

In the service's history, only 21 enlisted members have received the Air Force Cross. Here are their stories.



Crosses and Stripes

By Wendy Alexis Peddrick, Staff Editor

The Air Force Cross is awarded to US and foreign military personnel and civilians who have displayed extraordinary heroism in one of the following situations: while engaged in action against an enemy of the United States, while engaged in military operations involving conflict with a foreign force, or while serving with a friendly nation engaged in armed conflict against a force in which the United States is not a belligerent party. In the honor it confers on a recipient, the Air Force Cross is surpassed only by the Medal of Honor.

Congress formally established the Air Force Cross on July 6, 1960. Before then, the Air Force used the Distinguished Service Cross to honor the heroic actions of enlisted members. In the Vietnam era, countless airmen performed acts of bravery above and beyond the call of duty. However, only a few enlisted members were awarded the Air Force Cross. Since 1975, it has been awarded to only one airman, bringing the total to 21. (Asterisks indicate posthumous awards.)

A1C William H. Pitsenbarger *

On April 11, 1966, near Cam My, South Vietnam, A1C William H. Pitsenbarger, 38th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron pararescue jumper, sacrificed his life to save nine others. While evacuating American casualties during a firefight in a jungle area, he descended from the HH-43 Huskie to assist in rescue efforts. He treated the wounded and transferred three to the Huskie but stayed on the ground, waiting to send more troops to a second chopper. As the first Huskie returned, the fighting intensified, and the rescue chopper took many hits and began losing power. The rescue pilot signaled for Pitsenbarger to grab the hoist, but the PJ waved him off. Pitsenbarger continued to treat the wounded, collected ammunition to distribute to those who could use it, and helped fight off the enemy. When his body was found the next day, rescuers saw that he had been shot repeatedly. The Air Force Sergeants Association has established the William H. Pitsenbarger Award for Heroism, awarded annually to recognize heroism among enlisted airmen.



A3C Arthur Neil Black

A3C Neil Black, a pararescueman aboard a 38th Air Rescue Squadron HH-43B, was on a rescue mission to recover a downed pilot about 40 miles south of Vinh, North Vietnam, on Sept. 20, 1965. The rescue team found the pilot, but as they attempted to hoist him up into the aircraft, the helicopter was shot down. The entire crew was captured. Black and fellow Air Force Cross recipient A1C William A. Robinson, a flight engineer on the same helicopter, were POWs until their release in February 1973.



A1C William A. Robinson

A3C Neil Black is the third in line (above) and A1C William Robinson is just behind him aboard the aircraft returning them and other POWs to freedom. (Maj. Ronald E. Byrne Jr. is in the lead with Capt. George R. Hall next.)

A1C William A. Robinson was a flight engineer on a 38th ARS HH-43B as it flew a rescue mission to recover a downed pilot about 40 miles south of Vinh, North Vietnam, on Sept. 20, 1965. The rescue team found the pilot, but as they attempted to hoist him, the helicopter was shot down. The entire crew was captured. Robinson and fellow Air Force Cross recipient A3C A. Neil Black, a pararescueman on the same helicopter, were not released until February 1973.



TSgt. Donald Smith stands with Brig. Gen. Frank K. Everest Jr. at the medal presentation.

TSgt. Donald G. Smith

On Oct. 24, 1969, the crew of the 37th ARRS HH-3 Jolly Green 28, including pararescueman TSgt. Donald G. Smith, set out to retrieve two F-100 crewmen. When they located the fighter crew in the jungle, Smith was lowered to the ground, where he attached himself and the pilot, who had a broken leg, to the hoist. As they were being lifted, hostile fire damaged the external hoist mount, forcing the flight engineer to sever the cable, sending Smith and the pilot hurtling to the ground. Jolly 28 was forced to make an emergency landing about 1.5 miles away in a marshy area. The chopper's remaining crew members were immediately picked up by a companion HH-3. Despite injury, Smith cared for the fighter crew, directed air assaults against the enemy, and repelled enemy probes for several hours, until another rescue chopper successfully extracted him and the pilot.

A1C Charles D. King *

On Christmas Day 1968, A1C Charles D. King, a 40th ARRS pararescueman, and his fellow HH-3 crew members set out to find a downed pilot in Laos. When they located him, King descended, freed the wounded pilot from his parachute, and secured him to the hoist. However, as King tried to maneuver the pilot to a spot beneath the helicopter, intense enemy fire erupted, wounding King and hitting the chopper. King told the HH-3 pilot to pull up. The hoist cable snagged in a tree and pulled loose from the mount. His instructions to the Jolly Green saved the aircraft and crew. Two days of searching for King were unsuccessful. He was declared missing in action until Dec. 5, 1978, when he was listed as killed in action.



Sgt. Larry W. Maysey *

On Nov. 9, 1967, 37th ARRS pararescue specialist Sgt. Larry W. Maysey and the crew of HH-3 Jolly Green 26 attempted the night extraction of ground reconnaissance team members during heavy enemy fire. Another Jolly Green on the mission picked up three recon members before it was driven off by hostile fire. As Jolly Green 26 attempted to pick up the remaining two recon troops, hostile fire continued, but Maysey assisted in getting the recon members on board. Jolly Green 26 was hit by automatic weapons fire and burst into flames, killing Maysey, two other crew members (including the other enlisted Air Force Cross recipient on the mission, SSgt. Eugene L. Clay), and the two recon team members.

SSgt. Eugene L. Clay *

On Nov. 9, 1967, SSgt. Eugene L. Clay, a flight engineer with the 37th ARRS, and the crew of HH-3 Jolly Green 26 attempted to extract a ground reconnaissance team at night during heavy enemy fire. Another Jolly Green picked up three recon members before it was driven off by hostile fire. As Jolly Green 26 attempted to pick up the remaining two recon troops, hostile fire continued. Clay assisted in getting the recon members on board, but the rescue chopper was hit by automatic weapons fire and burst into flames. The conflagration killed Clay, two other crew members (including the other enlisted Air Force Cross recipient on the mission, Sgt. Larry W. Maysey), and the two recon team members. (Photo unavailable.)

CMSgt. Richard L. Etchberger *

On March 11, 1968, ground radar superintendent CMSgt. Richard L. Etchberger was manning a defensive position when the base was overrun by an enemy ground force. After his entire crew was killed or wounded and while the enemy fired from higher ground, Etchberger continued to return fire, direct airstrikes, and radio for air rescue. When air rescue arrived, Etchberger risked enemy fire to load his three surviving wounded crew members into rescue slings for airlift out. As his turn finally came, Etchberger was killed by enemy ground fire. His actions also helped save other surviving troops at the base. (Photo unavailable.)

Sgt. Charles D. McGrath

Pararescueman Sgt. Charles D. McGrath with the 40th ARRS was lowered from HH-53 Super Jolly Green 73 on June 27, 1972, to rescue a badly wounded F-4 pilot downed in North Vietnam. He dragged the pilot through thick brush to the recovery site, but the helicopter was hit by hostile fire and lost its hoist, leaving the two men stranded. When another rescue chopper arrived, McGrath got the wounded pilot ready and rode up the hoist with him amid gunfire. Once safely inside, McGrath treated both the F-4 pilot and another PJ whose leg had been shattered by the gunfire.



Sgt. Russell M. Hunt

A UH-1F helicopter, with flight mechanic Sgt. Russell M. Hunt in the crew, was shot down while evacuating American and Allied ground forces on March 31, 1967. Hunt sprang to work, aiding an increasing number of wounded men despite his own painful injuries and hostile fire. When the enemy action forced the ground party to move, he carried his mortally wounded aircraft commander to a designated landing zone. In the landing area Hunt braved enemy fire to give manual landing directions to the recovery helicopters and refused to leave until every seriously wounded man had been evacuated.

At left, Sgt. Russell Hunt receives the Air Force Association's Citation of Honor from AFA Board Chairman Jess Larson on April 5, 1968.

SSgt. John D. Harston

On May 15, 1975, SSgt. John D. Harston, a helicopter flight mechanic, was on a CH-53 Super Jolly Green helicopter sent to rescue crew members of SS Mayaguez, which had been seized by Communist Khmer Rouge forces. The helicopter was hit by enemy fire and crash-landed on Koh Tang, just off the shore of Cambodia. Although Harston was wounded, he helped survivors exit the burning helicopter. He fired his rifle until it jammed and emptied a revolver before inflating his life preserver. He then picked up two injured Marines before paddling to deeper water, where they waited three hours before they were rescued.

SSgt. John Harston stands between fellow medal recipients Col. Thomas J. Curtis and Capt. Donald R. Backlund at a ceremony in 1975.



Sgt. Nacey Kent Jr.

On May 5, 1968, Sgt. Nacey Kent Jr., an AC-47 flight engineer, and fellow crew members were defending Pleiku AB, South Vietnam, against enemy attack when their aircraft was critically damaged by enemy fire. Even though Kent suffered a broken leg in the ensuing crash landing, he helped other enlisted crew members evacuate and re-entered the burning aircraft to carry the severely wounded navigator to safety. Kent then boarded the aircraft again to assist other crew members and fight the fire.

Sgt. Nacey Kent receives the Air Force Cross from Maj. Gen. J.C. Sherrill in 1969.



Sgt. Thomas A. Newman

During a rescue mission in Laos on May 30, 1968, 40th ARRS pararescueman Sgt. Thomas A. Newman descended from a Jolly Green helicopter while under heavy hostile fire to rescue a downed Air Force pilot. Hindered by darkness and concentrated automatic weapons fire, he asked the helicopter pilot to hover out of enemy range to avoid being hit or disclosing his location. He kept searching for the downed pilot, risking detection by the enemy by calling the pilot's name. Newman finally found him and radioed for the Jolly Green. When the chopper returned, Newman secured the pilot to the hoist and shielded him with his own body as they were lifted into the aircraft.

TSgt. Victor R. Adams

TSgt. Victor R. Adams was an aerial gunner on a 20th Helicopter Squadron UH-1F when it was downed by hostile ground fire, crashing in the dense jungle near Duc Co, South Vietnam, on Nov. 27, 1968. Ignoring his own injuries and heavy enemy fire, he rescued crew members from inside the burning aircraft until he was forced to abandon his efforts by the severity of the fire and subsequent explosions. (Photo unavailable.)

Sgt. Theodore R. Hamlin

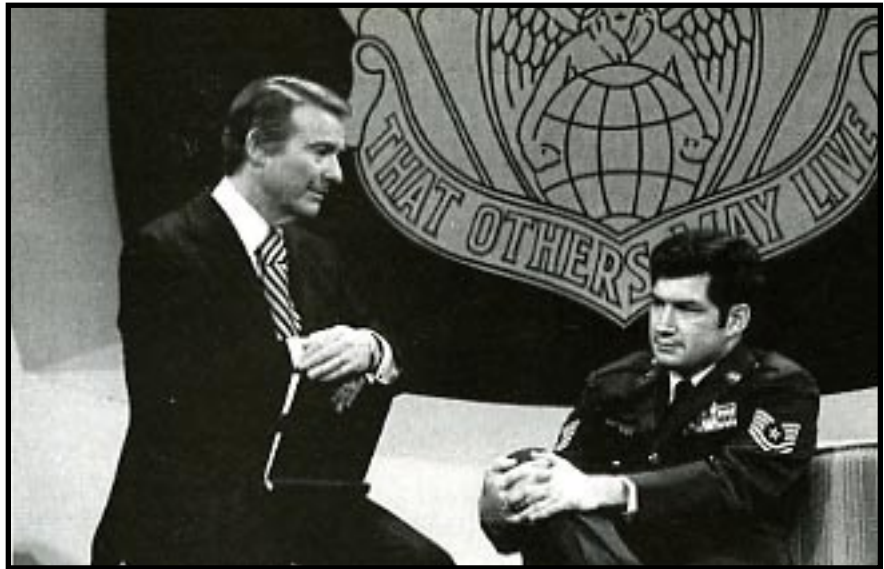
A combat radio operator, Sgt. Theodore R. Hamlin was trying to coordinate the evacuation of several wounded soldiers in the Vietnamese jungle on the evening of Oct. 25, 1969, when he was hit by enemy gunfire. He disregarded his wounds and finally made radio contact with rescuers. Instead of letting the rescue chopper find the wounded on their own, he went to the landing site and illuminated it. When the helicopter landed, Hamlin helped to carry the wounded soldiers to it but refused to leave with them, choosing to fight side by side with the remaining soldiers for the rest of the night. (Photo unavailable.)

SSgt. Charles L. Shaub

C-130 loadmaster SSgt. Charles L. Shaub and fellow crew members were to drop ammunition and supplies to US forces in the Vietnamese jungle on April 15, 1972. En route, the airplane was hit by anti-aircraft fire, which caused a fire in the cargo area. Shaub instinctively jettisoned the explosive crates on board—which exploded within seconds of their exit—and began extinguishing the fierce fire within the plane. Although he suffered severe burns, he had the blaze under control within minutes, saving the airplane and his four crewmates. (Photo unavailable.)

Sgt. Michael E. Fish

On Feb. 18, 1969, Sgt. Michael E. Fish, a 38th ARRS pararescue specialist, was lowered from an HH-43B Huskie through intense hostile ground fire into a dense jungle canyon near Tuy Hoa AB, South Vietnam. He came to treat and rescue four seriously injured US Army UH-1 helicopter crew members whose aircraft had been downed by enemy fire. Unable to immediately free the pilot from the wreckage, Fish chose to remain on the ground overnight, even though the HH-43 ran low on fuel and had to leave. The rescue chopper refueled and returned but because of darkness and extreme haze could not find the site again. During the next 15 hours, Fish faced attacks by enemy forces but cared for the pilot until the chopper returned at dawn on Feb. 19 and successfully extracted them.



Sgt. Michael Fish chats with television's "This Is Your Life" host Ralph Edwards in 1972.



A1C Joel Talley receives the Air Force Cross from Gen. Howell M. Estes Jr. at Da Nang AB, South Vietnam, in 1969.

TSgt. Leroy M. Wright

On Nov. 21, 1970, the US conducted a rescue mission at the Son Tay POW camp in North Vietnam. At the prison compound, enemy fire forced one of the rescue helicopters to make a rough landing, in which helicopter flight mechanic TSgt. Leroy M. Wright severely injured his leg. Despite his injury and the danger of the helicopter exploding, he let everyone else exit the aircraft before him. He then used his weapon to help Army combat troops advance to their target. Realizing that requesting assistance could jeopardize the mission, Wright, who was suffering intense pain, returned to the recovery area on his own. He was the only enlisted member to receive the Cross for that mission. (Photo unavailable.)

A1C Joel E. Talley

On July 2, 1968, A1C Joel E. Talley, a 37th ARRS pararescueman, entered the jungle at Dong Hoi, North Vietnam, to rescue an injured F-105 pilot. The pilot had landed in the midst of enemy forces that had immediately established gun positions to ensnare rescue helicopters. Three rescue attempts were thwarted, and a supporting attack aircraft was shot down. Finally, chopper Jolly Green 21 was able to penetrate the area and lowered Talley, who had to conduct an extensive search to locate the injured pilot. The PJ determined the pilot had a broken pelvis and decided he would have to direct the helicopter to their location. As soon as he strapped the pilot on the forest penetrator and gave the radio signal to hoist away, enemy fire erupted again. When Talley and the pilot cleared the treetops, the chopper departed the area with him and the pilot dangling, then slowly brought them aboard the aircraft.

A2C Duane D. Hackney

On Feb. 6, 1967, A2C Duane D. Hackney flew two sorties as a 37th ARRS pararescueman on an unarmed HH-3E Jolly Green helicopter to recover a downed pilot near Mu Gia Pass, North Vietnam. On the first flight, despite the presence of hostile ground forces, he conducted a ground search for the survivor until ordered to evacuate. On the second flight, Hackney located the pilot. As the rescue crew departed the area, their helicopter was hit repeatedly and caught fire. Hackney fitted his parachute on the rescued pilot and then located and donned a second chute, just as he was blown out of the helicopter by an explosion. Hackney managed to deploy his unbuckled parachute and was later rescued by another helicopter crew.

A1C Duane Hackney was the first living recipient of the Air Force Cross, here presented to him, along with the Purple Heart, by Gen. Howell M. Estes Jr. in 1967.



TSgt. Timothy A. Wilkinson

On Oct. 3, 1993, TSgt. Timothy A. Wilkinson, a pararescueman with the 24th Special Tactics Squadron, responded as part of a 15-man combat search-and-rescue team to the downing of a US Army MH-60 helicopter in the streets of Mogadishu, Somalia. Wilkinson repeatedly exposed himself to intense enemy fire while extracting five wounded Army Rangers, one by one, who were still on their crashed helicopter, bringing them to the aid point, where he provided medical treatment. As the battle continued, he responded to cries for a medic from across the intersection. He crossed this four-way intersection twice more bringing additional medical supplies to the Rangers, saving the lives of at least three who were badly wounded. He remained with them, using both his medical and weapons training, until the conclusion of the intense, 18-hour combat engagement.