USAF's Most Decorated PJ

In three tours as a para-rescue man (PJ), Duane Hackney became one of the legendary heroes of the Vietnam War.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE

In June 1965, Duane Hackney graduated from high school at Flint, Mich., president of the student council and the recipient of an athletic scholarship offer. Clearly, great things lay ahead, but no one could have foreseen that he would become one of the most honored heroes of the Vietnam War, the recipient of twenty-eight decorations for valor in combat (more than seventy awards and decorations in all), and winner of the Cheney Award for 1967. (The Cheney award is given annually to a member of USAF for "an act of valor, extreme fortitude, or self-sacrifice in a humanitarian interest performed in conjunction with aircraft.")

It all began when eighteen-year-old Duane Hackney enlisted in the Air Force a few days after graduation, volunteering for pararescue training. An honor graduate in every phase of the tough, year-long course, he had his choice of assignments. The action was in Vietnam. Airman Second Class Hackney turned down assignments in Bermuda and England for Detachment 7, 38th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron, at Da Nang.

Three days after reporting for duty, Hackney flew his first combat mission. Somewhere on that mission, a .30-caliber slug buried itself in his leg. As the sportswriters say, Duane Hackney came to play, not to sit on the sidelines. To avoid being grounded by the medics, he had one of his PJ friends remove the slug with a probe. That incident set the tone for the more than 200 combat missions he was to fly in three and a half years of Vietnam duty, all as a volunteer.

Five times in the months ahead his helicopter was shot down. He doesn't recall how often he went down into the jungle looking for survivors or how many lives his medical training helped him save. As he became a legend in the rescue world, he earned four DFCs, not for flying a certain number of missions but for specific acts of heroism, and eighteen Air Medals, many for single acts of valor. Then came the Air Force Cross, the Silver Star, the Airman's Medal, the Purple Heart, and several foreign decorations.

Duane Hackney's most celebrated mission was on February 6, 1967. That morning he descended from a HH-3E Jolly Green Giant to look for a downed pilot near Mu Gia pass. The pilot had stopped his radio transmissions, a clue that enemy troops were on his tail. For two hours, Hackney searched for the man, dodging enemy patrols, until the mission was called off because of weather.

Late that afternoon, the downed pilot came back on the air, and Hackney's crew headed for the rescue area. They had to get him out before dark, or the odds on success would drop dramatically. This time Hackney found his man, badly injured but alive, got him onto the forest penetrator, and started up to the chopper, drawing small-arms fire all the way. As the men were hauled aboard, the helicopter took a direct hit from a .37-mm antiaircraft gun

On February 6, 1967, Duane Hackney took part in a Vietnam rescue mission that earned him the Air Force Cross.

and burst into flame. Wounded by shell fragments and suffering third-degree burns, Hackney, knowing that the HH-3 was not going to make it, put his own parachute on the rescued pilot and got him out of the doomed chopper. Maybe he could find another for himself. If not. . . .

Groping through dense smoke, he found an oil-soaked chute and slipped it on. Before he could buckle the chute, a second .37-mm shell hit the HH-3, blowing him out the door. He doesn't remember pulling the ripcord of the unbuckled chute before hitting trees 250 feet below, then plunging eighty feet to a rock ledge in a crevasse.

When he regained consciousness, enemy troops were leaping across the crevasse a few feet above him. Once they were gone, Hackney popped his smoke and was picked up by the backup chopper, only to learn that his heroic attempt to save the downed pilot had not succeeded. There were no survivors from the rescue helicopter. Training and experience, helped along by a miracle, saved Hackney himself.

For that mission, Duane Hackney received the Air Force Cross, the second awarded to an enlisted man. The first had gone posthumously to A1C William Pitsenbarger, also a pararescue man. *(See "Valor," October '83 issue.)*

In 1973, Duane Hackney left the Air Force, the most decorated pararescue man of the Vietnam War. Four years later, missing the camaraderie of Air Force life, he enlisted again, returning to duty as a pararescue instructor. In 1981, he suffered a severe heart attack, the result of a rescue operation, and was permanently grounded—but not out.

Today, SMSgt. Duane Hackney is first sergeant of the 410th Security Police Squadron at K. I. Sawyer AFB, Mich., still guided by the philosophy that dominated his combat career: a dynamic sense of personal responsibility and compassion for his fellow men. ■