

Vietnam-era Marines Bring “Ugly Angel” Back to Life

**Her red eyes flashed in anger
When she roared into the scene,
Spitting flames like a fiery rain
To pick up her Marines.
She’s a combat-hardened lady
Who’s not afraid to try.
Come save me, Ugly Angel
Please don’t let me die.**

Marine Vietnam veteran Carl Jones, singer and songwriter for the band Homeland and, included these lyrics in a song titled “Ugly Angel:” which is Homeland’s tribute to the Sikorsky UH-34D so many Marines remember from the Vietnam War. A group of Marines in New York is paying tribute to the same helicopter by turning it into a “flying museum”

The Marines and volunteers of Marine Helicopter Squadron 361 Veterans Association Inc. call their mission the Vietnam Helicopter Memorial, History and Educational Restoration Project. They’ve found a second home in a 50-foot-by-100-foot potato barn in Jamesport, N.Y., and they’ve spent the last three years working to bring a combat-weary, bullet-hole-riddled UH-34D back to life.

“This particular helicopter ... played an important role in Vietnam,” said former Sergeant Al Weiss, the president of Marine Helicopter Squadron 361 Veterans Association Inc. “They were used to bring wounded troops out of the jungles. They also brought medical supplies and troop insertions into the jungles. A lot of veterans remember these helicopters coming to their rescue.”

One of those veterans heard about the restoration project and sent a letter to the Marines along with a monetary donation, ‘[I] was a [grunt] with 1st Battalion, 27th Marines, and was wounded and medivaced out of the Hue area on April 17, 1968;’ wrote Dane Brown. “Three UH-34Ds came in to carry out the dead and wounded, he continued, “So since then, a Marine UH-34D is a thousand times more beautiful than any sunrise or sunset.”

Weiss said that kind of thinking is what originally motivated him to take on the project.

There’s so much to be told,” said Weiss. “People just don’t know how this helicopter saved so many lives in Vietnam.”

Weiss and other Marines from the association came up with the idea at their Vietnam reunion in 1998.

‘While we were there, there was [another] restored UH-34D] flying around out side,’ said Weiss, a former UH-34D crew chief “A good 70 percent of people there were involved with that type of helicopter, so it really hit home. A couple of us got together and said, ‘Why can’t we do that?’ According to the Marine Medium



Vietnam-era Marines in Jamesport, NY, have worked for the past three years to restore a UH-34D (above), a helicopter flown by Marines during the Vietnam War. From left are Marine veterans Frank Flagg, George Debarge, Thomas Mastroianni, John Griffin, Ron Hatton, Al Weiss, Ben Cascio and Bernie Savoie. The helicopter’s original logbook (right) dates back more than 30 years. (Photos by Cpl Beth Zimmerman)



Helicopter Squadron 361 Web site, the UH-34D first brought Marines into Vietnam on April 15, 1962. During the next seven years, the helicopter was the Corps’ primary aircraft used during the war in Vietnam. The last Marine UH-340 was retired from HMM-362 in August 1969. More than 30 years after the Marine Corps deemed the helicopter obsolete, four Vietnam veterans found their ugly angel in an Arizona junkyard.

“When we walked in and saw it, I thought, ‘What am I doing here?’” said former Marine Staff Sergeant Ron Hatton. One of the Marines who traveled to pick up the helo in 2001, Hatton originally served as a crew chief with HMM-361 during Vietnam. “It was the biggest piece of junk I ever saw, he said, “But we put it on a lowboy and sent it back to New York in many pieces”

“This one served with HMM-361 three different times in Vietnam,” explained Weiss. “The logbooks prove it. The same names that are in the logbooks come to our reunions.”

The Marines of HMM-361, known during Weiss’s era as the “Flying Tigers:’ hold a reunion every two years. The squadron is now known as Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 361 (HMH-361), and it is based out of Marine Corps Air Station, Miramar Calif.

Once the helicopter is flight-worthy, the Marines will use it as an educational tool for the public and the Corps.

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