



GOOD VIBRATIONS

*THE RESURRECTION
OF UH-1B HUEY
SEAWOLF 324*

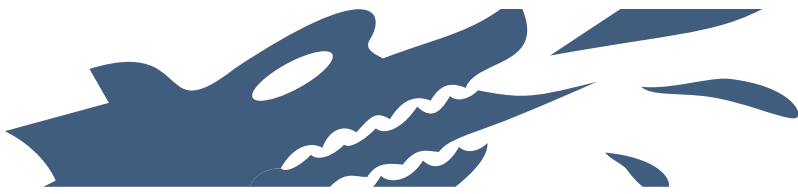
BY JIM BUSHA



SEAWOLF—A solitary fish with strong, prominent teeth and projecting tusks that give it a savage look.

STANDING UNDER A BRIGHT BLUE, late July sky during EAA AirVenture Oshkosh 2011, I was watching war-bird arrivals. I closed my eyes to determine if I could pick out the next incoming aircraft based solely on the sound of its engine. The Rolls-Royce Merlin-powered P-51 Mustangs were easy, with that unmistakable purr of the in-line engine. The radial engines were a little tougher; when I opened my eyes thinking a B-25 was nearby, it was in fact a lumbering TBM Avenger.

The next arrival was the easiest. Actually, the well-known “whop, whop, whop” sound vibrated off my chest like some native drum beat. As the sound grew louder, I opened my eyes expecting to see a familiar Army green Bell UH-1 Iroquois “Huey” helicopter slowly making its way onto Wittman Regional Airport. I was correct about the slow part, but as the Huey flew closer there was something different about this one. From a distance it looked like a “flying porcupine” with a wild array of guns and rocket tubes bristling from its



sides. As the helicopter slowed, the only green I saw was the freshly mowed grass being blown around in a mini tornado as the dark blue beast began to settle into a hover. “I didn’t know the Navy flew Hueys,” said an onlooker from the small crowd that had begun to gather.

I didn’t either, but I was about to learn a great history lesson about the lineage of this ultra-historic helicopter.

HISTORY OF SEAWOLF 324

Bell UH-1B Huey, Bureau number 63-12923, was built in 1963 and delivered to the U.S. Army in October 1964. By April 1965 it was in Vietnam experiencing its “baptism of fire” when it took three hits to one of its skids. Two weeks later it was brought down by small arms fire and incurred major damage. It was sent back to the United States for repair and returned to Vietnam in March 1967. Serving with the 1st Cavalry Division A/1/9 (A Troop, 1st Squadron, 9th Air

Cavalry), it was again damaged in February 1968. The Army said goodbye to this battle-weary Huey in November 1968 when it “lent” it to the U.S. Navy, where it began flying with the Seawolves.

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This particular Huey was a “flak magnet.” It was heavily damaged again in October 1969. On May 28, 1971, it was hit again, this time by a 75 mm recoilless rifle. The damage was determined to be “minor,” and the crew performed an emergency medevac and flew an injured sailor to a nearby surgical hospital.

The last military flight of 324 occurred on February 29, 1972, when the Seawolves returned it back to the Army. In October

1973 it was lent to NASA Langley Research Center until August 1975. This Huey, along with hundreds of others like it, was placed into long-term storage at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base (AFB) in Tucson, Arizona, with a total of 4,390 flight hours. It would languish in the hot desert sun for the next 16 years before being rescued once again.

RESCUE AND RESTORATION OF 324

John Boucher, president and CEO of Overseas Aircraft Support, an FAA repair station that specializes in rebuilding, upgrading, and recertifying Bell medium helicopter airframes and avionics, will be the first to admit he did not purchase Huey Seawolf 324 with the intent of restoring it. On the contrary, he wanted to blow it up.

“I bought 14 Huey airframes in 1994 with the intent of building them as mock-ups to blow them up in the movies,” John said. “By 2002 I



Seawolf 324 receiving maintenance in Vietnam.



A .50-caliber machine gun is mounted on the right side, paired with twin M60s on the left side to give the Huey lethal firepower.





A mere shell of its former self, Seawolf 324 begins its restoration transformation.

was shifting gears and refocusing my attention to old warbirds. I purchased two P-40 Warhawk projects with the intent of restoring them. I thought I was retiring from the helicopter side of life to rebuild warbirds; then everything went sideways with the historic discovery from a single piece of paper.”

When John purchased his 14 Huey airframes, each costing around \$700, all of them came with original logs and associated paperwork. “I had no idea about this helicopter’s historic significance,” John said. “One of my good friends, Pat Rodgers of Wings and Rotors Air Museum located in California, was over to my shop one day scrounging for parts when he asked if he could look through all the logbooks. He spent two days poring over them and then burst into my office one day, tossed a logbook on my desk, and said, ‘You have to rebuild this aircraft!’”

“Of course I asked him why, and he replied that it was a Seawolf Huey. Before I could ask Seawolf what, Pat gave me the history of the unit. After hearing they were the most highly decorated squadron in U.S. Navy history, I knew I had to save this helicopter,” John said.

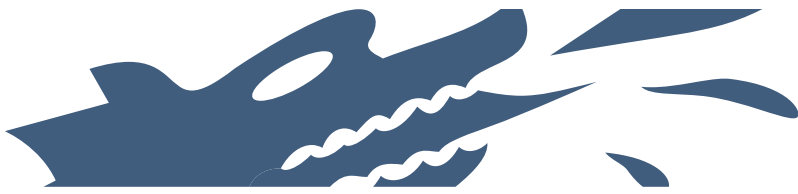
Fate is a strange animal. Although Seawolf 324 was no more than a shell of its former shape when John acquired it—no engine, no transmission, no blades—he had been acquiring UH-1B model parts for many years. He, along with his crew of skilled mechanics, began the tedious task of inventorying what they had and what they needed—naturally the list for what they needed was 10 times longer.

“My main request for this project was that we would restore it back to original. I wanted to keep all the repair patches intact, repair only what was structurally necessary, and zero in on returning it back to what it would have looked like in 1968,” John said.

John found that this particular Huey had three major combat repairs performed on it when he began the restoration. The nose itself had two significant ones, along with a half-dozen minor repairs found along the door posts and fuselage. Some repair patches were easy for John to recognize.

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“They used beer cans as patches,” John said and chuckled. “Schlitz, Pabst, and other beer can patches were found on the Huey. Legend has it that one Seawolf Huey had hundreds of beer can patches attached to it. More of a flying billboard I guess.



Seawolf 324 flies over familiar terrain.

“The nose of this Huey took the most beating, though. That’s because the Viet Cong aimed at the pilots. Some of the helicopter guys said they used to wear white helmets when they flew. But they stopped doing that when they found out that was the aiming point for the gunners on the ground,” John said.

As the Huey was slowly transformed again into Navy livery, some former Seawolves began to get wind of the project and became like nervous mothers as they sent John photos and periodically called to see how their old friend was doing.

“I really got to know this small community of men through this project,” John said. “There were less than 3,000 men who served as Seawolves in Vietnam. They lost 44 of their comrades in combat, and I was hoping this helicopter would be a foundation where they could come together as an organization.”

Because the B model Hueys were phased out of the Army services since the early 1980s, some parts were harder than others to locate, especially the innards of the aircraft. “We had to do a lot of scrounging for the correct period parts,” John said. “I am completely satisfied that if some old-timer sticks his head inside of the ‘hell hole,’ looking at all the wiring and plumbing, they would recognize the aircraft as being period correct.”

“THE SEAWOLVES HAD TO SCROUNGE FOR EVERYTHING THEY NEEDED,” JOHN SAID.

With the majority of the helicopter assembled, it was time to put it back in Navy colors. The problem for John was he had

received information that the Seawolves really didn’t have a “standard” color.

“The Seawolves had to scrounge for everything they needed,” John said. “It didn’t matter if it was tail booms, engines, instruments, blades, or paint. They ended up using some ‘borrowed’ Army olive drab green and mixing it with some Royal Australian Navy blue paint they had acquired in a trade. The end result was a dark blue color with a hint of green. The true test was when some retired Seawolves showed up and gave it a close inspection. We passed with flying colors!”

With the Huey ready to fly, there were just a few more items to add to make it combat ready.

“The Seawolves were the most heavily armed helicopters in Vietnam,” John said. “To replicate what they used in combat, we had to make an alteration

and strapped on a modern inert Dillon M134 Minigun. Other than that, everything else was period correct, including the .50-caliber and M-60 door guns, 2.75 rocket pods, and assorted crew weapons and ammo.”

With the Huey looking better than factory fresh, it was time for John to turn this piece of historic treasure over to his longtime pilot, Larry Clark.

FLYING THE HUEY

Pilot Larry Clark, founder of the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association (VHPA), admitted he has an odd relationship with Seawolf 324. The hard part for Larry was adjusting to the Navy colors. Larry wore all green when he served in the U.S. Army and flew B models in Vietnam in 1965 and 1966. He logged more than 350 combat missions, got shot at a lot, and was hit quite a few times. Larry admitted that he has a tinge of jealousy when he flies this bird because he wishes he had this much

hardware hanging off his Army Hueys.

“The Navy took a lot of liberties with adding all the machine guns and rockets,” Larry said. “We [the Army] were pretty tame with just some rocket pods and M60 machine guns on our doors. But for me, flying a Huey is a real kick in the pants.

“IT’S OLD, SLOW, SLUGGISH, AND WAY UNDERPOWERED. IT GETS ABOUT 1 MILE TO THE GALLON AND BURNS 100 GALLONS PER HOUR.”

“I can vividly remember when I was a 20-year-old kid, sitting in the right seat, listening to the turbine engine wind up, looking around at the guns hanging off the rear doors, and the tubes full of rockets. I was told I could go out, empty everything I had, come back and reload, and go again, and I

remember thinking, ‘And they’re going to pay me for this, too?’ It was very exciting for me.”

According to Larry, the Huey is very stable in flight, and he feels it is an inherently well-designed aircraft. The Huey requires very little control motion because the controls are hydraulically boosted. That means if you turn loose on the stick it will fall over and move on its own with no friction; it’s very smooth. There is no feedback; the stick doesn’t jerk around as one might expect. For Larry it feels like the Huey has a “super power steering system.” “Just move the stick and the aircraft follows you wherever you want it to go. It is very fluid and very easy to fly,” Larry claimed.

“Just because it was freshly restored doesn’t mean it flies any smoother,” Larry said, tongue in cheek. “Getting into this one brought back a lot of memories, some not so pleasant. It’s old, slow, sluggish, and way underpowered. It gets about 1



SEAWOLF HISTORY

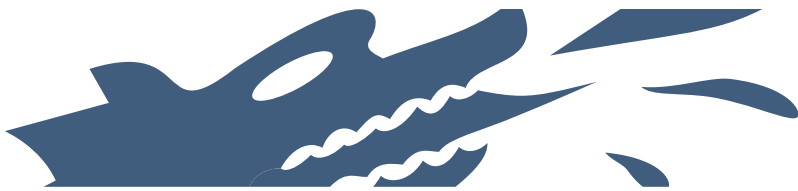
From early 1967 until March 1972, flight crews of Helicopter Attack Squadron, Light, or HA(L)-3, operated in support of U.S. Navy units in South Vietnam that included the inland “Brown Water Navy” and the SEALs. HA(L)-3 consisted of nine detachments of two helicopter gunships each. They were stationed at various locations in South Vietnam or on board barracks ships positioned in the larger rivers of the Mekong Delta. During the Seawolves’ first year, they fired more than 13,761,000 rounds of 7.62 mm ammo, 800,000 rounds of .30- and .50-caliber ammo, and more than 155,000 rockets.

“The Navy used to rely on the Army Huey gunships for protection, but I guess the Army got tired of flying for the Navy. The Army ended

up loaning the Navy 30 to 35 ‘war weary’ UH-1B models. By the time the Navy repainted them and rearmed them, the Seawolves carved out a name for themselves in the history books. The commanding officer ordered that the word ‘Navy’ would be painted in white on the tail boom so the people on the ground knew who was shooting at them from above!” Larry said.

Huey squadrons usually flew with a crew of four: two pilots up front, a door gunner, and the crew chief. There were times the Huey was so overloaded with fuel and ammo that the pilots would kind of bounce it along the ground trying to get it moving forward as the crew members ran alongside it and climbed up on a skid and jumped in just as it was taking off.

The Seawolves were the most highly decorated squadron in U.S. Navy history with 44 Seawolves killed in action (KIA) during the five years it spent in combat.



mile to the gallon and burns 100 gallons per hour. Up at altitude I can barely coax it to cruise at 85 knots, but down low it becomes a speed demon as the needle barely pegs 100 knots.

“With all that drag hanging out there in the form of rockets, Miniguns, and machine guns, this Huey doesn’t seem quite as snappy or as maneuverable as the ones I flew in Vietnam. But I could care less. I am all smiles when I am at the controls of this aircraft and am extremely proud to show it off to all the veterans who have a connection with these birds.”

STORYTELLER

During AirVenture 2011, Seawolf 324 became a “veterans mini clubhouse” as former Huey drivers, crew members, and Vietnam veterans stopped by to pay their respects to an old friend; many referred to the Huey as the “angel of mercy.”

“During the week we were stationed in the Warbirds area I saw guys come up to this helicopter and burst into tears,” John said. “It was a very emotional experience for them as

they recalled their Vietnam combat days.”

Larry Clark echoed John’s words about the veterans and said he can pick out Vietnam veterans pretty quickly. “When they first walk up to the Huey they have this ‘look,’” said Larry. “They are looking at the helicopter, and you can literally see the memories flooding back to them. I watched veterans begin to explain the significance of the Huey to the crowds because they either crewed one, rode in them on their way to combat, or were rescued out of a bad situation by the Seawolves. There were lots and lots of stories as history came alive for all of us who had the privilege to be there. Although this Huey is just a kid compared to the World War II aircraft that show up here [at Oshkosh], it’s still an old piece of aviation history that means so much to so many. I hope no one ever forgets the role the UH-1 Huey has played in our country’s history.” *EAA*

Jim Busha, EAA 119684, is an avid pilot and longtime contributor to EAA publications. He is the editor of *Warbirds* magazine and the owner of a 1943 Aeronca L-3.

UH-1 HUEY FACTS

- The prototype UH-1 Huey first flew in 1956, and the model continues in production today in both military and commercial models.
- The UH-1 Huey holds the world record for flying the most combat hours of any aircraft in history. There were 26,733,403 sorties alone flown by 17,000 Hueys during the Vietnam War. Hueys recorded more than 21,166 hits by enemy fire, with 4,128 Hueys lost in combat.
- More Hueys have been built than any other helicopter. They have been used for heavy lifting, firefighting, medevac, logging, troop transport, drug interdiction, aerial mapping, movie production, and law enforcement to name just a few uses.
- Transport Hueys armed only with door guns were called “Slicks.”
- Huey gunships were called “Snakes” because of their bite or “Hogs” because they bristled with an assortment of weapons.
- During the peak of the Vietnam War (1970-1972) the U.S. Army was training more than 3,000 pilots and 21,000 mechanics per year to keep the helicopters flying.

AIRCRAFT DATA BOX

Aircraft Make & Model: Bell UH-1B Iroquois Huey

N-Number: N370AS

Length: 41 feet, 8 inches

Rotor Diameter: 44 feet

Height: 14 feet, 7 inches

Maximum Gross Weight: 8,500 pounds

Empty Weight: 4,900 pounds

Fuel Capacity: 168 gallons

Powerplant Make & Model: T53-L-13A

Horsepower: 1,400 hp

Cruise Speed: 90 knots

For more information:

Overseas Aircraft Support Inc.
727B Woodland Road
Lakeside, AZ 85929

Phone: 928-368-6965