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Research Materials/Source Documents
AWARDS AND DECORATIONS

FILE TITLE: Air Force Cross Recipient - CMSgt (Ret) Joel E. Talley

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TALLEY, JOEL E.

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"The President of the United States of America, authorized by Title 10, Section 8742, United States Code, awards the Air Force Cross to Airman First Class Joel E. Talley for extraordinary heroism in military operations against an opposing armed force as Rescue Specialist on an HH-3E helicopter in Southeast Asia on 2 July 1968. On that date, Airman Talley volunteered to be lowered to the ground from a hovering helicopter into the jungle of North Vietnam to rescue an injured pilot, who had ejected the previous day. The downed pilot had parachuted into a concentration of North Vietnamese Army regulars who immediately surrounded him and set up gun positions to trap the forthcoming rescue helicopters. Four rescue attempts were driven off, and a supporting fighter aircraft was shot down by the devastating ground fire which encircled the survivor's position. Despite full knowledge of the well laid trap, Airman Talley voluntarily descended to search the jungle floor. After an extensive search he found the helpless survivor, carried him to the rescue device, and signaled the helicopter to commence extraction. While Airman Talley and the survivor were being hoisted, a fusillade of fire raked the helicopter scoring more than forty hits, forcing the helicopter to exit the area, exposing both airmen to hostile fire. The rescue was successfully accomplished...."

THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA . . .

A1C Joel E. Talley was a newcomer to the aerospace rescue business on July 2, 1968. He wasn't a rookie in terms of know-how or ability — he had been through a year of intensive training, earning the right to wear the maroon beret of a pararescue specialist . . . a PJ.

AUTHORIZED BY TITLE 10, SECTION 8742, UNITED STATES CODE . . .

But, he was a newcomer to Vietnam. Less than a month had passed since he stepped off the aircraft and into the heat of his first Southeast Asian afternoon.

AWARDS: THE AIR FORCE CROSS . . .

Looking out of the briefing room window at the HH-3E, *Jolly Green Giant* helicopter warming up on the pad, he thought about the year before—the year of training—that had prepared him for the mission he was about to fly.

"One helluva year," he silently recalled.

TO AIRMAN JOEL E. TALLEY . . .

It all began in basic training, during career counseling. Talley had been classified in the mechanics field, but was looking for something special.

FOR EXTRAORDINARY HEROISM . . .

So he was really tuned in that day in the big, green-walled classroom at Lackland when an NCO talked about some career fields that were open to volunteers. One of them was pararescue, and there was even a team of three PJs there to explain their jobs.

"It sounded fantastic," Talley explains now, "so I thought I would try to get into the field." A week later, he and 19 other volunteers began to test. Physical fitness, mental aptitude and a variety of other tests were required. Not everyone can cut it as a PJ.

IN MILITARY OPERATIONS . . .

Five of the volunteers were selected to begin training. Talley was one of them. With a single stripe freshly sewn on their new, green fatigues, the five airmen proceeded to the Aerospace Rescue and Re-

covery Service Headquarters, then in Orlando, Fla., for three weeks of intensive physical training. Three tough weeks. And that was only the beginning. "A team of seasoned PJs was there to prepare us for the schools to come," he recalls, pauses, then adds, "and they did."

AGAINST AN OPPOSING ARMED FORCE . . .

Jump school at Ft. Benning, Ga., was next. "It was rough but really interesting at the same time," Talley recalls. "PJs have a reputation for being gung-ho."

AS RESCUE SPECIALIST . . .

From jump school, the fledgling pararescuemen went to Fairchild AFB, Wash., for Air Force survival school, back to Orlando for more physical fitness training and then to Navy Scuba School in Key West, Fla. "That was the toughest of them all," he explains. "We stayed there a month and went back to Orlando."

ON AN HH-3E HELICOPTER . . .

After a ride in the altitude chamber, "for our flying status," it was on to Sheppard AFB, Tex., for medical training. "Essentially," Talley explains, "we are parachuting medics and they really crammed a lot of medical knowledge into us during that school."

Completing medical training, they went on to Eglin AFB, Fla., for transition training. "This is where we got it all together," he recalls, with a quick laugh. During the Eglin school older, seasoned pararescue experts teach the neophytes how each phase of their training will be used to complete a very important mission—aerospace rescue and recovery.

IN SOUTHEAST ASIA ON 2 JULY 1968. . .

During their three months of transition, the new PJs learn effective use of their unique equipment, advanced survival techniques—under many conditions—and continue physical training.

January 18, 1968, Airman Talley donned the maroon beret of pararescue specialist, a full-fledged PJ. After putting on the trademark he would wear with distinction during the next three years, he

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and his fellow PJs returned to Orlando to pick up their personal gear and await assignments.

Talley wasn't surprised at all to get orders to Da Nang AB, Republic of Vietnam. He took some leave, returned to Orlando for a familiarization course on helicopter operations and then headed for the West Coast and a ride to SEA.

He stepped off the aircraft in early June and began duty with the 37th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Sq. A local checkout and he was ready to go.

ON THAT DATE . . .

A few days less than a month had passed since his first day in Vietnam. Today, July 2, 1968, he would have to put his training to use—in the jungle. It would be his first rescue mission on low bird, the primary rescue chopper that would go in for a survivor. *Numero uno*. Number one. It wouldn't be just another training exercise where only a grade or perhaps the scorn of an evaluator counted. There would be no room for a rookie in the rescue bird today—no room at all, and he knew it.

The word had come in the day before. A *Thud* jock was down in the jungle. Worse yet, it was in North Vietnam, just inside the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ).

To further complicate the situation, the F-105 pilot, Lt. Col. Jack Modica, was right in the middle of a hornet's nest of North Vietnamese regulars. But instead of taking Colonel Modica prisoner, or killing him, the soldiers had set a death trap—baited with the downed pilot!

After his F-105 had been blasted with 37mm. ground fire, the colonel had punched out into a small U-shaped valley and the NVA troops had set up positions on the ridges and in the dense jungle which surrounded the airman. It was a common NVA trick, and they awaited the rescue forces, with a variety of small arms, .30 and .50 caliber machineguns, primed and ready.

During the afternoon and early evening the *Jolly Greens* and supporting A-1Es—the *Spads*—made several attempts to go

in for the colonel. Each time they had been driven away by walls of small arms fire and heavy machineguns.

Darkness comes quickly in the jungle, the red sun blinks and dies with little warning. And at dark, most of the rescue aircraft had to withdraw. But two *Jolly Green Giants* stayed, keeping a constant watch over the colonel.

Late in the evening, other rescue crews began planning for a first-light effort to pull the pilot out of the trap before it shut . . . permanently.

Jolly Green 21 would scramble before dawn and rendezvous with supporting A-1Es. They would gather below the DMZ.

Meanwhile, the two choppers that had stayed the night made another attempt to rescue the survivor and were again driven away by enemy fire. One of the A-1Es, attempting to cover the rescue attempt, was shot out of the sky.

The morning dawned hot and bright as the crew of *Jolly Green 21* prepared to make another attempt. Lt. Lance A. Eagan, an exchange pilot from the Coast Guard, Maj. Robert E. Booth, and flight engineer Sgt. Herbert H. Honer were ready to go.

So was Airman Talley—his year of pararescue training about to undergo a test of life or death.

The airmen aboard *Jolly Green 21* knew the risks. They knew that the soldiers surrounding the colonel had had time to reinforce their positions and were stronger than ever. They also knew there wouldn't be another chance. It was now or never.

Jolly Green 21 waited as the *Spads* flew in to soften the area. Raking the sides of the valley with rocket and machinegun fire, they tried to silence the formidable enemy positions.

After they had worked over the area for a time, *Jolly Green 21* was called. As the chopper moved into position, 37mm. antiaircraft artillery began to burst around it, jarring and rocking the ship.

Diving violently to the left, the pilot took the bird down on the deck to avoid



A1C Joel Talley rides a hoist to the floor of South Vietnam's jungle during a rescue operation.



Talley donned the maroon beret of a pararescue specialist in January 1968 and has worn it with distinction ever since.

the exploding triple-A. Close to the trees they continued on their way toward the rescue point.

Lieutenant Egan, the crew commander, planned to make a pass over the area to see if they would draw ground fire and possibly to spot the colonel, pass over the area again and then repeat the maneuver. On the final pass, the jungle penetrator hoist would be lowered from the chopper and the survivor would strap himself on and be pulled to safety. They hoped!

It was considered too risky to lower a rescuer with the penetrator because of the concentration of enemy troops surrounding the area. Much too risky.

But Airman Talley was willing to take the risk. Again and again he volunteered to ride the penetrator down into the jungle trap.

On *Jolly Green 21*'s first pass, Talley and Sergeant Honer spotted the smoke from a survival flare filtering through the dense growth of trees. It was then that Lieutenant Egan made a decision.

There had been no ground fire on the first pass—maybe, just maybe, the A-1Hs had really cleaned up the area and the North Vietnamese soldiers had pulled out. It was a chance. And since they also had spotted the survivor's smoke, they knew where he was—or at least pretty close.

They also knew that the *Spads* had hit only the ridges surrounding the survivor, but not close in. The ground could still be crawling with the enemy—even if they had left their position on the hill—just waiting for the rescue specialist to be lowered into their sights. Talley agreed to go in for the colonel and Lieutenant Egan decided to attempt rescue on the first pass.

Talley checked his equipment, adjusted the harness and started down on the jungle penetrator. Down—70, 60, 50, 40, 30 feet above the ground in the cover of the trees and heavy foliage.

Before leaving the helicopter, Talley had oriented himself to the survivor's suspected position in relation to that of the hovering chopper. But on the way down, the penetrator began to spin around and around. When he reached the ground he

had lost the positions he had set for himself and had to call back to *Jolly Green 21* for a bearing. The flight engineer pointed toward the direction where they had hoped the survivor was located.

Pistol in hand, Talley began his search. He crouched low and began inching his way through the heavy underbrush.

Dense jungle had turned the terrain into a dim background of shadows. Talley searched on, looking for both the enemy—who may have been lurking in the darkened corners—or the colonel who was so close to rescue.

Hovering above, *Jolly Green 21* had still not taken any ground fire. *Was the enemy waiting? Were they about to spring the trap?*

After a few minutes of searching and following the smoke of a flare, Talley lost radio contact with the colonel. He then slowed his pace and continued moving slowly through the underbrush, looking, watching, concentrating on finding another point of reference.

Then he spotted the glow of a night flare Colonel Modica had ignited. He quickened his pace toward the spot where the flare burned. He could only catch quick glimpses of the sizzling signal through the deep green growths. But at least he was going in the right direction.

The problem now was to keep a bearing on the flare and locate the colonel. Easy enough? But the night flare would only burn a short time and then the jungle would quickly darken and close. Time was critical.

He continued moving through the underbrush, across a gully and toward a large tree.

Then he spotted him, lying on the side of a small hill.

Talley rushed to his side, checked him for wounds and began directing the helicopter toward the spot where they waited. Because of the pilot's injury—a broken pelvis—Talley decided it would be too much of a strain on the colonel to carry him to the penetrator, so he signaled the chopper to come in closer.

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possible for the crew of the rescue bird to see Talley and the survivor, but from the ground the chopper was visible. Using Talley's radio directions, the pilot moved the bird into a good pickup position and dropped the penetrator about 30 or 40 feet from the men.

Still the jungle was silent. No small arms fire crackled from the green.

Talley carried the colonel to the penetrator, strapped him on and gave a signal to the chopper to pull them on board. But the injured man slipped from the hoist before they started up.

Again strapping him into the harness, Talley radioed that they were ready to go.

"Take us up," he called.

Almost before the electronically amplified words could reach the chopper, enemy fire erupted from the jungle. The enemy had monitored the rescue radios and the signal to "take us up," brought an instant response.

"All hell was breaking loose around us," Talley recalls.

Deadly accurate fire came from every angle as the crew began a desperate effort to pull Talley and the survivor on board the ship. One round, fired from a position on the side of the valley pierced the windshield of the chopper and passed between the two pilots.

Knowing that the most vulnerable time during a rescue operation was when the penetrator began its upward journey, the enemy had waited. When the survivor and the pararescueman were dangling in space, they opened fire on the bird.

From the jungle floor and the sides of the valley, the shots crackled.

Before the chopper could climb to safety, the men dangling below had to clear the tops of the trees. If not, the branches and limbs would tear them from the hoist and drop them into enemy hands.

They rose 10, 20, 30 feet. Ground fire continued to erupt from the jungle.

Forty, 50 feet. The hoist cleared the trees and the chopper raced to safety. Talley and Modica still dangled below. Slowly the men were pulled into *Jolly Green 21*.

On board, Talley and the flight engineer administered first aid to the pilot and made him as comfortable as possible as they sped to a nearby hospital.

After landing on the medical evacuation pad outside the hospital and seeing that the colonel was on his way to emergency treatment, the crew checked over the damage done to their helicopter.

More than 60 rounds had pierced her skin, four of the main rotor blades had been hit and nine holes had been punched in the fuel tanks.

On the way home, the flight engineer asked Talley to look to the rear of the chopper. "Sunlight beamed through the dozens of holes the ground fire had made in the aircraft," he explains. "It was amazing none of us was hurt or that the bird could still fly."

"You know," Talley recalls now, "you don't think about what is happening when it is all happening. You just do what you are trained to do and that is that."

Throughout the flight of *Jolly Green 21* on that day in July, Talley explains, he didn't think any of the crewmembers really thought about the dangers involved. "We were all fully aware of what had to be faced, but we just thought about the best ways of getting the job done.

"Even when I was on the ground, I was concentrating only on finding the man. Everything else was secondary."

Talley had spent 17 minutes searching the jungle floor for the survivor—a very, very long time when surrounded by the jaws of a well-laid death trap.

Now a Staff Sergeant, Talley is working for the 57th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Sq., Lajes Field, Azores. Before leaving Southeast Asia, he flew a total of 276 combat sorties and logged 294 combat hours. But even if Talley were to fly a million hours, he probably won't forget his first life and death test.

Through his extraordinary heroism, superb airmanship and aggressiveness, Airman Talley reflected the highest credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

