

USMC Class 38th OCC/BC 3-66 Alumni Profiles

Richard C. Rosser (con't)

Retired helicopter pilot shares combat lessons with Okinawa Marines

By [Mark Oliva](#), Stars and Stripes

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FUTENMA MARINE CORPS AIR STATION, Okinawa — Richard Rosser has a message for today's Marine helicopter aviators and crews: You're ready for war — more ready than you may think.

Rosser, a retired Marine colonel, knows. He once sat in chairs in ready rooms, planning flight missions through some of the heaviest fighting in Vietnam.

When he reported for duty there in 1967, he was a fresh-faced second lieutenant with, he recalls, very little training. Spirit carried him through, he said, a spirit he believes still is present in today's Marine ranks.

Rosser was on Okinawa to be guest of honor at the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing's birthday ball — but made time to talk with the helicopter crews.

"I accepted the invitation here because I care," Rosser told the Marines. "I don't know you personally, but that doesn't matter. I know what you're feeling."

Rosser flew Huey helicopters into Laos and Cambodia before U.S. actions against those Vietnamese neighbors were revealed to Congress in 1972. He flew through the siege of Khe Sanh, a 77-day constant shelling of a Marine outpost in 1968. Years later, he served as a liaison officer during Operation Desert Storm and as Director of International Police Officers in Haiti during Operation Uphold Democracy. But it was the early days, he said, that had the biggest impact on his career.

"We were all very young, just like you guys," Rosser said. "Combat is something that brings men together. We're not there for mom, apple pie and the flag. We're there for the man on your right and the man on your left. It's an experience, honest to God, you'll never forget."

Rosser said he still remembers the names of his crew chiefs, the ones who hung their heads out of the helicopters' sides in the pitch black of Vietnamese nights to guide him into landing zones even as they were taking fire.

"There was no time to look at instruments," he said. "You flew by sight and sound. Most of the rounds you don't see. Tracer rounds from a .50-caliber is like a giant basketball and at night, they look six feet long and every one of them seems to go through your blades."

But, he said, some things about combat he couldn't explain. He never heard the bullets that penetrated the skin of his helicopters. "You get back and there's just holes," he said.

He also couldn't explain why some Marines died and others lived. He said one round smashed through a windshield and into the visor of a pilot's helmet — then fell, harmless, into his lap.



Mark Oliva / Stars and Stripes
Retired Marine Col. Richard Rosser stands before one of HMM-262's CH-46E Sea Knights. Rosser, invited to be the guest of honor at a Marine Corps birthday ball, also spoke to younger Marines of his combat experiences.

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Others weren't as lucky. No one ever heard the shot, he said, when one co-pilot slumped over dead. They later figured out the lone bullet likely flew through the pilot's open side window. No one else was injured.

"There are things that happen to pilots that are just fate," he said. "It's just not their time."

But he credited surviving 13 months, 842 missions and more than 2,000 hours in the air over Vietnam to his crew chiefs, the enlisted Marines in the back of the helicopter operating the machine guns.

He remembers the crew chief who killed an enemy Viet Cong "on our ramp with his bare hands. The crew chiefs are the ones who do everything," Rosser said. "They're the ones who keep you alive. I watched crew chiefs put their fingers in bullet holes to stop the bleeding. I had certain crew chiefs I would ask to volunteer for missions and I was never turned down," even though some of the flights were harrowing.

Rosser dreaded flying "bald eagle" missions, emergency calls to units in the bush. Calls typically came in the middle of the night. The helicopter, many times, was the only separation between life and death. The flights were made without lights, before the days of night vision goggles.

"It was never a mission to a beach or a rice paddy," Rosser said. "It was always someplace impossible and they were surrounded" — such as in 1968, when Rosser flew into Elephant Valley to pick up a Marine reconnaissance team. He and his crew knew only that the Marines were holed up in a bomb crater and taking fire. Artillery was screaming on one side and jets on the other, trying to keep the attackers at bay.

Rosser set down into the crater. "I looked back to see who was coming on the helicopter and I watched the recon guys come in and smash the windows and drop grenades out. Those windows were \$48 apiece. I know because I kept fighting with logistics every time they had to be repaired. But when I lifted up, the Viet Cong were right there on the lip of that crater."

Rosser returned safely to base; the recon team quickly scattered — except for one 19-year-old.

"He was so grateful to get out he asked what he could do for me," Rosser said. "No one ever asked me that before. But I wanted a K-bar knife. He gave it to me." All these decades later, Rosser still has it. "I carry that knife with me when I go hunting."

The 19-year-old was Cpl. Steve Aaron. His last name is scrawled on the sheath. In 1998, Aaron found Rosser through e-mail; the two drove from Omaha, Neb., to Camp Pendleton, Calif., for a recon reunion. Rosser was the only aviator there.

He credited his training for being able to set the helicopter down in the middle of a firefight to save those Marines — and with eventually spending 31 years in the Corps. "There are moments of sharp terror where you perform what you are trained to do," Rosser said.

Reassuring words, indicated Marine Sgt. Michael White, who gears up every day in a drab-green helicopter crew flight suit — but has yet to see combat.

"To hear him tell us the stories and remind us that our training will carry us through is unparalleled, really," White said. "I think it makes us more effective to hear that. Factor in that we might see combat reasonably soon, we need to get as much out this as we can before we experience it for ourselves."

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Marine Cpl. Justin Freye said he relished the opportunity; he's never before talked one-on-one with a combat pilot.

"There's not a lot of guys still flying with us who have been in combat," Freye said. "The guys from Desert Storm are getting out. But it gives us an advantage to hear that he did all this without the training we have. It gives us a lot more confidence."

Rosser said despite the danger and terror, he counts his combat tour as a cornerstone to his success in the Corps.

"Vietnam, to me, was probably the greatest experience I ever had," Rosser said. "Most guys I know feel that way...mostly because of the guys who lived to fight another day."