

Cobra crashes near Pace

Rickenbacker escapes danger

Rickenbacker's back in the air. Edward Rickenbacker, the World War I, American flying ace who downed 22 German planes and four balloons and was awarded 19 decorations for bravery, isn't back in the air, but Ernest Rickenbacker, the son of Eddie's third cousin, is. Perhaps even more fame has been heaped on Eddie for his amazing survival during WWII for 21 days out on the Pacific after the plane he was on had to ditch into the ocean. The younger Rickenbacker, a warrant officer with F Battery, 79th Artillery, recently was involved in an aircraft crash, too, which, although shorter of duration, was equally as hazardous as any that the older Rickenbacker had in his lifetime.

During the second week of October, as part of Task Force Garry Owen on FSB Pace, WO1 Rickenbacker was the pilot of a cobra that was to escort a UH-1H Huey and suppress fire. When he took off from the firebase, he had no idea of the danger he would be faced with that day.

His first inkling was just a few seconds ahead of the disaster. "I don't like the air speed or the altitude," he said to the huey when they were but a few minutes out of Pace.

"Roger that," answered the huey. Then it hit.

Three .51 caliber enemy anti-aircraft machine guns opened up on the cobra, conking the engine out immediately. Rickenbacker could see a clearing just ahead, the hydraulics were out causing the cobra to steer worse than a Mack Truck with the power off. He fought the cobra into a loft position and floated heavily, crashing into the trees just ahead of the clearing. He heard an explosion to the rear as the cobra began to burn. He got out quickly, shouting for his co-pilot, Capt. James McLachlan, to get out as well.

"I can't! I can't get out!" yelled his co-pilot.

Rickenbacker helped McLachlan to struggle free of the forward cockpit. Finally, as the flames began to grow ever higher, McLachlan was free. They moved as quickly as possible (the co-pilot had his leg fractured at the thigh) behind a huge ant hill, the only protection

from the burning cobra. There they waited for the explosions and ignitions of the high explosives they carried. The tubes began firing over their heads like a belated fireworks display as somewhere around nine explosions took place before the burning ship quieted down.

Something had to be done. Couldn't just sit there and wait. They weren't far from Pace, should be able to get to the firebase, then bring help for McLachlan.

"Do you have your weapon?" asked Rickenbacker.

"No! I left it in the snake," answered McLachlan.

"Here take mine. I'm going to try to make it to Pace." And with that, he left.

Before he could get to the firebase, a Medevac chopper came out to get McLachlan who told them what his partner was doing. They began searching the area between the crash and Pace.

"If I had been wearing a white T-shirt," said Rickenbacker back in the security of a firebase, "instead of an OD one, I would have been picked up right away, but they couldn't see me no matter how much I waved. I've really got to hand it to those Medevac guys. They've got a lot of nerve coming in there for us right after we were hit from three enemy positions."

Captain McLachlan is in good condition and should be going back stateside with a great story to tell his people. WO1 Rickenbacker was grounded by the doctor the first day after his crash, but by the second day he was back in the air flying missions.

Rickenbacker's fellow officers are used to his speedy recovery and action. When he first got in country, he caught on to things in F Battery 79th Artillery, so swiftly that they nicknamed him "Fast Eddie," using the first name of his famous relative.

There are numerous similarities between the two pilots. They both have the strong, square chin and rugged, jutting cheekbones. Their eyes have that same warm, determined look of a professional. And they seem to possess that electric self-confidence you find only in men of quality.

Rescue by 1/12

FSB Pace - The day was hectic enough for the men of Delta Company, 1/12th Cav. They were being flown into FSB Pace to lend their muscle and fire power to the strength of the area. While only a part of the company was on the ground, the men witnessed a crippled Cobra gunship going down in the woodline to the east of the base. Shortly after the crash that area of the jungle in which the Cobra disappeared was torn by firey explosions.

The men's response was "really spontaneous, some just charged out," according to Delta's CO.

Two columns were formed to aid the downed gunship. SP4 Mark Caldwell was pointman for one of the columns and relates that the Cobra "kept blowing up and we had to pull back when we got too close." 1LT Richard Lee, a platoon leader with Delta Company, said, "I didn't think anyone would be alive after those explosions."

The columns found their way to the scene of the crash, about 100 meters inside the woodline. As Sgt. Mark Fry modestly put it, "We just went out and set up a perimeter." When portions of the patrol could reach the craft, they did not expect to find anyone alive. But behind a mound of dirt, about 15 meters from the exploding Cobra, the men found Capt. McLachlan. His leg had been badly broken in two places, but he was miraculously alive. He informed the patrol that his pilot had gone for help, in what he thought had been the direction of the firebase, after he had pulled the captain from the wreckage.

Lt. Lee stated that the patrol had attempted to carry the wounded man out of the area but that the pain caused by his movement had been too great. Forced to call in a Medevac bird, the men strapped Capt. McLachlan to a rigid litter and he was hoisted to safety.

"The men went in without hesitation," according to Lt. Lee, "although Bravo Company had found an automatic ambush in the same area the previous day." Just another job well done by the men of Delta, 1/12th.