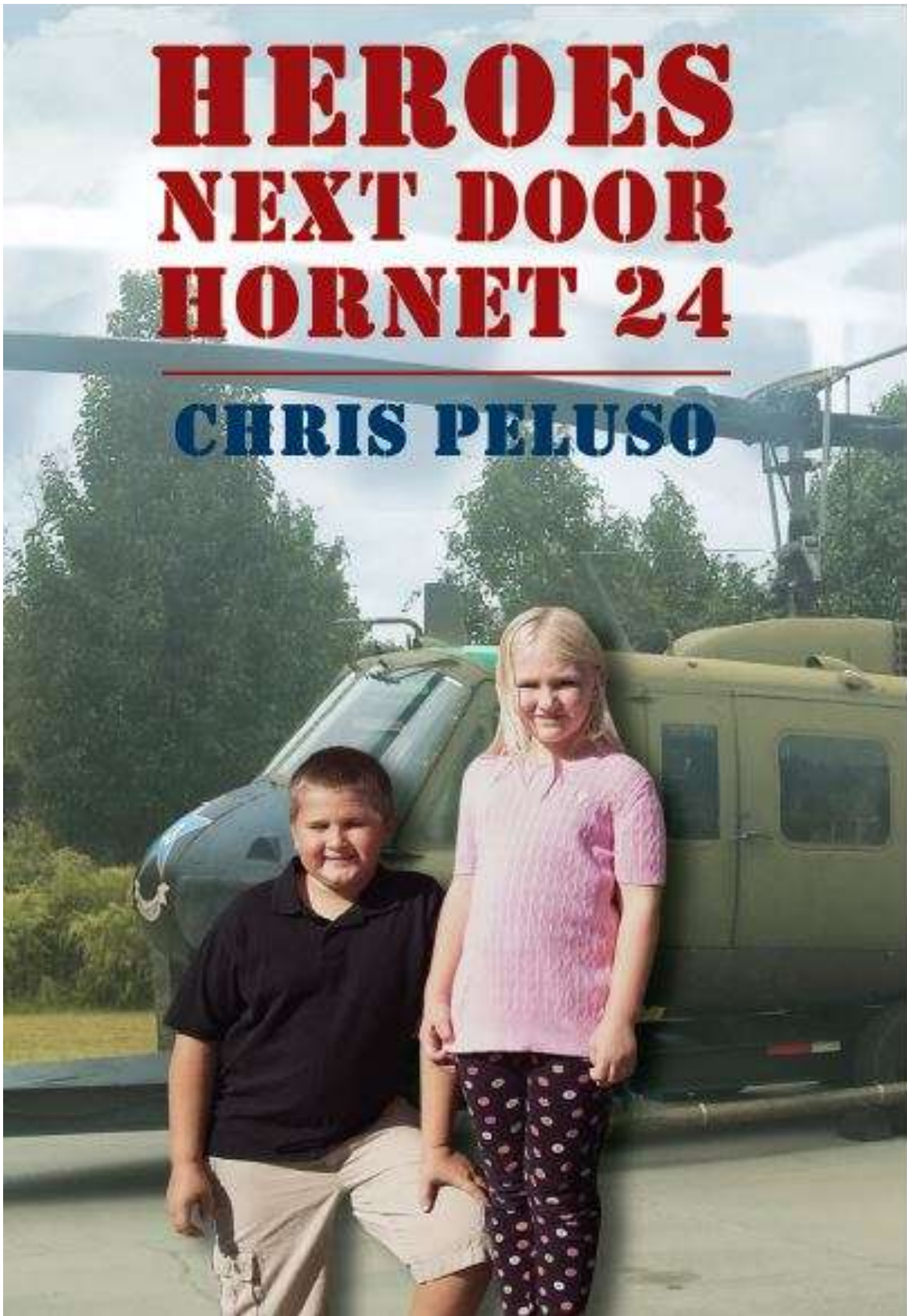


HEROES NEXT DOOR HORNET 24

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Welcome to the world of Heroes Next Door! I am excited that you are taking the time to read this bonus chapter, The Blue Stars in Lam Son 719. This is an additional short story. While it can stand alone, it is a follow on chapter, allowing Matt and Ellie to explore another chapter of the Vietnam conflict.

My wife and I home school our three, soon to be four, children. Our oldest son is an avid reader, but we found that his reading ability quickly outpaced the quality of material available. As we discussed U.S. History, and worked to find appropriate books to supplement their studies, we found very few age-appropriate works regarding the Vietnam War. There are tremendous memoirs and quite good history books, but we found they often contained age inappropriate materials. That need and our experiences with real life Heroes Next Door led to this work. Intended for the Middle School or Young Adult audience it provides a look into the life of an Army Aviator during the Vietnam conflict.

We provide a look at history, science, and current events while delving into the process of maturing from a recent high school graduate to a seasoned combat veteran. I paid particular attention to equipment and focused on providing a 'real' feel to the narrative. The individuals are fictitious, the stories heavily based on real events and locations. The stories are filtered to eliminate controversial or adult themes, language, and other age inappropriate content. I do not pretend that war is all glory, but do not dwell on the cost either.

The full text will be available on e-book and paperback over the winter of 2018. In the meantime, we hope you enjoy this short story. Please share this work, like our Facebook page, and look for the book on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, kindle, and other online retailers soon! I hope you choose to join Matt and Ellie as they meet Mr. Ed and learn about the Vietnam conflict.

<https://www.facebook.com/HNDHornet24>

Finally, to all of our Vietnam veterans, thank you for your honor, courage, sacrifice, commitment, and dedication to our great country. Welcome home.

“Hey, Matt?” Dad asked, as the family finished breakfast.

“Yes sir.”

“Can you put up the 50 Star and U.S. Army flags today when you go outside in a few minutes?”

“Sure. What’s up, do we have an anniversary today?”

“Not that I know of, just a little surprise later.”

“What kind of surprise?” Ellie asked, as she cleared her breakfast plate.

“You will just have to wait and see,” teased Dad.

Both kids finished clearing their plates and helped clean up the kitchen. Matt went to the front closet and pulled the U.S. Army banner from a storage slot. He walked out front and slowly lowered the American flag that flew in the front yard. Then, he connected the service flag to the halyard and quickly hoisted both flags back up the pole. He tied the line fast and stepped back, standing upright for a moment and looking at the two flags gently floating in the breeze. He turned and saw Mr. Ed riding a lawn mower next door. He waved hello and walked back inside meet his mother and sister in the schoolroom for the day’s lessons.

Matt had trouble focusing. He kept thinking about what kind of surprise Dad might have planned. Ellie, on the other hand, settled in to her work with purpose. She knew that working hard and finishing her assignments helped make the time pass faster.

“Mom, are we done yet?” Matt asked, two hours into the school day.

“You can’t stand it can you? Not knowing.”

“I miss the summer, I feel like all we do is school.” He complained.

Mom’s phone dinged, she picked it up from the table and checked the text message.

“Dad says you should look outside.”

Both kids jumped up and ran to the window, pulling back the curtains.

“Mom, look! There’s a Huey in the road! We’re going outside.” Both kids shot out to schoolroom door, down the stairs, and out the front door. Dad was standing in the driveway, chatting with Mr. Ed and another man. Matt ran to the shoulder of the road and stopped.

“It’s huge!” he exclaimed.

Ellie stood in wide-eyed amazement. She had helped work on the Loach next door over the last few years and had seen the Huey’s at festivals and air shows. Seeing one in front of her home was new and exciting.

“Dad, what’s it doing here?”

Mr. Ed grinned at Ellie’s dad. “You didn’t tell them did you?”

Dad shook his head and shrugged his shoulders, as he motioned to Mr. Ed to field the question.

“Kids, I was hoping we could borrow your yard for a few days. Mr. Joe Copeland here needs to leave it in New Bern for the festival in a couple of weeks. He had a change of plans and won’t be able to make it, but could drop it off early.” He explained.

“Dad, is Mr. Ed saying we’re going to get to keep a Huey for a while?”

Dad nodded. “Yup, that ok with you two?”

Ellie and Matt shook their heads with excitement, eyes wide. “Where are we going to put it?” Matt asked, his mind spinning with possibilities.

Mr. Copeland, who had towed the Hotel model Huey down from Durham spoke. “The trailer and aircraft weigh almost ten thousand pounds, so it needs to be pretty solid ground.”

“Alright, it’s pretty long, but I think we can put it in the driveway, right there beside our van. Probably easiest to back it in, as long as that trailer is it should back alright.” Dad suggested.

“Sounds good, Ed, can you help spot for me?” he asked, before getting behind the wheel of his truck.

Matt ran to the end of the driveway. When the reverse lights flashed on, he immediately began waving his arms, directing the huge helicopter and trailer back into his driveway. Mr. Ed walked beside the driver’s window, quietly giving directions. Dad stood near the tail of the helicopter, nearly eighty feet behind the driver. Mr. Copeland drove the rig with expertise and parked straight the first time.

“Wow, you did a great job. I see people have to pull up and back six or seven times at the boat ramp. You got it right the first time.” Matt said in awe.

Mr. Copeland walked to the nose of the helicopter and patted the blue star painted there. “Skill, not luck, son,” He said with a smile. “That’s how we flew in the Blue Stars.”

“Ed, I’ve got all the gear in the back of the truck, the posters, skirt, and cribbing for the jack. Can you all help set it up?”

“Yes sir, just tell us what to do.” Matt answered.

Mr. Copeland issued several directions, pointing and guiding the wooden blocks under the wheels and tongue jack.

“Joe,” Mr. Ed interrupts, “these two young folks have become something of junior historians. I realized you spent time up in I Corps during Lam Son 719. Do you mind telling them a little about it?”

“Alright, we can talk and work.”

“Lam Son 719, that was a hairy deal. In the winter of 1971 my company, the 48th Assault Helicopter Company, lived in Ninh Hoa. That is a coastal town way up north, close to North Vietnam. Nixon started Vietnamization two summers before. We spent a lot of time working with ARVN, the South Vietnamese Army and moving them around. Our major assembled us one morning. I remember the briefing.

“Men, make sure your affairs are in order. We have orders to move north, there’s a big operation coming up.” I saw a tear or two in his eyes. “Men, this will be tough, I expect some of us won’t make it out of this one.”

“That was scary. I’d been in country almost seven months. I was an AC or Aircraft Commander, and had never heard that kind of talk before. We loaded all our gear, extra food and ammo, and flew our helicopters up to stage, not far from Khe Sahn. If you remember, the Marines fought a huge battle at Khe Sahn in 1968. When we landed at the new base we could watch huge C-130s, big transport planes, carrying in ARVN troops. These big planes landed every ten minutes for days. We knew if they were moving that many grunts this would be a big operation. A day or two later we made our first lift to Landing Zone Hotel. The first lift was uneventful.

Things broke loose during the second lift. Our gunships, the Jokers came on the radio net.

“Blue flight, this is Joker 32. Hold your approach; we have a T-55 in the LZ.” We were five minutes from the border and about ten minutes from the LZ.

Our Company commander, in the lead helicopter, crossed the border in to Laos first, leading from the front. Just as we crossed the border, the North Vietnamese Army opened up with everything they had. Have you ever seen the old World War II movies, the ones with bombing over Germany?”

Matt nodded his head, “Yes sir, I watched one with a B-17 called the Memphis Belle a while ago.”

“Good, do you remember the flack? The big black puffs around the bombers?”

Matt nodded.

“Well, that’s what it looked like as we crossed into Laos. The NVA had big antiaircraft guns protecting the border and they lay into us. My whole company, almost thirty helicopters were flying that insertion. We would be flying along and *boom*. The ship next to you would be gone, just gone. There were big black clouds of flak everywhere. Those are just smoke from exploding shells, the smokes not bad, but where there’s smoke there’s flying metal, or shrapnel. Our CO, the major, was hit. We lost seven or eight helicopters during that one insertion. The NVA 37mm anti-aircraft guns and the .51 caliber machine guns were murder.

Our company, the 48th, along with many other helicopter units - Ed, I think your company was there to,” Mr. Copeland looked to Mr. Ed for an answer.

“Yes, the Hornets were there, but that was after I went home so I don’t really know much about it.”

“Ah, okay, well, we flew thousands of ARVN troops into Laos. The NVA had a road called the Ho Chi Minh Trail. It ran down the side of South Vietnam, mostly in Laos and Cambodia. They used this trail to move men, equipment, and supplies. For a long time we could not attack it, for political reasons. Since this was a South Vietnamese operation, they could. All together, we moved almost 16,000 ARVN into Laos, hoping to block the Ho Chi Minh Trail and protect South Vietnam. Since the trail was so important to the Communists, and so close to their borders, they could really bring their firepower into play. The Blue Stars had not seen anything like this before.

Most of the time, flying around South Vietnam, the biggest thing shot back at you was the .30 or .51 caliber machine guns. Here we flew against AAA radar guided anti-aircraft artillery. The grunts would be fighting against armored personnel carriers and tanks. The NVA set ambushes for our helicopters. They would place a small machine gun on a mountainside, when our helicopters came by it would shoot at them. Doctrine called for the gunships to circle back and attack anti-aircraft guns when found. Thing is, the NVA would hide their big AAA pieces nearby and use those to shoot back at the gunships as they attacked the first machine gun. This made a very bad situation for us and we lost a lot of helicopters and men.

For six weeks, we flew missions into these mountain passes, running the gauntlet or AA and AAA fire, sometimes three or four times a day. They shot me down three times. One of my buddies got shot down twice in one day. If you survived the crash landing, we always worked hard to pick them back up. Sometimes we could, sometimes it was just too hairy to get them back. To this day, my company has five members still missing in action in Vietnam. One of them is from Salisbury, North Carolina.

The NVA kept sending fresh troops and bigger weapons to the defense of Laos. We kept moving ARVN soldiers deeper and deeper. Our gunships flew every day. It seemed like we lost helicopters and men every day. They shot the CO down twice and wounded him once. Fortunately, we picked him up both times. That shook a lot of us, we looked up to him.

3 March was the worst day. We had a big lift into an LZ called LoLo. Four Blue Stars, and seven others get shot down. Thirty-five helicopters had combat damage. It was crazy. We did not have the helicopters or troops to keep up losses like that. There were so many NVA that we could not get an advantage. Every flight we heard 'Mayday, mayday, mayday' from helicopters crashing. Three days later, we reached the objective, LZ Hope at Tchepone, almost thirty miles into Laos."

"Mr. Copeland," Ellie interrupted, "Why did you keep flying into that kind of stuff. It doesn't sound smart to me."

Mr. Copeland looked at the helicopter for a minute, his eyes resting on the bright Blue Star on the nose. "We had to. That was the mission. If I lay out one of my friends would have to make the flight instead. No one wanted to be the man that chickened out, or got a teammate hurt. We flew for each other. We tried to be there to support each other. We tried to save each other when, not if, but when, shot down.

About a week later the ARVN Generals decided they had accomplished their mission. They started pulling troops back to South Vietnam. When the NVA figured that out they pushed back hard. Anti-aircraft fire got worse, even though we really did not think that it could. The ARVN troops were panicked and fighting to get on slicks when we picked them up. It got so bad that we had to use axle grease from the POL sites, Petroleum Oil Lubrication supply, to grease the skids so extra men could not hold on."

"What do you mean grease the skids?" Matt asked.

"Every time we landed, a whole bunch of people would scramble onto the helicopters. Our crew chiefs and door gunners physically restrained ARVN troops. We can only carry so many people. A few ships took off with ARVN troops hanging onto the skids. They were so desperate to get out that they would hold on, like you would do a pull up. Thing is, you cannot hold onto a skid for a fifteen or twenty minute flight. Most of those men wound up falling off. We were flying in the mountains, pretty high, well, you get the picture. So, we grabbed grease and made the skids slippery so they couldn't hang on."

Mr. Copeland fell quit. He shook his head in reflection. "Guys, that's a lot of memories for me. Just my company had four aircraft, out of thirty, still flyable at the end of Lam Son, took almost fifty percent casualties, ten dead or MIA. Those kinds of numbers don't happen very often and are not the way to win a war. It was a hard six weeks." Mr. Copeland, visibly upset, sat down on the tongue of the trailer and stared off into the woods.

Mr. Ed cleared his throat. “Joe, I think they get it. Thank you,” He paused for a moment, allowing his friend to collect himself. “What is next with the Huey?”

Mr. Copeland took a deep breath and stood before looking around. “It looks good. The wheels are chocked, doors locked, jack is locked down. Ed, here are the keys to the door locks, we’ll put the signs and stuff at your house if that’s okay.”

He turned to face the kids, “Matt, Ellie, it’s nice to meet you. Ed told me that you two would be the best people to look after my big baby here. So, if you have any problems, just let Mr. Ed know and we’ll work out a solution from there.”

He walked over to their dad. “Our group should be by to pick it up next Friday. As long as it’s ok with you, one of them will bring it back Sunday and I’ll be back about a week later to bring her home.”

“Yes sir that should be fine. It’s welcome for as long as you need somewhere to park.”

“Good.”

They shook hands, Mr. Copeland returned to his truck and drove next door to unload the remaining supplies. The kids ran around the huge Huey to take in all the details. Ellie reached up to press a recessed button near the base of the tail boom. *Click!* A huge hinged panel opened up.

“Look! I found the trunk,” she shouted.

“This is so cool!” Matt exclaimed. “We have a helicopter! I am going to call all my friends over.”

“Easy guys, we’re watching it. It doesn’t belong to us.”

“Ah, excuse me.” Mom interjected, having just walked outside, “Why is there a helicopter in my driveway?”

“Honey, we talked about this, remember?” Dad responded.

“You said the yard. That means the side yard, or the field out back. It doesn’t mean my *driveway!*” She fumed.

Dad grinned, “Well, you see...the sand in the side yard is too soft. So we decided the driveway would be best.”

“But it’s huge!”

“It’s only for a week or two.” Dad smiled, sheepishly.