



CSAF's Portraits in Courage



General T. Michael Moseley

Special Agent Jim Collins

On December 3, 2006, at Haditha Dam, Iraq, Special Agent Collins witnessed a Marine CH-46 Sea Knight crash into the lake during lift-off from the helipad on top of the dam. The CH-46's front end cleared the 4-foot wall in front of the helipad, but as the helicopter moved forward it lost power, its rear landing gear striking the wall of the dam. The helicopter pitched forward and nosed over the wall, headed for the cold water of Lake Quadisiya 40 feet below.

Passengers and crew were jumping into the rough water of the lake, weighed down with body armor, weapons and combat gear. Realizing all that extra gear easily added 50 to 75 pounds to each person now struggling to stay afloat in the water, Agent Collins raced down to a section of the wall he could jump over and reach his endangered comrades in arms fighting for their lives in the fifty degree lake.

He swam out about 40 to 50 meters where he found two people struggling. The first two survivors Agent Collins encountered were Marines who had bailed out of the downed helicopter. He pulled these two Marines with him back toward shore where other troops who witnessed the crash had formed human chains to pull the survivors of the crash out of the lake, get them warm and dry, and render medical aid.

Pulling these two Marines to safety was no easy task as two factors were working against him. The two fought his every swim stroke toward shore due to their panicked states of mind. Second, the combined weight of the two water-logged Marines and their combat gear was pulling all of them deeper into the water.

Eventually, Special Agent Collins made it to the shore and handed off the two Marines to the rescuers on dry land. Without hesitation, Agent Collins turned and went back into the lake, knowing what inhospitable conditions faced his return.

Swimming out again toward the CH-46 crash site he found another survivor; Agent Collins reached this survivor and pulled him to safety for his third rescue of the day.

The last time Special Agent Collins went out, he helped pull in one of the helicopter's crewmembers.

During his multiple swims, Special Agent Collins was pushed under by the members he was rescuing more than once. He was in the water for about 25 to 30 minutes and, after having been in the water that long, could feel the frigid water taking a toll on his body and muscle control.

Extremely cold and exhausted, he ignored his own pain and discomfort and rejoined the rescuers on shore to continue pulling even more troops out of the lake.