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1500 Feet Over Vietnam: A Marine Helicopter Pilot's Diary



Synopsis

The Vietnam experience was hellfire, privation, blood, sweat and death to the average ground soldier. Many a "grunt" looked up at the prosecutors of the air war as a privileged group who went to war at a distance, an altitude, from the "real" soldiers. But was it really so different? Bruce Lake, decorated with 42 Air Medals and the Silver Star for a heroic rescue mission, veteran of hundreds of helicopter missions under hostile fire during his "year, month, and day" in country, offers us a revealing, day-by-day look at the reality of flying bravely in the face of obscure or conflicting policy; of watching his friends from the squadron leave on missions without returning; of his increasing realization that the war was being fought with a goal of maintaining a position rather than winning. Lieut. Lake, an enlisted Marine who was one of a select few chosen from the ranks for flight school to earn his wings and commission, speaks eloquently of his love for flying, which never left him despite his increasing horror at what he witnessed in the landing zones and in the back of his helicopter.

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Customer Reviews

The Vietnam experience was hellfire, privation, blood, sweat and death to the average ground soldier. Many a "grunt" looked up at the prosecutors of the air war as a privileged group who went to war at a distance, an altitude, from the "real" soldiers. But was it really so different? Bruce Lake, decorated with 42 Air Medals and the Silver Star for a heroic rescue mission, veteran of hundreds of helicopter missions under hostile fire during his "year, month, and day" in country, offers us a revealing, day-by-day look at the reality of flying bravely in the face of obscure or conflicting policy; of watching his friends from the squadron leave on missions without returning; of his increasing

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In reviewing Bruce Lake's Book, "1500 Feet Over Vietnam," it is rare that an author can be so nonchalant and modest to the fact that he had earned the "Silver Star" and 42 air medals as a young Marine helicopter pilot. However, when Mr. Lake wrote this book, it was never intended for publication. This entire memoir is based on letters that started on April 1, 1968 and concluded on April 20th, 1969, all to his wife in an attempt to describe his missions and what everyday life was like in his Vietnam "chariot" i.e. the helicopter. Self published, and without the distortion of time (writing a memoir 40 years later from memory), Lake recounts the pain of close friends dying way before their time in combat and crashes, braving enemy fire for troop insertions, extractions and medical dust offs. Mr. Lake goes farther than that. After leaving the service after 5 years, he would feel embarrassed to tell people at his college campus (often five years younger than him and experiencing their first freedom from home) that he had been to Vietnam. Vietnam had done strange things to "his head." After seeing hundreds of dead and dying people in Vietnam, not to mention flying 840 combat missions in 11 months and surviving helicopter crashes and countless near misses, Lake began to both "think" he was immortal and "knew" he was addicted to the adrenalin the previously mentioned would generate. The reader will understand why Lake grew his hair long, bought a high powered motorcycle and drove it at reckless speeds and while working at a factory he would go to the 5th floor and stand with his toes over the edge of the roof and stare at the ground; all in a fruitless attempt to unsuccessfully recreate the surge of excitement that could only come from bringing a chopper into a hot landing zone while surrounding N.V.A. muzzle flashes were aimed right at him spewing forth hot lead. The letters that made up this book were put away for 8 years, and Vietnam receded in the author's mind. Then, after a Navy Reservist and ex "Air America" pilot who lost a relative in 1968 asked Lake if he had been involved in the medical evacuation of his nephew's unit, Lake collected his feelings and with encouragement from friends and family started to chronologically arrange and read them. The result of that effort comprises this wonderful book. Bruce Lake does a fantastic job of explaining his part of flying in a new military concept introduced in Vietnam that was called "Heliborne Warfare". Depending on weather conditions, Lake's primary job was to transport supplies, cargo, or most importantly 20 fully armed U.S. troops into battle flying

his "A" model CH-46 helicopter as part of "Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 265" (HMM-265). Lake was also quick to point out that even though between missions he went to the beach, slept in comfortable quarters, went to the air conditioned Officer's Club, he faced constant issues such as; "Why did a certain pilot get hit? Whose turn would it be next time? How soon will we lose another pilot? When will it be my turn to die?" Lake includes stories in this memoir that are rare, informing, and will never reach any history text. When delivering \$30,000 in cash as a payroll officer, Lake tells the reader the security of a cartridge belt and pistol would bring him. Another interesting anecdote was when Lake recalled learning in grade school how people during the U.S. Civil War would pack lunches and bring their family in wagons to watch battles in fields in valleys. Lake wondered how different it was to fly into and out of pitched battles for seven hours and then return to the base, go to the beach and check out a sailboat and sail up and down the coast watching other people fight. Ruminating on the course of the war, Lake reflected; "I had been in Vietnam less than 2 weeks and already I was beginning to think we weren't really over here to win a war. We were there for economic reasons more than democratic reasons." Lake also pointed out that despite the heavy attrition and heavy "body counts" of the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong, where the enemy was getting killed more than 100 to 1, superior U.S. weaponry (the awesome fire power of "Puff the Magic Dragon" (a transport plane, usually a "C-47" armed with "Gatling Guns" that could rain down a covering fire for U.S. ground troops of 15,000 rounds per minute!) and the devastation of a B-52 air strike, the U.S. was still not winning the war, with (to use the famous cliché) "no light at the end of the tunnel." Lake shamefully admitted that he worked with pilots who were too cowardly or scared to fly into "hot" landing zones. Similar to the problem with American ground troops fragging their overzealous superior officers, these sneaky pilots would pull circuit breakers to simulate mechanical failure to get out of dangerous missions. Also mentioned was the scarcity of territory the U.S. truly "controlled" in Vietnam, the problem of enemy tunnels all over the South (particularly in and around "Cu Chi") and how units of the South Vietnamese Army (A.R.V.N.) were composed of soldiers that in some cases were 12 years old or younger! The hardest letter Lake wrote to his wife was the story of his aversion to "Wrigley's Juicy Fruit Gum," which he still has today. There were missions Lake flew where he had to bring back many badly decomposed bodies of Marines killed in action. To mask the horrible stench of death, Lake would keep a pack of gum in the sleeve of his flight suit. To mask the odor, he would chew a few pieces and stick the moist gum to his upper lip just below his nose to mask the odor! How many 18 year olds that Lake later went to college with after Vietnam had to deal with this? Lake ends this incredible memoir with his experiences in Japan at the end of his tour and the anti-war sentiment he ran into upon his return to the States. There are so many more

anecdotes about the intricacies of this sad chapter in American history, that the serious student of the Vietnam War simply MUST READ this book!

I just finished Bruce's book - I was in ninth grade when my brother went to Vietnam, those were very hard years even at that young age I was always fearful. My brother who made it through Vietnam by the grace of God, but the years to follow many were heartbreaking. My brother "Mac" is mentioned in the book for entertainment he brought back a small pig in a shoe box from HK and then the story of his chopper being shot down and he was the only survivor after he swam 9 hours. It gives me chills to have read about it so many years later and like Bruce, my brother shares a loneliness that he battles with. One verse from the book that has en-lighted me greatly " politicians don't fight the wars; they just start them".

Author Bruce Lake's *1500 Feet Over Vietnam: A Marine Helicopter Pilot's Diary* is an excellent first-person narrative dealing with what it was like to be a Marine combat aviator in Vietnam. He has an understated writing style that manages to keep the reader involved with each chapter. This reviewer conversed at length by phone with Bruce on a number of occasions awhile back while doing some project research on 1st Lt. Horace H. Fleming, USMC, who is still listed as a POW/MIA. Lt. Fleming, known to his fellow Marines as "Bud," was the pilot of a Marine CH-46A helicopter that was bringing reinforcements into the compound of Ngok Tavak, about five miles away from the border outpost at Kham Duc, in Vietnam. Ngok Tavak had been attacked by elements of the NVA 2nd Regiment in the early morning hours of 10 May 1968, and by the time the two CH-46s arrived, the camp was undergoing heavy rocket, mortar, and infantry attack. As Lt. Fleming lifted off, his aircraft was hit by enemy anti-aircraft fire, severing either the fuel or oil line, forcing him to land his aircraft within the besieged compound. As a second aircraft, a UH-1 Huey, hovered over the fouled landing pad in order to take on wounded. Fleming and some Nung soldiers mounted the skids but were unable to enter the crowded cabin. After the aircraft lifted off, Fleming and the Nung soldiers fell over 100 feet into the thick jungle outside of the defensive perimeter that was controlled by the NVA. The Ngok Tavak defenders withdrew to the base camp at Kham Duc, arriving just in time to fight in the unsuccessful defense of that camp. Lt. Fleming was one of at least 39 Americans who died or was taken prisoner during the defeats at Ngok Tavak and Kham Duc, and one of the 32 whose possible remains have not been repatriated. Bud Fleming was promoted to Captain, then to Major over the years, but his status is still unknown. Bruce Lake and Bud Fleming were fellow Marine CH-46A pilots, both members of HMM-265, a Marine Medium Helicopter

squadron that was with MAG-16 at MMAF. If you read this book you will find Lt. Fleming mentioned as "Bud." The author offers a great deal of insight about what it was like to be "Up North" flying daily helicopter missions in what was some of the most hotly-contested territory of the entire Vietnam Conflict. *1500 Feet Over Vietnam* is one of those books that's hard to put down once you start reading. The author also describes what it was like to come home to New England after his tour of duty; a young combat pilot who had seen far more than most civilians could imagine from the daily news coverage that was being displayed in the media. It's not difficult to imagine what it was like flying from the way that the author relates his experiences there. Though frequently understated, the images of what Bruce and others experienced can be shared by reading this superb recollection of just one part of the Vietnam conflict. This reviewer has a personal interest in this book, as I still wear a POW/MIA bracelet that bears the inscription "MAJ HORACE H. FLEMING, III, USMC - 10 MAY 68 SVN." It's my third bracelet with his name since the 1970s. Thanks, Bruce, from one 'Nam-Era Marine to another. It's a superb read. Semper Fi!

I flew as a navy corpsman in USMC helicopters at the same time Bruce was a pilot. I may have flown with him, hard to tell anymore. I met Bruce a few years back and was impressed with his sincerity and warmth. His book occupies an important part of my bookshelf and I frequently turn to it. Bruce said things I wish I could have said. This is a great book full of truths. If you are a Vietnam veteran you need to read this book: if you are not a veteran, you need to read this book also to try and understand the sacrifices made on your behalf by brave aviators who climbed into the cockpits and cabins of rickety helicopters that should never have been flown in combat. Read this book.

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