

# A chance encounter



Vietnam veteran and Army medic David Chaffin (left) reunites for the first time in 50 years with DAV Past National Commander and Vietnam veteran Ron Hope. Chaffin pulled Hope out of his helicopter after it had crashed in Sông Bé, Vietnam, saving Hope's life.

**Past national commander reunites after 50 years with Army medic who helped save his life**

On the morning of July 15, 1969, Ron Hope, a 21-year-old Army helicopter pilot, had flown in a successful combat assault and thought he was nearing the end of another mission in Vietnam.

“We had just went in and refueled when our flight leader came on the radio and said we’re not going home,” said Hope. “We’re going back to Sông Bé, and you could hear the collective language pretty much throughout; this wasn’t a good place to be.”

Sông Bé had served as a battleground for the Viet Cong, who had gained control of much of the area in 1965. It also served as a staging area for the People’s Army of Vietnam (or North Vietnamese Army, NVA). The NVA would bring in supplies through the particular area Hope would be flying into, making it a constant target for enemy forces.

“We were probably a mile, maybe 2 miles away from the landing zone, when everything just started going wrong with the aircraft,” said Hope.

As Hope began to approach the landing zone, the helicopter began to lose rotor speed. He had lost control.

On the ground, not far from Hope’s wounded aircraft, Army medic David Chaffin was waiting for extraction along with the rest of his company.

“We heard this noise, and we look up, and here’s this chopper coming down through the tree,” said Chaffin, recalling the crash. “And when it hit the ground, with all the aviation fuel, the tanks just burst into flames.”

Chaffin and several others in his company rushed over to the blazing helicopter, pulling Hope out and stabilizing him until he could get to the medical unit.

Two of the men onboard that day died from their injuries, including Hope’s crew chief. As for Hope, his left brachial plexus—the network of nerves that sends signals from the spinal cord to the arm and hand—had been totally crushed. He’d also broken both legs, suffered compound fractures in six vertebrae and had third-degree burns covering 55% of his body.

Those few minutes changed the men forever. Hope not only survived, thanks to many months of grueling rehabilitation, but he also went on to serve veterans for nearly 40 years, becoming a life member of DAV and eventually being elected national commander.

As for Chaffin, he never forgot the encounter, and 50 years later, a passing glance at a DAV Magazine article caught his attention. It featured Past National Commander Ron Hope's Alive Day, detailing his helicopter crash in Vietnam and his incredible story of recovery.



David Chaffin holds a photo from his time in Vietnam. Chaffin reminisced on his service, the day he saved Hope, and when he realized he had a connection to Hope's story in DAV Magazine.

"I was reading this article and thought, gosh that sounds familiar—1969, helicopter crash, July—and I'm thinking that might have been the same month," said Chaffin, a life member of Chapter 147, in Grayson, Kentucky. "So I called down to DAV headquarters and I told them, 'I think I witnessed that crash. I think I was there. In fact, I know I was.'"

After the message was relayed to Hope, Chaffin would receive a

call just hours later.

“We were being extracted that day, and I believe you were one of the people we pulled out of the chopper,” Chaffin said, recalling his conversation with Hope over the phone that day.

“Over the years, I have run into people that I knew in Vietnam,” said Hope, “so it wasn’t that I hadn’t expected phone calls or meeting people. But to actually have somebody who was on-site that day—other than the people who were in my company—to actually talk to somebody like David, who was actually there, it hit pretty hard.”

A little over a year later, Hope—still a pilot—would fly his small Cessna 182 from North Carolina, where he lives with his family, into Cincinnati to reunite with the man who helped save his life.

They reminisced on their experiences in Vietnam and the volatile, divided country they returned to after the war. After several hours, the two left each other, promising to stay in touch.

“Well, I kind of teared up a little bit,” said Chaffin, “seeing somebody you haven’t seen for over 50 years and knowing that you had a part in them being here today.”

“I’ve told him if it hadn’t been for him, I probably wouldn’t have made it,” said Hope. “It was just being stabilized for that 30 to 45 minutes before they could get you to a MASH unit. That made all the difference in the world.”

For Hope, the experience left him with a feeling of closure and fulfillment that he encourages others to have.

“Never give up,” he said. “There’s always somebody out there, and there’s always somebody looking for you.”