



The VHPA Newsletter

Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association ®

November/December 1998 Vol. 16, No. 6



"Maverick 38," a UH-1C gunship with the Third Platoon, 175th Assault Helicopter Company, sits in a revetment at Vinh Long in 1968. The gunship carried two 19-shot 2.75 FFAR pods, a 40 mm M-5 grenade launcher and a .50-caliber machine gun. Photo courtesy of J.F. "Jim" Speirs Jr., a 175th AHC pilot in 1968-69.

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From the President

Legacy! Many people today are concerned about their legacy: Politicians, the media, the president.

Such interest in legacy is because it is natural for humans to be interested in how they, individually or as a group, will be historically remembered.

And, of course, the legacy should preferably be for something significant, meaningful and honorable.

I ask you:

- How will the VHPA and its members be remembered?
- What will be the legacy of the individual helicopter pilot and the VHPA?

As life moves on for us once-invincible warriors, we see mortality facing us in many ways. Right now I have a dozen of the new *Condolence Letters* and their accompanying *Certificates of Appreciation* for deceased members laying on my desk for signatures . . . a sign of mortality, for sure.

I attended a Mid-America Chapter get-together at Branson, MO, a couple days ago and the gray hair, lost hair and heavy mid-ridges of World War II and Korean veterans, as well as Vietnam vets, hinted strongly at mortality.

The signs of mortality for all VHPA members are there and looming larger each day. We can ignore the signs, but we can't escape them. Like the target of a Cobra on a gun run, we are under the "pipper."

On Oct. 29, my wife and I drove to Arkadelphia, AR, to witness and participate in an event which was wonderful yet bittersweet.

It was the dedication of the Arkadelphia Municipal Airport to a local son who was killed in RVN on Oct. 29, 1972 — 26 years to the day.

Talk about mortality and legacy! A wonderful town filled with the kind of people who truly make up what America is, paid a glorious tribute to their fallen son.

Almost 500 townsfolk of all ages turned out to say, "thank you" for the military service of First Lt. Dexter B. Florence, a helicopter pilot who once delivered their papers and played in their school bands.

Almost a dozen of his former buddies from C/17th Cav rallied from across the United States to say: "We knew

him and respected him for his bravery." In short, his legacy?

Gosh, as I sat in that audience filled with family, friends and buddies of the local son, I wondered just what would be my legacy. What would all our legacies be, as members of the VHPA?

Really, I doubt whether many people today have the knowledge or understanding of what we did, unless we tell them!

Fellow VHPA members, we must tell our story! We must take part in telling and establishing our legacy. We know how it has been botched by the media and politicians and now the wannabes.

Our story must be told correctly in our local towns and neighborhoods by us or nobody will know the truth. We must look for ways to bring it to the attention of those we work with, worship with and see every day.

How? Look around your town and see if there is an unnamed building, airport or public place that could be dedicated to a local son who fell in service to his country in Vietnam. Hopefully, he would have been a pilot.

There has to be a lot of towns with just that situation. If not, is there a scholarship fund in a local school, college or university that was established by a mourning family for the son it lost and who died in Vietnam? If there is, maybe we, the VHPA should be adding to that fund by making a donation so his legacy can live on with the memory of that son, killed in action.

I am sure that by actually being a part of his legacy, our legacy will be reinforced, too. We must boldly step forward to make sure our legacy is remembered and lives on! No one else can or will do it. We must take the first step.

Larry Cain, the VHPA member in Arkadelphia, took that step. And because he did, our legacy, along with the memory of Lt. Dexter B. Florence, has an excellent chance of living on in Arkadelphia.

Look around and see what you can do today. Mortality can catch up with you unexpectedly before your good intentions are acted upon. Then no one would know your legacy or the legacy of the VHPA. What a loss to be remembered by the wrong legacy!

Happy holidays from me and my family to you and yours. Hope your Christmas dinner comes from a hot Mermite container!

— Tom Payne, President
TomPayne@vhpa.org

Classified ads

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VHPA SUPPORT

Legal adviser	Charles R. Rayl
VHPA Headquarters	(800) 505-VHPA
Fax	(916) 966-8743

ELECTRONIC MAIL

VHPA Headquarters	HQ@vhpa.org
Newsletter editor	swickard@vhpa.org
Public relations chairman	PR@vhpa.org
Records/Database chairman	roush@vhpa.org
Website	http://www.vhpa.org
Membership chairman	membership@vhpa.org
Webmaster	webmaster@vhpa.org

VHPA chapters

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VHPA briefs

Membership contest begins

Last year Don Joyce won our membership drive with a total of 65 new members and was reimbursed for four days of his stay at the hotel in Fort Worth.

The same thing can happen to you if you win the contest this year.

All you have to do is keep track of all the new members you sign up and document them to the Membership Committee and your room will be paid for at the Nashville reunion.

Prizes will be awarded to the first- and second-place winners who sign up a minimum of 25 new members.

Winners will be announced at the banquet in Nashville.

You do have to be present to win.

Heavy lifters plan mini-reunion

CH-54, Skycrane or Tarhe pilots will have a mini-reunion during the VHPA Reunion in Nashville, July 1-5.

Those planning to attend should give their preference for a date and time.

Contact Max Torrence at [REDACTED] m

Ohio River reunion in February

The Ohio River LZ Chapter will be holding its annual reunion near Dayton, Ohio, the end of February.

The actual date is still pending, but people interested in attending can call Phil Marshall at ([REDACTED]) and leave a message.

Marshall will notify them of the date and place.

Current chapter members will receive a mailing.

Fort Worth reunion second honeymoon

First of all I'd like to thank VHPA and especially the Fort Wolters Chapter for the Fort Wolters Extravaganza at this year's reunion.

This reunion was special to us: First because it was our first, and second because my wife Sue and I were married at Fort Wolters Chapel No. 2 on April 1, 1967.

A special thanks goes to Bobby Bateman for arranging transportation for us from the mess hall to the chapel. After all these years, I would have never been able to find it.

I enlisted in the Army in February 1966 specifically for Warrant Officer Flight School. Because there were no openings in flight classes, I was put on the 120-day delay program. However, I didn't receive orders to report for basic training until mid-August.

During that time, I met my wife-to-be, Sue Hazlip. We corresponded while I was in basic training at Fort Polk, LA, and while I struggled through preflight training at Fort Wolters with class 67-13.

After a short leave for the Christmas holiday, it was up to "the hill" and we received our introduction to the TH-55A trainer.

The day I soloed I was on Cloud Nine and had the rare chance to visit the PX. They just happened to have a nice, inexpensive (remember the WOC salary) set of wedding rings on sale. On impulse, I purchased them.

That evening, back at the barracks, I had a second impulse. I had written Sue a letter and it was ready to mail. I hadn't mentioned the rings in the letter, but I took the engagement ring, wrapped it in toilet tissue, folded it into the letter and mailed it.

Imagine her surprise when she opened that letter and this wadded-up chunk of tissue fell out. Knowing me and having read tales of WOCs from my Letters, she didn't know what to expect. The engagement ring was the last thing she expected.

The next thing I knew, I got a call from her mother, telling me she was at the bus depot in Fort Worth.

Mr. Terry, our TAC officer, was not pleased that one of his candidates had to have time off to pick up a new fiancée in Fort Worth. He kept pretty close watch on my weekends from then on.

The only day I could get free for the ceremony was April 1. Then I forgot we'd need witnesses. Back to the barracks to find two warm bodies to provide that service. Gary Beck and Duane Caswell were available to complete the ceremony.

Sue and I were finally married and she remains an "Original Wife."

Thanks again to Bobby and relay our "thank you" to the gentleman in the squad car who took us down to the

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chapel, and was kind enough to take our renewed wedding pictures. I think he said he was the assistant chief of police for Mineral Wells, but somehow we lost his name.

Thanks also to my old roommate at Wolters, Chuck Carlock, both for the book "Firebirds" and for the splendid view of the fireworks from his office window.

This was our first reunion, but it will not be our last.

Ted and Sue Buisker
Davis, IL

Review of new book important to veterans

Thank you for your review.

While it probably made you angry to read this book, it will make me sad, but I fully realize its importance. I just ordered (the book "Stolen Valor") last week, so I didn't get mine yet, but it's coming.

I feel great sadness for the "lost years" that I grew up with the myths and stereotypes that you described, that the book brings to light.

I did a LOT of thinking about Vietnam in the years that many of you guys were still keeping to yourselves out there. Even then, you guys as individuals all KNEW those things weren't accurate. How was someone like me to know any better, at age 10, 14, 22...

Documentary producers seeking chopper pilots

We have started filming the documentary called "The Men With Painted Faces."

The unit I served with was stationed in Bien Hoa, RVN, 1967 through 1969. The filming is going very well concerning F Company, 51st LRP (Abn.) Infantry.

I would appreciate it if you could notify the pilots through your newsletter about this documentary. It would be nice to get the pilots who flew for us.

We will be shooting at Fort Bragg, NC, and then traveling around the country to do filming of (Gen. Norman) Schwarzkopf and others.

Would appreciate any and all help in locating "Hurry Sun Down." The emblem was the white pentagon with a diagonal stripe painted on the tail boom. The crew who flew for us shot down a MiG and has some very interesting stories we want to capture on film. I believe it was the 195th.

All the help would be greatly appreciated and we will give credit to the VHPA, of course.

Don C. Hall

I don't feel angry, just sad that I had the thought, planted in the back of my mind for so many years, "If my brother HAD come home, would he have ended up LIKE THAT?"

During all those years, I only clipped one Vietnam related article out of the newspaper. I kept it for many years — entitled "Vietnam veterans subject to suicide." I looked for it tonight after I read your review, and I found it in a folder. I had marked "David" for my brother — I think it's from the early 1980's when I was in college. I don't know why I kept it all these years.

It's a UPI article from Boston and it states that "Men drafted during the Vietnam War are much more likely to kill themselves and die in car accidents than those who did not serve in the conflict, doctors said today."



It says Dr. Norman Hearst of the University of California at San Francisco used data from the military draft lottery and, with other researchers, estimated that "men drafted during the Vietnam War have a suicide rate up to 86 percent higher than those who were not drafted and are up to 53 percent more likely to die in motor vehicle accidents."

It goes on — but boy, I had that 86 percent figure burned into my brain from the moment I read it. Never before had I felt such overwhelming sadness, not just for my brother, but for the thousands of others I thought were also casualties of the war due to suicide.

The thought was born that perhaps David was better off NOT surviving, I'm ashamed to say, and that thought was reinforced by other reports, movies, etc. as you all know.

For me to feel that uselessness (I know no other way to describe the feeling) about the loss of an eager, intelligent and sensitive 19-year old who had been my brother BEFORE he went to that "place" is a feeling I don't want to ever feel again.

For me to feel that every Vietnam veteran was a powder keg about to explode (or commit suicide or kill himself at the wheel) ALSO is a feeling I never want to feel again. It was this article, plus others, that was in the back of my mind making my knees shake the first time I ever called a Vietnam veteran in 1994.

If I had not found VHPA and VHFCN in April 1996, I would not have been able to finally do justice to my brother's memory. You guys have shown me who he was and, more importantly, in your eyes and your actions and your devotion to each other I see who he might have been. He would have been right alongside.

And like I always say, if he were here, I would not be, and that would be fine with me.

As a group, you have helped replace negative images with positive ones for people like me and Susan Blaker and other KIA relatives you have helped. But still, we grew up with them, and still, there are others like us out there who do not yet know about you.

I am finding out, for each of us KIA families, our war ended and the book was closed, much the same as it was

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for some of you guys. We lost our loved one and that was it. End of story.

Now, by finding out who David really was, I have found out who I lost that day in 1969 and it's a little like losing him all over again, as an adult.

So you have given us more to lose — sometimes I miss the 48-year-old who might be telling me about his first reunion or about the buddies he had found. But I would rather see who I lost, in your reflection, than see him in the skewed research studies and stereotypes of the past. Thank God we have ALL had enough of those.

Little sister,
Julie Kink

Sister of WO1 David Kink, KIA 8/3/69

EDITOR'S NOTE: Julie Kink's letter refers to Gary Roush's review of the book "Stolen Valor," which appears in this newsletter.

Revised Christmas poem focuses on holiday season

I thought you might be able to use this in the newsletter that comes out around Christmas.

Greg Ross

The Night Before Christmas

T'was the night before Christmas, he lived all alone

In a one-bedroom house made of plaster and stone.

I had come down the chimney with presents to give,

And to see just who in this home did live. I looked all about, a strange sight did I see, No tinsel, no presents, not even a tree.

No stocking by the mantle, just boots filled with sand,

on the wall hung pictures of far distant lands.

With medals and badges, awards of all

kinds,

a sober thought came through my mind.

For this house was different, it was dark and dreary,

I found the house of a soldier, once I could see clearly.

The soldier lay sleeping, silent, alone,

curled upon the floor in this one-bedroom home.

The face was so gentle, the room in such disorder,

Not how I pictured a United States soldier.

Was this the hero of whom I just heard?

Curled up on a poncho, the floor for a bed?

I realized the families I saw on this night,

owed their lives to these soldiers, who were willing to fight.

Soon round the world the children would play,

'Ode to Student Pilot' offers touch of humor

Many years ago when I was a WOC, Class 66-7, I wrote a letter to my father and enclosed the following:

An Ode to The Student Pilot

An instructor knocked at the Pearly Gates

His face was scarred and cold.

He stood before the man of fate

For admission to the fold.

"What have you done," Saint Peter asked,

"To gain admission here?"

"I've been an instructor, Sir," he said

"For many and many a year."

The Pearly Gates swung open wide

Saint Peter touched the bell . . .

"Come in," he said, "and choose your harp

You've had your share of hell."

But only a short while later

To those same Pearly Gates had come

A wearied and tired student pilot

Who was by no means dumb.

"And where have you been?" queried Saint Peter

(as the instructor pilot took down a harp from the shelf)

"I've not only been to hell," cried the student pilot

"But I've flown with the Devil himself!"

I do not know if I copied this ode from some article or if I may have been a very creative writer back in those days — my memory seems to have gone south.

In either case, I hope it may provide a bit of humor for the next newsletter.

Robert A. Heber
"X-Ray 3"



And grownups would celebrate a bright Christmas day. They all enjoyed freedom each month of the year, Because of the soldiers, like the one lying here. I couldn't help wonder how many lay alone, on a cold Christmas Eve, in a land far from home. The very thought brought a tear to my eye, I dropped to my knees and started to cry. The soldier awakened and I heard a rough voice, "Santa, don't cry, this life is my choice; I fight for freedom, I don't ask for more, My life is my God, my country, my corps. The soldier rolled over and drifted to sleep, I couldn't control it, I started to weep.

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*I kept watch for hours, so silent and still
And we both shivered from the cold night's chill.
I didn't want to leave on that cold, dark night
This Guardian of Honor so willing to fight.
The soldier rolled over, with a voice soft and pure,
whispered, "Carry on, Santa,
It's Christmas Day, All is secure.*

*One look at my watch and I knew he was right
Merry Christmas, my friend, and to all a Good Night!*

— Author Unknown

Aircraft lesson learned because of Vietnam crash

During the VHPA reunion in Orlando, several pilots inquired about the formation of the 478th Crane Company and the accident in January 1966 that claimed the lives of pilots Al Gajon, Bob Lane and three others, crew chief J. Hetzer, passenger C. English and grader operator, L. Bryan.

I was in Pleiku on another mission when the accident occurred, so I have enlisted the help of CW4 Jerry Verbeek, our administrative officer and adviser to the accident board that investigated the accident and had first-hand knowledge of the events leading up to the crash and its conclusion.

The 478th Flying Crane Company was formed at Fort Benning, GA, in early 1963. The unit was assigned to the 44th Battalion, 10th Air Transport Brigade, at Lawson Field, Fort Benning.

The mission was to support the 11th Air Assault Division.

Pilot requirements to be part of this company included twin engine (H-37) rating, instrument ticket and a minimum of 1,500 hours of helicopter time.

So all 12 pilots, warrant and commissioned, as well as the flight engineers and crew chiefs, were well qualified and eager to participate in forming this new and unique company.

Ground school for the pilots, crew chiefs, flight engineers and maintenance personnel was conducted at the factory. Five pilots remained at the factory for training, using the Sikorsky company crane 325Y.

The first four of six "off the shelf" CH-54As (equipped with people pods) were flown from the factory in Bridge-

port, CT, and joined the 11th Air Assault Division participating in the field test of Air Assault II, already in progress.

Returning to Fort Benning upon the conclusion of Air Assault II, training continued for the pilots and crews.

Several visits were made to different Army posts to acquaint commanders with the capabilities of the Flying Crane.

During this time, we lifted many different pieces of equipment, including one of our own CH-54s, minus the rotor blades.

During one demonstration at Fort Bragg, NC, we carried 87 combat-ready troops in the "people" pod plus a crew of three, for a total of 90, a Free World record at that time.

In August 1965, the 478th Flying Crane Company deployed to Vietnam as part of the 1st Air Cavalry Division and settled in at the "Golf Course" at An Khe in the Central Highlands.

The company began airlifting many various pieces of equipment, including downed aircraft, bulldozers, road graders, conex containers, fuel (2,500 gallons at a time)

blivets, 155mm howitzers, etc.

One of the pods was transformed into a communication center, another was developed into an emergency hospital and both could be flown to an advanced position with personnel dropped off and picked up later.

We procured two 40-by-40 foot cargo nets used in unloading ships and, doubling

them, made a net that was used to carry up to 18,000 pounds of artillery ammunition. This net weighed more than 1,000 pounds and had to be returned to the ammo supply point by sling, thereby reducing our payload going out and our speed and capability of going on to another mission after delivery of supplies or ammunition.

A new net, utilizing nylon straps, was devised with the thought it would be much lighter and could be carried in the cockpit when emptied, thereby increasing our mission capabilities.

Jerry Verbeek and Bob Marsh flew the first mission utilizing the new cargo net. They had problems with the net and voiced their concerns.

The next day, Al Gajon and Bob Lane had the mission



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of taking 105mm ammo to an artillery site at Mang Yang Pass, between An Khe and Pleiku, then they were to return to An Khe and four-point an Adams 310 road grader to an engineer road construction site.

Evidently to save time, they decided to take the road grader driver with them, plus one of our troops, who was scheduled to go home in a few days and had never flown in a Crane before.

There were five people in the cockpit, including the crew chief.

Jerry Verbeek picks up the story:

Regarding the accident involving Flying Crane SN64-14204, in which we lost Gajon and Lane, plus the other three men, the following is from my memory of the accident:

Bob Marsh and I had the same mission the day before, using the same type cargo net.

The nets being in short supply at the ammo point, we were requested to return the empty nets as we returned to the ammo point. This we attempted to do.

We attached the empty net to the hook on the single-point hoist and reeled in all the cable.

During takeoff, as the airspeed increased, the net became very unstable and, being so large, it could have become entangled in the tail and/or main rotor.

We aborted the takeoff and hooked it to the four-point load levelers in addition to the single-point hook.

Again, as the airspeed increased, the net began to flap so violently we aborted the takeoff.

We tried to fit the net in the cockpit area, but it was too large to fit in the small space available. Therefore, we informed the ground crew at the drop-off site that the nets would have to be transported by other aircraft internally or with a load in the net.

We also included the information in our after-action reports. The next day, with a different crew, another attempt was made to transport the empty net. This, to the best of my recollection, is what happened.

The empty net was attached to the hook on the single-point hoist. Then, either at a hover or on takeoff, they let out cable. I cannot recall how many feet, but I believe it was at least 50. This, I believe the flight crew thought, would make the net trail down and aft as the aircraft gained airspeed.

But, the net being so large, with enough surface area to catch and hold air, acted to some degree like a parachute, but very unstable.

As the airspeed increased, the net did not trail down and aft, as expected, but oscillated wildly under the aircraft, and in so doing, came into range of the tail rotor.

The tail rotor caught the net with a blade, which lifted the net and hoist cable up into the rotor area, where it was caught by a main rotor blade.



The main rotor blade then flexed down and struck the fuselage and cockpit area, resulting in the destruction of the aircraft in mid-air.

A post-crash fire destroyed much of the aircraft. However, sufficient evidence remained to confirm the sequence of events which resulted in the loss of the aircraft, in what I call a "non-survivable accident."

We reviewed our sling load, our safety and emergency procedures in the preflight, in-flight and post-flight phases of flying new or different types of equipment in an effort to prevent this type of accident from happening again.

For many of us, it was hard to admit that perhaps our enthusiasm and zeal for getting the job done had or could have contributed to accidents of this type and we vowed to be more cautious and thorough in our planning and flying in the future.

As costly as it was, I believe as a company we became better pilots from that day on, closer knit than ever, and still willing to perform and do our best.

James R. Oden

CW4 retired

Class 56-10

478th Heavy Helicopter Company

1946-66, 1968-69

Two great aviation events occurred on December 17

December 17: Two great events in the history of aviation:

- 1). Dec. 17, 1903: Orville Wright flew 120 feet in the world's first flight in a heavier-than-air powered aircraft.
- 2). Dec. 17, 1968: Warrant Officer Rotary Wing Aviator Class 68-519 graduated at Fort Rucker, AL. We "earned our wings."

Almost all of us in class 68-519 started together in Company B-4-1 in basic training at Fort Polk, LA.

Almost half the company and almost everyone in the fifth platoon were prospective aviators, which the gung-ho "Airborne" drill sergeants did fully appreciate, until about

halfway through boot camp, when the trainees began to realize that the drill sergeants could not, indeed, kill us.

A fellow trainee's older brother had gone through flight school and was already a warrant officer. The younger brother knew the cadence song for double-time (formation running) had slightly different words in flight school than what we were singing in boot camp.

At Fort Polk, we sang the boot camp song.

And, of course, we learned how to sing it very loudly, because singing it loudly was preferred to doing pushups.

On that fateful day, the flight school-bound trainees in



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the fifth platoon agreed the next time we had to sing "I Want To Be An Airborne Ranger" we would, instead, all sing very loudly: "I Want To Be An Aye-vee-aye-tor . . ."

The drill sergeant's response was as we expected: "All right all you & % # * @ * % # @ & % % \$ @ who think you are going to be flyboys, 20 pushups." We did the pushups. And, of course, we sang it our way again. More pushups.

We learned to sing "aviator" only on the way to class or something with a tight schedule, not meals. This first act of group defiance was the beginning of a close camaraderie that lasted all through boot camp and flight school.



In the last week of boot camp, the fifth platoon was allowed to buy a radio so we could listen to the important and confusing news about Tet 1968.

The first week of March, we were bused to Fort Wolters, Texas, for the first part of flight school, where we were Class 68-35.

For the first four weeks, we could not touch a helicopter. An OCS-like environment of classes, harassment, marching, inspections and cleaning the barracks was easy to take because we knew we would soon be flying; we were at Fort Wolters, where the sky was filled with helicopters. We were finally WOCs, warrant officer candidates.

We learned that when a tactical officer asked: "Candidate, what is a WOC?" we had to reply: "Sir, a WOC is something you frow at a wabbit, sir." Without smiling, of course, unless you liked pushups.

Finally, there I was, learning how to do a preflight inspection, and then strapping into a Bell H-13 (like the beginning of M*A*S*H). Proud and confident, until I took the controls. I may as well have been a bucking bronco; humility returned.



The instructor pilot would say: "OK, I have the cyclic and collective controls, you just work the pedals. Keep the nose pointed the way it is."

Easier said than done. I was soon overcontrolling and then spinning. Then he would let me work only the collective pitch, to keep the helicopter "three feet above the ground." I went between about 20 feet high and slamming the poor machine on the ground as the IP kept us perfectly centered.

Finally, I had only the cyclic control, with instructions to stay above a 20-by-20-foot square. I started swinging back and forth, uncontrollably. While trying to stay over that square, I accidentally took off, sideways. The only redeeming quality of that day was all WOCs humbly reported the same experience when we got back to the barracks.

It wasn't until about the fourth day of flying that I began to think I just "might" be able to control such a machine . . . someday.

Last Purple Heart of war goes to pilot

I am, I believe, recipient of the last Purple Heart of the war to be won by a member of the 114th Assault Helicopter Company in the unit's service in Vietnam. As a matter of fact, the last two.

The first for an action around mid-day of Feb. 10, 1972. During the rearming of a Cobra gunship on the flightline at Vinh Long. The second, for another action — this one around midnight of Feb. 17, 1972, while flying a borrowed Huey from A Troop, 7/1 Cav on a night airfield defense mission five kilometers west of Vinh Long.

By Feb. 10, all the 114th's Hueys had stood down and withdrawn from Vinh Long. By Feb. 17, the only mission still flown by the Cobra platoon was the escort of my light ship (Cobra Surprise). I understand that the 114th stood down altogether on Feb. 27. That's just 10 days after the second action. So this dubious claim is at least conceivable.

On a wall in my home hangs a small box frame containing a hand grenade (HE, frag-inert) set beneath a pair of Purple Heart medals, which have been welded together along one edge.

These decorations were presented for two unrelated actions, which occurred 10 days apart. But to me, they represent the two ends of one single 10-day-long experience, both of which involve grenades.

The story of how a Cobra pilot from the 114th flying a Huey and crew borrowed from the Cav bearing the name Cobra Surprise derived from the long-gone 121st AHC's light ship, Tiger Surprise came to win the last two Purple Hearts of the war in the 114th is far too lengthy and complex for this short note. Perhaps next time.

Robert L. Hofmann, CW2
Cobra Surprise
114th AHC (Cobra platoon)
December 1971-February 1972



In the third week of flying, the first candidate in class 68-35 soloed. Fortunately, we were flying out of the stage field that required the bus to pass the Holiday Inn on the way back to Fort Wolters.

We ceremoniously dragged our newly soloed brother to the swimming pool, under the arch made of two rotor blades, with the sign that read: "Under these arches pass the world's greatest aviators."

Every day, for the next few weeks, the bus would stop at that Holiday Inn or, if coming from the wrong stage field, the muddy Brazos River.

Either place was just as much fun, as each new inductee

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would try to drag others into the water with him.

In July, while out practicing landing at confined areas, one WOC spotted a huge patch of large, ripe, watermelons. The farmer had planted rows of tall corn around the edges of the patch so passersby in cars would not see the melons. But such camouflage was of little use against young helicopter pilots.



Our first hot extraction. We picked our own radio frequency and planned every detail. Only three ships went in. I was one of those assigned to provide cover and recon along the road to the south.

The mission went as planned and that evening, in the few minutes between supper and mandatory study time, we feasted on ripe watermelon . . . the spoils of war.

Then, our first night cross-country navigation exercise. We took off five minutes apart, two students in each helicopter. We probably didn't really need to navigate, just follow the lights of the helicopters in front of us. But they were students, too! Better navigate.

"What's that little symbol on the map, directly on the pencil line of our course? Why, it's a drive-in theater! Yes, I can see the drive-in ahead. Looks like the helicopter in front of us is almost over it. Look, you can make out the movie!"

Then the screen went white. A few seconds later, the movie was visible again. Then, as we were almost over the drive-in, wouldn't you know it: One of us bumped our landing light switch, too. Damn, I hate it when it does that.

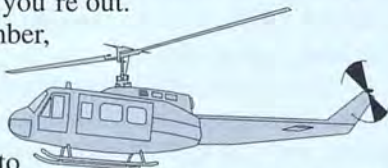
First week in August, graduation from Fort Wolters, then on to Rucker. Some crazy dudes went home to get married. Ed Sholar got married to Joyce and I got married to Judy. Since boot camp, Ed and I had almost always been next to each other in lines, alphabetically, of course.

There was no OCS-like environment at Fort Rucker, just serious flying and classes about flying. I hated it.

On my first day of instrument training, the IP asked if I wanted to try a ground-controlled approach, during which a radar operator on the ground gives the pilot instructions to follow a course to the ground. My track on his radar screen probably looked like I was drunk.

A few weeks later I tried my first instrument takeoff, whereupon I took off — backwards. Not good. Pink slip. Too many pink slips and you're out.

Finally, in mid-November, we transitioned to the



UH-1. The Huey. I shivered with awe the day I touched the door handle to get in. Big, heavy, stable, responsive, and smooth controls; it was a modern, powerful, proud machine. And they were letting me fly it. Me! I don't believe it. Flying an H-13 was like wrestling with it, but a Huey *wanted* to be stable, and it *wanted* to fly.

Forget all that technical stuff they've been giving us, this machine is *alive*. With my left hand, I wound up the throttle and heard that 1,300-horsepower engine respond. Then I pulled up the collective pitch control and asked the machine to hover. It did. A love affair began.

Students late to checkpoint

One of the most notable events was during low-level navigation training. We were all listening to the same frequency.

"Blackhawk 35" was the call sign of two students in a Huey; "Paddy Center" was the call sign of instructor pilots in an airplane, simulating a flight following station.

"Blackhawk 35, this is Paddy Center, what is your location?"

"This is Blackhawk 35, expecting Checkpoint Bravo in 10 minutes."

"Roger, report crossing Checkpoint Bravo."

About 12 minutes later: "Blackhawk 35, this is Paddy Center, what is your location?"

"This is Blackhawk 35, we are over Lake Cassidy, heading south, expecting Checkpoint Bravo in 10 minutes."

"Roger, report crossing Checkpoint Bravo."

Another 10 minutes later: "Blackhawk 35, this is Paddy Center, what is your location?"

"This is Blackhawk 35, we are still over Lake Cassidy, expecting Checkpoint Bravo in 10 minutes."

"Blackhawk 35, please describe Lake Cassidy."

"This is Blackhawk 35, on the north side was a white sandy beach and some hotels. We can't see the south side yet."

"Blackhawk 35, immediately turn north and climb to 1,000 feet. When you get back over the United States, please note that the Gulf of Mexico is much larger than Lake Cassidy."

"This is Blackhawk 35, roger."

It wasn't me. Honest. I just heard the conversations.



WOCs become warrant officers

Dec. 17, 1968, we became warrant officers and could wear the wings of an Army aviator. Joyce pinned on Ed's wings; Judy pinned on mine. Judy bought an 18-inch-wide replica of the small wings. Had to hang it on the wall, didn't look right on my uniform.

One pilot actually had orders to Germany! Could be because he already had two tours in 'Nam as an EM. A few guys had orders to Chinook, Cobra or medevac school. But most of us would be in Vietnam in three weeks.

From the VHPA Membership Directory, I found out many of my classmates extended their tours and some went back for a second tour.

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Sometimes I love that directory, sometimes I hate it.

Classmates saluted

On the 90th anniversary of powered flight and the 25th anniversary of earning their wings, I salute the special graduates of class 68-519 whose names are on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial:

- Ed Sholar — June 4, 1969 (Panel 23W, line 68).
- Orval Baldwin — Oct. 5, 1969 (Panel 17W, line 38).
- Jack Barnes — Feb. 1, 1969 (Panel 33W, line 30).
- Sam Bosenbark — June 6, 1969 (Panel 23W, line 83).
- Dennis Brault — June 26, 1970 (Panel 9W, line 93).
- Jim Casey — May 18, 1969 (Panel 24W, line 37).
- Freddie Chase — March 14, 1969 (Panel 29W, line 36).
- Will Clemons — April 3, 1970 (Panel 12W, line 87).
- Jim Dunn — April 23, 1969 (Panel 26W, line 31).
- Ben Haire — May 20, 1969 (Panel 24W, line 59).
- Rich Holman — June 5, 1969



(Panel 23W, line 74).

- Van Joyce — March 12, 1971 (Panel 4W, line 41).
- Steve Martin — May 31, 1969 (Panel 23W, line 29).
- Doug Moore — May 22, 1969 (Panel 24W, line 78).
- John Reilly — May 22, 1970 (Panel 10W, line 81).
- Bob Williams — June 19, 1969 (Panel 22W, line 94).
- Fred Walters — May 22, 1969 (Panel 24W, line 80).
- John Vars — July 17, 1969 (Panel 20W, line 12).

And our other classmates:

- Tom Bridges died during training on Nov. 8, 1968.
- Jim Bennett died after tour in a car accident.
- Laurenzon "Larry" Smith died after his tour.
- Bruce Cowie died after his tour in an Army aircraft accident.
- Dave Troxell died after his tour in Army aircraft accident.
- Stew Hundere died after his tour in an Army aircraft accident.

Jim Schueckler, Polecat

Army RVN, 192nd Assault Helicopter Company

Pilot, co-pilot remember mission after '98 reunion

On Dec. 11, 1968, I began early with a flight from LZ English to Uplift, where I was to fly command and control for the commander of 1/503rd, 173rd Airborne Division.

CWO Walton Henderson "Sugar Bear" was the aircraft

commander and I, with only three months in country, was flying pater pilot.

Neither of us were supposed to be flying this mission, but Walt lost a coin toss and I wanted more stick time than I had been getting.

Walt was one of those ACs who was good to fly with. He would give you all the stick time he could and try to teach you something in the process.

The crew chief was Spec. 4 Ned Costa and the doorgunner was John Steen. We were members of Casper flight platoon of HHC, 173rd Airborne Brigade.

At the briefing we received specific flight routes and altitudes to avoid artillery firing from English, An Khe, LZ Uplift and LZ Fox.

Elements of the 1/503rd were to be inserted by the 61st Assault Helicopter Company about 20 kilometers north of An Khe Pass at the north end of "Happy Valley." This AO was known to be an enemy stronghold.

At the briefing, no one had said anything about weapons, so Walt asked if there was any .51s or heavier anti-aircraft in the area. We were advised there were no heavy weapons in this area, and that was the reason the battalion was being lifted into this end of the valley.

We were shot down later that morning and Walt was trapped for more than seven hours before being freed. He spent 3.5 years in the hospital prior to returning to flight status.

I only spent three months at Camp Zama in Japan, returning to active duty with the 29th Infantry in Hawaii, and to Vietnam in 1971 with the 61st Assault Helicopter Company.

The crew chief and the doorgunner returned to Casper after a month at the evac hospital in Qui Nhon.

For 30 years, what happened that day has been unclear to Walt and me. We finally found each other at the 1998 Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association reunion.

Walt had been to the reunion several times prior, but this was my first. I did not know there were reunions happening and only found out on the Internet.

What follows is from what both of us are able to remember, and from what others who were there have told us.

We are trying to locate our crew and the others who were there to help us. We are still looking for the doorgunner to complete the crew.

Our first mission was to lift a 4.2 mortar crew to a mountaintop overlooking the AO, so they could give direct support and prep the LZ. This went without any problems.

The only interesting point was that on the first lift, while on short-final to the top of a mountain that looked like no man had ever been there, the grass parted and the LZ was leveled with sandbags and a large 1st Cav patch painted in the middle. We all expressed our disappointment at not



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being first.

After the 4.2 was in place, we refueled and picked up the battalion commander, the artillery forward observer, the radio operator and five PRC 25 radios.

At 10 a.m., we were back in the AO. The commander asked us to overfly the LZ so the forward observer could get a look. The low cloud cover and flight restrictions, due to the different gun target lines, kept us below 1,200 feet, which was causing Walt a great deal of concern.

When the AC is upset, a new pilot's pucker factor is at its limit. The battalion commander wanted another look at the LZ and told us to fly another pass. On the second pass, I was flying and Walt was turned talking to the commander, trying to convince him our repeated action was not the best plan.

As we crossed the LZ, the four-deuce crew advised the forward observer they were ready to fire. Walt turned to take the aircraft; all discussion was over, we had to get clear.

Just prior to Walt taking the controls, I saw what looked like a large bird at our 12 o'clock. It was about the size of the turkey vultures we saw in Texas.

Walt said at the time he was real upset at me for flying us into the bird's flight path. Walt took the controls and started a rapid descent.

I remember watching what we still thought was a large bird as we went under it.

Not a second later, there was a series of loud bangs. The Huey acted like a truck with no springs going over several speed bumps at high speed.



We began flying out of trim with the nose to the right and the helicopter rolled to the left. At this point, a lot happened and it all happened at the same time. The forward observer was yelling "cease fire," so I shut off the FM and his added noise.

We already knew the obvious, but the crew chief advised us the tail rotor was no longer turning and was hanging loose.

Walt said we were going in and he needed the coordinates. I looked at the map, but was too excited to quickly find our exact location. At the same moment, Walt asked me to get on the controls with him.

Walt then put out the first "Mayday" call that we had had a bird strike and "Casper 721" was going down.

I said something I had remembered from one of my flight instructors, "that as long as we were still flying, try to keep it flying." It was more a prayer than anything of substance.

There was a Special Forces base about 10 kilometers to our northeast and Walt said he was going to try to make it there. Walt was still worried about the artillery GT lines.

The Huey was so out of trim Walt had to look out the greenhouse to see where we were going. A Huey is real hard to fly when she wants to roll over.

Walt remembered me reading the instruments to him,

VHPA Directory earns praise from members

The *VHPA Directories* have gotten better and better each year and this one is by far the best work yet.

The history of the "over the border" operations was well-rounded. It's too bad more guys didn't contribute more information. I know there are a ton of stories out there that should be told, especially in the CCN AO.

I appreciate everyone's dedication to the *Directory* — it is well above and beyond the call of duty.

Richard Madore

Volume classy work

This volume is one class piece of work — a real monument to those who put all the work into it. The VHPA has had its stuff together from day one — nice job.

Wayne Mutza

Directory fabulous

I recently received my 1998 *Directory* and was especially happy to see the Bob Snead cartoon. I used to know Bob, but have long since lost track of him.

I compliment the VHPA on a fabulous publication! The OV-1 Association will never be the size of the VHPA, but use not only the *VHPA Directory* but the *Newsletter* as the publications that set the standard for us to strive.

Terry Clark, Editor
Mohawker (OV-1) Newsletter

repeating the air speed; we had to stay above 70 knots. All this happened in only seconds, but it seemed like minutes.

We lost altitude to about 1,000 feet. Walt remembers a bright flash, but no noise. I never saw the flash and only remember a loud explosion.

Before the sound of the explosion had gone, the Huey began to spin rapidly. I could not discern the sky from the ground. I remember both of us rolling the throttle off so hard it broke the idle stop switch.

Walt began a series of "Mayday" calls, and both of us were going through shutdown, battery and fuel.

Walt said he remembers looking for the best place in the trees to crash and planning a controlled autorotation. However, all I remember is a very rapid descent to the top of the trees. Both of us were on the controls, I was following every move Walt made; the Huey was not responding, there was no control.

The loud noise had been a round taking out our cyclic controls; the bright flash Walt saw was a round just under his seat. Walt told me the doctors removed the fuse of a 37mm anti-aircraft round from his leg.

There had never been a large bird. Both of us remember full aft cyclic and no flair, tried twice and still no flair. We pulled all the collective there was, which pulled the nose up

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some and changed our angle of descent, but never enough.

The air speed and rate of descent when we hit the trees was 70 knots and 700 feet per minute. The last thing Walt and I remember was hitting the top of a large dead tree head-on.

When I came to after the crash, all I could hear was the engine winding down. I reached for the fuel switch only to find some grass and dirt; everything was gone. The nose from in front of the pilot's seats to the greenhouse was gone and there was a strong smell of fuel.

We were standing on our nose on a steep slope, about 60 degrees. I was down slope and Walt was up slope. I found a small hole and, with fuel running down my back, was motivated to crawl out.

Walt was pinned in the ground with the ship on his back. The doorgunner was pinned in his seat by a 6-inch-diameter branch pushing against his "chicken plate," which that morning Walt had to order him to wear. The crew chief had freed himself and, between the two of us, we freed the doorgunner.

The doorgunner didn't appear to have any other injuries, but later found several holes, besides a very sore chest.

The crew chief said he thought he had a broken leg, plus had the carbon steel core of an armor-piercing round in his arm, which he took out. Only later did he realize that he had been hit several times and had several other injuries from the crash.



I crawled back into the Huey looking for Walt. There was not a lot of room, the greenhouse was caved in to the top of the seats, the transmission had broken loose and had come forward. The toolbox, a case of "Cs" and the colonel's radios were on top of the

back of Walt's seat.

After clearing this mess, I still hadn't found Walt when I heard him say to get the " *&# " off his back. I could only see part of his face and was able to clear the dirt and grass from his mouth, but other than that there was nothing I could do.

I tried to use the little, 12-inch cutting tool with rings on each end, which was worthless against metal. Ned joined me and the both of us could not move the seat.

The colonel was trapped with his leg under the left side of the Huey, his shoulder was dislocated, and he was covered in fuel. He was in a great deal of pain and would not let anyone approach him.

The radio operator was unconscious with serious face and head injuries. I found the forward observer about 25 feet from the crash site, wrapped in branches with only his eyes visible. However, he was conscious. It appeared he had left the Huey prior to it coming through the trees.

My left knee was severely damaged and my right leg had several cuts and holes.

Everyone was alive.

I couldn't do anything more to help the injured and

Father Dennis O'Brien wrote 'What Is a Vet?'

I was very pleased to see you use the article "What is a Vet?" This article was sent to me by a friend and I was so pleased with it, I sent it to many of my Internet correspondents. I also sent it to you in hopes you would put it in the newsletter, which you did.

As it is printed, it appears to give me credit for writing it, which is not correct. My agency also printed it for Veterans Day over our intranet. In that printing, they gave credit to the real author as Father Dennis Edward O'Brien, USMC.

As I said, I'm delighted you used the article, but please make a correction and give proper credit to Father O'Brien.

Thanks again and please accept my apologies for not making this clearer in the beginning.

David Clemmer

began to look for weapons, the SOI and the operations map. I think they taught this either at infantry basic or flight school. However, all I can remember is I felt I had to do something.

The crew chief had pulled the pins and kicked his M-60 and ammo over prior to hitting the trees. The doorgunner's M-60 and M-16 were broken. I could not get to the colonel's CAR-15; he wasn't letting anyone near him.

That left a couple of .45s and an M-16. The SOI and survival radio were buried under Walt, in the pocket of his "chicken plate," and the map was next to the colonel.

I recovered the map and, before burying it, I had a good look at it. There were several "hot spots" marked on the map that were gun emplacements. The ones that weren't there.

Later it was confirmed we had crashed in the middle of an NVA regiment. With a 37mm and .51s, they had to be protecting something big. We later found out it was a division-size hospital dug into the mountains. It was still there in 1971 when I returned to the same AO.

I tried to find a radio that would work. All the colonel's PRC 25s were broken except one and with it, only the headset was working. The frequency was set to the 4.2 mortar crew and, as I listened, I could only hear one side of the conversation, so I don't know who they were talking to, but they were saying there were no survivors.

We carried a case of smoke grenades. I passed a smoke to each of the crew and asked them to throw them in different directions and far enough from the helicopter so as not to set the fuel off.

The smokes were thrown at the same time, hoping the four-deuce crew would know more than one person was alive.

The mortar crew reported the smoke. We proceeded to set up what security we could. Ned said there were rounds being fired, so we all sat next to a large tree.

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I don't remember how much time passed or much else for awhile. Ned told me the smoke stayed in the trees and he heard rocket fire and AK-47s.

I was told one of the Casper ships had hovered over us and watched us crawl out, but I don't remember that. They took too many hits to stay.

The next thing that happened was a surprise.

A Huey was hovering at treetop level, trying to find a way down to us. There was an old bomb crater about 50 feet down slope from us and the Huey had to cut its way through the tree limbs. You can't imagine the racket that makes until you are underneath, trying not to get hit by flying limbs.



With no radio, it was important to get someone on the Huey and tell them we needed equipment to cut out the pilot. I told the doorgunner to get in the Huey. He said he couldn't, and the crew chief was in bad shape and didn't think he could make it.

The Huey seemed to be hovering forever, all the time cutting branches. They must of thought we were nuts because on one was moving

to get in the ship.

The crew chief was waving for us to get in, so I chose to go. The Huey could not get down and I had to crawl out on a tree that laid across the crater, the crew chief hooked his seat belts together, making a rope so I could climb up and get to the skids. As I got to the skids, our crew chief joined me.

I was told later the ship was taking small arms hits the whole time he was hovering while waiting for us, plus hits from the .51s on the way in and out.

I always thought the slick was from the 1st Cav. However, this year I found out it was a Ghost rider and the gunships were Avengers.

We have not found the AC of that ship, but he was an Afro-American major, with the Ghost riders in 1968. On the way to Phu Cat, I told him we needed cutting tools and a fireman to get the pilot out. He made the radio call starting the Air Force response.

Although Pedros had been there earlier, the Air Force send another one out with the fireman. The major told me he had been crossing An Khe Pass, heard the "Mayday," and since he knew the area, came to see if he could be of help.

He heard a "Mayday" call about a bird strike, so I am sure the green birds he ran into really surprised him.

The mortar crew on the mountain watched as we went in and made their own radio calls for assistance. Their reports were how I learned we were spinning vertical — tail up and nose down — and that after we hit the trees, we cartwheeled over the top of the trees until we slowed down enough to go into the trees.

The 61st slicks and guns were 10 minutes behind us with the first lift and were able to get troops on the ground

to provide security and get the other wounded out, leaving only Walt.

Walt found out later another Casper ship was on the Crap Table at LZ English, waiting for a colonel and some Red Cross ladies, and heard the first "Mayday" call.

There was a major on board waiting for the colonel and the "Doughnut Dollies." The major would not get out of the Huey, saying it was the colonel's helicopter.

Obviously, he did not understand the urgency of the situation and did not hear the AC when he told him there was an aircraft down and to get out.

In the excitement of the moment, the crew chief grabbed the major and tossed him out of the Huey, into the arms of the colonel just as the Huey came to a hover and departed.

This misunderstanding must have been cleared up later.

The AC knew the mission and the general area where we were. He found our crash site by the rotor blades on top of the trees, but was not able to get to us because of the heavy .50-caliber fire from multiple guns.

He took over 20 rounds and was forced to make an emergency landing at the Special Forces camp.

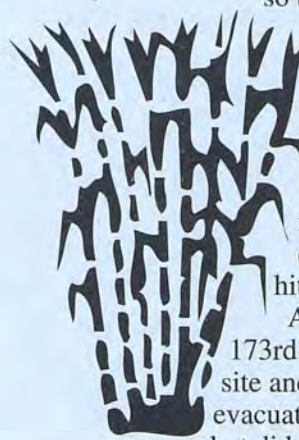
Some time during the rescue operation, "Red Baron" took over the command and control of the rescue operation.

I registered with the Society of the 173rd Airborne Association on the Internet. An engine maintenance tech specialist for Casper found me and filled in more of the information.

He said that Casper operations, hearing one of its ships was down and that a pilot was trapped, sent an additional ship with the flight surgeon, himself and another crew chief to the crash site.

They could not find a place to land near the crash site,

so the pilot dropped them off in a bamboo thicket at the bottom of the hill, leaving the three of them to find their way up the slope. He said they used a visible trail and, when stopping to rest, could hear all sorts of movement in the jungle. He doesn't know why they weren't hit.



At the crash site, they found the 173rd had already secured the crash site and everyone except Walt had been evacuated. They tried to get him free, but did not have the right equipment.

The doctor gave Walt shots of morphine, but could not get any closer to his wounds to help. It was getting dark and the flight surgeon said they couldn't stay and to get Walt out they were going to amputate his legs.

The timing is not clear here, if the Air Force recovery was there or had just returned, but an Air Force sergeant with the required cutting tools went to work and in a matter of minutes had freed Walt, and had him in a stretcher.

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He and the others were lifted into the Pedro and flown directly to Qui Nhon.

NOTE: It was strongly recommended to the flight surgeon by Gen. Allen, commanding 173rd Airborne, not to go in after Walt.



The flight surgeon not only knew and was a friend to all the pilots and crews, but it seems had the integrity to stand by his own decision to do what at the time he knew had to be done.

The "Stars and Stripes" had an article on their front page, saying the Air Force was calling this the largest air rescue operation of the war. (We were before Bat 21.)

According to the Air Force, three Pedro helicopters rigged for rescue of down crews were dispatched from Phu Cat air base. They were turned back by heavy anti-aircraft fire, with two Pedros being damaged and returning to Phu Cat.

F-100s were sent out from Phu Cat and, along with Army gunships, suppressed the fire prior so the Pedros' were able to get to the downed crew.

The "Stars & Strips" credited an Air Force tech specialist who rappelled in with cutting tools designed to cut out trapped aircrew with freeing Walt.

My e-mail communication with the tech specialist from Casper who came in to help confirms everything the paper said about the Air Force sergeant.

Walt and I don't know if this was the largest air rescue, because there were many other rescue efforts by aircrews from all branches to get their downed crews out.

We do know there was a great deal of effort and commitment by everyone in getting us all out, and would like to find and thank all those involved.

This story isn't complete and our search continues, so if anyone knows the whereabouts of our doorgunner, John Steen; the pilots and crew from the Pedros; from the Ghostriders and Avengers; the Air Force fireman Robert Rager; and the flight surgeon from the 173rd Airborne, let us know.

It wasn't until later that Walt found out and only this year when we met that I learned there was an investigation by the 173rd, looking for fault by the AC, believing he had flown into our own artillery.

The rounds and shrapnel in the ship and crew stopped any further efforts in this direction.

The cease-fire orders from the FO had stopped any artillery action and no friendly rounds were ever fired.

Clifford E. White

Class 68-12

Walton A. Henderson "Sugar Bear"

Class 68-501

Taps

John R. Smith

Retired Lt. Col. John R. Smith died Sept. 25 at St. Mary's Hospital in Livonia, MI, after an apparent heart attack. He was 66.

He was a veteran of the Korean and Vietnam wars during which he served in Army aviation units.

Smith was recipient of the Bronze Star Medal, the Air Medal and the Senior Army Aviation Badge.

He is survived by his wife Yvonne of Jupiter, FL.

Phillip Charles Watts

Phillip Charles Watts of Bishopville, SC, died Oct. 28. He was 50.

Born in Florence County, he attended Bishopville schools and entered the National Guard and served from 1967 until 1970, when he entered the Army.

Watts graduated from the Army Aviation School as a helicopter pilot. He served in Vietnam from 1971 until 1972.

He was an Army helicopter instrument instructor and retired from the Army in 1973 with a rank of CW3.

Watts was a captain for Atlantis, Braniff, Bankair and

Northwest Airlines until he retired due to health.

Surviving are his mother and a son, Christopher Charles Watts of Grandbury, Texas.

Barry W. Wood

Police pilot Barry W. Wood was killed and his partner seriously injured when their helicopter crashed at the B&O Railroad Museum in Baltimore while chasing a stolen car.

Wood, a 28-year veteran of the Baltimore Police Department, was a resident of Abingdon, MD.

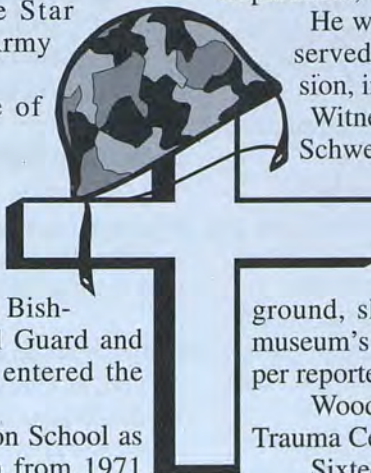
He was a member of flight school class 69-3, and served with A/227th Aviation, 1st Cavalry Division, in 1969-70.

Witnesses reported seeing the year-old, two-seat Schweizer 300C chopper known as "Foxtrot" circling low over houses with plumes of smoke pouring out the back, the Baltimore Sun said.

The helicopter then plummeted to the ground, skidded into an iron fence surrounding the museum's entrance and burst into flames, the newspaper reported.

Wood died during surgery at the Maryland Shock Trauma Center.

Sixteen motorcycle officers who had just escorted a lengthy funeral procession from West Baltimore to Timonium turned around at the cemetery to accompany Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke and Commissioner Thomas C. Frazier to the trauma center, the Baltimore Sun reported.



Activities plentiful near reunion HQ

RHEA RIPPEY

As promised in the last *Newsletter*, each reunion article between now and June 1999 will focus on a specific aspect of the reunion weekend.

This article addresses the phenomenal range of activities available within a four-block radius of our headquarters hotel, the 30-story Renaissance Nashville.

This information should convince your wives and girlfriends there's plenty of R&R for the two of you or for your family, as well as interesting activities for them while you're getting rowdy with the boys.

To appreciate the proximity of this hotel to a truly historic part of Nashville, here's an encapsulated local history lesson from a native son.

Nashville began its life in 1779 as a frontier outpost on the high banks of the Cumberland River. Fort Nashborough gradually spawned a village, a town, then a city.

The river played a major part in its emerging economy. During and just after the Civil War — or The War of Northern Aggression, as it is known in these parts — riverboat traffic feeding local commerce produced a need for warehouses in which to store wholesale consumer goods, building materials and consumables.

It is this restored 125-year-old brick warehouse district along the river that provides the fascinating complex of unique shops, galleries, nightclubs, dance halls, restaurants, pubs, breweries, offices and upscale residential lofts and apartments just three blocks from our headquarters hotel.

Food? There's something for everyone here.

Whether you're hungry for Tennessee barbecue, high-end gourmet, deli fare, fondue, sushi, fajitas, Italian or good old American steaks and chops, you'll find it in the historic Second Avenue warehouse district, only a ragged-trail, 15-ship LZ length from the hotel.

We've got restaurants and clubs suitable for families or for drop-of-the-hat, raucous mini-reunions.

If you can't find it at NASCAR Cafe, Planet Hollywood, Hard Rock Cafe, The Merchants, Market Street Brewery, Morton's of Chicago, Mere Bulles, Wild Horse Saloon, Hermitage Hotel's Capital Grille, Big River Brewery, Seanachie Irish Pub & Restaurant or the numerous other eateries and clubs in the area, you're just going to have to pack those ham and lima Cs and your Dr. Laura tapes for a Serno evening in your hotel room.

Shopping? From snakeskin boots and Western hats to the premiere guitar shop in the country, you'll have a host of unusual personal and gift selections just around the corner.

Rolling Stones to Chet Atkins, that air guitar riff

you've been performing all these years probably came from a guitar purchased at Gruhn Guitars. Major artists from the world over come to Gruhn for the incredibly wide selection of vintage acoustic and electric instruments at extraordinary prices.

Tour the Ryman Auditorium, home of the Grand Ole Opry (1943-74) and stock up on tapes, videos and posters of your favorite country artists in the Ryman's museum and gift shop, right around the corner.

Check out the burgeoning art gallery scene just up the street on your way to Nashville's oldest and funkier "shopping center," the Arcade.

Built in 1903, this venerable two-story, glass-covered, one-block urban mall is one of four remaining similar structures in the United States.

Stroll through the Arcade to get your reunion cigar, a haircut, a world-class hot dog, fresh fruit, a shoe shine and free peanuts from a guy in a peanut suit. Better than R&R in Bangkok . . . almost.

Music? Choose from piano bar nooks, string-quartet dinners, wine and jazz dinner clubs, honkytonk dives, major foot-stompin' country or full blast rock 'n' roll dance venues . . . it's all here.

Pack your street dancing shoes for "Dancin' In The District," a huge, free, Thursday night street party featuring top-name entertainment at Riverfront Park, four blocks from The Renaissance. This is big!

I'll end this section with a mention of the only place on this list I haven't visited yet: The Have A Nice Day Cafe. If the '70s were your kind of decade, you'll want to be there.

This should give you some idea of the wide selection of activities available just outside the wire and within easy walking distance from your hooch.

If you plan to bring your POV, you'll just increase your entertainment and shopping options a hundredfold.

Reunion admin notes

- Contact the Greater Nashville Chamber of Commerce by telephone at (615) 259-4755, by e-mail at info@nashvillechamber.com or download valuable visitor info from www.nashville.citysearch.com

- Mini-reunion reminder: If you plan a unit mini in Nashville, contact Rick Haines at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]

Rick is coordinating the minis, on-site or off.

- For special requests, local native contacts are Ross Rainwater at [REDACTED] or Rhea Rippey at [REDACTED].



VIETNAM HELICOPTER PILOTS ASSOCIATION

16th Annual Reunion Nashville, TN July 1-5, 1999

REUNION REGISTRATION FORM

Mail to: VHPA, 5530 Birdcage St., Suite 200, Citrus Heights, CA 95610-7621

FAX signed credit card registration to: (916) 966-8743

Name:	Member No.:	Arrival date:	Departure date:
Wife/guest name:	No. of children:	Is this your first reunion?	
Names of additional guests:	How many reunions have you attended?		
Address:	Check here if notifying VHPA of an address change []		
City:	State:	ZIP:	Phone: ()

REGISTRATION FEES

	No. of people	Price	Total
Registration before May 1, 1999*		@\$25.00	
Registration after May 1, 1999*		@\$40.00	
Total from sidebar	XXXXXX	XXXXXX	
Early Bird Reception (July 1)		No host	
Jack Daniels Tours (July 2) (Limited to 600 people)			
• Tour 1 (dry tour) — 8:45 a.m.**		@\$20.00	
• Tour 2 (wet tour) — 8 a.m.***		@\$27.00	
Music City Welcome Reception and Music Show (July 2 — 6 p.m.)		@\$25.00	
Fish Fry and Nightstalker Display; buses to Smyrna, TN (July 3 — 9:30 a.m.)		@\$25.00	
Grand Ole Opry (July 3 — 5-9 p.m.) (Limited to 900 people)		@\$25.00	
Ladies Tour of Hermitage (July 4 — 9 a.m.) (Andrew Jackson home)		@\$15.00	
Annual Banquet/Dance (July 4 — 6 p.m.) (Check menu at right)		@\$35.00	
Dues (if included)		@\$30.00	
Life Membership		@\$450.00	
GRAND TOTAL			

INDICATE IF YOU WANT TO PARTICIPATE IN THESE

Golf Tournament: (July 2 — 7 a.m.) Cost: \$60. Limit: 144 players.	
5k Run: (July 3)	
Sidebar total	

Annual Banquet menu

Entree choices	Number
• Rainbow trout	
• Prime rib	
• Breast of chicken	

**Lodging reservations
should be made
directly with hotel.**

☐ Enclosed is my check payable to "VHPA Reunion '99" ☐ Charge my MasterCard or VISA card (circle one)

* Each adult 18 and older must pay the registration fee.

** Dry tour (no alcohol) includes a box lunch.

*** Wet tour (alcoholic beverages served) includes a barbecue picnic with an open bar.

Credit card No.: _____ Expiration date: _____

Signature: _____

REUNION NAME TAG INFORMATION

Name you want on name tag: _____ Call sign: _____

Name of wife/guest: _____ Flight school class: _____
(Number or year for Army; branch and year for other services.)

1st combat unit: _____ Year(s): _____

2nd combat unit: _____ Year(s): _____

3rd combat unit: _____ Year(s): _____

Hometown or current residence: _____

Refund policy: No refund will be given for any dinner, event, registration fee, or other activity unless the member cancels the reservation by faxing or calling VHPA Headquarters no later than seven (7) days prior to the start of the first day's activities (July 1, 1999) of the reunion. Members may elect to notify VHPA Headquarters at 5530 Birdcage St., Suite 200, Citrus Heights, CA 95610 by U.S. mail of cancellation; however, the letter must arrive no later than the 7th (seventh) day prior to the reunion. Reasons for cancellation and refund, such as hospitalization, medical emergencies, death in the family, etc., will be considered on an individual basis.

Bullwhip Association meets at Ozark, AL

ROSS RAINWATER

C TRP, 1ST SQUADRON, 9TH AIR CAV

Several dozen members of the Bullwhip Squadron, Vietnam veterans of the 1st Squadron, 9th Air Cavalry, and family members met for their third and largest reunion Oct. 9-11 at Ozark, AL.

Founded in 1994 and named after the call sign of the first squadron commander, the late Col. John B. Stockton, the association's membership originally was limited to those who served under Stockton's command, which began with the unit's deployment by ship to Vietnam in 1965.

Membership eligibility has now been expanded to include anyone who served with the 1/9th in Vietnam.

Stockton is widely credited as the father of modern air cavalry, having taken command of the 3/17th Air

Cavalry during the 11th Air Assault Division phase of preparation for Vietnam. The 3/17th was redesignated 1/9th Air Cavalry and shipped out for combat operations in Vietnam.

The Bullwhip Squadron reunion opened Friday night with a welcoming barbecue, hosted by retired Brig. Gen. David J. Allen, association commander, and featured presentations to, and recognition of, Lawrence E. Kennedy, original command sergeant major of the unit; Rita and Annelies Stockton, Stockton's wife and daughter; Clark Burnett, former squadron commander; retired Maj. Gen. James Smith, former squadron commander; and Chaplain Harry K. Treude.

Saturday, attendees toured nearby Fort Rucker, golfed and enjoyed informal troop visits and mini-reunions.

Saturday night's main event was an auction and dinner at the Fort Rucker Officer's Club, and remarks

by Smith, who provided historical perspective to the early days of the squadron.

The auction featured aviation models customized with 1/9th markings and colors and a painting of the famous waterfall in the Ia Drang Valley, all auctioned to raise funds for a presentation at the 1st Cavalry Division Reunion in August at Fort Hood.

Sunday morning featured an outdoor memorial service at a nearby cemetery, with remarks and prayers by chaplain Treude; remembrances by members of those comrades who had paid the ultimate sacrifice; and a final playing of Taps by an Army bugler.

For more information about joining Bullwhip Squadron Association, contact:

• Loel Ewart,

• Al Defleron,



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The Word: Advocate

A simple definition is a person who argues a cause; supporter or defender. In other words, the guy in your corner.

The Point

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Your Advocate

Armed with twenty-three years of experience, JTA provides buyers the assurance of satisfaction, safety and sound business decisions by thoroughly investigating an aircraft's history, determining the true market value, overseeing the inspection process and analyzing the often underrated investment aspect.

For sellers, JTA provides professional marketing support, assuring a fair market value for the aircraft.



Promises Kept. Expectations Exceeded.

Chapter members soaked rafting

Seven members of the VHPA-California Chapter North (CCN) went on a whitewater river raft trip of the upper Coloma stretch of the South Fork of the American River on Sept. 26.

Twenty-one of us, including wives and kids, met at Coloma, CA, Saturday morning under an overcast sky amid drizzles and high hopes for a good trip and warmer weather.

Mike and Judi Nord and Ken and Marcia Fritz had arrived at 9 the night before to secure the LZ in a motor home.

Despite the fact they had sacrificed themselves and offered a small party to the mountain and river gods while asking for better weather, the skies were a hung-over sort of overcast gray with drizzle.

Bill Lang promised better weather for later in the day, but we suspected he slept through the meteorology classes in flight school. Or maybe he was tooling around in his Corvette with the rest of the LTs?

After we signed our lives away with meaningless remarks like "What does no liability mean?" we all chickened out and rented wet suits to stay warmer than the cool river (58 degrees F) and the cool air (60 degrees).

Then, after an almost sickening

serpentine mountain road bus ride upstream to the river entry point at Chili Bar (no bar and no chili — it's named after/misspelled for the Chileans who gold mined the area during the 1849 Gold Rush), we were ready to get wet.

With two RLOs and five WOPA members, it was sure to be a good trip. The wives were along, so it would be sane and fun at the same time.

A safety briefing and a few practice strokes led us downstream and into the first rapid: The Meat Grinder.

With a good briefing and good guides and rafts, only Bill Lang (RLO No. 1) was able to allow himself to be rather unceremoniously tossed overboard.

His return to the raft was even less graceful. And the fact he let his paddle get away and require rescuing, too, made Bill somewhat of a celebrity.

RLO No. 2 was aboard his raft, so he did have some consolation and some help getting back aboard. Having another RLO there in time of need was good thinking, Bill. It did take two guys to get him back in, so

you know he was really among friends.

Later the sun began to appear and the guides offered us the chance to shoot some rapids as human rafts, i.e., floating the rapid with our PFDs on and feet first downstream.

Everyone was soaked to the bone by this time, anyway, so it wasn't like anyone was afraid of getting wet.

Rod Dykehouse and Ken Fritz upheld the WOPA tradition by being first (and last) by volunteering to have some fun, then yelling about how the water wasn't really that cold. Yeah, right! Even the two RLOs weren't fooled.

After a couple of hours on the river, we crawled out onto the bank to ride the bus back to camp and have lunch.

James Marsh brought along some of his famous homemade hot, peppered jerky. Bill Lang, CCN president, graciously and expertly (although some of us think his wife actually did most of the work) provided a first-rate picnic lunch for all of us after the trip. Maybe the VHPA president will take the hint and host a picnic at the reunion?

PS: the jokes about the RLOs vs. the WOPA is all in fun, just like the rest of our get-togethers.

— Ken Fritz

Chapter report

Grunt leaves a surprise pack of cigarettes

We had flown combat assaults in the morning. After one lift, the crew chief said on the intercom:

"Hey, some grunt left a pack of Lucky Strikes, anybody want them?"

I didn't smoke, but the Peter Pilot said: "I'm not that desperate yet, but I'm running low. If you don't want them, toss them up here."

The pack of Luckys stayed on the console between pilots for most of the rest of the day.

After things calmed down in the LZ, we were tasked to take the infantry battalion commanding officer, a light colonel, out to one of his units.

On the way back, he had his headset plugged into the intercom and asked: "Can I bum a cigarette off somebody?"

I offered, "Want a Lucky Strike, sir?" and pointed to

the pack on the console.

"Thanks, but no thanks. I can't stand them."

Later, after we dropped off the lieutenant colonel, the Peter Pilot said: "Well, I'm all out, guess I'll have a Lucky."

He lifted the opened pack and pulled out a home-made cigarette.

"Look what you offered the colonel!"

Yikes!

I decided to drop the weeds over the ocean while we were on downwind.

Had the lieutenant colonel liked Luckys, I might not have been so lucky.

Jim Schueckler
Polecat

Book details phony Vietnam vets

"Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation Was Robbed of Its Heroes and Its History" by B.G. Burkett and Glenna Whitley

For 30 years, we have heard we Vietnam veterans are losers. We are so spaced out on drugs and haunted by nightmares of killing babies, we cannot hold a job or maintain a relationship.

We are a large portion of the prison and homeless population. Most of us suffer from PTSD and exposure to

When our turn came to serve our country, we did it willingly and with pride. But things were different for us.

Agent Orange, so we are unpredictably dangerous and should be avoided.

This has been reinforced by television, movies, some veterans groups, and even the Veterans Administration.

Guess what? It's not true.

Most of us have had a gut feeling for a long time this was not true because it did not individually fit. But because we have avoided other Vietnam veterans, we had no confirmation. After all, no self-respecting Vietnam veteran

Book review



would want to be associated with the losers we hear about in the news media.

Like most of us, Vietnam veteran B.G. Burkett grew up hearing about the heroics of World War II and experienced firsthand the respect our fathers, uncles, cousins and neighbors received from our families, communities and country. Most of our heroes were combat veterans, some of whom we had met or we knew personally.

When our turn came to serve our country, we did it willingly and with pride. But things were different for us. The post-Vietnam society we endure is nothing like post-World War II society.

Burkett spends 692 pages dispelling the myths of the Vietnam War and its veterans. He describes in great detail how our valor was stolen. His work is based on his meticulous research done over 10 years.

With the help of award-winning investigative reporter Glenna Whitley, Burkett describes how the fakes, wannabes and exaggerators have tainted and tarnished our reputations with the willing help of the news

media. Sloppy and poorly researched stories have allowed phony Vietnam veterans to establish a post-Vietnam culture that painted an untrue picture for the public.

The author's research indicates as many as 90 percent of these fakes, wannabes and exaggerators never even served in Vietnam!

But Burkett has uncovered a much larger story, an immense public fraud

The fakers have been aided and abetted by the VA, veterans advocates, and the mental health care industry.

almost completely overlooked by the press, historians and other alleged experts on the Vietnam War.

The myth of the Vietnam veteran as a social misfit, Burkett believes, has been perpetuated by the liars and

wannabes who have seized on Vietnam combat service as an excuse for their problems or as a way to add color to their otherwise drab lives. The fakers have been aided and abetted by the VA, veterans advocates, and the mental health care industry.

Not only do they denigrate fighting men who were among the finest

See VA FAILS, Page 21

Advertising rates

Display advertising rates for the VHPA Newsletter are:

- Full page, \$500.
- One-half page, \$250.
- One-quarter page, \$125.
- Business card size, \$45.

Classified advertising is \$1 per line or \$7 per inch, whichever is highest.

Advertising revenue is used to help produce the Newsletter and limit the publication's dependence on membership dues.



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(Gladiator 21)

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VA fails to check military records

Continued from Page 20

America ever produced, but the monetary cost has been enormous for American taxpayers. Even today, the Veterans Administration often does not check the records of those who claim to suffer from maladies caused by Vietnam, even though it is clear

Proportionately, three times as many college graduates served in Vietnam than in World War II.

from Burkett's research that many of those who make the claims never came within spitting distance of Southeast Asia.

But the deeper harm may be to our understanding of our own history. The image of those

who fought in Vietnam as poorly educated, reluctant draftees — predominantly poor whites and minorities — is not true.

During the Vietnam War, seven million men volunteered for the military; only two million were drafted. Burkett's research indicates 75 percent of those who served in Vietnam were volunteers.

They formed the best educated and most egalitarian military force in U.S. history.

In World War II, 45 percent of the troops had a high school diploma. During the Vietnam War, almost 80 percent of those who enlisted had high school diplomas, and the percentage was higher for draftees, even though at the time only 65 percent of military-age youths had a high school diploma.

Throughout the Vietnam era, the median education level of the enlisted man was about 13 years. Proportionately, three times as many college graduates served in Vietnam than in World War II.

They were hardly teen-agers,

Book review



despite the common belief youngsters were sent to Vietnam as cannon fodder. An analysis of data from the Department of Defense shows the average age of the more than 58,000 men killed in Vietnam was almost 23 years.

The stereotype holds that those who died in Vietnam were disproportionately black and Hispanic. About 5 percent of those killed in action were identified as Hispanic and 12.5 percent were black, making both minorities slightly under-represented in their proportion of draft-age males in the national population.

(When asked by Burkett, most people guess that "thousands" of 18-year-old black draftees died in Vietnam. In fact, only seven of those killed in action match that description.)

Another common negative image of the soldier in Vietnam is he smoked pot and shot up with heroin to dull the horrors of combat. However, except for the last couple of years of the war, drug usage among U.S. troops in Vietnam was lower than for American troops stationed outside the war zone.

And 97 percent of Vietnam veterans received honorable discharges

And when drug abuse rates started to rise in 1971 and 1972, almost 90 percent of the men who fought in Vietnam had already come and gone.

A study after the war showed the use of illegal drugs among those who went to war and those who stayed at home was about the same.

Of the 5,000 men who deserted the U.S. military for various reasons dur-

ing the 10 years of the war, only about 250 did so while attached to units in Vietnam. Only 24 deserters attributed their action to the desire to "avoid hazardous duty."

And 97 percent of Vietnam veter-

ans received honorable discharges, exactly the same rate for the military in the peaceful 10 years prior to the war.

After the war ended, reports began to circulate of veterans so deprived from their war experiences they turned to crime, with estimates of the number of incarcerated Vietnam veterans as high as

Since the war, the stereotype of the homeless Vietnam vet has been buttressed by panhandlers with signs like: "Vietnam Vet: Will Work for Food."

one-quarter of the prison population. But these estimates relied on the self-reporting of criminals.

In every major study of Vietnam veterans where military records were verified, a statistically insignificant number of prisoners were found to be Vietnam veterans.

A corollary to the prison myth is the belief substantial numbers of Vietnam veterans are unemployed. But a study by the Labor Department in 1994 showed the unemployment rate for Vietnam veterans was 3.9 percent, significantly lower than for male veterans of all eras (4.9 percent) and the overall unemployment rate for males (6 percent).

Since the war, the stereotype of the homeless Vietnam vet has been buttressed by panhandlers with signs like: "Vietnam Vet: Will Work for Food." But the few studies using military records show the percentage of Vietnam veterans among the homeless is very small.

See SUICIDE, Page 22

Suicide rates no different for vets

Continued from Page 21

The same is true for the belief Vietnam vets have high rates of suicide. More Vietnam veterans, it is often reported, have died by their own hand than did in combat. Not

Those who remained in uniform reshaped the American military after the Southeast Asian disaster and mobilized to win the Gulf War with lightning speed.

the military.

Those who remained in uniform reshaped the American military after the Southeast Asian disaster and mobilized to win the Gulf War with lightning speed.

Disproportionate numbers of Vietnam veterans — such as Dallas' own Sam Johnson and Arizona's John McCain, both POWs — serve in Congress. Florida's former congressman (and POW) Pete Peterson is now U.S. ambassador to Vietnam.

Vice President Al Gore is a Vietnam veteran, as is Gen. Colin Powell, former head of the joint chiefs of staff. Dallas City Manager John Ware is a Vietnam veteran, as is civic leader Roger Staubach, along with scores of our top corporate CEOs.

The stereotypes may persist, but meanwhile, real Vietnam vets are helping to run the country."

Burkett's research has been featured on "20/20," Reader's Digest and Vietnam magazine. He has exposed public officials, murderers and veteran organization officials as fakes and wannabes.

Book review



He illustrates how billions of dollars of tax money has been and is being squandered on fakes and exaggerators. This book is a milestone in post-Vietnam War society and should be required reading for everyone impacted by the Vietnam War, especially Vietnam veterans.

Burkett feels a public list of the heroes of the Vietnam War would greatly diminish those claiming phony heroism. As a result, for the first time, a list of Distinguished Service Cross recipients is listed in an appendix to this book, as well as a list of Medal of Honor, Air Force Cross and Navy Cross recipients. The appendix also includes a list of U.S. Military POWs who returned alive.

What does Burkett want out of this?

"I want an apology from America to every man and woman who served in Vietnam and to every family who lost a son or a daughter, an apology not for their service or their loss, but for the indifference and disrespect

heaped on Vietnam veterans, living or dead, after the war.

"It would be nice if the apology were in the form of a joint resolution of Congress and read by the president."

ate date. It matters little if the president is a war hero or a draft dodger. Others could be invited to participate: Jane Fonda, Tom Hayden and Joan Baez come to mind, as do members of Congress and the Joint Chiefs of

Staff of the period, not to mention Ramsey Clark and Robert McNamara.

"Present to accept the apology could be the living Medal of Honor recipients from Vietnam. Guests of honor could be the next of kin of the men and women on The Wall."

Publishing and distributing this book has been a problem for Burkett. It exposes people and tells some things organizations that have been taking money "on behalf of veterans" do not want to be known about themselves.

It is viewed by the publishing industry as controversial and subject

"The publication of this book is a declaration of war against deceit and falsehood."

to lawsuits, so some distributors have refused to carry the book and show it in their directories as being canceled. My local bookstore is one of those. It is not canceled.

The most reliable source is the publisher, Verity Press Inc., P.O. Box 50366, Dallas, TX 75250. Or call (800) 253-6789. Website <http://www.stolenvvalor.com>

From Verity (which means "truth" in Latin), the book costs \$31.95, plus \$4.95 postage and handling (Texas residents add 8.25 percent sales tax). Optional: Add \$3 for copy of Stolen Valor signed by author B.G. Burkett.

The last paragraph of the Acknowledgments by Burkett: "For many authors, the completion of a book creates a sense of triumph and finality. I harbor no such illusion. The publication of this book is a declaration of war against deceit and falsehood. I have no doubt those who embrace such concepts are numerous and will respond."

In this war to retake our valor, I'm in!

Gary Roush
242nd ASHC Muleskinners

Pilots rewarded with Laos mission

HARRY R. NEVLING
AND WILLIAM E. AILES

It was a fine spring day at the end of March 1969 in wonderful downtown Phu Bai.

Capt. William "Bill" Ailes and WO Harry "Rat" Nevling were on their way from A/159th Assault Support Helicopter Battalion, 101st Airborne Division (affectionately known as "Pachyderm Beach") to XXIV

Corps Headquarters.

We had been summoned for a briefing on a special operations mission.

Bill and Harry had been flying together frequently. Bill was the aircraft commander and Harry the pilot on a rather inter-

There was a U.S.-backed effort to relocate Hmong tribe members from the Plain of Jars area . . .

esting mission earlier that spring.

We had wound up in Laos on a medevac mission for the Marines. (See the "Mission draws chopper into Laos" article in the July/August 1998 VHPA Newsletter.) Our reward for that good deed was this call.

Upon arrival at the headquarters, Bill and Harry were taken into a briefing room. They were told a Chinook was needed in northern Laos. There was a U.S.-backed effort to relocate Hmong tribe members from the Plain of Jars area to a more secure area further south.

The Hook was needed to move some construction equipment for Pacific Architects and Engineers (PA&E).

The operation would stage out of Luang Prabang, site of the Laotian Imperial Summer Palace. This was about 135 miles northeast of Vientiane, about 250 miles west-southwest of Hanoi, and 110 miles west-southwest of Dien Bien Phu.

The mission was to move the equipment from an existing strong-

hold and haven for civilians to a new area, farther from harm's way. The Pathet Lao, the North Vietnamese and the Chinese were putting increasing

Part I of series

pressure on the area at the edge of the Plain of Jars.

An airstrip was required at the new area. This necessitated the relocation of construction equipment to have the new runway support up to C-123 aircraft.

The mission would require us to fly the Hook from Da Nang, across the panhandle of Laos to Ubon, Thailand, about 230 miles west-southwest of Da Nang, receive additional briefing information and then go on to Luang Prabang, another 365 miles to the northwest.

We would have a CH-54 Flying Crane accompany us to relocate equipment too heavy for the Hook. I wonder what good deed they were being rewarded for.

From there, we would make daily missions to a pickup zone, to be identified later, to pick up the equipment

for transport to the drop-off zone, also to be identified later.

The briefing officer said the comforting thought was Charlie was up at night to shoot at the jets, so he'd be asleep during the day.

We were shown the intelligence map displaying the anti-aircraft weaponry along the Ho Chi Minh Trail and its branches that would be crossed. There was an impressive array of colored pins showing

the various calibers of weapons ranging from quad .51s up to 122 mm cannons.

The weapons on the trail were there to shoot at tactical air bombers, all jets. Here we are considering going across in a Hook that has a top

speed of around 175 miles per hour and a ceiling of 13,500 feet pressure altitude. We gotta be nuts!

The briefing officer said the comforting thought was Charlie was up at night to shoot at the jets, so he'd be asleep during the day.

We were offered the additional comfort of knowing we'd be escorted by two OV-1 Mohawks. Yeah, that's

right, observation aircraft — no guns!

We were given the location of a safe zone on an escarpment in Laos. If something went wrong and we could make it

We were sitting ducks for anyone wanting to take a potshot at us.

there, we'd be OK. Yeah, like when it hits the fan, you've got a lot of choices where that flying brick is going to go down! Well, we were nuts. We said we'd do it.

Bright and early the next day, we left Pachyderm Beach for Da Nang. After topping off the fuel tanks, we headed west on the 2.5-hour flight to Ubon. We rendezvoused with the Crane outside Da Nang and the Mohawks over the southern end of the A Shau Valley. We all continued into Laos.

Looking down at the tracks of bomb craters that clearly marked the main route and branches of the trail, you couldn't help thinking how slow the Hook was traveling. Even the Mohawks couldn't go that slow. They were flying slow circuits around the lumbering helicopters.

We were sitting ducks for anyone wanting to take a potshot at us. Fortunately, the briefing officer appeared to be correct: Charlie must have been asleep. No tracers, flak bursts or other nastys were sent up to greet us.

Our arrival in Ubon was a relief. The security of a Royal Thai air base with U.S. Air Force personnel seemed a very safe haven.

See CREW, Page 24

Crew had flight suits with markings

Continued from Page 23

We were taken to a briefing room where we were greeted by men dressed in civilian clothes. We were asked why we had insignia and patches on our flight suits. The response was no one told us any different.

The bad news was that without civilian clothes, they wouldn't be able to take us into Vientiane.

The aircraft also had "U.S. Army" stenciled on its side. When asked if we had any civilian clothes with us, the response was "no." Again, no one had said anything about that either.

We told them we could cut the identification off the uniforms and, if they had any OD paint, we'd cover the markings on the aircraft. After some discussion among themselves, they decided that would not be necessary.

The bad news was that without civilian clothes, they wouldn't be able to take us into Vientiane. So we stayed in our Nomex flight suits with the insignia and patches. The formal briefing began.

They told us more details of the mission.

We would fly directly to Luang Prabang, and were given the frequency for an NDB at that location. There was an airstrip in the town used by Air America for resupplying the Loyalist forces in northern Laos. We would be staying there with Air America personnel in their compound.

The pickup area was located at Moung Soui, a village with an airstrip about 85 miles southeast of Luang Prabang and 180 miles north of Vientiane. The drop-off was in the area of Muang Kasi on the Nam Lik river about 55-60 miles west of Moung Soui, 60 miles south of Luang Prabang, and 150 miles north of Vientiane.

tiane.

We were provided with the names and grid coordinates for the pickup and drop zones, radio frequencies, call-signs and maps for the pickup and drop-off locations. Secure areas, enemy activity and defense forces also were described.

We were told that if we went down in an unsecured area, the aircraft would have to be destroyed and they'd try to get us out. We were not to take any type of photographic equipment with us. Overall, it was fairly dismal information.

The briefing also contained information regarding the Hmong tribe. These are the aboriginal people indigenous to the area. The Hmong had actually migrated south from China several centuries earlier and inhabited the mountainous regions of what is now Laos. This was now their homeland. They were very interested in protecting it. They are cousins of the Montagnards of Vietnam.

During World War II, the Hmong had fought the Japanese invaders with flint-lock rifles. Some were still using these weapons against the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese. Unusual looking, they have no stock. The handle is more like the head of a golf club and was held in the hand rather than against the shoulder. The Hmong were deadly with their use of this antique weapon.

They are very family- and tribal-orientated. Their loyalties are to their

Bill made arrangements for another unit to be flown in by Mohawk.

tribal family and its leader. This was and is Gen. Vang Pao. The general was not only the chief of the Hmong, he was the leader of the Loyalist forces in Laos.

The Hmong are quite industrious people. We were told to watch for their trails en route. When they wanted to go someplace, they simply took the straightest line. Most of these straight lines involved

significant vertical changes.

We were informed by the flight crew that the fuel control unit for our No. 2 engine was leaking. Bill made

In this area, there was not the obvious evidence of the conflict. No large bomb craters, no defoliation and no roads.

arrangements for another unit to be flown in by Mohawk.

We had lunch and waited for the replacement part to arrive. When the unit finally arrived, we found that the Mohawk that brought it over wasn't as fortunate as we had

been. The aircraft had taken several hits flying over the trail. Charlie must have been awake!

The crew quickly installed the fuel control unit so we could be on our way to Luang Prabang. The flight was uneventful, which was wonderful. The scenery was spectacular. The mountains in the area were quite rugged. Many of the ridge lines were nearly vertical, much like the mountains south of Hue.

Here was the evidence of the Hmong trails. As we had been told, they were straight lines, even if that happened to go over a 2,000-foot-high ridge, they went straight up the ridge and straight down the other side.

In this area, there was not the obvious evidence of the conflict. No large bomb craters, no defoliation and no roads. Just the trails going from village to village.

The vegetation was much like that around the A Shau Valley and Khe Sanh. Deep jungle with open areas the Hmong had cleared for their slash-and-burn agriculture. Spectacular scenery in an almost pristine area.

But, back to reality. Coming over yet one more ridge line, Luang Prabang appeared below. The summer palace of the Lao royal family nestled

See TOWER, Page 25

Tower controlled the road, airstrip

Continued from Page 24

into the ridge on the west edge of the town.

To the east, another ridge, more like a cliff. The small valley in between also held an airstrip — right in the middle of the town.

We were taken to the Air America compound, actually a home in the town with a fence and a gate.

The road, the first we'd seen since leaving Ubon, came up the valley and crossed the middle of the airstrip. Next to this crossing was an observation tower for control of the traffic on the road and the airstrip.

The control method was simple: When the observer, an American, spotted an approaching aircraft, he would fire his .30-caliber carbine into the air. The ground traffic cleared the strip and the aircraft landed.

The signal for departure was the revving of an aircraft engine or, in our case, picking up to a hover. The movie "Air America" must have used this airfield as its model for the film.

After landing, we were directed to a parking/loading area. The larger aircraft, like C-123s, seemed to be in and out traffic, not actually based there. Our Hook and the Crane took up a significant part of their loading area.

We were taken to the Air America compound, actually a home in the town with a fence and a gate. After stowing our gear, we had a beer with the other pilots at home there. They provided us with more information about the AO we were heading into.

More dismal information. If we were to go down for some reason and the Hmong were to get to us first, we'd be OK. The alternative was not pleasant.

During our chat with these men, another man in civvies came in. We could tell by the reactions of the oth-

ers: a.) He wasn't a pilot; and b.) he was someone important.

He informed us we were to have dinner with Gen. Vang Pao that evening. He told us this was quite an honor. The murmurs of the others in the room confirmed this. It appeared none of the regular pilots had been invited to dinner with the general.

We talked with the other pilots more and then got ready for the evening. This meant a shower and a clean Nomex flight suit — with patches and insignia.

About 6:30 p.m., we were picked up by the man who had informed us of the dinner and taken someplace in or near the summer palace compound.

Upon entering the dining room, we were introduced to several Laotian officers by our escort.

The room was very pleasant, quite comfortable, and well-decorated without being ornate. The table, with seating for 16-20, was set with linen, china and real silverware. For a couple of GIs from 'Nam, this was impressive.

Gen. Vang Pao entered the room and all were called to attention. We didn't speak any Lao, but didn't need

The general removed a ring from the box and presented it to Bill. He repeated this with Harry.

to for an understanding of this command.

We were introduced to the general by our escort. The general, through an interpreter, welcomed us to Laos and thanked us for our assistance.

He then called for an aide with a small box. The box contained rings.

Our escort displayed a look of surprise at seeing the box and its contents. The general removed a ring from the box and presented it to Bill. He repeated this with Harry.

He then said these were symbols of the appreciation he and his people had for what we were doing for them.

He understood this was a voluntary mission and we did not have to be there to help his people with this problem.

We thanked the general for his gift and said we were glad we could be of some assistance.

We all sat down to a thoroughly enjoyable meal. One item of local custom is the only glasses on the table are for whiskey.

Our escort went on to explain these rings were Hmong tribal rings. In effect, the general had adopted us into the Hmong tribe. These rings were a tribal symbol, made of almost pure silver, with a wound silver

frame on the front, forming four rows of triangles. Each of these triangles was filled with a colored substance that looked like enamel.

Very simple, very beautiful. He said we should be impressed. We were.

Harry was probably more impressed than Bill. On his first tour, Harry had been a grunt with the 4th Infantry Division. He'd been adopted by a Montagnard tribe outside Pleiku. A bit different process, but that's another story.

We all sat down to a thoroughly enjoyable meal. One item of local custom is the only glasses on the table are for whiskey. The silverware included a large spoon at each place. This was used to dip liquid from the vegetable bowl and sipped from the spoon. The whiskey was served straight and at room temperature.

After dinner and a bit more conversation, we gave our thanks and farewell and were taken back to the compound for a night's rest.

The next morning, we joined our flight crew at the aircraft. We performed a very thorough preflight check for the day's mission and departed for Moung Soui.

See MOUNG SOUI, Page 26

CH-54B in Thailand? True or false?

MIKE LAW

DATABASE COMMITTEE MEMBER

Periodically, the 478th Heavy Helicopter Company, equipped with CH-54A flying cranes and based at Red Beach near Da Nang, was tasked to support U.S. interests in Laos and Thailand.

VHPA member Ed Strazzini, who served with the 478th in 1970 and 1971, provided details about their TDY assignments to Udorn that appeared in the February 1995 VHPA Newsletter.

About the same time as the VHPA printed that article, I spoke with a VHPAer who flew for the 478th (most likely in late 1971).

He said words to the effect: "I have an unusual story for you — a CH-54B (as in Bravo model) in Southeast Asia during the war!"

While I am no expert on Sky-crane, all the crane drivers I know are consistent about one issue — there were only A models in Vietnam! So I said, "Tell me more."

I wish I could remember this person's name. I believe he lived in Florida, but could be mistaken on this matter.

Anyway, he described being assigned by the 478th to Udorn for a 90-day period as something of a "permanent temporary" to maintain continuity for their TDY operations. This

made sense.

Next he said that the Army test board was interested in getting some actual heavy lift operational experience for the B model in Southeast Asia without suffering all the political attention the aircraft might get if it was in Vietnam, so the board picked the Thailand TDY situation as the test site.

This also made sense — Laos was hot and high, there was no shortage of heavy lift opportunities and things there didn't make media attention all that often.

So, the Army had a U.S.A.F. cargo plane fly a disassembled B model to Da Nang where it was reassembled by the 478th guys at Red Beach. After it was checked out, it was flown to Udorn in much the same manner as their normal TDY aircraft rotation. Again, this story makes sense.

After some time in Thailand and everyone had seen and recorded whatever they wished, the B model went back to the States the way it had arrived.

Over the years, I have repeated this story to several CH-54 and 478th folk. To the man they say words like, "That might be true." They are quick to add, "I would like to know more about that story" — and so would I!

As part of my research for the History Section in the 1998 Membership Directory, I happened to speak with

VHPA Member John Wyatt, who served with the 478th from at least December 1971 until September 1972.

He too was "a permanent temporary" at Udorn, but for six months! Poor guy — someone has to take the tough jobs!!

He never saw a B model during his watch. He suggested the VHPA try to find a Dan Wall — the CO of the 478th during that period, but the Dan Wall in the VHPA Directory did not serve with the 478th.

If you know where Dan Wall, former CO of the 478th, is today, please contact Mike Law.

I believe John said he left the 478th in September 1972. Additionally, he speculated that after he left Udorn in late summer of 1972, the 478th did not send another Skycrane there.

The 478th stood down in October 1972, but I believe some of its aircraft went to the 62nd CAC, which continued to serve I Corps until March 1973. Maybe it was involved in this B model story?

Anyway, if you know anything about an Army CH-54B in Southeast Asia during the war, please contact Mike Law, [REDACTED]

(days). We need to record details about this in the VHPA's Historical Reference Directory databases.

Moung Soui turned out to be small dirt strip

Continued from Page 25

Another beautiful flight over spectacular mountain scenery. Moung Soui turned out to be a small dirt airstrip at about 4,200 feet altitude for C-123 and Aero Porter traffic. This wasn't as nasty as the dirt strip in "Air America," but there was a definite slope to it.

The strip had a small loading area beside it near the middle. This contained fuel bladders and 55-gallon drums of fuel. Just above this, on a small hill, was a compound. The strip

was outside any defensive perimeter for the compound.

We had been talking to Special Forces by radio before seeing the airstrip or the compound. After shutting down the aircraft, we were greeted by a sergeant first class and taken up the hill to Special Forces headquarters in the compound.

As we went into the compound, we noticed a wide array of weaponry, including many Uzis. There we were introduced to a Special Forces captain, the officer in charge of the com-

pound and the senior adviser for the AO.

We had a nice conversation with this officer. While he was pleasant, he had very hard eyes. He looked as if he had nails for breakfast — hold the milk and sugar!

He said the fuel in the bladders was contaminated. He suspected sabotage. What this meant to us was hand pump refueling from 55-gallon drums. A Hook burns about 2,000 pounds of fuel an hour.

Continued in next issue

VIETNAM HELICOPTER PILOTS ASSOCIATION

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