

# Combat Helicopter Pilots Association



CHPA Quarterly 2020 1st Qtr

## Member Spotlight

### What it Takes

by Dane (Pat) Nash  
Member, CHPA Board of Directors



Already qualified as a fixed-wing aviator in the U.S. Army, and with about one thousand hours under my belt, mostly flown in Europe, I was not favorably inclined toward rotary-wing flight. The helicopter, to me, appeared to be a machine intent on its own destruction.

Although now qualified as a rotary-wing aviator, I can't claim I had the vision to reach out for it on my own. I was much too conceited and arrogant. I had to be forced by an edict straight out of the Pentagon for all fixed-wing aviators, wherever situated, ordering transition training into rotary-wing. I had every intention of happily returning to fixed-wing flight just as soon as I was out from underneath the thumb of the Pentagon.

I struggled, as all rotary-wing aviators have, with learning to hover. After acquiring a basic skill in that endeavor, my rotary-wing skills took flight. I enjoyed the training, and to my surprise, I enjoyed flying a helicopter, an H-13 in this particular case. I remember one day, in the UH-1B phase, with a twinkle in his eye, our instructor advised us that that we were going to shoot auto-rotations (engine failure procedure) in the dark. What!? My mind said: "You're nuts." Auto-rotations in the dark, right. I've since realized that, yes, helicopters do suffer engine failures in the dark.

Preliminarily our instructor advised us that in the event of an engine failure in the dark . . . Right here, I was questioning the wisdom of flying a helicopter at all. I much preferred my trusty parachute, the prescribed method of dealing with an engine failure at night in a fixed-wing aircraft.

(continued)

CHPA  
PO Box 2585  
Peachtree City, GA 30269  
www.chpa-us.org  
hq@chpa-us.org  
800.832.5144

Terry Garlock  
CHPA Newsletter Editor  
editor@chpa-us.org  
770-630-6064 Eastern time

James Wilhite, President  
president@chpa-us.org

Jack Bailey, Chairman  
chairman@chpa-us.org

### IN THIS ISSUE . . .

<b>MEMBER SPOTLIGHT:</b>	
Dane (Pat) Nash	p1
Graham Stevens	p10
Al Major	p13
<b>From CHPA Leadership</b>	<b>p8</b>
<b>Book Review</b>	<b>p9</b>
<b>You Earned It</b>	<b>p15</b>
<b>Reunions</b>	<b>p16</b>
<b>Photos from Iraq</b>	<b>p17</b>

## What it Takes (continued)

Our instructor continued: “In the event of an engine failure in the dark, the first thing you do is turn on all of your lights. If you don’t like what you see, turn them off because what you see is what you get.” Consistent with all things in my helicopter training, auto-rotations in the dark proved to be a delightful rush. After we’d all shot several successfully, our instructor was prepared to dismiss us, but first asked if there were anything we’d like to do as there were a few more minutes left in our time slot. Uniformly, we all responded in unison: “Let’s shoot some more auto-rotations.”

The reason behind this forced transition was that additional helicopter pilots could not be trained from the ground up in sufficient numbers to meet the Army’s demands. The attrition in the combat zone was just too heavy. The result of the helicopter



*Pat Nash, young pilot*

transition was the complement of pilots in my unit in Europe was very soon reduced to one. That one was yours truly, no CO, no EXEC, no contemporaries, just this lonely, overwhelmed person. We had H-13 helicopters, O-1 (L-19) Bird Dogs, and one U-6 de Havilland Beaver. There was no one to run my parts department; there was no one to do anything except for what I could do. And that wasn’t much.

Soon, it was my turn to report to the combat zone. My replacement arrived just a few days before my departure, one lonely soul replacing another. My family and I packed up and made our way to

CONUS (Continental United States) for a short leave before shipping out to the other side of the world. It was nice to be home after being away for so long. Even though it was Christmas time, a cloud of dread hung over all our celebrating, everybody knowing where I was going next.

Soon, too soon, I was winging my way toward my first combat assignment. Upon arrival, experiencing all the jolts to my sensory system as was everybody else, I had a few days free to scout around while the assignment machine decided my final destination. I was originally assigned to the First Infantry Division, and that’s where my carefully packed duffle bag was shipped. Ultimately I was assigned to the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, Air Cav Troop, and never saw my duffle bag again. I was caught up in the confusing process of acquiring new uniforms, learning new duties, and meeting new strangers, soon to become friends.

Our days were busy, our calendars full. I soon lost track of day and time, because we never had a weekend off; each day was always the same, essentially. We would fly, fight, eat, and sleep. If you weren’t flying, you were filling sandbags or some such thing. There were some meetings but mostly fly, fight, sleep, and eat.

I remember being somewhat confused because my new contemporaries were laughing at things that weren’t funny. I soon learned that these were difficult times during which we were confronted by many things that would make a normal person want to cry. Military pilots, especially combat military pilots, don’t cry . . . so . . . we laughed. You don’t think about death much. To the extent it is on your mind, you developed a sense of immortality without realizing it. You also developed a callousness toward mayhem and gore. Such callousness would never be your conscious choice, but it was necessary for your mental health, and a callous attitude did evolve. It was the brain’s method of coping with the horrors visited upon all soldiers who’ve experienced combat. It’s not fun, and it’s not healthy. But, through the ages, it’s been necessary. We call it necessary and drape ourselves in patriotism without thinking that our opponent is similarly draped.

We accomplish acts which non-veterans would call heroic, but we, the initiated, know is just a natural response to our warm regard toward that soldier standing or flying next to us. We care about each other, so we naturally take care of each other.

(continued)

## What it Takes (continued)

This instinct, once absorbed in battle, lasts throughout all the years that follow.

My best guess is that all persons wonder if they have what it takes. Certainly, I did. It was a casual inquiry as a young person, but on my airplane ride to my own testing ground, the question became much more distinct. I was consciously questioning if I had what it takes. Would I let myself down; would I let my companions down? I knew how I wanted to act; I knew how I expected to act. I also knew that I wouldn't know how I would act until the circumstance arose.

Then my day came.

It started just before midnight. Roused from my sack, I gathered my necessities, helmet, flak vest, maps and such, reporting quickly to the flight line, a flurry of activity. We were flying what was then called gunships with four persons to a ship, each with different pre-flight duties. The flight line was a zone of intense activity accomplished under the added pressure of knowing comrades were somewhere in trouble. Understand, this was all performed in the dark. Lights were a dangerous attraction to unknown enemy troops that might be observing. Also, the wrong kind of light ruined your night vision, which was important. All of it was rather like a well-executed football play, except the "goal post" was miles away, and the "football" was an expensive helicopter. But it wasn't as if we hadn't done it before. All had trained for months, some for years.

The whole platoon was involved, not just one team. A gunship team consisted of two gunships; a heavy team was three gunships but seldom used. I think we were all assigned a different area, or we were run out in series. Usually, if you're in series, you'd see one team coming out as you returned. We fought from just before midnight until the late afternoon of the next day, about seventeen to eighteen hours. Except for my

teammate, I never saw another gunship in the sky, concluding we were all on individual missions. We flew, fought, refueled, rearmed, and fought some more. I recall the possibility of getting some reconstituted eggs sometime during that period, but I'm not sure. I only remember flying and fighting. I did learn that you could run with four 2.75 inch rockets in your arms. The pilots (2) rearmed the rocket launchers while the door gunners (2) refueled and replenished the door guns and mini-guns.

The weather was CAVU (Ceiling And Visibility Unlimited) and warm. In the afternoon, we were working a large clearing in the forest. It was an elongated rectangle in shape. Small arms fire was being taken from the long sides, but when and from where remained a mystery. We were testing, recon by fire in the general area, concentrating on the clearing. It wasn't healthy to just hang around, so we would take a peek and leave, come back, take a peek and maybe attack or leave again. By this time, all the other helicopters in our platoon had been shot down or disabled by fire, according to the rumor mill. Realizing that help from our platoon would not be available made for kind of a lonely feeling as we conducted our business on that sunny afternoon.

We were ordered out of the clearing by higher headquarters because an artillery bombardment was about to begin on and about that clearing. So we orbited nearby and watched the show. And what a show it was. I would not want to be the subject of an artillery bombardment. It looked like a pure kind of hell on earth.



*UH-1 Huey gunship in Vietnam  
(Photo not from this mission story)*

That bombardment having been concluded, we were on our way in again when a FAC (Forward Air Controller) warned us out of the area because a strike by fighter bombers was about to begin. I thought the artillery was colorful, but it was pale compared to the air strike. We just orbited outside of the strike zone and watched those Air Force pilots at work. Spectacular! You could see the bomb start its lazy arc from the plane to the ground as

(continued)

## What it Takes (continued)

the pilot released it and pulled out of his fairly shallow dive. Between us, the artillery, and the Air Force, you wouldn't think there could be one living thing in that area. We were told by the FAC that the next fighter bomber would be the last, and we would be free to resume whatever it was that we were involved in before the FAC's arrival. That plane came in on its horribly beautiful, shallow dive, prepared to release death on those below.

When those planes initiated their climb out after dropping the bomb, their nose would come up, but because of the plane's velocity, it would continue to mush through on its original path even though its nose was now oriented upward. Soon, after that gentle mush, the airfoils would catch the air, and the aircraft would accelerate away in a smart climbing, left-hand turn. The bomb would release; you could see it come free from the shackles underneath the wing. Even though free from the aircraft, they appeared still mated as the mushing of the aircraft caused it to continue to follow the falling arc of the bomb for a second or two before they separated.

This last fighter bomber and its brave pilot deceived us for a short time. It continued its shallow dive directly into its zone of greatest danger from ground fire. The bomb appeared to detach from the fighter bomber, and the aircraft oriented its nose upward to initiate its pull out. With its nose up, we were waiting for his airfoils to catch the air and begin his exit from the danger below. But . . . it never caught the air. The plane, even with its nose pointed toward a climb, continued its descent, following the arc of the bomb, with the bomb and the plane both hitting the ground at almost the same time. We were stunned into silence, certain that the pilot of that plane was dead. Nothing existed of the plane except for tiny parts so far as we could see.

We tried to gather our wits and begin our deadly game of cat and mouse anew with the enemy below. It was particularly ticklish since we'd just witnessed the still, very real ability of those below to harm those above. The loss of that fighter bomber could have been some kind of mechanical failure, I don't

know. Considering the immediate circumstances, it was most probably ground fire that brought it down. Not a very comforting thought for us about to re-initiate the fray.

For some reason, I don't recall being very concerned for our safety, despite the rather obvious warning signs. Some special kind of stupid, I guess. We were re-evaluating our attack plan and after some additional reconnaissance we heard a radio call to "army gunships in the area." In every airplane and helicopter, military or civilian, there are guard channels, frequencies 121.5 MHz on VHF radios and 243.0 MHz on UHF radios. Those "guard channels" are always tuned in and never assigned for normal use. They are strictly reserved for emergency use. Any aircraft can transmit on one of the two channels and know that other aircraft can hear. So we received a message over a guard channel: "Army gunships in the area — this is Air Force Rescue #." We switched to "guard and responded: "Aircraft transmitting on guard; this is Thunderhorse #; you're 5x5 (clear and strong)," meaning we hear you clearly and sharing our call sign. When receiving a call on "guard," it's required that you soon switch to an agreed upon

frequency different than "guard." This conforms to the requirement to keep the guard channels free. In our excitement and the urgency of the moment, we did not switch frequencies.

After the aircraft on guard identified itself, we started looking for it, and here, as if by magic, was a Kaman HH-43 Huskie. Now you want to talk about a weird helicopter; this

one qualifies. It has no tail rotor. It has two main rotors that sit just above the cockpit, beside each other, set out at an angle. The two main rotor blades intermesh like an old fashioned egg beater. The arc of each blade actually turns well within the arc of the other. It sounds impossible. It looks impossible even while you watch it right in front of you. I'd heard about this helicopter but had never seen one up until now. This was our Air Force rescue helicopter.

We communicated the impossibility of the situation. The thought we tried to share was: "Look,

(continued)



*F-100 in Vietnam  
(image not from this mission story)*

## What it Takes (continued)

there's no need to investigate this crash scene. In fact, there are several reasons why you shouldn't." Why "no need?" The pilot of the downed plane was dead ten times over. There wasn't anything left except maybe some teeth, if you could find them. No purpose could be served by coming in to rescue somebody that wasn't there.

"Reasons why you shouldn't?" Earlier today, we lost an F-4; now, we've lost an F-100, plus at least five armed helicopters in that immediate area. Right now, there's no one to rescue, but if you come in here, you're going to get shot down, and then we could have friendlies on the ground with a need for rescue. I don't know how much of this was communicated as opposed to what was on my mind. I know we told the rescue chopper the F-100 pilot is dead; this area is super dangerous; there's no need for you to expose yourself. He transmitted back that he had a moral and regulatory obligation to fulfill, which necessitated his physical presence over the crash site or words to that effect.

We transmitted: "Give us a second to get prepared, and we'll escort you over the crash site." We then got on either side of the rescue helicopter, but several hundred yards back, prepared to lay down suppressing fire as the pilot of the rescue helicopter overflew the crash site. This we did at nearly maximum speed. Everything was going great until, to our surprise, the rescue helicopter pulled up to slow down . . . for a closer examination, I guess. And you could hear the ground fire starting as we passed him. I wasn't going to pull up. There's nothing I can do when I'm standing still, plus my helicopter couldn't hold a hover in that air. I couldn't believe it. I earlier thought, with a little luck, we can help the rescue helicopter fulfill its moral and regulatory obligations and get him out of here in one piece. But it was not to be. As he slowed, I could hear the popcorn noise indicative of ground fire, and watched while passing in dumbfounded wonder as pieces of the rescue helicopter began to fly off from multiple

hits of small arms fire. It began to settle like a seriously wounded but not dead bird fluttering to the ground. As we passed, I looked back to see four live souls exit the rescue helicopter now on the ground, with one of the four seriously wounded, barely able to walk, let alone run.

Well, shit!!! That's exactly what I'm thinking, and there's no better way to say it. We went from all gauges in the green to SNAFU in about thirty minutes. We went from one pilot, unfortunately, but positively dead, and two gunships with stores (ammunition and rockets) remaining, to four, live Air Force personnel on the ground, a result of their bravery and dedication, definitely worthy of rescue. But by whom?

We looked around, and all we saw were two Army gunships not well suited to the rescue they were duty-bound to attempt. On the one hand, I knew we had to try; on the other, I knew that pretty soon, we'd have three helicopters on the ground with a new total of twelve souls wishing for a rescue that wasn't likely to come before the enemy finished us off.

We quickly agreed that we'd strafe the wood line of the clearing, encouraging the enemy to keep its head down and being careful not to expend all our stores. Then we'd come around again with the lead ship expending one hundred percent of its remaining stores, reduce weight by throwing the switch to fire explosive bolts that would drop externally-mounted weapons from both sides while it attempted a rescue.

If that ship didn't make it out, the second ship was to come in, doubting that he could lift twelve adults, expend all remaining stores, blow its external weapons and attempt a rescue. I knew exactly how this was going to turn out, and it wasn't good. Oh, ye of little faith. As the seconds turned into hours, I contemplated my fate and found my heart in my throat. I was going to die today if I had what it takes. At this point, I was talking to myself. You've made this plan on the spur of the moment



*Kaman HH-43 Huskie "Pedro"  
(photo not from this mission story)*

(continued)

## What it Takes (continued)

based on all facts known, and you're stuck with the result. There was no way to fly away into the sunset, not if you wanted to live with yourself afterward. It's time to pony up. Oh! I didn't want to do it. I can remember it freshly to this day. But I had to; there was no other way. I had to. Did I have what it takes?

In the haste of developments and the urgency of the situation confronting us, we never did switch away from "guard." Therefore every transmission we made went out over "guard," so every aircraft in range heard of our dilemma. It's a little embarrassing, but true. We became aware of this when an Army helicopter hailed us: "Thunderhorse # — this is [call sign not remembered]", an empty Army slick, a UH-1D, commonly called Huey, a troop transport/med evac helicopter. We advised this slick of the same information shared with the Air Force helicopter. Of course, I now see the slick pilot may have already known. At any rate, we discouraged the slick from unnecessarily endangering its crew; it wasn't their problem.

In response, the slick rejected our warning indicating he was going to try a rescue, and we were free to help or not. I didn't know about my gun team partner, but I was partially relieved. The slick's words had a ring of determination to them that instilled in me some hope, however minuscule. My gut said nobody going into that mess is coming out. I felt we would have an even worse situation on our hands, a fight we couldn't win, but couldn't avoid. But we could escort the slick though we would probably expend one-hundred percent of our remaining stores. Oh well, it wouldn't make much difference in the end, an end I could clearly see, and it didn't look good.

As the slick approached, we lined up on either side of it in preparation for giving it some kind of advantage in its attempted rescue. We were well back of the slick, but in a good position to give it some covering fire upon its approach. The slick knew we could only protect the approach. There would not be time or ammo to protect the departure.

It came in hot, the nose well down, the main rotor pulling for all it was worth. Then, as the slick

approached the crash site of the other rescue helicopter, it reversed its orientation, with nose now well up, vertical in fact. And its "stinger" (a metal rod on the tail of most single rotor helicopters, designed to protect the tail rotor in situations just such as this) was dragging through the high grass as the pilot extracted maximum thrust to halt the forward progress of the helicopter. Upon reaching near-zero forward airspeed, the slick lowered its nose, settling into a light hover. This was accomplished just as we passed the slick on our suppression run. When our guns could no longer bear on the tree line, and while the slick was still in its light hover, here came the sound of popping corn.

I knew the slick was done for; there was no way under the sun that it could survive this hail storm of small arms fire coming from all along the tree line. You could see the slick shudder from time to time as the survivors of the first rescue helicopter raced to their guardian angel, today in the form of an olive drab, Army, UH-1D. Of the three survivors who could run, two ran carrying the injured survivor between them. All veritably flew from their hiding spot to the awaiting Huey. The first survivor jumped aboard, the uninjured two threw the fourth on the helicopter like a log, the first survivor softening his fall. Following the injured crew member, the last two were aboard in a flash. I could hear the popping corn; I could see the Huey's tail come up, indicative of his intention to take off with his fresh load of previously lost human beings.

I winced as I heard the small arms fire increase to a crescendo of hot lead directed toward the struggling Huey. I could see it tremble between the small arms fire that was hitting it and the maximum power the pilot was demanding from it. The plane of the main rotor pitched forward; the blades flexed to their extreme limit as all the power available was directed to its twirling mast in an effort to save all souls aboard, souls I still viewed as lost. In spite of all the abuse and punishment being absorbed by the Huey, it seemed to get a second breath, stabilized, got ahold of the air, and began a distinct forward movement and a shallow climb.



(continued)

## What it Takes (continued)

My breath caught in my throat. Is the slick going to make it? Maybe, unbelievable, but maybe. It continued its tentative but determined forward acceleration and added feet to its altitude as it went. Yes! Maybe, yes! Am I watching a miracle? Could it be real? The Huey continued its struggle. It was still very exposed and taking fire. In spite of all the reasons why this couldn't be, the slick continued to gain forward airspeed and add feet to its still low altitude. Then, in the blink of an eye, the slick was out of the clearing, over the approaching tree line, promptly sticking its skids right down into the trees to minimize its exposure to the continuing small arms fire.

I could not believe what I was seeing. Suddenly, I gasped for air, only then realizing I hadn't taken a breath for the last forty-five seconds or so. That unbelievably stubborn, incredibly brave pilot and his crew pulled it off; they pulled it off. Oh! I can't describe the relief, for the slick, for the survivors on the ground, for us, for all of us. That Huey dropped out of the sky and solved the unsolvable. It did the undoable. It presented an opportunity to observe what can be done when somebody has what it takes.

I didn't learn that day if I had what it takes. The whole scenario left me clearly in doubt about myself on that score. But it was thrilling to watch, and I'm proud to have been in the air with such a person as the pilot of that Huey.

It is important to point out that all the helicopters mentioned today had pilots and crew. In our case, for instance, we had two pilots and two door gunners. The crew can see all that's going on and hear all that's being transmitted over the radio and the intercom. The crew could have voiced concern, fright, or objection. They could have made any displeasure known. But they never uttered that first syllable, not one peep. They suffered quietly and bravely through it all. In truth, I owe my life to a door gunner, but that's another story.

Dane (Pat) Nash  
Circuit Court Judge (Ret)  
Captain, Artillery, U.S. Army (Ret.)



Do you want to see stories from the Gulf War . . . or Iraq or Afghanistan or Bosnia or other conflict?

Those stories have to come from you. Contribute something. I'm here to help with word-smithing.

Terry Garlock  
CHPA Newsletter Editor  
tg.chpa@gmail.com  
770-630-6064



# From CHPA Leadership



James Wilhite, President  
[president@chpa-us.org](mailto:president@chpa-us.org)



Dr. Jack Bailey, Chairman  
[chairman@chpa-us.org](mailto:chairman@chpa-us.org)

**T**he CHPA Board of Directors is actively monitoring the situation with the COVID-19 virus. In accordance with our bylaws, we will look for any opportunity to support veteran or aviation military communities where we can be of service

For every member, your safety and health is our primary concern. During these times of uncertainty, please take advantage of the information provided at the following websites to protect yourself:

<https://www.va.gov/>

<https://www.cdc.gov/>

May God bless you and your family,  
our military,  
and the United States of America.





# Book Review by Mike King



## Undaunted Valor by Matt Jackson

**Note: the author is a CHPA member, using the pen name Matt Jackson and anonymity for his own personal reasons**

Simply stated, the author has reached back a half century to vividly detail the daily routine of those of those of us that flew in South Vietnam. He has succeeded in placing the reader back in time to experience (or re-experience) the mindset of helicopter pilots, their relationships with their crews, fellow aviators, and those we supported.

Detailing an eighteen month tour he points out the nuances of flying the myriad of missions flown by an assault helicopter company—the do's and don'ts of what we, as helicopter pilots, had to learn to progress to become aircraft commanders, and what it took to simply survive.

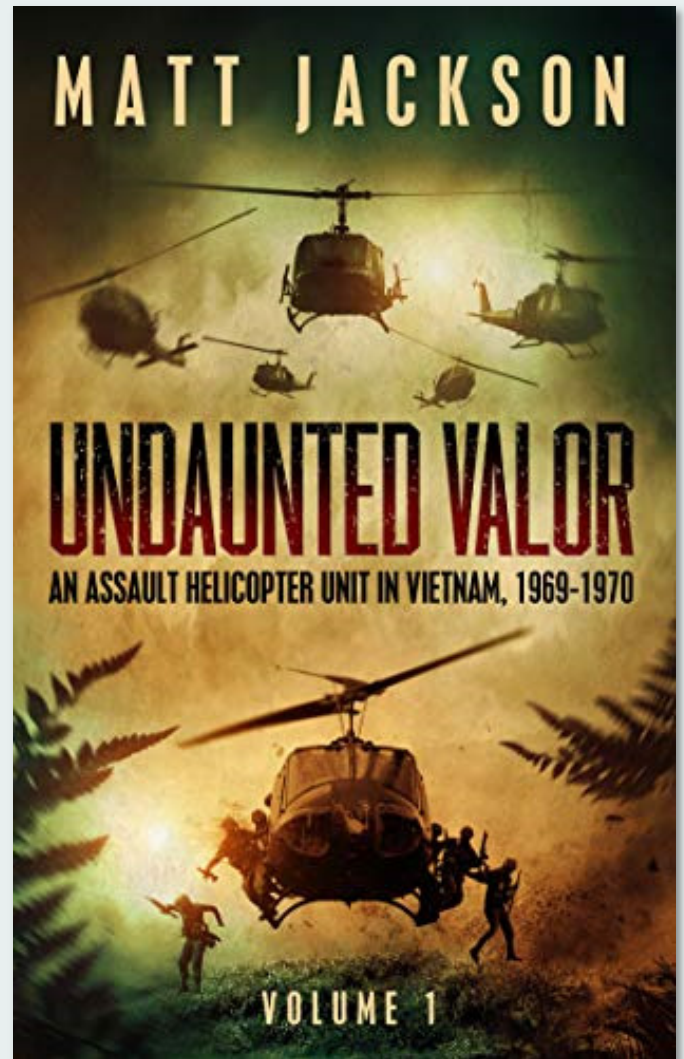
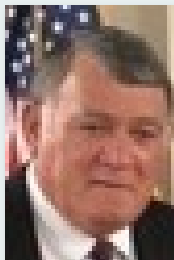
The author also points out the command climate of his unit over his time in Viet Nam and how the unit suffered under poor leadership detailing how it affected the entire helicopter crew. Conversely, he points out just how well his unit performed when led by professional and competent leaders.

Lastly, he details the sadness of losing comrades, the pain and anguish of “that could have been me”, and how personal it becomes.

A friend, Larry Prestige, was a UH-1B guns Crew Chief in 1966 with C Battery, 2nd of 20th Artillery ARA based in AnKhe. He also read the book, enjoyed it and said it brought back memories of missions and down times.

A great read, even for a LOH Scout pilot like me. I highly recommend it.

Mike King  
Darkhorse 14  
1971-1972





## God's Own Lunatics

by Graham Stevens

Member, CHPA Board of Directors



Graham Stevens

**B**ecause of the origin of the phrase, you might think that tag is reserved for Vietnam helicopter pilots. And you would be wrong.

Joe Galloway, a correspondent legendary among Vietnam vets, speaking on behalf of the grunts he traveled with and learned to love, was expressing their admiration and respect for helicopter crews in combat. "God's Own Lunatics," he said, referring to gunships coming to help, Dustoff or Medevac or ride out of hell coming to take their brothers home, announced early by the distant, escalating thumps of "wop-wop-wop" undeterred by the fire they took approaching the LZ.

Every war is different, has its own flavor and norms and mores, its own operating style, its own expectations of each other, its own lingo and setting and tactics. So I don't know everything you as an individual CHPA member have experienced but I do know this. Whenever and wherever you flew helicopters in combat as pilot or crew, you were exactly what Joe meant when he said God's Own Lunatics.

When I think back to my first Vietnam tour as a green Cobra pilot, I am reminded of the opening paragraph of A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens:

*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct*

*the other way – in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.*

I was a 21 year old, trying to figure out the chaos and contradictions called Vietnam. Many of us felt this way. We were the new kids on the block when initially assigned to our combat unit. The "old guys" had nicknames for us - newbies, FNG's etc. - but soon we would be the "old guys." You simply became one, or your luck ran out and you didn't. That's the reality of war.

Every helicopter crew generation from Korea to today has earned Joe's moniker. Each of you had your own adventures doing your duty in Iraq or Afghanistan, or South America, or God knows where else, doing crazy things like flying with NVG's.

Each of us signed up. I could tell a long story on my own journey from having to join or get drafted in 1968. Losing your draft deferment back then had consequences. I had no idea then I would become one of God's Own Lunatics.

Whether a Warrant or Commissioned Officer, new pilots in Vietnam all started green with a lot to learn, like this, put into words of his own style by a friend. *"You wanna' know what I think? It don't really matter what I think. Once that first bullet goes past your head, politics and all that shit, just goes right out the window."*

Helicopter crews in Vietnam went through some major battles with more excitement than we wanted, like Dak Tho 67-68, Tet of '68, Lam Son 719, An Loc 1972. These were touchstone battles of the war, but in between major battles the daily life in every unit brought tests of our skill and courage, sights, sounds, smells and horrible and wonderful memories that would change us for the remainder of our lives.

After Vietnam I was privileged to be a founding member of the 160<sup>th</sup>, and I had the thrill of flying in an under-rated hot little skirmish in Granada named Operation Urgent Fury. President Reagan pulled the trigger to interrupt the Commie trouble-making in Granada, and to rescue about 600 American medical students there at risk of becoming hostages. I was the lead AH-6 Little-Bird Gun pilot. We had four AH-6C Little-Bird

(continued)

## God's Own Lunatics (continued)

guns and six MH-6 slicks with crews, delivered to the Granada runway by C-130s, each carrying two of our birds.

The Grenadians and Cubans had blocked the runway with bulldozers, so ahead of us Rangers had to do a hop and pop - below 500' with no reserve chute - to land and secure the runway. They hot-wired the dozers to drive them out of the way. When we started offloading a sniper popped a few rounds at us but the Rangers quickly took care of him. We prepped the aircraft, cranked them up and then we got busy. It wasn't quite a cakewalk.

Several SEAL Teams were part of the operation. Four SEALs were lost in an airborne insertion with boats in a rainstorm, bodies never recovered. A SEAL from one of those teams who was not there but knows the history, says the deaths were not caused by weather, but by inadequate flotation for the heavy loads the SEALs were carrying. He said it was a lesson learned in lives lost that led to quick-release design in SEAL gear for ditching heavy equipment as necessary.

One of the SEAL missions was extraction of the Governor, but after arriving at the Governor's Mansion they were surrounded by a superior force of Grenadian and Cuban troops and held off several assault waves including BTR-60s, a big 8-wheeled Soviet APC with heavy machine guns.

My team was tasked to take two Little-Bird guns to the Governor's Mansion to relieve pressure on the good guys and try to get the Governor out.

We never got there. As we passed the Radio Free Grenada building at about 100', I didn't know a SEAL Team was pinned down there, and I looked down to see a BTR-60 uncomfortably close with a shit-load of Cubans. And then the fun started. My windshield shattered, and my tip path plane went to shit. I broke left and got on the deck, slowed down to about 20 knots and egressed back over the water. I thought about ditching, but, hey we were still flying, so I limped it back to our base at the end of the island, shut down, and listened to the whish/whish of the blades with all the holes in them. The blades looked like Swiss cheese. I had one hit on the blades just behind the D-spar on the leading edge. A half inch closer and the blade would have come apart.

When the bad guys engaged me, the gun noise of the BTR-6 trying to knock me down was a distraction the SEAL team needed to slip out the back door and E&E to the coast with their wounded. The SEALs found a small boat, handy for them to complete their escape with bad guys hot on their tail. They managed later to call into the command center, and at midnight we launched a MH-60 and my two guns to go get them. I hadn't slept for over 30 hours and knew at age 34 I was getting too old for this cat-and-mouse young man's game called combat.

The Blackhawk found them about a half mile offshore, dropped a repelling ladder and the SEALs began to climb up to the 60. If you have never climbed an 8 inch wide aluminum caving ladder



*Graham Stevens and his AH-6 Little-Bird*

continued

## God's Own Lunatics (continued)

under the rotor wash of a MH-60, I promise you it's almost too much for one man in decent shape, but one of those SEALs gave me the treat of an amazing sight as he climbed that ladder with a wounded man over his shoulder. I had worked with these guys for years and knew how tough they were, but I still marvel at that memory. They made it, all were recovered and we returned to base (RTB'd).

Later we were on a beach that borders the St. Georges Bay. A Marine Sea Cobra AH-1 had been shot down earlier in St. Georges, and his wingman was trying to provide cover for the CH-46 that was trying to get onto the island to rescue the downed crew. The Cobra was at about 2000' and probably took hits to his mast, likely from ZSU-23's. We watched the blade fly off, flexure plate and two blades. The Cobra dropped like a rock nose down into the deep water, no sign the crew got out. Worst thing I've ever seen.

I'll spare you my thoughts on recovering the body of a friend from his downed Black Hawk, but I would say Grenada for me was completely different and just the same as Vietnam. In both places some of our friends never became "old guys." They gave their last full measure of devotion as their luck ran out. The youth, the life, the blood, just ran out and they never got to live out their lives, never knew the joy of watching kids grow up and missed so many other things. For those of us who are left, their faces are frozen in our memory forever young, and even though we feel guilty that we lived through it, we know their actions "were in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service and reflect great credit upon themselves, their units, and the United States of America." God's Own Lu-

natics.

Can any of us adequately describe our combat experience when a civilian with genuine interest asks, "What was it like?"

Here's what Hoot said in the movie, Black Hawk Down. "When I get home and people ask me, 'Hey, Hoot, why do you do it, man? What are you? Some kind of war junkie?'" I won't say a goddamn word. Why? They won't understand. They won't understand why we do it. They won't understand that it's about the men next to you. And that's it. That's all it is."

And now it's not only the men next to you, it's women, too.

So, be good to each other. We are the ones who lived through it. For those who didn't come home alive we should make the most of it. We should be good to each other and every one of us should be proud to be part of our special club of God's Own Lunatics.



*Original Night Stalkers Patch, created by B Co 229<sup>th</sup> (160<sup>th</sup>) Safety Officer CW3 Jim Weisen (sp?). The patch was approved by then Commander Mike Grimm.*



(CHT3)GRENADA, Oct.27--SMOKE FROM BURNING BUILDING--Smoke rises skyward from a burning building in the town of Caliste as members of the 83rd airborne and students wait by helicopters Wednesday. (AP LASERPHOTO)(1k50320str-Jed Downhill) 1983

AP photo, caption reads:  
(CHT3) GRENADA Oct 27 --  
SMOKE FROM BURNING  
BUILDING -- Smoke rises sky-  
ward from a burning building in  
the town of Caliste as members of  
the 83rd Airborne and students  
wait by helicopters Wednesday.  
(AP LASERPHOTO)  
(1k503520str-Jed Downhill) 1983



## A Commercial “War Story”

by Al Major

CHPA VP, Membership



*Al Major*

As we all know, war stories always start out, “Now this ain’t no BS.” Not to be confused with a fairy tale, which always starts out, “Once upon a time.” This incident occurred in a civil variant of the mighty Huey, a Bell 212. So, it wasn’t a war story, but it definitely wasn’t a fairy tale, either! Read on . . .

In May of 1994, in a never ending effort to avoid paying taxes, I found myself a helicopter captain for Abu Dhabi Aviation. Most of ADA’s operations involved supporting the offshore oil and gas industry in the Persian Gulf flying personnel and supplies to platforms. But they had also secured a contract to install and maintain a series of microwave television repeaters in the mountains of Oman. This involved flying in very high density altitudes and conducting precision vertical reference external load operations . . . long line. These towers were to ensure the Sultan of Oman could have unfettered communication with his subjects throughout his rugged kingdom.

On the day in question, May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1994, we were winding down the operation. The towers had all been installed, and testing was underway. The day’s flight was to take a technician to one of the sites on a 7500’ mountain peak. The weather was fine . . . in “Brit speak” . . . CAVU. Clear and visibility unlimited.

Preflight inspection completed, we started engines and lifted off from our helispot about 15km south of Muscat. Onboard was myself, our Aussie engineer (mechanic) and a French techie. Climbing through 300 feet and 60 knots, I heard and experienced a very loud BANG!!! We had a 55 gallon drum of fuel to power the repeater’s generator strapped into the well seat on the starboard side. I initially thought that the drum had somehow fallen over. That notion left my brain a nano-second later when the aircraft began violently shaking in all axes. No caution or warning lights or horns, just violent shaking. I immediately reduced power and looked for a place to land. Luckily we were close to our departure point, and not on top of the aforementioned 7500’ pinnacle. I got a call off . . . MAYDAY . . . and set up for a running landing in the area we had just left. I might add that the tip path plane was plus or minus 12 inches! I ran the bird on at about 40 knots, and while still moving, managed to get both throttles full off and applied maximum rotor braking. We lurched to a halt, and let out a collective WHEW! Our Aussie engineer scrambled topside and exclaimed “HOLY SH...!”

I climbed out to see a 737 circling overhead. They had been vectored to our position by ATC to check on



(continued)

## A Commercial "War Story" (continued)

us. I climbed back in, powered up the radios, and told him we were okay and could arrange our own recovery.

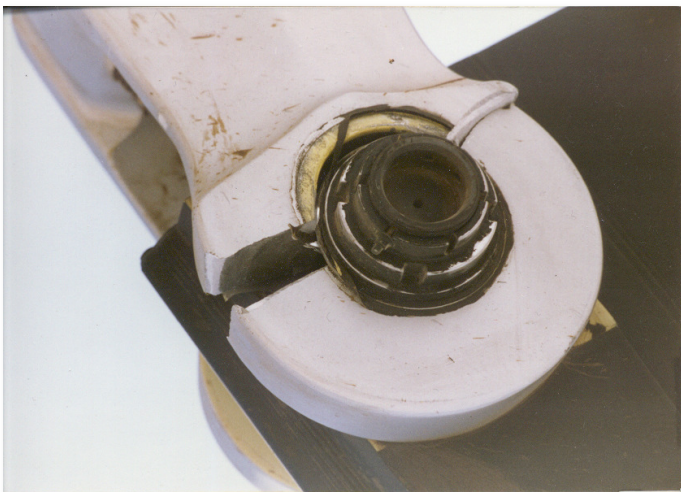
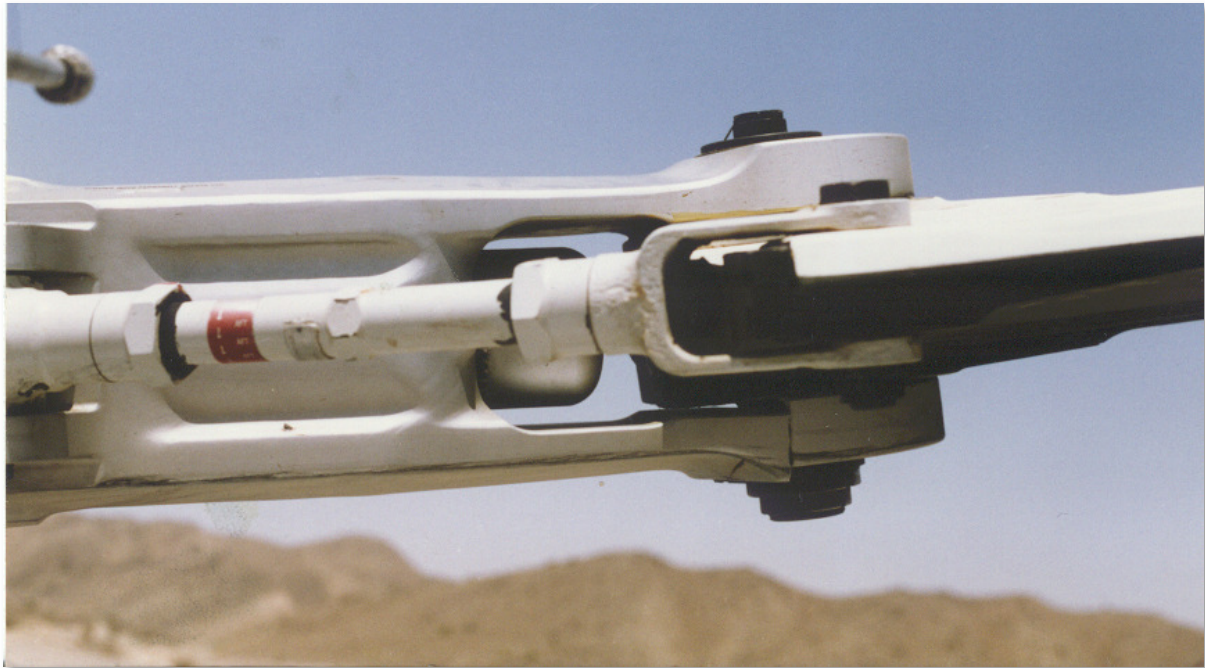
The photos speak for themselves, but if your Huey memories are a little fuzzy, this is what happened. The lower tang of one of the blade grips had failed catastrophically through the bolt hole. This component at that point in time, was "on condition." That changed! It had failed from the inside out in a star burst pattern. The aircraft had not been abused. Prior to Oman, this helicopter was used to fly to and from Abu Dhabi to a French platform about 100 miles offshore. Easy money! Our engineering group immediately inspected via ultrasound all fleet 212 blade grips. They found one other that was less than satisfactory. I bought the engineer that made that discovery a crate of beer!

I don't have a photo, but the blade flapping was inhibited by the drag brace. This had the unfortunate ramification of causing the main rotor blade to crack. The crack started at the end plate was propagating toward the trailing edge. Luckily, this all happened right after take-off. Otherwise, I wouldn't be sharing this with you. It held together just long enough.

We were staying at the local Holiday Inn in Muscat. After calling home and assuring my wife that I wasn't dead yet, I proceeded to put a significant dent in the bar's gin supply! Oh yeah, the tail number of the helicopter in question was A6-BBQ! I kid you not.

Blue side up!

Al



# You earned it . . .

CHPA Past President Richard Miller advises the National Resources Directory website <https://nrd.gov/> has both breadth and depth of links to good info and services for active duty and veterans on many issues.



# Reunions

The COVID-19 Pandemic is a continuing factor in scheduled travel and meetings. Make direct contact to confirm planned events.



## Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association

VHPA's 2020 Reunion in Denver, CO

# CANCELLED

See [www.vhpa.org](http://www.vhpa.org) for info on deposit refunds



## Vinh Long Outlaws Association

September 17 to 21, 2020

San Antonio, TX

Contact—Bert L. Rice

1217 Hillcrest Road, Odenton, MD 21113

[bert07@comcast.net](mailto:bert07@comcast.net)

(410) 507-3366

[www.vinhloutlaws.com](http://www.vinhloutlaws.com)

62<sup>nd</sup> Aviation Company

Company A, 502<sup>nd</sup> Aviation Battalion

175<sup>th</sup> Assault Helicopter Company

and all attached units



Photos taken by CW4 Apache Pilot Dan McClinton during OIF 2 (2004-05) in and around Baghdad



More of Dan's photos





Take care of yourself and those you love.



End