[Joe M. Jackson]

Joe Madison Jackson

Mother's Day, 1968

It was Joe M. Jackson's third war and, at 45 years of age, the Air Force Lieutenant Colonel could feel the exhaustion of the long and emotionally charged day. None-the-less, he pushed his weariness aside long enough to grab a piece of paper and pen to scribble out a brief Mother's Day letter to his wife back home.

It had been a day of tragedy, a day of triumph, and a day of extreme valor by soldiers on the ground, pilots in the air, and a 3-man combat control team left alone and surrounded by enemy soldiers when the base camp at Kham Duc was evacuated. For Joe, the day was supposed to have been a boring and routine "milk run" that included the traditional bi-annual flight check. Then the unexpected happened. As he remembered the surprising turn of the day's events he wrote:

> *Love,*
> *Joe*

Mortars continued to crash around the airstrip as Major John Gallager and his two combat controllers moved towards the base camp. An enemy 51-caliber machinegun drummed across the asphalt amid the distinctive sounds of numerous AK-47 rifles firing in a cacophony of lethal death. Moving slowly, the three men kept their rifles leveled at the waist as they moved deeper into the rubble of the well-fortified Kham Duc perimeter. Kham Duc was under full attack, had been for two days, and Gallager and his men had returned to finish their job of evacuating American personnel as well as South Vietnamese soldiers and civilians.

Technical Sergeant Mort Freedman glanced nervously about, gripping his rifle so hard that the muscles of his arms were sore. Sergeant Jim Lundie glanced back at the airstrip, now damaged almost beyond use. Mid-way down the 6,000-foot strip sat the wreckage of an Air Force C-130, and just beyond that was the remains of a downed O-2 aircraft. Nearer to their position was the still-burning wreckage of an American helicopter. Evidence of the enemy's complete control of the surrounding area was visible in all directions.

Something seemed terribly wrong as the men moved further into the base camp to complete their mission of evacuating its 1,500 friendlies. Amid the crash of mortars, the crackle of burning fortifications, and the whine of enemy rounds, it was

the silence that unnerved the three men. No M-14 rifles spoke back at the hidden enemy, no American artillery roared to repulse the ever-advancing North Vietnamese, and no American voices shouted out to direct the three Air Force combat controllers to cover. Freedman ran for the battalion command bunker. It was empty! Slowly realization dawned…. the evacuation of Kham Duc was complete… the camp was deserted and would soon be swarming with victorious communist soldiers. Across the bowl-shaped valley, the three men could see the enemy advancing, moving quickly towards Kham Duc. Already they had reached the end of the airstrip.

“My God!” he shouted to his comrades. They’ve gotta get us out of here. We’re trapped!” The three Americans turned and ran, as fast and furiously as their legs would allow them. Their flight was without reason, without conscious thought. There was nowhere to run. The valley was filled with thousands of enemy soldiers, and the only American presence was the three combat controllers now trapped within the burning corpse of a once-proud Special Forces base camp on the far western border of South Vietnam.

KHAM DUC, *South Vietnam*

Only a few miles from the Laotian border, the camp provided an excellent staging area for Special Forces and LRRP (long-range reconnaissance patrols) into Laos. As the war escalated, Kham Duc also became an important training site for South Vietnamese CIDG (Civilian Irregular Defense Group) personnel. The military compound was built only a short distance from the village, allowing family members of South Vietnamese CIDG soldiers to live nearby. In the five years leading up to a fateful Mother’s Day in 1968, tons of material were routinely flown into the camp by US Air Force C-130 Hercules and C-123 aircraft. To accommodate supply aircraft, a 6,000-foot runway was erected between the camp and the village.

The Tet Offensive of 1968 placed new importance upon the strategic location at Kham Duc. On February 6 – 7 the Special Forces camp at Lang Vei fell to the Communists. During the same period, 5,000 US Marines held out against 20,000 NVA during the 77-day siege at Khe Sahn, just 100 miles to the north of Kham Duc. By the end of April 1968, it was the last remaining border camp in Military Region I. The distinction brought Kham Duc an amplified role in the eyes of military strategists…for both sides!

With the siege at Khe Sahn ended and US Marines still controlling the base camp, the NVA (North Vietnamese Army) moved their massive force south…towards Kham Duc. Slipping into the hills that surrounded the bowl-shaped valley in which the Special Forces camp and its airstrip were located, by the end of the first week of May the enemy was poised for attack. The 1st VC Regiment, 2nd NVA Division was well supplied

and vastly outnumbered the defenders of the base camp. The stage had been set for a repeat of the horrible battle at Lang Vei.

Alarmed war planners at MACV (Military Assistance Command Vietnam) ordered the immediate reinforcement of Kham Duc. Before reinforcements could be sent, in the early morning hours of Friday, May 10th, the Communist soldiers began their attack.

The first enemy mortars began to rain down on the American outpost a little before 3 A.M. The attack was bolstered by scattered machinegun and heavy recoilless rifle fire, as the invaders from the North used the cover of the surrounding hills to drop deadly fire on the American and South Vietnamese defenders. Forty-five minutes after the attack began at, enemy soldiers simultaneously struck the neighboring outpost at Ngok Tavak.

Ngok Tavak was located just five miles down-river from Kham Duc and was defended by a 113-man Strike Force Company led by 8 Special Forces and 3 Australian advisors. These were bolstered by two 105 artillery guns manned by 33 Marines from Battery D, 2nd Battalion, 12th Marines. It wouldn't be enough!

There was little comfort in the arrival the previous day of a CIDG platoon from Kham Duc that had pulled into Ngok Tavak for respite. Assigned to the outer perimeter defense, when the NVA began their frontal attack on Kham Duc, the CIDG platoon rushed towards the Marine compound with shouts of, "Don't shoot. We are friendly." Suddenly several members of the CIDG platoon began hurling grenades into the gun positions of the Marines, shooting any Americans they encountered in the early morning darkness. The NVA had successfully infiltrated the ranks of the CIDG.

By 5 A.M. the outpost at Ngok Tavik was littered with the bodies of dead and wounded Americans and South Vietnamese. As the enemy entered the east side of the perimeter, *Spooky* gunships were called in to strafe the innermost reaches of the camp to repel the invaders, despite the fact that wounded defenders were scattered among the invading NVA. It was the only hope of surviving to the dawn.

At sunrise the Australian advisers led a valiant CIDG counterattack, pushing the NVA back into the hills and recovering the captured Marine howitzers. Only nine rounds remained and, with the knowledge that the outpost was on the brink of capture when these were fired the surviving Americans destroyed the big guns. It had been a desperate battle, but the courageous defense had bought some badly needed time.

As the day dawned, a 45-man Mobile Strike Force arrived by helicopter, and the seriously wounded were evacuated. One helicopter was forced down when hit in the fuel line by enemy fire, another erupted into a ball of flaming wreckage when hit by a rocket. As the last helicopter left Ngok Tavik, two South Vietnamese and one

American soldier grasped the skids. Unable to maintain their hold, all three fell to their death's moments later.

Enemy fire continued to pound Ngok Tavik, and the defenders requested permission to abandon the outpost. "Hold on," came their orders. "Reinforcements are on the way."

Tan Son Nhut Air Base *near Saigon, South Vietnam*

Air Force T/Sgt. Mort Freedman hung up the barracks phone and yelled over to his partner, "Come on Jim, we've got a mission." Sgt. Jim Lundie smiled. A tour in Vietnam was usually days of boredom, interrupted infrequently by moments of intense excitement, sometimes coupled with an adrenaline rush of fear.

The two men made it a point to first gas up their jeep. Though their mission lay far to the north, their jeep would be going with them. In the back of that jeep sat a $60,000 radio, the primary weapon of their trade. Both men were Air Force combat controllers, elite members of a special group of airmen with a distinguished history dating back to the days of the Berlin Airlift.

Combat controllers had a reputation…and a good one. Trained as radio operators, they were also parachute and scuba qualified and had practiced hand-to-hand combat to an art. It was their job to be among the first into a drop zone, to organize and direct the aircraft arriving with the first waves of supplies…or assault troops. Because they were considered an elite element of the US Air Force, much like Special Forces are an elite element of the US Army, combat controllers were authorized to wear a blue beret.

Major John Gallagher joined the two controllers and the jeep was loaded on a C-130 transport. MACV had ordered the reinforcement of the Special Forces camp at Kham Duc, and it would be the job of these three men to organize and direct the arrival of Air Force transports bringing in massive supplies, heavy weapons, and a reinforced battalion of soldiers from the 196th Infantry (Americal). For the beleaguered defenders at Kham Duc and Ngok Tavik, the cavalry was on the way.

Meanwhile, the defenders at Ngok Tavik could hold out no longer. Ammunition was

running out, other supplies were almost expended, the soldiers were demoralized and exhausted, and few believed there was any prospect of reinforcement. As noon approached the survivors of the attack at Ngok Tavik piled up all the weapons and equipment they could not carry and destroyed them. A rocket was fired to destroy the helicopter downed earlier with enemy rounds to the fuel line, and Ngok Tavik was abandoned to the enemy. As the Americans withdrew, they were forced to leave their dead behind. Missing also from their ranks was Thomas Perry, a medic who had flown in that morning to treat the wounded.

The Marines quickly assembled an 11-man search team to find him, while the rest of the American, Australian, and South Vietnamese defenders began to escape and evasion in the dense jungle now crawling with North Vietnamese soldiers. Five hours later most of the latter group was pulled from the jungle by American helicopters, half-way back to Kham Duc. Neither Perry nor any of the 11 Marines on the search team was ever heard from again, and remain Missing in Action.

As the C-130 from Tan Son Nhut began its approach to the airstrip at Kham Duc, the combat control team was preparing to unload. They'd been to Kham Duc before and found it a pleasant and somewhat peaceful place. The airstrip was one of the best; an Army Engineer unit based at Kham Duc had devoted considerable time and effort to its construction and maintenance. This had all the makings of an easy mission…land, unload, then direct the arrival of several incoming aircraft bringing soldiers and supplies. A "walk-in-the-park".

Dreams of an easy mission quickly vanished with the less than perfect landing. The well-maintained airstrip at Kham Duc was no more. As the cargo door opened for the three men to unload their jeep and trailer, they began to hear the loud explosions of incoming rockets and mortars that blew gaping holes in the runway. Quickly they backed their equipment out of the cargo plane, mindful of the incoming rounds that fell around them. Within minutes a round struck and destroyed their trailer. Leaving its tangled wreckage where it lay, Lundie and Freedman drove the all-important jeep across the runway and into the protection of a small drainage ditch. Then, as the rounds continued to fall, they began setting up their antenna to organize the incoming flights.

Suddenly, less than ten yards away from their position, an enemy mortar exploded. The ditch sheltered the men, but when Freedman peered over the edge, he noticed a wounded soldier. Rushing to his aid, he found the man had been struck by shrapnel in three places, including a head wound. Freedman helped the wounded man to the ditch, then began applying first aid. "How's my head?" the frightened soldier asked.

"It's fine," Freedman reassured him. Though bleeding profusely, the wound wasn't

serious. Suddenly another enemy round struck nearby, sending a shard of metal to strike the wounded man in the head again. Blood flowed everywhere as the stricken man said, “Oh my God, it’s not fine now!” Freedman finished bandaging the man up, then helped him to shelter. Despite the four wounds, the man would survive.

Meanwhile Sgt. Lundie raced back to the wreckage of the trailer to rescue a small generator needed to power their equipment. As he struggled to free the equipment, he broke his hand. A Special Forces medic checked it out and advised Lundie to catch the next flight out to Cam Ranh for proper treatment. Lundie refused. There were important flights to guide into the airstrip at Kham Duc.

And then they came, a seemingly endless flight of Air Force cargo planes carrying the needed supplies, weapons, and soldiers of the 196th. The enemy gave no respite, mortars exploding on the runway as soldiers quickly unloaded and moved to shelter. Two forklift operators assigned to unload equipment were hit by enemy fire. Quickly others moved them out of danger and took their place in the driver’s seat to continue the operation. On an airstrip that flowed with fire, blood, fear, and desperation…valor seemed to abound.

The combat controllers performed their job quickly and efficiently, guiding aircraft in, then expeditiously sending them back into the air and away from the enemy guns. But the enemy had found the location of their radio, and during the afternoon three mortars landed in a pattern around the jeep. “Looks like they’ve got us bracketed,” Friedman yelled. “Let’s move this jeep.” It was a fortunate decision. Moments after the jeep had been driven ten yards further down the ditch, a fourth mortar exploded…centered on the wheel marks of the position the jeep had occupied.

In all, the combat controllers successfully brought in 11 sorties of C-130 transports. The newly arrived soldiers of the 196th began setting up the reinforced defense of Kham Duc, with small elements posted in the hills to report enemy movements. As darkness fell, Gallagher, Lundie, and Freedman could take satisfaction in a job well done.

Kham Duc, *South Vietnam (Saturday, May 11th)*

A fog moved in to hang low in the valley as morning dawned. More flights would be arriving soon, and the combat controllers prepared for another busy day. Lundie’s hand had swollen to twice its normal size and the injury was quite painful. With work to be done, the airman steeled himself against the pain and joined Freedman in guiding in another endless series of flights…C-130s, C-123s, and C-7s bringing additional relief to Kham Duc. By midafternoon, the task was completed.

The hail of mortars had continued, but now Kham Duc was defended by nearly 1,500

troops, nearly two-thirds of them American soldiers. The seven American outposts in the hills were well placed, and Airlift Control Center advised its three men on the ground that the worst was over. They were to stand by throughout the night in case they were needed for resupply on Sunday morning, but for the most part, their job was done. But as the shadows of darkness fell over the valley, the combat controllers weren't so sure. The mortar attacks had increased in severity throughout the afternoon and all sensed that something big was about to happen.

In the darkness, the American outposts in the hills surrounding Kham Duc began reporting massive enemy movements, then attack. One by one they reported that they were under assault, as the mortar barrage on Kham Duc increased new levels of intensity. Direct hits on two of the camps 105 howitzers killed four gunners and wounded 16 others. Then the outpost radio reports became less and less frequent. Eventually, they became totally silent. Systematically, the NVA had targeted and destroyed each and every position in the hills. The reinforcement at Kham Duc had been too little, too late. Military planners weighed the incoming information against the intelligence that had been gathered. By midnight they determined that Kham Duc could not hold and sent a stunning message to the camp the Air Force had just spent two days building up…."Evacuate at daybreak!"

Though eagerly welcomed by many of the weary soldiers at Kham Duc, the order established for those who would carry it out, a mission without precedent. Never before in history had a force the size of that now positioned at Kham Duc, been evacuated from under the guns of an enemy. There was no model for planners to copy, no procedure for those on the grounds to employ. The only guideline available to Major Gallagher and his men was the priority list from ALCC: the engineers would leave first, then the Vietnamese and their families (living in the village across the airstrip), then the Special Forces who weren't too happy about leaving an unfinished job behind them. The last men out would be the Air Force combat controllers.

At 3:00 A.M. they came. As rockets, mortars, and recoil-less rifle fire turned Kham Duc into a raging inferno, hundreds of North Vietnamese soldiers left their sanctuary in the hills to swarm the airfield. Valiantly the men of the 196th fought back, trying to hold out against incredible odds. In the darkness, there was only confusion, terror, and death. Even the weather aligned itself against the Americans, making supportive air strikes ineffective or impossible. With uncommon valor, ordinary soldiers put their fear behind them to achieve beyond their human limitations, fighting to survive the darkness and welcome the dawn of a new day…

May 12, 1968 – Mother's Day!

Dawn brought a full array of the United States Army, the United States Marines, and

the United States Air Force. Originally MACV had planned to remove all friendlies from Kham Duc in Army and Marine Corps CH-47 Chinooks. As the lumbering, dual-prop helicopters dropped through the fog that now shrouded the early morning at Kham Duc, the enemy turned their fire on the choppers with a vengeance. The American outposts in the hills have all fallen to the enemy, they had been quickly converted to anti-aircraft positions to thwart any rescue attempt. At 8:20 A.M. MACV notified General Burl McLaughlin, Commander of the 834th Air Division, that the fate of Kham Duc was now in hands of the 7th Air Force.

Air Force observers and fighters did their best to see through the heavy fog to fly missions in support of Kham Duc. Early on Sunday morning, one F4 was badly shot up by the NVA anti-aircraft positions. The pilot struggled against the controls, somehow managing to pull out of the valley and return safely. An A1 was not so fortunate. Hit by enemy fire, it crashed near the embattled runway.

Flights of B-52 bombers began a series of bombing runs across the hills that swarmed with a determined enemy. Meanwhile, as C-130s from the Air Force were en route to evacuate the camp, Army and Marine Chinooks continued their attempts to rescue the trapped American and South Vietnamese. In the course of the morning, only a few of them managed to get in and out of Kham Duc. Then one of the Chinooks was hit by enemy fire and crashed on the runway. The bulky, burning wreckage blocked the landing area, reducing the once mile-long strip to a landing distance of only 2,000 feet. It was no longer a landing strip of sufficient distance to safely land a C-130.

The resident engineers of Company A, 70th Engineer Battalion set about the task of reassembling one of their two large bulldozers. Earlier there had been dismantled for destruction to keep them from falling into enemy hands. Now, with time running out, they feverishly worked to undo their damage. Shortly after noon, they had the dozer running and, under direct enemy fire on the open-air strip, they used that dozer to push the wreckage of the CH-47 to the side of the runway. As quickly as the wreckage was moved, Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Daryl Cole began an approach in his C-130, reversing his props and coming to a halt only feet from the wrecked CH-47. He was immediately swamped by a mob of frightened civilians, the wives and children of the CIDG soldiers at Kham Duc. Loaded beyond capacity, he then began his take-off. Suddenly enemy mortars bracketed the escaping transport plane, and shrapnel ripped into its side…flattening one of the two left-side tires and opening large holes in the wing that quickly spewed out fuel. Quickly his crew unloaded the civilians and moved them to some semblance of cover from the continuing enemy fire. That task accomplished; they began cutting away the ruptured rubber of the flat tire.

While Ltc Cole’s crew went about their task, Major Ray Shelton managed to taxi his

C-123 down the runway, come to a halt long enough to fill it with passengers, and then safely take off. Nearly a dozen mortars fell near his transport plane while he was on the ground, but he held his gritted his teeth against the onslaught to finish his mission. It was near noon now, and the only personnel rescued from Kham Duc were those aboard Shelton's aircraft, and a few successfully rescued earlier that morning by 15 helicopters. Of the 1,500 inhabitants, only 145 had been lifted from the inferno.

Then came the most devastating announcement of all…. prepare to escape and evade… there would be no more rescue planes. Major Shelton's crew had finally managed to strip away the rubber of the flat tire on the remaining C-130 at Kham Duc and, despite the flow of fuel from the holes in the left-wing, he was preparing to take off. "Head for that aircraft," Major Gallagher ordered his two combat controllers. The rescue mission was over…there would be no more incoming flights for his men to direct…and he had orders of his own not to risk losing two very good men without good reason.

> *"Sir, I feel like a rat leaving a sinking ship," Freedman protested. "Let me stay here. I'm trained for E & E. I'll make it ok, sir…these guys might need me for something."*

"I know how you feel," the Major replied, "but I'm the one giving the orders around here. This isn't our job. Our job's finished. Now, let's go." And with that, the three airmen raced to the C-130 warming up to depart Kham Duc. Flying out with volatile fuel streaming from the wings and with only three main-gear tires, maybe their chances of survival would have been better had they stayed in Kham Duc. Incredibly, Colonel Cole managed to nurse his crippled transport safely back to Cam Ranh. (Colonel Cole and his valiant crew later received the MacKay Trophy for "the most meritorious flight of the year" by Air Force aircraft.)

Unknown to Major Gallagher and his men, the message that there would be no more rescue aircraft had been in error. Above the fog-shrouded valley, more than a dozen Air Force C-123 and C-130s orbited, awaiting both opportunity and instructions to land at Kham Duc. In a separate C-130 in the dangerous skies, that day was General McLaughlin…personally monitoring the progress of the unprecedented evacuation. As Colonel Cole struggled to keep his battered C-130 airborne long enough to reach Cam Ranh, his radio crackled with a message for Major Gallagher and his men. "Back to Kham Duc." The combat controllers finally smiled. They were going back…back into the blazing inferno of Kham Duc…to finish their job or die trying. There would be a brief detour, Colonel Cole's plane would never make it back to Kham Duc. So, it was on to Cam Ranh to quickly board a new aircraft, call sign *Spare 808*, and return to

rescue Kham Duc.

It was now shortly after 3 in the afternoon, and the combat controllers were speeding back to Kham Duc in *Spare 808*. Meanwhile, one of the Forward Air Controllers (FAC) dipped below the fog in his Birddog to check out the airstrip. After a pass through the valley, he notified Command and Control that he believed he could guide the waiting transports into the valley for another evacuation. At 3:25 P.M. Major Bernard Bucher followed the directions of the FAC to successfully land his C-130 on the airstrip. He was immediately mobbed by the civilian women and children but managed to load nearly 150 people in his cargo hold. As he taxied down the runway and turned to take off into the north, it provided the frightened and war-weary members of the CIDG forces a tenuous moment of relief. At least their families would safely leave Kham Duc. And then, in yet another cruel twist of fate, the enemy fire began to pound Bucher's airplane. The stunned South Vietnamese soldiers watched in horror as the aircraft began to shake violently out of control, then turned and crashed in an eruption of smoke and fire in a nearby ravine. There would be no survivors…a final crushing blow to men who suddenly lost all will to survive, all reason to fight on.

The disaster might have halted further rescue efforts, but for the courage of the other Air Force pilots. Ltc William Boyd, Jr. turned the nose of his own C-130 towards the airstrip at Kham Duc. As he approached a heavy concentration of enemy small-arms fire was directed his way, forcing him to overfly the burning camp and circle. The first aborted attempt could not deter him. Returning in the face of enemy fire, he brought his transport to the ground, quickly loaded 100 people in his cargo hold (again, mostly civilians), and then braved the enemy fire that peppered the shell of his airplane to taxi out of the valley of death.

Ltc Boyd not only rescued 100 doomed civilians, but he also demonstrated that, despite the tragedy previously witnessed by all, Air Force transports could land, load, and escape. Ltc John Delmore followed suit, turning the nose of his own C-130 towards the landing strip. Spiraling down from directly overhead to land, enemy bullets pounded the skin of his transport plane. So intense was the fire that many were through-and-through, penetrating the floor and continuing upwards to rip gaping holes in the aircraft's ceiling. Smoke began to fill the cockpit and cargo hold as the hydraulic-boosted controls were shot away. Out of control, the aircraft slammed hard into the runway, the nose buried in the dirt to the side. The shaken but living 5-man crew scrambled out of the wreckage into the waiting arms of the American soldiers still stranded at Kham Duc.

If indeed the evacuation of Kham Duc was unprecedented in Air Force history, so too was the valor displayed in the skies. On the ground, the pilot of an O-2 Skymaster

who had been shot down earlier, stayed on the radio to relay radio information back to Command and Control. He stayed to the very end, one of the last Americans to be evacuated. As fighters and bombers strafed the hillsides and peppered them with napalm and heavy bombs, additional C-130s landed on the airstrip. From the ill-fated first landing by Major Bucher at 3:25 until 4:00 PM a total of 6 aircraft managed to land at Kham Duc. Four successfully left the airstrip with a full load of soldiers and civilians who a half-hour before had been doomed to the enemy. As Lieutenant Colonel James L. Wallace, the last of the six, departed Kham Duc, a helicopter was arriving to remove the Special Forces soldiers…the last to leave. It was 4:33 PM, the evacuation was complete, and the last Special Forces camp on the northwestern frontier had been destroyed and left to the advancing enemy. Unaware of all that had transpired in the last hour, Lieutenant Colonel Jay Van Cleef was on the final approach. In seconds *Spare 808* was on the runway, and Major Gallagher and his two combat controllers were racing back into the inferno to complete their mission. Van Cleef waited on the runway to extract more Americans, but none appeared. Finally revving his engines, he took off to the north while the radio crackled with the exciting news that the evacuation of Kham Duc, improbable as it had appeared, was now complete.

As the enemy began to swarm the burning compound, General McLaughlin ordered his fighters and bombers to level the camp, satisfied in the knowledge that all friendly forces had been removed. Frantically Van Cleef radioed back,

> *“We’ve still got three men on the ground!”*

High overhead, a frustrated Air Force Commander swore. How could this have happened!

On the ground, Major Gallager, Sergeant Freedman, and Sergeant Lundie were in a race for their lives. Around the burning munitions continued to explode. In the distance, they could see the advancing NVA soldiers. Already they had reached the airstrip and had set up a huge 51-caliber machinegun. The three Americans ran without conscious thought, pushed by fear and desperation. Somehow, without direction, they had returned to the airstrip to throw their bodies into the shallow shelter of the same drainage ditch they had occupied the previous two days. Before departing, the American forces had destroyed all radios left behind. There was no way to make contact, the three men were alone, abandoned to the enemy.

Overhead the Air Force pilots were stunned by the sad turn of events. Were there indeed three Americans…brother airmen…alone on the ground and surrounded by the enemy? “I’m going in for a look,” radioed Lieutenant Colonel Al Jeanotte as he nosed his C-123 towards the now almost totally destroyed airfield. Amazingly, he managed

to land his aircraft, sitting in the open as the enemy 51-caliber began to add its staccato beat to the thunder of mortars dropping around the exposed aircraft. From their position in the drainage ditch, Freedman and Lundie began to rain fire from their own weapons back on the enemy position. Still unaware of the ground crew's position, Jeanotte could remain on the ground no longer. The combat controllers watched in horror as the transports twin engines revved and their last hope of rescue lifted off. And then, with the primary target gone, the enemy turned its big guns on the stranded Americans. Lundie and Freedman dropped back down in the ditch. The enemy was less than 200 yards away.

"You know why he didn't pick us up?" Gallagher asked. "He thought we were VC." Freedman took note of his tiger-stripe jungle uniform and groaned. That had to be the reason, the pilot of the rescue craft mistook the Americans for enemy soldiers, and now there would be no further rescue effort.

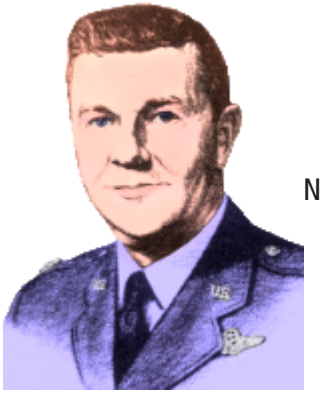
> *"If they get me, Jim," Freedman told his partner, you get the wallet out of my pocket. I want my money sent home; I don't want them to have it."*

"They won't get us," Lundie replied, not as sure of this as he sounded. The large machinegun had ceased firing on the 3 men, but as they peered over the rim of their drainage ditch, they could see squads of the enemy moving towards their position.

High overhead Ltc Jeanotte radioed Command and Control. As he lifted off the runway at Kham Duc, he had seen the three Americans. Then, in a voice of desperation, he announced that he did not have enough fuel to make an attempt to land again. Someone else would have to rescue the three trapped men…. but who?

In the distance, another C-123 flew through the skies of South Vietnam. At the controls were Lieutenant Colonel Joe Madison Jackson, a 45-year old former fighter pilot and veteran of service in World War II and Korea. Today Jackson was flying a routine delivery from Da Nang to an airstrip near the DMZ. Since it was a routine flight, Major Jesse Campbell had come along in the co-pilot's seat to administer Colonel Jackson's bi-annual flight check. Jackson was returning to Da Nang when he heard the frantic voice of Colonel Jeanotte announce the fate of the three combat controllers abandoned at Kham Duc. There were no second thoughts. Colonel Jackson banked his transport plane towards Kham Duc as he turned to his flight examiner and said:

> *"We're Going In!"*

LTC Jackson would have felt more at home going into combat in a jet fighter than the lumbering C-123 transport identified as  No. 542. Enlisting in the Army Air Corps just prior to World War II, his service in that war as a crewmember motivated him to become a pilot. In Korea he had flown 107 combat missions in an Air Force fighter, earning the Distinguished Flying Cross. After that war, he becomes one of the first Air Force officers to pilot the U-2 reconnaissance planes.

Twenty years of experience in the air had taught Jackson that sometimes one has to do the unexpected to accomplish the impossible. Reasoning that the enemy that now controlled the airstrip could hear the roar of his engines and were undoubtedly setting up their forces in anticipation of a landing like Ltc Jeanotte had made minutes before, Jackson prepared his own surprise. Banking his cargo plane to line up with the runway, the intrepid pilot cut power and dropped full flaps. The nose of Number 542 dropped and the C-123 was in the kind of dive reserved for fighter planes. Diving in at 4,000 feet per minute, eight times a normal cargo plane rate of descent, he was pushing his aircraft beyond its capabilities. Later he said, “I was afraid I’d reach the ‘blow-up’ speed, where the flaps in the full down position, would be blown back up to the neutral position. If that happened, we’d pick up additional speed and not be able to stop.”

On the ground, the three airmen could hear the whine of the C-123’s dive as it broke through the fog. Screaming earthward in an impossible maneuver, the men have filled with a mix of feelings… relief that a rescue craft was on the way…despair at the chances of success. As they watched the cargo plane dropping towards them like a rock, Sergeant Lundie thought, “This guy’s crazy. He’s not going to make it.”

And then No. 542 was on the ground, touching down in the first 100 feet of runway amid a hail of enemy machinegun and mortar fire. Plummeting down the battered runway at speeds far too high for any safe landing, Jackson fought the controls. Afraid that if he reversed the propellers to slow the C-123 he would blow out the two auxiliary engines needed for escape; he shoved his feet down hard on the brakes to skid past the enemy. Dodging debris, his cargo plane finally came to rest near the drainage ditch.

“There they are,” Major Campbell shouted as he spotted three ragged figures rise out

of the ditch and break for the waiting rescue plane. Staff Sergeant Grubbs opened the cargo door as the men ran towards the waiting plane, enemy fire erupting all around them. Quickly the haggard men were pulled inside the cargo hold and Jackson was revving the engines and turning his C-123 to take off in the same direction from which they had approached.

As the big cargo plane turned to face down the runway and make its escape, Major Campbell shouted, “Lookout”. From the edge of the runway, the enemy had fired a 122mm rocket to abort the dramatic rescue and destroy No. 542. Both pilot and co-pilot watched in horror as the missile sped towards then, then hit the pavement to bounce and skid within ten meters of their cockpit. As it bounced one final time, the rocket broke in half…. then lay there sizzling. Miraculously, it had been a dud.

Sending power to the engines, Joe Jackson raced down the runway and through the gauntlet of enemy fire. All within the cargo plane felt a sense of relief as the wheels lifted off the airstrip, and the C-123 was airborne…racing for home and safety. The plane gained altitude to head for Da Nang, landing shortly after 5:30 in the evening. A haggard Sergeant Jim Lundie walked over to the flight deck to look at Jackson quizzically for a moment, then said, “I wanted to see how you could sit in that little seat with balls as big as you’ve got.” It was the ultimate compliment from a combat controller who for three days had demonstrated his own brand of valor. “We were dead,” he later summed up the events of that day, “and all of a sudden we were alive.”

Before returning to their billets, Major Campbell and Ltc Jackson checked out their aircraft. Amazingly, despite the withering fire from small arms, 51-caliber heavy machineguns, and the torrential rain of mortars they had braved on the airstrip at Kham Duc, they had not been hit a single time!

A weary Jackson then settled back in his billets to write home. It was Mother’s Day, a day of tragedy and terror that had robbed far too many mothers of their sons. Joe’s actions that day had spared grief for three mothers. Picking up paper and pen, he began to write a letter to his wife Rose, mother of the couple’s two children. “Dear Rosie,” he wrote.

> *“I had an extremely exciting mission today. I can’t describe it to you in a letter but one of these days I’ll tell you all about it.”*

The evacuation of Kham Duc had proven to be an amazing military accomplishment. Despite the loss of 8 aircraft, of the 1,500 Americans and South Vietnamese at Kham Duc, only 259 lives were lost…nearly half of them in the tragic crash of Major

Bernard Bucher's C-130. For his heroism, Bucher was posthumously awarded the Air Force Cross. Our Nation's second-highest award for military valor was also awarded to Ltc William Boyd and Ltc Al Jeanotte.

Lieutenant Colonel Joe Jackson and Major Jesse Campbell, along with all three enlisted members of the crew of Air Force C-123 No. 542 were submitted for the Air Force Cross. Campbell received his award, the awards to the enlisted men involved in the daring rescue were downgraded to Silver Stars.

On January 16, 1969, Rose Jackson learned the story her husband couldn't tell in a brief Mother's Day letter nine months earlier. Joe Jackson's nomination for the AFC had been upgraded to the Medal of Honor.

Joining Jackson to receive our Nation's highest military award were three other young men, each from separate branches of service. Navy pilot Clyde Lassen was to be decorated by President Johnson for his daring helicopter rescue of two downed airmen. Army Special Forces Sergeant Drew Dix was also to be decorated that day for his intrepid rescue of an entire city in the opening days of the Tet Offensive. Dix's tale was a unique story in itself…a story beyond the valiant effort he had made alone to free civilians and secure Chau Doc. Dix hailed from the city of Pueblo, Colorado, a town of fewer than 100,000 residents. Incredibly, Drew Dix was about to become the fourth resident of that small town to receive the Medal of Honor for heroism that spanned three wars.

Joe Jackson smiled to himself. The fourth young hero was Marine Corps Major Stephen Pless, a daring rescue helicopter pilot from the sleepy little town of Newnan, Georgia….less than one-tenth the size of Pueblo. The Jackson family knew the Pless family well…Newnan, Georgia was also Joe Jackson's hometown.

Footnote:
The photo at the top of this page was taken by a pilot circling the Kham Duc airstrip while Joe Jackson was on the ground, picking up the three-stranded airmen. It is the only photograph of a Medal of Honor action, known to exist.

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educational purposes.

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