

It is the story about the U.S. military's 600 m.o.l. – Black helicopter pilots who experienced combat duty in Vietnam, some making the ultimate sacrifice of giving their lives, and who certainly have a place in U.S. history.

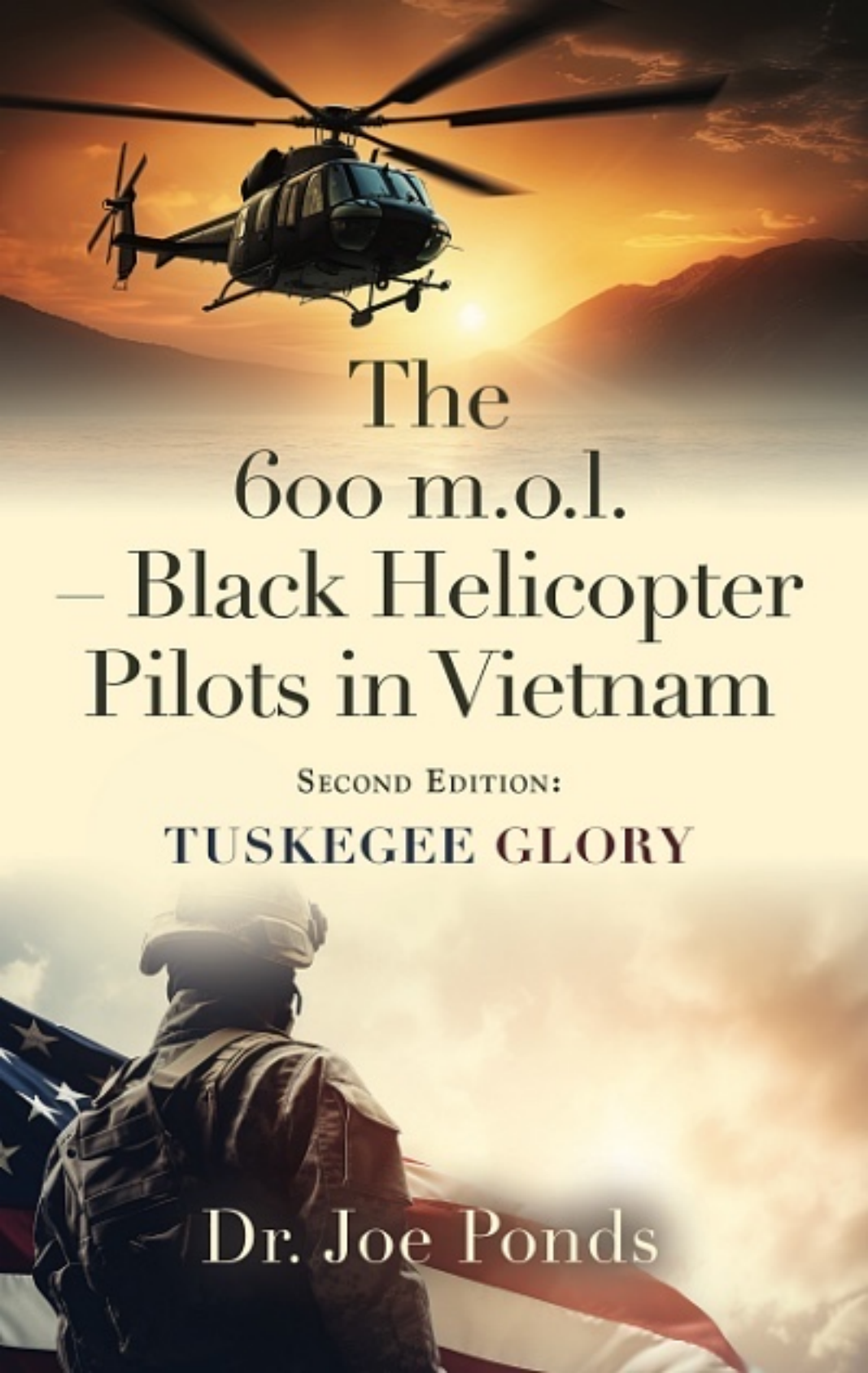
The 600 m.o.l. - Black Helicopter Pilots in Vietnam: Tuskegee Glory - Second Edition

By Dr. Joe Ponds

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The
600 m.o.l.
– Black Helicopter
Pilots in Vietnam

SECOND EDITION:
TUSKEGEE GLORY

Dr. Joe Ponds

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Preface

Only five months to live...that's what the doctor said to me! Shocking news, but more than that, it was terrible and terrifying news! Surely, a second opinion is needed. Got it! First opinion confirmed! What now? Was my "Bucket List" completed? No! I had not even started a bucket list. Especially since I had already accomplished many things that I had aspired to do. Yeah, thank God, I had previously written a book (*Can Christians Be Demon Possessed?*). Also, I had been a high school and collegiate Pole Vault Champion, earned a fixed-wing Private Pilot's license, became a martial arts expert, earned a commercial helicopter pilot's license, became a City Chess Champion, earned two Master's Degrees, became a U.S. Army one-meter and three-meter Diving Champion twice, earned a Doctoral Degree, became an All-Navy Judo Champion, and was an inspirational and motivational Speaker for Major League Baseball teams, just to name a few.

Still, I wanted to perhaps share some of my "little known" life stories or experiences that I had seldom, if ever, shared. There was one thing that I remembered that over the years people would ask me about, but I just didn't want to discuss. The memories were very often, and still are, too painful, terrible, and traumatic to share. It was those experiences leading up to and serving this country in combat during the Vietnam War as one of *the 600 m.o.l. – black helicopter pilots in Vietnam*, and to honor the courage, commitment, dedication, service, and sacrifices of this overlooked population. Perhaps now would be a good time, the right time, and seemingly the final time or opportunity to write about those experiences. After all, only five 5 months to live! So, I captured those thoughts and memories, and wrote

about those experiences in my book *The 600 m.o.l. – Black Helicopter Pilots in Vietnam*. Almighty God knew that it would take me more than 5 months to write that first book, so He blessed me with a few more years to complete its writing, and several more years to publicly tell the story. That was more than 10 years ago (Praise God)! So now, He has impressed upon me to write an update to the first book, especially the “Duties” chapter which is why the subtitle of this volume is entitled “Tuskegee Glory.” Though much of the information in this edition can be found in the first book, there are two new chapters along with some additional photos.

Once again, every effort has been made to as accurately as humanly possible, recall, reconstruct, and recount events that often had minimal or no written documentation. Strong emphasis was placed on urging contributors to share what they could recall, and they were urged to share pieces of their puzzles rather than share nothing. Since it has been more than fifty years since the Vietnam War ended, some memories have grown dim. If time has blurred any names, events, actions, or circumstances, any inaccuracies should be attributed to how time can ravage details or to how painful it is to remember some of the activities that especially involved disparate treatment.

It is highly unlikely that any black aviator got through his aviation training or his aviation service assignments without some resistance, race-related challenges, or difficulty – because disparate treatment, especially racial, was that predictable and that ubiquitous. That being the case, many things that happened have been repressed, or simply forgotten, for years, by the men who experienced them. Many times, these men thought that no one cared about what they did. So, they consciously shrunk their memories.

The 600 m.o.l.

This second edition is still aimed at sharing information about a population of men who engaged in military service to this country with duties involving aviation. The era that this book addresses is one during which there was considerable racial turmoil in America. So, these were stalwart men who entered into a professional career field that did not readily embrace them. The field that these brave men entered was one like the field of competitive tennis, golf, and even Federal Law Enforcement, i.e., ones predominated and dominated by white males. It is the story about the U.S. military's *600 m.o.l.* – *Black Helicopter Pilots in Vietnam*.

Prologue

Black Americans have served in every war engaged in by the United States and have a long and distinguished history of both service and sacrifice. Their contributions to America's military efforts are nothing short of outstanding even though up until the Korean War, black military units were largely segregated and very often commanded by white officers. Nevertheless, black Americans played a vital role in the Vietnam War effort despite racial hatred and hostility, racial segregation, and racial discrimination.

The Vietnam War was unlike any other war in which Americans were engaged. Traditional war plans, strategies, and tactics quickly became somewhat obsolete against an enemy that was quite experienced in jungle and guerilla warfare. Wheeled and tracked vehicles like tanks and Armored Personnel Carriers (APCs) were oftentimes virtually ineffective against enemy guerilla warfare fought in the dense forests and mountainous terrain in some of the northern areas of Vietnam or the abundance of rice patties throughout Vietnam, but especially in the Mekong Delta located in southern Vietnam. Even though helicopters were first used in World War II and subsequently during the Korean War, it was the Vietnam War that made extensive use of helicopters since they afforded rapid transportation of fighting forces on the battlefield over the varied terrain of Vietnam. They also provided unprecedented mobility and firepower while becoming an enduring and readily identifiable symbol of the war in Vietnam.

It is estimated that the United States Army deployed nearly 40,000 helicopter pilots that served in the Vietnam War from 1961 to 1975 with the total number estimated from all branches

of the military as closer to 50,000. The number of black helicopter pilots that served in the Vietnam War was about 600 m.o.l. (more or less). These were some of America's bravest and most daring pilots who risked being shot down or killed daily in support of ground forces. Their missions often required them to fly into a hostile area of operations close enough to the ground whereby one could easily look down the barrel of the enemy's rifle while simultaneously maintaining steady control of the aircraft as the American or South Vietnamese military troops disembarked from the helicopters. The danger these men faced was enormous as they answered their country's call to war.

The 600 m.o.l. is perhaps one of the greatest stories that was never told, at least up to now. This is a story about the black men who flew helicopters during the Vietnam War. It is generally an untold story because rarely is the subject discussed, especially since less than 2 percent of all military combat helicopter pilots in Vietnam were black. The story is never told or even mentioned in newspapers, magazines or other forms of print media, nor portrayed on television shows or in the movies. These men were very well-trained, determined, and highly motivated professionals. The following account is certainly not the whole story, nor is it a great part of it; nevertheless, it is at least an important, though only a fractional, part of it. It is written with the primary purpose of noting that the black helicopter pilots who experienced combat duty in Vietnam, some making the ultimate sacrifice of giving their lives, certainly have a place in U. S. history. They definitely played a vital role in the Vietnam War effort. It is also a story of the uncommon fortitude, perseverance, and triumph of black men who were often compelled to fight multiple battles against multiple enemies on multiple fronts simultaneously (the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army overseas and Racial Hatred and Discrimination both at home and overseas). Dr. Martin Luther

The 600 m.o.l.

King, Jr. once described the Vietnam War as racist: —““A white man’s war, a black man’s fight.” The path to becoming one of *the 600 m.o.l.* was certainly a road less traveled.

Duties

The Tuskegee Airmen's glory is well documented and is world renowned in aviation history. However, it is not generally known that some of them were the first black helicopter pilots to serve in Vietnam! Their chief flight instructor at Tuskegee, "Chief" Alfred Anderson, also has a very notable and distinguished history. Following the end of World War II, flight instruction ended at Tuskegee, but was resurrected again into the Army ROTC Program in 1966. "Chief" Anderson was again selected to train pilots at Tuskegee, and he has the distinction of training not only the Tuskegee Airmen of World War II, but also the "Second Generation" of Tuskegee Airmen who would fly helicopters in Vietnam. "Chief" Anderson would tell his students, "You are the next generation and what I teach you pass it on to the next generation." Among the initial graduating class of Army ROTC pilots were Eddie P. Johnson III, Omer L. McCants, and Aaron B. Watkins, all of whom would fly helicopters in Vietnam.

The aviation duties performed by the 600 m.o.l. in Vietnam were not only numerous and varied, but can be categorized into four (4) major helicopter types and missions: "**Slicks**" (the UH-1 [Utility Helicopter], "HUEY" initially had no guns attached to the outside of the aircraft, but later had an M60 machine gun attached to each side), "**Guns**" (Gunships were initially the A, B, and C Model *Hueys*, until the arrival in Vietnam of the AH-1 COBRA in 1967, a dedicated attack helicopter), "**Hooks**" (CH-47 Chinook- the primary heavy troop and supply transport aircraft, capable of carrying troops, artillery, equipment, and fuel), and "**Heroes**" (the unarmed Medical Evacuation helicopters – MEDEVAC *Hueys*).

At the top of the list of aviation duties was perhaps the combat assault mission.

“SLICKS”

The *HUEY* helicopter was the workhorse for these combat assault missions, which usually involved a customized infantry military unit (Company or Battalion-sized anywhere from 200 to 800 troops) that assembled on the pick-up zone (PZ) and staged for transport to a landing zone (LZ). Frequently, the LZs were hot (enemy present and firing bullets, rockets, grenades, etc. at the aircraft) which always put the ground troops and aircraft crew in grave danger. Sometimes the *Huey* was used for special missions that included “Firefly” and “Defoliation” missions. Firefly missions were also known as “Lightning Bug” missions. They used helicopters outfitted with searchlights to illuminate enemy personnel, vehicles, and boats at night which made these missions extremely dangerous. Defoliation missions were designed to clear away foliage which might conceal enemy activity. The chemicals used for spraying have since been determined to cause cancer and other life-threatening health problems. Many pilots who came in contact with these defoliants, like “Agent Orange,” are now deceased or have grave health problems as a direct or indirect result of their exposure to these chemicals.

Name: **Omer L. McCants**

Rank: First Lieutenant

Hometown: Langdale, Alabama

Dates of Vietnam tour of duty: 1969 to 1970

Unit assigned to in Vietnam: 162nd Assault Helicopter Company, 13th Combat Aviation

Battalion, 1st Aviation Brigade

Aircraft types flown: UH-1 (Huey)

Awards/decorations for Vietnam action: Unknown

On my very first night at Dong Tam (my first duty station in Vietnam), we were forced into the bunkers because of enemy mortar fire, for much of the night. Even though we “got mortared” practically every night during my stay at Dong Tam, after a while I didn’t panic as much because it had become routine, and I got used to it. In addition, our own Division Artillery was firing most of the night, every night.

After several days of company in-processing and getting familiar to the flying area, I was scheduled to fly on my first combat assault with the unit. We were told to expect heavy Viet Cong (VC) presence near the first landing zone (LZ). The gunships were doing a recon (reconnaissance) of the LZ and radioed that they were taking heavy automatic weapons fire. I was serving as the copilot on my aircraft, and we were the tenth helicopter in the flight of ten. We were just about to touch down, when I heard my pilot call over the radio that his copilot had been hit. About that time, I saw blood and body parts all over me and the helicopter. One of the Infantrymen we were transporting was sitting behind me and had gotten his head blown apart. I guess I must have looked terrified to the other pilot, because he looked over to me and (like in a John Wayne movie) said “this is war and people die in war”. I think that statement was just what I needed to make it through the war.

My unit also flew one ship missions that we called “ash and trash”, where we would carry cargo and people throughout our operating area. We were constantly aware of US Artillery units firing rounds all over our operating area. Normally they would warn you of their gun target line (direction of fire) or they would “check fire” when you flew near the line. On this one occasion, without any warning, we found ourselves flying right down a gun target line with artillery rounds swishing past us. In order to get out of the way we quickly dropped down to the treetops. Unfortunately, we went down right in the middle of a Viet Cong battalion. We surprised them about as much as they surprised us because before they could do too much damage we were able to zig zag our way out of there. We escaped with several bullet holes in the aircraft , but no one was hurt.

Another combat mission that my unit (the 162nd Assault Helicopter Company) flew was “Firefly”. The “Firefly” mission consisted of a UH-1 (troop carrying helicopter) flying “low and slow” around the perimeter of Can Tho airfield with a huge light mounted under it to entice the Viet Cong (VC) to shoot at it. Two helicopter gunships would be flying high to take out the enemy on the ground when they saw tracers being fired. I remember flying the mission one night, with my light burning brightly for about an hour, when the sky lit up with tracers all around us. I pulled maximum power, and I jokingly say, with help from my “pucker factor”, we quickly gained altitude and shut off the light. Unfortunately, the gunships could not fire back because the tracers were coming from “friendly” South Vietnam troops.

One morning in December 1969 (on Christmas Day or close to it), we had done a combat assault of a battalion of ARVN soldiers into an LZ, and had orders to extract them after they completed their search and rescue mission at an LZ a few clicks

(kilometers) away. Even though we had been told to expect heavy enemy fire in the area, we didn't receive any, going in. A few hours later, when we came back to extract the unit, they were receiving heavy fire, both rifles and mortars. We had inserted the troops in two lifts but we knew we would have to get them all out in one lift because, if we did not, the VC would overrun anyone not picked up. I was flying the last helicopter, so we overloaded my aircraft to make sure we left no one behind. But, we were too heavy to take off. We could see the mortars coming toward us as we dragged the helicopter across the ground trying to get enough power to lift off. I finally had to over torque the engine to bounce off the ground. Again, even though the helicopter was badly damaged from bullet holes and shrapnel, no one was killed or suffered major injuries.

Name: **Herbert W. Francis Jr.**

Rank: Warrant Officer (WO1 and CW2)

Hometown: New Orleans, Louisiana

Dates of Vietnam tour of duty: 1969 to 1970

Unit assigned to in Vietnam: Aviation Platoon, HHC, 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division

Aircraft types flown: UH-1 and OH-6 (Light Observation Helicopter – “LOACH”)

Awards/decorations for Vietnam action: Unknown

Herbert W. Francis Jr. passed away on December 16, 2009. The following incident was shared with me by a fellow aviator that CW2 Francis served with in Vietnam having direct or firsthand knowledge of this event.

On June 28, 1969, during Operation Lamar Plain, WO1 Francis was a helicopter pilot (Huey) flying a mission in the Area of Operations when the aircraft commander heard a boom, boom sound and thought that the tail rotor had been hit because the helicopter suddenly swerved and the torque (ability to keep the aircraft from spinning) was gone. Another crew member screamed that they were actually receiving enemy fire and that they had been hit. They had indeed come under intense small arms enemy fire! The reason that the aircraft commander thought that the tail rotor had been hit was because he had been shot by the enemy with an AK-47 (rifle) round that fractured his left leg femur, which threw his left foot off the aircraft's pedal causing the aircraft to momentarily spin out of control. After finally realizing that he had been shot, the aircraft commander turned control of the aircraft to his pilot WO1 Herbert Francis. WO1 Francis was able to regain control of the aircraft and, while still under enemy fire, fly the Huey without further incident to the medevac site where his aircraft commander was then safely transported out of Vietnam. It was WO1 Francis's outstanding aircraft knowledge and superb flying skills that enabled him to regain control of the aircraft under intense enemy fire, successfully evade additional hostile fire, and fly his air crew to safety!

“GUNS”

The 600 m.o.l. also flew helicopter gunships which provided direct fire support or close air support for the ground troops. These early helicopters had almost no armor protection which often left the flight crews vulnerable to enemy fire. Their main mission was to provide protection for troop transport helicopters by preparing the landing zones (LZs) with intense machine gunfire, rockets, and grenades designed to suppress enemy fire. Their valiant efforts often resulted in a greatly reduced percent

decrease in the death rate of friendly ground troops along with a higher number of enemy killed.

Another type of aircraft that often flew with *Cobra* gunships as part of a Hunter-Killer team was the OH-6, a light observation helicopter (LOH, pronounced LOACH) which was sometimes equipped with a machine gun. Sometimes, the LOACH would be equipped with a side-looking radar or infrared heat-detecting devices used to locate enemy targets. The LOACH was the “Hunter,” generally flying low to the ground or at “tree-top” level and at a slow air speed looking for signs of the enemy or to draw enemy fire. Once enemy targets were found, this information was then transmitted to the attack helicopter team members (the “Killers”), which were heavily armed with a combination of weapons to include machine guns, 40 millimeter grenade launchers, one or two 7.62-millimeter mini-guns, and 2.75 inch rockets.

Name: **Eddie P Johnson III**

Rank: First Lieutenant

Hometown: Dallas, Texas

Dates of Vietnam tour of duty: 1970 to 1971

Unit assigned to in Vietnam: 7/1 Air Calvary Squadron

Aircraft types flown: AH-1G (Cobra Gunship)

Awards/decorations for Vietnam action: Bronze Star Medal, Air Medal, 2 Purple Hearts

Prior to my tour of duty in Vietnam as an Army helicopter pilot, I was raised in Dallas, Texas, attended James Madison High School, and graduated from Tuskegee University in 1968. I later

earned a Medical Degree in Dentistry from the Medical College of Augusta, Georgia in 1982.

While enrolled in the Army ROTC program at Tuskegee, I was privileged to have qualified for the flight training program and earned my pilot's license under Chief Alfred Anderson, the same flight instructor who had trained the famous Tuskegee Airmen that flew in WWII.

After graduation from Tuskegee, I was assigned to Ft Knox, Kentucky, for basic Officer Training, which was immediately followed by flight school, and then to Viet Nam in 1970. Just prior to leaving, my grandmother, who was a good, Godfearing woman, said to me, "Don't worry about the war because God will protect you to come back alive to your family."

My first flight in Vietnam was at Can Tho Airfield, located south in the Mekong Delta. As a Cobra Gunship pilot, my mission was aerial gun support of US ground troops attempting to seize an enemy fortified position on the summit of a mountain. The enemy was killing American soldiers by not only firing down on them, but also rolling grenades downhill on their positions.

Once my team of four cobra helicopters arrived on scene, we immediately began firing our arsenal of rockets, 30 caliber machine guns, and 40 mm grenades. After three days of firing into caves, and bunkers, we finally drove the enemy off the mountain. The most terrifying moment for me was when the enemy fired their 50 caliber machine guns using "tracer" ammunition (Tracers are bullets that are built with a small pyrotechnic charge in their base. When fired, the pyrotechnic composition is ignited by the burning powder and burns very brightly, making the projectile trajectory visible to the naked eye during daylight, and very bright during nighttime firing. Usually,

every fifth round is tracer ammunition and looks like a laser beam being fired). When I saw light around the helicopters, I was thinking that it was lasers trying to shoot us down. I was never so afraid than those three days of my life. Although my aircraft was not hit on this mission, I was subsequently, shot and wounded on two other separate missions, and awarded two purple hearts. Nevertheless, my grandmother was right!

Name: **Gilbert Foote**

Rank: Warrant Officer WO1

Hometown: Newark, New Jersey

Dates of Vietnam tour of duty: July 1971–May 1972

Unit assigned to in Vietnam: F Troop, 4th Calvary

Aircraft types flown: UH-1 (Huey) and OH-6 (LOACH)

Awards/decorations for Vietnam action: Bronze Star, Air Medal (5)

Perhaps the most hair-raising experience I had in Vietnam was when my aircraft was compelled to land at an airfield near Cambodia. Even though it looked like a safe area to land, we were unaware at the time that the Viet Cong (VC) actually controlled the airfield. Since our aviation unit was in support of Vietnamese troops, it was not unusual for there to be Vietnamese soldiers on the airfield. Therefore, when some Vietnamese troops on the ground motioned to us to land on the runway, we complied. However, as we landed and started to taxi the aircraft to the side of the runway, we noticed that the soldiers were armed with AK47s (Russian-made rifles used by the Viet Cong) and not M16s (American-issued rifles). Realizing that we were completely surrounded by the enemy, we quickly hovered

toward the trees, gained airspeed and power, and took off, staying low over the trees before the Viet Cong could react. We barely avoided being shot down, captured, or killed!

While flying on another mission into Cambodia to destroy an ammunition dump, we came across three battalions of North Vietnamese troops who were heavily fortified in bunkers. We immediately began receiving enemy fire. So in order to avoid being hit, we dropped down to treetop level and escaped from the area. We spotted a flight of Australian Air Force T-28s and asked them to drop their ordnance on the enemy location and they did. We also spotted some B-52s and asked them to divert and respond to the area. They also dropped bombs in the area where we had spotted the enemy. After about two and a half hours, we returned to the area to assess the damage and found absolutely no trace of the North Vietnamese troops.

“HOOKS”

Another type of much needed special mission was “aircraft recovery” since aircraft were frequently shot down. During the early years of the war, the Army used the H-21 until the CH-47 became available. These were no easy assignments, and the pilots who flew on these missions were always “sitting duck” targets for enemy fire especially because of the great size of these helicopters.

Name: **Herbert R. Metoyer Jr**

Rank: Captain (CPT)

Hometown: Oakdale, Louisiana

Dates of Vietnam tour of duty: December 23, 1962 to December 22, 1963

Unit Assigned to in Vietnam:, 339th Transportation Company
(Aircraft Field Maintenance)

Aircraft types flown: UH-1 (Huey), H-21

Awards/decorations for Vietnam action: Air Medal

Captain Metoyer was an aircraft recovery platoon leader. A Caribou (fixed-wing aircraft) had crashed on a Special Forces Landing strip and to make the required repairs, I had slung load (carried beneath my H-21 helicopter on a sling) a hydraulic mule. After the Caribou was repaired and had taken off, we were cleaning up when a contingent of VC (Viet Cong) arrived and started shooting at us. My mechanic hooked up my load, then jumped aboard our Huey and took off. I was heavily loaded with equipment in the H-21. The Huey vacated the area in a hurry, but I could not. We were in a valley and I was forced to make shallow climbing turns so I could clear the mountains. This meant I was circling directly overhead of the VC for what seemed like an eternity while their whole army tried to shoot me down. I said a few prayers and lucky for me, I finally got enough altitude to clear the mountains, and then flew back home at the maximum safe airspeed. When I dropped my load back at NhaTrang, our hydraulic mule was riddled with bullets. We counted only about nine hits on the H-21. The mule had to be scrapped. Anyway, I was certainly glad that it was hanging between me and the VC on that day. I could not sleep that night for thinking about what could have gone wrong.

Name: **Aaron B. Watkins**

Rank: Captain (CPT)

Hometown: Memphis, Tennessee

Dates of Vietnam Tour of Duty: February 13, 1969 to February 12, 1970

Unit assigned to in Vietnam: 179th Assault Helicopter Company (Shrimp Boats) Pleiku

Aircraft Types Flown: CH-47 Chinook

Awards/Decorations for Vietnam action: Bronze Star, Air Medal

While I was in High School, I had NDCC (National Defense Cadet Corp) training which is the same as ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps) with military instructors. After graduation, I attended Tuskegee University where the first two years of ROTC were mandatory. I chose the Army program. I always wanted to fly, but the problem at that time was that there was no aviation program for the Army, only the Air Force. During my junior year, I took a flight physical and talked to the professor of Military Science about getting a flight program for the Army. Soon afterwards, we got the program, and I was in the first Army ROTC Aviation class for helicopter pilots at Tuskegee University. Our instructor was “Chief Alfred Anderson” who was the chief instructor to the Tuskegee Airmen. That makes Chief Anderson not only the chief flight instructor to train the Tuskegee Airmen but also the chief instructor to the first Army Aviation class at Tuskegee University for helicopter pilots. After completing my college graduation requirements, I was commissioned a Second Lieutenant in the Army, and went on active duty. After I completed my basic and advanced helicopter training, I was selected for further advanced helicopter training in the Chinook and began my tour of duty in Vietnam.

MY FIRST DAY FLYING IN VIETNAM

I arrived in Vietnam during the Tet season (the Vietnamese Lunar New Year festival). It was hot and I remember the smell in the air, the clouds in the sky, and I said to myself, "I hope I do not have to smell this for 365 days." The darkness came and I experienced my first rocket attack less than 24 hours with boots on the ground. Later that week, I arrived in Pleiku to my unit ready to fly, but I had to be cleared by the flight surgeon because I had received a hairline fracture in my left arm from the rocket attack. I had to wait 4 weeks before I was cleared to fly. My first day flying was not a calm event as we took off from Pleiku heading to Kontum. As the chinook approached the first LZ (Landing Zone) making the sound that only a chinook makes, landing with supplies, after one minute seeing everything explode before my eyes, the aircraft commander took the controls and exited the LZ with rocks and dirt hitting the chinook as we flew to safety. The day was not over as we picked up 100 rounds of 105mm mortar shells in cases in a sling under the chinook belly. I remember the flight engineer saying our left engine was on fire and smoking. We had lost one of our hydraulic systems. The emergency procedure for that is to land as quickly as possible. The aircraft commander transmitted a "May Day" call while stating our position. I started looking for a place for us to land as we both pushed the fire extinguisher button for the engine. At that moment, I thought I saw my whole life flash before me including a vision of my loved ones. As we were descending with the 100 rounds of mortar ammunition under us, at about 400 feet we went IFR (Instrument Flight Rules) which means (unable to maintain visible contact with the ground and flying the aircraft using cockpit instruments only) because of the dust from the ground blocking our vision. We literally could not see anything. The aircraft commander and I reached for the cargo release button at the same time and the

flight engineer said he was also pushing his release button. We had a hard landing but everything was intact.

The cobra gunships were over our position providing air support. Only God knows how we missed landing on the mortar ammunition. Our Operations Center (Headquarters) told us to stay with the chinook, and they were sending a maintenance team to repair the aircraft. Since we were in hostile territory, they also sent an infantry platoon of soldiers to provide us with a perimeter of protection. It was about 6:30 pm when this occurred. The maintenance team arrived with the Boeing team, and they worked on the chinook; at approximately 11 PM, they said we could fly the chinook out on one engine. We made it back to Pleiku, and I said my prayers that night thanking God for our safety. What a first day flying in Vietnam.

REFLECTIONS AND MEMORIES FROM AN AIRCRAFT COMMANDER

I remember landing in an LZ and while the troops were unloading from the helicopter, I saw a Viet Cong (the enemy) in the bushes with a rocket launcher on his shoulder firing at the aircraft but missing us. I still have flashbacks of that incident, along with the time when I flew the chinook into a booby trap of hand grenades that were attached to trees. As the down wash of the rotor blades set them off, we barely escaped disaster with no damage to the chinook. I also remember that the generator on the aircraft caught fire and we lost our entire electrical system forcing us to fly back to base without it at night, while having no communication with the control tower.

Then there was the time when we had to land in the mountains of An Khe to flash lights and someone popping a flare and blinding me on my approach to landing. I also remember picking up 102 Vietnamese children and women in the Chinook with

their blood everywhere because they had been tortured by the Viet Cong.

I can recall when we almost crashed because the thrust of the Chinook would not go down, which was required for landing. After using every emergency thrust procedure in our manual, we discovered the mission clip board was locked under the thrust of the co-pilot. Our experience changed the operational procedure relative to the location of the clip board.

I think back to Ban Me Thout, where every helicopter had been shot down at night trying to evacuate the troops, and I was supposed to fly in a Chinook as the last option. No one volunteered to go with me, because they recognized the danger involved in the mission. One warrant officer, Harvey Mullin, a Bible reading young man, who took his Christian principles seriously finally accepted the challenge. Amazingly enough, the mission was cancelled as we were just about to take off. I can't help but wonder if I would have made it back.

I have vivid memories flying to DakTo during the monsoon seasons (hurricane-like weather) under IFR conditions with mountains all around me. Finally, I often look back to Ben Het where the Shrimp Boats had 10 Chinooks shot up and one pilot wounded in one day of action, and my aircraft was the only one not hit. I had only six days left before going home. I remember waiting for the plane to return to the states and my college roommate trying to get me to come to Saigon to visit him, and I said, "No way!"

I especially thank Chief Alfred Anderson, chief instructor to the Tuskegee Airmen, Roscoe Draper, instructor to the Tuskegee Airmen, Colonel Reginald Crockett, Professor of Military Science at Tuskegee Institute, Captains Brazil and Lockhart, high school military instructors, and my wife Sandra McGlaun-

Watkins, my high school military sponsor (NDCC), all of whom played a vital part in my success as an Army aviator.

HEROES (“Dustoff” – MEDEVAC)

Some of the 600 m.o.l. flew Dustoff or Medevac (medical evacuation) missions. The Army’s Medical Corps relied very heavily on helicopters to transport wounded soldiers safely and quickly to hospitals for proper medical care. These daring and often overworked pilots flew unarmed helicopters (no machine guns mounted on the airframe) into any location (including dense jungle or an unsecured LZ), regardless of the situation (night-time, attacked by enemy fire, no gunship support, bad weather, etc.) to transport the wounded soldier to a hospital. One of the “heroes” reports that the missions that seemed to be the most daunting to him and his comrades were the “hoist” missions. On those assignments, because the jungle canopy was too thick to allow an aircraft to land, a “jungle penetrator” was lowered from the Dustoff helicopter that hovered motionless above treetops (sometimes 100 to 150 feet high) while a patient was attached to the sling and raised back up to the aircraft. These missions made the ship and its crew sitting ducks. There was an explosive device on the hoist which could cause it to cut the strong thick steel cable that it lowered to the ground. However, there is no known instance of any crew ever using it. Instead, they endured the fear, real or imagined, of enemy fire, and pulled the wounded soldier aboard before leaving the area. The outstanding dedication of these pilots greatly reduced the death rate of American troops in Vietnam. The survival rate of wounded soldiers in Vietnam was far better than in any previous war. It is ironic that one pilot greatly admired the courage of the men on the ground and wondered how they found the courage to travel through jungles which were criss-crossed with anti-personnel, highly explosive booby traps. The ground troops

thought that Dustoff pilots had to be crazy to come to locations where ground troops had just experienced some kind of combat wounds or injuries, make a lot of noise, have no guns, and sit motionless on the ground while the wounded were loaded aboard. They saw choppers as bullet magnets and the crews as easy targets for even the poorest of enemy shooters. Here's one pilot's story!

Name: **Arnold H. Sampson, Jr.**

Rank: First Lieutenant

Hometown: Baltimore, Maryland.

Dates of Vietnam tour of duty: March 15, 1969–March 20, 1970

Unit assigned to in Vietnam: 68th Medical Detachment (Helicopter Ambulance)

Aircraft types flown: UH-1 (MEDEVAC)

Awards/decorations for Vietnam action: Distinguished Flying Cross, two awards: Purple Heart, seven awards: Air Medal w/ "V" device for heroism, Air Medal for meritorious service, Bronze Star, Broken Wing Award, Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry w/ Silver Star Device for Valor/or Palm, Vietnam Service Medal, Vietnam Campaign Medal w/60 device

Medevac Memoirs I

The only choppers with the red cross on its door and nose were flown by my branch, the US Army's Medical Service Corps. (The army had roughly nineteen branches. The best known of those branches are the infantry, the artillery, and the armor branches. Less known, but much needed to support those combat arms branches were: the Medical Service Corps, the Military

Police, the Judge Advocate Generals Corps, the Ordnance Corps, the Medical Corps, etc.) We flew under the Geneva Accords, an off-shoot of the Geneva Convention, and had no external weaponry. We were unarmed. We flew missions of mercy. Frankly, having sat stock-still in many landing zones (LZs), stirring up a lot of dust and making all kinds of racket, noise-wise, it is clear that enemy personnel, who included North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldiers, NVA sympathizers known as the Viet Cong (VC), or sympathizers on the down-low, who might do something to hurt Americans on the sneak, while working for us during the day (Viet Cong Suspects, VCS), had plenty of opportunities to fire at us that they may have foregone. We would carry Vietnamese citizens, Army of South Vietnam (ARVN) troops, and even escorted or unescorted by restrained prisoners of war (POWs) to medical facilities. So I think, though we did take some fire, some of which wounded or killed us, it probably could have been worse, much worse.

On several occasions, my chopper was hit by enemy fire. Each time, I was super lucky, the bullet just missed me, but the metal from the helicopter did not. So, I was hurt, i.e., wounded, twice by flying metal that for a moment, in one case, felt like a gunshot wound. I was awarded a Purple Heart the first time and an Oak Leaf cluster the second time, i.e., I got two Purple Hearts, in effect. I must confess that I was always glad when I landed and examined an injury that I thought was a gunshot wound (gsw) that it was from a secondary missile and not the actual bullet. I don't know which constituted the closest visit by death, the bullets coming through the windshield and passing so close as it zipped between the pilots or when one went into the helicopter's engine housing and damaged one of the primary controls, rendering the helicopter almost un-landable. Before concluding that we could not get it down (i.e., lower the altitude from 200 feet to ground level), the aircraft went far enough out

of control for all on board to think we were going to die. This incident led to me being awarded the Broken Wing Award. The award seems to have been reserved for instances of an aircraft and its occupants being spared damage, injury, or death when circumstances suggest that a safe landing was unlikely or impossible using known training parameters or under normal conditions.

Medevac Memoirs II

I recall another incredible hair-raising experience which was a typical but challenging night medevac mission involving Korean soldiers who lived a much harsher reality than we did. Follow orders or be killed was an underlying tenet of their service in Vietnam. I think the Koreans had a reputation for being fierce in combat and for not taking prisoners. Here is my experience with their intensity and their ferocity. About an hour after it got dark and when the tiniest of hope was beginning to form, I heard the sound which meant “first up” (the helicopter on standby duty) needed to scramble for a pickup. I was the aircraft commander who was flying that night. I was the unit’s only black pilot and the unit’s only black commissioned officer. My pilot’s name and face escapes me. I think it was an interesting guy who sang with a hootenanny group in civilian life was uncharacteristically normal and friendly and who was a steady, reliable aviator. I got to the aircraft about the same time he arrived and the crew chief was already there, and he had untied the rotor blade and checked over the ship for any obvious issues. I did a hasty preflight check, slapped the Velcro holder on my chest plate, and asked the pilot if he objected to me backing it out of the revetment (parking place). He nodded that it was okay with him and he was writing the coordinates on a tactical map, using a grease marker. The crew said their piece: “Clear left, sir” (the crew chief) and “Ready right, sir” (the medic). I said my usual to the air traffic

control tower, “Dustoff 85 is on the go at this time. Thanks for clearing us.” The air traffic controller responded, “Be careful out there.” To which I responded with two clicks on the microphone button on the cyclic. That meant “Roger,” “Thanks,” and “I am sure gonna try,” without a syllable being uttered. Our mission was to evacuate a Korean infantryman who had been wounded in action. We arrived on location about fifteen minutes after takeoff. We lined up with where we thought they might be even though it was pitch-black darkness along the road we were using as a landmark. I called the unit and said, “This is Dustoff 85, Tiger 13, and we are two minutes out. Could you pop a flare?” A few seconds later, a flare went off and the Korean interpreter said, “Dust-a-off 8-a-5, we hear you, but we don’t see you.” (That separation of syllables was one of the things I vaguely recall about how English-speaking Koreans sounded on the radio.) I asked him if there were any wires near where they wanted us to land. He said no and that the landing pad for his unit was pretty well lit. When we landed, we were told that since the wounded soldier was in such bad shape, an RTO (radio telephone operator) who just happened to be armed with a BAR (Browning automatic rifle) would be accompanying him and that we needed to take the wounded Korean to the Korean Field Hospital outside of Nha Trang. Those were the wishes of his CO (commanding officer). As we took off, I thought about it and vetoed the Korean Hospital. It was darker than a witch’s heart that night and I wanted to land to a lighted reliable helipad that had a windsock. So I made the executive decision to land at the American hospital in Nha Trang, where I thought the soldier might get better care and where I knew good surgeons were stationed. When we landed at that hospital, chaos erupted. I saw the orderlies run out and stop a few yards away from the aircraft. My crew chief said, “Sir, we got a problem.” He said that the Korean accompanying the wounded guy had locked and loaded

his BAR, a .30 caliber semi-auto to full auto rifle, had put his back against the firewall of the helicopter, and was making it clear he was not going to allow the wounded guy he was with to be taken off the aircraft. We were talking to one another on the private setting. I told everyone to remain calm, but to prepare for the worse. I loosened my .38 revolver in its holster (we had no machine guns, i.e., external offensive weapons, but the Geneva Accords allowed us to be personally armed, in case we went down and needed to defend ourselves.) and saw my copilot do the same. I looked back at the guy who could not see my hands or the gun because I was seated in front of him and saw pure terror and panic in his eyes. (Pilots normally looked straight ahead, when we were on the ground, in case the one holding the controls was shot and the other one—whose hands hover near, but never on, the controls could grab them and take control of the ship.) I called the RTO at the hospital and reported what was going on and said we could use some assistance. The armed guy was clearly super stressed out. He was not budging. That was clear. The question seemed to be, “Will he start shooting, and if so, who will get it?” We, the entire crew, had our hands on the butts of our revolvers, though it appeared casual, for the ones whose hands he could see. He could not see the aviators’ hands which were gripping the undrawn pistol grips with white knuckles. Well, as white as my black hand could get. I was talking to the hospital RTO the entire time. He said he was sending us help. Out to the pad came a neatly dressed surprisingly tall Korean officer. I am guessing he was a lieutenant. He wore a snub-nosed revolver in his side and his uniform was not field camo (camouflaged), but khaki colored. In Korean, he ordered the man to stand down. The terrified grunt shook his head and looked even more tense. The officer, who was young looking to me, but still somewhat scary looking, drew his revolver and his hand hung down to his side. He gave

the guy another directive, which the guy tensely refused. At that point, the lieutenant pointed the gun at the soldier and growled out another command. I thought, "This is it! He is going to shoot this guy right in front us of." Or the soldier is going to open up on him and maybe us. When the lieutenant cocked the hammer, I wanted to look away because I could see an execution coming. I know me and seeing gravely wounded men being off-loaded was one thing. Seeing someone being fatally shot before my eyes was another. I did not want to see it, knowing I could not unsee it. I am glad I didn't turn. Tears slowly formed at the soldier's eyes, and he slowly lowered the BAR. The officer gestured to the orderlies that it was okay to remove the wounded ROK soldier and they did. The escort guy put his rifle on safe, dropped his head, and followed his comrade. The Korean officer must have asked who was in command of the chopper. He came to my window and explained that the escort had been given orders to help off-load the wounded guy at the Korean field aid station. He said that the guy felt his captain would kill him if he disobeyed. I thanked him for the explanation and slowly began to second guess myself. I felt like my executive decision to go to a US hospital where there were lights, a windsock, and an English-speaking RTO has almost cost a man his life. Bummer! There is little room for error in wartime. Stuff gets serious very quickly during wartime, and when it does, someone might die!

Name: **Otis Daniel Evans**

Rank: First Lieutenant and Captain

Hometown: Brenham, Texas

Dates of Vietnam tour of duty: September 1968 to August 1969

Unit Assigned to In Vietnam: Air Ambulance Platoon, 326th Medical Battalion, 101st Airborne Division (Air Mobile)

Aircraft types flown: UH-1 (Huey) and OH-6 (LOACH)

Awards/Decorations for Vietnam Action: Silver Star; Distinguish Flying Cross (2); Bronze Star; Air Medal (15); Combat Medical Badge

More Medevac Memoirs I

After completion of flight training, I arrived in Vietnam in the typical fashion. One week of preparatory training and I was shipped off to the assigned unit to learn the real art of flying aero-medical evacuation (dustoff). There, I learned of the Major Charles Kelly legacy: "When I have your wounded." Simply stated, a dustoff pilot will not abort a mission until the wounded are aboard his aircraft. Major Kelly gave his life to establish that legacy, and all dustoff pilots to follow him strove to live up to the expectations that soldiers on the ground had grown to expect from us. During the Vietnam era, the decision to fly a dustoff mission was left entirely up to the aircraft commander (pilot-in-command). There was no higher authority to determine the legitimacy of the mission or serve as an approving authority. Pilots had to consider five basic elements when accepting a mission: (a) Weather (wind/dust, rain, fog/low ceilings, ambient temperature), (b) Illumination (daylight, night, moonlight), (c) Terrain conditions (mountains, flatlands, over-water operations), (d) Aircraft limitations (mechanical condition, payload, density altitude), (e) Enemy disposition/capability. Of the elements listed above, dustoff pilots feared weather the most. Medical evacuation requests often came when weather was at its worst. During my tour, I flew in all of the conditions listed. Although enemy action brought my aircraft down once, I still feared weather the most.

Medevac Memoirs II

Next to gun ship pilots, dustoff pilots are the second most flamboyant bunch of aviators. Personally, I believe that this was their way of compensating for the constant danger of the missions they flew daily. On December 1, 1968, my crew attempted an evacuation in the Tay Ninh Province of Vietnam whence we received intense enemy fire on initial approach. We broke contact, made our operational checks, and made a second approach. Again, intense enemy fire such that our helicopter was severely damaged. Flight controls were so damaged that we had to make a hard landing which in fact was a controlled crash landing. During the course of the day, we acquired a replacement aircraft and subsequently completed the mission.

Medevac Memoirs III

On another occasion (March 1969), my crew was conducting hoist operations in dense jungle when the aircraft came under intense enemy fire, wounding the flight medic. With half our patients on board and a wounded medic, we broke contact and later returned with a replacement helicopter to complete the mission. Although we often basked in the glory and exhilaration of mission success, we paid a dear price. During my tour, my unit lost three crews to enemy action. While it was common place for pilots to receive commendations for mission success under enemy fire, I knew of no circumstance where exceptional flying skill was recognized. Enemy fire surely got my attention, but nothing raised my anxiety more than inadvertent instrument flying conditions (IFR) at night in the mountains or flying on a moonless night over the Gulf of Ton Kin to reach a naval hospital ship twenty-five miles out to sea. On such occasions, all you could do was thank the good Lord for blessing you with the skill to preserve your crew and patients during the ordeal. It was

this incident of going inadvertent IFR after the hoist operation described above that scared me most. Our aircraft was hit and I had received a shrapnel wound in the thigh from a round that came up through the floor between my legs. (I did not discover the wound until the next day. I had one of our medics treat it and kept on trucking.) Inadvertent IFR in a damaged aircraft in the mountains was the most uncertain situation you can find yourself (all we could do was climb to an altitude above the highest known obstacle). We declared an emergency and requested landing support from the Air Force. Those guys put all other IFR traffic in holding patterns and talked us down. After becoming VFR again (able to see outside the aircraft), all the aircraft windows fogged up and I landed the aircraft sideways looking out my door window. Once safely on the ground, I became a born-again Christian that day because I realized my life was not my own!

SPECIAL, SINGLE-SHIP HELICOTER MISSIONS (Ash and Trash)

“Ash and Trash” missions, which is slang for a single helicopter flying on what was generally considered as noncombative missions. These were the good, the bad, and the ugly assignments. A typical Ash and Trash mission was transporting high-ranking military officers and civilians to various places within the theater of operations. These were some of the good missions. Sometimes, the mission was to deliver mail, packages, and newspapers to the ground troops at military bases located in remote areas. It was wonderful to see the faces of the men as they received letters and correspondence from home. This was another good mission. Some missions required the transport of Red Cross Donut Dollies to isolated military bases. These were teams of young women, all college graduates, who operated the Red Cross Recreation Centers and conducted “audience

participation recreation programs.” The troops were provided with the opportunity to hang out with pretty girls from back home, play games, do crafts, and momentarily forget where they were and what they were doing. Though the program was only a brief diversion, it nevertheless did wonders for troop morale. So, flying these ladies around from base to base was a very good mission!

Sometimes these missions included Search and Rescue (SAR) operations. Flight crews were always at risk of being shot down over enemy territory, and with no air or ground support, they were captured and taken as a prisoner of war (POW). Therefore, it was imperative that those downed servicemen in distress or in imminent danger be located quickly to enhance their chances of survival. The role of the helicopter was vital in accomplishing that mission. There were also those missions which were frequently quite dangerous, usually without gunship support and sometimes ‘highly secretive,’ especially when inserting Army Rangers or Navy Seals into unspecified locations.

Name: **Eddie Leotis White**

Rank: Warrant Officer 1 and Chief Warrant Officer 2

Hometown: Jersey City, NJ

Dates of Vietnam tour of duty: January 5, 1969–January 4, 1970

Unit assigned to in Vietnam: A Company/101 Aviation Battalion, 101st Airborne Division; HHC, 2nd Brigade, 101st Airborne Division

Types of aircraft flown in Vietnam: UH-1 (Huey), OH-6A (LOACH)

Awards/decorations for Vietnam action: Air Medal (1–6), Army Commendation Medal, Bronze Star Medal

As Close as It Gets

In early December, the division decided to conduct artillery raids into Laos. My crew was chosen to fly the infantry battalion commander whose troops would secure the fire base chosen for the mission. After two nights on a secured base, we had VFR (visual flight rules) weather and could conduct visual recons near the Laotian border. We were unable to get reliable information regarding any artillery firing in our vicinity. Therefore, we relied on the artillery liaison officer that was assigned to the infantry battalion. We were assured that nothing would be firing in the area we were to be working. Thus assured, we proceeded to search the terrain for suitable places to be used as landing zones for the infantry troops. After about forty-five minutes into the flight, the ground around us began to erupt in massive explosions. Over the intercom from the infantry commander in the rear of the aircraft came a scream, “I forgot all about the B-52 strike today.” Somehow, we were able to make a 90 degree turn and make our escape by flying at a right angle to the bombs. I have no idea how fast we were going while escaping, but even though the maximum safe airspeed for my helicopter was 120 knots (138 MPH), I saw the airspeed indicator as we slowed down pass back through 140 knots (161.3 MPH)!

Name: **Joseph H. McHenry**

Rank: Warrant Officer

Hometown: Phoenix, Arizona

Dates of Vietnam tour of duty: 1965 to 1966

Unit assigned to in Vietnam: Company A, 82nd Aviation Brigade; 173rd Airborne Brigade

Aircraft types flown: UH-1

Awards/decorations for Vietnam action: Air Medal (20 Oak Leaf Clusters), Purple Heart, Vietnam Service Medal & Bronze Star Attachment, Republic of Vietnam Campaign Ribbon w/Device (1960)

As a kid growing up near the airport in Phoenix, Arizona and in close proximity of Luke Air Force Base, I marveled at planes flying overhead. My dream of becoming a pilot was realized when I enlisted in the Army and received orders for flight school. The reality of piloting a helicopter in Vietnam, and putting me in the center of action, was a rude awakening, especially the day I was shot down. The memories of that day are as intense now as the day it was happening. What started out as a two-helicopter mission, delivering a “hot meal” to troops in the field, ended with my helicopter flying into the LZ (landing zone) alone. As both helicopters got close enough to land, the pilot of the other helicopter stated that he had a generator problem that compelled him to pull up at the last minute and return to home base, especially since the LZ was foggy. Therefore, as Aircraft Commander, I continued on alone and while attempting to land in the LZ, I was subsequently shot down, wounded, and found myself in the middle of an intense firefight with the enemy. It all happened on March 16, 1966, when a U.S. paratrooper battalion suddenly found itself surrounded by a reinforced enemy regiment during Operation Silver City. It was later learned that the commencement of the attack on the LZ was to have been signaled by an enemy machinegun firing on the soldiers left behind at the LZ. As my helicopter arrived preparing to land inside the perimeter, an

enemy .50 caliber machinegun opened fire on my chopper, hitting it multiple times and causing it to crash into the tree line. This premature firing and downing of my helicopter alerted the enemy surrounding the battalion, at which time they began their attack around the entire perimeter. Following the five-hour battle it was reported that the paratroopers suffered 11 KIA (Killed in Action) and over 120 WIA (Wounded in Action), while the enemy left between 300-400 KIA on the battlefield and, it is assumed, countless wounded. It is believed by many, that had my helicopter not been shot down causing the premature opening of the attack, the entire paratrooper battalion, while broken-up into smaller units, would have most likely been overrun and totally destroyed.

Name: **Joseph R. Ponds, Jr.**

Rank: First Lieutenant (Promoted to Captain while in Vietnam)

Hometown: Baltimore, Maryland.

Dates of Vietnam tour of duty: April 30, 1969–April 30, 1970

Units assigned to in Vietnam: 162nd Combat Assault Helicopter Company, 13th Combat Aviation Battalion, 121st Aviation Company (Assault Helicopter)

Awards/decorations for Vietnam action: Bronze Star, Army Commendation Medal, Air Medal, Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry w/ Palm, Vietnam Service Medal, Vietnam Campaign Medal w/60 device

Very seldom was I privileged with being assigned to fly one of the “good” Ash and Trash missions. The overwhelming majority of Ash and Trash missions that I flew were bad and ugly. Even though these were supposedly noncombative missions, it didn’t

mean that you wouldn't get shot at or shot down! Anytime you fly over hostile terrain, there is always a possibility of not getting home safely or at all! I believe it was some guy named Murphy who's Law says, "If anything can go wrong, it will."

Ash and Trash I – "Medevac"

Before going to Vietnam, I had seen people bloody, usually from fistfights or from cuts and scrapes. However, I had no idea how much a person could bleed until I flew on my first Ash and Trash medevac mission. It was bad. A small infantry unit made contact with the enemy and several American soldiers were wounded. We were ordered to fly into the hostile area, retrieve the wounded, and fly them to a medical facility. Medevac helicopters with the Red Cross on the nose of the aircraft and painted on its doors were operating under Rules of War and the enemy wasn't suppose to shoot at it. However, since I was not flying a medevac helicopter, we were fair game to the enemy. Of course, they fired at us, but fortunately, we weren't hit...this time. As we approached the landing area, the wounded were being carried by their buddies and were immediately loaded onto the aircraft. There was blood everywhere! The aircraft was full of soldiers in a great deal of pain and agony with looks of shock, wonder, and uncertainty on their faces. Some were crying while others seemed to be joyful because they were leaving the field of combat. I couldn't help but wonder if any of those severely wounded would live while also hoping that they all would make it back alive. Their comrades were wishing them well and saying their farewells, knowing that this would perhaps be the last time they would see one another. It was sad and very bad!

Ash and Trash II – "The Hearse"

One of my first noncombat missions was to fly into a semi-hot LZ to extract some KIAs (American soldiers killed in action).

An infantry unit had engaged the enemy in a firefight and suffered multiple KIAs. They needed the dead bodies retrieved so that the unit could continue to pursue the enemy. As soon as we arrived on scene and landed in the rice paddies, the men immediately begin loading the corpses onto the aircraft. It was a very sad and horrible sight. Those carrying the bodies of their dead comrades had a look of shock, terror, and anger all rolled into one. It was as if they were thinking whether they may be the next ones loaded onto a helicopter. I remember thinking about the mothers, wives, and family members who were praying for the safe return of their loved ones from the war and the devastation they would feel when they received the death notification. I remember thinking about the commanding officers tasked with writing those letters of condolences and sympathy to the deceased's next of kin. As the dead soldiers' bodies were stacked into the aircraft, there were blood, body parts, and body fluids being slung everywhere. The stench of death is not easy to erase from the olfactory organ and very often, the odor remains even after more than forty years. The aircraft would always need a thorough washing after each of these missions. The troops that we might carry into battle the next day did not need to be subjected to the stench of death in the helicopter from the day before. I will never understand why the term Ash and Trash would include this type of mission. This was definitely sad and ugly!

Ash and Trash III – “I Spy”

Another so-called noncombat Ash and Trash mission was when I was assigned to fly along the Vietnam-Cambodian border to gather intelligence information about enemy troop movements and locations. It was a very dangerous mission for several reasons. First, the aircraft assigned to the mission was not one that I was qualified to fly. I was told that it wouldn't be a

problem since the aircraft commander, who was also an instructor pilot, would fly me around the airfield traffic pattern a couple of times, let me “shoot” a few auto-rotations (emergency procedure for loss of engine), and sign me off (that I had passed my qualifying check ride). Well, so much for that “problem”! Secondly, our helicopter was unarmed with no offensive or defensive weapons. There were only two crew members (the other pilot and I) each armed with our personal weapons, a .38 caliber revolver. Finally, we had no helicopter gunship support, no artillery support, and no friendly troop support whatsoever. The mission was very bad and very ugly!

Ash and Trash IV – “Mayday”

One of the international distress signals for a life-threatening emergency is Mayday, said very quickly and without hesitation, three consecutive times (Mayday! Mayday! Mayday!). Usually, when a person screams mayday over the radio, it means their death is imminent, and they don’t live to tell the story! One day, while flying a single aircraft mission with Special Forces personnel on board, somewhere over hostile terrain, the aircraft experienced a major mechanical problem. This situation compelled us to land the aircraft ASAP to avoid having the aircraft come apart in the air. A mayday call was quite appropriate in this case. It was because of the severity of the situation and the requirement (aircraft emergency procedure) to land the helicopter immediately that the only radio transmission we had time to make was a mayday call. The aircrew thought that this would be the end of us and that we were surely going to die because the aircraft might come apart before we could get to the ground or the transmission might freeze-up, preventing the rotor blades from turning and we would fall from the sky like a ton of bricks.

This was a most terrifying and stressful situation to put it mildly. We knew we would not be able to fly the aircraft any further, thought we might crash or blow up, and we had no ‘friendlies’ (friendly troops) around to help us or even report where we were going down. I think all of us had heard about a helicopter with identical problems that had come apart while still airborne and killing all crew members. When we radioed “mayday” we thought we were saying goodbye and here’s our location so that somebody could retrieve our bodies as opposed to us saying, “Please help us!” We spent several hours stranded on the ground somewhere in the Mekong Delta (hostile territory). We finally fixed the helicopter sufficiently to allow us to fly out of the jungle and limp back to base. We all felt fortunate and blessed that we weren’t killed in the aircraft before or during the emergency landing or that we weren’t captured and/or killed by the enemy. Even though many Ash and Trash missions were indeed noncombative, like transporting Red Cross Donut Dollies to outlying troop locations, nevertheless, there was always an element of danger while flying over hostile terrain. Seemingly, my Ash and Trash missions were almost always bad and ugly!

Special Ash and Trash

Occasionally, the Ash and Trash mission was so “special” (extremely uncommon) that the only information given to the pilot was to simply fly to a certain location and receive further orders from the unit’s commanding officer upon arrival.

Pratt I

Army First Lieutenant (1LT) Pratt, a black officer (not a member of *the 600 m.o.l.*) who graduated from his college’s ROTC program, received orders to Vietnam immediately following completion of Basic Officer’s Training at Fort Bragg in North Carolina. After his brief in-country orientation (in order to know

bare minimum etiquette with which to navigate interactions with the Vietnamese), 1LT Pratt was assigned to a combat company. One of his early duties was to be the unit's fire control officer. That did not mean putting out dangerous campfires that were blazing out of control. It meant directing the artillery responses to enemy mortar fire or personnel ground attacks against the relatively small base of operations that housed the men and their equipment. Shortly after his arrival at the Unit, Pratt met a man whose job was to train and guide him in duties which were new and somewhat foreign to him. That man was the Fire Control NCO (Non-Commissioned Officer) Sergeant First Class (SFC) Guthrie. In the first conversation the two men had, SFC Guthrie showed the new green LT the fire control room, which contained radio equipment tied to the artillery positions that surrounded the small installation. On the wall of that room was an operational map, and on that map was one fairly large area outlined in red. Pratt asked Guthrie what the red area was and why it was marked like that. Guthrie had the right personality. He was not overbearing, fairly welcoming, and comfortably respectful of rank. He stated, "Sir, that is the Michelin Plantation." He went on to say, "Yessir, the real auto tire Michelin. That French company owns the land and it has their rubber trees on it. We have drawn the red border around the area to clearly identify it since we are not supposed to fire any artillery into that area. Artillery strikes could harm the trees and we have agreed not to do that." Pratt, the newbie, naively asked, "Do we ever take enemy fire from that area, Sarge?" Guthrie immediately

replied, "Yes, sir, we do on occasion, but we try to get air support to hit the VC (Viet Cong) once they have exited the area and think we weren't watching. So far, that has been working pretty well for us, sir." As the attitude of NCOs went, when dealing with new lieutenants or new officers in general, Guthrie's was right up there with the best. He did not sound

smug. When he had ended his statement with “sir,” it did not sound like “knucklehead” or “dummy,” which many NCOs have the knack of doing without actually saying those discipline-engendering words. Pratt asked another question, but Guthrie seemed nonplussed by it. Pratt asked, “Do we take casualties when we get hit from that area?” Guthrie said, “Only on occasion, sir.” Again, it was the good sir. Guthrie was a patient man, who valued his career, appreciated being advanced slightly faster than one would have predicted and he did not seem intimidated, or more importantly resentful, of the rank structure, which brought in new, sometimes younger men—i.e., commissioned officers, to supervise combat experienced soldiers that the army expected them to lead. The fire control duties were just one of the duties assigned to Pratt, though it was his main duty. Typically, new officers were assigned a plethora of scut duties, many of which did not require much action on their part, but existed because the Army wanted someone to be responsible for decisions in a given area. An example of such duties might be CBR officer (that stood for chemical, biological, and radiological) who had the titular responsibility for training and equipment in the area of gas attacks. Within a short period of time after Pratt arrived at his newly assigned unit, the enemy launched a mortar attack, with enough ping and plunk sounds to suggest that the enemy had set up no fewer than five mortar tubes and hoped to kill several US soldiers and disrupt the camp’s operations. Pratt made his way to the fire control center and shook off every vestige of sleep as he made an assessment of where the enemy’s mortar tubes were. They clearly seemed to be in the no-fire zone and that appropriately give him pause for about twelve and a half seconds. Just as SFC Guthrie entered the room, Pratt was keying the mike on the radio and stating, “Fire mission!” That was the first thing that was said to the men who aimed the large 105mm howitzers and the 155mm tubes, which

fire even larger rounds. Then Pratt said it, “Coordinates: L56 M33!” Guthrie heard that and somehow managed to not grab the microphone from Pratt’s hand. Instead, he said, “Sir, not there! That’s the Michelin site!” Pratt nodded at him and said, “Fire when ready!” So they fired! Maybe it was because of their anger about how aggressive the attack had been or maybe they were scared that the mortars had already wounded too many men and might get them next; nevertheless, these men surely knew these were not the coordinates they were previously authorized to use. Whatever the reason, they mixed in with the HE (high explosive) rounds, some that were white phosphorous (we called/nicknamed them Willy Peter) rounds. White phosphorous burned rather than shredded. It burned hot and would burn through almost anything. It was a dreadfully effective explosive, which was used sparingly because the fire it started could not be put out until it burned itself out. The VC were terrified of it because it was a “nowhere to run, nowhere to hide” weapon. For a brief period, it artificially sounded like a duel: mortar rounds coming in and Willy Peter rounds going out. The duel was brutal for the entire four minutes that it lasted. Willy Peter: 1 and mortars: 0. In the morning light, the full extent of Willy’s success was evident. The Michelin Plantation was gone, burned to the ground. There were seventeen bodies in smoldering ashes. That felt good—as in, “Betcha they won’t do that again.” Two hours and twenty three minutes later, a chopper came in. It was sitting down and still had about six inches before it was flat on the ground, when a lieutenant colonel jumped out. He stomped up to the group of men awaiting him and asked, “Who is Lt. Pratt?” Small LZ, maybe twenty-three officers. Only one named Pratt. The CO had called Pratt to say that he should be at the helipad when the next ship landed. The LTC said, “I got my butt reamed by a one-star (general) in Saigon, Pratt. He said the French Embassy had called him over and given him the worst

talking to he had ever experienced—which made him glad he did not speak much French. Pratt, I know you HAD to know that the Michelin Plantation was off limits!: The Colonel didn't wait for an acknowledgement. He went on to say, "You think you are funny, lieutenant. Well, I am going to show you funny. You have thirty minutes to pack up your stuff. You are reassigned, effective immediately, to the 503rd Ranger Battalion in Quang/Ngai, Firebase Sallie. A chopper is leaving here in forty minutes and you had better be on it, mister." (Yes, in this instance, "mister" sadly and probably meant "the N-word") "We'll see how funny you feel once you get there!" As it turned out, the new unit that Pratt would be reassigned to had taken more casualties than any other in the II Corps area of Vietnam. It was the most dangerous LZ under that Lieutenant Colonel's scope of authority, and he definitely had an object lesson in mind for Pratt or his remains. Ironically, it was one of *the 600 m.o.l.* that caught this special Ash and Trash mission to fly Pratt to his new duty assignment.

Pratt II

That colonel knew his stuff. If Pratt's first assigned base was a bit hairy, the next one was Death Valley. When the chopper landed, the commanding officer (CO) was waiting for him. Pratt figured the LTC had put the bad mouth on him and that he would be received as the prodigal son. Instead, the CO was very welcoming. He assigned Pratt to the 3rd platoon and explained that they had lost their platoon leader and needed a good man to rein them in and restore military order. He surprised Pratt by saying, "I know you had a little run in with LTC Drago, but he was nobody's favorite on that LZ." So Pratt would not be judged by what he did there, but he would start with a clean record. The CO was a captain since the previous CO, a major, had been killed. Pratt's new unit location was so hot (constantly receiving

enemy fire) that a soldier could come into the unit on Monday, and by Wednesday, Graves Registration (those assigned to process soldiers killed in action and other deaths) would be trying to identify his body. It was so bad that he did not want to look into the face of newly reporting troops, because he knew many, if not most, of them would not last. Worse than that, the other three platoon leaders (a company has four platoons), eventually were killed—twice. This meant that the other three platoons were eventually assigned replacement leaders, and two sets of replacement officers were killed. He was the only platoon leader blessed to survive the regular attacks of rifle fire and mortar strikes at night. The area was super active with enemy units who needed to be observed or stopped. To accomplish this, four man teams were dropped in the middle of the field of operations, which is a nice way of saying in the middle of nowhere and told to report any enemy activity they observed. The team was an RTO (radio-telephone operator), a machine gunner, a leader and a rifleman. No brass (military rank or unit insignia) was worn. On Pratt's team, the rifleman was a sergeant assigned to work with him. Their usual procedure was to be flown by helicopter into an area thought to contain quite a few enemy personnel and were then dropped off. They took the precaution of assessing their surroundings for movement or signs of enemy personnel or an ambush and saw nothing. Using their tactical map, they began to slowly move toward their pickup point. They moved quietly and without much discussion. They were alert, nervous, but not truly afraid. Okay, they were afraid, but not terrified. They knew this was their job and all they wanted to do was perform it and get back to base camp. Roughly forty minutes into their slow and measured movement, Pratt received a call from his CO. "Where are you, Pratt?" Sounded odd, but Pratt checked the map, reported they had gone about 180 to 200 yards from their insertion point, and he gave

the coordinates: Yankee Bravo 67 Whiskey Alpha 53. (YB67 at WA 53) on the map. The CO's voice was muffled because the volume on the radio was set very low, but Pratt heard him say, "Lieutenant, I need you at Mike Zulu 83 Golf Sierra 41 in 22 mikes." That meant he wanted the four men to move 3,000 meters in 22 minutes. Before Pratt could either ask or protest, the CO abruptly said, "Out." Conversation over. Okay. There really had been no conversation! Without expressing his concern, Pratt, puzzled, said in a harsh tone, "We need to step it up," while swinging his machete like a baseball bat. The men quickly followed. The radio chirped again 19 minutes later. The RTO said, "Sir, it's the CO." Since they were moving fast, Pratt had not heard the buzz that signaled an incoming transmission. "Yessir..." was all he got out when the CO boomed, "Where the heck are you, Pratt?" The sergeant's eyes were locked onto Pratt's, who kept a straight face and reported, "Xray Lima 75 Charlie Hotel 36, sir!" Without realizing it, Pratt had responded a little louder and a lot disrespectfully than he intended; however, he was prepared to give the excuse of being out of breath ready, if the CO asked him if he had lost his mind. That didn't happen! Instead, the CO said, almost with a sound of resignation and urgency in his voice, "Dig in right now, lieutenant! Right now!" The radio went dead. Pratt gave his men a, "Don't give me no crap!" look and said, "Dig in right where you are! No questions!" In truth, Pratt had no answers. All he had was thoughts and utter confusion. Something told him to do as he had been ordered, and he started shoveling the soft earth right at his feet. In his mind, he thought, "What the! Surely, there cannot be an airstrike? We have an Air Force Liaison Officer. The CO would tell the Air Force not to drop any armament (bombs) near us, wouldn't he?" Pratt's anxiety and confusion helped him dig all the more faster. His sergeant, whose name was Blake, sensed something was up. He was either

scared or wanted to be supportive of the Louie (lieutenant). Either way, he out-dug Pratt and had a small grave in front of him that could hold two men, sandwiched one on top of the other and still have about three inches before any body part was on the surface. He kept digging. In roughly seven minutes, they had all dug themselves individual trenches that were crude, but put each man roughly two feet below the surface. They were dirty, beat, and starting to anger and starting to look at Pratt, when they heard the sound of distant engines. Everyone took cover and it was not a moment too soon. The heaviest thud they had ever felt in that man's war hit them and lifted their bodies almost out of their trenches. They instinctively knew to put their fingers in their ears and that saved their hearing. The sound that followed the concussion was so loud that it seemed like it could break some trees by itself, which answered Pratt's question. B52 strike, 500 pound bombs! Those planes flew out of Guam and their AF Liaison had no way to direct or control them. It was over in what felt like 90 minutes, but it was actually, probably, more like nine minutes. At first, no one said a word. The identical thought that ran through the minds of all four men was, "Is it over?" Pratt looked at Sgt. Blake and he was patting himself like he was frisking himself for weapons. Pratt's next thought was that Blake had been hit by something, if not shrapnel, then maybe a sharp branch had embedded itself in Blake's torso. To reassure him and maybe himself, he told Blake, "You're okay. You are not wounded." Blake was trembling and he seemed to find what he was looking for. It was a pen. On the wrapper of a "C-ration" (Canned food), he wrote, "I request immediate transfer from Lt. Pratt. The army is clearly trying to get him killed. Please give this urgent request prompt attention. Signed, Sgt. (E-5) Torrie Blake." He handed the paper to Pratt and began to dig out and assemble his belongings

without a word to anyone. Truer words had not been written or uttered! Pratt had a “bull’s eye” on his back.

His story is quite typical of the experiences of black officers in Vietnam, whether those assigned to ground units or those that flew choppers. Whenever black commissioned or warrant officers were perceived by their commanding officers and other white unit members as troublemakers or willing to stand up for righteousness, fairness, and equality, they were often reassigned to a different unit. As one of *the 600 m.o.l.*, I was assigned (officially) to three different aviation units and (unofficially) to an ARVN (South Vietnamese Army) Infantry (ground) unit!

“Cowardice asks the question: Is it safe? Expediency asks the question: is it political? Vanity asks the question: Is it popular? But Conscience asks the question: Is it right?”

There comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor political, nor popular; but one must take it simply because it is right.”

— Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.



Troops preparing to disembark from a 'Huey' helicopter approaching an LZ (landing zone) in the Mekong Delta.



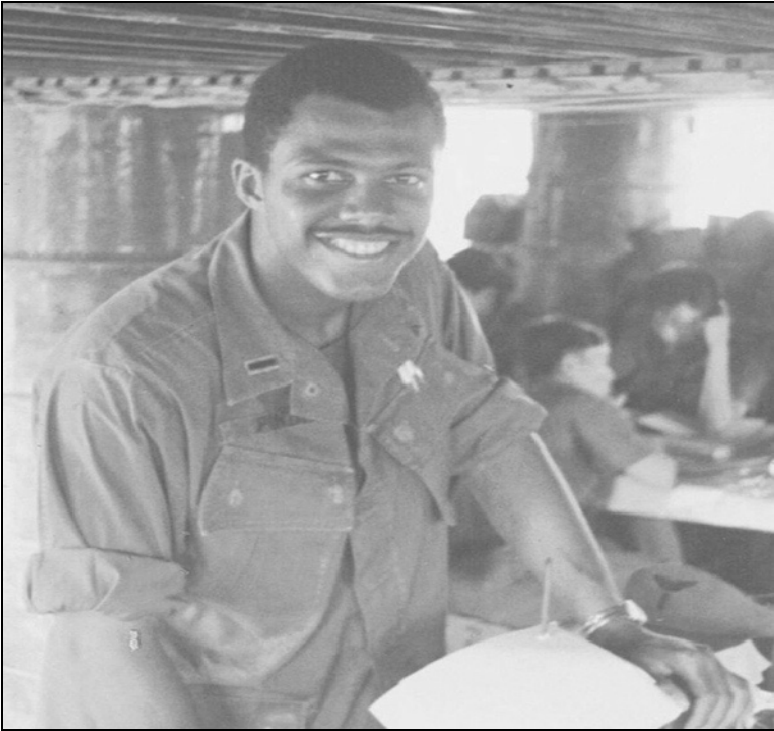
The first Tuskegee University graduation class of Army ROTC pilots in 1966 trained by Chief Alfred Anderson, the chief flight instructor for The Tuskegee Airmen of World War II. Three of these pilots would become “Second Generation” Tuskegee Airmen and fly helicopters in the Vietnam War.



First Lieutenant Aaron B. Watkins, a “Second Generation” Tuskegee Airman, completes a preflight inspection of his CH-47 Chinook and stands ready for another combat mission.



Warrant Officer Joe McHenry inspects his aircraft after being shot down and wounded during Operation Silver City.



First Lieutenant Joe Ponds assigned as the 13th Combat Aviation Battalion Liaison Officer to a Vietnamese Army Division Headquarters at Ca Mau, located in the Mekong Delta of South Vietnam.



First Lieutenant Joe Ponds, 162nd Assault helicopter Company, awaits a call for another combat mission.



First Lieutenant Joe Ponds on an “Ash & Trash’ mission at a remote Vietnamese village.

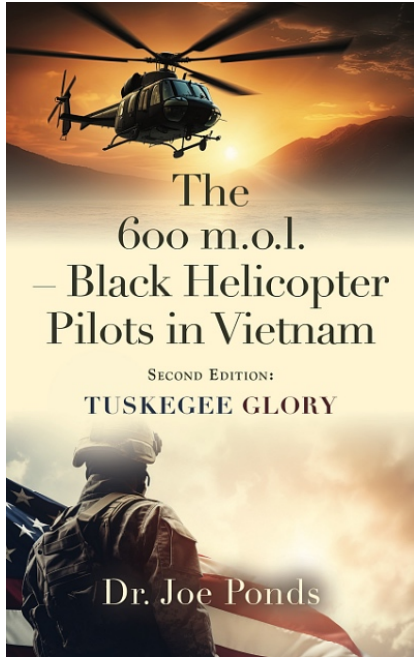
The 600 m.o.l.



First Lieutenant Joe Ponds commences duty as Assistant Operations Officer, 13th Combat Aviation Battalion, Can Tho Army Airfield, Vietnam.



First Lieutenant Joe Ponds promoted to Captain while assigned to the 121st Assault Helicopter Company, Soc Trang Army Airfield, Vietnam.



It is the story about the U.S. military's 600 m.o.l. – Black helicopter pilots who experienced combat duty in Vietnam, some making the ultimate sacrifice of giving their lives, and who certainly have a place in U.S. history.

The 600 m.o.l. - Black Helicopter Pilots in Vietnam: Tuskegee Glory - Second Edition

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