

Vietnam Medal of Honor recipient dies

Washington Post

Joe Jackson had been flying military airplanes for a quarter-century and was in his third war when he was touched by glory. He had enlisted in the old Army Air Corps before World War II, had flown jet fighters during the Korean War and was among the first pilots of U-2 spy planes in the 1950s.

In 1968, he was a 45-year-old Air Force lieutenant colonel flying transport planes in Vietnam. After landing his C-123 at an overrun military camp, braving mortar shells and weathering crossfire to rescue three stranded servicemen, Col. Jackson became one of only 14 members of the Air Force to receive the Medal of Honor for their actions in the Vietnam War.

He was 95 when he died Jan. 12 at a Veterans Affairs facility in Seattle. His death was confirmed by his daughter, Bonnie, who said there was no specific cause.

Jackson enlisted in the Air Corps (later called the Army Air Forces before the Air Force became an independent branch of

the military in 1947) intending to be an airplane mechanic.

On May 12, 1968, a U.S. Special Forces camp at Kham Duc, South Vietnam, was assaulted by North Vietnamese soldiers. 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.

Over a two-day period, about 1,000 U.S. service members, Vietnamese allies and civilians were airlifted from the camp, which was surrounded by mountains. One cargo plane, carrying about 150 South Vietnamese civilians, was shot down, killing everyone on board.

When the evacuation appeared to be complete, orders were issued to bomb the camp.

"Negative, negative!" a pilot shouted over his radio. Three members of an Air Force team assisting with the evacuation were not accounted for.

Jackson and his crew of four took over the rescue effort.

"We're going in," he said, as he pitched his unarmed C-123 into a

near-vertical descent, to reduce exposure to enemy fire.

Maneuvering his cumbersome aircraft through a 270-degree roll as if it were a nimble fighter plane, Jackson leveled out just above the trees and landed on the first 100 feet of 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.

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 three airmen jumped on board as bullets ricocheted off the runway and under the belly of the airplane.

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

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

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