

Pulling Together, At War

At the outset of the Vietnam War, Kjell Tollefsen voluntarily enlisted in the U.S. Army and was assigned to the 188th Assault Helicopter Company. The two selections below are from Tollefsen's 2008 interview with Eileen Hurst, the associate director of Central Connecticut State University's Center for Public Policy and Social Research. Tollefsen lived in Clinton when he enlisted and now lives in nearby Killingworth.

In the first excerpt, Tollefsen captures in vivid detail the extreme challenges he faced as a helicopter pilot and the intense dedication he and his fellow soldiers brought to their situation. He recalls here a mission in which he had to extract a Special Forces unit from the Cambodian jungle. At the start of this excerpt, Tollefsen had already picked up two wounded men and two men killed in action and was attempting to fly them back to their base in Tay Ninh East, Vietnam. In the second excerpt, Tollefsen reflects on how his experiences in the war affected his faith.

We were pretty much fully loaded now at capacity and we turned around and started going back up the same way... We got above the tree line ... and we took a hit. Alarms started going off on the dashboard, and we were losing ... engine oil... So we had the option of turning around and going back into the same place, which didn't seem very inviting at the time, or continuing to fly. The commanding control ship, way above where we were, was saying, there's an opening further into Cambodia, about ... a kilometer away... The engine was starting to seize as we were getting closer and closer to that, and we were barely treetops at that point, and we knew we weren't probably going to make it, and the engines cut out just as we reached the opening. It was a large field of elephant grass and we basically were able to do not a very pretty, uncontrolled crash—semi-controlled—and the ship rolled on its side, once over, and it ended up ... completely on its side. We always went to the right front of the aircraft if we had a crash to see if you had everyone. Three of us were there but the fourth guy wasn't there and we went back and my crew chief had been ... trapped under the aircraft; his head had been pinned under the

aircraft basically, with his helmet on, and his arms and legs were flailing around, and I'm standing, looking down through the compartment, at where he is. So we jumped down there and tried to get him out, but we couldn't get him out—he was pinned.

The other aircraft was carrying the other troops—wounded guys... . So all the Special Forces guys got out of the other aircraft, set up a perimeter for us... One guy had a belly wound where you could see his intestines, and now he's setting up a perimeter for us. No one left. We ended up ... eventually realizing that his helmet strap was what was holding him under the aircraft, so I got a knife ... and reached underneath there and cut that and basically ripped his body out of the helmet...

The command ship is telling us that the NVA [Northern Vietnamese Army] is closing in on us and to get out of there, and the Special Forces guys were engaging them at the perimeter... . We all stayed there trying to get the one remaining guy who was pinned out under the aircraft, and we wouldn't leave. The command control ship ... was yelling at us to get out, but we wouldn't leave him behind... We broke his collarbone, literally, pulling him to get him out from under the aircraft... That was one of the more difficult days and it went on for more than that. There were a number of missions like that over the next few days... The Special Forces guys lost an awful lot of people in the ... unit, as we did over that period of time.

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I lost any thought that I think that there's a power larger than us in the universe controlling any of what we do here day-to-day. I can



above: George Tally, Kjell Tollefsen's co-pilot. Tollefsen enlisted with the U.S. Army at age 20 and flew helicopters in Vietnam beginning in 1967.
left: In the 188th Assault Helicopter Company, Tollefsen and his fellow pilots flew helicopters like this one.



Images courtesy of Central Connecticut State University Veterans History Project

remember distinctly one day flying out of the Ashua Valley, after having a horrific scene in my mind—and it's still there—and saying if anybody's paying attention, they're not doing a very good job of it. . . . I guess I had to lose all that pie in the sky thought of it. Doesn't mean there isn't something larger than us, but I've personally probably changed my view of what I can potentially believe...

Outside of that I believe in a strong military force that's a strong deterrent, [and that] bad people do bad things . . . Leave it up to the people that want to serve this country—and [who] do that for you—and hopefully respect them a little more when they come home.

To view Kjell Tollefsen's full video interview, part of CCSU's Veterans History Project, visit <http://content.library.ccsu.edu/>.