

TIMELESS VALOR

Remembering
Capt. Scott R. Alwin

BY PAMELA (PJA) FULLERTON

DURING THIS 50TH ANNIVERSARY YEAR of the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, it is past time to include Capt. Scott Alwin among the ranks of America's greatest aviators.

Alwin served as a helicopter pilot in the 145th Combat Aviation Battalion, 68th Assault Helicopter Company in Vietnam between 1967 and 1972, flying the Bell UH-1 Iroquois. Official Army records show that, while there, he received 136 Air Medals. His battalion records indicate he earned more than 207. Either number is believed to be the record for Air Medals awarded to any pilot from any branch of the service — Air Force, Army, Navy, or Marines — in the history of military flight. During the Vietnam War, one Air Medal was awarded for every 25 hours of actual combat flight time, so Capt. Alwin amassed an extraordinary total of more than 5,000 hours. He was also awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Silver Star, and multiple Bronze Stars and Purple Hearts. His fellow veterans said he was nominated twice for the Congressional Medal of Honor for volunteer missions, and Hanoi Hannah placed a higher bounty on him than on any other pilot in the country. During his first tour, he invented the auto-rotational maneuver to counteract tail-rotor and engine failure.



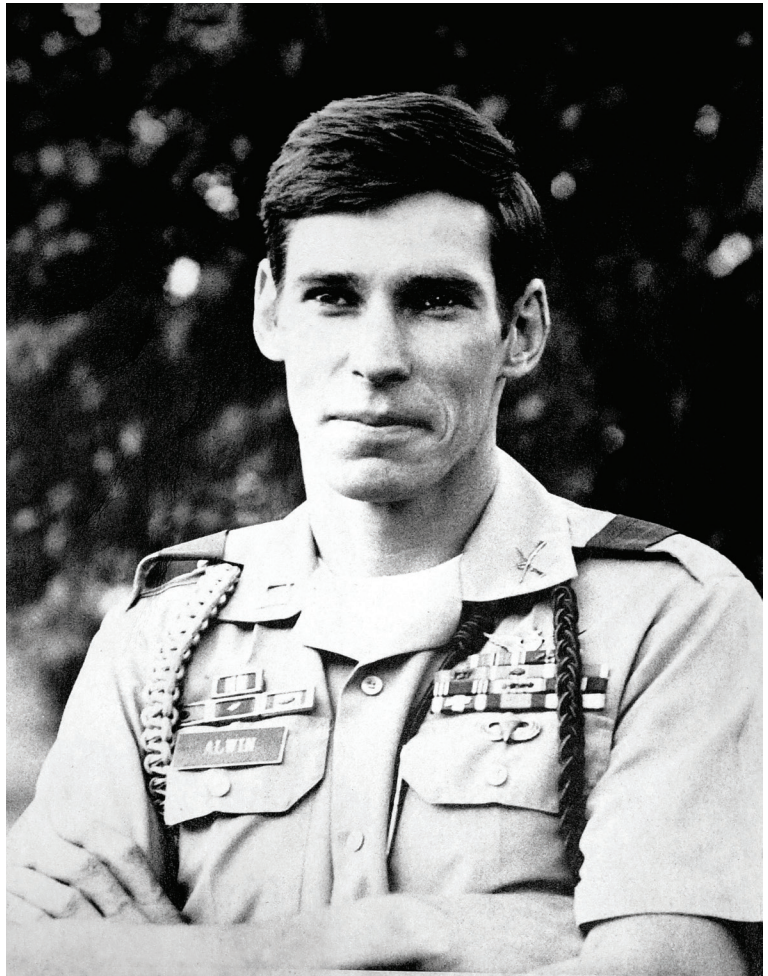
It is still standard training for all helicopter pilots and saves lives to this day.

But this combat warrior and consummate professional — a “silver dollar driver” whose final call sign was “The Grim Reaper” — was also a “PK”: a preacher’s kid who didn’t smoke or drink, wasn’t particularly tolerant of cursing, and demanded that the women working on the base be treated with courtesy and respect. And while a quiet guy sitting in front of him doesn’t conform to the prevailing image of a hard-charging combat pilot, his colleagues thought so highly of him that, on one occasion, every single one of them risked courts-martial to defy a nonaviator commanding officer. The XO had grounded Alwin after he crashed a badly damaged aircraft while returning from a mission. Every pilot in the 68th AHC crowded into the XO’s office and lay his wings on the desk, declaring that “if Alwin doesn’t fly, neither do we!” When threatened with court-martial, they refused to back down, saying that if Alwin couldn’t get his Huey home, no one could have — and it was plain dumb to go out on future missions while one of the best pilots stayed behind. That officer rescinded his order.

Alwin was born in Milwaukee to a World War II pilot who abandoned his classes at the Harvard Divinity School to join the Army Air Corps when tensions with Germany escalated in 1940. Interestingly, Alwin’s parents were married a mere 10 days after they met in March 1941. Their first child was born nine months later, one week after the attack on Pearl Harbor. His father entered the service with a group of 33 recruits, only two of whom survived the war. Ultimately, he became a flight instructor for B-26 bombers at a base in Oklahoma. His mother often said Alwin came out loving aircraft because she continued to teach new military flight crews about the hydraulics and armament systems on the bombers while she was pregnant with him.

When that war ended, Alwin's father returned to the ministry, but one of his favorite afternoon activities involved gathering all the couple's children (there were five or six by then, plus a couple of adopted ones) into the old woody station wagon and parking near the runways at Billy Mitchell Field to watch the airplanes take off and land. They would often share a picnic lunch of liver sausage and saltines, and enjoy glass quart bottles of chocolate milk. Alwin already knew he wanted to fly, but with his father earning a modest minister's salary, it wasn't the kind of activity his family encouraged. And his dream got even further out of reach when his father decided to move the family from Milwaukee to accept the pastoral leadership of three small rural churches. Over the next five years, the family moved from one broken-down parsonage to the next. These were often run-down or abandoned farmhouses — most without plumbing, a couple without electricity — that had been deemed large enough to house the minister's "too-big family," which by this point included 14 children.

Every child was expected to work any job that might contribute to the family coffers, including working the fields alongside migrant farm workers. Picking cucumbers (10 cents a pound), harvesting strawberries (2 cents a pint), and hand-weeding mile-long rows of mint in the hot summer sun at 9 or 10 years of age were normal activities for Alwin and his siblings. Needless to say, every child was also expected to be a good student and avid reader. It's easy to imagine the chaos this tight-knit band of siblings could create when they descended en masse on some poor, unsuspecting teacher in a one-room schoolhouse. Though he wasn't the eldest, Alwin was often the acknowledged leader of every adventure. From braiding the horses' manes into loops so you could hang off their sides at a gallop, to shooting homemade bows and arrows under their necks ("just like the Apache did!"), to building timber rafts on which to explore the nearest rivers ("just



Captain Scott Alwin

like Speke and Sir Burton did on the Nile!"), he displayed an enthusiasm that inspired his siblings to action.

Eventually, Alwin's father took a higher-paying job and the family moved to Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin. While there, Scott's father sent him to Concordia Seminary Preparatory school in Milwaukee to study for the ministry. It wasn't a profession he wanted to pursue, and the school did not suit his temperament. As he said later, the only good thing about his time there was that it allowed him to become proficient enough in Latin that he could finally read *Caesar's Commentaries* in their original language. A voracious reader, by this time he had devoured the writings of military strategists ranging from Sun Tzu to Gen. Douglas MacArthur — though his favorite general was Hannibal.

He returned home and completed high school in Fort Atkinson. During Alwin's senior year, Sen. Gaylord Nelson nominated him for an appointment to the Air Force Academy. After spending nine months there, he came away unconvinced that the program was actually designed to produce good pilots, much less good leaders. He resigned and returned home to attend the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Shortly thereafter, as the conflict in Southeast Asia escalated, he enlisted in the Army to become a helicopter pilot. He arrived in Vietnam in August 1967 and was assigned to fly "slicks," as were most



new pilots. Despite repeated invitations to transfer to the gunships, he remained with the slicks, telling one of his best friends, a gunship pilot, that he wouldn't switch because "you guys are only out to make kills and count coup, and that's not why we're here." Obviously, echoes of that preacher's kid were still much in evidence. But he also wrote to one of his brothers within two months of arriving in country, stating, "Either we need to come up with a completely different strategy for winning this war, or we need to craft a new definition of what it means to win – because what we are doing now, and how we are doing it, will never win this conflict."

During his first leave from Vietnam, Alwin took his ex-minister father with him to the homes of all the personnel who'd suffered casualties in the unit so he could personally visit with their families. He also tried to find a megaphone system that could be heard over the sound of the Huey's rotors so individuals on the ground could be told to stand and raise their arms – because if they ran, they were too often presumed to be enemy combatants.

He finally transferred to the gunships during his second tour when a younger, less skilled slick pilot went to the gunships after Alwin advised him to stay and get more experience. He was killed less than two weeks after transferring. Alwin told that same gunship pilot friend whom he had earlier refused that he would now go to the guns if it would save a less experienced pilot from being transferred. During this tour, he also met his future wife, Tess, and brought her back to the States on his next leave. During subsequent leaves, he finished his bachelor's degree in political science at UW-Madison and earned fixed-wing, multiengine, IFR, and commercial tickets. He was promoted from chief warrant officer to lieutenant and then captain. He also qualified in a Cobra and tried his hand at flying a Loach in-theater. On his last leave between tours, a friend made the mistake of taking him for a ride in an F-5 at Truax Field near Madison. His sights were immediately set


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on one more aircraft to conquer. It probably also explains why he always drove that 1969 Charger R/T.

Like many who fought in in the war, Alwin was disillusioned and dismayed by the nature of the United States' withdrawal from Vietnam. He was genuinely concerned that it would have long-term negative consequences on our foreign policy options, especially as they related to China, which he predicted would become and remain our greatest political, economic, and military competitor. He resigned his commission in protest just as he was about to be promoted to major, and returned to warrant officer status so he could continue to fly. His resignation letter stated, in part, "It is with deep regret that I find my value to the military at this time so much reduced by my inability to support the current actions of our government, particularly in the area of foreign policy." He continued, "[A]s I look around at some of my fellow officers selected for consideration in this RIF, I am stunned by the tragedy of the loss that will be suffered by both the service and these men. By replacing one of those whose utility is not impaired by the sort

of lack of commitment I now feel, I may help to avert a little of that tragedy."

He was killed shortly after the end of the war by a suicidal drunk driver while on his way from Fort Benning to meetings at the new War College in Washington, D.C. In fact, he was scheduled to meet with Sen. William Proxmire about a possible congressional seat. The police report stated that the man, who had been drinking all day, told his wife he was "going out in his car to commit suicide and that he was going to take somebody else with him." In a driving rainstorm, he came over a hill in the wrong lane, head-on into Alwin's car. Scott Alwin was 31 years old.

He is buried in a tiny rural cemetery next to a small red-brick country church in the middle of the vast hills of Marathon County, Wisconsin. His family had not really thought of him as a hero until his fellow veterans began to stop by his parents' home to tell stories of his skill and daring as a flyer, or just to visit his grave.

In one of his letters from Vietnam, he told his father, "[O]ften I can't give a real explanation for the things I do ... one that puts my soul at ease. Those times I blame you ... [although] I would change places with no man on earth. And I say in those times, I must simply have inherited more of your penchant for quests, challenges, and your rejection of common motivation than sometimes shows." And from Bien Hoa, he wrote to his sister Penelope, "I know what I do sounds scary, and believe me, I understand the danger, but when I get up there, up into the air ... I'm in my element. Be happy for me."

His red granite tombstone bears a famous quote, which he copied into his final journal, from *The Last Temptation of Christ*: "I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. I am free."

Scott Alwin spent his entire career in Vietnam in the 68th Assault Helicopter Company. On another page of that final journal, this



Free in-person presentations about Capt. Alwin (featuring artifacts like the nose cone art from his last Huey) are available to Wisconsin veterans groups. Presentations to other groups will be made on an “as available” basis. For more information or to support the documentary, please visit HonorInTheAir.com or call Susan Reetz at 715-212-6239 or Pamela (PJA) Fullerton at 715-675-4115.



Pamela (PJA) Fullerton is an author, speaker, and co-producer of the upcoming documentary *Honor in the Air*. Her newest anthology, *Red Road Redemption: Country Tales From the Heart of Wisconsin*, published by WWA Press, was released in April 2023. She lives in rural Marathon County, Wisconsin, near Wausau, where she breeds and trains performance Arabian and thoroughbred horses. She is also Capt. Alwin's slightly younger sibling.



preacher's son copied down his favorite Bible verse, Isaiah 6:8: “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?’ Then spake I, saying, ‘Here am I, Lord. Send me.’”

Perhaps that's what all heroes say in their hearts. It's certainly what all heroes do.

NOTE: A prize-winning documentarian is making a film titled *Honor in the Air* to tell the story of Capt. Scott Alwin's valor and cast new light on the forgotten and heroic feats so many veterans performed with dedication and gallantry in that unpopular war.



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