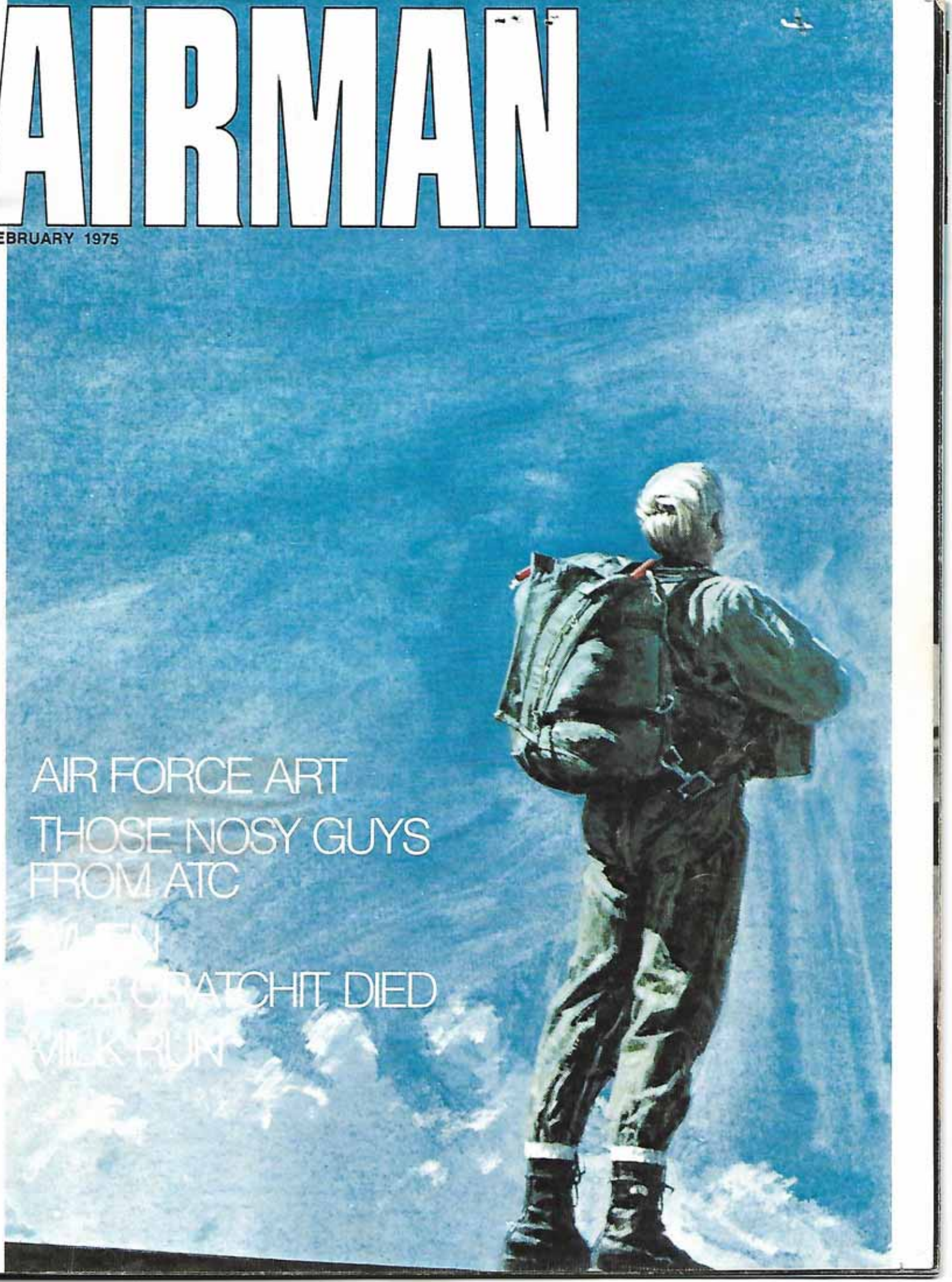
AIRMAN

FEBRUARY 1975



AIR FORCE ART

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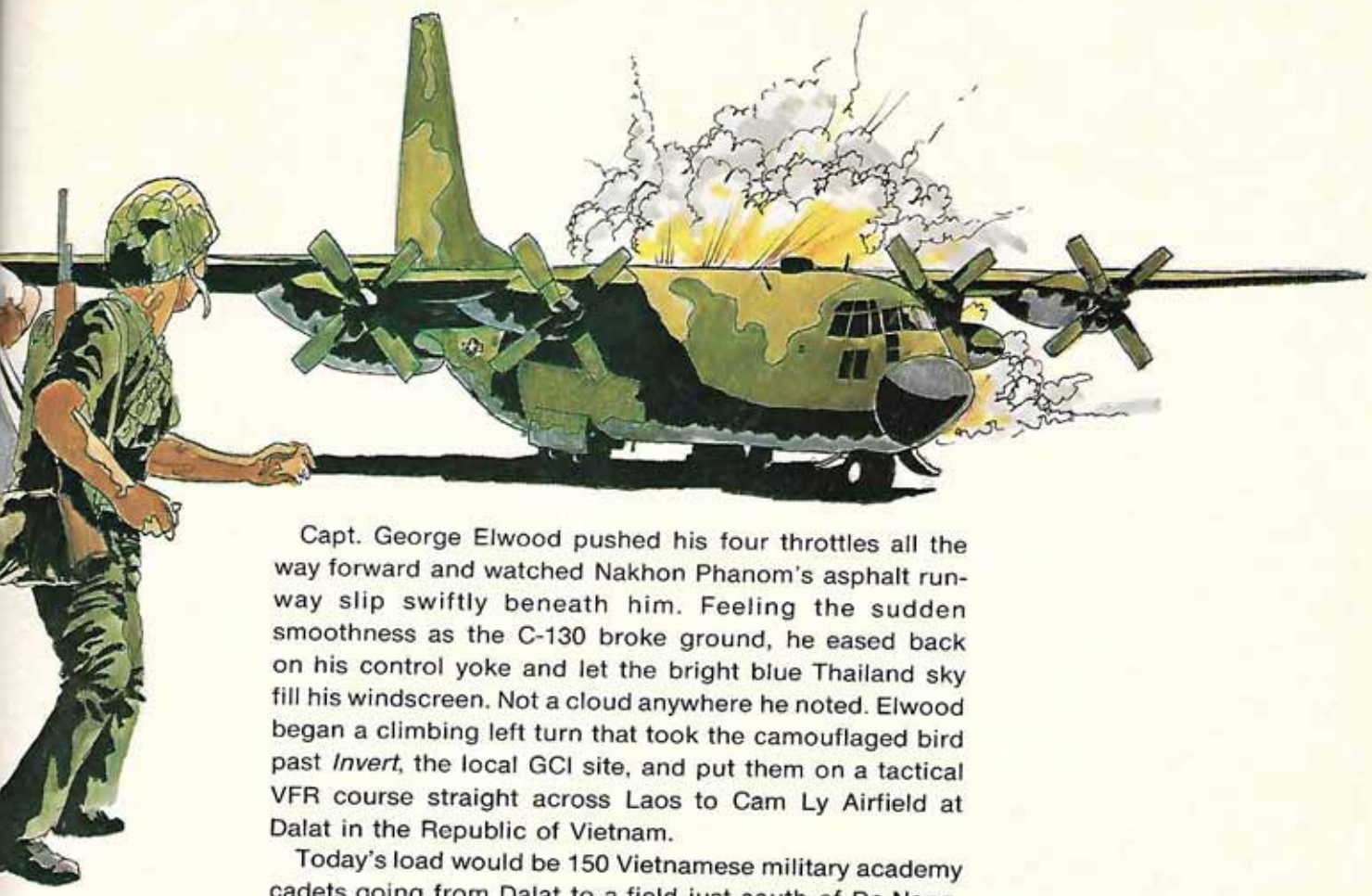
Illustration by RICHARD KRAMER



MILK RUN

by Capt. JOHN B. TAYLOR

Capt. George Elwood pushed his four throttles all the way forward and watched Nakhon Phanom's asphalt runway slip swiftly beneath him. Feeling the sudden smoothness as the C-130 broke ground, he eased back on his control yoke and let the bright blue Thailand sky fill his windscreen. Not a cloud anywhere he noted. Elwood began a climbing left turn that took the camouflaged bird past *Invert*, the local GCI site, and put them on a tactical VFR course straight across Laos to Cam Ly Airfield at Dalat in the Republic of Vietnam.

Today's load would be 150 Vietnamese military academy cadets going from Dalat to a field just south of Da Nang. A piece of cake.

The atmosphere on the flight deck of Spare 649 was relaxed. Tomorrow, diplomats in Paris would sign an agreement and the long war would be over. The last combat mission for this crew was going to be a milk run to Dalat.

The hour-long flight passed quickly. Elwood told his copilots, First Lieutenants John Grillo and Wayne Milner, about previous trips into Dalat to pick up fresh vegetables for delivery to American troops fighting in less hospitable parts of the country. Lt. Col. Ray Gilligan, the navigator, remembered Dalat as a former R&R spot. He was bending the ears of TSgt. Calvin Zenahlik, flight engineer, and TSgt.

Francis "Muff" Millen, instructor engineer, with stories of the great lobster dinners to be found there. Given half a chance, they conspired, they would find some way to send downtown for some lobster to take home. Back in the cargo bay loadmaster Sgt. Mike Michaud was rigging seats for the passengers they would soon have aboard.

As the C-130 spiralled down from 19,000 feet, Grillo called the airport tower for landing instructions. No answer. "We didn't think much of it at the time," Captain Elwood explains later. A pass over the field didn't reveal anything unusual so they lined up on the short runway and greased the aircraft in.

It was business as usual as they taxied over to the parking ramp. Shutting down two engines, they kept the other two turning so they could keep their ground time to a minimum. Loadmaster Michaud had already opened the big rear cargo door. As the plane stopped, he kicked down the ground loading ramps, unplugged his headset, and went out to meet his passengers.

They had all lined up behind the plane," he recalls, "and I was trying to hold them back so I could count them as they got aboard." Many would have to wait for a later flight. "I'd tap one to go, then another, and another, until I had about 40 or 50 aboard. Then I turned around to make sure they had taken seats all the way forward and left room for the others. Well, they were all running out of the airplane, and the crew was right behind them!"

TSgt. Cal Zenahlik had just reached up to change the bus power switch on the panel above his head when he glanced out the front windshield and saw a big cloud of smoke and dirt rising about 65 meters ahead of the plane. Ten seconds later another mortar round impacted 25 meters off the nose.

Elwood gave the word to evacuate the airplane. John Grillo quickly pulled the emergency "T" handles on the overhead console and rammed the condition levers to the feathered position, mechanically shutting down the two operating engines. Elwood remembered Grillo telling them a while back about another crew that had to leave their aircraft in a hurry, and how someone had forgotten to take off his headset—until he came to the end of the cord. "That's a strange thing to think about in a situation like that," he observes, "but it popped into my mind and I made sure I took my headset off."

Thirty seconds after the second mortar round landed, Elwood was just passing the left wing tip at a dead run when another round glanced off the C-130's left wing flap and exploded next to the rear paratroop door. "I jumped into this ditch off the wing," Elwood recalls. "It was super big, maybe two inches deep." Then he looked back at his plane. He didn't like what

Francis S. Millen, instructor engineer, is now a master sergeant.

he saw. "I'd flown 360 combat missions over a four-year period and never had as much as a bullet hole in a plane. Now my airplane takes a *mortar* hit." On his last mission.

Sergeant Zenahlik had sprinted straight out the back door of the plane and thrown himself in some tall grass beside the ramp. He was peering back at the bird through parted grass when the knockout round made a sieve out of his airplane. It was too close for comfort and the grass offered little shelter, so he crawled into a nearby Conex box, a large metal container used by the Army to ship foodstuffs. It was already occupied by about 25 Vietnamese academy cadets who were to have been Cal's passengers.

"They were brand new, right out of school," Zenahlik recalls, "but they were armed, and I wasn't. So I gave them some cigarettes and let them know I'd appreciate them taking care of me." Meanwhile other cadets in the grass between the ramp and the runway were taking up positions to engage hostile forces on the far side of the field. The instructor flight engineer, Muff Millen, had turned to the left when he ran from the plane and found himself out in the field with the troops. That wasn't where he wanted to be! As soon as the shelling died down a bit, Millen dashed back across the parking ramp, past the C-130, and headed

TSgt. Calvin Zenahlik, flight engineer

for a bunker he could see beyond the plane's left wing. He found his way blocked by a chain link fence that ran along the edge of the ramp and then turned down a red clay road. There was no way through, so Muff ended up down the road underneath a "deuce-and-a-half" truck. Some Vietnamese in the bunker saw his problem and pointed out a small gate where he could enter. He had just crawled into the top of the green sandbagged bunker when the mortar began again.

"With all that dirt and metal whizzing past our ears," he says, "I realized the bunker had no roof to speak of, just some light tin." He rolled down the back slope of the bunker to level ground, where he discovered a small opening into the bunker's well-protected basement. He crawled in, and found it occupied by some Vietnamese. With a safe shelter available, Millen called in the rest of the crew. Grillo and Michaud were down in the red clay roadway, protected only by another of the area's two-inch-deep ditches. They needed little encouragement to head for the bunker.

Captain Elwood was concerned about the other C-130s that were due in to pick up the rest of the cadets. He had no way to warn them. "I decided to make a run for the airplane to get a survival radio," he recalls, "but the crew was adamant about me not going. They said that they'd be out of luck if anything happened to me." Lt. Wayne Milner went for the radio.

A gun battle was still going on across the runway, but Cal Zenahlik decided it was time to leave the Conex box and find his crew. He spotted Elwood right away. "He was standing on top of this bunker, using a small radio to warn the other planes we were under attack," Cal remembers.

With his crew back together and the inbound airplanes warned off, Captain Elwood could now consider the options available to him. He could see that for a direct hit, the mortar round had done remarkably little damage to the aircraft. The left rear tire was flat and the bird had hundreds of holes towards the rear. One flap was damaged where the round went through it, and a small waterfall of hydraulic fluid was pouring from the tail section. Still it looked flyable, but even if it was, the 5,000-foot elevation and short runway would make it just about impossible for them to take off with one tire flat. And they all knew that a downhill cliff awaited them at the end of the runway.

There was one safe way out: An Army advisor to the Vietnamese was directing counterfire against the attackers. He had a helicopter that could lift the crew out. But, he told them pointedly, there was no question in his mind that if the 3½-million-dollar C-130 was still on the airfield by nightfall, it would be an irresistible target for the bad guys. They would most certainly overrun the field, and all the defenders, to get to it.

The already grim situation suddenly got worse with the incredible sight of another "irresistible target" on final approach to the field. Somehow, a lone C-130 hadn't gotten the word, and was now arriving right on time for a scheduled onload. Survival radio in hand, George Elwood scrambled toward the newcomer. "He was really doing some evasive running," Sergeant Michaud says. "You know, trying to run but keep down at the same time. By the time he got to them they had opened their doors and were ready to load troops.

"I figured they must not have been monitoring 'guard,' the frequency my survival radio operates on," Elwood says, "so I was running down the taxiway trying to signal them not to shut down." They pulled up behind Elwood's C-130 just as he reached them. They may not have read his signals correctly, but they understood clearly the meaning of the mortar round that impacted between the two planes. That round came within a hairbreadth of vaporizing Elwood, who disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

"My captain was standing there," Sergeant Zenahlik says possessively. "I thought right then I'd lost an aircraft commander, but when the smoke cleared, he showed up out there in the grass."

Minutes later there were *two* C-130 crews in the cramped bunker, along with the Vietnamese.

The cavalry arrived right on time in the form of a forward air controller (FAC) in a small 0-2. He had friends.

Under the FAC's direction, a flight of A-7 *Corsairs* from Korat AB pounded mortar positions again and again. The mortar firing ceased.

After a prudent delay both C-130 crews cautiously

ventured out to inspect their damaged airplanes.

Inside *Spare* 649 John Grillo and Muff Millen found some navigational equipment damaged, but the electrical bundles and controls looked good. Muff crawled up into the tail section and ran his hands up and down the flight control cables, checking for cut wire. Some cables were nicked, but would hold.

George Elwood and Cal Zenahlik found that the gusher of hydraulic fluid they had seen earlier was coming from a case of extra fluid stored in a bin toward the rear of the bird. That was a stroke of luck. The tail had so many big holes in it that Elwood was concerned that the skin might peel off in flight.

But it still looked flyable. The crew of the second C-130 was even luckier. Though some rounds had landed quite close to their plane it was undamaged. They were going home.

For the crew of *Spare* 649 it was decision time. All they had to do was climb aboard their sister ship and they were home free. Next stop NKP. But on the other hand, if they could get a new tire they had a flyable airplane. Maybe.

And they had air cover. The 0-2 had ignored his bingo time and was still buzzing around overhead. Without enough fuel now to get back to his base, he had committed himself to eventually trying to refuel at Dalat. And the mortars were still silent.

The decision was made. They wanted to try it.

They watched their recent bunker companions hurdle down the short runway and fade into the afternoon sky. The departing C-130 drew no mortar fire, but the ground battle was still going on strong all around the field. "I was beginning to wonder if we were ever going to get out," Captain Elwood says wistfully. The other C-130 crew would order them a tire and jack from NKP. All they could do now was wait.

After a short eternity another C-130 landed, and taxied back up a parallel runway. It stopped just long enough to deposit a tire, a jack, and two maintenance troops on the ramp.

Elwood and some of the crew went out to meet them. "We told them what was going on," he says. "All they knew was that they were needed to change a C-130 tire." As it turned out they were fighter maintenance types, and weren't too familiar with the C-130. But they were professionals and were eager to give the job their best shot.

The tire was already mounted and inflated, so they just rolled it over to the airplane. The jack was another story. "It was heavy and mounted on little wheels," says Cal Zenahlik. "We had to drag it through all that sand and dirt to get it over from the taxiway."

They shoved the "alligator" jack under the rear wheel strut and started pumping. It normally takes about 20 minutes to jack a C-130 wheel up using a good jack, but this one was going to take a bit longer. The afternoon sun was still strong and the jack was easing down into the soft asphalt about as fast as the airplane was going up. After an hour of sweaty pumping they were ready to make the switch.

Michael W. Michaud, ex-SSgt., now a civilian, was the loadmaster.

"Incoming!"

The cry came from the Army advisor. Tools were dropped and the work party sprinted for the bunker.

Fortunately it was a false alarm. More or less.

Some rockets landed down the hill where the fire fight was still going on. "The Army had an ear for that sort of thing," says George Elwood. "To us, it just sounded like things got more intense down there."

Fifteen minutes later, Cal Zenahlik, the maintenance men, and the two copilots manhandled the big tire into place. Sticky, sweaty and flushed with success, everyone scrambled into their places for engine starting. Running quickly down the checklist, engineer Zenahlik went to start the auxiliary power unit. No go.

Their battery was stone dead.

Where do you go to get a battery recharged in the middle of a war? Luckily *Spare* 649's guardian angel was still there. The tiny 0-2 zipped down the runway and taxied up underneath the C-130's wing. A young first lieutenant FAC, "armed to the teeth and draped with bandoliers," as Muff remembers him, offered his battery to the stranded crew.

TSgt. Muff Millen pulled the battery from the back seat of the 0-2. "It was a little dinky thing," Muff says, "smaller than a car battery." As Millen carried it to the C-130 he remembers thinking, "Oh, man, with this thing we'll probably get only one shot at starting the

gas turbine compressor." The engines are started off the GTC.

"His battery, of course, wouldn't hook up to our connectors," Muff explains, "so I took two pairs of long safety pliers and jammed them into our receptacle." The mouths of the pliers he pinched over the terminals of the 0-2 battery held by Lieutenant Milner.

"Crank it."

As the GTC wound up to speed, the pliers slipped and broke the connection. The "ear splitter" wound down.

"I was sure this little battery wouldn't make it again," Muff says, but he got a better grip on the pliers and gave the signal to try it once more. "I wasn't going to move a muscle until that GTC came on-speed," Sergeant Millen recalls tersely. The GTC wound up again and came on-speed; Millen and Milner could let go now. Soon thereafter, number three engine whistled to life.

Number four engine turned over. Elwood released his brakes and began taxiing west toward the runway. Things were falling into place now. Numbers one and two were whirling and the crew ran their checklists quickly as they turned off the parallel taxiway onto the main runway. "We didn't want to tempt a hidden mortar battery to start shooting again," Elwood explains. "We were in a real hurry and happy to be going."

The tall grass, the chain link fence, the bunker, all flashed past. The ramp was empty now except for a single 0-2, out of fuel and with a dead battery. Airborne finally, they slipped over the sheer cliff at the end of the runway and flew east over the city of Dalat. "We figured the city was the safest place to be while we gained some altitude." A climbing left turn headed them west toward NKP.

In the cargo bay Sergeant Michaud was busily checking various systems on the wounded airplane. "Looking out the left back window I could see a heavy stream of liquid coming off in back of number two engine. We thought it must be fuel," he says, "so the pilot shut down number two."

They weren't home yet!

"Next we got a warning light on the hydraulic system that powers the flaps, landing gear and flight controls," Elwood says. They shut it down.

Mike soon located the problem. The system had lost half its fluid. A piece of shrapnel had gone up into the wing flap well and punctured a hydraulic line. "When we pressurized the system, that line ruptured at the number two engine," Captain Elwood says. That must have been the stream of liquid Sergeant Michaud had seen coming off the wing.

Colonel Gilligan, meanwhile, was plotting a course back to NKP that would keep the low-flying C-130 away from hostile gun positions on the ground. They had been shot at enough for one day.

Sergeant Michaud and one engineer refilled the shut-down hydraulic system with fluid so it would be available for landing.

Finally Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base appeared in front of *Spare* 649's bulbous snout. On the downwind leg of the landing pattern Captain Elwood called for the hydraulic system to be turned on so they could lower their gear and get about 10 degrees of down flaps. A C-130 normally lands with a whole bunch more flaps, but with the left flap shot up Elwood couldn't risk it. "Ten degrees would be enough to ventilate the flap wells," he says. "I didn't want to have any hydraulic fluid fumes in there to cause an explosion on landing."

With flaps extended they landed fast. Over the threshold at 145 knots . . . flare it . . . touchdown . . . whew . . . 135 knots . . . 125. . . . "For a C-130 that's really humming," says Elwood.

Four thousand feet of runway left . . . 3,000 . . . the 2,000-foot marker flashed by. No reversed engines today; not with that hydraulic problem. The 1,000-foot marker!

Ever so slowly *Spare* 649 ground to a halt at the end of the runway.

A crowd had gathered at the parking ramp when they finally shut down. "Everybody came charging out to look," Elwood says. "They saw this airplane full of holes with hydraulic fluid all over the wing and tail area. They just couldn't believe."

Even heroes can't escape paperwork, so a bunch of maintenance forms had to be filled out before Sgt. Mike Michaud could head for the NCO club.

"I sat there and thought about it a while," he recalls, "and the whole thing seemed like a dream; it didn't really happen. But there I was, dirty from head to foot. I stunk and my hair was full of dust and mud. I just looked at myself and I knew it *had* happened. So I said, 'Thank God that's over with,' and walked back to the barracks and went to bed. I just wrote the whole day off!" Mike might have written the day off, but the Air Force didn't. The crew of *Spare* 649 had saved a valuable aircraft and had avoided a potentially costly enemy assault against Allied forces at Dalat. For their valor each member of the crew received the Silver Star. The three enlisted members of the crew were honored with the Air Force Sergeants Association's Pitsenbarger Award, given annually for the most heroic act by an enlisted man or men during the preceding year.

For the crew of *Spare* 649, two maintenance men, an Army field advisor and a young 0-2 pilot, the last day of the Southeast Asia conflict was not uneventful. And that flight to Dalat was no milk run.