

Michael Thornton & Tom Norris

Not Without My Lieutenant

Written by [C. Douglas Sterner](#)



Lieutenant Colonel Icael "Gene" Hambleton felt his body

exploding away from the crippled EB-66 aircraft. Moments earlier the unarmed, electronic warfare plane had taken a direct hit from an enemy SAM (surface to air missile) and was going down. As he looked back in horror at the pilot preparing to eject, the aircraft suddenly exploded into thousands of pieces. Five fellow crew members were instantly killed, leaving the 53-year-old Air Force officer the only survivor.

Heavy cloud cover masked the ground as Lieutenant Colonel Hambleton's parachute opened, but he had a pretty good idea what he would find below. Thirty-thousand North Vietnamese soldiers, controlling the surrounding terrain, would be searching for survivors from the downed aircraft. A year earlier American and South Vietnamese forces had maintained a tenuous hold on the area just south of the DMZ, marked by the Cua Viet River. As the American forces had withdrawn, enemy soldiers had swarmed south. Now, with the Easter offensive of 1972, thirty-thousand well-supplied soldiers from the North, supported by artillery and armor, were pushing south in a pincer-movement to complete their goal of total domination of the Republic of South Vietnam. Lieutenant Colonel Hambleton would land somewhere in the heart of their massive force.

An immediate Search and Rescue (SAR) effort was mounted to recover the downed airman. Two Army helicopters rushing to his rescue were quickly shot down. The entire 4-man crew of Blueghost 39 was lost, the second limped to an area of safety before making a controlled crash landing. That crew was rescued by a "Jolly Green" helicopter and

flown to safety. But as night fell over the northern corps of South Vietnam, Lieutenant Colonel Hambleton was alone, on the ground, and completely surrounded by one of the largest enemy offensives of the Vietnam War. It was Easter Sunday, April 2, 1972.

As morning dawned on April 3rd, Lieutenant Colonel Hambleton's position had been marked within 30 feet by onboard LORAN (long-range navigation systems). The Air Force knew where the injured survivor and the EB-66 was, but couldn't reach him because of the massive enemy force that surrounded him. Fellow pilots had circled above his position throughout the night, then with the first rays of dawn, they began dropping mines around him. If they couldn't fly in to rescue him, they could at least keep the North Vietnamese from reaching him as well. Then, as the dawn gave way to daylight and the cloud cover lifted, a new rescue effort was mounted.

Coast Guard Lieutenant Commander Jay Crowe, with additional aircraft cover, broke through the clouds and began a rapid descent towards the area where Lieutenant Colonel Hambleton waited. He was met by an immediate curtain of enemy fire, hurled against him with an intensity that defied belief. Enemy rounds literally shredded "Jolly Green 65", and it was only the courage and flying skill of the Coast Guard pilot that enabled the chopper to stay airborne long enough to return to base.

"Jolly Green 66" then followed, breaking through the clouds to face ten enemy tanks and withering fire. Lieutenant Colonel Bill Harris fought the controls to bring his rescue helicopter within one hundred yards of Hambleton, his gunners engaging the enemy on all sides.

"Where's the enemy fire coming from?" asked one of the pilots flying support for the effort. "From everywhere!" Harris replied as bullets riddled his helicopter and shattered the cockpit. Somehow Harris managed to get his badly damaged aircraft to gain altitude, then limp back to safety.

The two Jolly Greens were fortunate. Before darkness fell on Monday, another aircraft would take direct fire. This time two more American fliers went down. Captain William Henderson was piloting an OV-10 FAC (Forward Air Controller) in support of the rescue effort. In the cockpit behind him sat Lieutenant Mark Clark, grandson of the famous World War II general, scanning the ground through binoculars. Both managed to eject when a SAM destroyed their aircraft, landing in the same general vicinity as Hambleton. A "triple-play" rescue for all three fliers followed. On the ground in separate areas, the three airmen hid from the enemy, preparing to make the rush to safety as a new series of rescue aircraft began their approach.

All watched in frustration as enemy fire shattered three aircraft, forcing them to

pull back. Though destroyed beyond further use, all three helicopters managed to return home before night fell. On the ground, Hambleton, Henderson, and Clark prepared for the worst. In just over twenty-four hours of the rescue attempt, three aircraft had gone down, five more had been severely damaged, three American rescuers had died, and a fourth had been captured. Still, the three airmen remained on the ground, huddled in the darkness and completely surrounded.

During the night of April 3rd, Captain William Henderson was captured by the NVA (North Vietnamese Army). Meanwhile, new urgency was added to the mission as the Air Force gleaned information on the identity of the first downed airman. Lieutenant Colonel Hambleton had served with the Strategic Air Command. He carried, in his memory, intimate details of American missile forces and targets that dared not fall into enemy hands. The effort to rescue Lieutenant Clark and Lieutenant Colonel Hambleton was destined to become the most intense, and costliest, rescue effort of the Vietnam war.

On April 4th, the Air Force began launching a series of airstrikes in and around the Cam Lo Bridge. On the ground, LTC Hambleton directed the fire. So thorough was the enemy penetration in the area, of the ten A-1s that engaged the enemy from the skies over the downed airman that day, eight received battle damage. One aircraft was totally destroyed. It became quickly apparent that the North Vietnamese were using Hambleton and Clark as bait, drawing in the rescue forces, then systematically destroying them. It was dangerous work, but the American pilots refused to leave their comrades behind. Day after day, they flew into the inferno.

On April 6th, a total of 52 sets of American fighters and four B-52 bombers began pounding the area around Cam Lo. From their places of hiding the lone airmen on the ground watched the full force of American airpower rain around them. Back at Da Nang Jolly Green 67 was warming up for the "snatch". Captain Peter Chapman had volunteered to pilot the rescue, despite the fact he was due to return home very soon. In addition to his co-pilot, four additional Americans finished the crew of Jolly Green 67 as they lifted off to fly into the storm.

Amid a smokescreen and intense rocket and machine-gun fire deployed by accompanying American aircraft, Captain Chapman began to drop his rescue helicopter near Hambleton. Enemy fire raked the chopper, smoke billowed, and Captain Chapman began to pull away. Smoke continued to billow, then flames appeared. Pieces of the helicopter began to fall apart, the aircraft floundering in its attempts to flee the area. It rolled to its side, hitting the ground in an explosion of fire that instantly sealed the fate of six brave Americans.

On the ground, Lieutenant Colonel Hambleton wept, not for himself, but for the men

who had died coming to rescue him. For four days he had hidden in the midst of his enemies, wounded, hungry, scared, tired, and uncertain for any tomorrow. As he wept for the men who had died for him, he resolved in his heart to survive to make their sacrifice count for something.

On April 7th an OV-10 flying in support of the continued rescue effort was shot down. Aboard was Air Force First Lieutenant Bruce Walker and Marine Corps First Lieutenant Larry Potts. The two additional downed airmen added to a tragic list of heroes lost in the effort. Walker managed an initial radio contact before he began his escape and evasion effort. There were later reports that Lieutenant Potts died in captivity. His remains were never recovered and he remains one of the Vietnam War's Missing in Action.

By April 9th the 7th Air Force was in dire straits with far too many battle-damaged aircraft. Five aircraft had been destroyed, nine Americans were dead, two had been captured, and the fate of Potts and Walker was uncertain. In seven days the rescue effort had involved soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines from all branches of American military service, working feverishly against all odds. It was sufficient for them to understand that American fliers were in harm's way. These heroes lived by the creed that "We don't leave anyone behind", and would risk their lives towards that end.

It mattered not that the rescue crews didn't personally know the men they risked their lives to snatch from the jaws of death. All that mattered was that they were Americans. The rescuers did come to know them by their radio call signs. Each American aircraft was assigned a unique "call sign", and each person on that aircraft was identified by an alpha number. First Lieutenant Bruce Walker was the pilot of "Covey-282" and as such his call sign was Covey 282 Alpha. His co-pilot, First Lieutenant Larry Potts was Covey 282 Bravo. Lieutenant Mark Clark was Nail 38 Bravo. His pilot, the captured Captain William Henderson – Nail 38 Alpha. The stricken EB-66 that had been first to go down had carried six men, call with signs Alpha through Foxtrot. Only the second man on the roster had survived the enemy fire, the aircraft's 53-year old navigator "BAT-21 Bravo".

By now it was obvious that Nail-38 Bravo and Bat-21 Bravo could not be rescued from the air. Any new rescue attempt would call for a covert, land-based movement. Such an alternative was suggested on the afternoon of April 8th by Marine Colonel, Al Gray. "I have a boatload of guys that would love to do something like that," he announced. With the agreement of the rescue planners, the call went out to assemble the commando team at once. It would call for a special kind of warrior.



If the Air Force was expecting “Rambo” to show up, they would have

been disappointed when Lieutenant (j.g.) Thomas Norris arrived to join a five-man SOG Naval Advisory Detachment (NAD) Sea Commando team from Da Nang. One of the few remaining Navy SEALs in Vietnam, Norris was serving his second tour in Vietnam. Slight of stature, he didn’t fit the profile we have come to associate with the military’s elite. But like Rambo, Tom Norris was tough. Unlike Rambo, he was real. Above all, the 28-year-old warrior had heart. As the mission unfolded for the SEAL and his five South Vietnamese “frogmen”, the mission essentials would necessitate all three characteristics.

Meanwhile, the Air Force began the intricate process of preparing Nail-38 Bravo and Bat-21 Bravo for the newest rescue attempt. Lieutenant Clark was already near the Cam Lo river that flowed east into the Cua Viet so he remained hidden with instruction to move to the water on the night of April 10th. Lieutenant Colonel Hambleton was a mile away from the river and had to be guided through a heavily coded series of messages related in simile to a golf course, towards the river, and past thousands of NVA soldiers.

From a small South Vietnamese (ARVN) outpost less than a mile away, Lieutenant Norris would take his team of five up the river to find and rescue first Clark, and then Hambleton. As darkness fell on April 10th the team set out, six men alone in the darkness against a force that had defied the might of American airpower.

Initially, the plan had been for the team to swim upriver, against the current, while Lieutenant Clark floated downstream to meet them. The SEAL advisor checked the current and found it too swift for his frogmen to swim against, and began an overland insertion along the banks of the river. Slowly the team moved west, passing columns of enemy tanks, trucks, and frequent patrols. It was slow, dangerous work that could turn deadly without warning. Rescue planners had known the journey would be a dangerous one and had instructed Lieutenant Norris to proceed no further than one kilometer into the enemy-infested river bottom. The courageous SEAL knew that wouldn’t be close enough and moved eastward through the enemy, finally setting his team up to wait two kilometers upriver.

Overhead the FAC pilot instructed Lieutenant Clark to slip into the river and float

down until rescued by the commando team. Somewhere between 2 and 3 AM Norris noticed something moving down the river. It was Lieutenant Clark. Then, before Norris could begin the rescue, an enemy patrol appeared. He sat quietly at the water's edge until they passed, then slipped into the chilly river and floated downstream after the pilot. The water moved swiftly and Norris had lost track of Clark. Stealthily he emerged from the water and began a search of the banks, eventually returning all the way to his hidden team. He reported the situation to the rescue co-ordinators by radio, then began moving his team east again.

His team searched the banks on their withdrawal, while the Navy SEAL floated down the river. As dawn lit the dangerous skies, Lieutenant Norris rounded a bend in the river and noticed movement. It was the downed pilot, hiding along the banks of the river. Norris made contact, then led the airman to rendezvous with the rest of the team. Though they had found their quarry, they were still deep into an area filled with enemy soldiers. Slowly, carefully, they continued their escape and evasion, finally bringing Lieutenant Clark to safety. That afternoon he was taken by armored personnel carrier to the last outpost on the Cua Viet River at Dong Ha, then flown to Da Nang. Tommy Norris and his team of South Vietnamese "frogmen" remained at the distant ARVN outpost. Their mission wasn't complete. There was still an American pilot in harm's way.

Despite the overwhelming number of enemies the commando team had witnessed on their first incursion into enemy territory to rescue Lieutenant Clark, Tom Norris was prepared to do it all again on the night of April 11th to find and recover Hambleton. Enemy tanks had been reported at the Cam Lo bridge, and strikes were ordered to destroy them before the team began their dangerous journey. This time the enemy responded in kind, raining death and destruction on the tiny ARVN outpost. Among the casualties were two of Norris' South Vietnamese SEALS. The following morning the wounded were evacuated, and Norris sat down with his remaining three team members to plan a renewed effort.

They left the outpost after dark on the night of April 12th, this time moving nearly four kilometers into the massive enemy force to find BAT-21 Bravo. Two of Norris' team, upon seeing the force arrayed against them, became frightened and refused to continue. Only by convincing them that their only hope of returning to safety was to stay with the team, was he able to get them upriver to wait for Hambleton. As daylight began to break the skies they had to withdraw in frustration once again. After ten days on the ground, the 53-year old airman was weak, and in the darkness, directions were becoming confusing. Time was running out and little more could be done.

As Norris and his team tried to rest during the afternoon of the 13th, the FACs in

the air above Hambleton continued to encourage the embattled airman to hang on. His survival for eleven days had tested the limits of human endurance, however, and his physical condition had rapidly deteriorated. If they couldn't reach him tonight, it would probably be the last chance. It was also becoming obvious that in his weakened condition, Hambleton couldn't come to the rescue team. If they were to accomplish the task, they would have to go to him.

By far the most daring effort yet, Norris could not risk taking the two team members who had faltered the night before. The last remaining member of the team, Petty Officer Nguyen Van Kiet, volunteered to stay with the brave SEAL advisor. The two men dressed as native fishermen and set out after dark once again. They worked their way upriver to a bombed-out village, where they found a small sampan. Hunched low in the small craft they paddled upriver. Along the banks, they could hear the voices of enemy soldiers, the roar of tank engines, and the movements of a massive enemy force.

Carefully they threaded their way past unseeing eyes to find BAT-21 Bravo. A brief lowering of fog gave them obscurity but also masked their progress. Without realizing it they had paddled all the way to the Cam Lo bridge. Fortunately, they escaped unnoticed, moved back downstream a short distance, and beached the small craft. Then they began the slow, dangerous work of searching the river for Hambleton. Finally, they found him, the shell of a 53-year old man who had endured beyond human limitation for almost twelve days. He had lost 45 pounds, had steeled himself against the pain of a broken wrist for nearly two weeks, and evaded every effort expended by the enemy. But he was still alive.

Norris and Kiet slowly helped the near delirious airman back to the hidden sampan, laid him low in its bottom, and covered him with banana leaves. Slowly they began the long return home, past the enemy, and out of the jaws of death. By radio, Norris notified the base that BAT-21 Bravo had been recovered. The rescue was not yet complete, however. Daylight was breaking and their thin disguise as native fishermen might not hold out. American aircraft were put on notice to stand by to lend fire support as the three moved toward safety on the surface of the fast-moving river.

Suddenly the shouts of enemy soldiers could be heard, and along the banks of the river, the pursuit began. Norris and Kiet paddled furiously, taking advantage of the current to move swiftly while also seeking to use the dense foliage along the banks to mask their desperate race against time. Gunfire erupted across the water and they pulled into a hidden bank to call for air support. A smoke screen billowed across the river as Norris and Kiet took to the water again, moving swiftly towards safety. As they neared the outpost the North Vietnamese crowded the north bank of the river, and the South Vietnamese crowded the south. As they fired back and forth at each other, Norris and Kiet helped Lieutenant Colonel Hambleton out of the sampan and

began the dangerous last rush to the safety of a bunker. Hambleton could no longer walk, and South Vietnamese soldiers ran down the hill to help him to safety. When finally the three reached the bunker, Norris began administering first aid to Hambleton and preparing him for evacuation.



The saga of the rescue of BAT-21 Bravo was completed.

The ordeal of Lieutenant Colonel Hambleton would be written about, even featured in a popular movie starring Gene Hackman as the downed navigator, and Danny Glover as his friendly voice in the sky. Retired, "Gene" Hambleton is a popular speaker who makes his home in the state of Arizona. No one played the part of Lieutenant Tom Norris. His courageous actions were unknown to all but a few people, classified military secrets to protect the nature of such SAR actions on the ground.

Tommy Norris was submitted for the Medal of Honor for his own courageous role in the rescue of BAT-21, an honor he quickly refused on the basis that he had simply been doing his job. For many years, despite the popular BAT-21 movie, his role in the longest rescue effort in Air Force history could not be told. The details were classified. Instead, Lieutenant Norris's only desire was to return to his activities as a Navy SEAL in South Vietnam. Before his tour of duty ended, another Navy SEAL would refuse to leave a brother behind, becoming the last Medal of Honor hero of the Vietnam War.

Perhaps Lieutenant Norris himself provided the finest closing chapter to the saga of BAT-21 Bravo, as well as the introduction to a whole new chapter in the saga of two Navy SEAL "brothers". After returning to safety with Lieutenant Colonel Hambleton, he was met by a CBS News reporter who looked at the tired SEAL who had just made three unbelievable trips into "hell on earth".

"It must have been rough out there," the reporter stated. "I bet you wouldn't do that again."

Tommy Norris looked the reporter in the eyes and sharply replied, "An American was

down in enemy territory. Of course, I'd do it again!"

After the heroic rescue of BAT-21 Bravo, Lieutenant (j.g.) Thomas Norris returned to Da Nang to assist in planning the rescue of Lieutenant Bruce Walker, Covey-282 Bravo. On the night of April 17, 1972, Walker was attempting to escape and evade to a pick-up point under the watchful eyes of overhead Forward Air Controllers. Suddenly the enemy moved in, forcing the downed airman to race for cover. American aircraft tried to cover his flight for life, but the NVA moved in on him. It was the last that was ever seen or heard of the First Lieutenant. With contact lost, on April 20th the search was terminated and Walker designated MIA (Missing in Action). On the ground, one of the NVA pursuers had crept within six feet of the haggard pilot who had spent ten days eluding them. From less than 20 feet away the enemy soldier fired multiple rounds into the valiant Airman.

Lieutenant Tom Norris was content to slip into the background of the historic rescue effort of April 1972 and finish his tour training and running operations with the South Vietnamese LDNN (Lien Doc Nguoi Nhia – literally translated “soldiers who fight under the sea”). These Vietnamese “frogmen” were the native counterpart to the American Naval SEALs, operating frequently with American SEAL advisors and other times independently. Most were valiant warriors of immense courage who were willing to give their lives to preserve the fragile freedom of their homeland.

Slowly the American presence dwindled to three officers and nine enlisted SEALs, held in reserve for potential POW (Prisoner of War) rescue operations. The Americans occasionally operated in and around the DMZ on “sneak and peek” missions to surreptitiously observe the enemy and return with intelligence information. Most such reconnaissance teams consisted of one American SEAL officer who led the team, one enlisted American SEAL, and four LDNNs. Among the few American SEALs still serving in Vietnam by the fall of 1972 was Engineman First Class Michael Edwin Thornton.



If an imperiled American in need of a “Rambo” kind of hero

would have been initially disappointed by the arrival of the short, slender Lieutenant Norris; they would have been overjoyed by the appearance of Mike Thornton. Big enough to play linebacker for any NFL team, the 23-year old SEAL was not only large and muscular, he was fearless. Arriving in Vietnam in January 1970, by the fall of 1972 he was a seasoned veteran. He was the "recruiting poster" kind of Navy SEAL. He had the appearance, the knowledge, and the experience to be among the best in arguably the world's finest elite covert fighting force. For almost two years he had been involved in numerous SEAL missions that, had they not been highly classified, would have marked him a hero. But Mike Thornton wasn't interested in being a hero anyway, he just wanted to do his job and be among the best.

October 31, 1972

Six months after Navy SEAL Lieutenant Thomas R. Norris had penetrated a massive enemy force along with the Cua Viet and Cam Lo Rivers just south of the DMZ to rescue two downed pilots, the enemy was in firm control of the area. Near the coast sat the Cua Viet River Base, once a center in American and ARVN defense of the Northern I Corps. Now it, as well as much of I Corps, was in enemy hands as the North Vietnamese continued to stage their continued invasion of the South. Information on NVA movement, plans, targets, and strength was needed. Reports from aircraft that from time to time dared to fly over the heavily armed enemy territory couldn't provide an accurate picture. To gather the necessary information, a small commando team would need to slip in among the enemy. The team would involve an inexperienced LDNN officer, two veteran LDNN frogmen, an American SEAL lieutenant, and Michael Thornton. It would be a dangerous, dramatic, Halloween night.

A small raft bobbed silently on the swells of the ocean just off the coast of South Vietnam. Mike Thornton set himself to the task of paddling towards shore as his lieutenant, the only other American on the raft, directed the team towards their landing point. Slowly darkness engulfed the Vietnamese junk from which they had launched minutes earlier. Joining Thornton and his lieutenant in the small raft tediously moving towards the beach were three LDNN's, their South Vietnamese SEAL counterparts. It was just after four in the morning on October 31, 1972.

Mike Thornton was privy to information regarding Lieutenant Tom Norris' heroic rescue effort only miles from where they would be landing, which had occurred just six months earlier. He knew that, though landing on the shores of South Vietnam, he would see no friendly faces. The five men were on their own. If they got in trouble there would be no air cover or support, only suppressible fire from a Naval ship miles off the coast.

The five men finally reached shallow water and stepped into the cool waters to tow

the raft to the beach, where it was carefully hidden. Then they began the dangerous trek north towards the Cua Viet River and the old Naval base now commanded by the enemy. There was little cover. In the early morning darkness, they silently moved from one sand dune to the next, careful to avoid detection by the numerous enemy encampments they passed. The hours dragged on but the SEALs were unable to find the river that should have been there. In fact, there were no identifiable landmarks. It quickly became apparent that the team was lost.

Return to the DMZ!

As streaks of early morning light crept towards them from the ocean, the SEAL lieutenant used silent hand signals to order the team back to the beach. By radio, they were advised of their general location. The intent had been to insert the team south of the Cua Viet river so their northward movement would put them on a direct course with the river and the old Naval base. Instead, the Vietnamese had ventured too far north, landing them above the river. Their movement had taken them away from their target and almost directly into the Demilitarized Zone.

Hearts pounding and time running out as daylight dawned, the team released a silent sigh of relief when at last they saw the waves lapping against the beach where their raft was hidden. They were almost home. What could have been a terrible disaster was turning out all right.

Suddenly the sound of gunfire shattered the early morning quiet. The SEALs went to the ground, returning the enemy's volley of leaden death with the staccato beat of their own weapons. They had been spotted and fired upon by two NVA soldiers, but as the sounds of battle echoed across the shores of South Vietnam, as many as fifty more enemy soldiers rushed their position to rain death on the isolated team. The team leader put his men into a small defensive position as the enemy probed to within 25 meters of his small force. One of the LDNNs was hit in the hip, then shrapnel from an enemy grenade pierced both of Mike Thornton's legs and opened wounds in his back. The lieutenant called for fire from the USS Newport News, but the Naval heavy cruiser couldn't render effective cover fire. The enemy was so close to the embattled SEAL team that the huge guns of the ship lying offshore would be as deadly to the five commandos as it would be to the enemy.

For forty-five minutes the battle raged, five lone members of a Naval team struggling to survive against 10-1 odds, all the while knowing additional enemy troops would be arriving at any time. The team leader took a gamble. He radioed the Newport News with instructions to give him five minutes, then rain their heavy five-inch shells on his position. He ordered Thornton and two of the LDNN to make a desperate race to the hidden raft while he and the remaining LDNN covered their withdrawal. The fire

erupted anew as the three men raced across the beach for the last sand dune and the hidden raft. The team leader and the LDNN met the volley with a fire of their own, holding the enemy at bay to cover their teammates. Then, suddenly, the world went black for the SEAL lieutenant. His LDNN counterpart looked down at the gaping hole in the left side of the lieutenant's head, turned, and ran to join his living teammates. "Didi...didi, go, go!" he shouted as finally made the last sand dune.

"Where's my lieutenant?" Asked Thornton.

"Dead!" shouted the LDNN. It was obvious the LDNN was convinced nothing more could be done as he urged immediate withdrawal.

"Not without my lieutenant," Thornton quickly informed them. No SEAL would ever be left behind by a brother. Thornton broke from cover, rushing across the sand dunes to his team leader's last known position. There he searched frantically for the lieutenant. Two enemy soldiers found the lieutenant's body at the same time Thornton did. Quickly the SEAL shot them both, then rushed to his "brother's" body. The head wound was serious, the skin laid back to reveal the white of his broken skull. The team leader wasn't moving. He was unconscious, but still alive.

The powerful Thornton lifted his lieutenant's limp body over his shoulder and began to run back across the open sand dunes. Bullets flew around him and Thornton fired his own weapon on the desperate race to the last sand dune. Unbelievably, neither he nor his wounded lieutenant was hit. When at last he reached the last dune, his LDNN team members looked to the towering figure for guidance. The NVA were moving towards them, trying to encircle the battle-scarred team. Thornton pointed his comrades to the waves breaking across the beach 250 yards away. As artillery from the Newport News crashed behind them and hot missiles from the automatic rifles of the pursuing enemy dug trenches in the sand, the team moved out. Thornton himself, by sheer force of will, covered the entire distance with his stricken lieutenant over his shoulders.

At last, he felt the cool water of the ocean tugging at the cuffs of his fatigues. He plunged into the water dragging his lieutenant behind him and swimming desperately for safety. The NVA followed the fleeing team into the ocean, then continued to fire at the men until they were beyond the range of their guns. Thornton then inflated his lieutenant's life vest, towing him further into the ocean and away from danger. For two hours they bobbed on the swells of the ocean, Thornton doing his best to keep his wounded team leader's head above water. At last, they were spotted and picked up by the same junk that had inserted them earlier that morning. It was almost noon. The entire saga had transpired in less than eight hours.

For his refusal to leave the wounded lieutenant behind and his courage in returning

under fire to recover the fellow SEAL, Mike Thornton was recommended for the Medal of Honor. His action was the last Medal of Honor action of the Vietnam War, and the last by any living American.

Less than a year later, on October 15, 1973, Navy Lieutenant Michael Edwin Thornton was summoned to the White House to receive his award. At nearby Bethesda Naval Hospital, the gravely wounded SEAL team leader was still recovering from his horrible wounds. His condition was so serious, his request to be released for Thornton's presentation was denied. "We had to kidnap him, right out of Bethesda," Thornton recently said. "But he was there!"

The citation detailing Thornton's heroic action was read, then-President Richard M. Nixon stepped forward to drape the Medal of Honor around the Navy SEALs' neck for refusing to leave a brother behind. Standing to the side, the wounded team leader watched with pride and thanksgiving.

He was Navy Lieutenant (j.g.) Thomas R. Norris.

Tommy Norris spent yet another year recovering from his wounds. On March 4, 1976, President Gerald R. Ford invited two former Prisoners of War to the White House to receive Medals of Honor. In addition to the awards to Vice Admiral James Bond Stockdale and Air Force Colonel George E. "Bud" Day, a posthumous award was presented to the family of Air Force Captain Lance Peter Sijan who had died in a North Vietnamese prison camp.



Then the President turned his attention to the intrepid

SEAL. Despite the Lieutenant's protests, his nomination for the Medal of Honor as a result of his rescue of Lieutenant Mark Clark and Lieutenant Colonel Ideal Hambleton had passed through channels. This time, standing to the side and watching the ceremony with a smile on his face and pride in his heart stood a Navy SEAL. Mike Thornton wouldn't have missed this moment for the world!

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