attendance. The fifth, Bill Jones, was represented by his wife, Lois; their three daughters, Anne Gilfillan, Elizabeth Jones, and Mary Lee Kuhn; and by Kuhn's son, six-year-old Jack Davisson.

Gen. Ronald R. Fogleman, the Air Force Chief of Staff, joined the family in unveiling the commemorative plaque honoring Bill Jones.

Lois Jones keeps her husband's Medal of Honor in a glass display case in her home, where it lies alongside pictures and other memorabilia.

In a different kind of memorial, one that Bill Jones would probably have appreciated enormously, his middle daughter, Elizabeth, became a pilot.

Maxims for Men-at-Arms

Bill Jones was a man of many parts. He played the guitar and banjo, spoke Spanish, painted, sketched, and wrote. He was an athlete with an affinity for handball and racketball. He liked to work on old cars.

He also enjoyed collecting nuggets of wisdom, especially when they concerned military topics. Each day, he posted a saying on the wall behind his desk. While doing research for a master's degree at George Washington University, he compiled his favorites into a book, *Maxims for Men-at-Arms* (Dorrance & Co., 1969). He illustrated the pages with formal borders, pen and ink drawings of weapons and military equipment from various eras in history.

Jones had received the first copy of his book the day before he died. His youngest daughter, Mary Lee, then nine, presented a copy to the President at the Medal of Honor ceremony.

The book contains 120 maxims. One of them, origin unknown, could well be applied to Jones himself:

Poor is the country that has no heroes, but beggared is that people who having them forgets. ■

John T. Correll was editor in chief of Air Force Magazine for 18 years and is now a contributing editor. His most recent article, "Calculated Courage at Thai Nguyen," appeared in the February issue.