

'Huey' gunship takes flight from Edgewood to Smithsonian

The Smithsonian's Air and Space Museum has always had a penchant for collecting unique or famed period pieces for the general public to enjoy.

So, when the Maryland Army National Guard recently got a call to have its UH-1M model "Huey" gunship, the first of its type to be used in Vietnam, inducted into the Smithsonian, the call perhaps came only as a mild surprise, an Army National Guard spokesman said.

"They (Smithsonian officials) wanted one of the early model gunships, preferably a model used in Vietnam," said CW3 John Bechtold, a full time Maryland Guard aviator who works as an aircraft maintenance officer at Weide Airfield located on the Edgewood area of APG. Mr. Bechtold, the man who piloted the 19-year-old aircraft from Edgewood to Andrews Air Force Base outside of Washington, D.C., has approximately 3,500 hours of flight time.

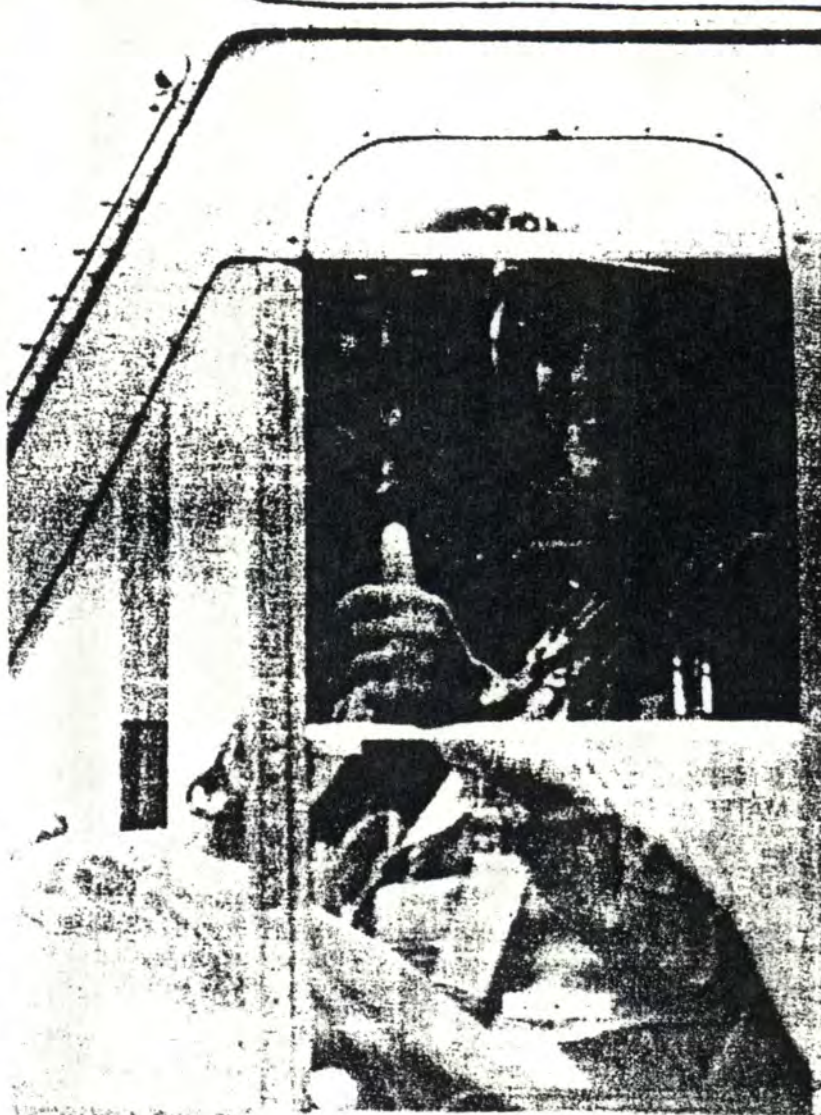
Mr. Bechtold said there were only two "Mike" models left in the Maryland Army Guard, and that one had just recently been painted like the newer model Hueys. The second one, scheduled to be painted the week the request came in, was still in its original birthday suit.

"It still had the old-style Vietnam (olive green) paint job," Mr. Bechtold said. "It just wouldn't have looked the same with the black paint with white markings."

The Maryland Guard's UH-1M 65-9446 was flight-delivered to Phillips Army Airfield at the Aberdeen area of APG by Bell Helicopter Company in Feb. 1966. By May 1966, the aircraft was redesignated JUH-1C, denoting a special test aircraft.

In Dec. 1968, the aircraft was partially disassembled and flown aboard a C-124 cargo plane to the then Panama Canal Zone, where the helicopter's new Fuze Rocket System was tested for its ability to penetrate the jungle canopy.

This model aircraft then was used in Vietnam in numerous units from 1966 to 1975, basically as a gunship, according to John Stanko Jr., chief of the Army National Guard Aviation Division, National Guard Bureau, Washington, D.C.



ON THEIR WAY — (Front) Co-pilot Noe and (back) pilot Bechtold. Noe gives thumbs up to photographer after landing the chopper at Andrews.

Following the end of the war and examination of its battle damage, the aircraft returned to the United States, where it was stored at Red River Army Depot awaiting overhaul and rebuilding at the Corpus Christi Army Depot, Texas. In December 1975, "445" was brought to the Texas depot for overhaul, undergoing conversion to the UH-1M configuration with the installation of a T53-L-13B engine that had 200 more horsepower than the original engine.

After the overhaul, in Feb. 1976, the aircraft became the property of the Maryland Army National Guard. It would be based at Weide Airfield, only ten miles from where it was originally inducted into the Army inventory ten years earlier.

This summer, Mr. Bechtold, of White Hall and co-pilot CW3 James Noe, of Jarrettsville, flew the aircraft to Andrews AFB, though the aircraft is currently being prepared for display at the Smithsonian's Silver Hill hangar.

Mr. Bechtold said he was chosen as pilot, because as the aviation maintenance director, he must maintain proficiency on all rotary aircraft in the Maryland Army National Guard's inventory. Mr. Noe was chosen as co-pilot, Mr. Bechtold said, because of his experience in flying the old Mike model in Vietnam. Mr. Noe had 300 hours flying time in that aircraft alone, according to Mr. Bechtold.

Originally, it was intended that the aircraft would be flown ceremoniously to the Air and Space Museum in downtown Washington, D.C. But, according to Mr. Bechtold, for safety purposes the fuel had to be taken out of the aircraft first before restoration work could begin.

"So, we went to the closest place — Andrews AFB," he said. "The District of Columbia's Air Guard unit, De-



HUEY FLIGHT — Joseph Cribbins (left), Special Assistant to Deputy Chief of Staff for Aviation Logistics; Donald S. Lopez, deputy director National Air Space Museum; and co-pilot Noe.

tachment 1, was very good about it." (The pilots flew the chopper and a chase helicopter to Detachment 1's runway/airfield at Andrews.)

After the aircraft is restored, the flying machine will become part of a display at the Air and Space Museum that will encompass the Vietnam era. ▢