

USCG IN SEA

ONE OF THE LEAST KNOWN CHAPTERS IN U.S. COAST GUARD HISTORY OCCURRED IN SOUTH VIETNAM BETWEEN 1968 AND 1973 DURING A PILOT EXCHANGE PROGRAM BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES COAST GUARD AND THE UNITED STATES AIR FORCE.

THE EXCHANGE PROGRAM CALLED FOR FIVE COAST GUARD VOLUNTEERS - THREE HH-52A PILOTS AND TWO HU-16E PILOTS TO EXCHANGE BILLETTS WITH FIVE AIR FORCE PILOTS FOR SERVICE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA.

LT JACK RITTICHER, ONE OF THE FIRST COAST GUARD PILOTS IN THE PROGRAM, POINTED OUT PRIOR TO HIS PARTICIPATION THAT "THERE IS A VERY CLOSE CORRELATION TO THE WORK WE DO AS SAR PILOTS AND THE TECHNIQUES AND MISSION OF THE AIR FORCE PILOTS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA. I BELIEVE THE PROGRAM CAN BE HIGHLY BENEFICIAL TO BOTH SERVICES".

THIS UNIQUE HISTORY BEGAN IN THE FALL OF 1967 WHEN COAST GUARD HELICOPTER PILOTS LCDR LONNIE L. NIXON AND LT. JACK RITTICHER, BOTH STATIONED AT CGAS DETROIT, AND LT. LANCE A. FAGAN, STATIONED AT CGAS BROOKLYN, BEGAN THEIR COMBAT CREW TRAINING AND SEA SURVIVAL SCHOOL AT FAIRCHILD AFB AT SPOKANE WASHINGTON.

AFTER 12 DAYS OF E&E AND POW TRAINING AT FAIRCHILD, THE TRIO OF PILOTS BEGAN FLIGHT TRAINING IN THE CH-3C "JOLLY GREEN" AT SHEPARD AFB, TEXAS, FOLLOWED BY RESCUE AND RECOVERY PROCEDURES TRAINING AT EGLIN AFB, FLORIDA. THEIR FINAL PREPARATION FOR

SERVICE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA WAS JUNGLE SURVIVAL SCHOOL AT CLARK AFB, REPUBLIC OF PHILIPPINES.

MIXON HAD BEEN A CHIEF SONARMAN IN THE COAST GUARD PRIOR TO ATTENDING OCS IN 1958.

RITTICHIER, A COAST GUARD DIRECT COMMISSION AVIATOR, HAD PREVIOUSLY BEEN AN AIR FORCE B-47 Bomber Pilot AND LAGAN WAS A 1962 GRADUATE OF THE COAST GUARD ACADEMY.

THE CG. PILOTS WERE ASSIGNED TO DUTY WITH THE U.S. AIR FORCE'S 37TH ARRS AT DA NANG AIR BASE, ARRIVING ON 3-APRIL-1968. A SAD NOTE TO THIS HISTORY OCCURRED ON 9-JUNE-1968. LT. RITTICHIER AND THE CREW OF HIS JOJO GREEN LOST THEIR LIVES WHILE TRYING TO RESCUE AN INJURED USMC FIGHTER PILOT ON THE GROUND 37 MILES WEST OF HUE. AS RITTICHIER HOVERED OVER THE DOWNED PILOT, HIS AIRCRAFT WAS HIT BY SMALL ARMS FIRE AND IT BEGAN TO BURN. HE TRIED TO PULL AWAY, BUT THE AIRCRAFT WOULDN'T CLIMB. IT SETTLED TO THE GROUND AND EXPLODED. WITHIN 30 SECONDS, THE AIRCRAFT WAS COMPLETELY CONSUMED BY FIRE. LT RITTICHIER'S REMAINS WERE NEVER RECOVERED, AND HE WAS LISTED MIA. HE WAS THE FIRST USCG CASUALTY FROM THIS ACTION AND REMAINS THE ONLY USCG MIA FROM THE VIETNAM WAR.

MIXON AND EAGAN DEPARTED DA NANG IN FEBRUARY 1969, AND JIM LOOMIS, ROB RITCHIE, AND DICK BUTCHKA BECAME THE SECOND GROUP OF COAST GUARD AVIATORS TO SERVE AS COMBAT HELICOPTER PILOTS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA.

LCDR JOSEPH "J" CROWE AND LCDR ROD MARTIN REPORTED TO DA NANG IN MAY 1971 TO REPLACE BUTCHKA, LOOMIS AND RITCHIE. LCDR CROWE BEGAN HIS TOUR AS THE TRAINING AND SCHEDULING OFFICER FOR THE 37TH AGRS. DURING HIS TOUR, STATESIDE AIRCRAFT TRAINING GROUND TO A HALT, AND THE UNIT BEGAN RECEIVING UN-QUALIFIED PILOTS THAT HAD TO BE TRAINED IN COUNTRY. LCDR CROWE WAS IN CHARGE OF QUALIFYING THOSE PILOTS FOR COMBAT, IN A NEW AIRCRAFT, IN THE COMBAT ZONE WITHOUT SECURE AREAS FOR TRAINING.

THE FINAL AND MOST NOTABLE OPERATION OF CROWE'S TOUR WAS THE EVACUATION OF QUANG TRI CITADEL. A NORTH VIETNAMESE OFFENSIVE HAD BEGUN ON MARCH 30 WITH A DRIVE ACROSS THE DMZ, AND QUANG TRI WAS SURROUNDED BY FOUR NVA DIVISIONS. TRAPPED IN THE CITADEL, WERE 80 AMERICAN ADVISORS AND A CONTINGENT OF ARVN. LT CROWE WAS NOT ALLOWED TO FLY IN THE MISSION BECAUSE OF THE AMOUNT OF CLASSIFIED PLANNING HE HAD BEEN DOING AND THE GREAT RISK INVOLVED, BUT HE PLANNED THE LARGEST AERIAL EVACUATION OF THE VIETNAM WAR. HELICOPTERS RETURNED SAFELY TO DA NANG WITH 132 SURVIVORS. THE MISSION OF MAY 1, 1972, WOULD BE CALLED AND REMEMBERED AS THE 'MIRACLE MISSION'

CROWE AND MARTIN DETACHED SHORTLY
AFTER THE QUANG TRI EVACUATION AND
WERE REPLACED BY LCDR BOBBY LANG
AND LCDR JACK STICE, THE FINAL TWO
TO SERVE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA.

1st Group - 3-APRIL 1968

LCDR LONNIE L. MIXON
LT. JACK RITTICHER
LT. LANCE A EAGAN

Group 2 FEB 1969

LCDR VIN LOONIS
LCDR ROB RITCHIE
LCDR DICK BUTCHKA

Group 3 - MAY 1971

LCDR JOSEPH "J" CROWE
LCDR ROD MARTIN

Group 4 - JUNE 1972

LCDR BOBBY LANG
LCDR JACK STICE

JOHN KENER UHRA MN. 5103