



Moral Imperative: 1972, Combat Rescue, and the End of America's War in Vietnam by Darrel D. Whitcomb.

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American air power played a crucial role throughout the Vietnam War. In *Moral Imperative*, Darrel Whitcomb concentrates on its use specifically in combat rescues in 1972. In that year, the United States continued troop withdrawals, helped South Vietnamese forces repel the Easter Offensive, resumed operations in Laos, and renewed direct bombing of North Vietnam. Whitcomb—a retired Air Force Reservist and author of books on military aviation—considers the rescuing of personnel to have been be moral obligation of American participants.

Chapter 1 surveys rescue efforts from early in the Vietnam War up to 1972, including those carried out in North and South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. We learn that, although all military service areas assisted with rescues, only the US Navy and Air Force had designated rescue units. From 1968 through 1971, combat rescues succeeded in 21 percent of aircraft losses.

Chapters 2–8 describe rescue activities month by month in 1972, first along the Ho Chi Minh trail, and in North Vietnam and Laos. By April, these involved rescues by US Air Force, Army, Navy, Coast Guard, Special Operations, and Air America staff; these collectively rescued ca. half of personnel whose aircraft were destroyed.

North Vietnam's Easter Offensive and South Vietnam's seeming inability to protect itself led Pres. Richard Nixon to order the bombing of Hanoi and mining of Haiphong harbor. Despite the greater frequency of rescue operations, Americans retained a high rate of recoveries through May. In discussing events of June 1972, Whitcomb covers US Air Force rescue reorganization, the bombing of North Vietnam, and a failed attempt to save escaped POWs in other areas. By late June, "it was abundantly clear that the North Vietnamese forces had failed in their grandiose plans in South Vietnam and had been halted on all fronts" (183).

Combat rescue activities reflected political and diplomatic events during the second half of 1972. In July and August, US airmen conducted rescues in support of bombing and reconnaissance operations in Vietnam. Rescue missions were undertaken in Thailand and, by September, in Laos. In the fall, the Nixon administration and North Vietnam neared a peace agreement and Nixon was reelected. From May through November, Whitcomb notes, US forces had a 37 percent success rate in rescuing men from lost aircraft. When North Vietnam delayed finalizing peace in December, Nixon ordered sustained bombing of Hanoi over the Christmas holiday. Two weeks later, the belligerents signed documents that ended America's direct involvement in Vietnam.

Chapter 10 assembles rescue statistics for all of 1972. In most cases, rescues were by helicopters. While all military service branches participated, the plurality of rescues were by Air Force personnel. Most rescues occurred in South Vietnam, followed by North Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia. The annual success rate for 1972 was 38 percent.

Many awards were bestowed on rescue personnel in 1972; airmen in three particular recoveries were awarded the Medal of Honor. For his part, Whitcomb commends the bravery of rescue personnel while criticizing the efficacy of bombing North Vietnam. A Postscript traces the subse-

quent use of the rescue aircraft employed in Vietnam in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Serbia among other places.

Whitcomb is fully conversant with the relevant scholarly literature on his subject¹ and, as promised, achieves his objective of concentrating on Vietnam War air rescues in 1972. In addition, his knowledge of various military aircraft used in rescues is most impressive. That said, his month-by-month breakdown of the year is ill-advised, leading to repetition of topics or the mixing of disparate material under given headings.

Darrel Whitcomb rightly asserts that American pilots “savagely wounded the invading NVA forces in the run-up” to the 1972 Easter Offensive (77). While the legacy of air power in Vietnam is open to debate, he has established that the courage and skill of rescue personnel saved hundreds of lives in 1972 alone.

1. E.g., George Galdorisi and Thomas Phillips, *Leave No Man Behind: The Saga of Combat Search and Rescue* (Minneapolis: Zenith, 2008); Mark Garrison, *Guts N' Gunships: What It Really Was Like to Fly Combat Helicopters in Vietnam* (Zurich: Wise Media, 2015); Chris Hobson, *Vietnam Air Losses* (Hinkley, UK: Midland, 2001); Phil Marshall, *Helicopter Rescues Vietnam*, vols. 1–5 (San Bernardino, 2016); Mason, Spalding Kenan Mason III, *Bring Me Back Alive: A Memoir of Adventure, Luck, and Terror in the Air* (2019); Marshall L. Michel III, *Operation Linebacker II 1972: The B-52s Are Sent to Hanoi* (Oxford: Osprey, 2018).