

48TH ASSAULT HELICOPTER PILOTS RETURN WITH HONOR

Rick Lester
"Joker 94"

In mid-January 1971, the 48th Assault Helicopter Company was moved from Ninh Hoa in the central highlands area of II Corps to Dong Ha in the northern part of I Corps and attached to the 223rd Combat Aviation Battalion. This move was part of the buildup of aviation forces to support LAMSON 719, a large scale offensive against the North Vietnamese lines of communication along the Ho chi Minh Trail.

The operation would be conducted in that part of Laos adjacent to the two northern provinces of South Vietnam. The South Vietnamese were to provide and command the ground forces, while U.S. forces would furnish airlift and supporting fire. The 48th Assault Helicopter Company played a key role in LAMSON 719 and not only earned formal honors for their accomplishments, but won the respect of other aviation units for their tenacity and valor during some of the operation's most intense and dangerous missions.

The performance of the gun platoon, call sign "Joker," from the 48th Assault Helicopter Company, was specifically noteworthy and won tremendous praise from everyone involved. They were admired for their total dedication to protecting all troop lift assets they supported, especially given consideration to the fact they were flying outdated UH-1C model gun ships against some of the most formidable North Vietnamese air defense assets encountered to that point in the war.

On February 20th, 1971, the unit was directed to fly an emergency re-supply mission in support of South Vietnamese forces in an area some twenty-five kilometers southeast of Tchepone, Laos. As the mission was being completed and the aircraft were clearing the area, the "Joker" gun ships encountered a crew-served ZSU-23-2 anti-aircraft gun. They immediately established themselves in a tactical pattern and initiated their attack on the gun emplacement. Although they began receiving heavy fire from other anti-aircraft weapons and small arms positioned to protect the ZSU-23-2, they continued their attack, making numerous passes in an attempt to destroy the gun.

As they were executing their last pass against the gun and expending their remaining ordnance, the trail aircraft was hit and immediately burst into flames. The pilot, CWO Jon Reid, continued his attack inbound toward the gun emplacement, but as the flames grew, he attempted to land the aircraft in a nearby clearing. With the flames now almost completely engulfing the aircraft, it crashed into the trees and rolled into a clearing, coming to rest inverted.

The team leader made several attempts to land next to the downed aircraft

to determine the status of the crew and extract any survivors, but finally was forced to depart the area due to low fuel, extensive damage to his aircraft and a severely wounded crewmember. Even though he had two of his three onboard radios destroyed by enemy fire, he continued to coordinate with other aviation assets in the area to support the rescue effort, but due to the intense enemy fire and the withdrawal of friendly ground forces from the area, all attempts proved unsuccessful.

The crew of that aircraft: CWO Jon E. Reid, the pilot; Capt. David M. May, copilot; Sgt. 1st Class Randolph L. Johnson, the crew chief; and Staff Sgt. Robert J. Acalotto, door gunner - were all listed as missing in action.

In 1994, 1996 and 1998, U.S. and Laotian investigators interviewed villagers who had been in the area at the time of the crash. The recovery team initiated an excavation that recovered human remains, as well as portions of an identification tag with the name "May, David M." Analysis of the remains and other evidence, enabled the Army Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii to confirm the identification of Capt. May and CWO Reid.

The remains of Jon Reid and David May were interred at Arlington National Cemetery on January 14, 2000 after being classified as missing in action for almost 29 years. The funeral service honored the memory of both men. Separate services were scheduled later to honor them individually, David May's service was conducted at 1:30 p.m. on January 14th and Jon Reid's will be held in Arizona several months from now.

The services on the 14th were very emotional and inspirational. The chapel was filled with family members, friends, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Security Affairs, several active duty and retired general officers, Army Aviation Association of America representatives, local and national Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association representatives and the former commander of the 48th Assault Helicopter Company, along with more than 40 former members of the 48th who came from Alaska, California and across the nation to honor two of their own.

The service in the chapel was conducted with dignity, respect and honor by Army chaplain LTC Gil Richardson, Father John Michael Beers and members of the Army's Old Guard. The young soldiers participating throughout the ceremony, both in the chapel and at graveside, executed their duties in a crisp and very respectful manner. As the ceremony allowed and, in an emotional way, several members of the honor guard commented they were very proud and indeed honored to participate in such a meaningful ceremony.

The graveside service in the morning began with a fly-by of four UH-1 helicopters from the 12th Aviation Battalion at Davison Army Airfield. As we all stood quietly by the caisson bearing the flag draped casket of our friends,

the distinctly familiar, reverberating slap of Huey rotor blades could be heard in the cold morning air. As we looked to see the aircraft flying toward us from the Potomac River, up the rolling slopes of Arlington National Cemetery, the sight and sound briefly carried us, in thought, back to earlier times and places where we last stood together as younger men, who were proud, strong, confident, daring and "invincible."

The aircraft glistened in the bright morning sun as they flew just above the trees in a diamond formation and, in a salute of respect to their fellow Aviators, who were only now returning from their last mission, broke one of their flight away and formed the missing man formation.

The afternoon ceremony for David May was conducted with the same respect and was attended by most who were at the morning service, as well as many additional family members and friends from his hometown of Hyattsville, Maryland. I believe the show of support by former members of Jon and Dave's unit, as well as that from other members of the Army aviation community, allowed the families to see the special bond we all share and gave them a look at an extended family who shared their grief.

The 48th Assault Helicopter company has progressively reconstituted through the years at the VHPA reunions and, since the reunion in Nashville, has established a "Blue Star," e-mail reflector list to help everyone keep in contact and assist us as we try to locate former members of the unit. It was this list which was key to helping us communicate the details surrounding the recovery of Jon and Dave's remains, as well as coordinate the support for the families.

The enthusiastic efforts on everyone's part to coordinate facilities for the reception at Fort Meyer, initiate the request for the fly-by, gather a collection of photographs to make an album for each of the families, design and order special flower arrangements and fabricate two engraved flag cases, showed a great level of pride, love and respect as we attempted to ease the pain for the families of two of our friends. As we worked together over the weeks leading up to the events of January 13th and 14th, one of our members forwarded a quote from Michael Norman's book "These Good Men," which seemed very appropriate;

"I know now why men who have been to war yearn to reunite. Not to tell stories or to look at old pictures. Not to laugh or weep on one another's knee. Comrades gather because they long to be with men who once acted their best."

It is truly great to be back among these good men from the 48th Assault Helicopter Company and the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association.

We all knew we could count on the chaplains from Fort Meyer, as well as the

members of the Old Guard, to do a professional job of honoring our friends, but we thought Jon and Dave's families needed to know how all of us felt about them. I tried to express all our feelings in the following eulogy which I read at both services on the 14th:

I served with Jon and Dave in the 48th Assault Helicopter Company. The 48th was a very close organization and we seem to have grown even closer through the years. Our commander and many members of the unit are here today, others were unable to be here, but share our sorrow and asked me to read this verse from a poem titled "The Fallen" by Laurence Binyon:

"They went with songs to battle, they were young, straight of limb,
true of eye, steady and aglow.
They were staunch to the end against odds uncounted,
They fell with their faces to the foe.
They shall not grow old, as we grow old,
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn,
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them."

I maintained a personal journal while in Vietnam and I have spent the past few weeks reviewing that journal in an effort to draw from it words which might express our feelings, then and now. On behalf of the 48th Assault Helicopter Company and all those who flew with us, I would like to present those words which I hope all will understand.

Through the fog of controversy which surrounded our country's involvement in Vietnam, some may ask why, but let no one ever question the intentions of these honorable men. There are so many good things we can say about them. In the finest traditions of our great country, they answered their call and went forth with only the best intentions. They did all they were asked, and with their lives showed their commitment. What more could our country or anyone ask?

Though some wars have been necessary, there has never been a good one, and true warriors know there never will be. The cost of war is so great. It robs nations of their most precious resource, their young. It also has a way of bringing out the best in men. War strips men to their most basic moral standards; facades are quickly torn away, and you are judged as your true self, good or bad. Those who knew these men saw them in that light and can tell you they were truly dedicated, strong and courageous.

Those of us who served with them also came to know their heart. In the quiet times, we heard of their love for their families, shared their

laughs and listened to their stories of life before Vietnam. We found pleasure in simple things such as music, mail from home, hot food, cold beer, a periodic hot shower and time shared in the club. We grew close.

In the violence of that war, we also shared our fear and frustration, endured physical pain and the bitter experience of losing friends. We came to know indefinable fatigue from seemingly endless hours of flying in the most demanding conditions; yet if we weren't flying, we were not happy. Though for the most part we dealt with the confusion, complexity and violence of battle in our own way, it was understood there was no shame in showing your emotion. We were only human. We endured and became stronger for it. We were sometimes hard on each other, but it was with purpose, and we knew we could turn to each other for anything. We grew closer.

We may have been sent in harm's way with a broken sword, but we stood as one. Our shield was our pride and the respect we had for each other and our duty was to carry out the mission. We were in this thing together, and our strength would come from our commitment to each other and our unit. We learned a special trust common only to those who learned to hide their fear and willingly place their lives at risk, not just for the cause, but for those with whom they served. The common theme was a bond of mutual respect and unspoken love and friendship forged and tempered through the trials of battle.

You realized, once you had fought for them, that freedom and life are indeed very special. You no longer took things for granted. You noticed for the first time how really intense and beautiful a sunrise can be and how nice it was to once again feel the warmth of the sun on your face after the monsoons had passed.

You no longer said prayers. You spoke with God. You now knew the fragility of life, and therefore it became more intense. Through all of this, we quickly realized what an honor it was to know and serve with men like these and how truly blessed we are to have had them in our lives.

We will remember them always, and to our absent companions we now say: Catch the wind, good friends, take the lead and soar to the warm light of God, and on your wing, keep watch for us.

