

Viet Base Under Heavy Fire

C-123 Came in on a Wing and a Prayer

"We were hiding in a culvert beside the runway, hoping and praying another aircraft would come in" recalled Sgt, Jim Lundie, a member of a three- man Combat Control team that was the last, to leave an overrun Special Forces camp at Kham Duc, South Vietnam.

"There were hostile forces all around us. I could see gun emplacements on both sides of the runway...., he said. "The whole camp was burning and exploding. When I looked up and saw that C123 coming in it was like a miracle."

Lt. Col. Jesse W. Campbell, now chief of operations for plans and programs of the 7310th Tactical Airlift Wing here, was piloting the C1 23. He has since been awarded the Air Force Cross, second only to the Medal of Honor, for his heroism.

"My crew and I had already had the experience of some 30 landings at the besieged camp at Khe Sunh," he remembered. "The day before the camp at Kham Duc was overrun, I had eaten lunch there."

The next morning, May 12, 1968, Campbell was on a routine cargo run out of Da Nang. At noon he was recalled to Da Nang to reconfigure for passengers and fly to Kham Due to help evacuate troops.

The base had been under heavy ground fire for three days.

Campbell's plane was one of the last two to arrive at the scene. C130s and C123s, with fighters providing cover, had already lifted nearly 1,000 troops off the base. The only Americans remaining were three Combat Control Team members hiding near the end of the runway.

Campbell watched as the other C123 went down to land. On touchdown it ran into unexpectedly heavy fire and increased power for takeoff. Just as the plane left the ground its crew spotted the team hiding in the culvert, but because of a nearly exhausted fuel supply it couldn't attempt another landing.

A flaming aircraft, one of eight destroyed on the ground, reduced the field's length to a mere 2,200 feet. In spite of the odds, Campbell briefed the crew and set up his approach from about 7,500 feet above the airfield.

"To the crew," he said, "it was just another Khe Sanh. I used the same kind of approach we had then. I just dropped the landing gear and flaps and made the 123 sideslip like a Piper Cub. We landed through probably the heaviest fire I've ever seen, though it wasn't accurate at all."

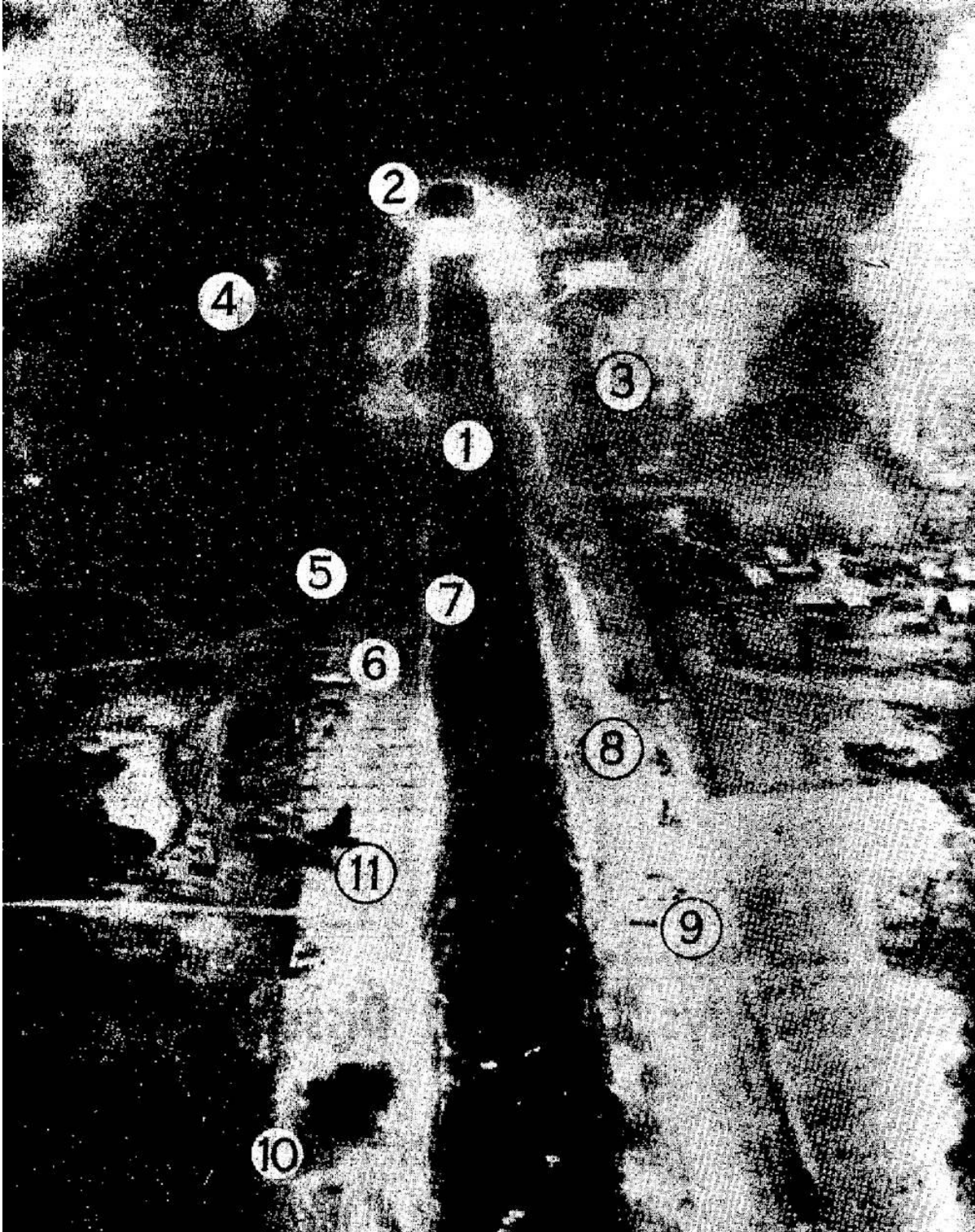
Campbell rolled to a stop avoiding the rocket craters and burning debris on the runway. The three Americans hiding in the culvert ran to the aircraft and leaped aboard.

There was a burning helicopter behind the plane and an unexploded rocket in front. Campbell used his nose wheel to taxi around the rocket and, during takeoff, to avoid shell craters and debris. "It was just like in the old cowboy movies,"* he said. "I could see a machine gun kicking up dirt in a nice little line just a short distance from the plane."

Upon landing back at Da Nang, Campbell discovered that, to his surprise, not one bullet had struck the aircraft during the entire rescue.

The aircraft commander, Lt, Col. (now a colonel assigned to the Pentagon) Joe M. Jackson, was later awarded a Medal of Honor for the rescue.

Sent by Patrick Aguilar



BY THE NUMBERS; 1—C-123 turning; 2—Where men hid; 3—Ammo dump; 4—Ammo dump; 5—V.C. gunners; 6—Crashed F102; 7—Crashed chopper; 8—Three crashed choppers; 9—V.C. gunner; 10—V.C. gunners; 11—Crashed C130.