



Surprised at Being Alive: An Accidental Helicopter Pilot in Vietnam and Beyond

Robert F. Curtis

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Sometimes you do everything right, but it just isn't your day. A part fails and your helicopter comes apart in flight, or, another aircraft runs into you and the pieces of both fall to the ground below, or the enemy gunner pulls the trigger at just the right moment and his rounds find your aircraft in exactly the right spot to take it out of the sky. Whichever way it happens, it wasn't your day.

Which is why, after 24 years and over 5,000 flight hours with four armed services, Major Robert Curtis was so surprised at being alive when he passed his retirement physical. Starting with enlisting in the Army to fly helicopters during Vietnam, and continuing on through service with the National Guard, Marine Corps and Royal Navy, he flew eight different helicopters—from the wooden-bladed OH-13E, through the Chinook, SeaKnight and SeaKing, in war and peace around the world. During that time over 50 of his friends died in crashes, both in combat and in accidents, but somehow his skill, and not an inconsiderable amount of luck and superstition, saw him through.

His flying career began with a misbegotten strategy for beating the draft by enlisting. With the Vietnam War raging full blast in 1968 the draft was inevitable, so he wanted to at least get some small measure of control of his future. Although he had no thought of flying when he walked into the recruiting office, he walked out signed up to be a helicopter pilot. What he did not know was that 43% of all the aircraft sent to Vietnam were destroyed in combat or accidents. Soon he was in the thick of the war, flying Chinooks with the 101st Airborne. After Vietnam he left the Army, but kept flying in the National Guard while going to college. He was accepted at two law schools, but flying is addictive, so he instead enlisted in the USMC to fly some more. Over the next 17 years he would fly around the world off US and British ships from Egypt to Norway and all points in between. His engaging story will be a delight to all aviation enthusiasts.

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