

STAY CLEAR OF HUE!

The warning was to stay clear of Hue because the enemy was mounting heavy assaults on the city and inflicting extensive damage and numerous casualties. Warrant Officer Fred Ferguson knew his wounded comrades needed to be evacuated immediately. He ignored the warning and flew his UH-1 into Hue. The decision resulted in the rescue of several critically wounded men—and the Medal of Honor for WO Ferguson

THE NIGHT OF 30 January 1968 had been long and nerve racking because the LZ had been under continuous rocket and mortar attack since before midnight. Consequently, as dawn broke over the Hue area of the Republic of Vietnam that Wednesday, the helicopter crews of C Company 227th Aviation Battalion (AH), 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) were uneasy. To make matters worse, missions for the day were delayed due to low overcast conditions extending north to the DMZ.

By 0930 hours the clouds had moved to the north clearing Hue and word was received for C Company to take off and head for Camp Evans to support the Cav's 3rd Infantry Brigade. The 227th's commander elected to accompany C Company to Camp Evans while the remainder of the battalion was to move north to rejoin the rest of the division.

At 1000 hours, the battalion commander took off and turned north. He was flying with the commander of C Company, the battalion sergeant major and four passengers. As they passed over the city of Hue their UH-1 received intense 12.7 mm machine-gun fire. The ship took numerous hits and was forced to land in the city below.

Seconds after touchdown, the helicopter was raked with small

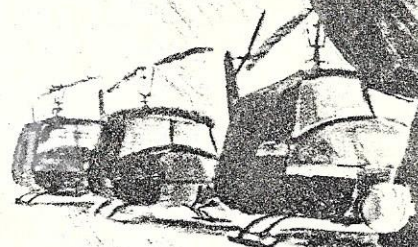
arms fire and a round from an RPG (rocket propelled grenade), fired at point blank range, crashed through the right windshield and detonated against the pilot's seat. The aircraft lay smoking in a rice paddy, a scant 100 yards from an ARVN (Army Republic of Vietnam) compound. Fire was being received from every direction. The ship had landed amid an NVA (North Vietnamese Army) battalion which had surrounded and was attacking the South Vietnamese engineer company in the compound.

The C Company commander, gunner and crew chief moved to the edge of the rice paddy and determined that the compound was still in friendly hands and would offer sanctuary for the wounded crew and passengers. The 227th commander, who had been wounded and blown clear of the Huey by the exploding RPG, laid down a base of fire which covered the withdrawal of the passengers into the compound. He then followed them inside the protective walls of the compound to relative safety. Contact with the outside world, more particularly the aircraft of the 227th, was established using radio equipment of the ARVN engineers.

The word had been received. Two helicopters had monitored the Mayday call and tried to

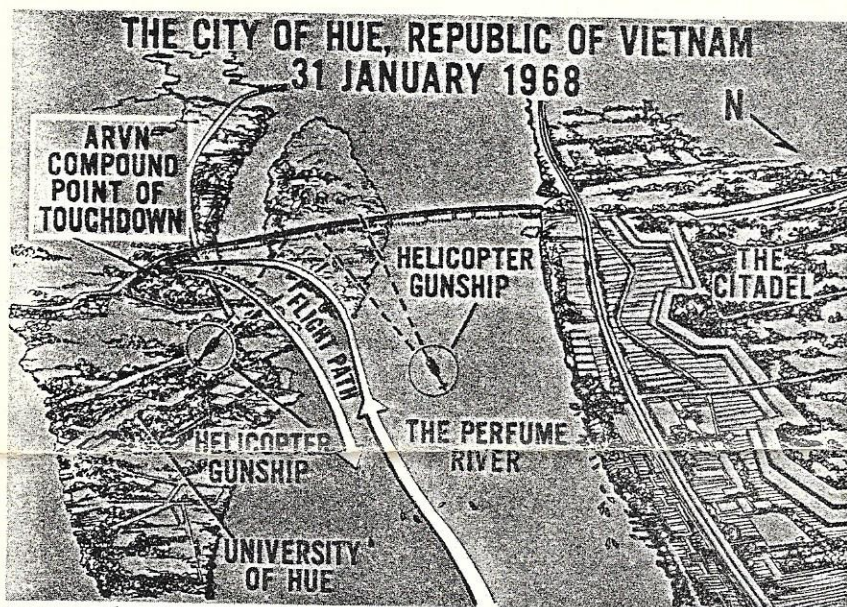
respond by following the stricken ship to the ground. But they were driven off by intense fire from heavy and light automatic weapons.

Following the initial attempt to



A black and white illustration of a man in a flight suit, looking off to the side. He is holding a helmet in his left hand. The background shows a control tower and some other structures. The text is positioned in the upper right area of the image.

Streaking from the embattled compound, WO Ferguson's Huey came under even heavier enemy fire than it encountered on the way in. Time and again the aircraft was rocked as it took hits, but WO Ferguson made it to safety with his wounded passengers



answer the Mayday, three more aircraft made a try at flying through the withering hail of fire to reach the isolated bastion and retrieve the wounded crew and passengers.

The radio transmissions were frequent concerning the fate of the men on the ground and those making the unsuccessful attempts to retrieve them. These calls were closely monitored by aircraft crews and ground control stations alike.

The order was finally put out for all to hear: *Stay clear of Hue!*

During this action Warrant Officer Fred Ferguson was flying a logistical mission nearby and had been monitoring the radio traffic concerning his battalion commander and crew. He completed his assigned mission and hastened to join a flight of gunships in the vicinity of Hue. Ignoring the obvious futility of an attempt to approach the besieged compound, he quickly briefed his crew, determined his flight path and alerted his company commander on the ground that he was going to attempt a rescue. He was warned of the improbability of the success of any such venture and advised to stay clear of the area.

The tempo of fire from light and heavy automatic weapons di-

rected at the ARVN compound had increased through the day. The walls had been assaulted by the NVA and mortar rounds were inflicting extensive damage to the compound.

Within the compound the C Company commander had been hit and the 227th's commander had been wounded again by fragments of the exploding mortars.

WO Ferguson acknowledged the transmission which warned him of the danger, and then announced that he was 2 minutes out on final approach and intended to try to effect the rescue.

The three accompanying gunships were suppressing with every weapon they had as WO Ferguson went in oblivious to the fire coming at him from all quadrants. His ship received hit after hit, shattering glass, ripping holes in the airframe and scattering debris throughout the cabin. He bore in straight for the compound with as much speed as his crippled Huey would give him.

The helicopter's skids were only inches from the railroad tracks over which WO Ferguson flew. He watched as the enemy gunners stood on roof tops, in doorways and in the streets, trying desperately to knock him and his ship

from the air. The hail of fire was murderous but was being answered to some extent by his own door gunner and crew chief.

WO Ferguson flared his ship as he crossed the compound wall and pulled every ounce of power available in his effort to slow his aircraft for a landing in the only clear area within the fire raked walls. His skids had scarcely touched the ground when the wounded were loaded aboard, four Americans and one South Vietnamese who had taken a 12.7 mm round near his left ear.

As the helicopter was lifted from the blood-soaked pad, three mortar rounds landed on the spot where the UH-1 had been only seconds before. The concussion of the exploding rounds lifted the tail boom and spun the aircraft to the left. Without hesitation WO Ferguson continued the left turn and exited the compound by the same route used on the approach.

As he streaked for safety, the curtain of fire thrown at the departing aircraft was even heavier and more intense than it had been on the approach. Time and again WO Ferguson's aircraft was rocked by enemy fire. One of the escorting gunships had its fuel tank shot away and the pilot reported that he was going down.

In spite of the severe damage his helicopter had sustained from the enemy fire and shell fragments, WO Ferguson completed his mission, delivering his wounded passengers to medical facilities at Phu Bai.

His day of days was over. His fateful Huey would never fly again. WO Frederick E. Ferguson didn't have to risk his life—in fact, no one could have blamed him if he hadn't attempted the rescue under the circumstances. But he did, knowing the possible consequences. To call him a hero seems inadequate. But he is a hero in the fullest and most sincere sense of the word.

DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
HEADQUARTERS 1ST CAVALRY DIVISION (AIRMOBILE)
APO San Francisco 96190

22 March 1968

GENERAL ORDERS
NUMBER 1792

AWARD OF THE DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS

1. TC 320. The following AWARD is announced. Ⓢ

STEFFES, HENRY M. RA16870285 [REDACTED] SPECIALIST FOUR E-4 United States Army Company D, 227th Aviation Battalion (Assault Helicopter)

Awarded: Distinguished Flying Cross

Date action: 31 January 1968

Theater: Republic of Vietnam

Reason: For heroism while participating in aerial flight evidenced by voluntary action above and beyond the call of duty in the Republic of Vietnam. Specialist Four Steffes distinguished himself by exceptionally valorous action on 31 January 1968, while serving as a crew chief of an armed helicopter during a rescue mission near Hue, Republic of Vietnam. While his aircraft was providing escort for a medical evacuation helicopter, Specialist Steffes exposed himself to the intense hostile fire as he placed effective suppressive fire on the enemy emplacements. His action enabled the medical evacuation helicopter to make several landings and extract the injured personnel. Specialist Steffes' display of personal bravery and devotion to duty is in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service, and reflects great credit upon himself, his unit, and the United States Army.

Authority: By direction of the President, under the provisions of the Act of Congress, approved 2 July 1926.

FOR THE COMMANDER:

OFFICIAL:


DONALD W. CONNELLY
LTC, AGC
Adjutant General

GEORGE W. PUTNAM JR.
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Chief of Staff

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