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Trial by Fire: Donovan Earns Multiple Medals as Sea Knight Aviator in Vietnam

By Beth L. Crumley

Over the course of 77 days in early 1969, First Lieutenant Joseph P. Donovan, a young helicopter pilot, became one of the most highly decorated aviators in the history of the Marine Corps. Flying with what he later described as the finest Marines (crew chiefs, mechanics, and gunners) the Corps had to offer, Donovan earned an astounding array of medals, including two Navy Crosses, a Silver Star, two Distinguished Flying Crosses, and a Purple Heart. He was also awarded a

total of 35 Strike/Flight Air Medals.

Designated a Marine aviator on 2 April 1968, Donovan was originally a UH-1E pilot and later stated that he was “fully qualified to serve my tour in Vietnam as a Huey gunship pilot.” However, by August 1968, he was ordered to Vietnam to serve with Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 364 (HMM-364). Operating initially out of Phu Bai and later Marble Mountain Air Facility, located near Da Nang, HMM-364 was flying Boeing’s

improved CH-46D Sea Knight. Their mission was one of resupply, medevacs, and insertions and extractions of troops.

After a period of transitioning to the Sea Knight, Donovan settled into the day-to-day realities of flight operations in Vietnam. There was rarely a “routine” flight. On 24 January 1969, while copiloting aircraft YK-22, the flight came under enemy fire. A hydraulic line was hit, resulting in the loss of both the auxiliary and number two hydraulic

First Lieutenants Joseph P. Donovan and William A. Beebe were photographed on 1 September 1969, the day they arrived at Phu Bai to serve with HMM-364.

Honorable Joseph P. Donovan





Marine Corps

A Sea Knight from HMM-364 delivers supplies to Company K, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, in July 1969.

boost system, and drenching the aircraft and crew with hydraulic fluid. The helicopter made an emergency landing at a remote fire base on the western edge of Charlie Ridge, north of Thuong Duc. It would not be the last time Donovan and his crew would find themselves in peril.

Marine patrols in the area north of the Nam O Bridge in Quang Nam Province had increased. Troops had swept the area and discovered no enemy, although an extensive tunnel system ran through the area. However, the situation heated up on the night of 22–23 February when the enemy acted. Mortars and 122-millimeter rockets hit Da Nang, igniting a 450,000-gallon fuel tank and damaging six helicopters. Crew chief and earlier 1968 Navy Cross recipient, Corporal Ernesto “Gooie” Gomez stated that

my aircraft had been assigned the night medevac mission on the evening of 21

February 1969. 1st Lt Donovan, and his co-pilot 1st Lt Sam Ware had preflighted YK-5 earlier . . . the bird and the crew were ready for the evening medevac. I had just finished buttoning her up when I heard the whooshing of incoming, followed immediately by their exploding on impact in and around Marble Mountain Air Facility. As the rockets and shells rained down on our location, I started the auxiliary power plant in preparation for engine start as Lt Donovan and Lt Ware ran toward the chopper.

Donovan launched at about 2200 as wingman in a flight of two Sea Knights, assigned to medevac a seriously injured Marine from an area north of the bridge. The lead aircraft had the corpsman on board. Once airborne, the lead aircraft experienced mechanical difficulties, and

with no radio, the pilot was forced to return to Marble Mountain. Donovan, having never flown as a night helicopter aircraft commander, resolutely elected to continue the mission, stating that “we will try.” Gomez handled the medical as well as crew chief duties: “When the Marines call you in the middle of the night with a medevac, something happens inside you . . . it sounds kinda crazy, but these guys are surrounded, these guys are getting hit, these guys are getting shot . . . and we’re going out there in a helicopter to help them.”

As they approached the designated area, Donovan observed a rocket launching site, and the accompanying gunships went after it. Despite the heavy enemy fire and without gunship support, he maneuvered the Sea Knight onto the side of a cliff and loaded the wounded Marine in the inky darkness, illuminated by rocket launches. Gomez stated that “it was

difficult to see through the smoke of the incoming. A grenade went off nearby and Donovan yelled 'I'm hit!' over the intercommunication system (ICS)."

Although wounded in the leg and face, Donovan managed to fly the damaged helicopter and headed toward Charlie Med in Da Nang. He noted that "rockets were hitting all over Da Nang. I was flying very slowly along China Beach toward the river and III MAF . . . and it was lights out at Marble Mountain."

Once at Charlie Med, Gomez ascertained that the helicopter was still operational, and Donovan launched a second medevac mission. Again, he landed in an hazardous area, without gunship support, to take on a wounded Republic of Korea Marine. Informed there were eight more seriously wounded Marines in another area, Donovan proceeded to

the site. Coordinating his approach with gunship fire, he picked up the wounded Marines, only to lift out and land again a third time, picking up two additional casualties in critical condition. After returning to Charlie Med and preparing to fly again, at dawn Donovan was ordered by Major Ernest C. Cunningham to stand down. Said Gomez,

Not too many other helicopters got off the ground that night . . . It was now almost dawn. We had refueled under the flashes of incoming rounds while the tower and airfield were closed. We had flown all night from outpost to outpost. We were shot at, by, and flew through enemy rockets, .51-caliber machine gun rounds, and other assorted small arms. We had grenades thrown at us. I had seen black pajamas in the

LZ Lt. Donovan had managed not to pass out, but he was very weak.

For his courage and devotion to duty, Donovan earned his first Navy Cross. He earned a Distinguished Flying Cross, less than a month later, on 17 March 1969.

Go Noi Island is located on the Hoi An River between An Hoa and Hoi An in the Quang Nam Province of Vietnam. In 1969, it was a hotbed of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army activity. Donovan launched on a daytime medevac flight, given the mission of picking up nine wounded Marines. Although UH-1E helicopter gunships attacked enemy positions around the landing zone, he encountered heavy fire upon his approach. While his crew sought to suppress that fire, he was able to land the aircraft. Almost immediately, however, the landing zone came under heavy

Marines of 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, board a "Purple Foxes" helicopter, 1969.

Marine Corps



mortar fire, and he was forced to lift off. After additional strafing runs by the gunships, he landed once more, and although dangerously exposed to enemy fire, maintained his position until all the wounded were on board the aircraft.

Throughout the month of April, Marines in Quang Nam Province undertook a series of operations, including large patrols to secure the "rocket belt" around Da Nang. Stretching from the Hai Van Pass in the north to Marble Mountain in the south, this area was where enemy forces launched 122-millimeter rockets into the Da Nang complex.

On 21 April, Donovan was assigned to evacuate seriously wounded Marines of Company B, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, from a rice paddy, northwest of Liberty Bridge. As he neared the designated landing zone, Donovan commenced a high-speed, low-altitude approach toward a tree line to the north of the wounded Marines. He immediately came under machine gun fire, which damaged the forward section of his aircraft. Despite the continuing enemy fire and his damaged helicopter, he flew close to the casualties who were loaded and flown to the hospital at Da Nang.

A subsequent inspection of Donovan's helicopter revealed the aircraft was no longer airworthy. He took command of a second aircraft and immediately received another medevac mission to the same area. Once again, he was forced to fly through intense enemy fire. As the wounded were being moved on board, additional ground fire erupted which prevented the Marines on the ground from getting the rest of the casualties into the helicopter. Lance Corporal John E. Harris, who was manning the starboard .50-caliber machine gun, was wounded in the right arm but continued to lay down suppressive fire. Donovan was then forced to lift out of the landing zone. Once he determined that

Harris was not seriously wounded and the aircraft was still capable of accomplishing the evacuation, he communicated to the Marines on the ground that he would attempt another landing. He was, however, informed that another helicopter would complete the medevac mission. Donovan later stated that Harris "was, and is my personal hero on this mission." For this action, he received his second Navy Cross (Gold Star in lieu of second award.) Seven days later, he would, once again, find himself on a mission that would require courage and devotion to duty.

The 1st Reconnaissance Battalion was stationed at An Hoa Combat Base. On 28 April, Donovan flew a reconnaissance team of 15–18 Marines into enemy-held territory some twenty miles southwest of Da Nang. During his briefing, he advised the reconnaissance team that "when we land and the ramp goes down, wait one minute, if no fire, then get off." He initiated a high-speed approach to the planned landing zone and, once again, encountered intense enemy fire. Climbing to a safe altitude, he selected an alternate landing zone. As the Sea Knight landed and unbeknownst to Donovan, a young reconnaissance lieutenant and another Marine bounded off the ramp and immediately engaged the well-concealed enemy. As small arms and automatic weapons fire peppered the helicopter, he lifted off and his crew chief said "Sir, we left a man in the zone." He returned to the landing zone and maintained his position until the two Marines were on board. According to Donovan, they didn't climb out of the landing zone as much as they dived off the side of a mountain. Said the red-haired, blue-eyed, reconnaissance lieutenant at the debriefing at An Hoa, "Sure appreciate you coming to get me." Donovan would be awarded a Gold Star in lieu of his second Distinguished Flying Cross.

On the morning of 9 May 1969,

Donovan and another pilot assigned to HMM-364, First Lieutenant William A. Beebe, had been flying medevacs for more than six hours. They returned to Marble Mountain Air Facility and refueled, fully expecting to be relieved by another section when a call came in from Alpha Company, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines. The company had two killed and another ten wounded: They were still fighting a large North Vietnamese force near the village of My Hiep 3. The terrain was flat, teeming with rice paddies and dikes.

As information flowed in over the radio, it became apparent that the casualties were widely separated at multiple locations. In 2003, Donovan's crew chief, Sergeant Kenneth A. Altazan stated that "thirty-four years later I can still hear the garbled chatter and almost subliminal flow of information over my headset . . . It was a disaster looking for a place to happen." Donovan neared the landing zone, marked by yellow smoke, flying at low level and escorted by gunships. He later stated that "the Marines and the NVA were all mixed up, and there was no clearance to fire." Because the wounded were scattered over a large area at five different positions, Donovan flew at low altitude over the rice paddies and spent an inordinate amount of time on the ground. As such, his Sea Knight got hit many times.

At one point, as the helicopter began taking on casualties, one of the Marines carrying a casualty was shot, and both men fell. Altazan later stated that "at this time I unplugged my intercommunications system (ICS) cord and ran to help the two fallen men at some distance from the aircraft. Carrying one on my shoulder, and helping the other as best I could, I heard or felt a sniper's bullet hit the man I was carrying. The impact caused me to fall with my wounded Marine, and I injured my knee." With the help of Hospital Corpman-3, John L. VanDamme,

Altazan and the wounded entered the aircraft. The quick-thinking gunners, realizing Altazan had no communication with the cockpit, informed Donovan that the helicopter was clear to take off. As the helicopter continued to take hits from enemy fire, they were advised to pull out of the zone. According to Altazan, Donovan “responded emphatically and in no uncertain terms that ‘We’re not leaving this zone until we’ve got all your medevacs! Do you understand that?’”

Donovan said that “the last location was the most difficult. It was close to the tree line.” Altazan noticed movement some distance from the helicopter and realized that a Marine was located in a small crater waving a green T-shirt. According to Altazan,

I did not have time to tell Lt Donovan that I was leaving the aircraft, but I decided to go to this man who obviously was not able to come to us. As I bolted from the front door of the aircraft, I forgot to unplug my long cord and in full stride was jerked from my feet when I reached the end of that cord. As I got up again I felt a terrible pain in my knee and was not certain that I was going to be able to even get to the medevacs, much less help them . . .

When I got to the spot, I found two men. One was unconscious, and the other was exhausted and suffering heat stroke. I picked up the unconscious man and grabbed the other man by the belt . . . I can still reflect back on the surreal scene before me as I approached the plane—a pilot holding his aircraft fast in a fire-swept zone, my right gunner firing his .50-caliber machine gun, the other gunner standing in full view on the steps of the front door firing over and past me with his rifle,

Huey gunships and fixed-wing aircraft literally right over our heads . . .

The floor of the helicopter was covered with “wounded Marines, spent brass, medical bandage wrappers, hanging intravenous bags, windblown grass, and debris” as they finally lifted out of the zone. Both Donovan and Altazan were awarded Silver Stars for their actions.

A year later, Donovan was presented the 1970 Frederick L. Feinberg Award by General Lewis W. Walt. The award, established by the Kaman Aircraft Corporation, is awarded annually to a helicopter pilot for “outstanding achievement in rescue, flight, and test development of a new aircraft or general high level of performance in operational flying during the preceding

year.” Given Donovan’s record, it was an honor he deserved.

Years later, Donovan would reflect on his service in Vietnam and his Marine air-ground team:

By my count on every mission, we were a team of pilot, copilot, crew chief, two gunners at each .50 cal, and the Navy Medic, or in the case of Doc Linkous, a Navy Doctor on board, not to overlook the maintenance crew that constantly went without rest to keep the aircraft ‘up.’ We were and are a Marine air-ground team linked by oath and blood to those on the ground we serve. We all achieved the missions, and we all respect the memory of our squadron mates and Marines on board who paid for the lives of their fellow Marines with their own.

Eileen C. Donovan

On 27 July 2007, Lieutenant Eileen C. Donovan, daughter of Joseph and Beba Donovan, earned her “Wings of Gold” after completing her training at The Naval Aviation Training Center, in Pensacola, Florida. The wings she received were worn by Colonel Eugene R. “The Papafox” Brady who commanded HMM-364 when her father flew under Brady’s command in Vietnam. She has continued in her father’s footsteps, flying Sea Knights in Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 166. Perhaps most notable, Captain Eileen Donovan and Captain “Big Cat” Stephenson, flew the very same HMM-364 “Purple Fox” helicopter on 21 April 2010, 42 years to the date, that Lieutenant Joseph Donovan completed the 21 April 1969 mission for which he was awarded his second Navy Cross. On 23 June 2010, HMM-

166 was redesignated as a tiltrotor squadron, VMM-166. Captain Eileen Donovan, is currently assigned to VMM-166, flying the V-22 Osprey.

Captain Eileen C. Donovan.

Honorable Joseph P. Donovan

