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Congress Considers Medevac Medal

When he was a 21-year-old Army Medevac pilot, flying Dustoff #112 in Vietnam in 1968, Richard Lindekens wasn't concerned about recognition.

It was about saving lives. As one of his band of brother pilots said during a particularly heavy firefight when the ground troops urged him to leave, "We're not going until we have all your wounded."

"That's just the way it was," says Mr. Lindekens. "I got shot down a few times. DUSTOFF is an acronym for what we did as Medevac pilots. It stands for Dedicated Unhesitating Service To Our Fighting Forces."

Still, even though it's thirty-seven years coming, he's heartened that HR 1308, a bill establishing a combat badge for helicopter medical evacuation (Medevac) ambulance pilots and crews, is working its way through Congress. A quirk in Army regulations has shortchanged the dedicated soldiers for decades.

"Please contact your House of Representatives member, and ask them to support HR 1308," Richard Lindekens urges.

"I was with the 254th Medical Detachment, part of the 44th Medical Group. We were a small unit with six ships, that flew our missions in the Central Highlands," said Mr. Lindekens. "During the Vietnam conflict, helicopters became a vital tool used to remove the wounded from the battlefield. Not only did they rescue the downed pilots in the north, but the bulk of the flying was done extracting wounded soldiers in the south.

"The pilots and crew members of these helicopters were, for the most part, volunteers to the dustoff mission. The helicopters were unarmed, except for the crew members' personal weapons. The missions were flown 24 hours a day, no matter what the weather was like."

Richard Lindekens, a captain for American Airlines, grew up in Pasadena, and has lived here for nine years. He's a past president of the Danish Brotherhood.

Helicopters run in the family. His wife, Raelynn, the daughter of former Viking Press owner Bo Pedersen, once landed a chopper at Solvang School to show the students. She's now a pilot for Northwest Airlines, on the Bombay route.

At the request of his former commanding officer, Richard K. Andersen, Richard Lindekens went to the Vietnam War Memorial May 3, where members of the Vietnam Veterans of America hosted a ceremony, attended by about 150 persons, dedicated to the 215 fallen crew members of the U.S. Army Medical Helicopter Ambulance units. An unofficial Combat Aeromedic Badge was presented at each soldier's panel, and later forwarded to their families.

"I went and represented our unit. This particular set of wings will be sent to Doug Stover's dad this afternoon. His dad was a World War II pilot, flying B-24s," said Mr. Lindekens. "The sad part is, I belonged to a unit that had only about six helicopters, but I presented ten of these badges.

"Not all of those guys died during my tour. Three of the crew members, that I flew with for the year I was there, died the day I left."

The first Gold Star mother of the Vietnam war was at the ceremony at the Wall, as was a former POW who spent a number of years in the same cell as Senator John McCain.

Richard Lindekens pointed to a man in wheelchair in a photo of the event. "He lost both legs, and this arm. He went in front of Congress on behalf of this bill, and in ten minutes had everybody absolutely crying. He talked about the crew who picked him up. Everybody in the crew got shot, including the medic working on him, who got shot in the face, and still wouldn't stop working on him."

"On May 3, we presented badges to 215 of our fallen friends, who made the ultimate sacrifice. They gave their lives. This bill, now working its way through Congress, will hopefully be passed, so these crew members will finally, officially, have their badges," said Mr. Lindekens.

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