In 1984, former Sgt. Eric L. Roberts II bought his wife, Sue, a necklace with a small pendant, a replica of a Silver Star medal. It was his way of saying thanks to her for spending more than a decade fighting for him and a fellow airman, retired CMSgt. Ronald W. Brodeur, to receive the recognition they were promised in 1969.

Neither Roberts nor Brodeur realized then that they were just 15 years into a 46-year odyssey.

In February 1969, Roberts and then-Staff Sergeant Brodeur were assigned to the 20th Special Operations Squadron as UH-1P helicopter gunners. While on a mission near Duc Lap, South Vietnam, an explosion rocked their helicopter as they worked to rescue six stranded Special Forces soldiers who were surrounded by the enemy in the jungle. It was the “most significant” mission of the airmen’s time in the war, Roberts and Brodeur later said.

The pilots and gunners were originally put in for the Distinguished Fly-

LIFESÄVERS
Along the Trail

By Brian W. Everstine, Pentagon Editor

Eric Roberts and Ronald Brodeur have now received Silver Stars they earned 46 years ago, for heroism in Vietnam.
Cross but were later upgraded to Silver Stars. The pilots received their Silver Stars in 1969.

The administrative effort to get the gunners’ medals languished for decades, however. Paperwork was lost or put aside. In 1984, the group thought the Silver Star award would finally be approved but a Pentagon review board said “no” to the upgrade, reversing the approval that first came 15 years earlier.

Sue Roberts swore to keep the necklace tucked away until the Air Force finally approved the upgrade to Silver Star. On Dec. 17, 2015, as Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Mark A. Welsh III pinned the Silver Stars on the chests of Roberts and Brodeur during a ceremony at the Pentagon, she sat proudly in the audience, wearing her necklace for the first time.

“This award was a long time coming,” Eric Roberts commented.

THE MISSION
The airmen called her “Patches.”

The 20th Special Operations Squadron had just eight UH-1 aircraft. The small fleet was in constant use supporting special operations, so the airmen only had limited time to fix, or “patch up,” any problems or holes in their aircraft. Many times the crews had just hours to repair large-scale damage and get their UH-1s ready for another day of tough flying.

“Patches brought us home many days with big holes in her skin, and I remember days coming home with tree branches sticking out of the main rotor blades,” Brodeur said. “And what we did when we got home, … we stayed up and fixed her. She had to be ready the next morning.”

Crews of the 20th SOS “Green Hornets” were tasked with inserting, retrieving, and supporting Army special operations forces in classified missions as part of Project Daniel Boone, targeting enemy supply lines throughout Vietnam and Cambodia in 1969. The Air Force crews were on constant alert, responding to calls to support three to four Army Special Forces teams that, at any given time, were on recon missions along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

The squadron’s UH-1s picked up the famed “Pony Express” missions that had previously been flown by CH-3Cs. These smaller, green UH-1s quickly were given the “Green Hornet” nickname, one that is still attached to the 20th Special Operations Squadron.

The Green Hornets were “a secret unit doing secret work,” Welsh said during the December award ceremony at the Pentagon.

On Feb. 20, 1969, Roberts and Brodeur’s crew was tasked with a regular mission to support Army Special Forces near Duc Lap. The soldiers’ missions had been named for tools, and this was called “RT Pick.” As the day went on, however, the team became “compromised and on the run,” Roberts said.

The six troops came under fire near a river. With the water on one side, the enemy quickly surrounded them and moved in. They lit the field on fire “to smoke them out” and to prevent the helicopter from landing. Instead, the helo moved into a low hover, Welsh said. The area had been repeatedly mortared, so trees were blown out, breaking up the tree line, also complicating the UH-1’s ability to easily hover.

As the helicopter located the Special Forces soldiers and moved in close enough to retrieve them, Roberts and Brodeur held on to the chopper’s skids and directed the pilots to make sure the rear rotor was not going to hit a tree.

Strapped into their harnesses, the two airmen fired their M60 machine guns to provide cover.

As the soldiers made their way toward the helicopter, one of them triggered a Claymore mine on the ground. The ensuing
blast rocked the helicopter and blew the airmen from the skids. Brodeur fell off the chopper and dangled from his harness. Roberts, on the other side, was blown into the helicopter.

The explosion had blown open the copilot’s door, leaving him unprotected. Brodeur, exposed to enemy fire, righted himself with his harness and climbed back to his skid.

“After I recovered and I got back on my skid and near my gun, I glanced back and there was nobody in the doorway. My heart stopped,” Brodeur said. “Then I saw this guy scooting back up on the skid to get back to his gun.”

Roberts, recovering from the blast, had disconnected himself from his safety harness and, exposing himself to the enemy fire, climbed out onto his skid. Without any safety connection to the chopper, he shuffled to the copilot’s position and closed the open door to protect him and then returned to his position.

“My first reaction—if I’m blown inside the helicopter, the enemy is firing at me, I don’t know what happened, my head’s ringing, I’m checking to see if I’m hurt—is probably not to unhook my harness, climb out on the left skid, ... and then walk up the left skid and shut the door to protect the copilot,” Welsh said. “That’s not what I would have done. It is what Eric Roberts did.”

The aircraft was able to remain in the hover, and the soldiers climbed in as the two airmen provided suppressive fire.

The last soldier, the team’s radioman, was shot in the back as he climbed on board. Luckily, the round destroyed the radio but did not injure him.

Because of the Green Hornet crew’s efforts, no lives were lost.

Roberts and Brodeur “are looking back on this thinking, ‘This is pretty routine, this is just what the squadron did. It’s what our job was, what we’re expected to do, what our teammates did all the time,’” Welsh said during the ceremony. “According to the laws of this nation and the standards of our service, that was gallantry in action. It’s incredibly appropriate, finally, that we have the chance to say, ‘Thank you for what you did, for who you are, for the example you set.’”

**DOCUMENTING IT—AGAIN**

After Eric told her the story in 1971, Sue Roberts picked up the effort for award of the Silver Star. The group was able to get a pilot and the squadron commander from the mission to rewrite the award nominations. Since the initial information was lost, the group had to completely rebuild all the documentation, according to Roberts.
As time progressed, more information became declassified and was used to bolster the cause for the award upgrade. In 1984, the two finally received DFCs, but an upgrade to the Silver Star was denied.

“The first iteration of this award wasn’t actually presented until 1984 as the Distinguished Flying Cross to these two gentlemen,” Welsh explained at the 2015 ceremony. “It was presented then only because Sue Roberts ... pursued it. The awards recommendations for these two guys in the back of the helicopter were separated from the pilot and copilot’s awards and decorations recommendations and just never reached completion.”

The lack of details about the mission—and a broader understanding of the role of Air Force combat helicopters in Vietnam—limited the clarity and importance of what the airmen did, they said.

“Part of the problem with these boards, is that most people didn’t realize or didn’t understand that we had the mission that we were doing,” Brodeur said of the Green Hornets. “They thought this doesn’t happen. And because it was special operations, it was a covert operation. We didn’t talk about it. … We weren’t supposed to be there.”

Also, the process changed as years went on. During the Vietnam War, Pacific Air Forces would approve the awards, Roberts said. Now the packets had to go through a review process at the Pentagon. While the two airmen had repeatedly been approved for Silver Stars at lower levels, they faced additional bureaucracy.

“All those years went by, and they didn’t follow that process from the ’60s and ’70s,” Brodeur said.

Additionally, the airmen said the Air Force medal review board largely included experts on fixed-wing flight. There wasn’t as much knowledge of combat helicopter operations, especially not on the relatively small group of Green Hornets that fought in Vietnam—specifically, of how the airmen had to expose themselves to enemy fire to help the helicopter safely hover near blown-out trees in the landing zone, Roberts said.

“That’s not a whole lot when you think of all the combat sorties and contingencies” the Air Force has been a part of, said Welsh. “It’s a very select group of warriors, for a reason,” he said.

Roberts and Brodeur stood on a stage in the Hall of Heroes in December at the Pentagon to finally receive their medals in front of more than 100 guests. Several Green Hornets, including former commanders, were in the audience to see two of their own finally receive the recognition they fought so hard to get.

The reception was surreal, the two honorees said.

“It’s very unbelievable, because of the way we came home—what we met when we came home,” Roberts said. “For now, for so many people discussing it and acknowledging it, it’s a little hard to believe sometimes.”

During their speeches, each said the medal is shared among the current and former members of the 20th Special Operations Squadron who have not received the proper recognition and whose valor, they said, has largely been overlooked.

“As a unit, all of the Green Hornets own this recognition,” Brodeur said.

“We want to share the acknowledgment and the recognition we received today with every one of them,” Roberts said. “They know who they are and they know what they did as a member of the Green Hornets, and we love them for it.”