

Legacy

Carl Patrick Hughes was a native and life-long resident of Savannah, Georgia. A graduate of Jenkins High School, where he was a member of the football team, Pat Hughes enrolled at Clemson University in 1964. At Clemson, he was a mechanical engineering major and member of the rifle team.

After leaving Clemson, Pat was employed by the Union Camp Corporation, owner at the time of the world's largest paper mill located in Savannah.

Pat's father had been a paratrooper in World War II, completing four combat jumps. Perhaps his father's legacy was part of Pat's motivation for joining the Army. In 1968, Pat began training as an Army helicopter pilot. His warrant officer class roommate Bob Holcomb remembered "shared competitive anxieties" as they labored to master the complexities of flying, "from our first solo flights to our first night formation flying above Georgia several months later. Flight school was hard and extremely dangerous." Much of Pat's training took place at Hunter Army Airfield near his hometown of Savannah.

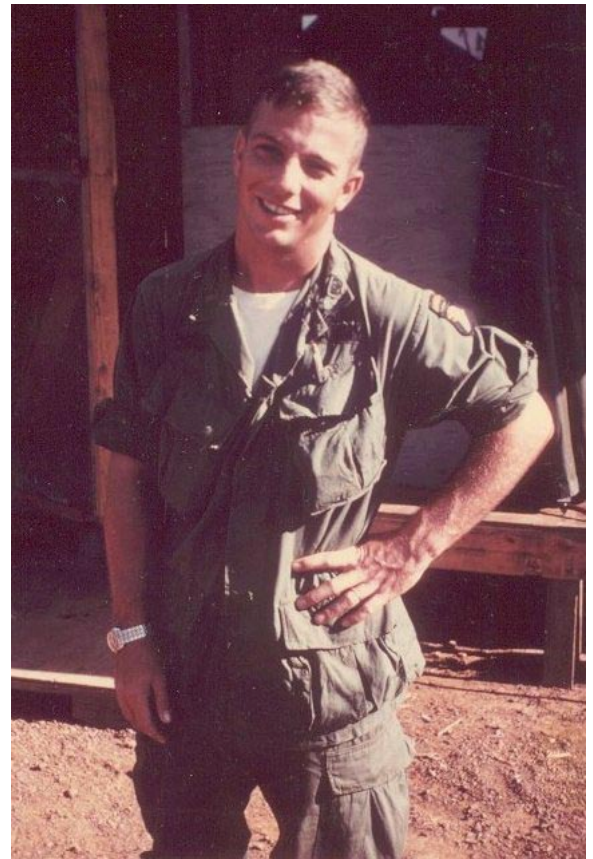


Pat shipped to Vietnam in the spring of 1969 and was assigned to the 158th Aviation Battalion at Camp Evans, northwest of Hue in central Vietnam. Camp Evans was located in the northern I Corps region operating against the the North Vietnamese Army and its infiltration routes through Laos and the A Shau Valley. Pat's battalion was part of the 101st Airborne Division, famous for its parachute infantry engagements in Europe during World War II. In Vietnam, the 101st had swapped its parachute silk for the roar of helicopter rotors. Pat's job would be to ferry troops into battle, provide logistical support, fire support and extraction.

At Camp Evans, Pat was assigned to B Company and Bob Holcomb to C Company. Holcomb recalled that his friend was "diligent" in his flying technique.

In an August 30, 1969 letter home, Pat wrote, "The troops in the A Shau Valley are being pulled back for the coming monsoons. It's hard to resupply them when the clouds are so low you can't see them... We don't get shot at but some of the places we have to go aren't very good... We have some outstanding pilots and I'm learning a lot from them."

On September 3, Pat was flying as co-pilot on a fourteen-ship mission to extract from the jungle a rifle company from the 101st's 2nd Brigade. Pat's UH-1H Huey helicopter was the eighth aircraft in the flight. Chief warrant officer Ben Sutton was the pilot. The first seven aircraft landed in the pickup zone and departed without incident despite the presence of a sixty-foot tall tree some forty meters directly north of the touchdown point. Each departing aircraft had turned approximately twenty degrees to the left upon takeoff which provided sufficient clearance for the helicopters' fifty-seven foot rotor blades.



Sutton and Pat's eighth aircraft, upon approach, was instructed to utilize a revised traffic pattern due to artillery fire impacting to the southwest of the pickup zone. Because of inadequate spacing, Sutton elected to abort his first landing attempt. The second approach was successful and five passengers joined Sutton, Pat, their flight engineer and gunner onboard the helicopter. Upon lift off, the aircraft departed to the north, failing to make the twenty degree left turn. As the aircraft executed a maximum performance takeoff, the main rotor blades struck the tree. Immediately, the rotor's revolutions dropped to a level unable to sustain lift. The aircraft slewed left about ten degrees, the tree's branches ripping the left elevator from the tail boom. The helicopter's remaining momentum carried it another seventy meters along its flight path where it slammed into the jungle canopy and plummeted down the side of a ravine, landing in a wide stream. The aircraft immediately exploded and all nine soldiers aboard were killed.



Pat Hughes had participated in more than twenty-five combat missions, earning a reputation, according to his company commander, as an 'outstanding aviator, soldier, man and friend...' Pat's untimely death is not the end of his story. His brother Jon followed Pat to Clemson. He recalled, "Pat was a good friend to many... I know of three young men named Patrick in his memory, including my oldest son."

Bob Holcomb, credited his former roommate with changing the course of his life. "He was a powerful role model I wanted to emulate, and my distinct shortfall was in 'knowing' things. I came from a youth of fast cars, fast people, and little else as a 19 year old. Flying was actually a continuation of my native hot dog pursuits, but [he] shook up my values. He actually knew things. Interesting things. Strange things. After being his roommate for so long I knew I had to go to a college if I was going to compete with men like him."

Holcomb attended San Jose State University on the GI Bill, earning his Bachelor of Science degree in 1975. "It has proven a fruitful degree to this day. Thank you Carl Patrick Hughes, and thank you Clemson for teaching him to teach me of the priceless importance of education."

Warrant Officer 1 Carl Patrick Hughes was awarded the Bronze Star and the Air Medal. He was survived by his wife Nancy, his parents, two sisters and brother. He is buried in Savannah's Greenwich Cemetery and is memorialized on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, DC on Panel 18W, Line 028 and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Emmet Park in Savannah.

