BOOK REVIEW

M*A*S*H Angels: Tales of the First Air Evac Helicopters
A book by Richard C. Kirkland
by Martin J. Pociask

The true story of the first Air Evac helicopters is told cleverly in MASH Angels: Tales of the First Air Evac Helicopters. It is a remarkable story about the courage and dedication of the crews and medics who snatched countless wounded soldiers and downed pilots from the jaws of death, often from behind enemy lines. It is also the story of the versatility of the helicopter on the battlefields of Korea. It is the story of the beginning of today's lifesaving emergency medical service, which owes its birth to a handful of MASH (Mobile Army Surgical Hospital) helicopter pilots and medics of a half-century ago.

The author, Richard C. Kirkland, is a Helicopter Association International (HAI) member and a 2002 HAI "Salute to Excellence," Excellence in Communications Award winner. Kirkland was recognized for his contributions to the helicopter community and his book, Tales of a Helicopter Pilot. He also published a previous work entitled, Tales of a War Pilot. A decorated World War II fighter pilot, Kirkland was sent to Korea in November of 1952, where he was assigned to a MASH unit. There he saw extensive action and experienced hair-raising adventures as a helicopter pilot, flying over the battlefield in a lightweight, unarmored chopper, while taking enemy fire.

His book relates those experiences, which he refers to as "tales."

Kirkland was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, six Air Medals and the U.S. Air Force Commendation Medal. After his military career, he was an aerospace executive and subsequently a nationally recognized author. Smithsonian Institutional Press and Ballantine Books/Random House have published his books. His stories and articles have appeared in Air and Space, Flight Journal, Air Force, Air Classic, and other national magazines.

The book also sheds some insight into the daily lives of a MASH unit during war. Kirkland has successfully told a historically accurate story, which is filled with all the drama that comes with war, while occasionally taking the reader behind the scenes to explore some of the lighter moments that offered some measure of relief to the men and women of the 8055 MASH.

For those of us who watched Robert Altman's movie or the long-running TV series M*A*S*H, some of Kirkland's tales will seem familiar. However, he also fills in the blanks for us, detailing the helicopters central role in the rescue and transport operations that brought the wounded to the 8005 MASH hospital facility. (The movie and TV MASH unit was called the 4077.) The author tells riveting stories of pulling wounded soldiers off the battlefield and snatching downed jet pilots from behind enemy lines. The interaction of medical personnel under combat conditions is a dramatic human story that the book doesn't ignore. The challenges, loves, and personal conflicts of those first air-evac crews and their MASH teammates, who laid the cornerstone for the helicopter lifesaving system we know today, are portrayed with humor and affection.

Captain Sam Gilfand used the alias "Hawkeye" at the 8005 MASH. Kirkland writes that Gilfand had a keen sense of humor and a habit of playing jokes that could have resulted in a pilot qualifying simultaneously for a medal of valor and a court-martial. This real-life Hawkeye also had a thing for beautiful M*A*S*H nurses. By the way, Kirkland says there was also someone called "Hotlips," but no Trapper, Radar, or Klinger.

A half-century later, Kirkland tracked down several of his old Korean War buddies and some M*A*S*H doctors, nurses, and other personnel, who added their recollections to his book. Kirkland referred to his notes and diaries and a number of sketches and paintings executed on scene, a long time ago. He also searched military records to ensure that his telling of the story would be historically accurate. Kirkland gives the reader a taste of the personalities and a flavor of the times. In a couple instances he has employed fictitious names where the story involved intimate personal relationships.

The title for the book came to Kirkland from an incident that occurred during the war, one cold Korean morning when a badly wounded G.I. was being lifted off the battlefield and into his helicopter carrying-pod. The wounded G.I. told Kirkland, 'It was like an angel had come to save me.' Indeed, the helicopter must have seemed like an angel to thousands of wounded G.I.s and downed airmen during the Korean War.

The air war included some of the most intense and vicious fighting of the war. To give you a better perspective, on a single day U.S. Navy pilots flew a record of 538 offensive missions in MIG Alley. Kirkland commanded the Tiger element providing battle-taxi and ambulance service for the MASH and pickup service for the Air Force, Navy, Marines, ROK, and other UN pilots and crews shot down over North Korea or the Yellow Sea.

Helicopters of the Third Air Rescue Group were given credit for
picking up 846 pilots and aircrew from behind enemy lines during the Korean War. Add to that 8,373 soldiers and airmen who were snatched from the battlefields and air-taxied to the front-line MASH units. Kirkland states that the 8005's Hawkeye actively kept up morale with his constant good humor and positive attitude. "It just seemed that no matter how bad things got, he always managed to smile or crack a joke. I can't remember of ever seeing him depressed. They exaggerated some in the movie and TV series, of course, but the part about his quick wit and good humor was right on target. And keep in mind while he was doing all those antics, Dr. Sam Gilfand was also performing his share of duty and then some. He was an outstanding surgeon, as well as a super person." Kirkland remembers an incident during one of those hill battles: "We were inundated with wounded. I had put on a gown and mask and was helping out in the OR, which we would sometimes do between medevac flights. Suddenly one of the MASH medics had an appendicitis attack and it was determined to be an emergency. When they carried him into the OR, Hawkeye had just completed a long and complicated surgery on a critically wounded GI. It seemed that he always got the worst cases. I guess that was because he could save a life even when it was all but hopeless. 'Okay we gotta take care of our own, so it's time out for a quick appendectomy,' Hawkeye said, standing there in his blood-splattered gown holding a scalpel. 'Richard, time me.'"

Kirkland exclaimed, "Go!" He glanced at his watch, noted that Hawkeye's incision was swift and accurate and within a few minutes the procedure was complete and he held up his scalpel and said, "Time!" The orderlies lifted the litter off the operating table and carried the medico to post-op while another group brought in the next badly wounded patient.

The helicopter brought a new dimension to the evacuation and care of the seriously wounded; it helped to reduce by half the wartime mortality rate as compared to WWII—no doubt about it. The helicopter boosted troop morale, with the soldiers knowing that they would be plucked from the battlefield if seriously wounded. Kirkland describes those early helicopters as "primitive," and proudly points to today's technological marvels that fly around the clock saving thousands of lives by snatching them from raging waters, burning buildings, mountaintops, accident sites, and a score of other life-threatening emergencies. The Vietnam War marked another stage in the development of a more efficient second-generation turbine-powered helicopter for battlefield medical evacuations. Manufacturers have taken this experience and produced an even more efficient and better-performing helicopter that is used in civil operations, including the air ambulance/medevac mission. Today, civil emergency medical service programs have validated the concept of the helicopter as a quick-response air ambulance that doesn't require an airport and is not hindered by urban sprawl or traffic congestion. At this writing, in the U.S., there are nearly 600 helicopter air-ambulance bases, providing excellent coverage for emergency requirements.

Kirkland is proud of his Korean War helicopter experience. After he retired from the USAF, he remained involved with helicopters for the next 30 years, occasionally flying patients to hospitals, sometimes landing on a parking lot or the street. Kirkland notes that today there are few hospitals that do not have a heliport. He points out that today's emergency transports all originated from the MASH Angels in Korea.

I encourage anyone interested in helicopters or emergency medical missions to read MASH Angels: Tales of the First Air Evac Helicopters.

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