



Snake Pilot: Flying the Cobra Attack Helicopter in Vietnam

Randy Zahn

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Based on audiotapes he recorded during the war and sent home to his family, Randy Zahn's *Snake Pilot* recounts his experiences flying AH-1 Cobra helicopters during the Vietnam War. First deployed in Vietnam in 1967 and loaded with a formidable arsenal of weaponry, the Cobra was the first helicopter designed from inception as an attack aircraft. It dramatically changed the nature of the war in Vietnam by offering the Army, for the first time, its own powerful and highly accurate weapons platform for close-air-support missions. Randy Zahn arrived in Vietnam shortly before the 1970 U.S. invasion of Cambodia, one of the most impressive demonstrations by the Cobra in the war. He describes his stunning transformation from a naive, middle-class teenager from southern California to a hardened killer during his tour in Vietnam. Unlike the pilots who flew the fast-moving strike jets, Zahn experienced the war "up close and personal," witnessing the grisly effects of the Cobra's firepower on enemy soldiers. The author does not glorify killing but rather explains in sharp relief the kaleidoscope of emotions associated with combat: fear, revenge, hate, remorse, pity, and even ecstasy. He captures many of the ironies and nuances inherent in Vietnam, especially during the final years of the conflict. Zahn displays a sensitivity rarely found in memoirs written by battle-hardened warriors. This human element, combined with the vast amount of archival research and interviews with members of his former unit, ensures that *Snake Pilot* will become the definitive account of the role helicopters played in Vietnam.

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