

For 17 hours, Capt. Gerald Young led the North Vietnamese through the jungle and away from the crash site.

Flak Trap

By John T. Correll



Capt. Gerald Young was assigned to a rescue squadron at Da Nang AB, South Vietnam, in August 1967. Three months later, his helicopter was caught in a flak trap.

On the afternoon of Nov. 8, 1967, a 12-man team of American and South Vietnamese soldiers returning from a secret road-watch and reconnaissance mission on the Ho Chi Minh Trail was ambushed and mauled by a North Vietnamese Army battalion.

The team was assigned to Military Assistance Command Vietnam's "Studies and Observation Group." The name was intentionally vague. MACV/SOG was an unconventional warfare task force that had been conducting cross-border operations in the Laotian Panhandle—where the United States did not admit it had any military forces—since October 1965.

Some contemporary reports give the location of the ambush as Vietnam's Quang Tri Province, but the actual site was a mountainside, surrounded by dense jungle, a few miles inside Laos. It was not far from the US Marine Corps base at Khe Sanh, which lay to the northeast on the other side of the border.

At first, the soldiers thought they had run into a reinforced company, but it turned out to be the main body of an enemy battalion.

The team leader, a US Army Special Forces sergeant, called for help—just as the North Vietnamese expected him to do. They were setting up what was known as a "flak trap."

In the Vietnam War, the United States made an unprecedented effort to rescue those shot down or in trouble in hostile territory. The North Vietnamese knew it, too, and took advantage of it. They often held back from finishing off the survivors of a crash or an attack, preferring to use the Americans as bait. Helicopters and other aircraft would be coming soon and the aircraft would make fat targets as they moved in for the rescue.

The first effort to pick up the SOG team was by a South Vietnamese Air Force H-34, escorted by a US Army UH-1B "Huey" gunship. The North Vietnamese held their fire as the two helicopters approached.

The Huey went in first and hosed down the surrounding area with rockets and guns. The enemy guns were silent until the H-34 pulled into position above the hillside and a sudden fusillade blew him out of the sky. The Huey attacked again, and again the ground fire stopped. The

Huey pilot decided to try the rescue himself, and his helicopter was promptly shot down as well.

The NVA battalion could have made short work of the beleaguered patrol, but chose instead to wait for more aircraft to be drawn into the flak trap, which was still baited.

The second rescue force got there around midnight. There were two Air Force HH-3E "Jolly Green Giant" helicopters from Da Nang, an Air Force C-130 flare ship, and three Army helicopter gunships.

Flares from the C-130 lit up the whole area and the Hueys pounded the enemy positions with their rockets and guns. The first HH-3E, call sign Jolly Green 29, maneuvered into position on the slope and picked up two American soldiers and three South Vietnamese. However, enemy fire from a nearby ridge took its toll and Jolly Green 29 pulled away leaking fuel and hydraulic fluid and headed for an emergency landing at Khe Sanh, the closest airstrip.

The pilot of Jolly Green 29 advised the second helicopter, Jolly Green 26, to pull out. The ground fire on the



Photo courtesy of Yadira Young

The HH-3E Jolly Green Giant was the most famous of rescue helicopters during the Vietnam War. Its nickname came in part from its green and brown paint scheme.

mountainside was intense, and the enemy guns were too numerous for the Hueys to suppress. The Rescue Center agreed and told Jolly Green 26 to return to Da Nang although there were more survivors left on the ground.

The pilot of Jolly Green 26, Capt. Gerald O. Young, didn't like that order. He talked it over with his crew and they all wanted to stay. Expressing the sentiments of them all, the copilot, Capt. Ralph W. Brower, said



An Air Force art collection painting by Harvey Kidder portrays Young and the helicopter rescue that he led in Vietnam.



Capt. Ralph Brower (shown here as a lieutenant) was the copilot on Young's helicopter. When Young asked the crew if they should continue the rescue attempt, Brower spoke for them all: "We're airborne and hot to trot."

that "we're airborne and hot to trot." Young appealed the order to return and the Rescue Center authorized them to see what they could do.

Young, 37, had a lot of flying experience behind him. He had dropped out of high school and joined the Navy in 1947. In the Navy, he obtained a General Educational Development diploma and got a private pilot's license. After a break in service, he again joined the Navy. In 1956, he moved over to the Air Force, where he earned his commission through the Aviation Cadets, went to flight training, and became a helicopter pilot. In August 1967, he was assigned to the 37th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron at Da Nang Air Base in South Vietnam. On Nov. 9, Young was on his 60th combat mission.

Jolly Green 26 went in fast, with the gunships strafing the jungle on both sides. It was a tricky hover. Young rested the right main wheel on the slope while holding the other two wheels in the air and avoiding rotor contact with the ground. Brower directed the gunship fire. The pararescue jumper, Sgt. Larry W. Maysey, hopped to the ground and lifted two American sergeants, both of them wounded, up to the flight engineer, SSgt. Eugene L. Clay, who pulled them aboard.

As Young applied power to lift off, enemy troops appeared at point-blank range and raked Jolly Green 26 with au-

tomatic weapons fire. A rifle-launched grenade struck the right engine, which caught fire and exploded. The big

helicopter flipped over on its back, burst into flames, and crashed down the hillside into a ravine.

17 Hours

Young was suspended by his seat belt, hanging upside down, and his clothing was afire. He managed to kick out the right window, get out of his straps, and reach the ground. He rolled farther down the embankment and beat out the fire in his clothes. The burns already covered a fourth of his body.

He found another survivor, one of the Army sergeants, who had also been thrown clear. He was unconscious. Young put out the fire in the sergeant's clothing with his bare hands. He tried to reach others in the wreckage, but was driven back by the heat.

About 3:30 a.m., two A-1Es, Sandy 07 and 08, arrived from a base in Thailand to direct the continuing rescue effort. At this point, at least seven Americans and South Vietnamese were still alive on the hillside.

According to Maj. Jimmy Kilbourne, the pilot of Sandy 07, the rescue team could not talk with Young on the radio

Air Rescue in Vietnam

One of the great success stories of the Vietnam War was combat search and rescue. Chances were good that a pilot shot down or troops in trouble behind enemy lines would be picked up and brought out.

Air Rescue Service—later Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service—was credited with saving 2,511 aircrew members and 1,372 others during the war. Of the aircrew rescues, 739 were in Laos, 176 were in North Vietnam, and 1,596 were in South Vietnam. That record was all the more impressive because the Air Force entered the Vietnam War with extremely limited rescue capability.

Initially, rescue detachments used the HH-43F Huskie, a utility helicopter, universally known as "Pedro," designed for fire and crash work around air bases. It was slow, unarmed, and had a short operating range. Nevertheless, Pedro accounted for more saves than any other rescue helicopter in the war.

The HH-3E, most famous of the rescue helicopters and called the "Jolly Green Giant" because of its green and brown camouflage, arrived in 1965. The Jolly Green was built for missions deep in North Vietnam. It had a range of 736 miles, could be refueled in flight, and could carry up to 15 wounded in litters. It had two 7.62 mm machine guns to aid in its own defense.

The ultimate rescue helicopter in Vietnam was the HH-53C Super Jolly, almost twice the size of the HH-3, faster, better armed, and with longer range and able to carry more people. It entered service in 1967. The other services also flew some rescue missions, as did the CIA's proprietary airline, Air America.

The conspicuous heroes of ARRS were the pararescue jumpers, or PJs, airmen trained not only in rescue but also in survival skills, hand-to-hand combat, and as medics. They went down on jungle penetrators attached to long cables to bring out the wounded. PJs won more decorations for bravery than any other airmen in the war.



Sgt. Larry Maysey, a pararescue jumper, lifted two wounded US soldiers onto Young's helicopter. He died when enemy fire hit the Jolly Green, causing it to flip over and burst into flames.

because there were “three ‘beepers’ broadcasting on the emergency radio frequency, making voice contact with the survivors impossible. ... The beepers blocked the voice transmissions.” The scene below was illuminated, Kilbourne said, by the three helicopters, which formed a “fiery triangle” within 100 yards of each other.

Sandy 07, who was directing the rescue team, decided to wait until first light and bring in more Sandys, fighters, and gunships before the next attempt. “The plan,” Kilbourne said, “was to go in early, locate the survivors, and draw enemy fire by flying low and slow over the area.” Sandy 07 would then put fire from gunships and fighters on the enemy positions and “escort the Jolly Green Giants in for the pickup while all four A-1Es formed a firing ‘daisy chain’ around them.”

At daybreak, Young came out of hiding long enough to fire a pen gun flare. He wanted to warn the Sandys that they were circling a flak trap. Sandy 07, making a low, slow pass, saw Young. The Sandys made about 40 passes, “trolling” for ground fire, but drew none.

At 7 a.m., Sandys 05 and 06 relieved Sandys 07 and 08, who were low on fuel. Sandy 05 spotted five survivors near the wreckage of one of the helicopters. Two hours had passed with no sign of the enemy, so the Sandys led Army and VNAF helicopters in for

the pickup. They were not fired upon. Apparently, the enemy had pulled back for the night and had not yet returned. Sandy 05 was on the verge of sending in a Jolly Green to pick up Young and the sergeant when the North Vietnamese troops reappeared.

Young saw the enemy force approaching from the south. He hid the wounded man and decided he would lead the North Vietnamese away from the crash site if he could. Injured and suffering from second and third degree

burns, he drifted into shock from time to time. He used his survival maps to cover the worst of his burns.

“When enemy troops approached the crash scene, he led them away from the wounded sergeant hidden in the underbrush,” an Air Force historical summary said. “He took off through the brush, enemy troops following him. Young knew that the only way rescue helicopters would be able to reach the scene and recover any remaining survivors was if they could see and have time to operate without encountering enemy fire. Young was determined to give them that time by luring his pursuers farther and farther from the wreckage. In his condition, that meant almost certain capture or death. After stumbling for six miles, he eluded the North Vietnamese troops in pursuit.”

Young came to an open field, dragged himself out, signaled the helicopters circling overhead, and was picked up. He had been on the ground for 17 hours.

Medal of Honor

Back at the crash site, US and VNAF aircraft pounded the enemy with rockets, cannon, and machine gun fire. The NVA gunners got a piece of Sandy 07—who had since returned and resumed control—and kept on shooting.

Eventually, a 100-man ground party landed, remained overnight, rescued another survivor, picked up bodies, and destroyed ordnance on the Army



Photo courtesy of Yaelira Young

Young suffered second and third degree burns in the helicopter fire. He covered them with survival maps and led the enemy away from the crash site, so others could be safely rescued. Here, he recovers on USS Sanctuary after his own rescue.



Young stands in front of his barracks next to an advertising icon that helped give a nickname to the HH-3 helicopter. On the back of this photo, he wrote, "Two Jolly Greens."

gunship. The eight helicopters working the extraction had to avoid the flak trap, but they took no more losses.

Accounts vary of how many people got off the hillside. According to an article written in 1969 for *Airman*, the official magazine of the Air Force, by Sandy 07 pilot Kilbourne, "seven survivors and the remains of six men were recovered." The bodies of Brower, Maysey, and Clay were not recovered.

Young was treated for his wounds at Da Nang and flown back to the United States for further treatment and skin grafts. He spent six months in hospitals recovering from burns before he returned to active duty.

The Medal of Honor was presented to Young by President Lyndon B. Johnson at the Pentagon, May 14, 1968, in ceremonies dedicating the Pentagon's new Hall of Heroes. The other members of the Jolly Green 26 crew, Capt. Ralph W. Brower, SSgt. Eugene L. Clay, and Sgt. Larry W. Maysey, were awarded the Air Force Cross posthumously. The four Sandy pilots received the Silver Star.

Propensity for "Rescuing"

Gerald Young served another 13 years in the Air Force after returning from Vietnam. He had several assignments in flight training programs at the Air Force Academy and in Air Training Command. He helped set up a forerunner to the Military As-

finished his B.A. degree at the University of Maryland with a major in Latin Studies and a minor in Spanish. That prepared him for his last assignment, as air attaché to Colombia. He retired as a lieutenant colonel in 1980.

Young and his family went to the Pacific Northwest and a 30-acre farm on Guemes Island in Puget Sound, a five-minute ferry ride from Anacortes, Wash.

"I think that 'rescuing' was in his blood," said his wife, Yadira Young. "Here on our farm ... he always wanted to employ people who needed second chances. As he worked alongside of his helpers fixing fences or feeding the cattle, he told them that it was never too late to change."

He was a frequent speaker for schools, ROTC units, and public events and took an active role in the community. The city of Anacortes named Young's Park, a popular recreation area on the north end of the island, for him.



After receiving the Medal of Honor from President Johnson, Young and his first wife, Nancy Lee, show the award to Gen. John McConnell, Air Force Chief of Staff.

sistance to Safety and Traffic (MAST) program in which military helicopters support the civilian highway patrol in emergencies. He also assisted the Panamanian Air Force in establishing a rescue program.

During a tour with the VIP transport squadron at Andrews AFB, Md., he

Young was diagnosed in 1989 with a brain tumor and died in 1990, just after his 60th birthday. A memorial service on Guemes Island featured a flyover by HH-3 helicopters. He was subsequently buried with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery. ■

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