

Finally, a soldier gets his medal

Raleigh man saved lives after '68 chopper crash

By JAY PRICE

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RALEIGH — It took more than 43 years, a tireless effort by a former commander of a year of pushing by U.S. Rep. Brad Miller's office, but today a retired Raleigh doctor will finally get the medal he earned in Vietnam but he never sought: the Army's highest honor for noncombat heroism.

Dr. Lyle Parker, 72, who has lived in Wake County since the mid-1990s, will receive the Soldier's Medal — the same medal Gen. Colin Powell won in Vietnam — in a ceremony at the N.C.

Museum of History. The honor recognizes what Parker did on Jan. 31, 1968, when Camp Ranier — built on a massive Michelin rubber plantation west of Saigon — was under fire as the massive Communist Tet Offensive began with



Parker

Over the stutter of gunfire and the explosions of enemy rockets and mortar rounds,

The crumpled helicopter was almost upside down,

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A photo from about 1968 shows Dr. Lyle Parker after receiving the Soldier's Medal of Valor today. COURTESY OF LYLE PARKER

an unnatural high note as it took off from camp, then the sounds of the copter crashing.

Maj. Jack Johnson, the company commander, yelled at the unit's doctor — a laid-back, guitar-playing Californian named Lyle Parker — to get ready for casualties. Then Johnson grabbed his driver and jeep to go find the crash.

The crumpled helicopter was almost upside down,

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Johnson, now 79 and living in Lawton, Okla., said he would have put in the paperwork for the medal back in 1968, but the Tet Offensive went on and on, then the unit got moved to another base. He always figured Parker's medical unit commanders sent in the paperwork.

"It was a complete oversight," he said. "He absolutely deserved it, because he could have stayed back in his little bunker and been safe and secure. But that wasn't Lyle."

It took Johnson nearly a year to search through the National Archives for logs and other records of that day, hunt down members of the crew, get notarized statements from witnesses and other records together.

Regulations required the request go through Con-

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leaning against a rubber tree with its engine still racing but its rotor blades shorn. The kerosene smell of aviation fuel was everywhere, and Johnson knew the wreckage was going to explode. But he climbed inside anyway and began pulling the stunned four-man crew to safety. Almost immediately, he felt someone beside him, also yanking out the victims. He looked over and was startled to see Parker.

Working together, they got everyone out, even the co-pilot, who was pinned hard against the dash and had a shattered leg. Someone said maybe there was a fifth person inside. They went back in but couldn't find anyone. The wreckage had started to smolder. Just as the two men stepped clear, it exploded.

A battalion commander made sure Johnson won a medal for his heroism that night. After Johnson's tour of duty ended a few months later, he lost track of Parker.

Then, a couple years ago at a unit reunion in Washington, D.C., Johnson met Parker again and was surprised to find out the doctor's valor had gone unrewarded.

'A complete oversight'

IF YOU GO

The ceremony at the N.C. Museum of History on Edenton Street in Raleigh begins at 2 p.m. today. It will be held in the Call to Arms Room in front of the Vietnam War display.

gress, so Johnson contacted Miller's office. A staffer there, he said, was tireless in following the request and making sure it didn't get hung up in the Pentagon bureaucracy.

Watching for stress

When Parker first joined the unit, guitar strapped to his back, Johnson figured he had a California hippie who wasn't going to be much of a soldier. Instead, he said, Parker proved him wrong, going out on missions to better understand the psychological stress and recommending which members of the crew needed rest for awhile.

Parker would socialize with the men, drinking and playing songs, all while carefully watching to see who had signs of too much stress.

On big missions where the unit set up forward staging areas in dangerous spots, Johnson said, Parker could have stayed at the main base. But he almost always came out to the staging zone so he could be close if there were casualties.

A humble man

Parker, a jovial man, lives with his wife, Trish, in an older neighborhood off Wade Avenue, where he restores old cars and does decorative metal work.

He said he is humbled by the honor and Johnson's relentless efforts.

And he is surprised at all the hoopla.

"I thought they'd just send me a nice medal in a box and that would be the end of it," he said.

A couple years ago, Johnson said, he called Parker to say that he wanted to start pushing for Parker's medal.

"He said something like 'Oh, why do that?'" Johnson remembered. "I said, 'Because you deserve it.'"