

From Heart of Gold to Silver Star

Larry Liss Receives Military Honor

On March 5, 2024, Vietnam War veteran, [Larry Liss](#), a longstanding resident of West Vincent Township, was awarded the Silver Star for Gallantry in Action for his heroic service. The Silver Star is the third-highest military combat decoration that can be awarded to a member of the United States Armed Forces. A captain in the United States Army, Mr. Liss was recognized for flying his UH-1 “Huey” rescue helicopter, not equipped with machine guns, into a battle six times and also left the helicopter’s cockpit two times, to engage a superior North Vietnamese Unit with his personal weapons, to save his fellow soldiers – historically known as the *Rescue at Cau Song Be* on May 14, 1967. Mr. Liss was credited as saving 85 lives under heavy fire during this rescue. Accolades of this stature represent the true extent of Mr. Liss’s giving nature. A born storyteller, he opened his personal history to us so that he could share his remarkable life with his neighbors.



Mr. Liss is first generation American, being born to Russian-Ukrainian immigrants in Philadelphia. His father was a civilian worker at the Philly Navy Yard. His mother was highly active in politics but promised to curb those activities once Larry was born in 1941. Five years after Larry was born, he was joined by his brother, Arthur. “My friends were his friends. My enemies were his enemies,” Mr. Liss said. Their early years were filled with stickball and scouting.

Around the age of 13, the family moved from Overbrook to Penn Valley where he attended Lower Merion (now Harrington) High School. Mr.

Liss admitted with a slight chuckle, “I was a little ‘out there’ as a kid. I got in a lot of trouble.” At age 14, he hot-wired a new Oldsmobile and took it on a joyride. Unfortunately, when trying to take a turn, the power-steering failed, and he scraped three cars. This incident resulted in various professionals telling Mr. Liss’ parents to keep this active lad busy.

Mr. Liss was a great golfer, but even more so, “I loved to drive, so I started racing. I was 14 when I raced my first race at Vineland, NJ, and I raced 35 times over two years. I got my certificate to race on the track. I couldn’t drive on the street... I raced an Aston Martin at Watkins Glen, and I didn’t do too badly.” In fact, he raced with Aston Martin at [Bahamas Speed Week](#) in Nassau, and he shared driving responsibilities with [Stirling Moss](#).



However, thoughts of college loomed for the young man, and Mr. Liss was faced with a decision which was made easier on Mother’s Day 1958. [Pennsylvania Military College](#) (now

Widener University) hosted an annual parade. “The entire Cadet Corps marched out including the calvary.” He made the decision to apply the following year and, “PMC accepted me right away. I really liked it! My first year was rough as a plebe. After that, I was a member of the Pershing Rifles, and it was a national championship drill team. Out of the hundreds of drill teams all over the country, we became number one. I became a brother of Company Q5 Pershing Rifle. And I had total liberty. Even as a sophomore, I had Senior Privileges.”



Mr. Liss soon graduated and shipped out. “I was a well-known scout, and I was always getting pulled in for different duties where they couldn’t send anybody else in, so they sent me and my team.” While Mr. Liss was scouting on the Czech/German boarder during a snowstorm, a chance encounter with helicopter pilot Randy Merritt changed his life. “This guy came in a Huey, and he put down his window. He had on short sleeves, and he was drinking a cup of coffee, and I was freezing my butt off, and he just looked at me and he said, ‘You’re such a jerk. Look at you! You’re freezing your [bleep] off. It’s snowing. It’s sleeting. I’m here. I’m nice and warm. Man, you should sign up for



helicopter training.’ So, the next day at the Officer’s Club there was a sign that says we’re looking for helicopter pilots, so I said, ‘Take me!’ Within four days, I was in the states going through flight school.” He received his wings as a helicopter pilot in 1966. He flew a total of 650 combat missions in 9 months, and his ground-duty consisted of being the leader of a pathfinder detachment during [Operation Junction City](#).

Mr. Liss readily admits that he struggled in flight school. “I was not a good pilot for the first 300 hours, especially in Vietnam. I was dangerous. I just couldn’t get it all together. And then one day something happened where I did, and it was just the opposite. Now rather than ME riding along in a helicopter, IT was riding along with ME. It was going where I wanted it to go. And I just went up to a whole different level. And from then on in, I was known as a Top Gun Helicopter Pilot and Instructor.”

Danger was around every corner. “My claim to fame as a helicopter pilot was I got shot down five times... three times in one 24-hour period.”

VIETNAM HELICOPTER WAR STATISTICS	

1961 - 1975	
HELICOPTERS SENT	11,827
HELICOPTERS DESTROYED ...	5,086
HELICOPTER PILOTS SENT	40,000
HELICOPTER PILOTS KILLED	2,202
NON-PILOT CREW KILLED	2,704
HUEY HELICOPTERS SENT	7,013
HUEYs DESTROYED	3,305
HUEY PILOTS KILLED	1,074
OTHER HUEY CREW KILLED ...	1,103
TOTAL HUEY HOURS FLOWN	7,531,955
	(1966 - 1975)

But Mr. Liss continued to stay, even though his hours and missions would have allowed him to take a desk job in Operations. “I stayed because I could accomplish the missions. The helicopter is not going to kill me, and the odds of [the enemy] getting me and shooting me were pretty slim. I had a white helmet with the Star of David on the back in blue tape while everyone

else was in green ballistic helmets which gave me headaches. So, I joked they couldn't hit a white helmet... they would miss. I always say it worked... except once." On that occasion, a round came through the window, denting his forehead and blowing the helmet off his head. Mr. Liss was able to land his helicopter at Cu Chi Base Camp before passing out from his head wound. "The only thing I remember was I was on a dolly, and the nurse looking down at me said something like, 'Oh my god!' All I can remember is that I threw up and don't remember anything after that."



Capt. Larry Liss receives the Distinguished Flying Cross in July, 1967, in Vietnam. He flew more than 650 combat missions.

But when it comes to recounting the *Rescue at Cau Song Be*, which led to his Silver Star, Mr. Liss becomes quiet and introspective. A piece of the nomination process required eye-witness testimony, and Mr. Liss' co-pilot, Tom Baca, provided this item. However, having earned his Silver Star, Mr. Liss is now hoping it opens the door to nominating other soldiers, and he has already initiated the conversation with a number of congressional personnel. He is also hoping to bring awareness to the few Jewish soldiers who



have received honors for service in combat. In addition to the Silver Star, some of Mr. Liss' awards include 25 Air Medals, one for valor, 3 Purple Hearts, the Bronze Star, the Valorous Unit Award for Extraordinary Heroism, the National Defense Service Medal, the Meritorious Unit Commendation, Vietnam Service Medal, the Vietnamese Campaign Medal and the Distinguished Flying Cross for Valor. He was also awarded the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry for valor twice and received the Armor Officer's Order of St. George Medallion in December of 2017. "The 4-star general that gave me the award [Silver Star] was really an amazing guy. He whispered in my ear as he tried to pin the Silver Star on me, 'How can someone with so little time have so many medals?' I said, 'I was very busy.'"

After completing his military service in 1970, Mr. Liss returned home with extra cargo: his wife and daughter, Stacey. "Stacey was born in Germany in 1965.

Her mother was an American-born Czechoslovakian. We were together for 20 years... but Stacey... she is this gorgeous smart woman. We're connected. She learned a lot by being with me. It probably got her inhibited in some areas and gave her power in others." When pointing out his wide range of experiences, he chuckles at the reference his daughter made when she got older, "My daughter calls me Forrest Gump with a slightly higher IQ."



Mr. Liss also speaks with awe about West Vincent Township. During his many trips to the Valley Forge VA Hospital after his return from Vietnam, Mr. Liss would find himself with a few hours between appointments. "I would drive around. One day, I wound up on Route 23 and made a left turn and came through the [Sheeder-Hall] covered bridge... and parked in

front of the [Birchrunville] General Store. And there was a John Deere tractor, and there was a Jag that I later found out was Hy Mayerson's, and there was some guy sitting around this pot belly stove smoking cigarettes and talking, and I walked into the post office [which] had AnnaMae... AnnaMae asked, 'Did you come through the covered bridge?' I said, 'Yes! Why?' She said, 'Well, you're never going to leave.' She was right. One week later I rented a house from Helen Wade Parke on Hollow Road."



And years later, Mr. Liss found a log cabin tucked into the woods off Jaine Lane for sale. "It was built in '78 and I got there in '80. I drove down the driveway, I said, 'This is it! I'm gonna get it!' Something said, 'Do not let this go...'" And he softly states, "I wouldn't want to leave here."

It is this same conviction that led Mr. Liss to start Flightways Corporation, a regional air carrier. "I started an aviation company with \$1,200 bucks in my pocket, and it basically got bought out by FedEx [in 1975]... and then I started a company called Diversified Environmental which was rigging buildings to save energy. It was so easy to sell them because people were really freaking out when it came to their energy bills. This was in the late-70s, early-80s. And it got very big." After selling his interest in this company, Mr. Liss then became a global leadership consultant with Gap International.

However, one constant over these years was his role as a speaker and executive consultant, hosting seminars designed to create breakthrough thinking for senior corporate executives and managers of Fortune 1000 companies. And it was at one of these seminars in 1982 that his whole life changed. "I'm up on the stage looking around. The last people were coming in and the doors were about to close, and this really tall GORGEOUS woman – she was 6'1" AND in heels - squeezed through the doors and was standing there looking around. And I was SMITTEN. It was more than [love at first sight], boy... I think that whole room of 350 participants saw it because people were turning around." But as quickly as she entered, she was gone. So, Mr. Liss did the only thing that he could.



Larry and his wife Celeste McQuade

"I called a break... fast, like within 15 minutes... and you usually don't call a break until an hour. And I scooted out the back door looking for her because she was gone. So, I'm running down the hall and I made the turn and I bump right into her... I jumped up trying to recover myself, and I looked up at her. I said, 'I've been looking for you my whole life.' And in my head, I was like, 'Oh shut up you fool! This gorgeous thing and you say that stupid line!'" The beautiful woman was named Celeste, and she told him to go back and lead his seminar; she would wait for him. And she did. Mr. Liss happily shares, "By 1990, we were married and living in what Celeste calls 'the little log cabin up a dirt road' in Birchrunville..."

The thing with Celeste and I is we have not MOVED from each other for the last 15 years. And since the pandemic, we're never not together... I love it. [She's my] best friend."

With 83 years of successes and failures scattered through Mr. Liss' life, the free-flowing conversation stops as he's asked how he wants to be remembered. After an extended silence and with tears welling in his eyes, He references a scene from the movie *Saving Private Ryan* at the gravesite where Ryan says to his wife, "Tell me I've led a good life. Tell me I'm a good man." With Mr. Liss' voice barely above a whisper, he says, "That I cared, and I helped people. That's really the bottom line."

POST NOTE: If you are interested in learning more about Mr. Liss' contributions during Vietnam, the BBC produced an award-winning four-part series entitled "Helicopter Warfare." You can watch Mr. Liss' episode called "Vietnam Firefight" at the link found [HERE](#).



The President of the United States of America, authorized by Act of Congress, July 9, 1918, has awarded the Silver Star to:

CAPTAIN LAWRENCE M. LISS
HEADQUARTERS AND HEADQUARTERS COMPANY, II FIELD FORCE VIETNAM

for gallantry in action while participating in aerial flight in the Republic of Vietnam on 14 May 1967 while serving with the Aviation Detachment, II Field Force Vietnam. On this day, during the transportation of the II Field Force Vietnam Staff Chaplain to Special Forces Camps in the III Corps area for Sunday Services, Captain Liss learned that a Civilian Irregular Defense Group Company was engaged in heavy fighting with a numerically superior Viet Cong force a few miles from his location at Cau Song Be Special Forces Camp. Disregarding his own safety, Captain Liss volunteered his services to fly in reinforcements and evacuate wounded personnel. To successfully complete the rescue mission, Captain Liss used his rotors to cut through the dense underbrush, an extremely hazardous undertaking. Again using the rotors to clear a path for takeoff, he brought the wounded Soldiers safely back to Cau Song Be Camp. While sharing the flying responsibilities with the aircraft commander, Captain Liss made numerous trips despite the increasing danger with each lift. He ignored the continuously shrinking perimeter against an intensified enemy attack and the lost radio contact with the tactical air support aircraft. On the last two extraction landings, Captain Liss unflinchingly leapt out of his seat, and in total disregard for his own well-being and safety, exited the aircraft and engaged the enemy on the ground while rallying the troops and helping the wounded Soldiers board the helicopter. On the last trip, although the aircraft was overloaded, Captain Liss was determined to extract the remaining 18 Soldiers; therefore, he directed troops into the cargo bay and told others to stand on the skids, and even personally held onto two Soldiers who were hanging onto his door and window by their lapels until the helicopter safely landed at the base camp. Through Captain Liss' courage, determination, and leadership in extreme conditions, the Civilian Irregular Defense Group Company was rescued and their casualties evacuated successfully. Captain Liss' extraordinary accomplishment reflects the greatest credit upon him, the II Field Force Vietnam, and the United States Army.

