

# Mike Stevens: Our Hometown Hero

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of November 3, 2025)

Benita Albert presents another Veterans' Day story about one of our own.

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*Valor is a gift. Those having it never know for sure whether they have it till the test comes.* Napoleon Bonaparte

Native-born Oak Ridger, Mike Stevens, a 1964 Oak Ridge High School (ORHS) graduate, has met the test for valor more than once in his military service. As a helicopter pilot in Vietnam, his long service in the Tennessee National Guard, and his role as Blackhawk Mission Planner and Pilot in Command during Operation Iraqi Freedom, Mike's military assignments spanned 38 years from 1969-2007. During a part of those years, Mike was also a chemistry and math teacher at Clinton High School ('72-'86) and ORHS ('88-'01).

I knew Mike as a teaching colleague, as an enthusiastic coach and mentor in the athletic program at ORHS, and as a quiet hero to his students. In fact, one of Mike's chemistry students memorialized his ORHS experience in the book, "Celebrating 75 Years of Excellence in Education in the Oak Ridge Schools: 1943-2018," by writing the following tribute.

Tyler Carr, ORHS Class of 2004, wrote, "Most people remember where they were sitting on September 11, 2001. I know I will never forget. I was a sophomore sitting in Mike Stevens's chemistry class. I cannot remember the exact dialogue, but I knew the world was changing. Little did I know that my chemistry class would be changing as well. At winter break, Coach Stevens left his position as a teacher at Oak Ridge High School to serve actively in the Military Reserves. To this day, when I see him, I remember and admire his choice to help protect our country. Coach Stevens continues to be a substitute teacher in the system, and it makes me smile seeing him still influencing students' lives. I doubt he realizes he taught me the importance of responsibility, accountability, and honor that year."

Mike's parents, Clarence and Voretta Stevens, moved from Roan Mountain to Oak Ridge in 1944, where Clarence (known to co-workers as Shorty) began work as a chemical operator at Y-12, a job he held until his retirement in 1970. Their family of seven children grew to eight with the birth of Mike, the only Stevens child born in Oak Ridge. Mike's education began at Highland View School and then Robertsville Junior High School, where Algebra 1 teacher Mary Elizabeth Alexander made a lasting impression on his future. Dewey Bilbrey, ORHS chemistry teacher, was another role model in Mike's career planning. Mike said that he always knew from an early age that he wanted to be a teacher and a coach.

Mike lauded another of his inspirational role models, Lawrence Hahn, longtime Director of the Boys' Club of Oak Ridge. Mike proudly stated, "I became a charter member in 1958 when it opened its doors." He added, "My Boys' Club days under Lawrence Hahn kept me out of trouble and on the straight and narrow."

Mike's athletic skills were further honed at ORHS, where he was a pole vaulter for the 1962 State Championship Track Team and the 1964 State Runner-up Track Team under legendary Coach Ben Martin. Mike also played on the 1963 ORHS State Championship Basketball Team with Coach Ira Green. His athletic record earned him a track scholarship to Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) where he majored in math and chemistry with minors in secondary education and physics. Later, in 1980, he completed a Master's in Education, Curriculum and Instruction, from the University of Tennessee. Also, adding to his resume of state championships, Mike was pleased to be on the coaching staff of the 1991 ORHS State Championship Football Team.

As Mike was graduating from MTSU midyear of 1969, he received a draft notice from the U.S. Army. He reported to basic training in Fort Polk, LA in August of 1969 and was subsequently selected for Flight School training in Fort Walters, TX. Mike reflected on this interruption to his early career plans: "Despite the fact that I was drafted into the military, it provided an opportunity for me to become someone that I never dreamed of being—a helicopter pilot. My first-ever experience on an airplane was flying to Flight School to learn to be a pilot."

By mid-September 1970, Mike was in Vietnam, assigned to the 117<sup>th</sup> Assault Helicopter Company, famously known as the first to arrive and the last to leave during the Vietnam War. In March of 1971, he was transferred to Bravo Troop 2<sup>nd</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> Air Cavalry attached to the 101 ABN at Camp Eagle, providing direct combat support to both U.S. and Republic of

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Vietnam troops. Mike's Vietnam tour of duty ended in mid-October 1971. This 12-month deployment earned Mike the following honors for valor: The Distinguished Flying Cross, the Bronze Star, and 28 Air Medals. Mike flew his helicopter into heavy fire on May 1, 1971, while covering a downed U. S. aircraft, extracting crew members, and safely departing without injury to anyone. The Distinguished Flying Cross Award letter praised Warrant Officer Mike Stevens's efforts on that day for his "flying ability and devotion to duty."

Mike joined the TN National Guard in April 1980. He said, "I encouraged others to join. I formed a bond and friendship with many other Vietnam Era pilots and crew members." In the years after active duty, Mike began his teaching career with a one-year hiatus from education while he served as a Pilot for UT LIFESTAR Aeromedical Services from June 1986 through April 1987.

His National Guard duties included serving as an Instructor Pilot for UH-1H/M (Huey) helicopters, an AH-1 Cobra Pilot in Command, and a UH-60 Black Hawk Pilot. His Guard assignments included water bucket teams to fight fires in Tennessee and Florida, flight services for rappelling team missions to eradicate marijuana plots, and emergency rescue operations.

One notable rescue operation, where Mike's piloting skills were invaluable, occurred during the Blizzard of '93 in East Tennessee. Mike's wife, Eleanor, wrote this account:

"It started snowing in Knoxville on Friday, March 12, and continued through Sunday, March 14. Mike received a call from the National Guard in Knoxville on Sunday morning that he was being activated for the search and rescue of people in the Smoky Mountains National Park. He couldn't get out of our driveway, so the Guard sent a Humvee to pick him up."

"Two Hueys flew up to cabins above Gatlinburg, where 90 people had been stranded since Friday with no food, water, fuel, or electricity. The aircraft could not land because the skids would sink down into the deep snow accumulation. It was decided that the people on the ground needed to pack the snow down at the landing site until it was solid. The copters were finally able to land, and they made several trips to the Sevierville Community Center on Sunday afternoon until all 90 people were safely evacuated."

"They refueled at the flight facility and began looking for others, namely the reported 117 Michigan students who were on a school wilderness expedition, as well as other camper/hikers stranded in the mountains. The search continued Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. The Hueys would spot the hikers, and the Blackhawks from Ft Campbell were contacted to use their hoists to lift those stranded and take them to the National Guard facility at McGhee Tyson. In 1993, the local Guard did not have Blackhawks available. It was on Wednesday that the last Michigan students were rescued."

Mike returned home and was back to teaching at ORHS the next day as he recalls this time. Mike was later feted with a 'Quilt of Honor' from the Clinch River Quilts of Valor Foundation.

From December 2001 until his retirement in December 2007, Mike served as a TN Army National Guard Operations Technician. In August 2004, a Blackhawk Company of the TNARNG was mobilized. Mike joined that unit for deployment to Iraq, arriving in October 2004 and serving for a year. Mike's duties were as an Operations Officer, Blackhawk Mission Planner, and Blackhawk Pilot in Command (his Call Sign: Moonshine 3A). His leadership in Operation Iraqi Freedom earned him more honors, another Bronze Star, and two additional air medals. Mike retired from the Guard and the position of State Aviation Safety Officer with the rank of Chief Warrant Officer 5, one of only two CW5s in the state of Tennessee.

Mike's family must not be neglected in telling his story. His wife, Eleanor, has been a vital support person for all that Mike's service required. Eleanor was thrilled to speak with me and to share so many details that her more reticent soldier/teacher/coach/hero husband overlooked. Eleanor worked for thirty years at East Tennessee Children's Hospital and taught classes at Roane State and Pellissippi Community Colleges as well as for the University of Tennessee. Their son Matthew is a Hardin Valley Middle School social studies teacher, and their daughter Jessica is a Senior Graphic Designer in Burbank, CA. They have two granddaughters at Hardin Valley Middle School who now keep them busy attending their many athletic activities.

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Mike and Eleanor have enjoyed numerous travels across the United States and Canada in their retirement. They regularly attend UT football and men's basketball games, as well as occasional visits to UT baseball games and Oak Ridge football and basketball games. Mike reported that he plays golf daily, adding that "Being active has helped me to stay healthy."

Eleanor shared a second interesting story concerning Mike's military service, a story that she first told when I asked Mike if he would consider giving me the honor of writing his story for a Veterans' Day feature. As one of his fellow coaches and close friends, Winston Russell, later said, "Mike is an ever humble and unassuming man with an incredible story to tell. I hope you will write it, Benita."

Thus, I finish this tribute to Mike with Eleanor's captivating account:

"I went to the PX at McGhee Tyson Airbase to purchase ribbons that Mike had earned during his military career. I had his DD214 (Certificate of Discharge from Active Duty), which authorized the awards that he had earned. When I asked for help, the PX employee questioned the DD214, not believing that someone could have served both in Vietnam and in Iraq or that someone could earn 30 air medals. He called his buddies over to check out the DD214, and they all laughed and said, "No way!" They felt sure it was a fake. I assured them that it was real. Everyone in the store was gathering around to check it out. Finally, it was decided that the form must be legit, and I paid for Mike's ribbons. They are framed and hang proudly in our home."

Valor is defined as heroic courage and strength of mind in the face of danger, a quality of bravery and determination that goes beyond mere physical courage. On Veterans Day and throughout the year, thanks to all who have served to ensure and protect our freedom.

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Thank you, Benita, for the insightful story of Mike Stevens, an Oak Ridger veteran who has served his country in many ways. It is good to take the time to honor veterans, and Mike is an excellent choice.

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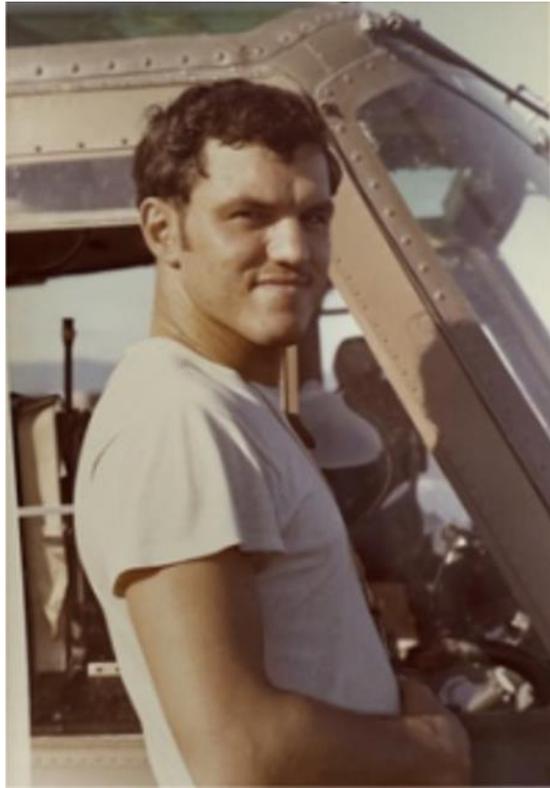
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Military honor ribbons and awards (Courtesy of Eleanor Stevens)

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Mike Stevens in Vietnam, September 1970 – 1971 (Courtesy of Eleanor Stevens)



Pilots and Crew Chiefs in Iraq, (Mike on the far right) October 2004 – 2005 (Courtesy of Eleanor Stevens)

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101<sup>st</sup> Airborne painted this water tower during the 1999 Iraq War. Mike is the pilot of the Black Hawk from which the photo was taken of the second Black Hawk over the tower (Courtesy of Eleanor Stevens)

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Mike received a Quilt of Honor on November 10, 2018, from Clinch River Quilts of Valor. Pictured with the quilt are Matt (son), Claire (granddaughter), Eleanor, and Mike (Courtesy of Eleanor Stevens)