HEROIC HUEY SEARCH-

Blueghost 39, a UH-1H Huey, went into action to help rescue a downed Douglas EB-66 during the Eastertide Offensive—but the chopper's crew would soon need a search team of its own.

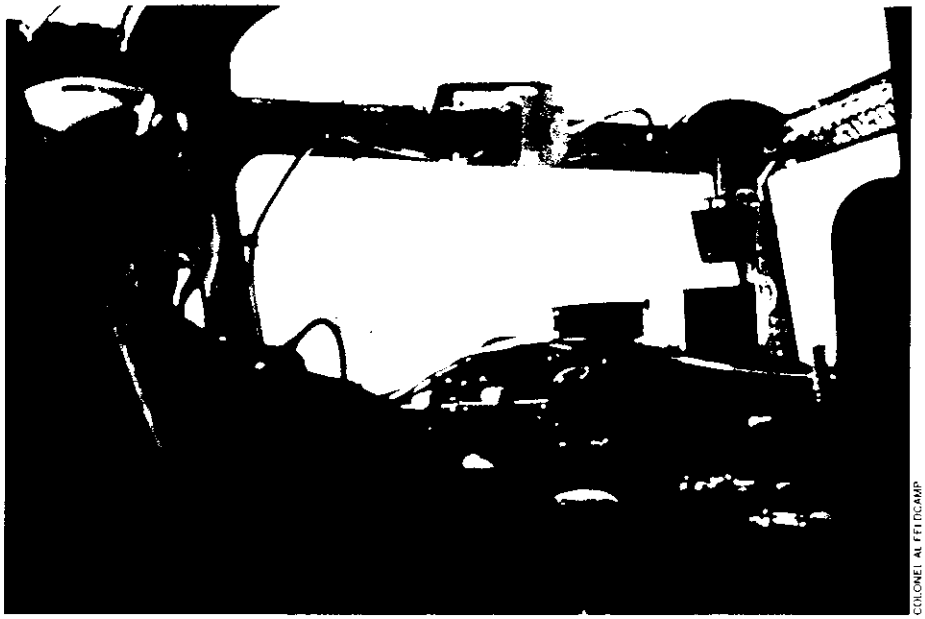
By Colonel Darrell D. Whitcomb, U.S. Air Force Reserve

Fort Myer, Virginia, is not much of an army post as posts go. It is not the biggest in land area, nor is it home to any major combat units. But it does perform one very important mission for the Army and the nation. Located next to Arlington National Cemetery, the post serves as the sentinel for that most hallowed ground. Its personnel are constant participants in and witnesses to the interment of American men and women who have served their country near and far and have made the ultimate sacrifice.

April 29, 1994, was like most other days at Fort Meyer. Numerous burials were scheduled throughout the day, and

Directed by a Hughes OH-6 observation helicopter, Bell AH-1G Cobra gunships peel off to lay suppressive fire on Communist ground forces, in Chariots of Fire, *by Joe Kline (Joe Kline Aviation Art).*

AID-RESCUE MISSION



COLONEL AL FELDCAMP

The navigator of a Douglas EB-66C electronic warfare aircraft on a long-range mission waits his turn while another EB-66C closes in to refuel from a Boeing KC-135 tanker.

ceremonial troops and somber hearses continually came and went. At 9 a.m., an eclectic group of civilians and military personnel gathered at the old post chapel. They were there to honor three young men who had been killed in South Vietnam on April 2, 1972. The men were three of the four crew members of a Bell UH-1H Huey helicopter (call sign Blueghost 39) assigned to F Troop of the 8th Cavalry.

To the families, the burial marked the end of a long ordeal of waiting and praying that the soldiers' bodies would be returned to their native soil. To the military men in the group, both active and retired, especially those from F Troop, it represented "mission completed." They were there to welcome home their comrades from that last mission, flown so many Aprils before. As the chaplain, Colonel David Pierce, eulogized the three men, the veterans present remembered those days 22 years earlier and the mission that had taken the lives of these three air cavalry soldiers.

The crew members of Blueghost 39 were participants in one of the most significant actions of the Vietnam War. In late March 1972, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) launched its Eastertide Offensive, a full-scale invasion of South Vietnam with a conventional force of tanks, artillery and infantry. The opening gambit was directed at Hue, with coordinated thrusts south through the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and west, out of Laos. That attack was followed a few days later by a second, equally brutal thrust against the central areas of South Vietnam and a third strike aimed directly at Saigon.

There were few American forces available to meet the NVA. The United States had been involved in the war for more than eight years, and the nation was bitterly divided by the effort. Since the 1968 Tet Offensive, the American people, for the most part, had turned against the war, and U.S. forces were coming home. When the Eastertide Offensive started, most American combat divisions had already been pulled out. Those U.S. Army units that remained were largely support units or aviation units like F Troop of the 8th Cavalry. Located at Marble Mountain air facility, just east of the jet base at Da Nang, that unit of 26 Hueys, Hughes OH-6 Cayuses and Bell AH-1G Cobra gunships flew missions all over northern South Vietnam. The troop was attached to the 196th Light Infantry Brigade, but the brigade was limited to protective patrolling around Da Nang and Hue. The South Vietnamese fought this ground battle.

But they were not alone. In addition to the residual U.S. Army units in the area, the U.S. Air Force and Navy kept strong strike forces of fighters and bombers in the region. They were supported by forward air controllers (FACs) who spotted targets and coordinated with ground forces assigned to search-and-rescue missions for downed aircrews. North Vietnam had anticipated this American involvement and was ready to defend its ground forces from aerial attack. They were shielded by an air defense force of massed anti-aircraft artillery guns and the latest surface-to-air missiles (SAMs).

The battle opened on March 30, when NVA forces attacked Army of the Republic of Vietnam forces located in an arc of firebases extending along the DMZ and into the first series of ridges west of the lowlands that ran from Hue up to the DMZ. At the time of the attacks, the area was covered with low clouds and rain. Helicopter units like F Troop could work in that kind of weather and immediately began responding to calls for help. But the poor weather limited the initial response of U.S. Air Force and Navy strike forces. The FACs could not spot targets through the clouds and could not visually direct fighters against the massive ground targets. Airstrikes had to be directed by radar or long-range navigational equipment, neither of which was as accurate as visual control.

Boeing B-52s, which could bomb in any weather, were the one exception. As the offensive unfolded, they began to take off in formations of three aircraft, each formation carrying more than 100 bombs. The B-52s were sent after the NVA formations coming through the DMZ and out of Laos.

The NVA SAM sites were waiting for the bombers. As the B-52s began hitting the ground units, the enemy attempted to shoot them down with 15-foot-long SA-2 missiles. To protect the B-52s, the Air Force began to escort them with Republic F-105 Wild Weasel aircraft equipped with special "black boxes" designed to locate SAM sites. The F-105s were armed with missiles of their own that, when launched, would home to and destroy the SAM sites. The B-52s were also escorted by Douglas EB-66 aircraft equipped with special electronic gear that sent out signals to jam and confuse the missiles' radar guidance system.

On April 2, the third day of the offensive, three B-52s took off from a U.S. Air Force air base in Thailand to strike an NVA column moving just south of the DMZ. They were escorted by two McDonnell F-4s, as protection against possible intervention by NVA MiGs, two F-105s for SAM suppression and two EB-66s for electronic jamming support. The two EB-66s used the call signs Bat-21 and Bat-22. Approaching the target, the aircraft were engaged by several SAM sites, which launched numerous SA-2 missiles against them. Using electronic jamming, suppression missiles and some very imaginative evasive tactics, the formation was able to evade all the missiles except one, which struck and destroyed the lead EB-66 (Bat-21).

When the missile smashed into Bat-21, one crew member, navigator Lt. Col. Iceal Hambleton (call sign Bat-21 Bravo), ejected. Working directly below him at that very moment was a U.S. FAC in a small Cessna O-2 observation aircraft (call sign Bilk-34). The Cessna's pilot, 1st Lt. Bill Jankowski, was horrified when he saw the EB-66 hit above him.

Jankowski knew that the search-and-rescue force (SAR) of King command-and-control aircraft, Douglas A-1 Sandy strike aircraft and Bell HH-53 Jolly Green long-range rescue helicopters was ready and waiting, so he made an emergency call to alert them to the shootdown. Already aware of the situation, the SAR force was preparing for action. But at that moment, the battle was Jankowski's. As the man on the spot, he was directed by King to assume the duties of on-scene commander for the search and rescue

of the downed crew member. Every minute was critical. Jankowski knew that sometimes the best plan was to get whatever aircraft were available in the area to try a quick pickup before the enemy could go after a downed crew member. He called on the emergency frequency for any support available to rendezvous with him for the search-and-rescue effort.

Sandys 07 and 08, two Douglas A-1 Skyraiders led by Captain Don Morse, responded to the call. They were in the area, having taken off earlier for two unrelated missions. The Sandys were scrambled with two Jolly Greens that had been sent out to pick up Mike 81, the pilot of an O-2 that had been downed earlier in the day near the DMZ, but Mike 81 had already been recovered by a U.S. Navy ship. Consequently, the Jolly Greens had been told to orbit and be ready to support an evacuation of some American advisers from a forward combat base.

But that evacuation had also been canceled, so the two A-1s and Jolly Greens 65 and 67 were holding just east of Quang Tri when they heard Jankowski's call. Responding immediately, Sandy 07 (Captain Morse) instructed the Jolly Green pilots to hold south of Quang Tri, and then turned the two Skyraiders north, toward Jankowski in his Cessna. Morse had not been briefed on the North Vietnamese invasion. Consequently, he thought that since the EB-66 had gone down in South Vietnam, the search-and-rescue effort would be fairly straightforward and could be accomplished quickly.


U.S. AIR FORCE

Jankowski told the Sandys and Jolly Greens to proceed to Cam Lo. The crews were not very familiar with the area, and they wandered too far to the west and began taking groundfire, including some kind of unguided rocket that almost hit Sandy 07. The weather was overcast at about 1,500 feet, and some rain was restricting the visibility.

They found Jankowski right over Cam Lo. Groundfire, mostly of the barrage type, was extremely heavy from the north and east. The FAC directed them to fly north of the river that ran east-west above Cam Lo and Dong Ha and showed them Hambleton's location in a clump of trees just north of a small village. Hambleton later recalled that he was amazed that the search-and-rescue force had responded with such speed.

Sandy 07 took over as the on-scene commander, and Jankowski flew south looking for more support. Morse was shocked at the ground situation. He had never seen so many guns, not even in Mu Gia Pass, the hottest place in Laos. Intelligence had not briefed him that anything of this magnitude was occurring. Prior to taking off, he and his wingman had received the standard daily briefing without any indications that anything unusual was happening. But to Morse it looked as though the whole NVA had come south, and he quickly rethought his estimate of the situation. This was going to be one tough mission.

Jankowski's call for emergency support was also monitored by an Army helicopter

Top: *Lieutenant Colonel Iceal Hambleton, navigator of the EB-66C (Bat-21 Bravo). When his plane was hit by an SA-2 surface-to-air missile, Hambleton ejected, precipitating a hazardous rescue operation.* ***Above:*** *An aerial reconnaissance photo showing Hambleton's circled position. After spending 12 days in hostile territory, Hambleton was rescued by a U.S.–Vietnamese sea-air-land commando team.*

flying near Hue. It was a UH-1H Huey (call sign Blueghost 39) from F Troop of the 8th Cavalry. Normally based at Marble Mountain air facility, near Da Nang, it was one of several aircraft that had been assigned to missions in the Hue–Quang Tri area that day. Blueghost 39's crew consisted of pilots 1st Lt. Byron Kulland and Warrant Officer John Frink, crew chief Spc. 5 Ronald Paschall and gunner Spc. 5 Jose Astorga.

On board Blueghost 39 as passengers were Captain Thomas White, the F troop operations officer, and Stu Kellerman, a reporter for United Press International. Earlier in the day, Blueghost 39 had taken Kellerman on an aerial tour of the Dong Ha area to get a firsthand view of the unfolding battle. While returning, they were instructed ro swing by the Hue–Phu Bai area and pick up White for the return home to Marble Mountain air facility. There, the original Blueghost 39 co-pilot, Warrant Officer Guy Laughlin, changed aircraft with Frink, who had been the co-pilot on another F Troop Huey, Blueghost 30. Frink had already spent several days at Hue–Phu Bai and was scheduled to rerurn to his home base for a few days of rest and relaxation. Blueghost 39 was his ride back.

The emergency call changed all of that. White briefly considered having the helicopter turn north and immediately proceed to Cam Lo. But the emergency call specified that there could be as many as six survivors. Captain White knew that six added to the crew of four, plus two passengers already on board, would overload the Huey. Besides, he could not risk the life of the reporter. So he directed the crew to drop him and Kellerman off at the Hue–Phu Bai tactical operations center, where he could monitor events by radio. Whire directed the helicopter crew to proceed to the Hue–Phu Bai airfield, refuel and be ready for action.

In the refueling pits, they were joined by two F Troop Bell AH-1G Cobra gunships, call signs Blueghost 28 and 24. Earlier in the day, the two Cobras had been working out of the Quang Tri airfield, a few miles to the east, when it had come under heavy NVA artillery fire. They had scrambled to save themselves and their aircraft and proceeded to Hue–Phu Bai for safety. The other Huey assigned to the unit, Blueghost 30, was also at the refueling pits. It was flown by Warranr Officer Ben Nielsen and had no specific assignment, but was on call for whatever might develop.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF COLONEL DARRELL D. WHITCOMB

LEFT: PASCHALL FAMILY; RIGHT: FRINK FAMILY

Clockwise from top left: *First Lieutenant Byron Kulland, pilot of Blueghost 39, a Bell UH-1H of F Troop, 8th Cavalry; Captain Mike Rosebeary, pilot of the Bell AH-1G gunship Blueghost 28; Warrant Officer John Frink, who substituted for Blueghost 39's regular co-pilot, Warrant Officer Guy Laughlin; Specialist-5 Ronald Paschall, crew chief of Blueghost 39.*

Based on whar little he knew abour the shot-down aircraft and the developing land battle, White directed Blueghost 28, piloted by Captain Mike Rosebeary, to immediately lift off with the other gunship, Blueghosr 24, and one of the Hueys, Blueghost 39, and respond to the emergency call. Rosebeary acknowledged the call and took off with the three helicopters. White then called him in the air and said it appeared that six crew members from an Air Force aircraft were down north of Cam Lo. He instructed Rosebeary to contact an Air Force FAC, call sign Bilk 34, on the emergency "Guard" frequency to coordinate the rescue. White also informed Rosebeary that there were apparently massive enemy forces at that location, and directed him not to take his flight north of the river near Dong Ha without fighter support.

Five minutes later, White decided to augment the flight with the other Huey. He directed Blueghost 30 to take off and join the others in the effort and informed Rosebeary that the second Huey was being launched. Rosebeary then made a critical decision. Not realizing what he was getting into, he directed his second Cobra, Blueghost 24, to drop back and join up with the second Huey, which was actually just a few minutes behind. By doing so, he reduced by half the firepower he and Blueghost 39 would have when they reached the river.

Flying north, Rosebeary and his team checked in with Jankowski. The FAC gave them a cursory situation briefing and instructed them to proceed to Dong Ha, cross the river and head west to the one survivor who was located near where the river made a big bend back to the east. Rosebeary acknowledged the message but queried the FAC for further information on the NVA threat. Jankowski told them that there were "many, many" anti-aircraft guns in the area, but that A-1s and F-4s were already hitting them. Satisfied, Rosebeary committed his two lead helicopters to the rescue attempt.

Blueghosts 28 and 39 proceeded into the area at low altitude. Blueghost 39 was out front, 50 feet above the ground; Blueghost

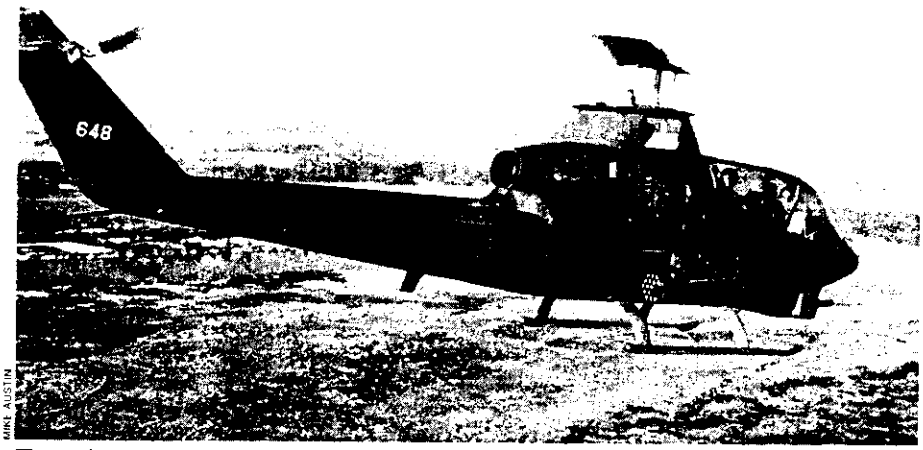
28 was at 300 feet, about 3,000 feet behind Blueghost 39, in proper position to deliver rocket and machine-gun fire against anything that might shoot at the other Huey. As they passed Dong Ha and crossed to the north side of the river, they began to take heavy groundfire. Blueghost 28 responded with rockets and 40mm fire, but the groundfire was coming from every direction and began striking both helicopters. Rosebeary was thrown off-balance as the rounds slammed into his aircraft. Some shattered his canopy, and others ripped at the vital components of his Cobra. Critical systems began to fail, and warning lights lit up all over the cockpit.

Rosebeary's trusty Cobra was in trouble, and he could see that Blueghost 39 was also taking hits. Rosebeary called for the two choppers to turn and leave the area. Although the pilot of Blueghost 39 did not respond verbally, Rosebeary could see that he was beginning to turn. Then smoke began to pour from Blueghost 39's engine area, and Rosebeary watched the Huey cross behind a tree line and set down in a controlled landing about two kilometers northwest of Dong Ha.

Down behind enemy lines, the crew of Blueghost 39 was in serious trouble. During the run-in, the pilot, Lieutenant Kulland, had tried to use the terrain and trees for protective cover. The gunner, Spc. 5 Astorga, had called out the location of groundfire to him and returned fire against the overwhelming enemy force. But then his gun had jammed, and he was wounded in the leg and chest.

After passing out momentarily, Astorga came to when the helicopter lurched to a stop on the ground. He quickly unstrapped and crawled to the cockpit to check on the other three crew members. One pilot and Spc. 5 Paschall were conscious. Somebody threw Astorga a survival vest, and he began to crawl away from the chopper. Realizing that he was alone, he turned back to try to pull out the rest of the crew. Then someone yelled, "VC!" and he saw enemy troops closing in, firing at the helicopter as they came. Blueghost 39 exploded in a violent fireball, with the other three crew members still aboard. The wave of heat from the explosion swept over Astorga, and he tried again to crawl away. But he was surrounded by NVA troops and taken prisoner. Astorga was later transported to a prison camp in Hanoi.

DON LEGAN



MIKE AUSTIN

Top: *This Douglas EB-66C, assigned to the 42nd Tactical Electronic Warfare Squadron at Korat Air Base, Thailand, flew as Bat-21 on the April 2, 1972, mission.* ***Above:*** *An AH-1G of F Troop, 8th Cavalry. Two of the unit's Cobra gunships, Blueghosts 24 and 28, provided fire support for UH-1Hs Blueghosts 30 and 39 during the Bat-21 rescue effort.*

Rosebeary knew nothing of the events taking place on the ground as he struggled to keep his ripped and shattered helicopter in the air while he made his escape to the south. Fortunately, his main radio still worked, and he called a warning to the other two choppers not to cross the river. He also made his own Mayday call, announcing that his chopper was badly damaged and heading southeast to escape. Jolly Green 67, one of the HH-53s that had been launched to rescue the previously downed O-2 pilot, was still in the area. He acknowledged the call and proceeded to a rendezvous with Blueghost 28.

Once clear of the immediate danger area, Rosebeary and his gunner, Warrant Officer Charles Gorski, tried to determine the condition of their aircraft. It was badly damaged. The anti-torque control was gone, and the transmission bypass light was on. The fuel tanks were also leaking fuel at a rate of about 50 pounds per minute. Rosebeary kept flying until the engine quit, then autorotated onto the beach south of the Cua Viet River. Almost immediately, Jolly Green 67 landed and picked up the crew. Just a few minutes later, Blueghost 30 landed next to the wreckage of Blueghost 28 and recovered as much gear as possible, along with radio code cards and maps. The co-pilot of Blueghost 30, Warrant Officer Laughlin, was in shock over the fate of his compatriots on Blueghost 39. But for a turn of fate, he would have been in its smoking wreckage instead of Frink.

Back over Hambleton's position, Sandys 07 and 08 continued to strike enemy targets. Hambleton was acting as a ground FAC, calling out targets and giving them corrections. The Sandy crews were impressed by his cool composure. But several things concerned Captain Morse in Sandy 07. First of all, the weather was not improving. Visibility was worsening, and low clouds were rolling in, making airstrikes more and more difficult. It was also getting dark. Morse called Jankowski to inquire about the progress of the Army helicopters. Only then did he discover that they were involved in their own search-and-rescue mission and would be of little use to him.

Apprised of that situation and facing withering groundfire, Captain Morse chose not to commit the two waiting Jolly Greens to the rescue effort. The area was just too hot. Too much work was needed to prepare the area for a pickup attempt. The quick snatch had not worked. So he turned over on-scene command to another

COURTESY OF COLONEL DARRELL D. WHITCOMB

A caisson carries the remains of Kulland, Frink and Paschall to their final resting place at Arlington National Cemetery on April 29, 1994—22 years after their deaths. Blueghost 39's gunner, Spc. 5 Jose Astorga, was wounded and taken prisoner by the North Vietnamese.

FAC and pointed the two damaged Skyraiders toward Da Nang. Lieutenant Jankowski was not far behind them.

As Jankowski and the Sandys headed for Da Nang, Jolly Green 67 landed at Hue–Phu Bai to drop off Rosebeary and Gorski. White was there to meet them. Just a few moments earlier, he had gotten a call from higher headquarters notifying him that two of his helicopters were down up north. The caller did not specify which two. When White heard that the Jolly Green was inbound, he hoped that his men were aboard.

Rosebeary and Gorski climbed out and told White what had happened. Even though it was now almost completely dark, White dispatched several other unit helicopters to Dong Ha to search for the downed crew. But the weather, darkness and enemy forces combined to make the effort fruitless.

Morse and his wingman landed at Da Nang. Both aircraft were so badly damaged they needed several days of repair work to be flyable again. They told intelligence officers about the dramatic events unfolding up north. Then Morse got on the phone and called his squadron commander at Nakhon Phanom Air Base in Thailand. He described the situation and said that they needed more A-1s at Da Nang. It was going to require an extensive effort to fish Colonel Hambleton out of the middle of the North Vietnamese Army. His commander replied that several A-1s would be dispatched that night to help.

Then Morse tried to get some sleep. He knew that tomorrow was going to be a very busy day, dangerous and difficult. But they had to rescue the downed flier. That was why they were there. They would do everything they could to get him out. As long as Hambleton was still alive and free, all efforts would be made to rescue him. But Morse could not doze off. The thought of the NVA guns haunted him. There were so many. Instead of sleeping, he either paced or shook the whole night. He said later that it was the worst night of his life.

Search-and-rescue forces returned to the area the next day to continue the effort to locate Hambleton. Elements of F Troop also continued to listen and search for Blueghost 39, but found no signs of the Cobra. The search went on for 11 more days, during which two more helicopters, two North American Rockwell OV-10s and one F-4 went down. Hambleton and one of the OV-10 crew members were eventually rescued by a combined U.S.–Vietnamese SEAL commando team.

The fierce ground battle continued. South Vietnamese forces eventually were able to halt and partially reverse the NVA offensive. But the crew of Blueghost 39, like so many others, had disappeared. One year later, all remaining U.S. troops were withdrawn from Vietnam. U.S. participation in the war ended with the return of American prisoners, one of whom was Jose Astorga, the gunner on Blueghost 39. He could finally tell the tale of what happened April 2, 1972, when his crew attempted to rescue the downed Air Force navigator.

Three years later, in 1975, North Vietnam invaded South Vietnam again. But this time South Vietnam was alone; American air power was not there to help them by decimating the advancing NVA columns. South Vietnam fell, and many Americans just forgot the war and the warriors who fought it. But the families and compatriots of those lost never forgot and never lost hope that their friends and loved ones would eventually be returned to their home soil.

In the post chapel at Fort Myer on that spring day in 1994, friends and family welcomed home the three lost crew members of Blueghost 39. The previous August, a joint U.S.–Vietnamese search team, assembled as a reflection of the reopening of relations between the two nations, went to the crash site of Blueghost 39. The team eventually recovered the remains of Byron Kulland, John Frink and Ronald Paschall, which were shipped home under an American flag.

The commemorative service at Fort Myer was a touching ceremony. The pomp, the precision of the soldiers of the old 3rd Infantry, the snapping of the flag, the hymns—all were part of the tearful celebration as the Army chaplain led the congregation through several songs and readings in that historic chapel. After the ceremony, a caisson carried the common casket containing the sparse remains of all three men into the cemetery itself. The crew of Blueghost 39 was home at last. □

Now a captain for Delta Airlines, U.S. Air Force Colonel Darrell D. Whitcomb logged some 1,875 combat hours as a cargo pilot and Forward Air Controller in Southeast Asia. Suggestions for further reading: The Rescue of Bat 21, *by Darrell D. Whitcomb (forthcoming);* BAT-21, *by William C. Anderson (Prentice-Hall/Bantam); and "SEALs Shadowy Rescue," by Dale Andradé,* Vietnam *Magazine, December 1990.*

To read Colonel Whitcomb's story of Air Force rescue efforts in the aftermath of Hambleton's shootdown, go to http://www.thehistorynet.com on the World Wide Web and see "Brave Jolly Green," which will be published starting the week of May 19, 1997, on TheHistoryNet.