

Dozens of Medals and a Dangerous Mission Or: I Pushed and Booted Him out of Plane

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

Alert readers may remember a piece we published last March 10. Some military dog tags had come into my possession, and I was able to return them to Donald T. St. Hilaire of Lake Redstone. The tags belonged to his son, Donald J. St. Hilaire, a recently deceased veteran whose military career included serious undercover work.

We had a good personal visit at the time and I assumed the matter was closed, but recently I heard from Don and we met again. After discussing a little more about the life of his son in the military, he mentioned that son Donald had received 27 medals, and a brother, still living, had 14. Questioned, Don allowed as how he had a couple or so himself. They were a great military family!

Don is a pretty modest guy, and served in WWII as a pilot in the Aleutians. He casually mentioned that he had written about one mission. That got my attention, and after a little prodding he brought out the following story. It was hand printed, neatly and nicely spaced, on four pages of paper.

Don's is not a Congressional Medal of Honor story. It simply illustrates the ingenuity and bravery of the young men of that fated generation when confronted with a problem, in this case a rescue. Actually it is a letter to a magazine requesting information on a story they had published. Here is Don's letter and story, in his own words:

By Donald T. St, Hilaire, to the Saturday Evening Post

Please accept my request to locate a story which appeared in your Sat. Eve. Post entitled "And Then I Jumped". It was written by a former army doctor whose name was Dr. Shapiro or Dr. Schaeffer. It was in your magazine (or Cosmopolitan or some other competitor) in 1945, '46 '47' or '48.

In 1945 I was an Army Air Corps pilot on a C-47 flying troops back from the Aleutian Islands. We landed at Cold Bay (Randall) to refuel before proceeding on to Elmendorf Field in Anchorage, Alaska. While on the ground at Cold Bay we learned that a plane from my 54th Troop Carrier Squadron was overdue.



A C-47 Cargo-Ambulance Plane

We assumed that they must have crashed into a mountain side, so we immediately took off searching for the plane. We discovered it on the side of a mountain and saw a man waving at us. We wagged our wings to let him know we saw him. Since dusk was setting in, we returned to Cold Bay to begin a rescue plan for the next morning.

By sheer luck, we discovered we had a ground force doctor and two ground force medics on board our plane. All 3 men volunteered to parachute to the survivors, with plasma and other medical items strapped to their sides.

They were the bravest men I have ever met. Because of the mountainous terrain, we only had a very limited area to drop these men, so we had to do it quickly and with split second timing. It had to be "paratrooper style", to drop them between a 400' and 500' altitude.

Lt. Estes was the pilot, while I was strapped to a bulk head by the open door to help these brave men out. The red light was on as we approached our drop zone. When it turned green, the Dr. said "Well, this is it" and jumped out like a champion.

The second man pulled his chute (undecipherable) too soon and the chute dropped behind him on the plane floor, and I kicked it out for him. Thank God he missed the plane's tail. The third man froze in the door. I actually pushed and booted him out. All three heroes survived the split second jump. They saved three lives and I recall another three men had died in the crash.

A dog sled team carried (them back) to the Bering Sea where a ship was waiting for them. They were later flown to a hospital at Elmendorf Field, and later to a hospital in the States. I believe these three rescue men should be awarded a Soldiers Medal, for valor, or a bronze star.

Signed Donald T. St Hilaire

What Don does not make clear in his article is that none of the three men had received parachute training, and had never jumped before. The reason he booted the third man out is that with even a moment's hesitation the plane would have moved a great distance, and the jumper would not have landed even close the first two. On landing he might not even know the direction to go to reach them and the downed place. This would require another rescue mission, if he could be found even.

How many of us would have "frozen" at the open door of the plane, buffeted by the freezing Alaskan Air? Or even volunteered? And how many of us would have had the initiative to boot the man out? Don made a good split second decision, as did so many young men of that era.