



Into the Night

By Hill Goodspeed

In the early morning hours of 19 June 1968, Lieutenant (jg) Clyde E. Lassen launched his helicopter into the inky black night and set course for North Vietnam, where a downed fighter crew awaited rescue deep within enemy territory. Thus, the stage was set for one of most daring rescues in Naval Aviation—an event for which Lassen would receive the Medal of Honor.

A native of Fort Myers, Fla., where he was born on 14 March 1942, Clyde Lassen enlisted in the Navy on 14 September 1961 and later applied for the Naval Aviation Cadet program. Accepted in 1964, Lassen entered the helicopter pipeline and received his wings of gold on 12 October 1965.

With the darkness broken only by the *Seasprite's* landing lights, Lassen descends through heavy enemy fire to set down in a rice paddy to recover the downed aviators.
Illustration by Morgan Wilbur.

Lassen's first aviation assignment was with Helicopter Combat Support Squadron (HC) 1. After the squadron's redesignation to HC-7, he became officer in charge of the Cubi Point, R.P., detachment, where he had the opportunity to practice search and rescue (SAR) techniques in the jungle terrain of the Philippines. By June 1968 Lassen had become officer in charge of Det 104 aboard *Preble* (DLG 15), with a primary mission of combat search and rescue.

Shortly after midnight on 19

June 1968, the SAR alarm startled Lassen from a sound sleep. Two aviators had ejected 20 miles into enemy territory in North Vietnam after their F-4J *Phantom II* was crippled by a surface-to-air missile. Walking to his UH-2A *Seasprite*, Lassen remembered thinking, "My God, is it ever dark out here!" An additional worry was the helicopter itself, which had not been designed for the mission he was about to fly and was so grossly overweight that it could not take off with a full fuel load. In fact, when Lassen launched from *Preble* 10 minutes later, he had to dive toward the water to gain flying speed, a disconcerting technique in the darkness.

Medal of Honor Series

Once airborne, “Clementine Two” held briefly off the coast awaiting the signal to go feet dry, its crew thinking there was no chance that they would be sent so deep into enemy territory on such a pitch-black night. They were wrong. Vectored to the survivors’ location by Rescue Combat Air Patrol (RESCAP) aircraft, Lassen descended and tried to spot the downed airmen.

On the ground the F-4J crew—pilot Lieutenant Commander John Holtzclaw and radar intercept officer LCdr. John A. Burns—had

sloshed through rice paddies and were struggling through heavy jungle up the slope of a ridge. The vegetation was so thick that they had to kick and shoulder their way through it, a particularly difficult procedure for Burns, who had suffered a broken leg during the ejection. They soon established radio contact with Clementine Two and at the sound of the approaching helicopter turned on their survival strobe lights, but the lights could not penetrate the thick canopy of trees on the ridge. Lassen requested they fire a flare, which successfully pinpointed their location.

Initial hopes were that the survivors could make their way to a clearing of rice paddies at the bottom of the ridge. As Lassen set down, the UH-2A began taking small arms fire and the thick vegeta-



Below, the crew of Clementine Two—clockwise from top left, pilot Lt.(jg) Clyde Lassen, copilot Lt.(jg) Leroy Cook, and gunners ADJ3 Donald West and AE2 Bruce Dallas—flew deep into enemy territory to recover two downed aviators. Note the emblems below the *Seasprite’s* starboard door depicting two night rescues. This rescue contributed to the squadron’s amazing record: of the more than 250 aircrewmembers rescued from the Gulf of Tonkin and North Vietnam during the war by Navy search and rescue forces, more than 140 were recovered by HC-7.



tion prevented the downed fliers from reaching the helicopter, so he decided to try to get above their location and bring them aboard using the rescue hoist. With calls of “Come get us, come get us” filling his flight helmet, Lassen flew to a

position 50 feet above the downed aviators, positioning his *Seasprite* between two towering trees. However, before the hoist rescue could commence, the RESCAP parachute flares that had been illuminating the area extinguished and enshrouded Clementine Two in darkness, erasing all visual reference. Lassen remembered, “I added power and was just starting a climb when I hit the tree. I felt a large jolt, and the helo pitched down and went into a tight starboard turn. I regained control and waved off.”

Lassen’s quick reflexes averted a disaster; the helo escaped the impact with minor damage. Forced to postpone the rescue until another RESCAP aircraft with more flares arrived, Lassen determined that the survivors would have to make their way to the clearing if they had any hopes of being picked up. Burns and Holtzclaw soon heard copilot Lt.(jg) Leroy Cook’s voice come through their survival radios: “If you don’t come down that hill, you’re going to stay there all night.” Inspired by

these words and the sounds of pursuing North Vietnamese in the jungle around them, the pair made their way down the slope.

Intensifying small arms fire erupted along the perimeter of the clearing as Lassen maneuvered for a

second landing, which was aborted because the survivors were too far away. During a third approach, the last of the new illumination flares extinguished and Lassen was forced to turn on the helicopter's landing lights despite the fact that it would provide a better target for enemy gunners. For two minutes Clementine Two sat in a controlled hover over the rice paddy, with Lassen keeping the weight of the helicopter off the wheels lest they become mired in the mud. All the while, the helicopter's gunners—AE2 Bruce Dallas and ADJ3 Don West—blasted away at the tree line with machine guns as Burns and Holtzclaw dashed toward the aircraft. When they reached the helo Dallas yanked them through the doorway, and within seconds the UH-2A was airborne and on its way home.

For Lassen the outbound flight felt like an eternity. "I really started to get antsy from the time we got them on board," he recalled. "That was the only time I really thought we weren't going to make it." With an engine vibration, a malfunctioning compass and a rapidly dwindling fuel supply, the crew headed toward the coast, dodging enemy antiaircraft fire on the way out. Lassen landed aboard *Jouett* (DLG 29) with 135 pounds of fuel, enough for only five minutes of flight. Although the *Seasprite's* tree-damaged starboard door was lost in flight and it carried other minor scars from the impact, only



Clementine Two landed aboard *Jouett* (DLG 29) and delivered the *Phantom II* aircrew—pilot LCdr. John Holtzclaw, above left, and radar intercept officer LCdr. John Burns, above right—to a warm welcome. Lassen, below, received the Medal of Honor for the daring rescue.



one bullet hole could be found in the aircraft.

Waiting to be moved from the helicopter to sick bay, Burns tapped the man who had just saved him from certain captivity on the shoulder, saying, "I don't know how to say this . . ." Lassen cut him off, responding nonchalantly, "You know, we've been over here for a

couple of months and we haven't had a damn thing to do. It was nice to have a little something to do tonight."

The gathering in Washington, D.C., for the Medal of Honor presentation ceremony was a reunion for the Lassen family, which had not been together for the three years Clyde and his wife, Linda, had been stationed in Japan. On the afternoon of 16 January 1969, Lassen joined other officers at the White House to meet President Lyndon B. Johnson for the presentation of the medal. When Lt. Lassen received the nation's highest award for valor, he was so nervous that later he could not recall what the commander in chief had said as he placed the blue and white starred ribbon around his neck.

Lassen continued his career in the Navy, eventually retiring as a commander in December 1982. A modest man, he never spoke much about the events of 19 June 1968. It was not until a 1993 symposium, reuniting the participants in the flight, at the National Museum of Naval Aviation that the Lassen children heard the full story of their

father's actions. This gathering was a most fortunate occurrence for on 1 April 1994, Cdr. Clyde E. Lassen passed away after a brief but courageous battle with cancer. He is buried in Barrancas National Ceremony aboard NAS Pensacola, Fla. ✈

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