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There has always been a strong bond between man and machine, and none is stronger than that forged in the heat of battle. Those who have been there maintain a special place in the heart for the machines that have carried warriors into combat and returned them safely home. That bond is often very tenuous, however, and none more so than those from the Vietnam War.

In the structure of Army Aviation, helicopters were not assigned to pilots as they often are in the other services. The Army way in many units was to assign these aircraft to the enlisted men who flew in and maintained them – they were only “loaned” to the pilots for assigned missions. These crew chiefs and flight engineers “owned” that aircraft, and treated it like it was their first love. But at the end of their tour in Vietnam, the bond was broken, and they likely never saw the aircraft again.

But every so often, the planets align, the fates intervene, and a reunion mysteriously occurs. A special moment like this is occurred on Tuesday, January 3rd, 2006 at Mineral Wells Airport. A Bell UH-1H “Huey” helicopter, serial number 70-15707, that was acquired by The National Vietnam War Museum is undergoing restoration at the airport. Through a news story in the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association (VHPA) newsletter, members of the unit that the Huey had been assigned to read of the aircraft’s existence. Through various contacts, that information was eventually passed along to Mark Hostetler of Indianapolis, IN. Mark, it seems, was the crew chief of that particular aircraft in Vietnam during the last half of 1972. Until hearing of the museum having the aircraft, Mark assumed it had met the same fate as many similar helicopters of that period, resting at the bottom of the South China Sea.

Mark arrived at DFW airport on the morning of January 3rd, and Jeannie Leonard, a board of directors’ member from The National Vietnam War Museum, met him and escorted him to Mineral Wells for the reunion with the aircraft. An additional surprise for Mark was the presence of one of the unit’s former commanding officers from Vietnam, Jack Shields, who presented The National Vietnam War Museum with the unit’s guidon flag from the period when it was known as H Troop, 16<sup>th</sup> Cavalry. While Jack had transferred command of the unit in October of 1971 to Major Coleman J. McDevitt, well before Mark arrived, there were still members who had served under him, and Mark was familiar with his name. Having served in the same unit provided a sense of continuity and brotherhood not found in most professions.

During the drawdown of U. S. forces in Vietnam, company-sized units were often moved around like pieces on a chess board, and renamed as well during the move. Thus it was that B Troop, 1/9 Cavalry, 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division, in July 1971 became H Troop, 16<sup>th</sup> Cavalry. Unfortunately, this designation was not approved by the Department of the Army, who carried the unit as Troop F, 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry in the official records. However, in Vietnam, the unit was known as H Troop until January 1972, when it was renamed Troop F and command was ultimately transferred to Major George P. Hewlett in May of 1972. Also during this period, the unit was transferred from the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division to the 12<sup>th</sup> Aviation Group, 1<sup>st</sup> Aviation Brigade. Because of situations like this, many of the personal histories from this period contain conflicting information about the identities of the same unit.

Mark Hostetler enlisted in the United States Army in 1971 to become a helicopter mechanic; a young man with flying experience, but no high school diploma, looking to learn a useful trade. His background took him through aviation mechanics’ school, into the non-commissioned officers

training program, and eventually to a helicopter unit in Vietnam in mid-1972, when U. S. forces were pulling out at an ever increasing rate. F Troop, 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, operated in what was known as Military Region III, the area surrounding Saigon, and extending from the South China Sea to the Cambodian border. Late in the war, the unit supported both U. S. and South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) forces, and faced increased threats from anti-aircraft fire that included SA-7 “Strela” surface-to-air missiles, ZSU-23, 23mm self-propelled anti-aircraft guns, and even Soviet S-60 57mm towed anti-aircraft guns that had not been used in the South earlier in the war.

Both the unit and the aircraft, 70-15707, were involved in one of the last major U. S. efforts in the war, the “Easter Offensive” of 1972, when the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) launched a massive offensive throughout South Vietnam from the DMZ to the Gulf of Thailand. The pivotal battle occurred in the northern portion of Military Region III, when NVA forces, supported by armor and artillery, rolled out of Cambodia and attempted to drive down Highway 13 to Saigon and subjugate the South. The ARVN, with air support from the U.S. Army and Air Force, successfully repelled this attack at An Loc, about 50 miles northwest of Saigon, and were able to maintain their independence for another three years. In this operation, U. S. helicopter crews faced some of the most lethal ground-to-air weapons in the hands of the NVA while providing close air support and re-supply missions to the ARVN forces. In fact, this stand by the South Vietnamese Army, combined with Operation Linebacker 2, which involved the intense bombing of military targets in Hanoi and Haiphong by Air Force B-52s, was instrumental in bringing the government of North Vietnam back to the Paris Peace table.

While he lived through many experiences most people hope they never see, and was decorated for valor, Mark, like most Vietnam veterans considers that he was only doing his job, and that what he did was nothing special. But Mark, himself, is a reminder that a large percentage of these young men who went to war at their country’s bidding, and then were shunned upon their return, rose above the attitudes of their fellow countrymen.

After leaving the service, Mark not only finished high school, but graduated from college and acquired two graduate degrees. In addition, he has worked as a firefighter, sheriff’s deputy, constable, counselor, and Chaplain. And yet, he has never lost his love for aviation, or his memories of “his” helicopter. This reunion was something he never expected, but would not have missed for the world, knowing that his helicopter will be on display for years to come, helping to tell the story of his generation to generations of the future.



Mark Hostetler with UH-1H 70-15707 in Vietnam in 1972 ..... And in Mineral Wells, Texas in 2006

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