

Ford: The true story of a Vietnam helicopter pilot



Bob Ford of Okeene poses in 1967 with his Huey helicopter, in which he flew over 1,000 missions in Vietnam.

By COSETTE WYMER

Anyone who has lived in Okeene and the surrounding area has known of Bob Ford and his experience as a Vietnam pilot. Few, however, have known the “rest of the story” but they will soon.

Ford, co-owner of the Shawnee Flour Mill in Okeene, has written his story and the story of his crew in his book *Black Cat 2-1: The True Story of a Vietnam Helicopter Pilot and His Crew*.

Even though Ford hesitated to share his time as a helicopter pilot in Vietnam, he opens the book with an 1990 account when an Okeene teacher, Sandy Boeckman, asked him to talk to her students.

In the course of the day, he opened himself to the children and they to him. Boeckman concluded the visit by encouraging Ford to write down his story so he did.

Brown Books Publishing, Inc. out of Dallas, Texas plans to release the copy by Dec. 15th, just in time for the Christmas holidays. Information may be found on Amazon, Barnes and Noble, Facebook and www.BlackCat2-1.com.

Ford approaches the chapters in the book with excerpts from letters he wrote his sweetheart Diane, who would become his wife during flight training school and later the mother of their three children.

He immediately takes the reader into the war action on board a helicopter nearing a landing zone with Ford inside on his first flight in enemy territory.

“You have to put personal safety aside and do everything you can for the troops on the ground,” said a pilot veteran as Ford awaited his first assignment. The veteran’s intensity permanently became etched in his mind he remembers.

He then shares those first

impressions of Vietnam before his assignment when he was eager not only for action but for a leadership position as an arriving lieutenant.

As Ford describes his impressions, he introduces the officers that not only played an integral part in his career decisions but also educated him on how to survive in this “new environment” called Vietnam.

Mentioning Yeager, York, Murphy, Rickenbacker and Doolittle as his early heroes portrays Ford’s interest in aviation and his early innocence of the glory of war. He would learn the realities of war later . . . the hard way.

As he reflects to the University of Oklahoma campus and his ROTC training, his memories introduce younger readers who are interested in the military path how his road began.

In Aug. of ‘67 he speaks of his first chance in the left seat of a Huey as the pilot in the gun platoon called the Alley Cats. His call was Black Cat 2-1 and he turned 21 in that seat that day.

Ford remembers the details of the flights and the men as though the experiences were yesterday, using the war terminology of the era such as “chicken plates, klick, thumper, desk jockey,” as well as the locations, “Pleiku, Nha Trang, Da Nang, Hoi An, Tam Ky and Chu Lai” to name a few in a long list.

On a Talk Radio interview Ford was asked how he remembered the details in the book and he answered, “I put myself in the cockpit and then I called those that were in the cockpit with me. I asked how they recalled things and then I wrote it.”

He also shares the death of the first officer who had flown cover for him and chose to “make another run” to check for any activity.

Ford remembers visiting

the hurt officer in the hospital with his superior officer. “I felt I shouldn’t have been there . . . I was a new guy. . . I had the feeling I was evolving emotionally and rapidly adapting to death in combat . . . Even though I felt badly for Easley, I was thankful it did not happen to me. After writing a letter home, I thought only about how to improve as a pilot and the missions to be flown the next day. I slept well.”

The Lieutenant’s honesty and realism is what makes any historian want to read more. Even though that same realism makes the read uncomfortable at times, the truth is what makes the read necessary.

Whether he was recalling the time he suffered from vertigo in the pilot’s seat, trying to pick up a soldier in the dark with only a Zippo lighter to guide him on the ground, or describing when he and his crew pretended between missions they were WWII pilots and dropped ammo canisters filled with sand on small lakes just to “blow off some steam”, Ford shares a humanistic outlook on an inhuman time.

Ford’s touch of humor and humanism with those around him as well as his family at home encourages those who were there, those who are grateful they weren’t and those that could find themselves in similar situations in the future learn from sharing in Ford’s true story.

After flying 1000 missions in one year, sometimes more than 15 in a single day, Bob Ford and his crew portray a side of the Vietnam War that few books have expressed. On this Veteran’s Day, an appreciation for their service and their sharing to help all Americans better understand sacrifices made is not only appreciated but are also respected. Black Cat 2-1 is not only worth the read; it is necessary.