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From hunter to hunted: The body of a U.S. helicopter pilot returns to Khe Sanh

'Just Say It Was the Comancheros'

"When we were down in South Vietnam, we were told not to go out if the enemy had two 51-cal. guns working together. Out there in Laos, those guns stretch as far as the eye can see."

"I don't write home much. What am I supposed to say? That I took fire eight times today, and that if I had stayed on those LZs [landing zones] five seconds longer each time, I'd have been dead?"

"We looked out and saw little clouds. Then there were lots of little clouds and little black cotton balls from airbursts. You understand, this was at 6,000 feet. Six thousand feet."

The sign that hangs outside the headquarters of C Troop, Second Squadron, Seventeenth Cavalry shows an angry vulture crouching on a limb. The legend beneath the bird proclaims: "Patience, my ass! I want to kill something." There was a time when that slogan aptly summed up the daredevil pilots of C Troop. But a month ago, their sleek Cobra gunships were ordered into the skies over Laos, and since then, six of C Troop's twenty crack pilots have been killed and three others have been wounded. Now, for many of the once-happy warriors in C Troop, the grim facts of death in Laos have cast their job in a different light. Says Warrant Officer Harry Adams, 28,

of Fort Pierce, Fla.: "I have a very modest ambition. I want to stay alive."

To the modern American cavalryman of the air, the plunge into Laos has been something like an old-time charge on horseback: admirably heroic, stunningly effective—and terribly costly. For four weeks now, American helicopter pilots have flown through some of the heaviest flak in the history of the Indochinese war. One day alone last week, the Army admitted to losing ten aircraft to the unexpectedly heavy North Vietnamese ground fire, and there were reports from the field that the actual losses had been much worse. As a result, the customary bravado of the American chopper pilot was beginning to wear a bit thin. "Two weeks ago," said one gunship skipper, "I couldn't have told you how much time I had left to serve in Vietnam. Now I know that I've got 66 days to go, and I'm counting every one." Another flier added anxiously: "The roles are reversed over there. In Vietnam, you have to hunt for the enemy. But in Laos, man, *they* hunt for *you*."

Despite the risks, it was inevitable that U.S. helicopters should be deeply involved in the Laotian campaign, for more than any other artifact of war, the chopper has become the indelible symbol of the Indochina conflict. Helicopter pilots were among the first Americans

killed in the war a decade ago, and, under President Nixon's Vietnamization program, they will probably be among the last to leave. In the years between, the chopper's mobility and firepower have added a radically new dimension to warfare, and the daring young American pilots have scooped up their Silver Stars, Distinguished Flying Crosses and Air Medals by the bushel—along with Purple Hearts. In the opinion of many military experts, the helicopter has been the difference between a humiliating U.S. defeat in Vietnam and whatever chance remains of attaining some more satisfactory outcome.

But other people see the helicopter in a far different light. To them, it is the lethal instrument by which the Nixon Administration has been able to expand and prolong the war at a time when most Americans simply want out. They argue that the helicopter is merely a surrogate for the battalions of U.S. ground troops that, in another day, might have been committed to battle. And they are not at all persuaded by the Administration's contention that the 70 or more American fliers killed or missing in the Laotian operation so far constitute a relatively acceptable number.

Indeed, the idea that the war can be fought almost indefinitely, if only American losses are "acceptable," is at the core