

The War Without Heroes?

By GORDON I. PETERSON
Senior Editor



When Americans gather to honor their war dead this Memorial Day, it is a fitting occasion to refute one of the lingering misconceptions associated with the Vietnam War—the notion that heroism somehow was in short supply in the ranks of those who served in that bitter, protracted, and socially divisive conflict.

Many of the real heroes of that era rest silently today—men like Aviation Ordnanceman 3rd Class James A. Wall, a Navy helicopter door gunner from Atlanta, Texas. Following recruit training in 1970, Wall volunteered for duty with the Seawolves of Helicopter Attack (Light) Squadron Three (HAL-3). He arrived in Vietnam in June 1970.

Formed in 1967 as the Navy's only rapid-reaction armed helicopter squadron, nine detachments of heavily armed UH-1B "Huey" helicopter fire teams were stationed at key locations across South Vietnam's Mekong Delta region. The detachments provided close-air support for riverine operations on the Delta's all-important waterways—working with the "brown water" Navy of river patrol boats, Navy special-warfare SEAL teams, and other units. The Navy helo gunships could be airborne within minutes—day or night. Urgent calls for help arrived frequently in Navy tactical operation centers: "Scramble the Seawolves."

Wall was initially stationed at HAL-3 headquarters in Binh Thuy, but he soon volunteered for duty with a squadron detachment as a combat aircrewman. Dennis Caldwell of Santa Ana, Calif., a close friend who served with Wall at the time, recalled that Wall was not content to remain at squadron headquarters. "He wanted to get into the fight on detachment," Caldwell told *Sea Power*. "He wanted to fight for his country and do anything he could to help out. Texas boys are like that," Caldwell added. "You wanted him at your six o'clock."

Wall was posted to HAL-3 Detachment 2 at Nha Be, a small base 20 miles southeast of Saigon in the Rung Sat Special Zone. One of the detachment's principal missions was to prevent Viet Cong units from attacking "special interest" merchant ships transiting the lengthy shipping channel leading from the South China Sea to Saigon, South Vietnam's capital city and one of the country's largest ports.

Detachment life for a Seawolf helicopter door gunner entailed numerous aerial patrols interspersed with daily CAS (close air support) missions. A door gunner's ability to "walk"

the fire from his .50-caliber door-mounted machine gun to within a few yards of units in contact often meant success or failure, life or death, for U.S. and South Vietnamese forces. For Wall, there also were long, hot hours of helicopter maintenance and ordnance work on the flight line between missions. His monthly basic pay was \$249.

Wall was severely wounded by enemy ground fire on a mission north of Nha Be in October 1970. Prompt action by his fellow door gunner saved his life. As it was, Wall nearly bled to death before his combat-damaged aircraft could return to base. He spent two months recovering in a Navy hospital—but asked to return to duty with the Seawolves.

When HAL-3 experienced a shortage of qualified door gunners early in 1971, Wall again volunteered for flight duty and was assigned to Det 8 at Rac Gia, a small village on the western coast of South Vietnam on the Gulf of Thailand. During an air strike on 19 April in support of Operation Tran Hung Dao VI, an enemy round hit a rocket warhead on Wall's side of the helicopter, causing a low-order detonation. Wall received a fatal wound from exploding shrapnel. It fell to Dennis Caldwell, the petty officer of the watch at squadron headquarters, to confirm Wall's identity and, with the squadron duty officer, to sign for the remains of the 20-year-old door gunner.

Wall's sister, Judy Tentecost, today lives near her mother's home in Texarkana, Texas. One year younger than her brother, she exchanged hundreds of letters with him during the war. "I saw physical, spiritual, and emotional differences in Jimmie after he was wounded," Tentecost said recently. Tentecost said that in his last letter—received the same day she was notified of his death—Wall described his reasons for volunteering to serve in one of the Navy's most highly decorated squadrons. "He believed wholeheartedly in what he was doing," she recounted. "His letters were filled with passion—yet there was a longing to come home."

Tentecost has several mementos of her brother's service. One, a wood-framed shadow box, displays his 15 military decorations and service medals—including the Distinguished Flying Cross and three Purple Hearts. "Many pieces of his story are missing," she told *Sea Power*, "but I fly his flag in my front yard to remember what he gave. He was a hero."

Learn more about the Seawolves at the Seawolf Association homepage: www.seawolf.org

"... Vietnam was a war largely without heroes."

Stephen Hunter
The Washington Post, February 27, 1999

"Much has been written about the Seawolves, the Navy helicopter gunship squadron that worked under CTF-116 (Navy River Patrol Force). I don't know a single SEAL who operated in Vietnam and wasn't saved by those guys at least once. They were the best helo crews I had ever seen. The Seawolf crews were real heroes."

Capt. Robert A. Gormly, USN (Ret.)
Combat Swimmer: Memoirs of a Navy SEAL

AO3 James A. Wall: Hero & Patriot

By CAPT Gordon I. Peterson, USN (Ret.)

Nearly 30 years ago, Aviation Ordnancemen 3rd Class James A. Wall was killed in action while serving as a helicopter door gunner with the famed *Seawolves* of Helicopter Attack (Light) Three (HAL-3) during a night-strike mission in the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). In April, on the 25th anniversary of the final U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, Naval Station Norfolk, Virginia, named one of the Navy's largest enlisted berthing facilities "James A. Wall Manor" in honor of the young Sailor.

The squadron's personnel casualty report to BuPers on April 19, 1971, was characteristically terse in describing his death: "Wall received fatal wounds from exploding round or shrapnel."

How the 20-year old native of Atlanta, Texas, met his fate in the skies over Rach Gia, RVN, is a longer—and inspiring—story. Following his enlistment in 1969 and advanced training, Wall volunteered for duty with the *Seawolves*. The petty officer's mettle was demonstrated vividly during his Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape training in the U.S. He smuggled an American flag into the simulated POW compound. "The result was predictable," recalled *Seawolf* CPO William Schieber. "There was even more abuse from the guards and immersions in the 'People's Pond,' but there was Jim, his usual unflappable self, grinning and looking like he was having the time of his life."

Wall reported to HAL-3 in Vietnam in June 1970. Formed in 1967 as the Navy's only rapid-reaction armed helicopter squadron, nine detachments of heavily armed *Seawolf* UH-1B Huey helicopter fire teams were stationed at key locations across South Vietnam's Mekong Delta region. The detachments provided close air support for riverine operations on the Delta's all-important waterways, working with the "brown water" Navy of river

patrol boats, Navy special-warfare SEAL teams, USMC advisors, and other units. Navy helo gunships could be airborne within minutes - day or night. Urgent calls for help arrived frequently in Navy tactical operation centers across the Delta: "Scramble the *Seawolves*."

Wall was initially stationed at HAL-3 headquarters in Binh Thuy, but he soon volunteered for duty with a squadron det

calls for close air support or harassment and interdiction missions. A door gunner's ability to "walk" the fire from his 7.62-caliber M-60 or .50-caliber door-mounted machine gun to within a few yards of units in contact often meant success or failure, life or death, for U.S. and South Vietnamese forces. For Wall, there also were long, hot hours of helo maintenance and ordnance work on the flight line between missions. His monthly basic pay was \$249.

Wall was severely wounded by enemy fire while supporting Vietnamese ground troops on a mission north of Nha Be in October 1970. Prompt action by PO Fred "Terry" Meeks, Wall's fellow door gunner, saved his life. As it was, Wall nearly bled to death before his combat-damaged helo, streaming fuel from numerous hits, returned to base. Wall was raced to Nha Be's small sick bay for emergency surgery. LT Roger Ek, a *Seawolf* pilot who was present when Wall came out of the anesthesia, recalled that the young gunner's first words were: "How is Terry?"

Retired CAPT Clint Davie, then a lieutenant and the helicopter aircraft commander when Wall was wounded, visited him in a hospital near Saigon. Davie said that Wall hobbled across the ward to greet him, dragging a drainage bottle for his chest wound. "I told him that his wound meant it would be Japan and home," Davie said, "but Jim said, 'No way—I'm staying to finish my tour.'" Wall spent two months recovering in the hospital—but asked to return to duty with the *Seawolves*.

When HAL-3 experienced a shortage of qualified door gunners early in 1971, Wall again volunteered for flight duty. He reported on April 19th to Det 8 at Rach Gia, a small village on the western coast of South Vietnam on the Gulf of Thailand. The detachment's four enlisted gunners all had been flying around the clock



AO3 Wall, right, with PO Terry Meeks, refueling aircraft following HAL-3 Det 2 mission. Meeks saved Wall's life in October 1970 when he was severely wounded. (Photo by author)

as a combat aircrewman. Dennis Caldwell recalled that Wall was not content to remain at squadron headquarters. "He wanted to get into the fight on detachment," Caldwell said. "He wanted to fight for his country and do anything he could to help out. Texas boys are like that," Caldwell added. "You wanted him at your six o'clock."

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Detachment life for a *Seawolf* helicopter door gunner entailed numerous routine aerial patrols interspersed with daily

for days without relief. They needed help, and Wall stepped forward.

PO3 Mike Madrid was assigned as Wall's roommate. After a short orientation briefing, the two threw Wall's seabag in their room in the barracks and went to an Army mess hall. The details of that dinner remain fresh in Madrid's mind to the present day. "I clearly remember the meal as very poor Army spaghetti with acceptable garlic bread and lime Kool-Aid with brown sugar sweetener," Madrid said.

Mindful of Wall's serious wound just months before, Madrid said that a question crossed his mind as the two gunners ate their meal. "I wanted to ask him, 'What are you doing here—haven't you done enough?'" The question went unasked, however, as the two hurried back to the detachment. "After we ate," Madrid continued, "I was dropped off at our hotel and fell immediately asleep. Jim started flying missions right away."

That night, Det 8's *Seawolves* were again in action. During an air strike in support of Operation *Tran Hung Dao VI*, Wall was flying in the trail helo in the two-helicopter light fire team. When it came under heavy ground fire, Wall leaned outward and laid down suppressive fire from his door gun.

In the ensuing firefight, a Viet Cong .51-caliber round struck a rocket warhead and ricocheted into Wall's head, killing him instantly - nine days short of the second anniversary of his enlistment in the Navy. The projectile then ploughed through the cabin's ceiling, damaging wiring bundles before exiting the airframe. The aircraft plummeted groundward, but the pilot recovered at treetop level and returned safely to base.

PO1 Russell Underwood, Det 8's petty officer in charge, was flying in the lead helicopter when Wall was hit. He examined the damaged aircraft at Rach Gia the next day to trace the path of the enemy round. "The force of the bullet's impact bent the warhead back before striking Jim," he said. "He never knew what hit him."

It fell to Dennis Caldwell, the petty officer of the watch at HAL-3 squadron headquarters on April 20th, to greet the Army field ambulance carrying Wall's remains when it arrived at Binh Thuy. Together with the squadron duty officer, Caldwell identified and signed for the remains of his friend. Wall had never unpacked his seabag at Rach Gia.



UH-1B Huey gunship assigned to HAL-3 overflies PBRs in Mekong Delta during a low-level patrol. Below, in this HAL-3 Det 2 group photo, taken in Nha Be, Vietnam in the fall of 1970, PO Wall is standing to the immediate right of the .50-cal door-mounted machine gun.

Other *Seawolves* who served with Wall were shocked to learn of his death when they received the news at duty stations around the world. Most never expected that he would return to a flying status. Years passed. Wall's memory stayed fresh in their minds - along with the hope that something would be done one day to recognize and honor his sacrifice.

Those aspirations were realized when CAPT Arthur H. Barber III, the CO of NS Norfolk, forwarded a proposal to CNO in November 1999 to name a building in Wall's honor. He had learned of Wall's heroism through a Memorial Day article published in the May 1999 issue of the Navy

League's *Sea Power* magazine.

"I appreciated efforts to perpetuate the memory of this Navy hero and patriot," Barber said, "and I am glad that I came across the article right at the time that I was looking for ideas on how to name the enlisted barracks at the former naval air station after that base's merger into my own."

Barber's request was approved early in 2000. A dedication ceremony was held April 28th, just over 29 years since Wall's combat death. The Navy flew Wall's sister, Judy Pentecost, and daughter, Angela Wall Solley, to Virginia to attend the dedication ceremony. Fellow *Seawolves* passed the hat to fund travel for both Pentecost's and Solley's children. More than 30 of Wall's squadron mates attended the ceremony.

Pentecost lives near her mother's home in Texarkana, Texas. One year younger than her brother, she exchanged hundreds of letters with him during the war. "I saw physical, spiritual, and emotional differences in Jimmy after he was wounded," Pentecost said. She noted that in his last letter - received the same day she was notified of his death - her brother had described his reasons for volunteering to serve in one of the Navy's most highly decorated squadrons.

"He believed wholeheartedly in what





PO Wall receives Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry from an ARVN general during a 1970 ceremony at Nha Be. PO Meeks is to Wall's right

he was doing," she recounted. "His letters were filled with passion - yet there was a longing to come home."

Pentecost has several mementos of her brother's service. One, a wood-framed shadow box, displays his 15 military decorations and service medals - including the Distinguished Flying Cross, Bronze Star, Air Medal, Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry, and Purple Heart medals. "Many pieces of his story are missing," she told *Sea Power* last year, "but I fly his flag in my front yard to remember what he gave. He was a hero."

Wall's daughter, Angela, was 18-months old when her father was killed in action. Today, she continues to read to her children a letter he sent to her just two weeks before his death. "I want you to know that I love you and cherish you with all my heart, and I wish I could be there with you," Wall wrote.

The dedication ceremony, hosted by CAPT George E. Slaven Jr., CO of Naval Support Activity, Norfolk; and Capt. Joseph F. Bouchard, CO NS Norfolk, provided an opportunity for those who served with Wall to pass along their remembrances to family members - to help fill in the blank pages of his tour of duty with the *Seawolves*. The assemblage of *Seawolves* knew Wall at different times and places during his career.

In addition to the Navy's mementos of the ceremony, the *Seawolf* Association presented Wall's sister and daughter with identical albums containing photographs and other memorabilia associated with Wall's service with HAL-3. A 25-minute video production dedicated to Wall - com-

piled from Super 8 motion picture film shot by Davie at Det 2 in 1970, also was given to each member of the Wall family. It contained scenes of the young *Seawolf* door gunner never seen by the family until their reunion in Norfolk.

"I now know why men who have been to war yearn to reunite," Michael Norman wrote in *These Good Men*. "Not to tell stories or look at old pictures. Not to laugh or weep. Comrades gather because they long to be with the men who once acted their best - men who suffered and sacrificed, who were stripped raw, right down to their humanity."

REP Owen Pickett (D-VA), the guest speaker, told the large audience of active and retired service members that the new building will serve as a daily reminder of Wall's heroic achievements. "By dedicating this building in his name," Pickett said, "we remember Petty Officer Wall; we remember his patriotism; we remember how he sacrificed in Vietnam to keep a just peace in the world; we remember those who came home, and those who did not. We remember this because his sacrifice and that of his comrades in arms must not be forgotten."

In a letter to Solley presented at the ceremony, CNO ADM Jay L. Johnson wrote, "Your father epitomized the very highest values of honor, courage, and commitment. The story of his dedicated service will be perpetuated among future generations of Sailors as they learn of his gallantry."

Secretary of the Navy Richard Danzig also wrote Solley and Pentecost to convey his appreciation for Wall's heroism during the war in Vietnam. "Petty Officer Wall died in the service of our Country while performing a most noble act,"

Danzig wrote, "Trying to protect his fellow aircrewmembers from deadly enemy ground fire during a fateful night mission on April 19, 1971."

The Navy's decision to name the building in Wall's honor made a tremendous impact on all members of his family. "It gives me a sense that his loss was not in vain," Solley said. Pentecost said that she and her family would be forever grateful to the Navy and the *Seawolf* Association.

In Norfolk, former *Seawolf* Steve Martin spoke of his deceased shipmate and helped to answer the question that perplexed Mike Madrid during his brief time with Jim Wall 29 years ago. "He put himself out front," Martin said of Wall. "That was Jim - out there all the time."

On the day following the dedication ceremony the Wall family, accompanied by former PO Madrid, traveled to Washington D.C., for a first-ever visit to the Vietnam War Memorial. Emotions ran high as they gently traced the outline of the letters engraved on the black marble - James A. Wall - and were reunited with their fallen American hero. ■

CAPT Peterson served with Petty Officer Wall in HAL-3 and flew more than 500 combat missions in Vietnam. He is the senior editor of Navy League's Sea Power magazine.

Seawolf Association homepage:
HYPERLINK <http://www.seawolf.org>

James A. Wall Manor at NS Norfolk was dedicated April 28, 2000. Left to right are CAPT Joseph F. Bouchard, NS Norfolk CO; RADM C.W. Cole, Commander, Navy Region Mid-Atlantic; Mrs. Judy Pentecost (Wall's sister); REP Owen Pickett of Virginia; CAPT George E. Slaven Jr., CO of the Naval Support Activity; and Mrs. Angela Wall Solley (Wall's daughter). (Photo by Michael Madrid)

