

LT LASSEN AWARD



MEDAL OF HONOR presentation is shown in top photo. Below, Lieutenant Lassen, third from left, is shown with Cdr Lloyd L. Parthemer, former commanding officer of HC-7; Lt(jg) Clarence L. Cook, copilot on the hazardous mission; and Cdr Ron Hipp, HC-7's present commanding officer. In third photo, the Medal of Honor winner and his wife Linda pose with Kaman Vice President William R. Murray during plant tour.



On the 16th of January, in one of his last official acts as Commander-in-Chief, President Lyndon B. Johnson presented the Medal of Honor to Navy Lt Clyde E. Lassen, a 27-year-old UH-2 pilot from Helicopter Combat Support Squadron Seven, NAS Atsugi, Japan. The nation's highest honor was awarded for Lieutenant Lassen's "conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his own life above and beyond the call of duty" while rescuing two F-4 pilots whose aircraft was downed at night over North Vietnam.

The first Navy helicopter pilot of the Vietnam war to be thus decorated, Lieutenant Lassen wears his award proudly—but also with humility. This was readily apparent during a visit to Kaman Aircraft a few days after the impressive White House ceremony. Kaman Vice President William R. Murray, who has a first-hand knowledge of UH-2 operations off the coast of North Vietnam, escorted the Lieutenant through the plant which had produced the helicopter used on the hazardous flight. Lieutenant Lassen accepted the numerous congratulations appreciatively and with cordial good humor but several times he seized the opportunity to remind his well-wishers that it was not his accomplishment alone—he was "just one man" in a squadron dedicated to saving human life, and that almost daily, other HC-7 helicopter crews were conducting SAR missions within range of enemy guns.

The three men who accompanied Lieutenant Lassen on the rescue mission were also honored. Lt(jg) Clarence L. Cook, who served as copilot, received the second highest decoration possible for a Navyman to receive—the Navy Cross—from VAdm William F. Bringle, CinCPacFlt. Silver Stars were awarded to the two crewmen, AE2 Bruce B. Dallas and ADJ Donald West, for their part in the hazardous night-time rescue. The medals were presented by RADM Harvey P. Lanham, ComFairWestPac.

The following account of the mission was among those featured in the August-September-October, 1968, issue of Rotor Tips. It is republished as a special tribute to these and the other gallant men in Helicopter Combat Support Squadron Seven: ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

When the UH-2 SEASPRITE from HC-7's Det 104 landed at 0240 on the USS Jouett, it marked the end of a rescue mission which began shortly after midnight aboard another SAR ship. In between times the helicopter crew had been the target of bullets, flak and missiles; made an unsuccessful attempt at a hoist pickup; hit a tree while flying in total darkness; and landed three times in rice paddies while under enemy fire. At mission's end the UH-2 was damaged, vibrating and missing a door but the crew was miraculously unhurt, and two very relieved pilots had been snatched from the enemy in a last minute save that rivaled the very best in fiction writing.

The mission started at 0022 when Lt(jg) Clyde E. Lassen lifted the helo off the deck of the USS Preble in response to a SAR alert and headed through the darkness for the enemy shore. With him were Lt(jg) C. L. Cook, the copilot, and aircrewmen Bruce B. Dallas, AE2, and Donald West, ADJ3. Waiting for rescue were two pilots who had ejected from their F-4 after it was struck by a surface-to-air missile. They had landed about 20 miles inland on a small, steep hill which was flanked by villages and rice paddies on three sides and a mountain range on the other.

As the SEASPRITE neared the area, two "balls of flame" thought to be SAM's streaked by the helicopter. A minute later the flaming wreckage of the F-4 was spotted and the position of the survivors located. Lieutenant Lassen landed the helicopter in a rice paddy below the hill and 200 feet from the downed pilots, but as soon as it

D MEDAL OF HONOR



HAZARDOUS RESCUE of downed F-4 pilots by Lieutenant Lassen and his crew is portrayed in painting by aviation illustrator John McCoy, Jr. The artist was commissioned by Kaman Aircraft to depict the event. In top left photo, with Lt Lassen are well wishers Jim Stone, left, General Electric service representative, and Don Delaney, Kaman service representative. In third photo, the Medal of Honor winner, in cockpit, poses with members of HC-7's Det 104. At machine gun is AE2 Bruce B. Dallas, one of his crewmen on the perilous rescue flight. Supporting the sign and holding rifles are ADJ3 Donald West, left, and Lieutenant Cook, the other two members of the crew. Also shown are, front row, left to right, ADJ2 Gary Jennings, AMH3 Joe Chiaramonte, AE3 Tom Moriarty and ADR2 Tom Hitchcock. Standing, at left, is AMH3 Mike Doninetz. AMH2 Gerald Russell is in the helicopter.

touched down the waiting enemy opened up with small arms and automatic weapons fire. Taking off, the UH-2 orbited the area and aircraft flying cover for the rescue mission began dropping flares. The survivors were between two large trees about 150 feet apart and other fairly tall trees were also in the area. As Lieutenant Lassen approached a 50-foot hover between the trees, Petty Officer Dallas began lowering the rescue sling. Suddenly the flares went out leaving the area in pitch darkness and the pilot with no visual reference.

"I started retracting the hoist as fast as possible," Dallas said, "and in the process the helo hit a tree on the right side. In my leaning out I was also hit on the face as the tree went by. As soon as the limb hit me I yelled 'get up, get up' and we were out of there and climbing. Nothing but the skill and experience on our pilot's part saved us from crashing."

When Dallas yelled, Lieutenant Lassen quickly added power and was just starting to climb when the helo hit the tree, pitched down and went into a tight starboard turn. Somehow he managed to regain control and lifted the SEASPRITE out of the potential death trap. The helicopter developed a fairly heavy vibration immediately after the collision which had damaged the horizontal stabilizer, tail rotor, antenna and door.

Shaken but undeterred by the narrow escape, the UH-2 crew told the survivors they must leave the hill and get to a clear area. As the downed pilots started down the hill through the thick underbrush, the SEASPRITE made

pass after pass while the crewmen and copilot fired at the gun flashes below. Then, using the helicopter flood light for illumination, another approach was made to the rice field; however, as the UH-2 touched down it was seen that the survivors were too far away. Enemy fire was also steadily increasing with the light beam as a target. The rescue helicopter took off again, circled the area and headed in for another landing. Another ball of fire went by, narrowly missing the UH-2, but the pilot continued to drop lower until finally he held the helo in a hover with the wheels just touching the soft ground. For three minutes the helicopter hung there as the survivors frantically stumbled and fell their way across the paddy with its criss-crossing dikes. The UH-2 was under fire from two sides at first and then from a third as the enemy closed in on the area vacated a minute before by the rescues. Returning the fire, the helicopter crew silenced at least one position and managed to keep the enemy down until the gasping, mud-spattered survivors clambered aboard.

Lieutenant Lassen immediately lifted off and headed for the sea—for 45 minutes the helicopter had been under fire while pressing the rescue attempt. As the SEASPRITE neared the coast it ran into heavy flak and automatic fire and during subsequent evasive action the damaged door was torn off.

Only 135 pounds of fuel remained when the SEASPRITE landed aboard the Jouett.