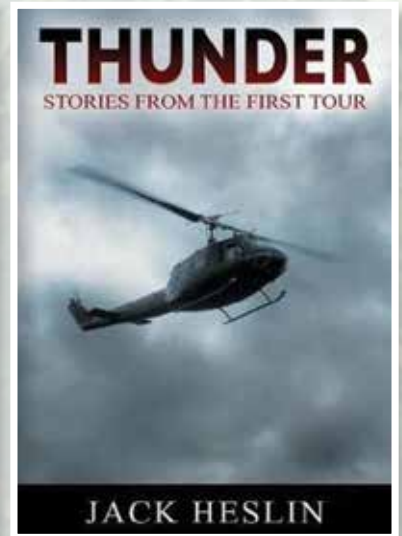


Carolina Shores

Vietnam veteran Jack Heslin unveils new book and a quest



They lived it: Jack and Jean Heslin have been a true team for the past 53 years. While Jack was serving in Vietnam, Jean was birthing and raising their children back in the States. Both later became professors at colleges in Virginia, Jack teaching sociology and Jean an instructor of nursing. They retired to Carolina Shores permanently in 2011. "This area is just the most beautiful area to be in," said Jack Heslin, pointing out they've lived in many places over the years, including Hawaii. "This place is gorgeous."

Fifty-one years ago, Army pilot Capt. John G. "Jack" Heslin flew his first tour of duty in the Vietnam War after not being drafted.

"I was an ROTC grad," said the Rhode Island native, who now lives in Carolina Shores.

Now retired Lt. Col. Heslin had joined the Army as a lieutenant in 1965. Following a tour as a paratrooper with the Army's 82nd Airborne Division, Heslin attended flight school. In October 1967, Vietnam followed for a one-year tour.

"Then the letters came to me just before Christmas in the mail," Heslin recalled. "I got this package in the mail."

At the time, he was flying a classified war mission called SOG — Studies and Observation Group — which Heslin says was a cover name for the Special Forces Mission on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. His

wife of 53 years, Jean, meanwhile, stayed back in the states birthing and raising their children eventually totaling four.

"I was in this little base," Heslin said, adding it's all documented in his newly released book, "Thunder: Stories From the First Tour," detailing his initial experiences in Vietnam, including the 25 letters he received that December from his brother-in-law Bill Evans' eighth-grade students back at East Hartford High School in Connecticut. Some of the letters were addressed directly to Heslin, while others were to "any soldier in Vietnam."

"I had very little time to write letters," said Heslin, who served a second tour of duty in Vietnam in 1972. "So I did write a response to my brother-in-law, who was the teacher for the English/history class and thanked him for the letters."

Earlier this year, at the request of a

friend, Heslin started delving into his records and found the students' letters asking about and thanking him and his soldiers for serving during a difficult time and an unpopular war. He decided to publish them verbatim in his new book, including the students' first names and just the last initials of their last names.

"Dear Captain Heslin: I think you are doing the right thing helping the people of South Vietnam," wrote one of the students, Susan B. "I hope the soldiers keep trying their hardest to help these people."

In 2018, Heslin has launched a new quest to find as many of those now-grown students as he can to send them free autographed copies of his new book, plus original copies of their letters, as a thank-you for the letters they sent him and his soldiers more than five decades ago. In recent weeks, he has already found several.