

Celebrating the Last Huey

A retirement ceremony took place Friday, October 2, 2009, at Summerall Field, Fort Myer, Virginia. The subject of this honor was the venerable UH-1. To fully understand the relationship between man and this marvelous machine, one would need to go back to 1952. That was when the Army identified their requirement for a new helicopter that would serve as a medical evacuation (MEDEVAC), instrument trainer, and general utility aircraft.



In early 1955, the Army selected Bell to build three copies of its Model 204 for evaluation, designating it the XH-40. The XH-40 first flew on October 20, 1956. Two more prototypes were later built. Then in March 1960, the Army awarded Bell a production contract for 100 aircraft. The helicopter was designated as HU-1. The official name was "Iroquois." For those who wonder where the affectionate nickname "Huey" came from, take another look at the designation and think of the "1" as an "I."



Billed as a ceremony, and it was, it was also a celebration. The crowd that gathered at Fort Myer arrived in gala fashion. Some guests arrived in Tuxedos and gowns, while others were in military dress and combat fatigues, to bid farewell to the last active UH-1 in service.



Representing Helicopter Association International (HAI) at this event were Harold Summers, HAI's Director of Flight Operations and Technical Services; and Marty Pociask, HAI's Director of Communications and Editor of ROTOR® magazine, covering the final active assignment for the last active Huey, before she glides off to a well-deserved retirement.



The National Anthem was sung by SPC Belita Ford, of the DC Army National Guard, who gave a spirited rendition to Old Glory. Brigadier General Alberto Jimenez, Senior Aviator, Army National Guard followed with an address to the audience. He reflected on what the Huey meant to the men and women who flew the machine that was credited for saving so many lives.



There were guest speakers from three notable helicopter manufacturers. Mr. Nick Lappos, Senior Vice President, Bell

Helicopter Textron; Mr. David Haines, Vice President, Rotorcraft Programs, EADS North America; and Mr. Joseph Haddock, Vice President, Sikorsky Aircraft. Also addressing the crowd was Dr. Jim Fulbrook of the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association.



The service history of the Huey began with the 101st Airborne Division, the 82nd Airborne Division, and the 57th Medical Detachment, which arrived in Vietnam in March 1962. During the Vietnam War, the Huey went through several upgrades, each improving performance and load-carrying capabilities.

More than 7,000 Hueys saw action in Vietnam. Of these, more than 3,300 were destroyed, and more than 2,700 American crewmembers and passengers lost their lives. It should be noted that during its time of service, an untold number of men and women owed their lives to this magnificent machine.



In October 1970, the Army National Guard received its first five UH-1s and forwarded them to the Texas Army Guard. By mid-November, 13 other states also had received Hueys. The UH-1 went on to provide 39 years of service to the country in the Army National Guard. So this retirement ceremony was a fitting way to say goodbye to this remarkable machine.

The pilot, Kenneth Michael Miles, Chief Warrant Officer 4, stationed with the 121st Medical Air Ambulance, D.C. National Guard, had brought the chopper in just three hours earlier, setting her down on the field of green. Miles, who will retire as a Major, was making his final flight, ending a 40-year career. As he prepared to take her up and away, he waved to the crowd, and started the engine. As the chopper lifted off, the turning rotors also seemed to be waving goodbye.



Though the sky was overcast, and a brisk breeze skipped across Summerall Field, no one seemed to mind. The Huey's rotors belted out the familiar "wop-wop-wop" sound that has been a trademark of the UH-1 — a sound welcomed by so many of our fellow countrymen in battle, and feared by this nation's enemies.



As she lifted skyward and headed out of sight, many in the crowd saluted and bid her a fond farewell.

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