

rounds at the rapid fire rate of a round every two seconds, mixing air bursts with contact fuses. There was a pause to assess the effect, to shift fire to the other battery, and to repeat the four rounds of rapid fire. *Bordelon*, holding a faithful loose line of bearing station, with four barrels in her two twin mounts, could sustain a similar barrage rate of fire when provoked, and the coast artillery taking the helicopter under fire did provoke them. She fired 32 rounds.

Between the two, a 5-inch shell on the average every six seconds exploded above the North Vietnamese guns at the climax of the rescue effort while the helicopter was in a hover. That's why the third round, the feared coup de grace, after the first two bracketed the hovering helo, never fell.

With Woolcock clear of the water, Big Mother quickly broke away from the hover and ran out from under the shells passing over head. Powerhouse 315 streaked for home, low state. No further rounds fell around the helicopter, but a missile exploded above and just seaward of *Perth*. Big Mother broke away at 1844, and *Perth* and *Bordelon*



Big Mother 73 heroes, J.W. Jones, Roland Cockerham, Jim Rooney (top) and Vern Von Sydow.

thankfully sped clear of the area, having taken no major hits. The tin cans had unhesitatingly faced danger and laid it on the line to protect the helpless rescue helicopter.

Inspection of the dripping CDR Woolcock revealed a serious wound to his hand. Most of the flesh between thumb and fingers was missing and bleeding was severe. His hand looked like "a cooked sausage which had exploded through the liner, his skin being the liner," someone noted.

Big Mother returned to *Dewey* to face the challenge of making a night landing on a tiny flight deck which had no night

lighting or landing aids. Von Sydow, with the intensely attentive coordination of Rooney and Jones, carefully dropped among the obstacles surrounding the touchdown point which was illuminated only by their inadequate hover lights.

The crew was not even coming down from their adrenalin rush and the difficult landing, before the doctor aboard *Dewey* immediately sent them back into the night to evacuate Woolcock to USS *Ranger* where the commander underwent four hours of emergency surgery. The takeoff from *Dewey* was less dangerous than the landing because the helo was starting from the steel deck and only had to fight blinded night vision and vertigo to escape danger. Rooney was now in the right seat. The night carrier landing aboard *Ranger* was a piece of cake with all that lovely bird farm flight deck space, compared to the tin can. ■

Source notes for this article are available at Wings of Gold.