

Honoring an American hero and a native son of Connecticut

By Barry Barnett

In an instant, the pilot answered a hard question—should I try to save others, or should I for sure save myself?—the same way he would every other time it came up on that long day almost 55 years ago.

Machine-gun fire had just taken out the servo motors that had given him easy control over the Sikorsky CH-3E helicopter. A moment later, the flash across his brain told him to steer into the ambush. He could still wrestle the 10-ton behemoth up and out of danger. But that would mean death to the 26 men fighting for their lives in the jungle clearing below.

The calm and steady courage of U.S. Air Force Major Philip J. Conran on Oct. 6, 1969 saved two U.S. helicopter crews and 46 combat troops. It led his commanding officer to cite his “conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of life above and beyond the call of duty” and to recommend him for the highest honor the U.S. can bestow on one of its soldiers, the Medal of Honor.

There was just one problem.

Twenty-two months after the 1968 Tet Offensive, a secret mission under Lt. Colonel Ted Silva aimed to stem the flow of North Vietnamese Army troops and weapons down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Five CH-3E helicopters would ferry 125 “friendly” soldiers to a remote landing strip, from which they would join other Laotian units.

A briefing on local conditions around 10:30 a.m. confirmed that friendly forces held the airstrip. But as the formation neared the landing zone, torrents of machine-gun fire told a different story. Damage to Silva’s lead Jolly Green Giant forced a crash landing. Over two dozen men bolted for cover. Taking command, Conran ordered the other helicopters to a holding area, where he called in air strikes that for a time prevented a massacre.

Conran quickly saw that the men on the ground could not hold off the NVA for long. He therefore resolved to carry 25 more friendlies to the landing strip himself. His approach cost his helicopter the servos, and upon his landing more NVA fire took out the main rotor blades



Major Phillip J. Conran receiving the Air Force Cross from Lieutenant General Lucius D. Clay on May 20, 1970 at Hickham Air Force Base on Oahu, Hawaii. Photography credited to the Collection of Robert F. Dorr.

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and transmission. Conran, his co-pilot and flight engineer, and the Laos now joined the men from Silva’s CH-3E, roughly doubling the number of defenders.

As his CO later wrote, Conran “repeatedly exposed himself” while directing the ground defense. His “complete disregard for his own safety was an inspiration to both the friendly forces and his fellow crew members.” The air strikes he directed hit “enemy positions with deadly accuracy.” He himself retrieved two “sorely needed machine guns and ammunition” from a CH-3E as “enemy automatic weapons fire ripped through the cabin.” On each trip, Conran braved NVA gunfire across 100 feet of open ground.

As the afternoon wore on and hostile fire increased, “air strikes were unable to prevent the enemy from closing the ring about the downed personnel.” A new rescue attempt at 4 p.m. failed. Then Major Conran “received a severe leg wound” yet “continued to encourage the others and did not mention his wound until he had lost all feeling in his leg.”

Just before sunset, with ammo for the one working machine gun low, deliverance at last arrived. A pair of Super Jolly Green Giants landed to pick up eight Americans and 46 friendlies. His right leg numb, Conran went on all fours to give his even more severely wounded CO a boost into one of the choppers.

Major Conran’s heroism unfolded at a time and in a place

that made presidential recognition of it practically impossible. The incoming Nixon Administration had secretly decided to ramp up covert operations in Cambodia and Laos while publicly touting its “Vietnamization” strategy of withdrawal. For the next 40 years, not one of the seven Medal of Honor candidates cited for their gallantry in Cambodia or Laos received it.

A breakthrough finally came in 2010, when President Barack Obama presented the Medal of Honor to the family of Richard Etchberger. Since then, 5 of the 6 other candidates have received the Medal of Honor for bravery in Cambodia or Laos—most recently when President Joseph Biden presented it to Dennis Fujii, on July 5, 2022. Only one remains: Colonel Philip J. Conran (Ret.).

Colonel Conran’s story speaks to me both because his son Patrick was a teammate of mine and because I knew and loved people who served with honor in the Southeast Asian War. Earlier this month, Sen. Richard Blumenthal, Sens. Laphonza Romanique Butler, and Alex Padilla and U.S. Rep. Salud Carbajal, who represent Conran’s native and adoptive states of Connecticut and California, urged the Secretary of Defense to at last fully recognize Colonel Conran’s selfless courage in Laos. If President Biden fastens the Medal of Honor around the neck of Colonel Conran, he will honor not only the last hero of a tragic war but all the others, too, regardless of how, when, or where they did their duty. I respectfully urge the president to do so without delay.

Barry Barnett, a fellow in the American College of Trial Lawyers, is a partner at law firm Susman Godfrey LLP and a nationally recognized antitrust litigator. He is also a trustee of the New York Historical Society, a member of the Yale University Art Gallery’s Governing Board, and a long-time supporter of the Yellow Ribbon Program at Harvard Law School. A member of Ivy League championship football teams in his junior and senior years at Yale, he recovered a Crimson fumble in the waning seconds of “The Game” on November 22, 1980, sealing Yale’s 14-0 win.