

FIGHTING IRISHMAN

Scrappy Pilot Earns Commission, Citizenship

By JACK MALONEY
Staff Writer

FORT DIX — Eight years ago the Army told John O'Sullivan that he couldn't go to Officers' Candidate School because he wasn't a citizen.

But after the scrappy Fort Dix Irishman got to Vietnam and picked up 61 medals, including five purple hearts, and went down in shattered helicopters 19 times, he got his commission anyway — via the battlefield route.

Not only that, but the Army Aviation Association of America selected him as Aviator of the year for 1970.

And Monday he'll square things with the United States by taking the oath of citizenship in Federal Court, in Newark.

The 26-year-old O'Sullivan grew up in Ireland's County Kerry, in a town named Tralee — the Rose of which gets sung about in American watering places every St. Patrick's day — and came to this country, with his parents, in 1960.

Turned Down

After graduating from high school in Brooklyn, N.Y., he enlisted in the Army in 1962. When he was turned down for OCS, O'Sullivan settled for the Armored Cavalry. He went to jump school and won his parachutist's wings.



L.T. JOHN O'SULLIVAN
... 61 Medals Show His Mettle

Then in 1968, he graduated from the Army flight school in Fort Rucker, Ala. as a helicopter pilot and a Warrant Officer.

He went to Vietnam where he flew with the 174th Assault Helicopter Company, which gave direct support to the Americal Division. "I got

there after the so-called My Lai affair," O'Sullivan points out.

You can hardly hear his brogue when he talks. "I'm trying to lose it," he claims.

Like every other man assigned to Vietnam, O'Sullivan's orders only called for him to spend one year in the embattled country. But when his year was up, he decided to stay on for one more. "I was single at the time, and I thought that if I stayed on, that would make one less married man, perhaps, who had to come over."

The record will never show whether his gesture lengthened the at-home time of another pilot, but before he finally got back to the States in August 1970, O'Sullivan had won the Distinguished Service Cross (second only to the Medal of Honor), six Distinguished Flying Crosses, three Silver Stars, three Bronze Stars for valor, five Purple Hearts for wounds, the Army Commendation Medal for valor, and 42 Air Medals.

Those awards, probably making him one of the most highly decorated men to survive the Vietnam War, were piled up during 1,700 combat missions, during which he was shot out of the air 19 times. You get the feeling he's a

little embarrassed about losing all those ships, although most of them were later recovered and repaired.

The day he won the Distinguished Service Cross he nearly lost another helicopter. The action was near Quang Ngai City, and O'Sullivan was trying to help some South Vietnamese soldiers on the ground who were trapped by three companies of Viet Cong.

When O'Sullivan's company commander got shot down, O'Sullivan kept the VC occupied with covering fire for his C.O. until a rescue ship could lift him out.

Then something hit O'Sullivan's ship and set his outside aerial rockets on fire. The Irishman landed the stricken aircraft and, while two crewmen set up a base of fire to keep the VC off, O'Sullivan and his co-pilot ripped off the burning missiles.

That done, they all got back into the ship and got out of there.

But not for long. When they

got back to base, they exchanged ships and got back into the fighting — and stayed there for eight hours, except for refueling trips back to the air base. Not too many of the VC managed to crawl away from the encounter with O'Sullivan.

Ground Pounding

The man who finally will become a U.S. citizen on Monday is now flying helicopters at Fort Dix, although he'll eventually have to do some groundpounding as an Infantry Officer, in order to stay qualified in his Infantry commission.

Last December he married another child of the Auld Sod — the former Siobhan Moore, of Carlow, Ireland.

The young officer intends to make a career of the Army and, at the age of 38, when he'll be eligible to retire, thinks he'll probably go back to Ireland to live.

"You can live pretty good on retirement pay over there," he says, smilingly.