

Veterans restore Vietnam-era workhorse

Story and photos by
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During the early 1960's, when Marines needed transportation to or from combat zones, they didn't call in MV-22's. For the Marines on the frontlines in Vietnam, their savior was the UH-34D, ancestor of the CH-46E and the MV-22.

At the stand-up ceremony for Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron-263, the first operational MV-22 Osprey squadron, Marines from the Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron-361 Veterans Association displayed a piece of the squadron's past, a static display of a fully restored, operational UH-34D.

The UH-34D was flown by HMM-361 and other Marine squadrons during the Vietnam era. While it wasn't the most beautiful helicopter, it got the job done, bringing Marines back from the front, earning the nickname "Ugly Angel."

As a crew chief on medical evacuation missions in Vietnam, Frank Flag saw firsthand how important the helicopter was.

"You're going in and getting Marines who need medical attention," said Flag. "We could get them to a hospital in 15 minutes."

While he understood the risk of his job, he accepted it.

"You can get a Marine to do stuff that's dangerous, but you can't get them to do things that are boring," said Flag.

The impact of the helicopter and how it helped save the lives of so many Marines compelled the members of the HMM-361 Veterans Association to build a fully operational UH-34D helicopter.

While attending a Vietnam veteran's reunion, Allan Weiss, president of the HMM-361 Veterans Association and a former crew chief, noticed the strong reaction Marines had to seeing Vietnam-era helicopters.

"When I saw almost every former Marine there crying, I knew this was the one to restore for our guys," said Weiss.

The reaction spurred a project that has taken five years to complete, with an approximate \$350,000 price tag, according to www.34restoration.org.

More than 50 corporate sponsors, including the Marine Corps League, Vietnam Veterans of America, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and American Legions have aided the restoration of the UH-34D.



Maj. Gen. Thomas L. Moore meets with members of HMM-361 Veterans Association and builders of the fully-operational UH-34D helicopter. The Vietnam-era helicopter caught the attention of Marines young and old at the stand-up ceremony for VMM-263 March 3.

From a pile of scrap in a Cochise, Ariz., junkyard to a fully-operational, fully-restored piece of Vietnam history, the project was finished Nov. 13, 2005, said Weiss.

Ron Hatton, an HMM-361 crew chief who spent 14 years with the UH-34D, had his doubts when he first saw the frame sitting in a desert lot four and a half years ago.

"I turned my back to the aircraft and said, 'Oh my God, what have we gotten ourselves into,'" said Hatton. "Now the helicopter is a dream come true."

Larry Turner, a former HMM-362 pilot with 18,000 hours of flying experience, flew the first flight of the fully restored UH-34D.

Weiss never flew a UH-34D during his time in Vietnam, but almost a half century later, he was proud to ride in the helicopter.

"Everybody was in tears," said Weiss. "It was a very emotional day after years of rebuilding it."

The members of the HMM-361 Veterans Association flew their "Ugly Angel" to New River March 2, marking the longest flight of the recently restored helicopter.

Flying in the UH-34D still thrills George DeBarge, an HMM-162 crew chief.

"To see this thing fly after 41 years, its amazing," he said.

Berine Savoie, a Marine Helicopter Transport Squadron-263 crew chief, didn't need to see the helicopter fly to feel the excitement.

"When I heard it start for the first time in 40 years, chills ran up and down my spine," he said.

"Honey, we're home," screamed John Conner as the UH-34D descended onto the flightline. Conner, a HMM-162 crew chief, returned to the home of his former squadron in the aircraft he rode out of Vietnam.

During Conner's return flight from Vietnam, he drew his knife and carved the date into the interior of the helicopter, said Conner.

When he joined the project almost two years ago, he heard Weiss talking about an engraving next to the crew chief seat, and with

that, he knew this was his UH-34D.

"Out of the hundreds of helicopters they looked at, what are the chances something like that could happen; it's incredible," he said.

The stand-up ceremony for VMM-263 was the first exhibition of the finished aircraft.

The Marines plan to take their "Ugly Angel" around the country to teach about their savior in the sky, while paying tribute to their fallen warriors. The crew travels with a sign, representing the Marines who perished from the squadron in Vietnam.

Flag said he sees the restoration project as a link to his grandchildren.

"I'm thinking of my two grandchildren in Texas. They can go into a museum someday and say, 'That's grandpa's helicopter,'" said Flag.

The HMM-361 Veterans Association relies on donations to support its mission of traveling the country to display its fully operational UH-34D helicopter and can be contacted at (631)-827-5526. Donations should be sent to the Marine Helicopter Squadron-361 Veterans Association, P.O. Box 429, Cutchogue, NY 11935.



The UH-34D is completely restored down to the smallest detail.



Old School! A UH-34D "Ugly Angel" takes off from the New River flightline.