

# The Tiger and the Hummingbird

It was David against Goliath when Forward Air Controller Hilliard Wilbanks single-handedly took on a Viet Cong battalion.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE

**C**APT. Hilliard Wilbanks was a fighter pilot. When he went to war, that's the way he wanted to go. But in early 1966, the US was just getting into a major buildup in Vietnam. There was a shortage of pilots, and personal preferences went by the board. In April 1966, Captain Wilbanks arrived in Vietnam as a forward air controller with the 21st Air Support Squadron, destined to fly a most unwarlike plane—the 105-mile-an-hour Cessna O-1 Bird Dog. Aside from additional communications gear and four wing pylons for target-marking smoke rockets, it was the same plane in which aspiring civilian pilots took their first lessons at the local airport on a Sunday morning.

Wilbanks may have been a frustrated fighter pilot, but he was also a professional who knew that the FACs were the key link in providing close air support to ground troops fighting in jungle country. By February 24, 1967, he had survived 487 combat missions and had earned the DFC, seventeen Air Medals, and the satisfaction of knowing that his work in spotting enemy forces and directing fighter strikes against them had saved hundreds of allied lives. Two more months and he would be on the way home to his wife and four small children.

Late on the afternoon of the twenty-fourth, Captain Wilbanks was in the air over the Central Highlands, about 100 miles north of Saigon. He was in radio contact with the senior American advisor of the 23d Viet-

namese Ranger Battalion. The Rangers were advancing through a tea plantation that gave little cover when Wilbanks, intimately familiar with the terrain, spotted a trap ahead of them.

A large enemy force was concealed in camouflaged foxholes on a hillside. As Wilbanks radioed a warning to the Rangers, the enemy, knowing they had been seen, opened fire, pinning down two Vietnamese companies. Wilbanks fired a smoke rocket to mark the center of the Viet Cong position, drawing heavy fire on his frail O-1. The VC, knowing that fighters would soon be on the way, left their foxholes and charged down the slope toward the outnumbered Rangers.

Captain Wilbanks knew the fighters would probably not arrive soon enough to save the day unless the Viet Cong attack could be temporarily disrupted. He had two alternatives: get out of range of Viet Cong fire and hope the F-4s would come in time, or attack with the only aviation ordnance he had—his remaining smoke rockets. Three

times he dove through automatic weapons and small-arms fire, each time putting a white phosphorous rocket into the Viet Cong line. The momentarily disorganized attackers now knew that he had no more rockets. They moved forward once more against the Rangers.

Wilbanks had one last desperate alternative that might slow the attack for the few minutes needed to get fighters on target. He picked up the M-16 automatic rifle he always carried on missions and began a series of strafing attacks from an altitude of 100 feet, firing through the open side window and reloading between passes. Even with violent evasive maneuvers, which weren't possible while he was firing, his chance of survival against the firepower of a battalion-size force was remote. The veteran Wilbanks knew it.

On his third strafing run, the O-1 wavered. Wilbanks slumped over the controls, and his aircraft crashed 100 meters ahead of the Rangers. An Army advisor, Capt. Gary Vote, ran to the plane and pulled the unconscious Wilbanks from the wreckage. Two Army helicopter gunships that earlier had been driven off by enemy fire tried unsuccessfully to land by the crashed plane. Finally, a flight of F-4s roared in to strafe the enemy while a chopper picked up the wounded Wilbanks. He died before reaching a friendly base, but he had given the Rangers time to withdraw to safety.

On January 25, 1968, Secretary of the Air Force Harold Brown presented the Medal of Honor to Hilliard Wilbanks's widow, who was accompanied at the ceremony by two of their four children. In his heroic act of self-sacrifice, fighter pilot Wilbanks died while performing a fighter mission in the slowest and most fragile of USAF's aircraft. He fought his last battle with the heart of a tiger, on the wings of a hummingbird. ■



USAF Chief of Staff Gen. J. P. McConnell shows Capt. Hilliard Wilbanks's Medal of Honor to Paula and Tommy at the Pentagon ceremony at which Air Force Secretary Harold Brown, left, presented the award to Mrs. Rosemary Wilbanks.