the swash plate

October - December 2018

President's Message

Ladies and Gentlemen, This has been a busy year for CHPA and as we enter the fourth quarter, the tempo will remain high in order to close the year strong.

Coming off of an extremely productive annual business conference in Colorado Springs in August, we have already kicked off the Annual Gift Box for Troops Campaign and have 90 boxes sponsored thus far (please visit the CHPA web site for more information). We are finalizing the 2019 Scholarship Campaign with Mick Tesanovich remaining in lead for that effort; the 2019 Tredway Award Committee is about to kick-off their activity on the first of the year; and the end-of-year administrative actions begin in October (financials, registrations and filings).

CHPA will also be engaged in a final 3-month print advertising campaign for new membership. When tied to other initiatives the BOD has staffed this year, we think we'll have a tremendous "final push" towards our 2019 goal of 600 members. ***We've current broken the 560 mark, the highest level since 2016.***

Finally, with a schedule that robust, some things have fallen behind during third quarter and we intend to accomplish those tasks by end-of-year, principally, the magazine re-naming competition. During the 2018 Annual Business Conference it was recommended that the voting for a new name be opened to the entire membership versus just those in attendance at the conference. The board members in attendance agreed unanimously. Therefore, the vote will be conducted electronically between October and November.

I'm proud of CHPA and honored to be your President.

Dr. Jack Bailey

"Passing the Torch"
Copyright Joe Kline
CHPA Life Member
www.joeklineart.com

Inside this issue

Christmas Boxes for the Troops

CHPA is starting its Christmas Boxes for the Troops project for 2018 and we're getting a bit of a late start. To refresh everyone's memory, every year CHPA accepts donations, purchases items and packs boxes to be sent to military men and women who will be deployed over the Christmas holidays and to those who will be in the hospital and away from family. With your help and support this has always been one of CHPA's most successful projects.

Boxes are $30 per box and you can donate to sponsor up to six boxes online. If you wish to sponsor more than six give Jay a call at 719-650-5874. You don't have to be a member to donate. Simply go to the website www.chpa-us.org and click on the link "Simply Click Here". If you're a member and log in first the form will pre-populate with your information. If you're not a member you'll be asked for your email address. This will be used to send your receipt as all donations to the project are tax deductible. Once on the form complete the information, select how many boxes you want to sponsor, select your payment option and click submit. Again, if you want to sponsor more than six boxes give Jay a call. You can also just drop a check in the mail to CHPA, PO Box 2585, Peachtree City, GA 30269. If you're local you can bring it by 168 Maroon Lake Circle, in Divide or give Jay a call and he'll pick it up.

Remember, we'll need time to purchase supplies, pack boxes, fill out the necessary postal forms and get the boxes in the mail in time to arrive for Christmas so the time to sponsor one or more boxes is now. Thank you all for your generous support.

V/R,
Jay Brown
CHPA, Chairman Emeritus

by Keith Woodcock, Oil on Canvas, 2007

Air Combat First On 12 January 1968, four North Vietnamese Air Force AN-2 Colt biplanes lifted off from an airfield in northeastern North Vietnam and headed west toward Laos. The aircraft were on a mission to destroy

a US radar base that was guiding bombers in attacks against targets in North Vietnam. Known to the Americans as Site 85, the radar facility was perched atop a 5,800-foothigh mountain, Phou Pha Thi. Manned by US Air Force volunteers "sheepdipped" as employees of the Lockheed Aircraft Corporation, the site had been in operation only a few months. The mountain, used for many years as a staging base for CIA-directed Hmong guerilla fighters and American special operations and rescue helicopters, was only 125 nautical miles from Hanoi. Air America, a CIA-proprietary, provided aerial support for the facility, the technicians, and the security forces.

The Colts reached Site 85 early in the afternoon, and two began bombing and strafing passes as the others circled nearby. Coincidentally, Air America captain Ted Moore, flying a UH-1D Huey helicopter carrying ammunition to the site, saw the attack ("It looked like World War I," he recalled.) and gave chase to a Colt as it turned back to the Vietnamese border. Moore positioned his helicopter above the biplane, as crewman Glenn Woods fired an AK-47 rifle down on it. The pursuit continued for more than 20 minutes until the second AN-2 flew underneath the helicopter. Dropping back, Moore and Woods watched as the first AN-2 dropped and crashed into a ridge just west of the North Vietnamese border. Minutes later, the second Colt hit the side of a mountain three miles farther north. The other Colts escaped, inactive observers throughout. Within hours a CIA-controlled ground team reached the crashed aircraft and found bullet holes in the downed planes.

In the mists of the Annamite Mountains and part of a secret war, Air America employees Ted Moore and Glenn Woods gained the distinction of having shot down a fixed-wing aircraft from a helicopter, a singular aerial victory in the Vietnam War. Two months later, North Vietnamese commandos attacked and destroyed Site 85, inflicting the deadliest single ground loss of US Air Force personnel of the Vietnam War.

On 27 July 2007, CIA officially received An Air Combat First in an event attended by members of the Air America Board; pilot Ted Moore; Sawang Reed, the wife of flight mechanic Glenn Woods; CIA paramilitary legend Bill Lair; and the donors of the painting, former Air America officers Marius Burke and Boyd D. Mesecher.

'A veteran is someone who, at one point, wrote a blank check made payable to 'The United States of America ' for an amount of 'up to and including their life.'

The National Archives Foundation planning a multi-day program to honor veterans and encourage the public to visit on and around Veterans Day. As an established Remembering Vietnam partner, the Combat Helicopter Pilots Association is paramount to helping us pay tribute Vietnam veterans this November.

Their partners from the North Carolina Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association will install Vietnam era helicopters on the National Archives lawn on November 9 thru 16. In addition, the Museum is expecting high foot traffic due to the President's D.C. military parade on Saturday, November 10.

They are also planning a special event to honor Vietnam veterans and their families for the week of Veterans Day. The event will include remarks from a prominent speaker and the National Archives will distribute pins for Vietnam veterans and their families

Following the event, there will be a panel discussion where outspoken leaders in the veterans community will discuss support and resources for our veterans today. After the panel discussion, veterans and their families will have the opportunity to take an exclusive tour of the Remembering Vietnam exhibit.

Representing CHPA will be several of our former senior leaders: Jay Brown, Robert Frost and Steve Riley.

VETERANS CORNER

If you were exposed to a chemical, physical or environmental hazard during your military service, you may be eligible for health care, disability compensation and other VA benefits. Agent Orange is a Vietnam era compensated claim. But other potential qualifying exposures include Camp Lejeune water contamination, potential Gulf War exposures, some potential radiation exposures, depleted uranium and more.

VA also offers free health registry evaluations for possible health problems related to environmental exposures. Although the registry health evaluations are not considered exams for disability purposes, the medical findings can be used to help file a claim.

To learn about all VA benefits and how to apply, visit Explore.VA.gov.

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Each US state has a number of benefits offered to veterans residing there. Here are two sites that one can do some research to see if they qualify for those additional benefits offered to Veterans.

https://militarybenefits.info/state-veterans-benefits

https://themilitarywallet.com/state-veterans-benefits-websites/

DAV is a nonprofit charity that provides a lifetime of support for veterans of all generations and their families. They are active in working within the political process to ensure our nation keeps the promises made to them, helps attain funding for veterans, families, and survivor programs. DAV is also a leader in connecting veterans with meaningful employment, hosting job fairs and providing resources to ensure they have the opportunity in the work force.

The DAV is one of the premiere advocacy organizations that helps veterans with VA disability claims insuring that the process is fair and equitable. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lSubzVSDIJM
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The 14th annual Combat Helicopter Pilot Association (CHPA) business meeting and conference, 2-5 August was a tremendous success with members traveling from as far as Texas, California, Alabama, Louisiana, Tennessee, South Carolina, Pennsylvania and New Mexico to attend.

This year's closing banquet was highlighted by guest speaker R.B. Sam Shamp (Battle of Mogadishu, Somalia) and the presentation of Department of Defense authorized commemoratives to our Vietnam War veterans.

This year's event was sponsored by Silver Birch, LLC and Black Hall Aerospace. This was Black Hall Aerospace's second year of sponsorship and the January 2019 edition of our magazine will profile its owner, Paul Daigle, also a member of CHPA.

Many thanks to Jay Brown for tirelessly and expertly coordinating the event.

COMBAT HELICOPTER PILOT'S ASSN.

CALL FOR NOMINATIONS

Robert N. Tredway Award

We are announcing this years call for nominations for the Robert N. Tredway Award.

The Tredway Award is presented by CHPA to an individual or corporation for demonstrated accomplishments in support of one or more of the following:

- The United States military helicopter community.
- U.S. military veterans with an emphasis on helicopter veterans.
- The CHPA Association, and the community at large.

The award is presented in honor of COL(R) Robert Tredway (USA), a founding member of CHPA. COL(R) Tredway was a 1958 graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point, Vietnam veteran and recipient of the Silver Star, two distinguished Flying Crosses, four Bronze Stars, and two Purple Hearts during two tours of combat duty.

Nominations for this prestigious award may be submitted by email: hq@chpa-us.org or mailed to CHPA HQ, PO Box 2585, Peachtree City, GA 30269. Please add the subject line Tredway Award to an email or a similar attention line to any correspondence.

The nomination committee will review all nominations and put forth its recommendation to the board not later than 1 April 2019. An Awards presentation will be made at the next CHPA annual Conference.

If there are any questions, please send an email to jackbailey2014@gmail.com.

RESUPPLY MISSION TO SURROUNDED FORT

By Skip (Carl) Bell

In May 1972, I was pilot-in-command of a UH-1H helicopter belonging to one of the flight platoons of the 18th Corps Aviation Company (CAC), which was the General Support Aviation Company for Military Region IV (the Mekong Delta area of South Vietnam). The 18th CAC (Callsign: Green Delta) was based in at Can Tho Airfield; it was a composite unit that contained two platoons of UH-1H Iroquois ("Huey") helicopters, one platoon of CH-47 Chinook helicopters, and one platoon of OH-58 Kiowa helicopters. That unit organization came about during the drawdown of U.S. Army aviation assets throughout South Vietnam – as units went home, portions were left in-country to provide ongoing aviation support and in the Delta, helicopters with a Combat Support mission went to the 18th CAC. There was also one Air Cavalry Troop (C/16 Cav, Callsign: Darkhorse) remaining in the Delta, and they were also based at Can Tho Airfield.

Most of our missions were single-ship province support missions, but we also had a VIP mission – we provided the Commanding General of Military Region IV with his daily Command and Control aircraft. Those of us given the province support missions would fly out to the appropriate province headquarters, report to the tactical operations center (TOC) and receive our missions for the day. Most of these involved flying advisors or local leaders from town to town, resupply of Regional Forces/Popular Forces outposts, mail delivery, and the occasional medevac.

Medevac missions could be a bit "hairy" since we were usually single-ship (no gun cover other than the two M-60 machineguns on our aircraft). In the case of the medevac, we usually didn't know what the enemy situation was (other than someone on the ground was wounded) and it was very difficult to get a clear picture of the best routes of entry/egress, actual number of wounded, cause(s) of the wounds, etc. Also, we had no medically trained personnel on-board the aircraft, so the only thing we could do was pick up the casualties and take them to the nearest hospital. Since we usually had a MACV (Military Assistance Command Vietnam) advisor and his Vietnamese counterpart in the back of the aircraft, they rendered first aid to the casualties and directed us to the nearest medical facility.

I had spent the first part of that tour of duty flying Cobra gunships with an Air Cavalry troop, so moving to a Combat Support aviation company was a bit of a culture shock at first. In the Air Cavalry troop, we rarely (if ever) went on single ship missions. Due to the nature of our business (direct combat with the enemy), we always tried to send at least two aircraft on each mission; that way, if someone got shot down rescue was close by (or at least somebody else would know where you went down). In the Combat Support unit, the vast majority of our missions were single-ship. That meant that each aircraft was responsible for every aspect of the mission. The artillery, flight following, navigation, knowing where to find fuel, etc. In the Air Cavalry troop, those duties were relegated to the Air Mission Commander (the rest of us just flew and did what we were told).

I think the biggest difference was the lonely feeling that came with single-ship missions. By that time in the war, it was not unusual to fly for 30 minutes or more without seeing another aircraft. For someone used to going out and back in a group, this was initially somewhat disconcerting. I came to enjoy it after awhile, though. It was nice to be my own boss and to be totally responsible for the outcome of the mission. My first tour of duty in Vietnam I had been an Armored Cavalry Platoon Leader and later that tour an Armored Cavalry Troop Commander. The nature of our employment was such that we were given areas of operation (AO) for which we were responsible and how we patrolled those areas, kept our troops
resupplied, maintained knowledge of platoon locations and situations, etc., was left up to the unit commander. Flying single-ship missions was a lot like that (there were fewer people involved, but every aspect of the mission was my responsibility).

On this particular day, we had been flying “ash and trash” missions for a province located in the northern Mekong Delta. When we landed at the province headquarters pad for the last mission of the day, the Senior Military Advisor (an Army Lieutenant Colonel) came out to the aircraft with a troubled look on his face. He said that there were a series of six triangular forts (two rows of three forts that were 2-3 kilometers apart) that had been manned by Regional Force/Popular Force (RF/PF) soldiers. Five of the six forts had been overrun and the final one was under siege. They were in desperate need of food and ammunition and the advisor asked if we could resupply them. He further stated that we could only make one pass over the place due to the large number of enemy soldiers in the area and the (strong) possibility that if we went in more than once we’d be shot down. He said that we would have gunship cover (which told me how bad the situation was – we *never* had gun cover for any mission that I had ever heard of since I joined the 18th CAC. The guns were from the Air Cavalry Troop (C/16 Cav – callsign: Darkhorse) that was the other aviation unit at Can Tho airfield. I knew the lead gun pilot – CPT Tony Snow – he was a good guy and (as far as I knew) a competent gun pilot.

The plan was that we would fly at altitude (2,000’) to the town nearest the area where the forts were located, drop out of the sky to treetop level, rendezvous with the guns (who would be flying at altitude) and be vectored in to the fort under siege. We were not to land at the fort, but were to do a ‘quick stop’ over it, toss out the supplies, and get out of there ASAP. The guns were cleared ‘full suppression’ in and out, which meant that they could engage anything outside the fort.

This was the first time I had worked with the Darkhorse guns, but the mission seemed to be pretty straightforward. We established radio contact with the gunships and flew the UH-1H at a pretty good clip (80-90 knots) away from the village and toward the forts. I had my co-pilot ‘ride light’ on the controls in case I got shot, and switched the force trim on with the cyclic slightly aft so that if I went limp on the controls the aircraft would start up. I also instructed the door gunner and the crew chief to be ready to engage targets with the two M60 machineguns on the aircraft. In addition to the normal crew of the aircraft, we had a couple of Vietnamese soldiers in the back who were to kick out the supplies when we did the ‘quick stop’ over the fort.

Our flight path was to take us down the long axis of the forts (there were two rows of three forts running roughly east to west – we were flying west). Evidently there was some confusion with the gun pilots as to which fort we were to go to and we were initially vectored to the wrong one. As I was decelerating over the fort, the guys in the back started throwing out supplies – then one realized we were over the wrong fort and quit throwing out the supplies. I didn’t notice us taking fire on the way in there, and that was probably why – the bad guys had already taken the fort and we were essentially resupplying them. So now I had a half-loaded Huey and an un-accomplished mission. We had gone past the fort we were supposed to resupply and we would need to turn around. I talked it over with the gun pilot and we decided that we’d try to hit the right one (even though the advisor had said not to make a second pass through the area). As we started toward the correct fort we began to take a lot of small arms fire. I was trying to sound cool on the radio (I knew Tony Snow would be sure to ‘razz’ me about it later if I sounded panicky. I said, “We’re taking fire, taking fire, taking fire” and unkeyed the radio. Snow came back with “Which way, which way, which way?!” Most of the fire was from the 3 o’clock position of the aircraft. I wanted to say “3 o’clock” but I could not remember the clock system for some reason, so I said, “From the right! From the right!” We immediately had rockets landing under our aircraft and along our right flank. The Huey bounced like a car on a bumpy road as the rockets exploded, but the small-arms fire seemed to decrease a little.

I looked to the front and above the foliage I saw a South Vietnamese flag waving in the breeze about 150 meters ahead of us. I began to decelerate and pretty much stood the aircraft on its tail over the triangular fort. The remaining supplies were kicked out and we nosed the aircraft over and got out of there. When I got back to the province headquarters pad I told the senior advisor what had happened. He was disappointed that we hadn't gotten all the supplies where we were supposed to put them, but he appreciated what we had tried to do (especially when he saw the bullet holes and shrapnel holes in the aircraft).

Of course, when we got back to Can Tho and I got to the airfield officers club, I heard, "From the right! From the right!" in a loud squeaky high-pitched voice when I came in. It was Snow and I bought him a beer.

Approximately two years later, I was teaching Armor and Infantry Tactics at the U.S. Army Field Artillery School. As I was walking down the hall, I heard a loud, squeaky, high-pitched voice yelling, "From the right! From the right!" It was CPT Tony Snow and he was attending the Field Artillery Officers Advance Course. I didn't know that he was a Field Artilleryman – the guys in the Air Cavalry Troop usually wore crossed sabers on their uniform collar. It was good to see Tony again. I guess one never lives down some things that are done under duress. I certainly haven't!



Preserving the legacy of combat rotary wing crew & pilots. All branches. All conflicts.

What can you do for CHPA

CHPA is not unlike any other fraternal or non-profit organization. Volunteers are of huge value. The organization would not have been started, or continue to exist, without them. There are many things that you can do as a volunteer:

Reach out and touch someone. This is your organization and we need you to recruit qualified members to make it stronger .

Be your own recruiter. Sponsor a member for one year. The small cost of a one year membership will grow our numbers and provide opportunities to sustain it when that person renews. Consider multiple year or Life Time membership for yourself. The administrative actions associated with renewing membership are less for you and CHPA.

Inform fellow aviators about the website. Forward the newsletter to someone. Any fellow aviator, any service, any aircraft might enjoy reading it. If they too pass it on, then that's a domino effect getting the word out about CHPA.

Ours is not a last man standing organization. Please help CHPA to meet its mission and better serve the membership. Please help sustain the Legacy of combat helicopter pilots and crew members - and the spirit of God's Own Lunatics - for future years to come.

United States Army Aviation Gift Shop

https://aviation-museum-gift-shop.myshopify.com/collections/combat-helicopter-pilots-association

Until the supply of Small and Medium sized jackets is depleted, this is an inventory clearance sale of the CHPA logo windbreaker.

These are nice, warm, water resistant jackets suitable to wear for most outdoor occasions.

Only $29.99
(was $39.99)

Order by calling 334-598-2508 or online at the above link

Other items available are medal challenge coins, ceramic coins, ball caps, polo shirts, and more. Visit the store to see all of the merchandize.

Photo of Clyde Romero
VP Admin, CHPA

You were right in the enemy's face with a helicopter and had to know what you were doing," recalls warrant officer Clyde Romero of his 1,100 hours flying scout missions over South Vietnam in 1971. "*It's like a street cop going into a bad neighborhood. You can have all the guns, vests, and radios you want, but you need street smarts or you're going to be dead within an hour."*

Although most combat aircraft in Vietnam aimed for altitudes and speeds that helped them avoid anti-aircraft weapons, U.S. Army crews flying Hughes OH-6A Cayuse helicopters flew low and drew fire—to set up the shots for the Bell AH-1G Cobras circling above. These hunter-killer missions, among the most hazardous of the Vietnam War, tested the resolve of the OH-6 pilots and the aerial observers sitting beside them. Although many were still teenagers, their survival depended on well-honed instincts and razor-sharp reflexes, along with plenty of luck.

In 1965, the concept of helicopter-borne fighting forces was still new and largely untested, and units in Vietnam invented tactics on the spot. The U.S. Army began to use Bell OH-13 Sioux and Hiller OH-23 Raven helicopters, once artillery spotters, to scout ahead of UH-1D Huey formations in the moments before air assaults to gather information about landing zones and enemy locations. Vietnam's mountainous terrain stressed the underpowered, obsolete helicopters to their limits: They could neither fly fast enough to escape enemy fire nor carry enough armament to pose a meaningful threat. Units in Vietnam began sending UH-1Bs outfitted with rocket pods and machine guns to circle over the scouts at around 600 feet and attack anything that might interfere with the imminent troop landing. But the Hueys proved too slow to do the job properly, and the need to replace both scouts and protectors was immediately evident.

Within that same year, help was on the way. An inventive Bell Helicopter engineer was already at work on the world's first attack helicopter, and Bell's decision to keep the project hidden until complete let the model slip into service as a Huey derivative (see "The Birth of the Cobra," Aug. 2017). In August 1967, the AH-1G Cobra arrived in Vietnam. The Cobra was fast and deadly. From the rear cockpit, the pilot fired rockets from launchers fixed to the stub wings on either side; the copilot in the front operated a chin turret that held a minigun and grenade launcher. Unlike its troop-carrying ancestors, "a Cobra was like a World War II fighter," says Jim Kane, who arrived in Vietnam fresh out of Purdue University. "It was a joy to fly." Kane, who today sells securities in Richmond, Virginia, flew AH-1s in Vietnam from 1968 to 1971.

Following a contentious selection process that included allegations of industrial espionage and political favoritism, the first Hughes OH-6A observation helicopters arrived in Vietnam in December 1967. Army troops called the OH-6As Loaches, a contraction of "light observation helicopters." The ship was unusually light and had plenty of power, perfect for flying nap-of-the-earth missions, and its 26-foot-diameter main rotor made getting into tight landing zones a snap. It had no hydraulic system and its electrical setup was used primarily to start up the engine—simple even by 1960s standards, which for practical purposes meant it was easier to maintain and harder to shoot down than other helicopters. But the light aluminum skin could be easily pierced by rifle bullets, and it also crumpled and absorbed energy in a crash, and a strong structural truss protected critical systems—like the people inside. Loach crews regularly walked away from crashes that would doom others.

As the H-13s were phased out, Loaches were paired with Cobra gunships. Loaches, usually with a pilot and observer and sometimes a door gunner aboard, flew as little as 10 feet above the treetops at between about 45 and 60 mph, scouting for signs of the enemy. Cobras, nicknamed Snakes, flew circles 1,500 feet above the scouts, waiting to pounce on whatever the Loach found. But the Vietnam War was unlike any previous American conflict; there were few real definable frontlines, and combatants needed to know what was happening all around them, all the time. "We operated from fixed bases that were islands, if you will, of allied control," says Hugh Mills, who flew both Loaches and Cobras in Vietnam from 1968 to 1972, and went on to fly helicopters for the Kansas City Police Department. He recalls: "360 degrees around you was enemy territory, and the ability to work with American and [South Vietnamese] units on the ground really required aviation to be able to look eye to eye to tell the good guys from the bad guys." Loach-Cobra pairings were sent out more and more frequently, until their main role was to gather general intelligence rather than prepare landing zones.

Missions began every day at dawn, when crews were briefed on where to fly and what to look for. To hunt for encampments, bunkers, or other signs of the enemy, commanders would deploy a flight of one scouting Loach and one supporting Cobra, called Pink Teams. (Scouts were known as White Teams and Cobras as Red; the two colors combine to become pink. In some areas, Purple Teams—one Loach and two Cobras—were also common, as were other variations.) "We were so close to the elephant grass that we'd blow the grass apart to see if anyone was hiding in there," observer Bob Moses says. Moses, a 19-year-old draftee, arrived in Vietnam in July 1970 for the first of two year-long tours, and later worked for the Department of Veterans Affairs as a therapist and administrator. Even trampled grass was a clue; it meant that enemy troops had passed through the area within eight hours, the time it took for grass to dry upright. Since units were all but permanently assigned to particular areas, they came to know the local geography intimately and could spot anything out of the ordinary. "We were combat trackers," says Mills. "I followed footsteps. I could see a cigarette butt still burning. I could tell how old a footprint was by how it looked.

"Most of our engagements [we] were 25 to 50 feet [away] when we opened up on [the Viet Cong]," Mills continues. "I've seen them, whites of the eyes, and they've seen me, whites of the eyes…. I have come home with blood on my windshield. A little gory but that's how close we were."

As the Loach flew among the trees, the rear-seat pilot in the Snake circling above kept a close eye on the little scout and the front-seat gunner jotted down whatever the Loach observers radioed. Upon encountering enemy fire, Loaches were to leave immediately, dropping smoke grenades to mark the target so that within seconds, the Cobra could roll in. Loach crews were equipped with small arms and returned fire as they fled. They could also use grenades and on occasion even homebuilt explosives; more aggressive units mounted forward-firing miniguns. Cobras generally attacked with rockets, preferred for long-range accuracy, switching to the less-accurate chin-mounted machine gun and grenade launcher only if they were far enough away from friendly troops or if the rockets—AH-1s could carry as many as 76 rockets—ran out. Four troop-carrying Hueys (called a Blue Team) often sat idle somewhere nearby, ready to insert troops if the Pink Team discovered an interesting target—or were shot down and needed rescuing.

Loach and Cobra were in constant radio communication, and because of the intensity of hunter-killer missions, it wasn't long before pairs in each type knew each other well enough to anticipate the other's moves. "It had to do with the timbre of your voice-—how you talked to other guys on the radio," says Romero, who arrived in Vietnam in 1970, initially as a Huey co-pilot. (He later transferred to the Air Force and flew F-4 Phantoms, and eventually became an airline captain.) Loach and Cobra crews lived together, and schedulers generally paired the teams with the partners they requested, though given the high turnover rate, that wasn't always possible. "To this day I am closer to those guys I flew with in Vietnam than my own brothers," says Mills. "I spent more time with them."

For most of the war, there was no formal Army training to prepare scout pilots and observers. Army headquarters developed doctrine by building on what worked in the field, rather than the other way around, and each unit in-country did things slightly differently. Though Cobra pilots were trained Stateside, most Loach pilots didn't take control of OH-6s until arriving in Vietnam. "You had a couple of flights in the Huey, then you rode front seat in a Cobra," scout pilot Allan Krausz recounts. Krausz was ordered to Vietnam in April 1971, and today teaches Army students how to fly the Eurocopter UH-72 Lakota, a twin-engine trainer. After around 10 hours at the controls of a Loach, the pilots were deemed worthy of flying in combat.

Warrant officer John Shafer was 21 when he arrived on October 16, 1970, to fly Loaches. "I was just out of flight school when I went to Vietnam." He flew Loaches for the next 11 months, and today is an accountant in Seattle.

The observers and gunners had even less experience. "There was one day of initial training," says Bob Moses, who was first trained as a tank crewman and then as infantry before a sudden transition to helicopter door gunner. "I went up in a Loach with an M60 machine gun to get used to firing the weapon. That was about it."

Another such gunner was 19-year-old Joel Boucher, drafted and sent to Vietnam from 1967 to 1969. Boucher quickly discovered that life as a qualified crewman was extremely dangerous. “We flew down along the Ho Chi Minh Trail,” he says of the supply route that wound through Vietnam and neighboring Laos and Cambodia. “The NVA [North Vietnamese army] was everywhere. Each time we went out, we got shot at. One time we ran into hundreds of enemy troops. We thought they were ARVNs [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] until they started running. It was pretty hairy, and we got the hell out of there.” But Boucher got a rush from the missions, and stayed six months beyond what was required of a draftee. Upon returning to the United States, he established a career in the construction industry and settled in rural Sierra City, California.

Other Army pilots, most of whom flew Cobras or Hueys, thought of Loach pilots as a little offbeat. “Scout pilots were a different breed of cat,” says Cobra pilot Jim Kane, who likens his former colleagues to the airborne equivalent of the Tunnel Rats, soldiers who crawled head-first into Viet Cong-built tunnels without any idea what awaited them there. “I was wounded three times and shot down nine times,” Romero reports. “The shelf life of a scout pilot was probably six months. You were killed, shot down, or got scared and quit. I liked it because in the Bronx, I was a ghetto kid. I was used to getting up close and personal with the enemy.”

Mills, who served two tours in Loaches and one in Cobras, was shot down 16 times—all but once in OH-6s. The Army dictated that after 300 hours of flight time, each Loach go through a thorough inspection, but in practice such inspections were rare: Few Loaches survived to reach that mark.

“I had a wingman shot down,” pilot John Shafer says. “They went down in the jungle, and both [members of the crew] survived. I had another lead that went through 150 feet of trees, and they survived.”

Shafer himself had brushes with disaster, and his luck nearly ran out on a mission west of Dak To, near the border with Laos. “I got shot down on my 22nd birthday,” March 27, 1971. “I was flying wing and just dropped into the AO [Area of Operations]. Following the lead, we got peppered with rounds.” The Loach had a bad vibration, but he made it about half a mile before he had to land. “Just as I set it down, the tail rotor spun off. The enemy was moving toward us when a [command and control] ship picked us up. Cobras rolled in and blew the downed aircraft up—taking with it about 15 bad guys standing around it.”

Jim Kane’s Vietnam tour abruptly ended one day in February 1971. NVA troops shot down a Cobra, killing the crew. Kane was dispatched to the crash site in another Cobra with copilot Jim Casher. While they were circling the wreckage, enemy rounds hit their ship. Kane recalls, “The vibrations were so harsh I had to return to base camp at Khe Sanh,” seven miles from the Laotian border. Upon landing, an inspection revealed a damaged pitch link, a rotor head component so critical that had it failed, they too would have crashed.

“We got into another aircraft and went back out. We were about ready to call in tactical air support to blow up the wrecked ship when another Cobra took a lot of fire. So I engaged the enemy, but didn’t make it out of that one.

“We got hit by incendiary .51-caliber rounds, and the phosphorus ignited the Cobra’s hydraulic fluid. The flames covered my boots and lower legs. It was the same for Jim. I still have scars on my legs—it was terrifying. I tried to move the stuck controls and prayed for a place to set down.” It took all of Kane’s strength to pull out of a steep dive, and they crash-landed with a horrific thud. “Jim was unconscious when I helped pull him out of the burning aircraft.”

Kane’s commanding officer flew his command-and-control Huey to the ravine where Kane and Casher huddled. The Huey descended gingerly into a clearing smaller than its main rotor
diameter, the aircraft’s rotor blades chopping tree limbs as it descended. Kane and Casher were pulled aboard and returned to Khe Sanh, but the Huey barely made it back; slicing trees

The hunter-killer tactic worked well for a few years, but by the time the United States left
Vietnam, it was obsolete, says Mills. In 1972, as U.S. troops slowly withdrew, the NVA began a
major push that became known as the Easter Offensive. The campaign included the first major use in the war of Soviet-built, shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles.
SA-7 Grail heat-seeking missiles could down a Loach before its crew even realized they were under fire. The Cobras high above had a few seconds of warning—they could spot the missile’s exhaust plume—but were all the more tempting because at their higher altitudes they were more easily seen than the smaller Loaches. The North Vietnamese deployed hundreds of the missiles, and from then on, both hunter and killer tried to stay well hidden.

By the end of the war, the Loach’s replacement was imminent. Despite a strong out-cry from crews in Vietnam, the Bell OH-58A Kiowa, powered by the same Allison T-63 engine as the OH-6, was being distributed to Army units. Scout crews argued that the Kiowa was nowhere near as nimble as the Cayuse, but scouting flights were changing. The high-low hunter-killer combination gave way to uniform-altitude missions, with all helicopters flying nap of the earth. Kiowas, largely relegated to low-threat cargo and liaison missions in Vietnam, were after the war tasked to spot targets from afar and guide Cobras (and later, Boeing AH-64 Apaches) to good firing spots

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A sobering statistic: Out of 1,419 Loaches built, 842 were destroyed in Vietnam, most shot down and many others succumbing to crashes resulting from low-level flying. In contrast, of the nearly 1,100 Cobras delivered to the Army, 300 were lost.

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https://www.airspacemag.com/military-aviation/snakes-loaches-180964341/

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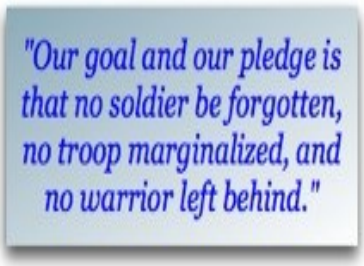

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