

Larry Taylor obituary

Vietnam War pilot whose daring rescue of a four-man patrol was recognised with the US Medal of Honor 55 years later — after a campaign by one of the men he saved

Taylor at the start of his army career in the 1960s and an emotional moment as he receives the Medal of Honor from President Biden in September last year

MEDAL OF HONOR: JIM WATSON/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

On the moonless, pitch-black night of June 18, 1968, a four-man American reconnaissance patrol found itself pinned down by nearly a hundred Viet Cong guerrillas in a rice paddy near the village of Ap Go Cong, northeast of Saigon. They radioed for help. Within two minutes two Cobra attack helicopters had taken off from a base outside Saigon while a larger Huey rescue helicopter prepared to follow them.

Time and again for 45 minutes the two Cobras flew perilously low over the Viet Cong fighters, strafing them with their rockets and machineguns, doing all they could to drive them back. They fired roughly 150 rockets and 16,000 bullets in all, but their efforts failed. Their ammunition ran out and they had barely 20 minutes of fuel left.

Taylor then received two messages over his radio. The first was that the Huey's rescue mission had been called off because it stood almost no chance of success. The second was an order to return to base. Taylor refused. "I'm getting my men out," he replied.

He turned off his radio and embarked on a manoeuvre never attempted

in a Cobra. As the other helicopter returned home, he turned on his landing light and continued to fly low over the Viet Cong fighters, hoping to draw their fire while the American patrol fled to an extraction point that he had identified roughly 100 yards in the opposite direction.

Taylor then swooped down on the clearing, telling his compatriots they had ten seconds to clamber not into the helicopter, which only had two seats, but on to it. He landed amid a barrage of gunfire. Two of the patrol jumped on to the helicopter's rocket pods, and two on to its landing skids. One of them banged twice on the helicopter's metal shell and Taylor lifted off.

Miraculously nobody was hit, but the danger was still not over. Taylor could not fly far with the men clinging to the outside of his craft. He landed several miles away, at a water treatment plant where other US troops were waiting on the ground.

There the four men jumped off. They ran round to the front of the helicopter, lined up and saluted the pilots who had saved them from near certain death. The Cobra lifted off again. It reached its base with its fuel gauge on empty and at least 16 bullet holes puncturing its shell.

"I was doing my job," Taylor said long after he pulled off one of the most dramatic airborne rescues of the Vietnam War. "I knew that if I did not go down and get them they would not make it ... You never leave a man on the ground and I never did."

Asked if he got into trouble for disobeying an order, he replied: "What were they going to do? Send me to Vietnam?"

Lovell said he would never leave a man on the ground as a helicopter pilot in the Vietnam War

CONGRESSIONAL MEDAL OF HONOR SOCIETY

Larry Taylor was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in 1942, the son of a roofing contractor who had fought in the Second World War.

He was a member of the US army's Reserve Officers' Training Corps at Chattanooga City High School and the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. He enlisted in the regular army in 1966 and trained as an armour officer at Fort Knox, Kentucky, as America was sucked ever deeper into the Vietnam War.

At that point, having already obtained a fixed wing pilot's licence, he decided he would rather fly helicopters than serve on the ground. As a pilot "you can kick some ass", he said. "I'd rather be an ass-kicker than to have my ass kicked."

He qualified as an army aviator in June 1967 and was sent to Vietnam two months later. At first he flew Hueys, but then switched to the new Cobra attack helicopter as a member of Troop Delta, 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry, 1st Infantry Division. The Cobra was the army's fastest and deadliest helicopter at that time.

During his year-long tour in Vietnam he flew more than 2,000 combat missions, came under enemy fire 340 times, and was forced down five times. He received more than 50 combat decorations, including four Distinguished Flying Crosses and a Silver Star (America's third-highest military honour) for his rescue of the reconnaissance unit.

Taylor went on to serve in the 2nd Cavalry Regiment in West Germany. He left the army in 1971, with the rank of Captain, and returned to Chattanooga to take over the family roofing business. That same year he married his second wife, Toni Betchel, who survives him. He had two

sons, Larry and Grady, through his first marriage to Dolly Caywood which ended in divorce.

Taylor's heroism in Vietnam was finally recognised 55 years later

LEWIS D RAY

Taylor's heroism would have been largely forgotten had he not met one of the men he rescued at a veterans' reunion in 1999. Until that moment, he had met none of the four since they had saluted him at the water treatment plant that night 31 years earlier.

Sergeant David Hill, who is now the last of the patrol still alive, was dismayed that Taylor had not been awarded the Medal of Honor, the US equivalent of the Victoria Cross, for his valour. "Hell, we were dead," he said. "The fortunes of war had turned against us that night ... I'm alive because Captain Taylor saved my life."

One problem was that Taylor's commanding officer and division commander had both been killed in action soon after the rescue, so the paperwork required for a top honour had never been submitted.

Hill set out to rectify what he considered to be a great injustice. He enlisted retired generals, and the help of Tennessee's senators and congressmen. Twice over the next 20 years he appealed to the army, but both times it refused to upgrade Taylor's Silver Star on the grounds that there was no new or substantive evidence to justify doing so. Hill and his supporters then discovered witnesses including Ratliff, Taylor's co-pilot, and his third appeal was successful.

President Biden telephoned Taylor last year to break the news. "I thought you had to do something to receive the Medal of Honor," Taylor

said. "You did something extraordinary," Biden replied.

Fifty-five years after Taylor's heroics, Biden presented the award to him at a White House ceremony last September. "When duty called, Larry did everything to answer," he said. "And because of that, he rewrote the fate of four families for generations to come." As the president hung the medal round Taylor's neck, the veteran's eyes visibly filled with tears.

Larry Taylor, Vietnam pilot and winner of the US Medal of Honor, was born on February 12, 1942. He died of cancer on January 28, 2024, aged 81