Don’t ask permission, ask forgiveness: The USMC pilot who “borrowed” a helo to end a sniper situation has died.

Lt. General Charles "Chuck" Pitman passed away this past Thursday at age 84. His career spanned over 40 years, including three combat tours in Vietnam. He also was involved in Operation Eagle Claw, the attempted rescue of the American hostages in Tehran in 1980. He commanded an Air Wing and was the Deputy Chief of Staff for Marine Corps Aviation. He earned the Silver Star, four Distinguished Flying Crosses, a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart. But for all his achievements in uniform, Pitman is better known for ignoring military protocol and breaking a bunch of regulations so he could save lives.

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 That was the thought process of then, Lieutenant Colonel Pitman. On Jan. 7, 1973, Pitman was the commander of the Marine Air Reserve Training in Louisiana. Pitman had turned on the television to see a horrible scene unfolding. A gunman had taken position on top of a hotel and was shooting and killing police officers. The sniper had a full view of all on comers, and any attempt to enter the hotel was met with murderous gunfire.

Pitman didn't even think twice about asking permission to help. He grabbed another pilot and two crew members and jumped in a CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter and headed toward New Orleans.

 The incident Pitman was flying into actually started several days earlier on New Year's Eve. Mark Essex was a Navy vet who had been kicked out due to behavior issues. He had ended up in New Orleans, where he fell in with radical groups. One of those groups was the Black Panthers. Essex had grown angrier over time with what he perceived to be injustices he faced in the Navy and now as a civilian. After learning of a civil rights protest in which two students from Southern University were killed by police, Essex lost it.

He went to New Orleans police headquarters, where he shot and killed an African American cadet; shooting him from behind. He then fled and tried to break into a warehouse. When police arrived, unaware that he was linked to the shooting at HQ, Essex ambushed them, mortally wounding one. By the time backup arrived, he had vanished into the night.

On Jan. 7, Essex reappeared, and entered a Howard Johnson hotel in downtown New Orleans. As he made his way to the roof, he murdered a newlywed couple and the hotel's manager and assistant manager. He then set fires in several rooms and made his way to the roof.

Essex had set an ambush. The shooting and fires would draw first responders to the scene. Then he would carry out his horrible plan to kill more cops.

 As the police and firefighters arrived, they attempted to enter the hotel. Essex killed three police officers and wounded several more. He was able to pin down anyone that attempted to move toward the hotel and was completely concealed from return fire by concrete barriers on the roof.

By this time, the TV cameras had shown up. Broadcasting over the airwaves, they told viewers of the horrible situation unfolding in downtown New Orleans.

One of the viewers was Lt. Colonel Pitman.

Pitman flew the CH-46 toward the hotel without any idea what he was actually going to do. He just knew he had to do something. When he arrived on site, Pitman located an empty parking lot next to the hotel. He landed, headed to the command center, and quickly became apprised of the situation. The cops on the scene sought his advice, and his years of service in Vietnam kicked in. Essex had the high ground, so Pittman would go higher.

He put several New Orleans police officers on the helicopter and took off. He started flying passes over the roof of the hotel, slowing down and turning so that the police could get a good shot. They could not. Essex would take shots at the aircraft from afar but would take cover the minute they closed in. Pitman noticed this and kept making passes to lure Essex into thinking this was his routine. Finally, after one pass, he turned immediately around and caught Essex in the open. The police in the helicopter unloaded on the sniper.

When all was said and done, Essex was found with over 200 rounds in his body.

Pitman was lauded as a hero by the police and citizens of New Orleans and just about everybody...except the United States Marine Corps.

It turns out that Pitman (kind of… sort of) violated a few rules and regulations when he took the helicopter. He wasn't allowed to use military personnel or aircraft for anything other than a rescue mission (like evacuating flood victims).

You would think that the Marine Corps would look at the badassery that Pitman just pulled off and call it a public relations coup. But, they didn't (of course) and started the process of a court-martial.

 It was only due to the intervention of Democratic Congressman and House Armed Services Committee Chairman Edward Herbert that the issue was dropped.

Pitman would continue his amazing career, retiring in 1990 as a Lt. General.

Lt. General Pitman, rest easy, and Semper Fidelis.