

LYRA HILLIARD

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## When I Have Your Wounded

**N**ineteen-year-old Michael Hilliard joined the Army in 1967 because he wanted to fly. He had dreamed of flying since he was a little boy, imagining himself soaring with the birds. When he was very young, he would run outside to watch the vintage WWII planes that used to fly over Cape Ann from the various military fields in the area: formations of propeller-driven Corsair fighter bombers and Navy blimps from South Weymouth. Whenever he had a bad dream as a boy, he was always able to escape by imagining himself flying away.

By the time he was a teenager, he wanted to get out of the insular town of Rockport, Massachusetts. At one point, he had also wanted to become a priest, a veritable expectation for one of the sons in a large Irish family. To this end, he went to a different high school than his six siblings, St. Ann's. He played the trombone, of all unlikely instruments, in the band. Even as a teenager, he was different, distant, thinking. Not yet brooding, but thinking. He was shy around girls, but he was criminally good-looking—six feet tall, slightly curly dark brown hair, high forehead and cheekbones, mischievous hazel eyes, wide, bright smile—so they probably came to him. In the summers, he and his friends would dive off of the dock and even the roof of Motif Number One, the iconic red fishing shack that has represented Rockport's tourism industry for decades. At night, when there was little to no traffic, they would race cars up and down the end stretch of Route 128 in Manchester, just south of Rockport and its big sister city, Gloucester. A two-lane highway that ribbons between massive granite boulders that are ubiquitous in the region, 128 connects this northeastern tip of Massachusetts, Cape Ann, with the rest of the state—and the country, for that matter. Every other point of Cape Ann

looks out over water: Ipswich Bay to the north, Massachusetts Bay to the south, and the open water of the Atlantic to the east of Cape Ann's approximate ten-mile eastern shoreline.

It was here, growing up, that Hilliard learned how to read the water for weather. When he went to Front Beach to go swimming, he could tell if the water would be warm or cold just by looking at it. The beach faced east, so winds blowing from that direction would keep the warm surface water in and the water would stay warm. When the wind blew from the west, the wind pushed the surface water out and the cold water underneath, often only in the mid-fifties, would upwell to replace it. He'd watch sailboats race off the end of Bearskin Neck and saw how the sailors would try to catch the dark spots on the water—puffs of wind—in order to gain an advantage. The approaching wind shifts would create a line on the surface of the water where the water on one side would be darker than the other. He studied the clouds and how fast or slow they moved, which direction they were coming from, how to read the puffy cumulus ones and the faint, stringy cirrus ones. He had been studying the wind and the weather for years before he learned how to operate machines capable of flying through them, a sequence that most other pilots learn in reverse. Years later, this would give him a unique advantage as an air traffic controller. First, though, he would put these skills to use in flight school, first at Fort Walters, in Texas, and then at Hunter Army Air Field in Savannah, Georgia, where he learned how to fly the Bell Iroquois UH-1 helicopter, known simply as the Huey.

By the time Hilliard was in flight school in 1968, the Huey had become arguably the most important asset in the escalating Vietnam War. Vietnam's topography—jungles, mountains, swamps, more jungles—combined with a relative dearth of roads, made effective ground movement nearly impossible.<sup>1</sup> The helicopter enabled the entire war to be conducted by the air, deploying and extracting troops wherever they were needed. As Joe Galloway, Vietnam war correspondent and coauthor of *We Were Soldiers Once...and Young* explains, “the helicopter really freed the infantry from proceeding at the pace of a man walking to an ability to jump deep into a battlefield,” taking the enemy by surprise.<sup>2</sup> Helicopters “would quickly carry troops into hostile territory and deploy them, then remov[e] them after the fighting ended.”<sup>3</sup> They could fly supplies in the same way, conduct air assaults and invaluable air reconnaissance, and swoop in to evacuate the wounded in medical evacuation (Medevac) missions.<sup>4</sup>

Helicopters may have been workhorses, but they were far from immortal. They are complicated machines with complicated parts that could and did break or

malfunction all the time due to wear and tear. Of the nearly 5,000 helicopters lost in Vietnam between 1962 and 1973, close to half of them were lost due to operational accidents mostly related to mechanical problems. The other half were brought down by enemy fire. Of those 5,000 downed helicopters, 1,000 were lost in 1968 and another thousand were lost in 1969.<sup>5</sup> Hilliard happened to enlist at the peak of the most dangerous period to be a helicopter pilot in Vietnam.

But he got to fly. He got to fly the iconic symbol of the Vietnam War, the Huey, and, in so doing, learned how to operate one of the most complex, seemingly illogical machines of the twentieth century. To fly a helicopter, the pilot must use both arms and legs: the lever between the seats controls both lift and speed, the stick between the pilot's legs controls direction, and the left- and right-foot pedals control the tail blades, without which the whole thing would uncontrollably spin around itself. It's an awkward beast, one that requires the pilot to think and control three dimensions. When we drive our cars on the ground, we manage two variables—speed and direction. In the air, helicopter pilots balance the forces of lift, yaw, tilt, and the overwhelming tendency of the ship to want to turn into a whirling gyro if any of these variables are altered. On top of this, they also have to factor in wind speed, air density, and, for Medevac pilots, the unknown weight of new passengers. The mental acuity and technical prowess needed to fly one of these things also had to be matched by a good degree of confidence that often bordered on arrogance, guided by the ineffable intuition common among those whose lives depend on their ability to read the weather (think seamen and airmen), and supported by no small amount of faith.

The engineering and operational differences between a helicopter and a fixed-wing airplane lead many to make sharp distinctions between the pilots for each, such as “airplane pilots are clear-eyed, buoyant extroverts and helicopter pilots are brooders, introspective anticipators of trouble.”<sup>6</sup> Hilliard would internalize this; years later, he had a small poster in his room that listed similar distinctions between the two, with helicopter pilots clearly emerging as the superior breed. Across the small room on an adjacent wall hung another eleven-by-seventeen-inch poster, black on what must have once been white but was now dark, brittle brown paper, a long stream of conscience poem ending in “Death where the pilot cannot see his victims cannot see his victims cannot see” that sank into an excerpt of Picasso's *Guernica*: the pile of bodies, the woman clutching her baby, looking straight above, screaming for help. Looking for someone to save them, to extract them.

Many soldiers in Vietnam also faced the horror of lying on the battlefield surrounded by maimed bodies, themselves shot through with excruciating pain; in

a bullet's instant, they had gone from fighting soldier to helpless burden. When they looked straight above, however, some screaming, some not, they had something that Picasso's woman does not: they knew that Dust Off would come. As former US Advisor John L. Cook explains in the introduction to his book, *Rescue Under Fire: The Story of Dust Off in Vietnam*, "the absolute certainty of DUST OFF coming was something we believed in completely...In many ways, the belief in DUST OFF was stronger than a closely held religious conviction. We weren't absolutely certain God would listen to our prayers...but we knew DUST OFF was with us."<sup>7</sup>

On November 15, 1968, Cook "was with a company of South Vietnamese soldiers south of Binh Tri looking for Viet Cong."<sup>8</sup> After an underground booby trap exploded and killed or injured most of the men he was walking with, he managed to find the radio and call for Dust Off. Cook was injured too; his right hand, arm, and chest were bleeding from at least half a dozen bullet holes. He managed to find a map to give headquarters his location and helped drag the wounded survivors to a small clearing. In all, thirteen men needed to be evacuated—far too many for the Huey's carrying capacity.<sup>9</sup> Soon after he had gotten everyone to the clearing, Dust Off radioed in and asked him to mark his location with smoke. Cook "threw a red smoke grenade into the center of the clearing and waited. Then I heard the distinctive whoop-whoop-whoop of the Huey. There is no other sound like that in the world. You always hear a Huey before you see it...I looked up and saw the big red cross on the bottom of the helicopter. Without question, that was one of the most beautiful sights I had ever seen."<sup>10</sup> Even though there were too many men for one helicopter, the co-pilot insisted that Cook get everyone on board, for there wasn't another available helicopter to send out. The extra weight made for a difficult ascent out of the tiny clearing, but they made it, getting to the Evacuation Hospital at Long Binh within forty-five minutes of being wounded.

While likely the most memorable day of Cook's life, to the Medevac crew, this was fairly routine. This was their job, a job that had only been established and sanctioned within the previous couple of years. That Dust Off even existed at all is due in large part to the 1962 efforts of a young Captain Temperelli and his immediate successors, Majors Lloyd Spencer and Charles Kelly, who had the nearly impossible task of convincing the army that air ambulances could be useful and were worth establishing.<sup>11</sup> Kelly's tenacity, rebellious nature, and unwavering commitment is legendary; nothing—bad flying conditions, scarcity of equipment, the Army's constant threat to take Dust Off's helicopters and use them for combat missions—prevented "Mad Man" Kelly from his singular task: to rescue the wounded. On his last mission in June, 1965, he came under sudden enemy fire and

was told over the radio to get out. “When I have your wounded,” he calmly replied. He was shot through the heart moments later and died.<sup>12</sup>

“When I have your wounded” became the proud motto of Dust Off pilots. One of them, Patrick Henry Brady, compares the pilot’s ethos to that of the soldier’s:

If [soldiers] were given a mission to take a hill, you took it using the tools at hand, a rifle, a grenade, a tank. Excuses were not allowed. The same should apply to missions to rescue the wounded. A pilot and his helicopter were not more precious than a soldier and his rifle. Of course safety and the prospect of success were considered, but they paled before mission accomplishment—patient rescue. If necessity is the mother of invention, then caring is the mother of Dust Off. A caring pilot would find a way.<sup>13</sup>

Kelly and his predecessors succeeded; by 1965, Dust Off was a legitimate, authorized operation. In 1963, Dust Off crews evacuated over 2000 wounded patients; in 1968, the total number of evacuated wounded was well over 200,000.<sup>14</sup> In all, Dust Off crews saved about 390,000 American soldiers during Vietnam.<sup>15</sup> The men Cook was working with, however, were ARVN, or South Vietnamese soldiers. Dust Off evacuated just as many Vietnamese soldiers and civilians, bringing the total number of lives saved closer to one million.

Cook’s evacuation took place on November 15, 1968, about two weeks after Hilliard got to Vietnam. Cook was patrolling an area just south of the Binh Tri outpost, in the Di An District, which is just northeast of Saigon. He and his crew were evacuated to Long Binh, which means that he was most likely picked up by a crew from the 45<sup>th</sup> Medical Detachment. The 45<sup>th</sup> was one of four Dust Off units in III Corps, the section of Vietnam that contained Saigon and one of the closest ones to the 82<sup>nd</sup>, down in the Delta. Crews from the 82<sup>nd</sup> and the 45<sup>th</sup> knew each other and sometimes flew with each other. While it’s highly doubtful that Hilliard happened to be on that particular mission, he probably knew men who were.

The military divided Vietnam into four sections, or Corps: I Corps was the northernmost, on the border of “North Vietnam,” II Corps, the largest one, was between that and III Corps, which included Saigon, and IV was the southernmost one: the Mekong Delta. It was the only region to have just one Medevac unit, and they were busy in 1968 and 1969. According to Peter Dorland and James Nanney, authors of *Dustoff: Army Aeromedical Evacuation in Vietnam*, slightly more than a third of Medevac pilots and their crews were killed in their one-year tours, making theirs “one of the most dangerous types of aviation in that ten-year struggle.”<sup>16</sup> New

pilots were warned that flying Dust Off missions were a good way to get killed. Mike Novosel, a WWII and Korea veteran pilot who volunteered for active duty again after the assassination of John F. Kennedy because he wanted to offer his experience to young pilots, didn't realize he'd be flying Dust Off missions until he arrived in Vietnam for his first tour in January 1966. He hadn't even heard of Dust Off. As he gathered his gear in preparation to set out for the 283<sup>rd</sup> Medical Detachment, the army aviator who had sat next to him on the long flight from California to Saigon cautioned him to be careful. "If I were you, I'd look for a change of assignment. Otherwise, see that your will is up to date."<sup>17</sup>

On the one hand, advising military personnel in Vietnam to update their wills seems almost obvious: they were there to fight a war. Everyone's lives were in danger. On the other hand, not every soldier who went over there saw a lot of active combat. Some didn't see any. In contrast, Dust Off pilots flew into hot zones regularly, sometimes multiple times a day. If a call for Dust Off came in, there was a good chance that the casualty had been brought down by enemy fire, enemy fire that was still in the area. Furthermore, where a single soldier on the ground was armed and could quickly duck for cover if need be, helicopters had neither advantage. Helicopters are impossible to mask: the thumping of their rotor blades can be heard from miles away, they are large, and Medevac helicopters have to either land or hover for several minutes while casualties are loaded. To top it off, because Medevac helicopters weren't combat units, they were not allowed to carry arms or ammunition and were forbidden to engage in combat.<sup>18</sup> Their large red crosses were supposed to be their shields. Instead, they were targets. A 1964 Viet Cong pamphlet instructs, "The type used to transport commanders of casualties looks like a ladle. Lead this type aircraft one times its length when in flight. It is good to fire at the engine section when it is hovering or landing."<sup>19</sup>

Still, even a seasoned veteran like Novosel admitted that there was a "certain allure" to flying Medevac missions:

I was not inflicting casualties on the enemy but was offering assistance to our wounded and relieving them of the trauma of battle. I saw wounded young men almost every day, heard their cries, and understood their agonies ... I saw death so often that saving a life produced an emotional high. I'd be flushed with the triumph of the occasion. At times it was as if I were in a race with death itself. Invariably if the men we found were still alive, the race was decided in our favor. It never occurred to me that the grim reaper who watched my work was at all interested in me. I felt

that no matter what I would not be a casualty of that war. Under the circumstances, that was a most arrogant position to assume.<sup>20</sup>

Hilliard was half Novosel's age, but he wasn't blessed with quite that level of arrogance. When he arrived at Soc Trang airfield in the Mekong Delta to join the 82<sup>nd</sup> Medical Detachment in November of 1968, he was told that he was a replacement pilot for someone who was killed a few weeks earlier. A couple of months after Hilliard's arrival, he flew a mission to retrieve casualties from an ambush similar to the one Cook had faced. A local RF/PF company was on patrol about five kilometers east of a village near Bac Lieu and walked into a command-detonated Claymore mine trap, killing and wounding dozens.<sup>21</sup> When the surviving troops came to the aid of the wounded, another round of Claymore mines was detonated. By the time Hilliard arrived, most of the wounded had died. In a letter detailing some of his missions in Vietnam, Hilliard writes that he had "never before witnessed such utter devastation. Most of the victims were cut to ribbons. There was nothing left except body parts. Some of the recognizable victims were simply cut in two. There were arms and legs everywhere. There was blood and intestines, boots, shreds of tattered uniforms and military gear covering the dirt road that the RF/PFs had been walking on."<sup>22</sup>

About a week later, on January 17, 1969, Hilliard was en route to an LZ (landing zone) to pick up a US Army advisor who had been wounded during a combat helicopter assault about twenty miles southwest of Can Tho. He was a few miles away from the LZ and was in radio contact with the helicopter gunships that were covering the operation when the crew of one of the helicopters, a UH-1H, decided to do the medevac itself. On the way out of the LZ, the UH-1H took heavy machine gun fire and sustained heavy hits. Hilliard decided to follow this aircraft to the hospital as a precaution. The UH-1H pilot thanked Hilliard and his crew and then told them he was losing transmission oil pressure. Hilliard told him to land immediately and that he would follow them and pick everyone up. The pilot said that his transmission oil temperature was normal and that he did not have a transmission caution light illuminated. He elected to continue his flight and ignored repeated requests from Hilliard to land. About a minute later, Hilliard watched as the main rotor system of the UH-1H separated from the aircraft. The helicopter promptly dropped down, crashed into a rice paddy, and burned. The transmission had seized up because of lack of oil. Hilliard and his crew landed to search for survivors but the helicopter was fully engulfed in smoke and flames. The heat was too intense for any kind of rescue effort.

The following day, Hilliard and his crew returned to the scene to retrieve the remains of the flight crew and patient:

It was a difficult job for my crew since the remains were submerged in hip-deep water of the rice paddy. They had to feel around with their bare hands to find the remains of the patient. He was underneath the transmission, which had rotated forward. When they tried to pull him out, his arm came off. They had to remove him piece by piece. I observed my crew vomiting as they removed his remains and the remains of the pilots. The co-pilot was a classmate and friend of mine, WO1 Ken Peters. He was recognizable but his face and skull had shrunk to less than half of its original size as it boiled in the rice paddy water as the aircraft burned.

One of the most important helicopter innovations was the hoist, vital for evacuating casualties in heavily forested or mountainous areas where landings were impossible. Thousands of lives were saved due to the hoist, yet remaining motionless in a high hover above the pick-up zone was both difficult and extremely dangerous.<sup>23</sup> Hoists were particularly strenuous for the pilot—the physical strain of keeping a helicopter in one place for several minutes, let alone with high crosswinds, requires a great deal of skill. Yet as Cook explains, “the slightest movement 200 feet in the air is greatly magnified on the ground. During many hoist operations, the crew on board the Dust Off could not even see the ground. As a result, the pilot had no visual reference to use as a cue to compensate to drift. This condition added enormously to the stress of holding the aircraft motionless while the men on the ground strapped the patient to the hoist.”<sup>24</sup> To make matters even worse, many hoist missions were conducted at night, which required the pilot to leave the helicopter’s landing lights on to illuminate the ground below. Brightly lit and motionless for several minutes, they were sitting ducks, as Hilliard put it.

On February 5, 1969, Hilliard returned to Soc Trang from a night mission and walked into the operations room office to pick up paperwork for his next mission. As he approached the operations clerk, he saw that someone had written on the clear plexi-glass counter top: “Dustoff 13, CPT Poole, WO1 Hix, SP4 Johnson, SP4 McNish.” Hilliard was told that the crew’s aircraft had been hit by a rocket-propelled grenade and exploded while on a hoist mission just an hour earlier. William Hix was Hilliard’s best friend. They had been roommates the entire time during flight school and during medical training at Fort Sam Houston.

The enemy activity only increased during the spring and summer of 1969. The 82<sup>nd</sup> was losing aircraft to enemy fire and many crew members were wounded. It got to the point that when Hilliard went to bed at night, he didn't know if he would live through another day: "We didn't have enough aircraft and crews to complete the number of missions assigned to us. We were losing many patients as a result. The aircraft commanders, including myself, were making life or death triage decisions on a daily basis that were resulting in fatalities due to lack of resources. I felt terrible whenever I lost a patient."<sup>25</sup>

In a rare picture of one of these moments, three severely injured, dying American soldiers, their bloodied heads soaking their litters, lie mere feet from Hilliard, who stands fixed in the photograph with both hands on his hips and his thin lips pinched tight. He's just gotten a call to go on another mission and pick up ten injured men. He knows he can't take all of them and he knows the men at his feet would be classified as "expectants." In other words, even if Hilliard were magically able to transport all thirteen patients, once he got to the hospital, the receiving doctor would take one look at these three and send them into the area of the recovery room where a nurse would wipe their faces, soothe them, hold their hands, watch them die.<sup>26</sup> It might take the entire hospital staff two hours to save one of these men; in that time, they could treat and ultimately save dozens. He had to let them go.

Around July 20, Hilliard took a six-day Rest and Relaxation trip to Honolulu. Later, he would say that the "little vacation saved my life. I was starting to take a lot of risks. I just figured that I was going to die anyways. The Hawaii trip helped to rejuvenate me." Traveling east from Vietnam, Hilliard gained nearly an entire day. It was the afternoon of July 20 from the lobby of the hotel in Honolulu when Hilliard watched Apollo 11 land Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin on the moon. The lobby was packed with transfixed viewers watching the world change once again in front of their eyes. In the last ten years, the United States had gone through four different Presidents, had narrowly escaped a nuclear attack from Cuba, had been devastated by the assassinations of four of the most influential leaders of that generation—Jack and Bobby Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr.—and had been torn apart by the civil rights movement, student revolts, the Beatles, Black Power, women's liberation, race riots, the Democratic National Convention riots, a long-haired, folk rock-listening, sexually liberated counterculture and an increasingly conservative dominant culture, all of whom fought bitterly over the war in Vietnam, fights fueled in no small part by the media's accounts on the televisions that most Americans now owned. In these ways and countless more,

the mid-to-late 1960s marked a national identity crisis on a level not seen since the Civil War.

Back in Vietnam, Hilliard was even busier than he had been before. Combat was increasing to the point that it was a rare day that the 82<sup>nd</sup> was not airborne.<sup>27</sup> Missions were nonstop at times and pilots routinely exceeded the 140-hour limit of hours flown during a thirty-day period.<sup>28</sup> It was not unusual for a pilot to “log thirteen to fourteen hours of flight time in a scheduled twelve-hour day,” Novosel, now on his second tour in Vietnam with Dust Off, remembers. “All our aviators experienced days when they’d be airborne soon after reporting for duty and wouldn’t shut off their engines all day. The crewmen would use hot refueling (taking on fuel with the engine running) to save time, then proceed onto the next mission.”<sup>29</sup>

In mid-August of 1969, one lone US advisor had been shot and was stranded in a remote, mountainous area northeast of the town of Rach Gia, Vietnam. Hilliard, who had recently been promoted to Chief Warrant Officer, was in the middle of picking up four or five wounded ARVN<sup>30</sup> soldiers when he got the call. He loaded the wounded and told the troops on the mountaintop that he’d come back for the dead. En route to pick up the US advisor, Dust Off operations informed Hilliard that his was the third helicopter to be summoned to this mission; the first two had been forced out by intense enemy fire. The pilot of the second one had sustained serious wounds and had almost crashed. An Air Force forward air controller, circling overhead, wished Hilliard good luck. Hilliard recounts the mission in his letter:

As we started our approach, we started to take sporadic machine-gun fire from the enemy bunkers located a hundred meters to the front and flank of the pinned-down friendly troops. As we got closer, the bullets started to hit our aircraft. The Army AH-1 Cobra gunships that were escorting us stayed at a high altitude and were not returning fire. We were now on short final approach and beginning our deceleration. I got a very bad feeling about our situation. I applied full power and banked sharply to the left. As I did so, the enemy opened up with extremely heavy machine-gun fire. Numerous rounds came through the now exposed belly of the aircraft. Some rounds came through the radio panel between the pilots’ seats and went into the roof. It seemed like time was frozen. I could see pieces of the radio control panel flying through the cockpit.

I exited the area making sharp turns to the left and right. I also made rapid climbing and descending maneuvers to avoid the fire. They were still hitting us. I felt the cyclic control stick suddenly jerk suddenly. I also started to feel a moderate amount of vibration. I made an emergency landing at a small airfield in the nearby town of Vi Thanh to determine if the aircraft was still flyable.

As we were shutting down, the ambulatory ARVN soldiers that we picked up on the mountaintop exited the aircraft. One of the soldiers did not. He had a gunshot wound to the head and was killed. When we rescued him from the mountain, he only had an ankle injury.

Hilliard's helicopter was riddled with bullet holes, even the rotor blades, but it was flyable. He returned for the still-stranded advisor, this time following his commanding officer, Major Simmons, who had just shown up to help. The idea was to go in low enough to drop off one of the medics who would stabilize the patient and then come back when it was safe to hover long enough for a pick up. Simmons made his approach and was immediately attacked and driven off. Hilliard started his approach but then received a radio transmission ordering him to return to base immediately: "higher headquarters did not want us to lose any more aircraft or personnel on this mission. We could make another attempt after US Air Force fighter bombers had eliminated the threat. We returned to our base at Binh Thuy." But machine-gun fire had rendered his ship damaged beyond repair. The Air Force came and bombed the area, and the 82<sup>nd</sup> sent another helicopter to rescue the advisor. By that time, he had bled to death.

If the mission to save the US advisor exemplifies the agility of the Huey, a night mission a few weeks later in September, 1969, illustrates its limits. Hilliard was flying with three men on loan from the 45<sup>th</sup> Medical Company; his co-pilot had only been in Vietnam for two weeks. They were sent to rescue twenty severely wounded troops from a Vietnamese Marine battalion in two locations about two kilometers apart. Hilliard recalls that "it was classified as a "secure" landing zone and therefore we wouldn't have helicopter gunships providing covering fire. We were advised that the nature of the injuries to the wounded soldiers was gunshot wounds. We questioned how you could have soldiers with gunshot wounds and yet classify the landing zone as secure."

Upon arriving at the first landing zone, Hilliard was told that there was a force of North Vietnamese Regulars nearby and that the area was insecure. Despite the

lack of protective helicopter gunships, Hilliard proceeded. He picked up the troops in the first location, taking enemy fire on the way in and out as the full moon's light kept his ship fully exposed:

The second location was at a small clearing in the forest. We made a steep approach and then had to hover straight down into the trees. We turned on the landing light and took some fire as we did this. The light was turned off at touchdown. There were so many litter cases that they loaded two to a litter, facing opposite to each other. We had total of five litters. Three were in the normal location. One was on the floor in front of the normal location and the other was placed on the crewmembers' folded down seats, directly behind the pilots. They broke the windows on the small doors that fold out and are just forward of the main cargo doors. They did this to fit the litters in a location that far forward in the aircraft. They simply slammed the door shut onto the litter pole and the window would break. I didn't know if we would be able to lift this heavy load out of a confined area. The rule of thumb that we used was the "forty pound rule." If we could do a three-foot hover at 40 pounds of torque or less, we should be able to make it out of a confined area of trees in the Mekong Delta. The torque gauge was our primary instrument for measuring power.

I went to a three-foot hover and saw that we were at forty-three pounds of torque. It was doubtful that we would make it over the trees without exceeding the aircraft limitations. I turned on the landing light to see the trees and started a slow deliberate climb. Our torque gauge read between fifty-five and fifty-seven, as we passed through an altitude of about twenty feet, the enemy opened up with a tremendous amount of machine-gun fire from the left side of the aircraft. Dozens of rounds were hitting the aircraft, I thought we were dead. Time was again frozen. We cleared the trees and I leveled off to a low level departure to avoid enemy fire. The shooting stopped.

"Time was again frozen." The exposition shot is foreboding: night, full moon, unsecure area. The action shot: Hilliard slips his helicopter into a quick descent, aiming for that hole in the trees, focusing on his approach, not the splash of bullets that answered the momentary flash of the landing lights. As soldiers darted towards

the helicopter, shouting, carrying ten men on five litters, ten men shoved in an area designed for three, Hilliard would have heard glass breaking, doors slamming, men shouting. Would he have protested? Gotten out, said no, we're never going to make it? Looked at his inexperienced copilot? His whole crew was from a different company. Where were his men?

The time between the three-foot hover and the climb to twenty feet at forty percent more torque than his helicopter could handle would only have been a matter of seconds, but that space of time was probably three to four times longer than it would have been if the aircraft hadn't been overloaded. Here's our now twenty-year-old pilot, ten months into his tour with three guys from a different company in a Huey with too much weight trying to get out of a very unsecure area under a full moon. At three feet off the ground, the torque gauge reads forty-three. At ten feet, they're at about forty-eight. By fifteen feet, they're near fifty-five and by twenty they're at fifty-eight and that's when they hear and immediately feel "dozens of rounds" hitting his aircraft. "I thought we were dead." Yes—and what did it feel like? What did it feel like, physically? Do you remember? Do you remember how your hands felt, on the controls, your feet, as you steadied your heading? Your heart—was it pounding wildly underneath your chicken plate or did it stop? In which part of your body do you hold terror? And what do you do with it?

## Notes

1. Herbert LePore, "The Role of the Helicopter in Vietnam," *Army Aviation Digest*, July/ August 1994, quoted in "The Vietnam War: 1960–1975," US Army Aviation Museum Foundation, 2 January 2003. Web. Accessed 10 February 2012.
2. Joe Galloway qtd. in "Helicopters in Vietnam" *The History Channel Website*, 2012. Web. Accessed 16 February 2012.
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5. "Helicopters."
6. Peter Dorland and James Nanney, *Dust Off: Army Aeromedical Evacuations in Vietnam*. Center of Military History, United States Army: Washington, D.C., 1982, 68, Web. Accessed 17 February 2012.
7. John L. Cook, *Rescue Under Fire: The Story of Dust Off in Vietnam*, Atglen, PA: Schiffer Military–Aviation History, 1998, 6. Print.

8. Cook 8.
9. Based on November, 2009 interview with Michael Hilliard and Cook 82, in which Cook describes the carrying capacity of the UH-1D as “up to 14 passengers or nearly 4,000 pounds of cargo.” There are four people in the Medevac crew: pilot, copilot, crew chief, and medic, leaving room for only ten.
10. Cook 10–11.
11. Cook chapters 1–3.
12. Brady, Patrick Henry and Meghan Brady Smith, *Dead Men Flying: The Legend of Dustoff, America’s Battelfield Angels*, Bennington, VT: Merriam Press, 2010, 75.
13. Brady, *Dead Men Flying*, 86.
14. Cook, *Rescue Under Fire*, 47, 125.
15. Lepore, “The Role of the Helicopter in Vietnam,” 3.
16. Dorland and Nanney, *Dust Off*, 117.
17. Mike Novosel, *Dustoff: Memoir of an Army Aviator*, New York: Presidio-Ballantine, 1999, 119. Print.
18. Dorland and Nanney 85.
19. Dorland and Nanney 86.
20. Novosel 126.
21. RF/ PF = South Vietnamese National Guard-type units. Regional Forces were company-size and protected district areas. Popular Forces were platoon-size and guarded their home villages.
22. Hilliard.
23. Cook 94–5.
24. Cook 96.
25. Hilliard.
26. From Barbara Hafner Rounds, Army Nurse interviewed in what on *YouTube* is titled *Vietnam War Documentary*, 2/2 of which “Dustoff” is Part 6.
27. Novosel 231.
28. Novosel 235.
29. Novosel 239.

30. Army of the Republic of Vietnam. At first, Medevac pilots were only supposed to pick up US soldiers, but that quickly proved ridiculous. We needed the local soldiers as much as they needed us. About half of the wounded that pilots saved were Vietnamese. Some were even enemy soldiers. Many of the victims my father saved were civilians, women and children. He got reprimanded more than once for bringing civilians to US hospitals that he knew were overstaffed and underused; civilians were only supposed to go to Vietnamese hospitals, which were most often low on supplies and staff. He knew that if he brought the children, for example, from one bombed school to a Vietnamese hospital, they'd die. So he brought them to the US hospital. He didn't care too much about the rules by this point in his tour. He considered it his job to save lives, so he did.

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