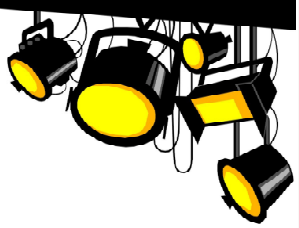
Combat Helicopter Pilots Association

Report on 2020 Annual Conference, see pages 13-21

Member Spotlight



Robin Hood, Brotherhood & Déjà Vu

by Wayne King, Sr. (with writing assist by Terry Garlock)

In the middle western highlands of Vietnam is a mountain range known to the Vietnamese as the *Trường Sơn* mountains, running 680 miles north-south on the border with Laos. The English version of the French name is the Annamite mountains, the root word "Annam" coming from the Pinyin of Chinese words meaning "to pacify the south," a name fitting to a long history of human struggle and rivers of blood.

Much of the Annamites are rugged, thick triple-canopy jungle, difficult terrain giving the enemy cover to infiltrate from the Ho Chi Minh Trail, concealment until they were ready to strike and many avenues of escape.

In addition to the setting for battles between divided people, the Annamite mountains form a geologic divide that sends streams and rivers from rain forest downpours east to Vietnam's flat coastal plains and the South China Sea, or west to the mighty Mekong River, which flows through Laos and Cambodia to end its journey spreading tributaries far south into Vi-

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IN THIS ISSUE . . .

etnam, dropping its fertile silt to form the huge flat delta rice-paddy region before emptying into the South China Sea.

The Chinese had coveted the rich rice bowl of the Mekong Delta for millennia. Around the time of Christ, the Chinese overcame mountain barriers between China and Vietnam, and for nearly a thousand years the Chinese dominated Vietnam and took the Mekong Delta rice they had long wanted. Hatred between the Vietnamese and Chinese remains and erupts into battle periodically even in recent years.

About 500 miles north of the Mekong Delta, in northern II Corps in the shadow of the Annamite mountains on the dusty Bong Son plain, LZ English was my first home in Vietnam. Not far away was the Vietnamese village of Bong Son, beside the flat and shallow Song Lai Giang river, surrounded by An Khe, Pleiku and Qui Nhon, a mountainous and dangerous area that had been a hotbed of Viet Cong and NVA activity for a long, long time.

LZ English was the home of the 173rd *Sky Soldiers* Airborne Brigade, and other units like mine, the 61st Assault Helicopter Company. Six plus one is seven, the magic number in the dice game of craps, and our 61st AHC symbol was a pair of dice, our takeoff pad called "The Crap Table." Our primary mission was to move troops and supplies from one place to the other, to give them the mobility they needed to even the odds with our stealthy, wily and tough enemy who knew well how to take advantage of tough terrain to move, strike and hide.

I was one of those helicopter pilots, but I had another job, too, and I sometimes wondered which was more important to me, and even to my CO. I had no idea the construction experience I had in my youth would be useful in Vietnam, but in a place where we lived in tents and tolerated dust in everything, even gritted in our teeth, in a place where the Army was thin on resources, the ability to construct our own buildings was a vital matter of comfort and morale.

So, when I wasn't flying, I wielded a hammer and a saw because I knew how and I enjoyed building. I also enjoyed the camaraderie of Richard Benicewicz working beside me, and I think this distraction during our off-time was soothing to the soul. How many guys can indulge the pleasure of a hobby with a buddy during a war?

Anyone who says I stole things in Vietnam just doesn't understand the logistics system! I never stole a thing, though I did become a master of *value-added re-allocation* of DOD assets. You see, Uncle Sam had what seemed an endless supply of building materials, the raw goods of creature comforts in such short supply at LZ English. But Uncle Sam's stuff seemed always to be in the wrong place, and so Richard and I learned the tricks of moving certain items from where they were in excessive abundance to a place they were sorely needed. We didn't steal anything, we just relocated Uncle Sam's stuff within Vietnam to achieve the *highest and best use* for these goods paid for by the taxpayer, and it still belonged to Uncle Sam. Can you see the virtue here?

We needed more comfortable places to live, to relax and have a drink after a day of fighting the war. So when we were tasked to fly to a base to pick up 20 pallets of something, we'd con or persuade or weasel our way to bring back 25 pallets.

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Then we had something to trade.

Our daily wheeling and dealing kept a stream of construction materials coming for the billets we needed. Somehow the guys with steaks could always find the guys with beer and work out a win-win deal. But sometimes one side didn't win. Whenever I visited the Air Force and saw that they had way more good stuff than I thought they should have, well, I borrowed things like mattresses. I mean, nobody was watching their billets in the middle of the day and they had extra mattresses stacked against the wall while we just had miserable cots, and the Air Force guys had so much stuff they weren't much interested in our trade business unless we had LRRP rations, so why shouldn't I re-allocate those mattresses to where they were sorely needed? Uncle Sam just had not yet figured out yet where the need was, and I felt I was helping the war effort. Don't you think the folks back home would have wanted me to re-allocate those mattresses?

Wayne King, Greg Ressler and their hobby
Photo courtesy of Wayne King

Richard and I got to know some other re-allocation specialists and we struck deals in dark corners. But sometimes more direct action was called for.

Our company had two 50-gallon drums with an immersion heater for showers, which meant we almost never had a hot shower, and even cold water was in short supply. But we noticed the 173rd had a big re-supply operation going, with helicopters lined up in an airborne waiting line, coming in to a high hover, one after another, to slingload a 500 gallon bladder and fly it off to parts unknown. They sure had a lot of 500 gallon bladders!

So Richard and I borrowed the one helicopter in our unit without 61st AHC external markings, or any other identifying marks – no need to get people stirred up - and we took off from The Crap Table and just, well, got in line with all the other 173rd helicopters. The aircraft in front of us couldn't see us, the one behind didn't know or care who we were, and when our turn came the ground crew wasn't going to ask questions, they just hooked us up to the lines of the net holding the bladder while we hovered, then we took off! That's how we got our 500 gallon water supply for showers.

Please! Hold the applause.

We constructed buildings for the enlisted men and pilots, far better than tents. I wrote my Dad and asked him to send a door kit with doorknobs, locks, keys, hinges, the works. When I finished, my room had a locked door, the walls were stained ammo-crate wood pima-primed with JP-4 (helicopter fuel, kerosene), and I even trimmed with the wood outlining the cardboard crates that were used to ship wall lockers. You'd have to spend some time in war zone tents to appreciate this; I had straw matting over the windows for shade and privacy, built a makeshift drop-ceiling, and had tile on the floor from our horse-trading with the Navy. It was the lap of luxury, relatively speaking, Richard's place and mine, twice as enjoyable because of our ever-sharpening acquisition skills.

We had fun in our off-time! It was like our own little band of Robin Hood and the merry men, re-allocating from the haves to the have-nots, laughing our asses off all the way. Besides, this is the only time Richard and I flew together, because I was a slick pilot and he was a gun pilot.

When I arrived in Vietnam near Thanksgiving 1968 without final destination orders, I expected a plush assignment at the huge base beside the ocean at Cam Ranh Bay because I knew a few highly placed people and thought I would pull strings. After two weeks in my sleeping bag, I eventually had to face off with a personnel officer wearing the same Artillery insignia I wore. He listened to my plea for a Signals assignment that would eventually get me back to fixed wing flying, looked me in the

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eye and said, "Son, I am going to do you a favor. You won't thank me now for it but you will later. I am going to send you to LZ English with the 61st AHC. These guys are getting plenty of combat experience and you'll have the opportunity to put into practice many of the skills you have learned." He was right.

I was smart enough to know I didn't know everything, but I had no idea how much I had to learn.

My first flight was a checkride with a seasoned CW2 named Sam Kyle, a two-tour experienced pilot with a huge handlebar mustache who wore the aircraft like an extra-light comfortable suit of clothes; he was the finest helicopter pilot I ever knew.

As senior SIP Sam flew from the left seat, and when at risk of enemy fire Sam lowered his seat to make best use of the armor on the side of his seat, crouched low behind his *chicken plate* down to his eyeballs, and held the cyclic with a gentle touch despite no arm rest. Periodically Sam took his left hand off the collective and, still crouching behind his *chicken plate* he used just a few fingers of his left hand on the cyclic while switching radio frequencies with his right hand. I thought, "How the hell does he do that?"

He showed me how, but it was impossible at first, like learning to fly all over again, since I was used to leaning my arm on my leg to steady my cyclic hand, and he was showing me how to control the cyclic with two fingers and no armrest so I could crouch behind the chicken plate. I would soon discover the virtue of crouching behind something that stopped small arms fire.

A few minutes into my checkride with Sam, we got a radio call directing us to pick up wounded in a nearby LZ. We diverted to the LZ, located and confirmed the color smoke they popped, and I set up my approach. Sam must have seen the strained look on my face as I descended into my first combat situation, and he said "I have the controls" as he took over and I let go. Sam flew it in cool as a cucumber while we were taking enemy fire, and overlapping traffic in my ears on the UHF (other aircraft), VHF (airfield tower control) and FM (ground units) radios confused the hell out of me. I tried to make myself as small as possible behind the chicken plate and nearly jumped out of the aircraft when the crew chief and gunner two feet behind us opened up with their M-60s to shoot back. I watched Sam with admiration as he calmly touched down nice and smooth while the wounded thrown in the back turned out to be KIA, the dead remains of what had been just a little while ago young Americans doing their duty, now smearing the helicopter floor with what had been their lifeblood. With no wasted motion, Sam nosed it over and took off, taking our grim cargo on the first leg of their journey home.

That was a memorable checkride, and a fitting introduction to flying slicks in Vietnam.

Many of our missions were combat assaults, meaning we loaded up a group of slicks with about seven American troops each, or ten ARVNs since they were smaller and lighter, and flew them in formation into an LZ that may or may not be hot with enemy fire. Richard and his gun buddies would fly with us and prep the LZ with suppressing fire or maybe just fly in an escort mode in case we received fire, ready to roll in with rockets and miniguns.

The sudden loud crack of rocket explosions out our window on either side of the LZ was comforting cover, but sometimes they just came too darn close. I asked them once in a while when I was edgy if they had a bet on who could shoot me down! I might have been more edgy if I knew then how bets and guns would coalesce in my future.

I have been asked if I was scared flying into an LZ. Well, that depends. Most times I was too busy to be scared.

When we flew formation with other helicopters, the idea was to keep it tight so we would all touch down together in an LZ of limited size, offload the troops, nose it over and take off together; that's better than going in one at a time and giving the enemy more opportunities to shoot us, and it puts more troops on the ground in one landing, a stronger unit instead of weaker pieces.

Flying formation meant staying within one rotor diameter of the next aircraft, usually on a 45 degree angle by visually lining up his near rear skid strut with his far front skid strut, and keeping his rotor plane visually on the horizon so we had three feet of vertical separation in case the rotors overlapped. If the lead aircraft was not sufficiently smooth in turns or deceleration or descent, it was like trying to stay steady in the middle of a slinky though the fun of flying the slinky was diminished by thoughts of certain death from a mid-air collision. I monitored several radios, listening intently for things like "taking fire!" or "go around" if the initial landing attempt was a no-go. As we went in I had to keep the aircraft steady with the others descending and bleeding off airspeed,

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watching for stumps or booby traps or trees too close to the rotors, always alert for VC popping up to punch our lights out, watching the other aircraft to stay in sync with touchdown, keeping an eye on the delicate balance of RPM and torque to make sure we had enough power to keep flying. When pulling pitch and increasing turbine power for more lift, exceeding torque limits might damage the aircraft, but RPM would bleed off first when we were pushing our limits, the first warning we were running out of juice.

Sometimes there was no touchdown at all since the troops would jump the last couple of feet, anxious to get away from the huge target they were riding. As they jumped we kept moving and gently nosed it forward to take off, mentally prepared for painfully loud reports from M-60s a few feet behind me when my crew chief and door gunner went hot to shoot back or to lay down suppressive fire.

Whether we were inserting troops into an LZ or picking them up in a PZ, who had time to think about being scared?

Photo public domain

But if the LZ was hot, and the lead said "Go around" so that we stayed in formation and set up for a second try at a hot LZ where the tracers were already flying, well, the pucker factor escalated and my butt-cheeks sometimes took a big bite out of the seat as I crouched behind my chicken plate and used a few fingers on the cyclic like Sam showed me.

I've heard a lot of guys talk about hearing rounds punch through the thin magnesium skin of our aircraft or whack into the engine compartment, but I don't think I ever heard it through all that noise. We just found the holes when we got back.

On a 173rd combat assault, in a flat area out toward the ocean on a night mission, we had enough light and a big LZ so we flew formation of about seven slicks and set up to all land at the same time. Lead slowed down too much, like he lost his visual reference, and as our formation came apart and the aircraft scattered we started taking fire out of a hooch. I saw in the twilight a Vietnamese woman exiting the hooch. Our door gunners returned fire and I could see tracers from the aircraft in front of me walking toward her. She was knocked down and did not move. I suspect she was VC, but that scene is forever frozen in my mind and even now I wish she had lived. When the shooting starts things happen too fast, with consequences that last forever.

Wayne King bargaining with Montagnard kids selling carved wood helicopter
Photo courtesy of Wayne King

Experienced pilots could volunteer for LRRP missions, and I flew LRRPs a number of times. These covert missions deep into unsecure areas were always teetering on the edge of high risk, for the six-man LRRP team on the ground and for helicopter crews inserting them and trying to get them out.

The PZs for getting LRRPs out were often very tight for even one ship if the team was outrunning the VC and had no time to make it to a pre-planned PZ. I would slowly descend straight down while the crew hung out on monkey straps calling the clearance for rotors and especially the fragile tail rotor. There were times we maneuvered back and forth on the way down to fit between layers of trees and, looking up through the roof bubble we could see nothing but tree limbs. Liftoff was straight up and might bring the loud ch-ch-ch-ch-whack-whack noise of the rotor chopping tree branches, made worse if the VC was hot on the LRRP team's tail and shooting at us while

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we nursed that hog up, foot by foot, into the air. Even when we were a sitting duck and they were shooting at us, I had to stay calm to apply a very gentle control touch to keep the rotor plane steady so it didn't lose lift to excessive movement.

Back at the base, the 173rd LRRPs were part of my circle of trading partners. It helped that they loved helicopter pilots, and they had high-value trading items like LRRP rations, freeze-dried vacuum-sealed tasty meals, prized everywhere, even by the Air Force guys. They also had enemy weapons they brought back from their covert missions.

These young men on LRRP teams were some of the most courageous I have ever seen, sneaking around far from friendly support, hiding in extreme camouflage, sometimes concealed so close to enemy trotters (trails) they could reach out and touch enemy troops as they moved on the trail, gathering intel like enemy units and strength. When they were compromised, the enemy chased them hard, they were always seriously outnumbered and the enemy put long-standing bounties on LRRPs because they were so effective. Getting them out when they were on the run was typically a life-and-death emergency situation.

So, when LRRPs called us for extraction, sometimes they were quiet, whispering as they did for days in the field, and sometimes they were in a shitstorm, crying and screaming, popping claymore mines, throwing grenades and firing weapons, six lightly armed men scrambling to stay alive until we got there, and the look on their faces when they jumped in the aircraft told their story in a flash of terror, relief, fear and loss.

One day as we took off one of the LRRPs reached from the back and gave me a big hug. Some of them weren't yet 20 years old.

The water was lousy in Vietnam and we doctored it with Kool-Aid, which got old fast. But even if the water had tasted good, we frequently wanted something stronger. When we drank beer or booze after a day of tension in the cockpit, it made the war recede into a forgotten corner of our minds for a little while, put on hold while we joked around. And so we drank a lot, especially if the following day was a day off. That was our relief valve, which was probably important since we were young and macho and loathe to admit or talk about the turmoil bubbling deep inside.

One night I drank and laughed and joked until late into the night because I was not scheduled to fly the next day. In the morning, Operations rousted me from bed and told me they were short a pilot and I had to fly the C&C ship. I told them no way, I wasn't sober yet, no way could I fly, it wasn't safe, and what about the "bottle-to-throttle rule?" The Operations officer told me, "We don't want you to fly, we don't want you to touch the controls, just get in the seat." He promised to make sure the other pilot was experienced and I could sleep in the other seat but he had to have two pilots so the bird was legal to take off.

Aw, shit! I was still woozy and sleepy, my mouth tasted like I ate a rat and my stomach was churning like a washing machine agitating something nasty floating in Tabasco sauce. While doing a preflight inspection I stooped to check something and fell over. Shit! And flying Command & Control meant I had to be on good behavior since our mission purpose was to fly a Colonel observing ground operations and giving command directions by radio from three feet behind my seat.

I got lucky despite being semi-wounded . . . our Colonel had a keen sense of taking care of his men. He picked up on my impaired condition right away but didn't say a word about it. After takeoff, when we were bumping around in choppy air and making sudden turns, he saw my gills turn green and he handed me his steel pot so I could puke in it.

And I did. I still owe that guy.

When one of our crew chiefs was killed, my name was next on the list for bereavement duty. It was my job to collect his personal belongings, cull out anything that might be embarrassing to his family, pack his belongings for shipment, and write a letter about his death to the family. That was a hard day. A much worse day was ahead.

My takeoff from The Crap Table on the morning of March 24, 1969 was routine. I was part of a flight of slicks on our way to a combat assault, and heard my gun-pilot buddy Richard say on the radio he was returning to land to check out a caution light. We kept going, knowing the guns would catch up while we made slow turns in formation to give them time.

Richard called a few minutes later to say it looked OK and he was taking off from The Crap Table again. Shortly after takeoff his transmission froze in mid-air. With a dead rotor he plowed in and died a violent

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death along with his co-pilot, crew chief and gunner.

I don't remember too much else from the rest of that day, I was flying and walking around feeling cut in half, as if my guts were hanging out. We lost guys now and then and the grunts we flew were sometimes wounded and killed, the normal ugly stuff that happens in a war. But Richard's death was like a stab right through my heart. Intellectually I always knew it could happen to any of us, but I guess emotionally I just wasn't prepared when it happened to my best friend. I suppose nobody is ever prepared.

I went through the motions of doing my job, and I tried to put it behind me. I really tried, but I couldn't. Food didn't taste good. Booze didn't help. I didn't care about the fancy hooch we had built. Everything in it reminded me of Richard. I was pissed off at the utter stupidity of the war.

My world had changed, and I took it hard.

I couldn't do this any more.

I told the CO I wanted to fly guns like Richard flew. I wanted to shoot back for a change. My CO told me the 238th Air Weapons Company at An Khe, just down the road, was new in country and needed experienced pilots.

Gun pilot Wayne King in the cockpit
Photo courtesy of Wayne King

Flying guns with the 238th was like flying in a different war. I was sent to the in-country Cobra transition school in Vung Tau, but we never got Cobras while I was with the 238th. We flew the under-powered B-model Huey guns. I think the daily trial of nursing our birds in the air, constantly dealing with less horsepower than we needed, ultimately made me a better pilot.

The Mang Yang Pass, aka "Ambush Alley"
Photo courtesy of Wayne King

We didn't fly combat assaults covering slicks; we were hunters. Our AO was much the same as the area I already knew, but our primary mission was patrolling highway 19 from Qui Nhon through An Khe and 50 more miles to Pleiku through the Mang Yang Pass, aka "Ambush Alley." The Mang Yang was the site of many ambushes by the Viet Cong because the terrain made convoys sitting ducks with steep hills all around. Parts of the pass were dotted with graves of French soldiers from their battles in the 1950s, buried standing up and facing west, toward France.

Sometimes we wished the enemy would shoot at us so we could shoot back, and my wingman and I would cover each other while one of us flew low trying to draw fire. Since our clear mission was to stop them, the VC kept their heads down when we were in the area.

When we weren't patrolling, making ourselves visible and threatening to our hidden enemy, we were on standby, waiting to be called when a unit in the field needed close air support. Standby was relaxing until it got to be boring.

My new lifestyle was completely different than the 61st. At the 238th we didn't fly nearly as much, and we had our own aircraft and our own crew instead of the daily assignment rotations we had at the 61st. That change meant we got to know our crew chief and gunner very well, and it meant our crew chief could tune the aircraft to get the most out of it. We cooked and ate together, slept in the same Alert Tent when we were on stand-by, and we even got to know the families of our crew.

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But the waiting was boring, and being itchy for action as young men are, we had to do something with our time and so we made bets, usually winning or losing a can or six-pack of beer.

Wayne King on the high alert of "Standby'
Photo courtesy of Wayne King

We bet on whose crew chief could drop a smoke closer to a rock. We bet on who could put a rocket closer to a tree, and I became a pretty good shot with rockets. We bet on whether a chicken can really fly, and we had the wherewithal to prove the answer by taking the chicken up and giving it a fair toss. Could the chicken fly? Well, the chicken could certainly flap its wings frantically, but in a word – splat – no, the chicken couldn't fly. We bet on how a fly lands on a ceiling; does it loop or does it roll? I don't remember the answer, or how we proved it.

When we engaged the enemy in a firefight, shooting back never satisfied the emptiness of losing Richard Benicewicz, but it did feel like I was doing something worthwhile that day.

The VC struck by ambushing a convoy on the highway one day when we were already airborne, patrolling in the area, and we caught them in the act, in the open, and hosed them pretty good. When we were low on fuel and ammo our other gun team relieved us, and while we were re-armed and re-fueled some guys handed us a tray of food for lunch and we wolfed it down as we sat in the cockpit with the rotors still turning, took off and returned to the battle to relieve the other gunship team. After that battle, our ground troops lined up about 35 torn up enemy bodies on a bridge so the locals could see what happened to VC. I didn't much want to look at the dead men, not even from the air. They all looked so young and I figured some of the locals were probably seeing their own family members lying there dead and could not react naturally for fear of what might happen to them. War sucks.

I know very clearly how I held body and soul together during that tough year. My wife Cookie wrote me a letter every day. Some guys received a letter from home just a few times in their year in Vietnam. Cookie's daily letters were not only my connection to the family I loved, they were my lifeline, my refreshing reminder that there was a peaceful world somewhere, with the soft breath of a baby and the trying antics of a toddler instead of shooting and killing and dying. She sustained me.

Wayne King and wife Cookie
Photo courtesy of Wayne King

My tour ended with my body intact. The trip back to the US was not eventful, except for my barely contained excitement that I would soon be with my wife and my sons, Wayne Jr., who turned five while I was gone, and Scott, who was just two months old when I left. My family gave me a warm welcome at the airport in Wichita Falls, Texas.

Vietnam had been my aviation baptism of fire, an intense learning experience in many things a pilot has to do to stay alive, keeping a keen eye on safety even when someone is trying to kill you and the tracers come from several directions at once.

Those lessons served me well. I would go on to an Army aviation career in both rotary and fixed wing, a good career doing what I loved, flying.

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Many years after I retired from the Army and turned my work life to a different direction, part of my past in Vietnam caught up with me in an extraordinary case of déjà vu.

A hangar at the Henry County Airport in GA is home to the Army Aviation Heritage Foundation. An outstanding group of dedicated AAHF volunteers, mostly Vietnam vets who were pilots or maintenance crew, rebuild and maintain Vietnam era aircraft in excellent flying condition. They perform displays, air shows, raise funds by selling helicopter rides for countless adults and kids, and otherwise keep alive the history many of us lived flying in Vietnam.

One of the UH-1 aircraft refurbished by AAHF and now part of their flying fleet is tail number 624, one of the very slicks I flew with the 61st in Vietnam. The 61st maintenance crew was good but mission urgency meant we often flew with a light out, blades that needed tracking or other flaws. The AAHF crew skills and standards are outstanding with safety as top priority and I'm certain 624 is in better flying condition today than when I was in that pilot seat and taking fire on the other side of the world 50 years ago.

I am grateful to the AAHF for the remarkable chance to share with my children and grandchildren a tangible piece of my history with a ride in the same bird I flew in combat. This has been a rare piece of serendipity that money cannot buy.

Looking back at my Vietnam experience, it was a tumultuous mix of so many things that became part of who I am. After all this time, I still often think of Richard Benicewicz. He is my personal reminder that, no matter how noble or just the cause might be, war is a tragic waste of good people. Losing that friend left a hole in my heart that never really healed.

Years later I visited the Vietnam Memorial wall in Washington, DC. Like innumerable other veterans who lost a close friend, seeing Richard's name on that wall brought back the pain and tears as if it were yesterday.

You never forget.

Wayne King with 624 and his extended family
Photo courtesy of Wayne King

Book Review by Mike King

Low Level Hell

by Hugh Mills

When I was just learning to breathe the fire of a Loach pilot in Vietnam, two guys showed me how it was done, Hugh Mills and Rod Willis. I saw in them the guts and skill it took to be a Scout pilot in the Delta, hanging our nuts out as bait, sometimes low enough to get blood splatter on the nose bubble. We made ourselves targets to lure the enemy to shoot, exposing their position so we could kill them. It was thrilling and very risky. We lived through being shot down too many times because the OH-6 cockpit was tough, highly survivable in a crash.

When we strapped on our OH-6 every day we were going hunting an enemy skilled at concealment. To flush them out of a suspected position, we flew a low-level circular cap, covering each other from 180° in the cap, tension high and trigger finger itching as we were impatient for the enemy to take the bait and sling some shit into the fan.

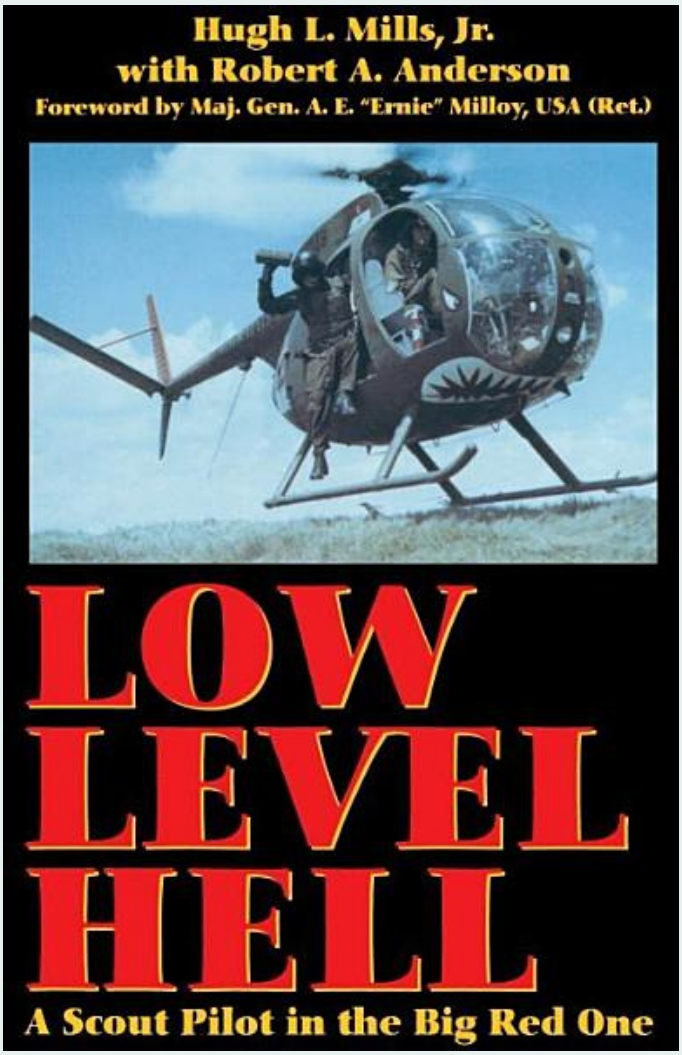
I can't inject you with the intensity we lived in Scout missions, but you can tag along with Hugh vicariously in the book he wrote about his first tour as a Scout, Low Level Hell. I read it long ago, and re-read it recently just to compose this short review for you. You're welcome!

You won't find a better read than Low Level Hell to put you in the daily life of an aero Scout in Vietnam, among the best books of our helicopter war 50 years ago.

Hugh details the art of flying the treetops barely inside translational lift, hunting an elusive enemy, frequently rewarded by taking fire at ranges including eyeball contact and having the cojones to keep the fight for ourselves a little while before turning it over to the gunships. He illustrates well the commitment we made to grunts we supported every day, risking everything to get the job done.

Whether you were then or are now a rotary wing pilot, crew, family or just interested, Low Level Hell is a must-read. If you buy his book on Amazon and want to send to him for signature or personalization, Hugh's email is hmills16@aol.com

Mike King, Darkhorse 14 1971-1972



Hugh Mills

Editor's Farewell

I volunteered to revise the CHPA newsletter design and get the quarterly issues done through 2020. This issue completes my task, another in a number of tasks I have undertaken for CHPA over five years.

Now I must turn my focus to an urgent family matter.

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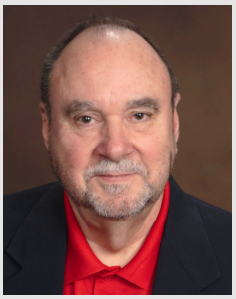

Will you do your part for CHPA?

What about you? Will you pitch in to help with the volunteer tasks CHPA needs?

If you are willing to serve in the quarterly newsletter Editor's role, or the other volunteer roles needed, please contact President James Wilhite at president@chpa-us.org

Want more content from varied conflicts?

Do you want to see more stories from the Gulf War . . . or Iraq or Afghanistan or Bosnia or other conflicts? Those stories have to come from you. Contribute something. Contact the editor for help with word-smithing.

CHPA 2020 Annual Conference - Nov 5-7

Dr. Jack Bailey, Chairman

Robert Frost
Past President/Chairman

Editor's note: the challenges of 2020 would have made cancellation of this year's CHPA conference routine, like so many other organizations. But Jack Bailey and Robert Frost formed a formidable team to make it happen. Their summary is below, along with selected photos from the event.

This strange and crazy year of 2020, CHPA held its annual conference and business meeting 5-7 NOV at the Courtyard By Marriott Houston NASA Clear Lake, within a stone's throw of the Johnson Space Center near Houston, TX. Thanks to the CHPA Board of Directors taking a chance on having this event. It was successful.

Our hotel host was wonderful to work with on the precautions to ensure that our group could have a good reunion and be safe. Many weeks after the event, we are not aware of anyone in attendance testing positive or getting sick with the virus. That good news reinforces the good times we enjoyed.

Whoever, ordered the weather should get a raise. It was gorgeous! Severe clear, sunshine, mild breezes and temperatures in the 70s - it doesn't get any better than that!

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We had two planned events which were well-attended and much enjoyed. On Friday, the 6th we spent most of the day touring the Space Center Museum and the Johnson Space Center Campus.

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Friday evening, many of us caravanned to the Kemah Boardwalk on Galveston Bay only a few miles away. We enjoyed a fun dinner at Bubba Gump's outside terrace next to the harbor. Everyone adjourned back to the CHPA hospitality suite for adult beverages and more war stories, a fine end to a near perfect day.

Saturday, about 30 of us showed up for a private tour of the Lone Star Flight Museum at Ellington Field, near the Johnson Space Center. This is a wonderful museum that has many flyable aircraft from WWII and Vietnam. We were very fortunate that all of the aircraft were there on static display, a rarity due to a busy airshow schedule.

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Saturday evening the banquet was well-attended, and due to social distancing we were at maximum occupancy. The evening was special for two reasons.

Our guest speaker was the US Army's SSG (ret) Timothy Kellner. Tim served two tours in Iraq and has been recognized as one of the greatest snipers in US Military history. He has 139 confirmed kills and almost 300 unconfirmed. He spoke about the planning of his missions and the critical role of rotary winged aircraft in mission success. We were very fortunate to have Tim and his wife Charlotte join us for the entire three days of our gathering. I think they enjoyed being around a bunch of old veteran helicopter pilots. It was certainly an honor for CHPA to have them in our ranks for those three days.

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Another part of the Saturday banquet was special. We invited four Vietnamese families - 15 people who have within the past year realized their dream of immigrating to the USA. It was a special evening for them to be with so many Vietnam veterans who tried to save their country many years ago from an invading Communist enemy.

These guests presented our members and families with souvenirs and coffee from Vietnam. When we veterans of Vietnam look back on a long and contentious war, it is sometimes difficult to find anything good about the loss of so much of our blood and treasure. But, there is good if one is willing to look for it. Even though Vietnam fell to Communist aggression, we have been blessed with more than a million new US citizens from Vietnam over the past few decades. They come searching for the American dream, they work hard, pay their taxes, build businesses, and become contributing members of our society. They are patriotic and love this country in ways most of our birthright citizens never will. They understand the price of freedom and how difficult it is to keep.

Many of these new immigrants want to return to next year's banquet in Washington DC. They want to be in our company and see the nation's capital. We hope to see them there.

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As always, throughout the conference there was the rich reward of fellowship.

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Our Legacy . . .

. . . we few, who know the skills, thrills, service to country, commitment to each other and mortal risks of rotary wing combat. Best job we ever had!


CHPA
COMBAT HELICOPTER PILOTS ASSOCIATION


HAPPY
Holidays

End