

By John L. Frisbee, Contributing Editor

## A Spectacular Save

**A tanker crew broke the rules to save two “Thuds” about to flame out over the jungle.**

**T**HE Vietnam War was unique in many respects. It was the first air war in which both tactical and strategic operations were heavily dependent on air refueling. Strategic Air Command (SAC) tankers on temporary duty in the Pacific and Southeast Asia began flying missions in June 1965 and completed nearly 200,000 sorties during the course of the war. Except from the aircrews they served, the tankers have not received the recognition they earned.

One of the most unusual refuelings was flown on May 3, 1967, by a crew of the 902d Air Refueling Squadron operating from U Tapao RTAB, Thailand, on TDY from Clinton-Sherman AFB, Okla. The crew was led by Maj. Alvin Lewis and included copilot Capt. Kenneth Kelly, navigator Capt. Manuel Macias, and boom operator TSgt. Walter Baker. They were on their second five-hour refueling sortie of the day.

The action began when an F-105 “Thud” was shot down over North Vietnam. Wabash Flight, two of the F-105s covering the downed airmen, was led by Col. Jack M. Broughton of the 355th Tactical Fighter Wing at Takhli RTAB, Thailand. To protect the downed pilots, Wabash stayed in the area until their fuel was approaching zero. There was no friendly base they could reach without refueling. Their emergency call for a tanker resulted in all frequencies immediately becoming jammed by transmissions from numerous ground controllers and tanker crews, each anxious to help in their own way. The redoubtable Colonel Broughton told everyone to get off the air so he could contact a tanker, then, as described in his book *Thud Ridge*, gave a synopsis of what he would do to any noisemakers if he and his wingman had to walk out of the jungle.

Lewis’s crew was holding at 32,000 feet on its assigned refueling track about 80 miles south of Wabash.

They had completed their refueling for the day and were about to head for home with enough fuel to reach U Tapao—but not a lot to spare—when they picked up Wabash leader’s emergency call. While keeping radio silence, navigator Macias plotted the Thud’s reported position at 18,000 feet. Despite their own fuel situation, the Lewis crew decided to go for it. It was a tight spot. Wabash leader reported that both fighters were down to 100 to 200 pounds of fuel. Unless help arrived in minutes, they would be traveling by parachute.

At this point, Major Lewis broke radio silence, gave Wabash a heading, and informed him there would not be time for a standard refueling pattern and that because of their lack of fuel, they could give the fighters only enough to keep them out of the jungle, but not a full load. While en route to the F-105s, Macias got a firm fix on the fighters, copilot Kelly began draining fuel from the KC-135’s wing tanks to pump to the F-105s, and boomer Baker made ready for a quick hookup.

As soon as Lewis established visual contact with the fighters, he rolled the KC-135 over in what he describes as the closest to a split S you could perform in a four-engine aircraft. Any bank of more than 45° was considered an unusual position and was frowned on by SAC. As they came over the top of Wabash Flight in a most unorthodox approach, he slowed the diving tanker to 320 knots to get into position for a hookup.

Maneuvering a four-engine airplane over the top of the F-105s, then under the nose of a starving fighter—at the right heading, airspeed, and separation—called for some very delicate flying by Major Lewis. As he was about to move into final position, the number two F-105 flamed out. Its pilot was on the verge of punching out, but, encouraged by the tanker crew, he stayed with his Thud and, guided by the signals from Sergeant Baker, glided up to the tanker. Baker drove the refueling boom into the fighter’s receptacle with an unerring eye. Fuel began to flow as



**KC-135 pilot Maj. Al Lewis received a DFC for his part in saving two F-105s.**

the two aircraft headed for the jungle at a dive angle between 20° to 30°.

The Thud pilot was able to restart his engine. After receiving a minimum of fuel, he pulled off to let Colonel Broughton, whose engine was surging and about to quit, onto the boom. When the Colonel’s aircraft had taken on several hundred pounds—with the ominous gray jungle rushing up at him—his wingman returned to the boom for enough fuel to get to Takhli. Two badly needed fighters worth several million dollars—but more important, the lives of two experienced fighter pilots—had been saved in a spectacular refueling.

The Lewis crew arrived at Takhli with enough fuel for a go-around. It was the last refueling sortie of their TDY, though all of them would return to Southeast Asia. For them, saving the two pilots had been a team effort all the way and a day they will always remember with pride. For that magnificent performance, each member of the crew received the Distinguished Flying Cross and earned an honored place in the annals of air refueling. ■

*With thanks to Col. Howard V. McDonald, former commander of the 902d Air Refueling Squadron, and to Maj. Alvin Lewis, both now retired.*