

Book Review – Dead Men Flying
The Legend of DustOff: America's Battlefield Angels
By Patrick Henry Brady

Review by Chris Hope, Master CFI

When I was a young, eager-eyed 2nd Lieutenant, about to go to USAF pilot training and then on to Viet Nam, I decided that I wanted to fly helicopters as my first assignment. And not just any helicopters – I wanted to fly rescue choppers. At that time, 1965, the Air Force was flying the CH-53, Jolly Green Giant. And they were charged with plucking downed airmen out of the jungle and bringing them back safely. During my year of pilot training, my eyes were opened, and while I admired everything the chopper pilots did, it was a job that I did not want.

Fast forward a couple of years, and I was flying the Lockheed C-141 Starlifter, making regular flights to all points in Viet Nam and Thailand. And one of our regular assignments was to transport new army Huey's from San Antonio TX to Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport. We could carry about six choppers over, but about twelve back. This because the parts didn't fit too well together when we brought them back home.

All of this went through my mind as I read General Brady's recollection of the start up of the Army's operations of their own medical evacuation procedures.

General Brady served completed two tours in Viet Nam. The first was pre-1965, the second after 1965. The distinction is important, because after 1965 the war became very intensive. In his first tour, the unit transported 4,000 patients over the year's time. In his second tour, the same number of pilots would transport an average of 7,000 **per month**.

The Dustoff team flew the UH-1 Helicopter (the Huey) with the 57th Medical Detachment. In the early part of the campaign the unit was charged to evacuate the wounded, but only during the day, in good weather, during a lull in the fighting. During its first operational year, 1962, the Detachment's five aircraft flew 235 evacuations, none of them Vietnamese. Major Charles Kelly took command in 1964, with a new attitude toward medical evacuations.

Under Major Kelly, and later under then Captain Brady, the attitude toward evacuations would change. The later Dustoff attitude would be "Anytime, anywhere, we will pick up the casualties as soon as called." Daytime, nighttime, good weather, bad weather, under fire or not, the Dustoff team charged itself with immediate evacuations.

General Brady's writing brings immediacy to the events. He talks of dropping into the mountains, jungle, through the clouds, and "walking" the helicopter down the hillside by watching the rotor just a foot or two off of the mountainous terrain. He talks of entering firefights by popping up over the trees, loading the wounded, and trying to escape before the enemy can react.

He talks of Major Kelly's last flight. A bit south of Vinh Long, Major Kelly drew heavy fire as he took his helicopter in to evacuate wounded during a fire fight. The on-site ground forces commander screamed at him to get out. Kelly's answer: "When I have your wounded." That was Major Kelly's last mission, as he died from enemy fire just after that transmission.

He talks of one of his medics, Pappy Coleman – three Purple Heart awards in six months. He talks of working with the grunts in the field to ascertain the direction and strength of the enemy in the area, the severity of the wounds, and the total risk to the rescue crew so that the Dustoff team can best complete a successful evacuation.

General Brady's writing puts the reader right in the middle of the landing zone as the Dustoff pilots and medics carry out their mission of bringing the wounded back for immediate medical care. This is a book not to be missed by anyone interested in the full range of air operations in the Viet Nam era.

*Chris loves to read, write, and fly, but not necessarily in that order
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