

What veterans are saying about *Mended Wings*...

When courage, guts and loyalty merge, you'll find Army helicopter pilots fighting in Vietnam, committed to each other beyond measure. This is their story. Buckle up.

-- Admiral Thomas B. Hayward, Chief of Naval Operations 1978-1982, USN Ret

Colin Cahoon has that rare gift that only a few authors possess. He didn't just tell the stories of these young American heroes--he became their shadow warrior. He felt the horrific body slam as round after round pounded their ceramic body armor. He felt himself losing control as their Huey was being ripped to shreds on short final into a hot landing zone (LZ) and . . . he felt their pain; their terrifying fear and the million thoughts running through their heads as the doctors and nurses worked frantically to save their lives. Well Done!

-- Ronald L. Walters, Sr., U.S. Army aviator, First Cav Division, Vietnam, Commander, USCG Ret

I developed the greatest respect for helicopter pilots in Vietnam. Helicopters seemed flimsy flying machines to me. Anything from automatic weapons to small arms fire could bring one down. The results were usually disastrous. I served as a medical officer with the Special Forces in Vietnam and my use of helicopters was ubiquitous. I *never* had a single request for a medevac or other mission, night or day, turned down during my entire 365. Every time a helicopter flew a mission, one chopper and four crew members risked their lives. They were men of bravery, and these ten stories will show you exactly why.

-- Russell L. Hunter, Captain, Medical Corps, Special Forces, Det. C-2, Vietnam

Mended Wings is a great snapshot in the timeline of the Helicopter War in Vietnam. It is a humanization of the sky soldiers who piloted and crewed these amazing aircraft. As for me, I was transported back to Vietnam, great read.

-- Eldridge Johnson, U.S. Army Aviator, C Troop, 2/17 Air Cavalry, Vietnam, Lt Col USAF Ret

The majority of my Infantry Officer classmates who died in Vietnam were killed in helicopter shootdowns as were many of our wounded. Helicopter pilots vied with infantry platoon leaders for having the most dangerous assignments in the war. *Mended Wings* has the full flavor of that long ago war, from the dangers to the messiness that is part of war.

-- Ronald E. Neumann, Ambassador (ret), Lieutenant, Vietnam

Mended Wings is a great read. The view of war from a diverse group of pilots and crew members and how they ended up in Vietnam is moving to say the least. As a combat Veteran pilot from Desert Storm, I found this book to present a much-needed human element to a war story.

-- Craig C. Ebejay, Lt Col USAF Ret

As both an RCAF jet pilot and Loach pilot with thousands of hours of tactical experience, I found *Mended Wings* well written and very readable. Colin Cahoon masterfully portrays the Vietnam helicopter war while honoring the pilots who fought it. Well done.

-- Peter Campbell, RCAF Ret

“Roger. Death rides a Dark Horse. Out”: the last radio message I received from the gunship team as it left after pulling my and my Vietnamese soldiers’ “fat out of the fire” in a night ambush in the Vietnam Delta in 1971. Colin Cahoon brings empathy as well as technical knowledge to recounting the human (and war) stories of the men of the “Dark Horse” 16th Cavalry and other Army aviators who flew into the maelstrom to aid Americans and Vietnamese comrades. “Mended Wings” is a well-researched and long overdue account of their valor and their post-Army accomplishments. Recommended reading.

-- Charles E. Tompkins, Col USA ret

Mended Wings

Mended Wings

The Vietnam War Experience Through the Eyes of Ten
American Purple Heart Helicopter Pilots

Colin P. Cahoon



VALOR PUBLISHERS
Centennial, Colorado

Copyright © 2021 Colin P. Cahoon, all rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, write to the publisher, addressed “Attention: Permissions Coordinator,” at the address below.

Valor Publishers, an imprint of WordServe Press, A division of WordServe Literary, 7500 E. Arapahoe Rd. Suite 285, Centennial, CO 80112
admin@wordserve-literary.com, 303.471.6675

All permissions inquiries should be addressed to the address above.

Cover Design: Darko Bovan
Interior Book Design: Greg Johnson
Front Cover Image: Getty Images, Used by Permission

Ordering Information: Quantity sales: Special discounts are available on quantity purchases by corporations, associations, and others. For details, contact “Admin” at the email address or phone number above.

All photos in this book are courtesy of the pilot or their families.

Colin P. Cahoon, December 4, 1961

First Edition: June 2021

ISBN: 978-1-7331707-2-7

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you, Barbara, Bonnie, Chris, Joan, and Susan, for your support and guidance.

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE—Page 9

CHAPTER 1 - THE LUCKIEST DAMNED SOLDIER--Page 13:
WO Pruet Helm, D Troop 1/10 Cav, November 11, 1966, Central Highlands near Cambodia

CHAPTER 2 - PREORDAINED—Page 40
1st LT Mike Bongart, 195th AHC, October 4, 1968, Plain of Reeds near Dong Tam

CHAPTER 3 - THE SERGEANT MAJOR'S SON—Page 67
WO Chris Kilgore, Aviation Section 199th Infantry Brigade, January 28, 1969, east of Parrot's Beak

CHAPTER 4- MARLYNN'S HUSBAND GOES TO WAR—Page 88
1st LT Norman Simpson, 155th AHC, November 22, 1969, near Duc Lap, Central Highlands

CHAPTER 5 - THE YOUNGEST HESTER BOY--Page 111
WO Eddie Hester, B Co 158th AHB, May 16, 1970, south of Khe Sanh

CHAPTER 6 - BILL'S BEST FRIEND—Page 136
CPT Richard Toops, 240th AHC, January 22, 1971, Bien Hoa Province

CHAPTER 7 - BRO CLYDE—Page 157
WO Clarence Romero, C Troop 2/17 Cav, February 23, 1971, Laos

CHAPTER 8 - A CREW CHIEF'S PREMONITION—Page 175
WO David Middleton, C Troop 16th Cav, January 6, 1972, Mekong Delta

CHAPTER 9 - FIFTH TIME'S A CHARM, CPT—Page 194
Mike O'Byrne, F Troop 8th Cav, November 28, 1972, Tay Ninh Province

CHAPTER 10 - BUT FOR THE GRACE OF GOD—**Page 217**

1st LT Dennis Duarte and 1st LT Dan Cheney, A Troop, 3/17 Cav,
January 6, 1969, south of Duc Hoa

EPILOGUE—**Page 246**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR—**Page 249**

PROLOGUE

Roughly 40,000 Americans served as helicopter pilots in Vietnam. Most of them were shot down or crash landed at least once during their tour. About half the helicopters they flew never made it back. Over two thousand of the pilots also never came home, making up about seven percent of all the American deaths suffered during the war. Many more pilots came home wounded, some maimed for life.

I never set out to be an Army helicopter pilot. I entered college in 1979 on an ROTC scholarship and would owe Uncle Sam a chunk of my life upon graduation. Like many of my classmates, I wanted to be the next General Patton, the one played by George C. Scott. The mind-numbing, physical beatdown of Air Assault School in the summer of 1980 changed my view. Toward the end of the course, on a steamy morning in the woods of Fort Campbell, Kentucky, I trudged aboard a brand-spanking new Army Blackhawk helicopter. The doors were open, and a fresh breeze blew through the fuselage as the bird took flight. The cologne from one of the pilots wafted by on the wind. That's when it hit me. After this pilot drops me off back in the woods, he's going to the airfield. After that, he'll go to the Officers' Club for a drink while I'm out marching through Kentucky. He'll be home with "Momma" long before I get back to the barracks. I want that job. I want to be him.

My first instructors at flight school (Fort Rucker, Alabama) were Vietnam vets working as civilians training the next crop of Army aviators. They were unflappable, the coolest cats I had ever seen. You could flip a helicopter nearly upside down, shut off the engine, and bleed off precious main rotor speed before the instructor would calmly announce "I've got the controls." Three seconds later you're straight and level over Alabama, as if nothing had happened.

The aircraft we flew during the "Huey phase" were all battle worn UH-1 Vietnam ships, the ones you see in war documentaries with skids on the bottom and soldiers jumping out into the jungle. Hueys were the work horses of the Army during the Vietnam War and the most common aircraft in the conflict. The Army had hundreds of the old birds at Fort Rucker, and you never knew which one you'd fly from day to day. Many had tail numbers with the first two digits in the mid-to-high sixties, such as "66" or "67", indicating their year of birth. They all

were freckled with little square patches sprinkled along their skins covering up old bullet holes.

On the flight line it was not uncommon to hear an instructor casually mention something like “66-24672, that was my bird when I flew for C Troop out of Can Tho.” He would pause for a moment and smile, as if he’d bumped into an old friend, one who brought him safely home, over and over again, without complaint. You knew some of those patches covered holes punched in the bird when the admiring vet was at the controls. I often wondered, if those aircraft could talk, what stories would they tell?

Vietnam was a helicopter war, and helicopter pilots were the lead protagonists in the deadly drama. They whisked troops to battle. They brought them food and ammunition to sustain them. They were the aerial artillery that turned the battle. They flew into “hot” LZs to take the wounded and the dead home. No one who spent any time in Vietnam will ever forget the “whop whop” approach of a Huey. The distinct sound still brings some Vietnam vets to tears with a flood of insuppressible memories.

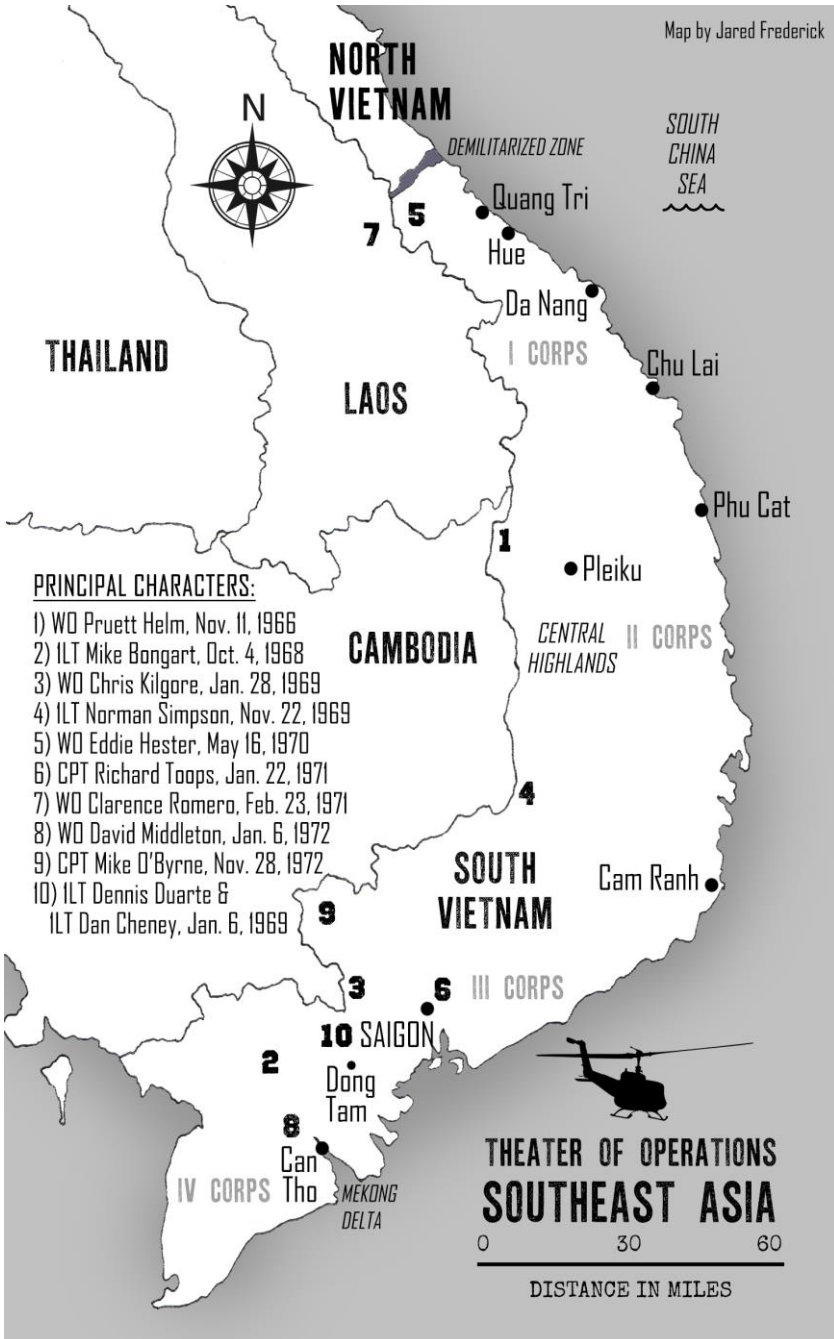
During the five years I spent on active duty in the Big Green Machine, I had the privilege of flying with many more Vietnam vets who were still in the Army. They were my heroes, skilled and professional to a man. They challenged me to be the best Army Aviator I could be. I had the same job they had, but I could never be them. There is something about experiencing hard combat that distinguishes a pilot.

This book features the stories of ten Vietnam War helicopter pilots. Their stories are each unique and extraordinary, but the same can be said for thousands of other guys who rode the whirling craft over Vietnam. The common thread between them is that each was injured while flying in combat, some badly, some not. But each had his wings clipped in battle. The war changed their lives, but their stories didn’t end on the battlefield. They all managed to mend their clipped wings, and that’s part of their story, too.

Vietnam vets followed in the footsteps of the “Greatest Generation.” By all accounts, they served just as admirably as the World War II vets. Until recently, they’ve rarely been told how well they served. They deserve to be honored and remembered. This book is dedicated to them, my heroes. No, I can’t be you, but I can tell your stories.

Author's Note

Many of the events depicted in this book occurred over fifty years ago. Few of those events were recorded by more than a short notation in a duty log or passing reference in a letter home, if at all. By necessity I relied on the memories of the men who were there for the accuracy of the details they related to me. Even contemporary eyewitnesses will disagree on what they have seen, so I have done my best to confirm the facts presented by referencing multiple sources. When confronted with eyewitness accounts that differed, I sided with the account that made the most sense given the circumstances. The reader is also warned that this book contains some vulgar language, including terms that many may find offensive. This was the language used by the men who were there at the time, and they have encouraged me to accurately convey that language. I am honoring their request.



CHAPTER 1

THE LUCKIEST DAMNED SOLDIER

The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution passed both legislative chambers nearly unanimously on August 7, 1964, giving President Lyndon Johnson broad powers to escalate the American military commitment in Vietnam without a declaration of war. At the time there were 23,000 American “advisers” serving in Vietnam, and their death toll had only recently climbed over 400, hardly noticeable numbers to a generation raised during the immense carnage of World War II.

America’s youth didn’t want another war, but neither did they shrink from it. Communism was on the march with a stated goal of destroying democratic capitalism. The previous generation had whipped National Socialism, this one would whip International Communism. Young American men went off to war with optimism and swagger. It might not be over by Christmas, but the job surely wouldn’t take long once the US got serious about it.

It took time to train and deploy the ever-increasing number of fighting men demanded by the US Commander, General William Westmoreland. The 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade waded ashore near Da Nang on March 8, 1965; the first official combat troops committed to the war. By the end of 1965 there were 184,000 American troops in Vietnam, and the butcher’s bill had well exceeded the 2000 mark.

More combat units followed the Marines into Vietnam, including the Army’s 4th Infantry Division, which began deploying in September of 1966 from Fort Lewis, Washington, to Pleiku in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. The conflict was in full swing now, with 389,000 Americans deployed to Vietnam by the end of 1966. The death tally climbed above 8,600 by the close of the year, with nearly three quarters of that number occurring in 1966. America had a tiger by the tail.

November 11, 1966, Central Highlands near Cambodia, South Vietnam

“What a cluster fuck,” Warrant Officer Pruett Helm mumbled to himself. He peered through the front windscreen of his idling C Model Huey gunship at the organized chaos of helicopters and soldiers

swarming the Plei Djereng Special Forces Camp. Red dust swirled around the hodgepodge of helicopters from various units, for some reason all thrown together at the last minute and now waiting in line for a turn to hover to the refueling point. His fellow pilot, Captain Lawrence Beyer, had been pulling his hair out all morning trying to figure out the mission details and get direction from someone in charge. All they knew for sure was that a Special Forces unit somewhere near the Cambodian border was in trouble and taking heavy casualties. Infantry grunts were being airlifted into the area by Huey slicks to help, and Pruett's Huey gunship was one of several from three different units assigned to escort the slicks into the Landing Zone (LZ).

A Special Forces Lieutenant emerged from the dust and shouted at Helm through the open window of his cockpit door. "I need to get on board! I know where the heavy weapons are."

Pruett shook his head. At the altitudes encountered in the Central Highlands, their gunship barely had the power to get off the ground with armament, the four-member crew, and half a tank of gas. Adding the weight of another soldier didn't seem like a wise move.

"But I know where their heavy weapons are!" insisted the Lieutenant.

"We're too heavy. We can't take you."

Helm waved the Lieutenant off, who promptly ran to the next helicopter in line to plead his case. Pruett turned to Captain Beyer and pushed the intercom button. "He said he knew where the heavy weapons were. What the hell does that mean?"

Beyer shrugged as he fiddled with the radios, still trying to get a handle on the whos and whats of the communications involved.

The whine of turbine engines spooling up and the increasing staccato of spinning rotor blades announced the start of the mission. Captain Beyer took the controls and pulled the aircraft off the ground a moment after the bird in front of them lifted off. The six gunships surged upward and joined a flight of troop-laden slicks headed west toward Cambodia, with some of the gunships flying on the right of the formation, and the rest on the left. A few minutes later the slicks descended toward an LZ overrun with elephant grass. Pruett's gunship joined the others in suppressing fire around the LZ by nosing over for a gun run, blasting the periphery of the LZ with rockets.

The LZ wasn't big enough for all the slicks to get in at one time, so they split up into two "sticks." The first stick disgorged their human cargo and lurched skyward to make room for the second stick, which

Mended Wings

was orbiting nearby. The recently deposited soldiers, from inexperience, poor leadership, or both, milled about instead of running outward away from the LZ to secure the perimeter. The radio traffic erupted with frantic calls to divert the second stick of grunts for lack of anyplace to land.

“Damn, NVA regulars! They’re everywhere!” shouted their door gunner on the aircraft intercom over the chatter of his machine gun.

Helm glanced down at the surreal sight. The tall grass was alive with swarms of enemy soldiers with twigs and branches stuck in their hats. The air exploded with tracers arcing up from the ground. Bullets ripped into the aircraft, sounding like dozens of hammers smacking the fuselage. The cockpit filled with white smoke.

Helm and Captain Beyer glanced at each other. The two men knew what was being communicated without a word spoken. They could fly straight ahead to safety *or* turn around and fight. Their job was to protect the grunts on the ground and the slicks buzzing above. Beyer swung the bird around to start another gun run. As they raced back into the battle, a gunship flying where they were headed exploded into a ball of fire.

* * * * *

Stapleton Airport was an easy bike ride from Pruett Helm’s house in Aurora, Colorado, and he loved to make the trip. He’d gaze with fascination at the big mechanical birds floating in and out of the airport, typified by the Douglas DC-6 passenger aircraft with the recognizable snout in front of the cockpit. The DC-6s were sleek and powerful, each sporting four radial engines and flying the colors of the airline operating it. They were the essence of cool in Pruett’s young eyes.

The way Pruett saw it, there were exactly two types of men in Aurora in the early 50s, airline pilots and everybody else. Airline pilots had nice houses, nice cars, cabins in the mountains, and were home more often than at work. Leonard Helm, Pruett’s dad, was an everybody else. They lived in a modest house, had one beat up car, and owned no vacation home. Dad worked his tail off just to make ends meet. To his six-year-old brain, the options life presented to Pruett were pretty clear. He was going to be an airline pilot and fly those lumbering planes that filled the sky over Aurora.

Not that he didn’t admire his old man. Leonard Glen Helm was a Navy Seabee at Pearl Harbor when it was bombed by the Japanese.