

A Hero Among Us

As students at Grandview Heights High School, we liked to think that we knew what our future held. And as most discover, we had no idea of what actually lay before us. You are about to read such a story.

Bill Ailes grew up on First Ave., near the corner of Avondale. He was a member of the GHHS Class of 1965. After graduating, Bill enrolled at The Ohio State University. "The Big Farm" as it was sometimes called back in those days.

After a brief time, Bill decided that college just wasn't for him. All he could think about was flying helicopters. Dropping out had some heavy consequences in 1966 because the Selective Service Board, AKA the Draft, was looking for young men. Demand was high, there was a war in Vietnam. Knowing that it was inevitable, twenty-year-old Bill enlisted in the Army that year, hoping for the chance to fly.

After completing AIT (Advanced Infantry Training) in Armor at Ft. Knox, KY, Bill was selected for Officer Candidate School. He received his commission as a Second Lieutenant in March 1967 and having applied for flight training, was accepted into helicopter flight school. After flight training at Ft. Walters in Mineral Wells, TX and Hunter Army Airfield in Savannah, GA, he was selected for further training in the Army's CH-47 Chinook helicopter at Ft. Rucker, AL. Bill had developed an amazing skill that he had only dreamed of. By the Spring of 1968, he received his orders and was taking that skill-set to Vietnam.

Bill now was a 1st Lieutenant in the 101st Airborne Division, the renowned "Screaming Eagles", and was based at Vandegrift Combat Base in the Republic of Vietnam. Flying the CH-47 Chinook, a thin-skinned unarmed transport helicopter, mission assignments were often perilous, and this was never truer than it was on February 28, 1969.

On this day, 1Lt William B. Ailes distinguished himself as few others have. His valor resulted in being awarded the Silver Star Medal. There is only 1 award that separates the Silver Star from the Medal of Honor. Think about that for a moment.

The citation for Bill's Silver Star follows:

The President of the United States of America takes pleasure in presenting the Silver Star to Captain (Transportation Corps) [then First Lieutenant] William B. Ailes, United States Army, for gallantry in action in the Republic of Vietnam on 28 February 1969. Captain Ailes distinguished himself while serving as the Aircraft Commander of a CH-47C Chinook helicopter in Company A, 159th Assault Helicopter Battalion, 101st Airborne Division, located at Vandegrift Combat Base, Republic of Vietnam.

The weather had restricted flight in the area the previous day, and Captain Ailes decided to make a weather check. Upon arrival at Fire Support Base CUNNINGHAM, a message was relayed that three locations had emergency medical evacuation which needed to be taken to Quang Tri. Two medical

evacuations were loaded at Fire Support Base ERSKINE, where Captain Ailes aircraft was joined by a UH-1E gunship escort to the two remaining pickup zones. The next pick up zone was located on the side of a knoll, requiring the aircraft to be hovered straight into the area, after considerable maneuvering to remain clear of small arms fire. After landing, there remained approximately six inches clearance under the forward blades, and five feet of clearance to the front and sides from trees in the area. The aircraft remained on the ground under fire for five minutes while seventeen casualties were placed on board. Departure was made on instruments due to low lying clouds that had moved in. The gunship support element flew into the nearby valley to locate the second pick up zone which was to be on the road passing through the valley. After the gunship located the area, Captain Ailes descended through the clouds, breaking out approximately 500 feet above ground level, and proceeded along the road. The aircraft came under heavy fifty caliber machine gun and small arms fire. He immediately climbed into the clouds and came down through another opening 100 meters away. A rapid descent was made through the clouds into the pick-up zone while the gunship circled the area to suppress any enemy fire, and he landed on the road and picked up fourteen more wounded personnel. Another instrument ascent was necessary, and he then flew to Camp Evans. Captain Ailes' outstanding flying ability and devotion to duty were in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service and reflect great credit upon himself, his unit and the United States Army.

Thirty-three wounded troops were successfully extracted from harm's way and taken to safety and treatment on that single mission. But that's not all. The events of February 28th were merely a harbinger of what was in store for Bill in March.

Wednesday, March 12, 1969 proved to be another busy day at the office. He was flying in support of units of the Third and Ninth Marine Divisions at Fire Support Base NEVILLE on a mountain peak near the Demilitarized Zone. Flying his CH-47C Chinook helicopter was particularly challenging on this day due to severe overcast on the mountain. His mission was the emergency evacuation of casualties and the resupply of the Marines. Undeterred by the overcast (think pea soup-like fog) which reached well below the crest of the mountain, and guided by a radio operator at the fire base who judged the position of the helicopter *only by the sound of its rotors*, Bill was able to skillfully maneuver his airship up the side of the mountain with a sling cargo net *only five to ten feet* from the tops of the trees. After lowering the cargo to the ground at Fire Support Base NEVILLE, he then landed his helicopter and quickly loaded the casualties, air taxied down the side of the mountain and proceeded to the medical facility at Vandegrift Combat Base. This was repeated on four more occasions on this day. For heroism while participating in aerial flight as evidenced by voluntary action above and beyond the call of duty, the Army, after reviewing the after-action reports, awarded Captain [then First Lieutenant] William B. Ailes *two Distinguished Flying Crosses*.

The following week, on March 17th while attempting to extract wounded troops, his helicopter came under intense enemy fire. It was hit, rendering one of its two engines inoperable. He managed to fly out of the gun and mortar fire and return to base with one engine, saving the Chinook. An example of "extraordinary achievement while participating in aerial flight". Bill was awarded another Distinguished Flying Cross.

On the following day, he was sent to help extract a Marine unit that was in danger of being overrun by the enemy. On his approach, his aircraft came under intense fifty caliber fire that struck one rotor blade. After landing, mortar rounds began to impact within ten meters of the aircraft. After a substantial time to load the Marines, he left the area. Upon his return for the remaining troops, he came under another mortar attack. Again, he remained on the ground long enough for the troops to load their equipment and board. After returning to the base camp, the helicopter had to be grounded for maintenance due to hits taken during the extraction. Bill was awarded yet another Distinguished Flying Cross.

Two days later, on March 20th, Bill received a distress call on the emergency frequency of his radio while sitting on the landing pad. A Navy A-4 Skyraider had been shot down and the pilot had ejected. Bill immediately left for the site of the downed pilot, having his crew rig the jungle penetrator in case his aircraft was needed for the rescue. Due to the large number of enemy troops in the area, any delay could lead to the downed pilot's capture or death. Bill elected to initiate the extraction before the UH-1 gunships could reach the area to provide support. An approach was made to the downed pilot's discarded parachute, and the helicopter was brought to a hover on the side of a steep hill. Due to the height of the trees, he was forced to hover the aircraft with the rotor blades brushing the tree tops. When the jungle penetrator was raised to approximately twenty feet, it jammed and could not be raised or lowered. Bill, with the guidance of his crew, lifted the pilot clear of the trees, climbed to one thousand feet, flew to a nearby fire base, lowered the pilot to the ground, and then placed him aboard the aircraft to be taken to safety. Bill's outstanding flying ability and devotion to duty were again in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service. Yes, he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. Again.

The Distinguished Flying Cross is highly coveted among military airmen, but only awarded sparingly. It is awarded for heroism and extraordinary achievement while participating in aerial flight, no small feat. Bill was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross a total of FIVE times during March of 1969.

Bill returned to the States from Vietnam later that Spring. Like the other men and women returning from Vietnam, he received no hero's welcome. The Nation was in turmoil and had no time or desire to honor her Veterans. He left active duty in 1971 and spent a couple of years in the Army Reserve. He wanted to pursue a career in commercial aviation, but that wasn't possible due to diabetes brought on as a result of exposure to Agent Orange while in Vietnam. However, he still loves to fly whenever possible. Bill lives in Ravenna, Ohio and works in the plastic fabrication industry, a career he has enjoyed to the point of having no plans to retire.

Thank you for your distinguished service to our country, Captain Ailes... and welcome home.