



HISTORY IN BLUE

A 5-MINUTE HISTORY LESSON

AIR FORCE HEROES

Helo pilot's heroism in Laos earned him Air Force Cross

By Fred L. Borch
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SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Retired Col. Philip J. Conran, a CH-3E helicopter pilot stationed in Thailand in 1969, received the Air Force Cross for attempting to rescue another helicopter crew. This award is unusual because the action occurred in Laos at a time when the U.S. had not yet acknowledged that its troops were fighting there.

Born in Connecticut in 1937, Conran graduated from Fordham University in 1958. Having been a member of the Reserve Officers' Training Corps, he was commissioned a second lieutenant.

After completing flight training at Spence Air Base, Ga., and Laredo Air Base, Texas, Conran received his wings in 1960. He served two tours in air rescue prior to arriving in July 1968 at Nakhon Phanom, Thailand.

Then-Maj. Conran was assigned to the 21st Special Operations Squadron. More than a year later, on Oct. 6, 1969, he was flying in a formation of five helicopters carrying friendly troops to Laos. After being told the landing zone was clear, the helicopters started their approach in trail formation.

It was an ambush. The lead helicopter was shot down. Its crew and passengers abandoned their aircraft and took up defensive positions. Conran climbed out of the range of small-arms fire, took command of the remaining four helicopters and directed fire from two escorting A-1E Skyraiders.

Running low on fuel, Conran had two choices: return to a safe area and refuel — leaving his Air Force



COURTESY OF PHILIP J. CONRAN

Lt. Gen. Lucius D. Clay Jr. presents the Air Force Cross to then-Maj. Philip J. Conran for his actions in a 1968 rescue attempt in Laos.

comrades — or attempt a rescue of the downed crew and reinforce the friendly soldiers on the ground. Concluding that the 26 friendly soldiers would not be able to provide enough protection for the downed crew, Conran elected to land his aircraft.

During his landing attempt, Conran's CH-3E was severely damaged by small-arms fire. He could have broken off his approach and returned to a safe area, but he decided instead to land and unload the friendly soldiers on his aircraft — who joined the fight.

As Conran began to take the downed Air Force crew members aboard his helicopter, enemy fire ripped through the main rotor transmission and cockpit. Takeoff was then impossible. Conran and his crew abandoned their aircraft.

Throughout the day, Conran subjected himself to enemy fire to obtain ammunition and food from the downed helicopters. After an HH-3E "Jolly Green Giant" tried to rescue Conran and other downed airmen and

was driven off by an intense barrage of automatic-weapons fire, enemy mortar rounds began falling into the friendly positions. Again under fire, Conran located the enemy mortar crew and called in an airstrike to destroy it.

Conran was severely wounded in the leg. He did not mention this injury until he'd lost all feeling in his leg and realized that if another rescue were attempted, he might not be able to reach the rescue aircraft without help.

Just before nightfall, two "Jolly Greens" rescued all 44 personnel. Responsible for the survival of the entire party, Conran was recommended for the Medal of Honor.

In a recent interview, Conran said he was told that the nation's highest honor could not be considered in his case "because the government would have to admit that we'd been flying in Laos and, at the time, the government denied that any U.S. forces were engaged in combat operations in that area."

Conran received the Air Force Cross, the second highest gallantry decoration.

After his service in Southeast Asia, Conran finished his career as a command pilot with more than 5,000 flying hours, 300 of which were combat hours. He lives in California. □

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