

Lassen Building

Bldg. S-457

(When the Lassen Building was dedicated) crew members, spouses and friends of Helicopter Combat Support Squadron 7 (HC-7) gathered in Millington for a reunion and to honor one of their own: Commander Clyde Lassen.

Among the activities lined up for the group were golf, a Memphis Redbirds game, and tourist attractions such as Graceland, the Memphis Belle, and the Memphis Queen riverboat cruise. However, the highlight of the four-day gathering was a framed photo presentation, where more than 150 gathered at Navy Personnel Lassen Building (S-457) that is named for Lassen.

HC-7 existed for seven years and 10 months during the Vietnam War with the mission of combat search and rescue.



(Then) Lieutenants junior grade Lassen and Clarence Cook were manning HC-7 Detachment 104 on the USS Preble (DLG-15) on the night of June 19, 1968, when shortly after midnight they were sent to rescue the F4 Phantom crew of Lt. Cmdrs. John Holtzclaw and his radar operator John "Zeke" Burns, who had been shot down near the village of Vinh.

Lassen and his three-man crew flew 60 miles to the crash site over unknown and hostile territory to a steep, tree-covered hill when they spotted the burning wreckage where the survivors were located. Despite enemy gunfire, Lassen landed in a clearing near the base of the hill. However, due to the dense undergrowth, Holtzclaw and Burns could not reach the helicopter.

With the aid of flare illumination, Lassen made a partial-instrument, partial-contact approach over the survivors, who were between two trees. As a crewman was lowering the rescue sling, the overhead illuminating flares went out.

Just a short way from the survivors—and dangerously close to the trees—Lassen added power and was just starting to climb when the helicopter hit a tree, commencing a sharp descent. Lassen's skill and expertise are credited in saving the helicopter from crashing.

Under 58 minutes of intense fire and several additional landing attempts, Lassen's crew fired back and was able to keep the enemy down until the survivors could be taken on board. It took five passes, three landings and two attempts to rescue the two men, but they succeeded.

Once they left the area, they encountered and successfully evaded additional hostile anti-aircraft fire. With only five minutes of fuel remaining, they landed safely on board the USS Jouette (DLG-29).

Cook was awarded the Cross for his part in the rescue. Aviation Electrician's Mate Third Class Bruce Dallas and Aviation Machinist's Mate J (Jet Engine Mechanic) Third Class Donald West each received the Silver Star. Lassen received the Medal of Honor, marking the second award to a Naval Aviator for combat rescues in Vietnam.

Holtzclaw and Burns both continued serving in the Navy, retiring as captains.

Lassen retired from the Navy as a commander. He died of cancer (in 1994).

In addition to having a building at Naval Support Activity Mid-South named after him, Lassen also has an Arleigh Burke-class destroyer, USS Lassen (DDG-82), named in his honor.

More than 3,500 people attended the ceremony when the LASSEN was commissioned on April 21, 2001. At that ceremony, Lassen and his crew were honored for risking their lives to rescue Holtzclaw and Burns.

This story, by Pam Branch, was originally published in the Bluejacket Newspaper on May 13, 2004.

When Navy Personnel Command was established in Millington, PERS-6 was the first to move in and stand up operations. PERS-6 transitioned to N17 falling under the Bureau of Naval Personnel. Navy Corrections (PERS-00D) is the only NPC entity still working out of the Lassen Building.