

To Win Navy Cross

Helo Driver Rescues Hurt Pilot From Enemy



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An HC-7 helicopter pilot has been given the second highest award a Navy man can receive after driving his bullet-spattered rescue bird over the North Vietnamese heartland to grab a downed and injured A-4 Skyhawk pilot.

VADM William F. Bringle, ComSeventhFt, presented the Navy Cross to LTJG Jeffrie E. Wiant Monday morning during ceremonies held at HC-7.

LTJG Wiant is a search and rescue helicopter pilot with HC-7, whose SH-3A 'Big Mothers' fly in support of Task Force 77 carrier-based pilots in the Gulf of Tonkin.

The cross was presented as a result of a rescue in August 1968, when Wiant and his crew rescued LCDR Harvey Eickel from his downed Skyhawk. The mosquito-like attack aircraft was down about 25 miles inland near Vinh, North Vietnam.

The trip over the north was made under heavy enemy fire which continued during the rescue pickup. Wiant's 'Big Mother' was ripped numerous times by North Vietnamese gunfire.

LTJG Paskell D. January, co-pilot, was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross during the same ceremonies. LTJG January was cited for "heroism and extraordinary achievement" which led him to carry on his duties as a co-pilot and additionally fire at the enemy, rendering them ineffective while the pickup was in progress.

Combat rescue aircraft in support of the mission were A-4s from the rescued pilot's own squadron, VA-93, and its sister squadron, VA-94, both based aboard the USS Bon Homme Richard, a Seventh Fleet attack aircraft carrier.

The rescue has been termed the largest successful rescue penetration by a Navy helicopter over North Vietnam.

Wiant was forced to skirt heavily defended Vinh to the south and fly a wide arc to avoid more intense ground fire and complete his mission.

LCDR Eickel, suffering from head wounds, a knee injury, exhaustion and shock, was hauled aboard a little over one hour after his Skyhawk was hit and he was forced to 'punch out.'



BIG MOTHER—LTJG Jeffrie E. Wiant sits at the controls of his SH-3A helo. He won the Navy Cross for a Vietnam rescue of a downed aviator made in a similar helo. (staff photo)

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