

JOE JACKSON 1923-2019

Georgian won Medal of Honor for Vietnam heroics

Air Force pilot saved the lives of three men in 1968.

By Matt Schudel
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Georgia-born Joe Jackson had been flying military airplanes for a quarter-century and was in his third war when he was touched by glory.

He was a 45-year-old Air Force lieutenant colonel flying transport planes in Vietnam when his moment of testing came. After landing his C-123 at an overrun military camp, braving mortar shells and weathering cross-fire to rescue three stranded servicemen, Jackson became

one of only 14 members of the Air Force to receive the Medal of Honor for their actions in the Vietnam War.

Joe Madison Jackson was born March 14, 1923, in Heard County, the youngest of seven sons. He died Jan. 12 at the age of 95 in Seattle. His death was confirmed by his daughter, Bonnie Jackson, who said there was no specific cause.

After high school in Newman, Jackson enlisted in the Army Air Corps during World War II and served mostly as a gunnery instructor. He flew jet fighters during the Korean War and was among the first pilots of U-2 spy planes in the 1950s.

He was flying a transport May 12, 1968, when a U.S.

Special Forces camp at Kham Duc, South Vietnam, was assaulted by North Vietnamese soldiers.

Over a two-day period, about 1,000 soldiers and civilians were airlifted from the camp, which was surrounded by mountains. Eight aircraft, including helicopters and airplanes, had crashed or been destroyed on the ground. One plane blocked the runway, leaving only 2,200 feet of the 4,000-foot airstrip usable.

When the evacuation appeared to be complete, orders were issued to bomb the camp and demolish anything left behind, then it was discovered that three Air Force members were still on the ground. One trans-

port landed to pick them up, but didn't have enough fuel to return. Jackson and his crew of four took over.

"We're going in," he said, as he pitched his unarmed C-123 into a near-vertical descent, to reduce exposure to enemy fire. Jackson leveled out just above the trees and landed on the runway, by then engulfed in smoke from burning fuel tanks. He slammed on the brakes, with the tires screeching as the plane skidded down the runway pockmarked by mortar shells.

He came to a stop near where the three members of the combat control team were hiding in a ditch.

"It didn't seem like there was any possible way for a

plane to get in," Jim Lundie, one of the three rescued servicemen, later said. "The whole camp was burning and exploding. When I looked up and saw that C-123 coming in, it was like a miracle. I couldn't believe it."

The three airmen jumped on board as bullets ricocheted off the runway and under the belly of the airplane. A rocket headed for the cockpit, fell short and landed "immediately in front of the nose wheel of the airplane," Jackson said in a Library of Congress oral history interview. It failed to explode.

Turning the plane around, he roared back down the runway, taking off at the steepest angle he could.

"I say that we were on the ground somewhere around 40 to 50 seconds," he later recalled.

President Lyndon B. Johnson presented the medal to Jackson and three other service members at a White House ceremony on Jan. 16, 1969.

After 298 combat missions in Vietnam, Jackson served at the Pentagon and at the Air Force's Air War College in Alabama. He retired in 1974 as a full colonel.

Survivors include his wife of 74 years, the former Rosamund Parmentier of Kent, Washington; two children, Bonnie Jackson of Kent and David Jackson of Dallas; a granddaughter; and a great-granddaughter.