

PROPOSED CITATION

BY DIRECTION OF THE PRESIDENT, UNDER THE PROVISIONS OF THE ACT OF CONGRESS, APPROVED 2 JULY 1962, A DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS IS AWARDED TO SPECIALIST FOURTH CLASS WALTER Z. MITCHELL, RA19835855, UNITED STATES ARMY, WHO DISTINGUISHED HIMSELF BY HEROISM WHILE PARTICIPATING IN AREIAL FLIGHT EVIDENCED BY VOLUNTARY ACTION ABOVE AND BEYOND THE CALL OF DUTY ON THE NIGHT OF 1-2 JULY 1967. ON THIS NIGHT, SPECIALIST MITCHELL HAD VOLUNTEERED TO FLY AS DOORGUNNER OF THE UH-1C GUNSHIP ON A 'FIREFLY" OPERATION ALONG THE TRUONG GIANG RIVER COMPLEX, REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM. NUMEROUS VIET CONG AUTOMATIC WEAPONS EMPLACEMENTS IN SAMPANS AND VILLAGES ALONG THE ROUTE POURED STREAMS OF DEATH INTO THE AIR, BUT SPECIALIST MITCHELL REMAINED AT HIS POST, MATCHING THEIR FIRE WITH HIS GUN, DAUNTLESSLY EXPOSING HIMSELF TO ENEMY MARKSMEN IN ORDER TO SUPPRESS AND DESTROY ENEMY POSITIONS. FOR SIX HOURS, SPECIALIST MITCHELL UTILIZED HIS MACHINEGUN TO ENGAGE THE ENEMY, AND ON OCCASSIONS WHEN MINIGUNS AND ROCKETS WERE EXPENDED, HE CONTINUED THE SHIPS PRIMARY MISSION OF SINKING SAMPANS UNTIL FUEL RAN TOO LOW TO CONTINUE. THROUGH SPECIALIST MITCHELL'S HEROISM AND COURAGE IN THE FACE OF DEATH, HIS DEVOTION TO DUTY, AND HIS EXCELLENCE AS A GUNNER, HE HELPED SET A NEW RECORD OF 148 SAMPANS SUNK, THIRTEEN STRUCTURES DESTROYED, AND FOURTEEN VIET CONG KILLED IN ACTION. HIS ACTIONS ARE IN KEEPING WITH THE HIGHEST TRADITIONS OF MILITARY SERVICE AND REFLECT GREAT CREDIT UPON HIMSELF, HIS UNIT, TASK FORCE OREGON, AND THE UNITED STATES ARMY.

EYEWITNESS STATEMENT

I was an eyewitness to the acts of extraordinary heroism and exceptional flying skill performed by members of the 71st. Assault Helicopter Company "Firefly" team on the night of 1-2 July 1967. I rode with them in the Command and Control ship that night to give on-the-spot ground clearance for targets of opportunity along the Truong Giang River Complex in the northern part of Tan Ky district. This area had been Viet Cong dominated for over twenty years, and the two Viet Cong companies intelligence reports placed in the area were suspected to employ many automatic weapons used in anti-aircraft roles. Fire could be suspected from all large sampans and all villages along the route. We turned on the light at 2100 hours at approximately coordinates BT 2836, and immediately saw a river full of supply-laden sampans. The gunship began to attack with rockets and miniguns, exploding, burning, and splintering the boats, sending them to the bottom of the river. After each pass the helicopters would report their sinkings and the Command and Control ship would fly down for confirmation. I added each confirmed boat sink, structure destroyed, and Viet Cong killed to my log book, giving coordinates and time. I also recorded probables, but could not confirm them. At three separate villages during the six hour operation we received heavy automatic weapons fire. First at Dong Tri (1), Coordinates BT 286375, then at Chau Khe (2) Coordinates BT 264383, and finally at Phuoc An, Coordinates BT 215438. On all three occasions the team functioned with trained perfection, marking the firing positions, illuminating them, and destroying them swiftly and efficiently. Several of the buildings used as firing points erupted with secondary explosions when penetrated, testimony to the amount of munitions already sent along this route.

The operation consisted of three periods of approximately two hours each spaced by a return to Chu Lai base camp to refuel and re-arm. The lightship, possessing only two M-60 doorguns, and the Command and Control ship, possessing one M-60 and one .50 caliber machine gun, do not require the time to re-arm that a minigun and rocket bearing UH-1C does. Major Arink team leader and gunship commander, radioed ahead to prepare an additional gunship rather than waste precious extra minutes servicing his first helicopter. The gun crew landed, sprinted to the waiting ship, performed a pre-flight and were airborne with the rest of the firefly team. They did this also for the second re-arming and re-fueling stop. The urgency lay in the significance of the mission after Major Arink had flown the first hour. The tremendous volume of shipping he had intercepted in that short time hinted at the tremendous volume still untouched. A concerted effort by the team would most probably set a record for single-night sampan sinkings, but most important, it would deny valuable war material to the enemy and destroy a great deal of his transportation capacity. Thus, on the second period of operations, he and the team remained on station after miniguns and rockets were expended, utilizing only door guns and the .50 caliber to sink enemy vessels. They returned to Chu Lai only when fuel was too low to remain on station longer. The third period was also continued until fuel reserves ran low, and that time the coming of dawn made another trip unfeasible. The teamwork, coordination and flying ability of these aviators, together with uncanny marksmanship on the part of all personnel, contributed to a record of one hundred forty eight sampans sunk, thirteen structures destroyed, fourteen Viet Cong killed in action, seventy probable, but unconfirmed, Viet Cong killed in action, and uncounted tons of food, weapons, ammunition, and other war supplies lost to the Viet Cong insurgency effort. This one mission was a major factor in the bringing to a virtual standstill of Viet Cong resupply efforts in the Tam Ky sector.

William E. Zak
1/Lt. TC
Sector Advisor

On the night of 1-2 July 1967, the "Firefly" team for the 71st Assault Helicopter Company distinguished themselves by an extraordinary heroic and exceptionally proficient display of tactics, operational knowledge and flying skill in the face of Viet Cong fire. A "Firefly" team has two UH-1D helicopters and one UH-1C helicopter gunship. The HH-1C has "mini-guns" and rockets, the lightship had two H-60 machineguns and one special lighting kit, and the Command and Control ship carries one H-60 machinegun and one .50 caliber machinegun. At 2045 hours, the team picked up 1LT. William E. Zak, who was to be on-the-spot ground clearance authority from Tan Ky sector Headquarters, and headed for the night operation on the Trung Giang River Complex. For over twenty years no government troops have been in the area. It is a major supply route between North Vietnam and the Chu Lai, Ton Ny area, and intelligence reports indicated that a major sealift of Viet Cong War materials was to take place. Two companies of Viet Cong were in the area, well armed and possessing numerous automatic weapons. Lt. Zak briefed the aviators on the way out, stating that automatic weapons fire could be expected from every large sampan and every town along the route. There was a quarter moon, but ground fog and mist obstructed visibility. Major Arink, the gunship commander and company commanding Officer, decided on a normal search and destroy formation. The gunship flies between one hundred and three hundred feet above ground, firing at targets of opportunity procured by the command and control ship and lighted by the light ship. He was vulnerable to ground attack because of lowness, but speed, aggressiveness, firepower help the ship function affectively at that altitude. The light ship flies at eight hundred feet to best utilize the intensity and size of the light cone. The command and control navigators for the team at twelve hundred feet. It picks out targets and assigns them, guides them and the light, and

provides suppression for the lightly armed lightship. At 2100 the team arrived at Truong Giang River, approximate coordinates HU2836, and switched on the light. The river was full of Viet Cong Sampans. The low ship immediately began striking and sinking the nearest with rockets and machine gun fire. All door guns opened fire on the targets not sunk, sinking what the gunship did not hit. Each time a Sampan was sunk, Lt. Zak would note the time, approximate coordinates, and number of enemy dead observed, entering this information in his official log book. He also counted structures destroyed and probable enemy killed. Shortly after initiating the search, the team passed over the village of Dong Tri (1) coordinates DI286375, as predicted, streams of automatic weapons fire welled up at the team from several brick and concrete buildings. The Viet Cong marksmen were rapidly zeroing in on the light and lightship requiring prompt action to keep it from going down in flame. Swiftly with little regard to the danger he faced, Major Arink maneuvered between the light ship and the enemy guns, drawing fire to himself and away from the light ship. He then flew back down the line of enemy tracers, spewing out death with his rockets and miniguns. The structures vanished in a series of secondary explosions. Three times during the six hour mission, Viet Cong marksmen threw up the challenge from a village, and each time the gunship rolled his aircraft into an attack pattern and destroyed them. With the river so crowded, Viet Cong sampans could find no place to hide. Mooring under the overhanging brush along the river banks and turning into tiny coves merely prolonged the eventual outcome. The gunship and Command and Control ship both descend to extremely low level, using the integral aircraft searchlights to probe the areas the lightship could not reach. Utilizing their complete arsenal, they blasted the sampans from concealment, sending many to the bottom with secondary explosions, on fire, and in splintered pieces. During the first phase of this operation, Major Arink realized that the number of enemy vessels sunk and the amount of supplies destroyed would easily set a record

Continuation sheet.

CONTINUATION SHEET

FOR one-night firefly operations. In addition to the great amount of war goods which would never reach the Viet Cong insurgents, the record smashing number of ruined cargo vessels would decisively slow the war effort by the bottleneck in logistic supply. Wishing to make the utmost of this golden opportunity to put a major segment of the Viet Cong supply system out of operation, Major Arink relentlessly pushed for the highest possible number of kills before expending completely. Since a gunship takes considerably more time to rearm and refuel than the UH-1D models, Major Arink, anticipating his eventual return to Chu Lai for servicing, ordered a second gunship prepared. When the team landed at Chu Lai the gunship crew sprinted to the UH-1C that had been prepared for the mission, performed the necessary pre-flight checks, and became airborne. He thus used a minimum of time, and sped back to the river complex to increase the quantity of materials that would never reach guerilla hands. Time and again during the second phase of the operations the guns of the three ships riddled enemy sampans and positions. Visibility, poor at first because of the haze and fog, steadily became worse with the smoke from burning vessels and supplies. The team was forced to seek a lower altitude for sufficient observation, and with the lower altitudes came added dangers. Not only were the Viet Cong capable of more accurate fire but also the natural hazards of night low level flight were intensified. Skimming through the air barely above the tops of the nests of the sampans, ever alert for a miscalculation that could send them plunging into the river, the gunships and command and control ship policed the river. On several occasions, the ships were so close that mud and debris from exploding ships splattered the plexiglass windshields of the gunship. Throughout the entire second phase, the ships rained destruction on the Viet Cong. At this time the .50 caliber malfunctioned, the rockets were expended, and the mini-guns had no ammunition left. Nevertheless, the team remained on station until fuel ran too low, using only door guns to inflict damage to the supply craft. On several occasions the lightship guns would fire down the cone of light to a target, exposing themselves to hostile fire in order to effectively engage the illuminated targets. The team again returned to Chu Lai, where the rapid rearming and refueling was accomplished with no difficulty. The gunship crew traded for the third helicopter of the night, and the team began its last trip, to the river. On the last trip, the crew chief's machine gun on the gunship exploded, spewing metal fragments throughout the ship. Undaunted by the experience and seeing that there was no real damage to ship and crew, Major Arink continued the mission. With the coming of dawn and the exhaustion of fuel and ammunition, the team headed back to base camp. Lt. Zak had recorded one hundred forty eight sampans sunk, thirteen structures destroyed, fourteen Viet Cong confirmed killed, and seventy possible Viet Cong killed. Through the efforts of the team, enemy supply actions in the northern part of the Tam Kt sector came to a virtual standstill. The gallant aircraft commanders, pilots and crewmembers set a new record in the interdiction of seaborne supplies from North Vietnam, and by their courage under fire, flying skill, and devotion to duty, engineered a definite setback in the Viet Cong insurgency effort. Their actions are in keeping with the highest traditions of military service and reflect great credit upon themselves, Task Force Oregon, the United States Aviation Program and the United States Army.