

The Other Vietnam War

A Helicopter Pilot's Life in Vietnam

FREE PREVIEW

By

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INTRODUCTION

In 1971, I was among the many who, for the promise of glory or the threat of fear, followed the call to arms. We were swallowed by the evil and goodness, the wretched ugliness and amazing beauty, the despicable sins and glorious honor of war. A war that wasn't urgent, a war against no real threat to America, a war undeclared by our government. A war with only three possible redeeming qualities: it was a war that would make pacifists drunk with arrogance, humiliate the hawks, and place a shroud of humility around the United States of America.

It was many things to many people, but to the soldier, it was a chance to come to terms with his own doubts, beliefs, and frailties as a human being. While in Viet Nam, he grew up, became broken, or died.

The male college student in the late sixties was screwed. If he had a clean nose, he could avoid the draft with a college deferment. But even a minor academic mishap could erase that and he would be on his way to see the world, courtesy of Uncle Sam. That's what they said in the commercials: "Join the army, see the world." Hell, I hadn't even been anywhere but Kansas and Oklahoma. I had 49 other states to see in North America. I didn't give a rat's ass about the rest of the world. Not then, anyway. But as a student, I suspected Vietnam was inevitable.

Unless a guy had a shitload of luck, if he weren't in college, he was probably already on a plane headed for Vietnam. Another option was a medical deferment. If you were gung-ho, you had no interest in that. If you weren't gung-ho and had the money and knew the right doctor or congressman, you could buy one. Then there was always Canada.

Those of us who had enough drive to seek an education and the integrity to do what we thought was right ignored the ranting of our fellow students and peers who opposed the Vietnam War and pursued commissions as officers in the armed services. That was ROTC, the Reserve Officers Training Corps. All eligible freshmen and sophomores were required to undergo four semesters, or twelve credit hours, of ROTC training. Since it was a bona fide course, ROTC counted toward a student's grade point average. For those who loathed military training, this was a thorn in the saddle of education, at least to the students who were in college to actually get an education. To those who weren't, it was even more so, because they could easily jeopardize their draft deferment with low grades in ROTC. To the few who were gung-ho, it was a cushion for their grades.

The draft was not a fair business, but without it, our nation's defense might have suffered. A strong military seems to deter aggression by other countries. So, I can't be too hard on the draft. It was a necessary bit of awkwardness that we had to go through. I don't begrudge our country taking young men to fight for it. I was glad to do it. That's not quite all there was to this scenario, though. It's what we were sent to fight for that's the problem.

Since advanced ROTC was optional, after the sophomore year, most of the fellows dropped out of it. Enrollment in advanced ROTC meant you belonged to the military machine. You were one of them. You studied two more years, got your degree, and along with it a commission as a second lieutenant. Then you served your time, usually two or three years on active duty before being released. Well, you were still subject to being called up for active duty again, but that didn't happen very often.

Those of us who didn't drop out knew what was coming down the pike and figured that instead of allowing the military to tell us that we were going to be grunts sloshing and slashing our way through the rice paddies and jungles of Vietnam, we would select our own means of risking our lives and satisfying

our military obligation. Well, there was a slight chance that you might escape the draft lottery. All the dates of birth of all eligible men were put into a pool and the dates were drawn, supposedly, at random. If your birth date was the first drawn, you would be the first to be called up for service. The first 120 dates were almost assured of being drafted unless that person had a deferment. Because I already had an education deferment, I had no idea what my number was and I really didn't care. I'm sure I saw it on the notice I received from the Selective Service Board, but I paid no attention to it. At that time, it didn't matter. But if I graduated, I would lose my deferment and if my crappy luck held, it would be the only time in my life that I would be close to number one. I made sure that didn't happen.

I've always wondered, though, what my number would have been. And what kind of person I would be now if I were number one and didn't finish college? But all of that aside, I am who I am now because of what happened during that time in my life.

As I look back, the Army wasn't so bad. It could have been a lot worse. As you will discover after reading this book, I was not a career officer, and I damned sure wasn't out to be a hero or win any medals, even though the Army gave me some. I'm not the bravest sort, and I don't have a death wish. Never did. Sometimes a guy gets put in a situation that makes him do things he wouldn't ordinarily do. That's what Vietnam did to me

I didn't know it at the time I signed up for flight training, but statistics now show that a helicopter pilot in battle in Vietnam was twice as likely to be injured or killed as a soldier fighting on the ground. The statistics also show that one out of eighteen helicopter pilots in Vietnam never made it back. Somehow, I survived. I figure I was damned lucky.

We were essentially brainwashed by the military and the government to believe the Vietnam War was a worthwhile endeavor. Oh, there was the threat of Communism, all right. But I can only blame myself for caving in to the shallow arguments we heard in the ROTC classroom about how the South Vietnamese people were oppressed by the communist aggression from the north and how the government of South Vietnam pleaded for our assistance to drive the communists back. I'm sure they were and it did. But the government was corrupt to begin with and the people of South Vietnam suffered from their own government's leadership. I'm willing to wager that if given the choice, most of the South Vietnamese would have gladly accepted the Communist regime only to be rid of the burden of the corrupt South Vietnamese government.

We were hedged by visions of duty, honor, and country. Those that resisted did not necessarily do so because they were smarter. I imagine some of them just didn't want to get their shit blown away. Well, I guess in some respects, that was damned smart. I can't blame them for that. I never have. Others just thought it was wrong, but they chose to run away instead of facing the problem like men. At least I don't have to live with that embarrassment. I don't hold anything against those folks, either. They did what they thought they had to do, and that is what I have always tried to do.

My ambitions? Different now. Regrets? Sure, I have a lot of them. Would I do it again? I would do my homework first, but knowing what I know now, no way in hell would I do that again. Not for the reasons we were given. I don't regret having served in Vietnam. It showed me what I was, and made me what I am. I proved to myself that I was as good as anyone else. And it also taught me humility and opened the door for the courage I never knew I had. I'm glad I went, but I wouldn't go again.

If you're expecting to read about white-knuckle exploits and heroics, or aggressive air battles, or blood and guts, you will probably be disappointed. That's not what this book is about. If you are easily offended by profanity and vulgarity, then this book is damned sure not for you. It's about an American serviceman's life in Vietnam. Many soldiers were profane and vulgar, but so was the Vietnam War.

So many books written by helicopter pilots in Vietnam elaborate on such themes. I'm not at odds with these books. I consider many of them to be well written accurate historical accounts of the war we fought, and I salute the brave souls who endured the hell of that country and lived to tell their stories. I also salute those who did not survive the experience.

This book tells the story about the other war in Vietnam. The personal war I, along with each of the other soldiers, fought with myself trying to adjust to the caustic environment, trying to fit in with the other guys who were waging their own personal battles, and trying to figure out how to survive so I could return home in one piece. The day-to-day trials, the challenges, the predicaments, and the choices I made were the results of struggles with my conscience, my ego, and the oath I took as a commissioned officer in the United States Army. After forty years of wondering about it all, I finally was able to make sense of most of it. Some of it I still don't understand and probably never will. I'm fortunate to be able to tell this story. I'm lucky. I didn't realize this until just a few years ago. That's when I began remembering all the shit that happened. The gullibility, the courage, the stupidity, and the luck. They were all there, for all of us. How we negotiated them determined whether or not we made it home.

A lot of books have been written about Vietnam, many by soldiers, especially helicopter pilots. Most of them are good. They tell it like it was. But many of them dwell on the violence, killing, and battles. There was much more to that war. There was the self-doubt of the soldier that played hell with his courage. There was the drudgery and tedium of waiting, with plenty of time to think about if he would get it. When would it be? Where would it happen? Could he face the danger and act like a soldier? And then there was the ever-present question: what was he actually doing there? And why?

As a commissioned officer, I did more than just fly helicopters. The warrant officers flew. That was pretty much it. They didn't see much of the behind the scenes nonsense and politics of command. They were given missions and they accomplished them. Commissioned officers were different. We had the burden of suffering through all of the shit that was necessary to make the unit work. The administrative functions, the supervisory details, all of the crap that those above thought necessary for our presence in that war. No one ever tells that story. The one about conscience, morality, mortality, and faith, if there really is such a thing in war.

So, this is my story. Of course, the names of the people are different. If you hadn't served in Vietnam during the war, you probably might not believe much of the account, but that I leave to you to deal with. What is certain is that you can have no idea of the day-to-day dangers, tedium and dilemmas we faced. I WAS there, and I still have to think about the reasons for the things I did or did not do.

It's like believing your coach when he tells you that you're going to go out and win the big game. Well, maybe you will, and maybe you won't. Hell, he doesn't know one way or the other. I don't think most of our presidents knew one way or the other about the game in Vietnam. Each of them had to make decisions and that's what he did. It's just too bad that they screwed up. Life isn't always fair. You take what you can get and endure the rest. You can't control most of what happens to you. All you can do is adapt and learn from it and strengthen yourself to meet new challenges. Just like Vietnam. Once you are army property, you do what you're told to do. You might not agree with it, but that's your job and you do it. I didn't think about what I did when I did it. I just did it. Now I do think about it. I don't like a lot of it, but I did it, just the same. If I really did do something bad, I'll have to live with it. I just don't know what that is yet.

This story is not the whole truth because truth can't be told in a story. Only the experience can. I have to convey my experiences in Vietnam the way I lived them. That's why I'm telling the story in my own way.

JANUARY 1971
A NEW LIFE BEGINS

LEAVING HOME

Bitter cold swept in from the Kansas plains, blasting every house in Derby. It was like I walked outside naked. My lightweight khakis and flight jacket made me look good but were otherwise practically worthless. I got into the car, one of those behemoth Oldsmobile 98s that would suck gas from any fuel pump within fifty feet, and settled back into the posh seat, probably the last one I would sit in for the next year. My mother, her tiny four-foot-eight frame practically hidden behind the dashboard from other traffic, backed the car out of the driveway. The icy chill from the windows grabbed me by the balls, and I knew my life going to change. I just didn't know how.

My mother's silence on the way to the airport was as threatening as I imagined a bullet screaming toward my head would be. My father, a stoical relic of my youth, was at work. After all, his job as a tool and die maker fabricating parts to support good old capitalism was far more important than seeing his son off to Vietnam. So what if we might never see each other again? Good for him, I thought. I didn't need his indifference there in the car with us. The silence was trying enough. I just thank God, if he exists, that my brother wasn't there. I couldn't possibly imagine what kind of humiliation he would have put me through. The thought that I might never have to see him again left me with mixed feelings.

I had received orders in November, having successfully completed advanced rotary-wing aviator training. That was the most challenging thing I had done in my life. Learning to fly a helicopter, that is. And being good at it. Well, I thought I was pretty good. The certificate I received said I was in the top five percent of my class, 70-40. The white hats. My head was pretty big then, too, but my hat still fit.

I didn't listen to newscasts about the Vietnam War much. I didn't listen to news about anything. I was in a world of my own, isolated in my own thoughts. I really didn't think about Vietnam too seriously, but it was always in the back of my mind, waiting for me to realize I would have to face it soon enough. Hell, the army training shoved it down my throat twenty-four hours a day, and I sat through those talks with my head up my ass, thinking about something else. My folks and I never talked much about it, but I could tell it was eating at them. There was this distance between us, as if I were a stranger. We weren't the huggie, lovey family that some were. We were somewhat stoical about the whole thing. I was just trying not to think about it.

I never kept in contact with the fellows in my flight class. We all went our separate ways and I never heard from any of them again. I suppose if I had, it would have put a severe obstacle in my path to survival in Vietnam. I would always be thinking about how so-and-so got it and I would worry about how I would get it. I was not married at the time, either, so I didn't have the problem of leaving behind a wife and kid. I never worried about much of anything except making a fool of myself.

During that short drive my mind kept drifting to the thought that I might never see my family again, but only as short impulses that flitted through my head. It wasn't like I actually believed that I would never come back. My twenty-four-year-old brain didn't understand that notion. Not that I knew what was in store for me. The ROTC cadre, the officer's basic staff, and the flight instructors had been vague about that. We can only put things into the perspective of events we have already experienced, not those that are foreign to us. What I was about to do would be as foreign to me as my first day at school.

It was January 12, 1971. I was supposed to be in-country by January 14. Allowing for the International Dateline and the twelve-hour lead in South Vietnam, my tickets were for the twelfth. I was surprised that Uncle Sam paid for my flight to California.

The folks in the terminal stared at us, or maybe just my uniform. There were a few smiles and pointing fingers, but mostly blank stares. I couldn't tell if it was because they were impressed by my stature as a soldier who was sworn to defend the country against all aggressors, or if it was because I was a symbol of the controversial and unpopular war raging in Southeast Asia. It could have been either. It wasn't like I was coming home. But that wouldn't have made much difference. I was targeted by a lot of scowls, as well. Those I just ignored. That's all I could do.

My mother walked with me to the gate at the airport while everyone stared at us. No kiss, no hug. Just a few words of parting, not that I remember what they were. I waved as I went through the door and didn't look back. I have no idea how long she might have stayed there, but I'm sure she watched me cross the concrete ramp and board my flight to San Francisco. I knew what she was thinking, and she might have known what I was thinking, but I doubt it. I was gone. Out of there. My own man. Free. And heading toward glory. Or death. Then I remembered how fortunate I was not to have to say goodbye to a wife. And I felt so alone.

The flight was short enough that I didn't spend a lot of time thinking about where I was going. The smoke from my cigarette filled my lungs and erased what I was trying not to think about. I just wanted to get my ass to the plane at Travis Air Force Base on time. I damned sure didn't want to start out my army career on the wrong foot, even if it did mean I might get killed. Well, hell, that was going to be my job anyway. Maybe getting myself killed, I mean. The flight attendants seemed to take special care with me. I'm not sure why, but I hoped it was out of respect for my uniform. It made the flight more pleasant when I thought of it that way. The plane landed before I could become too distracted from it.

I took a bus from the airport at San Francisco to Travis Air Force Base. The bus stopped some distance away from the gate at the airfield, so I lugged my two-ton duffle bag and gear along the sidewalk toward the gate. I had no idea what I was doing and a young black man watching me apparently knew it, too. He offered to carry my bag for me to the gate, and I remember thinking how thoughtful of him. I was about to change my opinion of the folks in California because my arm and shoulder were getting sore from the dead weight of the bag. But just as we neared the gate, the fellow slammed my bag to the sidewalk and said, "That'll be five dollars."

I had just been had. It wasn't the first time. I was just too stupid to wonder why the fellow was lurking around an airport terminal with no apparent means of transportation and no one else around. I paid him the five dollars. It was worth it to save the wear and tear on my shoulder. I lugged my bags around the corner and inside the door.

I was processed through customs with over a hundred other souls who were as clueless as I was. We were herded onto a Boeing 707 and off we went to Anchorage, Alaska, bound for Vietnam.

We made a quick fueling stop at Anchorage, and most of us disembarked to the terminal to smoke. We all looked out the windows through the darkness at the lights shining on the snow and ice. I had never seen so much snow in my life. It was deeper than most cars. It could just as well have been the Arctic. I wouldn't have known the difference. Then, back onto the plane.

I pretty much remember what I was thinking when I looked out that little window by my shoulder and saw the lights of the United States of America retreating into the distance. I know I had this sort of excitement about seeing a new country, but at the same time I was dreading actually getting there. You know how it is when you're excited about leaving on a trip to a new destination, but you're not sure what's going to happen when you get there. Well, I damned sure didn't know what would happen. After hearing all of my military instructors harp on the dangers we would face, I thought to myself, would I be killed? Would I perform some superhuman feat of bravery? Or would I piss my pants and be a coward? I

had never been in combat and I'm sure none of the other saps on that plane had, either. I imagine the army did its best to prepare me for the possibility of killing and being killed. I had never done any of that. It's not like something you can practice. So I wondered if I'd be a hero or dead. I had about twenty hours of flying over the Pacific to think about it.

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