



Helicopter pilot lived for danger

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Barry Meeker had cheated death more times in his life than the hero of a dime store adventure novel.

But it wasn't the enemy fire he had dodged so many times as a combat helicopter pilot in Vietnam and later flying refugees to freedom from behind the Iron Curtain that ended his own real life adventure story.

Meeker, 40, was working for an Oklahoma City aviation firm and was on a routine flight taking two businessmen to Elk City when his helicopter crashed near Hinton last Friday, killing all aboard.

Memorial services were held Monday in Oklahoma City.

News of his death spread quickly to western Europe, where the daring pilot became an international hero in the 1970s when he made three secret rescue flights to carry East German refugees to the West.

At the time, Meeker was no stranger to extraordinary risk. During the Vietnam war, his helicopter had been shot down seven times and he had been wounded twice by shrapnel. His combat record earned him a chest full of medals.

He left the Army after a short tour in West Germany, where he remained and went to work as a pilot for a Bavarian helicopter rescue service. There, he met Heinz Heidrich, a lawyer who had fled East Germany two years earlier and was determined to be reunited with four members of his family he had left behind.

Heidrich had taken helicopter flying lessons with the intention of liberating his own family. But he decided it would take someone with Meeker's skill and expertise to pull it off.

After two months of careful preparation, the daring plan was carried out in July 1974.

Heidrich's wife and children were waiting along the Czechoslovakian border when Meeker's helicopter streaked in at treetop level and whisked them to freedom all in four minutes.

Heidrich later contacted Meeker about plans for a second rescue mission to fly his secretary and three friends out of East Germany.

The operation was carried out Aug. 15, 1975 without mishap. For this second flight and for a fateful third and final one, Meeker was accompanied by a friend, Thaddeusz Kobrzynski, a German physics student.

Staged two days after the second rescue, the mission began as smoothly as the preceding ones. But on the ground inside Czechoslovakia, border guards were waiting this time.

A family of three and a student came scrambling up a hill toward the helicopter when shots rang out.

Kobrzynski ran to carry a 14-year-old girl to the helicopter after she was wounded in the leg. Her mother had collapsed from exhaustion, and when Kobrzynski returned to her aid, a bullet came crashing through the helicopter cabin and hit Meeker, shattering his elbow.

As the gunfire became more intense, Meeker was forced to take off, leaving behind his friend and the wounded girl's mother.

The chopper, its engine pierced by gunfire, made it back across the border safely with only 90 seconds worth of fuel to spare.

The narrow escape made international headlines. But to Austrian authorities, Meeker's exploits were less cause for celebration.

"The Germans don't want to do anything to me," he explained at the time. "It's a little embarrassing to them, but inside they're tickled pink. They just can't make it look that way."

Meeker was fined \$770 in West Germany for landing twice without permission and flying without a license, but a higher court overturned the conviction.

In Czechoslovakia, a Communist court sentenced him in absentia to 10 years in prison. The girl and Meeker's friend who he left behind ended up in prison. After a long struggle, Meeker succeeded in gaining their release last year through Amnesty International.

A Columbia University graduate with a degree in English literature and a Fulbright Scholar, Meeker had once planned a more tranquil career in teaching.

But Meeker said it was the war experience that changed him. "I ceased to be interested in eternity and became more involved with what I was going to do in the next five minutes," he once said. BIOG: NAME:

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