

Valor in the Forgotten War

By Hill Goodspeed

In his classic novel of the Korean War, *The Bridges at Toko-Ri*, author James Michener introduces the reader to helicopter pilot Mike Forney. This colorful character marches to the beat of his own drummer, wearing a green stovepipe hat and a WW I scarf when flying. Yet, he is a skilled and intrepid aviator, and the novel ends with Forney's death at the hands of North Korean troops after his helicopter crash-lands during a heroic rescue attempt.

John Kelvin Koelsch was the antithesis of Mike Forney in virtually every way. Whereas Forney, an enlisted pilot, received his education in the fleet, Koelsch was a product of Princeton. In contrast to the salty manner of Forney, Koelsch was remembered by one fellow officer as "a very quiet, reserved person." John Koelsch differed from Mike Forney in another way as well. His heroism was not the product of fiction, coming to life only on the pages of a novel and in a subsequent movie, but a very real drama set against the backdrop of the Korean War.

Born on 22 December 1923 in London, England, Koelsch attended boarding schools and then Princeton University for two years before joining the Navy on 14 September 1942. Designated a Naval Aviator on 24 October 1944, the new ensign received assignment to torpedo-bombers, and was flying TBM *Avengers* with Torpedo Squadron (VT) 97 when WW II ended. Electing to remain in the Navy, he eventually joined VT-18, which in November 1946 was redesignated Attack Squadron 8A. While in the squadron, Koelsch operated from *Leyte* (CV 32) during the carrier's first two cruises,

achieving the coveted title of "Leyte Centurion" with over 100 traps on her flight deck.

By the time he returned to carrier duty in 1950 following a period of shore duty at Princeton and NAS Quonset Point, R.I., Koelsch had traded in his tailhook for rotor blades. Introduced to Naval Aviation by the Coast Guard during WW II, the helicopter attracted more attention from the Navy after the cessation of hostilities, prompting the establishment of Aircraft Development Squadron 3 on 1 July 1946 for the training of helicopter pilots. At the time of Koelsch's designation on 9 December 1949, the Navy's aircraft inventory included over 50 helicopters. Having established their benefit as plane guards to quickly rescue pilots from the water in the event of a carrier mishap, it became standard practice to assign a helicopter to each carrier. To this end, in October 1950 Lieutenant (jg) Koelsch received orders to *Princeton* (CV 37) as officer in charge of her helicopter detachment. Recently recommissioned from the mothball fleet because of the war in Korea, the aircraft carrier arrived on station with Task Force 77 in December and began launching strikes over Korea.

Aboard *Princeton* Koelsch quickly made a name for himself in the air, rescuing at least two of his shipmates. In addition, in an effort to improve the capabilities of the HO3S helicopter, he developed a floating



rescue sling and personally designed devices to aid operations in the harsh winter conditions off the Korean peninsula. Although *Princeton's* cruise ended in May 1951 the young helicopter pilot felt his skills were still needed in the combat zone, so he sought and received another assignment flying helicopters, first off LST 799 and then LST Q-009. An officer aboard the former vessel recalled that Koelsch "was always ready for any rescue mission, no matter how dangerous, and he let this be known. If anything happened, he wanted to be a part of it." So it was no surprise that in the late afternoon of 3 July 1951, when word was received that a Marine fighter pilot was down west of Kosong, North Korea, Koelsch volunteered to go after him.

Gathering darkness and thick overcast precluded fighter escort for the slow, vulnerable helicopter, so Koelsch and his crewman, AM3c George M. Neal, proceeded alone. Having bailed out of his F4U *Corsair* after being hit by ground fire, Captain James V. Wilkins had landed in a valley and begun to make his way up the slope of a mountain when he heard the "whop-whop-whop" of a helicopter. Reversing

John Koelsch, opposite page, was shot down while flying an HO3S helicopter, below, into hostile territory in North Korea to rescue a downed pilot. Bottom, Koelsch's mother accepts the Medal of Honor from the Secretary of the Navy in the name of her son, who died in captivity in Korea.



course, he descended into the valley just as Koelsch's HO3S passed over the area at 50 feet altitude amid intense ground fire. Wilkins thought that the helicopter pilot would immediately leave the area after observing the North Korean defenses, but such was not the way of John Koelsch, who returned to the valley despite having his aircraft rocked by a near miss. To the Marine aviator on the ground "it was the greatest display of guts I've ever seen."

Positioning his helicopter over Wilkins, Koelsch instructed Neal to lower the rescue sling. The downed pilot got into it and was raised about three feet off the ground when a North Korean shell struck home, sending the HO3S down in flames. Though Koelsch and Neal were uninjured in the crash, Wilkins suffered severe burns on both legs and a twisted knee. Gathering themselves,

the trio headed up the adjacent mountain, where they remained until they observed a North Korean patrol searching for them. Moving mostly at night for the next seven days, they managed to leave the area and make their way to the coast, eventually reaching the outskirts

of a small fishing village.

Weak from having not eaten during their nine days on the run, the trio took up residence in an abandoned house in order to get some rest. Unfortunately, a North Korean patrol discovered them after only three hours. Tied up and marched through the fishing village, the captured Americans were subjected to verbal and physical abuse from the townspeople. Throughout this time Koelsch repeatedly pointed to Wilkins' legs, which by this time were infested with maggots, and his efforts paid dividends; after reaching a headquarters building the injured Marine was separated from the others to receive some attention. It was the last he saw of his would-be rescuers.

The signing of the armistice declaring a cease-fire in Korea in 1953 brought the repatriation of prisoners of war, among them George

Neal and James Wilkins. Tragically, John Koelsch was not counted among them. Suffering from malnutrition and severe dysentery, he died in captivity in October 1951. Returning POWs attested to his fortitude in prison, where he resisted his captors and provided aid to his fellow prisoners despite his weakened state.

On 1 August 1955, Secretary of the Navy Charles S. Thomas presented the Medal of Honor to Koelsch's mother in a ceremony at the Pentagon. He was the first helicopter pilot to ever receive his nation's highest honor. Additionally, in 1965 the Navy honored the fallen hero by naming a destroyer escort after him (the ship was later reclassified as a frigate).

Upon arriving in the combat zone in December 1950, Ltjg. John Koelsch composed his last will and testament. In it he expressed his belief that "a man who has failed to merit the attention of posterity in life cannot obtain [it] by means of [a] monument and plaque after death." By his actions in North Korea nearly a half century ago, John Koelsch certainly attained the attention of all those who study U.S. Navy history, and his lasting monument is the Medal of Honor. ✈

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