

Helicopter Hero

Fred Howell McMurray, Jr. was decorated for heroism not once but twice. A helicopter pilot in Vietnam, Captain McMurray was awarded the Silver Star and Distinguished Flying Cross for separate actions against the enemy.

Fred McMurray grew up in Charleston where he was a Boy Scout and attended Porter Military Academy. At Clemson, McMurray majored in industrial management and became a member of the Society for the Advancement of Management. As a freshman, he was selected as the Pershing Rifles' outstanding pledge. As he progressed through his Clemson career, McMurray was selected as the organization's executive officer and then took a position in its Regimental Headquarters. McMurray participated in the Army Flight Program and was selected for membership in the military honor society Scabbard and Blade. Designated as a distinguished military graduate, McMurray was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Regular Army upon his graduation from Clemson on May 14, 1966.



Second Lieutenant McMurray proceeded to Fort Knox, Kentucky to attend the Armor Officer Basic Course. On November 19, 1966, McMurray wed the former Nancy McCall. McMurray was next ordered to Fort Rucker, Alabama for helicopter pilot training. He received his wings on August 29, 1967 and was shortly on his way to Vietnam. McMurray was assigned to Troop B, 1st Squadron of the 9th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Air Cavalry Division. The Air Cav was a new concept designed to take advantage of the mobility and firepower provided by helicopters. The 9th was composed of aerial scouts, weapons ships, and infantry who could be rapidly transported to the scene of the action by troop-carrying helicopters.

On January 31, 1968, First Lieutenant McMurray "distinguished himself by exceptionally valorous action... while serving as a pilot of an armed helicopter, during a reconnaissance mission." According to the citation for the Distinguished Flying Cross awarded for his actions:

While flying at low altitude over enemy controlled terrain, First Lieutenant McMurray observed and engaged a large and well entrenched enemy force. During the action First Lieutenant McMurray made numerous passes over the insurgents' positions and placed a large volume of effective suppressive fire against them. Disregarding his own safety, First Lieutenant McMurray braved the intense ground fire and neutralized the insurgents' fighting ability and contributed greatly to the successful completion of his unit's mission.

On March 10, Lieutenant McMurray's conduct in battle was again noted with an award for gallantry in action, this time the Silver Star Medal. According to its citation, McMurray disregarded:

...his own safety, exposed himself to the hostile ground fire as he hovered his aircraft over enemy positions, enabling the observer to successfully engage the hostile

force. Disregarding his own safety, he maneuvered over the enemy, placing suppressive fire and marking the positions for friendly ground troops. His courageous action inflicted numerous casualties on the enemy force and contributed greatly to the successful completion of the ground element's mission. Lieutenant McMurray's gallant action was in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service, and reflects great credit upon himself, his unit, and the United States Army.

Recently promoted, Captain McMurray's final mission came on April 7 when he was piloting a Bell OH-13S observation helicopter on a reconnaissance mission in support of an operation in the Au Chau Valley. McMurray's aircraft was hit by enemy ground fire, began to burn, and crashed. McMurray's observer, badly burned, was recovered some distance from the burning wreckage, but the intense heat from the fire prevented rescuers from recovering Captain McMurray. The following day, a search team investigated the crash site but could not find the



pilot or his remains. The presence of McMurray's chest protector and flight helmet, along with one American boot print led the searchers to believe that Captain McMurray might have been captured. He was listed as missing in action.

Shortly after McMurray was declared MIA, his wife Nancy was appointed the South Carolina coordinator for the National League of Families of

the American Prisoners of War and Missing in Action in Southeast Asia. Nancy, along with McMurray's mother, met with United Nations representatives, traveled to Paris and Geneva, gave radio and television interviews, and spoke to organizations all over the country to ensure that POWs and MIAs would not be forgotten.

Captain Fred McMurray remains among the more than 1,700 Americans unaccounted for in Vietnam. In November 1974, his status was changed from missing in action to died while missing. In addition to the Silver Star and Distinguished Flying Cross, Captain McMurray was awarded the Purple Heart with Oak Leaf Cluster, Air Medal with Numeral 4, National Defense Service Medal, Vietnam Service Medal, Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross Unit Citation with Palm, and Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal. He is memorialized at Arlington National Cemetery.

