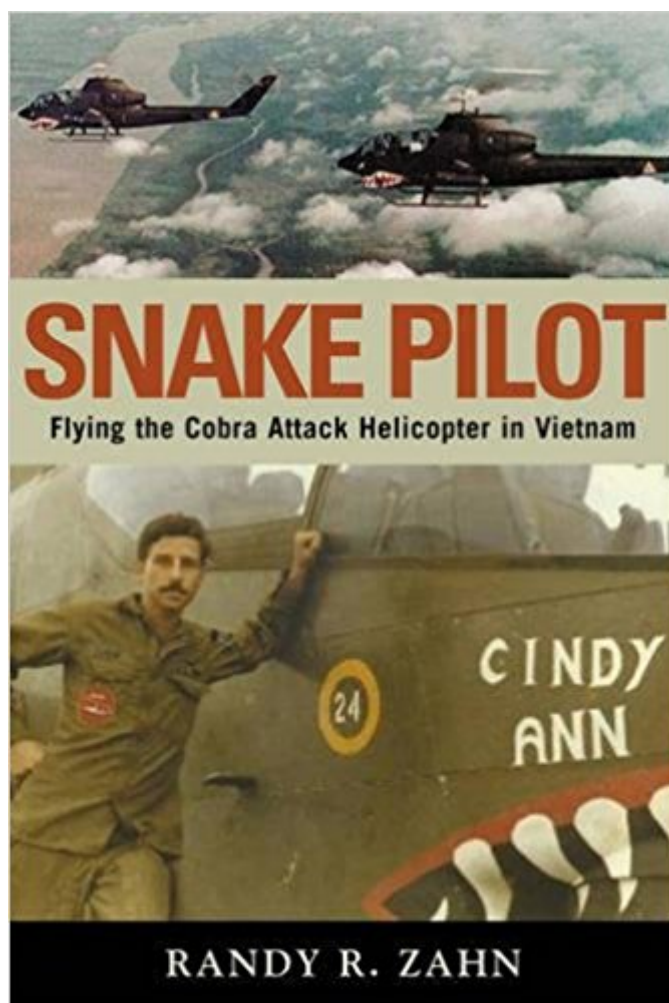


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# Snake Pilot: Flying The Cobra Attack Helicopter In Vietnam



## Synopsis

Based on audiotapes he recorded during the war and sent home to his family, Randy Zahn's Snake Pilot recounts his experiences flying AH-1 Cobra helicopters during the Vietnam War. First deployed in Vietnam in 1967 and loaded with a formidable arsenal of weaponry, the Cobra was the first helicopter designed from inception as an attack aircraft. It dramatically changed the nature of the war in Vietnam by offering the Army, for the first time, its own powerful and highly accurate weapons platform for close-air-support missions. Randy Zahn arrived in Vietnam shortly before the 1970 U.S. invasion of Cambodia, one of the most impressive demonstrations by the Cobra in the war. He describes his stunning transformation from a naive, middle-class teenager from southern California to a hardened killer during his tour in Vietnam. Unlike the pilots who flew the fast-moving strike jets, Zahn experienced the war "up close and personal," witnessing the grisly effects of the Cobra's firepower on enemy soldiers. The author does not glorify killing but rather explains in sharp relief the kaleidoscope of emotions associated with combat: fear, revenge, hate, remorse, pity, and even ecstasy. He captures many of the ironies and nuances inherent in Vietnam, especially during the final years of the conflict. Zahn displays a sensitivity rarely found in memoirs written by battle-hardened warriors. This human element, combined with the vast amount of archival research and interviews with members of his former unit, ensures that Snake Pilot will become the definitive account of the role helicopters played in Vietnam.

## Book Information

Paperback: 302 pages

Publisher: Potomac Books; 1st Edition edition (October 1, 2005)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1574886118

ISBN-13: 978-1574886115

Product Dimensions: 5.9 x 0.8 x 8.9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars 63 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #460,157 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #15 in Books > Engineering & Transportation > Transportation > Aviation > Helicopters #320 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Leaders & Notable People > Military > Vietnam War #371 in Books > History > Military > United States > Veterans

## Customer Reviews

"[Zahn] writes with authority . . . he captures the intensity of moments long since buried in the memories of those who lived them. . . . He has produced a book that is not so much a memoir of events past as a freshly discovered live report from the past. . . . It has lessons to teach the 'battle captains' of today. . . . The glimpse it offers of leaders-as-seen-by-the-led should be of value to anyone who leads the smart, aggressive, competent, self-assured young Mr. Zauns of today." "Zahn reconstructed his year of combat in Vietnam with surprising detail, capturing the cockiness, angst, and attitude of the naive nineteen-year-old 1st Cavalry Division attack helicopter pilot of 1970 and 1971. . . . I recommend it to those interested in Army aviation, the Vietnam War, and leadership of aviation units." "Zahn has shared the ups, downs, and horrors of a year in the life of a nineteen-year-old Cobra gunship pilot with the 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry in Vietnam. Snake Pilot is a real keeper. I couldn't put it down." "You're just a kid,' the flight surgeon said. And he was right. Randy Zahn was just nineteen years old when he served as an AH-1 pilot in 1/9 Cav in 1970-71. Low and slow, up close and personal, he saw war from the steamy cockpit of a Cobra gunship. Through the sweat, blood, and tears of far too many missions, he learned that war is about men and what it does to them. 'We've established bonds that are stronger than blood,' he wrote. Exactly right, and Randy tells it well. Cleared hot." "Snake Pilot puts you in the seat of one of the most awesome weapons of the Vietnam War: the Huey Cobra gunship. In short, [Zahn's] book chronicles the AH-1 at its point of maximum impact. It also is a telling tale of modern war: a story of how a naive middle-class kid from the suburbs is transformed by the pathos of war. This is the best memoir to date on the air war in Vietnam."

Randy R. Zahn is the chief pilot, Alaska Rotor Wing Division, for Era Helicopters in Anchorage, Alaska. He learned to fly helicopters while serving in the U.S. Army from 1968-71. He served a tour of duty in Vietnam (1970-71), earning two Distinguished Flying Crosses, a Bronze Star, two Air Medals for valor, and two Army Commendation Medals for valor. He lives in Eagle River, Alaska.

Zahn tells his story well; from his days in flight training to his arrival in theater and his year of living on the edge. The book is well organized and thoughtfully written. He writes using excellent grammar. While the words get salty in places, those were the days of our youth and that was the way most of us in the military spoke at the time. His references of letters home and diary entries reinforces his memories of the intensity of it all. Of the several books that I own of that long-ago war, Zahn's is my new favorite. I'm amazed at the background similarity shared by the aircrews and

'woulda' beens'. I'd signed up for flight school and was well into the program at Fort Wolters when the RIF's hit. Can't complain, I was well treated by the Army, but I've carried a sense of regret at not having gained that Warrant for much of my life. I can live vicariously in that long-ago while enjoying his great re-telling. It is cathartic, I think. And---I am still alive and healthy; a privilege not accorded to about 30% of those noble pilots and gunners who never came home.

After 45 years of not watching war movies or reading war books, except for Philip Caputo a local boy, I decided to pick up Snake Pilot. The book at about 250 pages is short enough to not be boring. He ain't whining folks. He's telling it like it was. Warrant Officers were in kind of a middle ground in the military. I can see an insecure, jerk of a new junior officer in country being jealous of, or not wanting to take the suggestions from a 20 year old seasoned Cobra pilot, potentially causing deaths. As any war drags on, younger and younger troops are acquired. Remember, in WWII, President #41 was a 19 year old aviator..The flight surgeon was right, he (Zahn) was just a kid. I'm happy that he lived to tell the tale and a realistic tale it is

This is an outstanding record of a highly decorated, American Airman's Vietnam War experience. Randy is very fortunate in possessing an almost photographic memory, apart from his documented letters & tapes. His recall of individual conversations, events & enemy contacts etc. is profound, & creates an environment of which you feel part thereof. Randy, unlike many of his friends & colleagues, survived the Vietnam War. As a result, he has provided a permanent record of his remarkable service to America, flying the Cobra Attack Helicopter. Randy, I sincerely appreciate your military service to your country. Thank you for your commitment in recording the experience.

I am sorry to read the negative and derogatory reviews of Mr. Zahn's book. As far as his "insubordination" goes, many of the finest soldiers (pilots) I served with in Vietnam made courageous decisions not to follow direct orders, even in the face of a possible court marshal. I witnessed a few "senior officers" making decisions that cost people's lives because they did not have first hand information about the situation at hand. I was personally involved in a situation like this, and because the ground mission commander called the shots, our air mission commander was overruled, and the results were tragic. This still keeps me up at night. I was with the 101st Airborne Division ( 158th Assault Helicopter Battalion) and we had guys flying Cobras, OH6-A scout helicopters, Hueys, and Chinooks. Each of these aircraft had their pluses and minuses, but all of the pilots were genuine heroes in my opinion. As I read this book, I was transported back in time to the

year I spent in Quang Tri province and I found his description accurate and informative. So, if you are looking for a book that accurately portrays the experience of a Cobra pilot in Vietnam, this book is all you need. Thank you Mr. Zahn for your courageous service and for writing this book.

This is an excellent story told from the first person perspective of a helicopter gunship pilot providing first hand accounts of the flying and wartime experience. Highly recommended to anyone interested in the Vietnam War, helicopters and aviation combat. He provides a refreshing "tell it like it is" insight that only someone who was there could reveal. I would like to have heard more about the training phase of the pilot's experience as it seems to have been watered down by the editors for some unknown reason. I give the story 5 stars. Took off a rating star for the lack of Nook availability. If you buy the physical hard copy you should be able to get the electronic addition as a backup without having to purchase another book. Other than that this is a great book and highly recommended.

This story is a personal history of the author's experiences from a teenager in California to an Army aircraft commander in the AH-1 Cobra Gunship. It is well written and shows great attention to detail which has been provided by letters and audio tapes that were saved by his parents during his tour in Vietnam. As a pilot who has flown an OH-6A, but not in the military, I was fascinated by the descriptions of flying the LOH and Cobra as a "pink team". My helicopter check ride was given by a former LOH pilot who was shot down and wounded flying the "pink team" missions. Zahn's technical explanations are free of the mistakes often made in other books that employed ghost writers who were not pilots. I have heard of the 1st Cav a lot, but this is the first book about it I have read that gives a complete look at the missions, conditions and tactics used by them. Overall a great book, I recommend it to anyone interested in combat flying, the Vietnam war, or just helicopters.

This book would have to be one of the most enlightening accounts of one man's service in Vietnam that I have ever read. I am sure there are thousands more out there to equal this narrative but will never be told. That does not take one single word away from this book. Kudos for putting it on paper, kudos to his family for saving the correspondence. Thank-you for sharing.

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