

NO EFFORT SP

JAMES MICHENER DIDN'T DREAM UP THE HARROWING STORY BEHIND THE BESTSELLING NOVEL *BRIDGES AT*
THOMAS MCKELVEY CLEAVER DESCRIBES A RESCUE GONE WRONG

Right
 Re-loading belts of 20mm
 ammunition into an F9F
 Panther prior to a strike.
 ALL KEY COLLECTION UNLESS
 NOTED

By 1952, James Albert Michener was one of the most famous writers in America. His collection of short stories, *Tales of the South Pacific*, became a best-seller shortly after its first publication in January 1947.

Three years later Rodgers and Hammerstein turned it into a beloved and long-lived Broadway musical, then Hollywood took an interest and a film – directed by Joshua Logan – was released in 1958.

In the autumn of 1951, Michener accepted a war correspondent assignment from *Reader's Digest* to go to Korea; and – as an old navy man – write about how his service was faring in the conflict. That November, he went aboard the carrier USS *Essex*. Among other things, he became friends with a young ensign in VF-51 named Neil Alden Armstrong. The Grumman F9F Panther pilot became the first person to walk on the Moon on July 21, 1969.

At the end of January 1952, Michener departed *Essex* and reported aboard USS *Valley Forge*. Nicknamed 'Happy Valley', the carrier was then on her third deployment to Korea. Michener was now writing for United Press International (UPI) and the *Saturday Evening Post* as well as *Reader's Digest*.

Over the course of the next 45 days, Michener found much to write about. Among the first naval aviators he met was Lt Donald Brubaker, a reservist flying Douglas Skyraiders with VF-194 and a lawyer from Denver, Colorado – he inspired the character of Lt Harry Brubaker in the novel (played by William Holden in the film).

Valley Forge reported to Task Force 77 in the Sea of Japan off the east coast of North Korea on February 1, 1952. The pace of operations continued through the week

with every third day spent refuelling and replenishing supplies.

February 8 would later be considered the worst day of the entire deployment. It was at this point that somebody changed the carrier's nickname from 'Happy Valley' to 'Death Valley'.

HORSE RESCUE

On the morning of the 8th, army intelligence informed the ship that VF-194's Lt Harry Ettinger, thought lost on December 13, had instead been badly injured and rescued from a prison camp by anti-communist Korean guerrillas who had kept him hidden in the mountains. Suffering from pneumonia and frostbite, his rescuers attempted to carry him by stretcher to Wonsan, but were pursued by North Korean troops.

Happy Valley's air group was to provide cover for the Sikorsky



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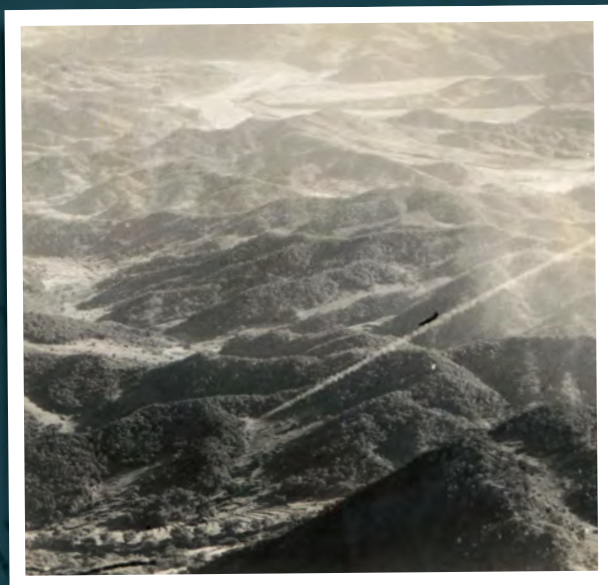


TOKO-R! HE WAS PRESENT AS THE REAL DRAMA UNFOLDED.



HO3S-1 Dragonfly helicopter from USS *Rochester* flown by Duane Thorin, who would pick up Ettinger. Thorin was equally well known throughout the fleet for his ability to pluck men from behind enemy lines and for rendering commanding officers apoplectic when he





Top left
A dramatic image showing an F9F Panther of the 1st Marine Air Wing firing rockets.

Above
A Skyraider prepares to take off from the USS 'Princeton' on a mission to relieve pressure on Marine units.

Above right
As a Skyraider pulls away from its bombing run, the aircraft in the foreground releases its warload towards targets near Wonsan.

exchanged his helmet for a baseball hat after lifting off the ship.

For his part, Thorin was dismayed when he was told to take an intelligence agent with him. Thorin pointed out he couldn't take the army man and his crewman *and* pick up Ettinger. When told they would land to pick up Ettinger, he relented, but argued about the medical supplies and a radio destined for the guerrillas.

Shortly after dawn, Thorin lifted off Rochester and headed toward the coast. A six-plane rescue combat air patrol (RESCAP) of three VF-194 Skyraiders and three VC-3 Vought F4U-5N Corsairs from Valley Forge joined up as he crossed the shoreline. Soon, he spotted the thatched-roof hut the guerrillas had set afire to mark their location.

Reconnoitering the fresh snow, he saw no other footprints and came in for the pick-up. He spotted a North Korean patrol in a nearby village that he estimated would take 30 minutes to get to the rescue site, enough time to pick up Ettinger and get away. He ordered the army agent to drop the 150lb (68kg) of gear, since it would be impossible to rescue Ettinger otherwise.

Bringing the 'Horse' (from the helicopter's designation HO3S-1) in as close as possible, Thorin held it on the edge of a small terrace while Ettinger hobbled to them on his frostbitten feet. As he scrambled aboard, the helicopter dipped, out of balance since the supplies hadn't yet been dropped.

Thorin was unable to maintain hover. As he manoeuvred to come

around again, he moved out of 'ground effect' and lost power. The Horse plummeted into the ravine below and the rotor blades shattered.

Thorin called the RESCAP and they strafed the North Koreans, who had left the village to investigate the burning hut. As Thorin pulled the army man and Ettinger from the wreck, the Corsairs and Skyraiders roared low above. "The explosive rounds sounded like popping corn, and shrapnel sizzled through the trees above us, close enough that I felt the breeze," he recalled.

The soldiers fired back and hit five of the six aircraft. Lt John McKenna's F4U-5N was set on fire. He called that he was heading for open water, but the blaze soon



spread to the cockpit. The Corsair sank quickly when it struck the ocean and McKenna was lost.

Lt Mel Schluter's Skyraider took hits, but he managed to stay airborne and reach Marine airfield K-50, at Sokcho-ri just south of the front lines.

The others continued to circle and strafe the enemy until they had exhausted their ammo and were too low on fuel to return to *Valley Forge*; they headed to K-18 at Kangnūng.

After the departure of the RESCAP the North Koreans closed in on the ditch. Moments later Corsairs from the USS *Philippine Sea*, that had been diverted to help, arrived overhead and cut down the enemy soldiers with strafing runs.



"The explosive rounds sounded like popping corn, and shrapnel sizzled through the trees above us, close enough that I felt the breeze"

INTO THE VALLEY

Upon learning of Thorin's crash, the USS *Greer County*, a tank landing craft, in Wonsan Harbour, sent her helicopter to attempt a rescue. The helicopter was half way there when it was struck by anti-aircraft fire and damaged so badly it had to land on *Rochester*. There was no other immediate way to rescue the men, and a RESCAP was organised while calls were made to find another helicopter.

While this was happening, *Valley Forge* launched the morning's scheduled strike against three bridges crossing the deep river valley of Samdong-ni, close to the villages of Poko-ri and Toko-san; Michener would combine the names for his fictional 'Toko-ri'. VF-194's Lt Cdr Robert 'Iron Pants' Schreiber led eight Skyraiders, each carrying a 2,000lb bomb on the centreline and a 1,000-pounder on each inboard wing station.

The valley was filled with anti-aircraft guns. The attack plan had Panthers from VF-52 and -111 attacking the guns first, while VF-653 Corsairs bombed to keep the gunners' heads down when the Skyraiders attacked.

Schreiber led the first division. Lt Bob Komoroff headed the second, with Ensign Marvin Broomhead as 'tail-end Charlie'.

Lt Richard Kaufman later recalled: "We had no illusions as to what we were in for. I was very uncomfortable, knowing from the radio that the rescue helicopter from the *Rochester* was in trouble and unable to help us."



Left
One of VF-653's Corsairs approaches the Korean coast after taking off from USS 'Valley Forge'. WARREN E THOMPSON

Schreiber's Skyraiders arrived to find the Panthers had attacked too early, alerting the gunners. Kaufman: "They were waiting for us. We spread out in a loose tailgate racetrack pattern 12,000ft above the bridges, so as to attack out of the sun. We were to drop the centreline 2,000-pounder and the two 1,000-pounders on the wing stations on the first run, saving the 250s we carried on the wings if it was necessary to make a second attack."

As Kaufman followed Schreiber, the snowy white valley erupted with gun flashes: "All hell broke loose. In my 30 missions over North Korea thus far, it was the heaviest flak I had ever seen."

Kaufman was about 1,000ft behind his leader. "I descended into the valley in a 60° dive, dive brakes extended to stabilise at 280 knots at the release point. We went in so low that the guns on the hilltops were shooting *down* at us. I really didn't have time to concern myself with the flak tracers and bursts all around me. Accelerating to 360 knots at full power at 1,000ft and 4g on the pull-out was our plan to get through."

MAN DOWN

Miraculously, they came out of the valley untouched. Schreiber looked back and saw that only two of the bridges were down. They would have to do it again.

Kaufman fired his cannon for flak suppression as he followed



Below
A USMC Corsair goes into action with rockets over a bleak Korean landscape.



"All hell broke loose. In my 30 missions over North Korea thus far, it was the heaviest flak I had ever seen"



Above
A Grumman F9F jet over Korea.

Right centre
Pilots walking past a row of VF-111 F9F Panthers on the USS 'Valley Forge'.
WARREN E THOMPSON

Right
Chief Petty Officer Duane Thorin. VIA AUTHOR



Schreiber and pickled his eight 250lb bombs with Komoroff right behind. With so many 250-pounders on the one bridge, smoke and dust was thick.

Looking back, Kaufman could not immediately make out the damage, but he did see Broomhead's Skyraider flying eastward down the valley with smoke streaming behind.

Broomhead had been grazed by shrapnel; his Skyraider's engine had been hit and he didn't have the power to climb. Broomhead radioed: "I'm hit, I'm losing rpms." Schreiber ordered him to bale out. "I'm already too low. I have to find some place to set down."

Kaufman and the others followed Broomhead for 10 miles before he spotted a snow-covered mountaintop clearing and crash landed. Kaufman: "The crash was sudden in a flurry of snow as he hit

and skidded to a stop in about 300ft. The engine broke off but there was no fire. All was quiet."

Broomhead had fractured his back and broken both ankles in the crash. He finally managed to drag himself out of the cockpit. "As I buzzed over him on a go-around circle, I saw him lying by the wing in the snow. He rolled over and waved to me."

While the others remained low to cover Broomhead, Schreiber climbed to get above the mountians and call for rescue.

HUNG UP ROCKET

The nearest help was the light cruiser *Manchester's* helicopter, which was 100 miles north spotting the warship's shore bombardment of the coastal railroad.

Pilot Lt Edward Moore and Marine artillery observer 1st Lt Kenneth Henry volunteered for the mission

to get a taste of combat. They immediately headed south, but it would take an hour for them to get there.

Aboard *Valley Forge*, pilots came forward to fly cover. VF-653's executive officer, Lt Ray Edinger, led four Corsairs and two Skyraiders to relieve the *Philippine Sea* Corsairs. They were en route when they learned of Broomhead's crash.

Edinger detached a Corsair and the Skyraiders to provide cover for Broomhead and continued on to the Thorin crash site. For two hours, they strafed the enemy who attempted to capture the downed Americans. During this attack, Edinger had a rocket hang up.

As a relief flight of aircraft from *Essex* arrived, Edinger heard a thump; his wingman said his Corsair was streaming oil. Edinger: "I looked out at the left wing, and sure enough, it's



Left
An F9F-2 of VF-52 on the USS 'Valley Forge' in 1950. VIA AUTHOR



all running out. Flying at full throttle to get to Wonsan where he could ditch, he realised the engine should have been dead from lack of oil. The leak was hydraulic fluid, which meant trapping on *Valley Forge* without flaps or locked-down landing gear, and then there was the hung rocket.

Valley Forge's flight deck crew rigged the barriers, backing them with a line of tractors. On the second try, Edinger's Corsair was nose-high when he got the cut. Chopping the throttle, he smashed onto the deck so hard the unlocked landing gear collapsed, and the rocket skittered along until two crewmen pitched it overboard.

Below left
Fully-armed, an F4U-5N Corsair of VF-53 prepares to take off from the 'Valley Forge'. WARREN E THOMPSON

Below
Panthers of VF-51 sit with wings folded awaiting their next mission. WARREN E THOMPSON



BAIT IN A TRAP

While Edinger was scaring *Valley Forge's* deck crew, Moore's helicopter finally arrived at Broomhead's position. They took hits as Moore put it in hover, then rolled over and crashed; Moore and Henry got out unharmed. Despite enemy fire, they ran to Broomhead's Skyraider, where they found him unconscious and carried him to cover.

Another attempt was made to rescue Thorin and Ettinger. Word was received at Marine transport squadron HMR-1 that a helicopter was needed. Pilot Lt Colonel William P Mitchell with his co-pilot and crew chief took off with the squadron doctor. They rendezvoused with eight Corsairs over K-50 and headed north. ➔





THE BEST TO COME OUT OF KOREA



The story of the complex rescue attempt eventually evolved into the sad finale of Michener's 1953 novel *The Bridges at Toko-Ri*. The book is considered by many to be among the best written about the Korean War.

Mark Robson directed the movie of the same name which was released in 1954, starring William Holden, Frederic March, Grace Kelly and Mickie Rooney. It was a commercial failure due to the downbeat ending.

In later years, when returnees from Vietnam viewed it on late-night TV and saw its honesty about war, it was finally hailed as one of the greatest films about naval aviation.



Top
A VF-51 Panther manoeuvring on the USS 'Valley Forge'. WARREN E THOMPSON

Above right
A gaggle of F9F Panthers of VF-51 on 'Valley Forge's' flightdeck. WARREN E THOMPSON

Once near the crash site, the escorts strafed the enemy on the surrounding ridges. Thorin: "A Marine helicopter came looking for us, moving upslope over the open area about 200 yards outside of our hideaway. It was a [Sikorsky] HRS-1 and had the capability of taking all three of us."

Mitchell made a second approach and flew over Thorin's wrecked helicopter. His crew chief reported enemy troops on the ridges on both sides of the valley. The fighters made additional passes and Mitchell moved the helicopter up the stream bed.

Thorin realised he and the others were now bait in a trap, surrounded on all sides by hidden enemy troops. "If we were to break out into the open area where this helicopter could pick us up, both it and ourselves would be a well-centred target for all of the troops in the vicinity. All things considered, it seemed best to let the Marine helicopter pass on by."

At the same time, Mitchell reported he saw no activity and broke off. When he flew off, Thorin and Ettinger stood up and raised their hands and surrendered.

Around 16:00 hours, a USAF Sikorsky R-5 Dragonfly helicopter

attempted to rescue Broomhead, Moore and Henry. High winds made flying difficult, and the enemy had brought in heavy machine guns. The R-5 landed 200 yards (182m) from the three men. There was space in the helicopter for only two, and Broomhead was unconscious. While Moore and Henry might make it in a quick dash, it would not be possible to carry Broomhead through enemy fire. They would not leave him, and they waved the rescuer away.

The pilot came back and despite the high winds and fading light managed to make an even more dangerous landing closer to Moore and Henry and begged them to climb aboard, but they refused again. Bad weather, approaching darkness and heavy fire finally drove the would-be rescuer off.

The carriers *Valley Forge*, *Philippine Sea* and *Antietam* flew 70 individual RESCAP sorties in unsuccessful rescue attempts.

EPIC IN FAILURE

The next morning, when *Valley Forge* withdrew for replenishment, she launched eight VF-194 Skyraiders to search for the downed

men. They operated from K-18 to maximize coverage throughout the day.

No sign of the men was found. Initially, the searchers reported all three at the Thorin site had been killed when they saw snow saturated red that appeared to be blood from a massacre; it was actually marker dye.

James Michener reported the story in a UPI article, *An Epic in Failure*, and a short story, *Heroes Fail to Save Pal*, in the July 1952 *Reader's Digest*. Part of the latter read: "Here was complete failure... Helicopter[s], planes and men were lost in the futile tragedy. The enemy had a field day and we had nothing. Nothing, that is, except another curious demonstration [that] sometimes defeat does actually mean more to democracy than victory."

In truth, all had been captured. In June 1952, Thorin escaped for three days before being recaptured and tortured for making the attempt. In August 1953, all six walked across the bridge at Panmunjom to freedom. In total, the rescue attempt had cost the lives of one man – Lt John McKenna – and four aircraft. ●