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By John L. Frisbee, Contributing Editor

A Tale of Two Crosses

Leland Kennedy salvaged two combat rescue attempts that seemed doomed to failure.

No one who was in Southeast Asia during the long course of the war will be surprised that, in relation to their number, Air Rescue and Recovery Service (ARRS) crewmen earned more combat decorations than any other group. One of their number, then-Capt. Leland Kennedy, was the first airman to be awarded the Air Force Cross twice. His two awards of the nation's second highest decoration for valor were for extraordinary heroism in combat missions only 15 days apart.

Captain Kennedy had been at Udorn RTAFB, Thailand, with Detachment 5 of the 38th ARRS Squadron only a short time when, on Oct. 5, 1966, he lifted his HH-3E Jolly Green Giant helicopter off the ground to search for an F-4C crew downed along the Black River west of Hanoi. It was a deep penetration--some 300 miles into enemy territory. He was flying backup to Capt. Oliver O'Mara, pilot of the low rescue bird.

The F-4 crew was located in a box canyon. Two A-1H "Sandys" made a low pass over the area, drawing no fire. Captain O'Mara dropped into the canyon and lowered his hoist. His helicopter was immediately hit by fire from a ridge 200 yards above the F-4 pilot. Captain O'Mara had to pull out, but he made two more attempts in the badly damaged HH-3E before his hoist was knocked out and he had to head for Udorn. (Captain O'Mara was awarded the Air Force Cross for his part in the mission.)

The usual practice was for the secondary helicopter to escort the lead ship home if it was heavily damaged, but Captain Kennedy was asked to return and attempt a pickup. It was his eighth mission and his first actual rescue attempt. On the first pass, his Jolly Green was hit and one of the crew wounded. In spite of the odds against them, Kennedy's three crewmen joined him in wanting to try again. Four times the HH-3E was driven off by enemy fire, taking more hits on each pass. On the fifth try, with Captain Kennedy holding the aircraft in a hover just off the canyon floor, the crew dropped their hoist to the pilot and reeled him in. Kennedy climbed out of the canyon and flew his tattered chopper back to Udorn. His determination, skill, and sustained heroism were to make him a member of an elite group--only 25 at that time--to earn the Air Force Cross.

The mission for which Captain Kennedy was awarded an oak leaf cluster to the Air Force Cross came 15 days later, on Oct. 20. Again he was flying the secondary helicopter in an attempt to rescue an F-4 crew, both of whom had parachuted into trees. The lead helicopter flown by Maj. A.D. Youngblood, dropped its hoist to the pilot, who had strapped himself to a tree. While the downed pilot was hanging half in the hoist, Major Youngblood's Jolly Green was hit so hard he had to make an emergency landing.

Captain Kennedy, descending and dumping fuel to compensate for the added weight of Major Youngblood's crew and the F-4 pilot, directed Youngblood to a field nearly a mile away. Kennedy had to continue dumping fuel while

on the ground--engines running and rotor turning--knowing that vaporizing fuel might blow up the aircraft at any moment. Luck was with them. Major Youngblood's crew and the rescued pilot climbed aboard, one of them wounded by small arms fire, and Kennedy lifted off with nine men in the helicopter.

At that point, an O-1E pilot spotted the second F-4 crewman, still in a tree. As Kennedy hovered to pick him up, enemy soldiers came from the tree line, firing at the HH-3. The F-4 crewman was wounded as he came up the hoist, and Kennedy started for Nakhon Phanom. Then one of the Sandys that had participated in the rescue reported that it was losing power Kennedy escorted the damaged Sandy all the way to a safe landing. It was a great day for an elated Jolly Green crew who saved six fellow Americans from death or the horrors of Hanoi's prisons.

Leland Kennedy, now a retired colonel, flew 99 missions in Southeast Asia for a total of 354 combat hours. Colonel Kennedy spent much of his subsequent career in Alaska before retiring from an assignment as director of Operations Plans at Tactical Air Command headquarters. Like so many other ARRS crewmen, the satisfaction of saving others whose lives were in peril made his combat tour in southeast Asia the high point of an Air Force career. Leland Kennedy was a major player in Southeast Asia rescue operations, called by former Secretary of the Air Force Harold Brown "one of the most outstanding human dramas in the history of the Air Force."

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