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Vietnam Helicopter Pilots and Crew Members Honored

ROTOR Staff • 2018 Spring



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HAI hosted a group of Vietnam veterans who traveled from around the country for the dedication. From left to right: Ken Nye, Thomas Cole, Patrick Coleman, Bill Beversluis, past HAI Chairman Ed Newton, Douglas Nelms, John Skimbo, Ron Putnam, Todd Petersen, Jake Hinton, Rick Lester, HAI President and CEO Matt Zuccaro, David Sheppard, Ralph Timmons, James Aretz, and Tom Aretz.

 Dan Sweet/HAI

On April 18, 2018, a memorial marker was unveiled at Arlington National Cemetery (ANC), just outside of Washington, D.C., to honor the young men who gave their lives flying and maintaining the helicopters flown in Vietnam.

A crowd of more than 1,000 Vietnam veterans, families, and others attended the dedication ceremony. Mini-reunions sprang up among men who had flown together nearly half a century ago. The dedication was capped by a flyover of four UH-1s from the U.S. Air Force.

It was an event three years in the making. In 2015, the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association (VHPA) submitted a proposal to the U.S. Army for a memorial to both the pilots and the crew members who died in the war. When that proposal was rejected, VHPA member William Dennison approached his congressman, Rep. Mark Amodei (R-Nev.), for assistance.

“We went to see the folks at Arlington, who were nice to us but pointed out that they were in the burial business, not in the memorial business,” Amodei says, who spoke at the memorial’s dedication. “But what the VHPA members were asking for was just 5 square feet. I was thinking that surely Arlington National Cemetery had 5 square feet for almost 10 percent of the casualties of

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Amodei worked both sides of the aisle to get support for a bill that would require the secretary of the army to place a suitable memorial stone at the cemetery. The bill passed the House, but its Senate counterpart got wrapped up in bureaucratic red tape. A subsequent bill also failed to pass.

Finally, the VHPA and Karen Durham-Aguilera, ANC executive director, reached a compromise. A monument measuring 22 inches high, 21 inches deep, and 32 inches wide would be placed in Section 35, along Memorial Drive, not far from the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. VHPA paid for the construction and placement of the monument.

“As a Vietnam veteran, I want to express my gratitude to the members of VHPA for their leadership on this issue,” says Matt Zuccaro, HAI president and CEO. “For so many reasons, we need to remember the courage and selflessness of our comrades who paid the ultimate price in service to their country.”

HAI hosted a group of Vietnam veterans and their families for the event. Some of their stories are below.

James "JJ" Aretz and Tom Aretz, Crew Chiefs

Tom Aretz actually started out in Army aviation in flight school at Fort Wolters, Texas. After he became medically disqualified, he was offered the opportunity to attend crew chief's school at Ft. Eustice, Virginia.

The youngest of three brothers, Aretz was the third to serve in Vietnam. His oldest brother, JJ, had been a crew chief with the 334th Armed Helicopter Company until he was hit with shrapnel, losing an eye. He was medically discharged from the army but later went back to Vietnam as a civilian with the Lear Sigler corporation. He was “in country” when Tom arrived in March

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On Memorial Day 1969, the youngest Aretz gained a bit of unwanted fame when JJ talked Tom into letting him fly along on a mission. “We got shot down, and he shouldn’t even have been in the aircraft,” says Tom, also remarking that while he saw the men he served with as brothers, it’s another thing to be in a ship that’s going down and see your actual brother. “We had to be all right because I wouldn’t have known what to say to our old man.”

Fortunately, everyone survived the crash. It was the only known instance in the Vietnam War when two brothers were shot down in the same aircraft. The two brothers have spent every Memorial Day since together.

Tom was actually shot down three times before leaving Vietnam in April 1970. He was discharged immediately upon returning to the States and became an independent insurance salesman and financial planner.

Following his retirement, he met some members of the Friends of Army Aviation out of Ozark, Alabama, and five years ago, he joined the unit. This group restores old Hueys that then travel around the country, giving people rides and promoting Army aviation. “We now have our own flying Huey, a UH-1H. We picked it up as just a hulk from the Florida Forestry Department. We bought three of them. A second is in the process of being made flyable. We also have an AH-1 Cobra in the hangar that we’re working on, hoping to get it up,” says Tom.

Ernest Hare, Crew Chief

Ernest Hare, nicknamed “rabbit” for obvious reasons, attended the army’s aviation maintenance school at Ft. Eustice, Virginia, and arrived in Vietnam in January 1970, assigned to the 1st Aviation Brigade.

At the end of his initial tour, Hare extended for two more tours. He stayed in

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“There wasn’t any particular job I wanted to come back to in the States, and I was doing what I loved to do,” he says. “I started out as just a door gunner, got trained on the aircraft, then became a full crew chief.”

After his discharge, Hare kept looking for a job in aviation, “but nobody was hiring in my field.” He finally got a job with the Veterans Administration hospital that had just opened in the Tampa Bay area.

“I spent a year there, but my heart was in aviation. None of the local FBOs would hire me without an A&P license, so I went to the Florida Academy of Aerospace Technology [now the National Aviation Academy] at St. Pete–Clearwater International Airport and got my A&P ticket.”

He then got a job with the Tampa Flying Service FBO but left after six-and-a-half years to work for the Hillsborough County (Fla.) sheriff’s department.

“The reason I left the FBO was to make more money,” he says. “In my area of aviation, mechanics were making less money per hour than automobile mechanics. But now that the demand for mechanics is growing, the pay scale is growing. Because of the demand, the FBOs are having to get the pay scale up.”

He left the sheriff’s department work to be an aviation mechanic for the Tampa Police Department. He retired from the City of Tampa in 2012. A member of both the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association and the Vietnam Helicopter Crew Members Association, Hare occasionally accompanies aircraft for “show-and-tell” demonstrations.

Hare says that, back in the day, aviation mechanics were more hands on. “With the technology today, they have the computerized ADs and service

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William C. Beversluis, Pilot

Bill Beversluis flew B and C model Huey gunships for B Troop, 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry Regiment from May 1967 to May 1968, earning the Silver Star and a pair of Distinguished Flying Crosses while flying.

Upon returning from Vietnam, he flew as a contact instructor at Hunter Army Airfield in Savannah, Georgia before being discharged. After earning a degree in geography at William Paterson University in Wayne, New Jersey, Beversluis was hired by Executive Air Fleet (EAF), flying Bell 206 JetRangers for Prudential Insurance.

To get that first flying job, “I just kept pounding on doors, handing out resumes, visiting and revisiting companies,” he says.

In 1978, Beversluis left EAF to join AT&T as chief pilot, flying JetRangers, AW109s, and then an S-76B. He spent 20 years with A&T and was named director of aviation in 1992, supporting the company’s fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft. In 1998, Beversluis moved to Gulfstream to sell corporate jets. He left in 2004 to work for Jet Aviation as its vice president of aircraft management, retiring in 2015.

Most of his flying was done in the metropolitan New York area. “It was a very small band of people who were flying corporate aircraft in those days. Everybody knew everyone else. You knew who someone was, just by the sound of his voice. The camaraderie was absolutely incredible. It was sort of like the air mail pilots of the 1920s and ’30s — they all knew each other.” And because many pilots today are civilian-trained, they lack the common bond of military service that most pilots of his generation shared.

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Prior to going to Vietnam in June 1968, Ken Nye had already been in the army for eight years, maintaining and crewing the CH-37 Mojave, the army's last, and largest, piston-engine helicopter. "So I was the 'old man' of the outfit," he says.

"I was with the 273rd Assault Support Helicopter Company, based in Vung Tau and Long Binh. They changed my MOS [military occupational specialty] from the Mojave to the CH-54 Skycrane, but it wasn't that big of a deal. The engines, of course, were a big deal, going from piston engines to turbine engines, but the rotor head, flight control systems, and tail rotor were comparable to the CH-37. I was the flight engineer, the GIB (guy-in-back)." Nye left Vietnam in June 1969 and was assigned to Ft. Rucker as a Skycrane student pilot instructor. He retired from the army in 1980.

"I went to Mountain View College in Dallas to get my A&P license, then went to work for Aerospatiale [now Airbus Helicopters, Inc.] in Grand Prairie, Texas, as a maintenance instructor. I went into their field service as a technical rep, working in-house for a while, then signed on for a program Aerospatiale had in Israel. I was a service rep on the HH-65A there for two-and-a-half years."

From Israel, Nye moved to Florida, serving as Aerospatiale's technical rep for seven southern states and six Caribbean islands from 1989 until his retirement in 2007. He then worked freelance maintenance for three years. "I had made a lot of contacts in the southeast, and worked with some service centers, helping them with scheduled maintenance. I also worked with a company that had news helicopters scattered all over the Eastern seaboard."

Todd Petersen, Pilot

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He returned to the States in March 1970 and immediately re-upped for another tour, returning to Vietnam the next month. After returning to the States the second time, he was discharged and started looking for a job. "I went to a flight school in St. Petersburg, Florida, to get a commercial fixed-wing rating and instrument ticket," he says. "I got it, and never flew fixed-wing again."

He eventually found a job with Helitrans in Cairns, Australia, flying Boeing Vertol 107s, the civilian equivalent to the CH-46 "Phrogs" flown by the US Navy and Marine Corps. "Most of the jobs were in Papua, New Guinea. I spent almost a year in Australia, then the project slowed down. All of the American pilots were released. However, the helicopters had been leased from Columbia Helicopters in Portland, Oregon. Columbia was just starting helicopter logging and offered jobs to the guys who had been flying their aircraft in Australia."

He worked for Columbia for about a year and then had the opportunity to go back to Southeast Asia with Air America, flying as a civilian pilot for the CIA. However, as the war wound down, he was released from Air America.

Petersen then went back to Columbia. His second stint there lasted 40 more years than his first. He flew as a line pilot doing long-line work for about 10 years, then became a logging project manager, then an overseas project manager. "I came out of the field to work for the operations manager, the chief pilot, setting up overseas jobs. We did that in Sudan, Burma, Laos, Malaysia, Indonesia, as well as Africa and South America."

Compared to when he started, Petersen says the helicopter industry today has

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Ralph Timmons, Army Ranger

Ralph Timmons arrived for his first tour in Vietnam in March 1966 as a marine. That tour, however, lasted only until August 1966, followed by his return to the States and discharge from the Marine Corps.

In July 1967, Timmons enlisted in the army. By December, he was back in Vietnam, assigned to the 101st Airborne Division. He later volunteered for Long Range Patrol (LRP) duty.

“One of the differences in being in a LRP unit is that we had our own [aviation] assets,” he says. “Most people who got on a helicopter in an infantry unit were going in and dropped off by someone they didn’t know, then picked up later by someone else they didn’t know.” LRP teams knew the pilots who flew them on their missions.

“Those pilots were fearless,” Timmons said. “I know they were as scared as we were, but they went through some pretty hot and nasty stuff to come in and get us out of there.”

A typical mission was like his last one: Timmons and the rest of the five-man team were set down on a ridge in the A Shau Valley and immediately heard NVA — the “bad guys” — looking for them with dogs. The Americans called in a report and were told to get to the extraction point. “Some fast movers [jets] were brought in, who shot along the ridge line. The bad guys suddenly got very quiet.” The helicopter pilot who came to pick them up had to stay at a high hover and drop a ladder, allowing the team to climb to safety.

After retiring from the Army in 1984 as a first sergeant, Timmons joined “the

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Matt Zuccaro, Pilot

Matt Zuccaro arrived in Vietnam in July 1969 as a warrant officer, fresh out of flight school. He was assigned to the 7th Squadron of the 17th Air Cavalry, flying UH-1 helicopters. On returning stateside in August 1970, he was assigned to Fort Rucker, Alabama, as a flight and classroom instructor. Upon his discharge in 1971, he returned home to New York City, making the rounds to operators, resume in hand. After six months, he landed his first job as a charter and instructor pilot with Island Helicopters in Garden City, New York.

Over the next 35 years, Zuccaro held various pilot and executive management positions with operations such as the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, Resorts International Airlines, Union Carbide, and various charter, aircraft management, and maintenance organizations.

A member of HAI from the late 1970s, he served on the HAI Board of Directors and as chairman. In 2005, he assumed the full-time position of HAI president (and later CEO). Zuccaro has been an outspoken advocate for improving safety in the international helicopter community, including the development of the Land & LIVE program, which promotes the use of precautionary landings by pilots faced with deteriorating flight conditions. "Today the focus and commitment to safety is the highest I have ever seen in the 50 years I have been in the industry," he says.

His transition from flying in Vietnam to civilian aviation forced him to leave behind the "can-do, will-do, at-all-costs military mentality." On the other hand, he notes that safety and operational oversight were not priorities in civilian operations at that time. Zuccaro also expressed thanks for the help he had along the way: "Your family lives the Vietnam experience with you. That is

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