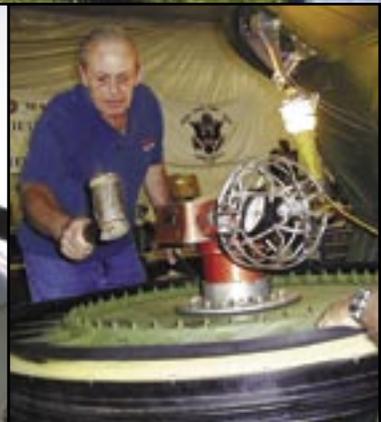




# Return of the *Seahorse*



Helicopter restorations in the warbird movement are few and far between. That may be changing, given the enthusiasm demonstrated by a group of veterans in New York. The Marine Helicopter Squadron 361 Veteran's Association recently returned a Sikorsky UH-34D 'Seahorse' to the air.

It is hard to imagine that the fall of Vietnam was over thirty years ago. The involvement of U.S. forces drew down several years before. Those who served in the conflict returned to the United States with little fanfare, in many cases to the scorn of anti-war protestors. Only in the past two decades have Americans begun to embrace the heroes of that far away conflict. The veterans, however, never forgot those days and as their numbers begin to fade through the passing of time, some have looked for ways to insure that the sacrifices of the time period are not forgotten. New Yorker Al Weiss is one of those men.

Weiss served in the United States Marine Corps...or simply the Corps to those who served. As a crew chief he went to Vietnam with Marine Helicopter Squadron 361 'The Flying Tigers' flying CH-53s. HMM-361 had first gone to Vietnam in October 1963, at that time they were flying the UH-34 'Seahorse.' The 'Seahorse' is the military version of Sikorsky's civilian S-58. Sikorsky nearly missed the opportunity to produce the S-58 for the military when it lost both a Navy competition for an anti-submarine aircraft and an Army and Air Force competition for a new utility aircraft. The Navy's selection, the Bell HSL-1, proved unsuitable for shipboard operations and the Army's selection, the Piasecki H-21 was also the Air Force choice, and all the production was going to the younger service. Since it was in production and readily available, the Army, Navy and Marines all began purchasing S-58s, designated the H-34 'Choctaw', HSS-1 'Seabat' and HUS-1 'Seahorse' respectively by the different services. In 1962 U.S. military aircraft designations were standardized and all services recognized the helicopter as the UH-34. By the time production ended, the military would purchase over xxxxx UH-34s and they would be produced

overseas by Westland in the United Kingdom, where it was known as the Wessex, and by the French company Sud-Est. The UH-34 would receive some measure of fame as 'Marine 1' the Presidential helicopter during the late 1950s and early 1960s.

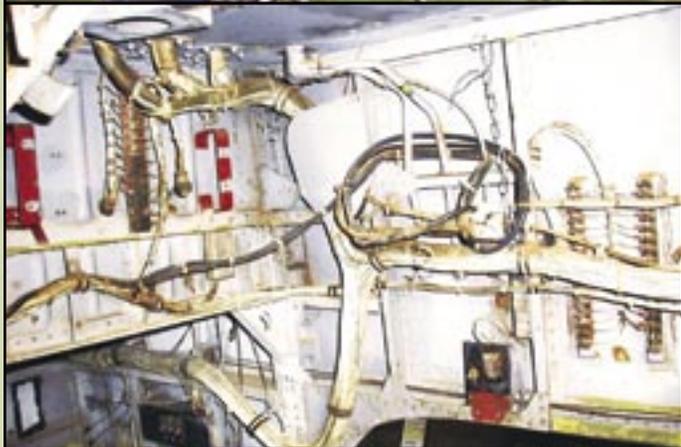
The Marines received their first 'Seahorses' in 1955 and would eventually receive 515. It became the mainstay of Marine helicopter squadrons for the next ten years. The first USMC UH-34Ds arrived in Vietnam in 1962 and were assigned to Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron (HMM) 362. The unit deployed as part of Operation SHUFLY- the effort to support South Vietnamese troops in engaging the Viet Cong. The Marine units would be the only U.S. combat operators of the UH-34 in the theatre, serving in the assault and medivac roles. They soldiered on longer than the military had planned when the replacement, the CH-46 suffered development problems. The last Marine UH-34D would not leave Vietnam until 1969.

The Marines who served in the helicopter squadrons came home from Vietnam and restarted their lives. By the late 1980s many of those men began to wonder what had happened to all their buddies from Vietnam. A few of these men got together and started making phone calls. The grass roots effort resulted in the USMC Vietnam Helicopter Association. The first reunion was held in Las Vegas, Nevada in 1988 with 200 attendees. Over the years the group has grown and so have the reunions. The last reunion in 2004 brought over 4000 attendees, and a change in the charter for the group. An invitation was extended to all Marine combat helicopter men -both veterans and active duty and the organization was renamed the USMC Combat Helicopter Association.

This brings us back to Al Weiss, who attended the 1998 association reunion. "There are usually vintage helicopters in attendance at our reunions that someone brings in to fly. At the Pensacola reunion where was a UH-34 flying. I was standing on the beach and I saw this thing fly by and just happened to watch the reaction of the other veterans. There were tears streaming down guy's faces. I wasn't a UH-34 guy myself, I served on heavy helicopters like the CH-53, but I thought, why can't we do something like this ourselves?"

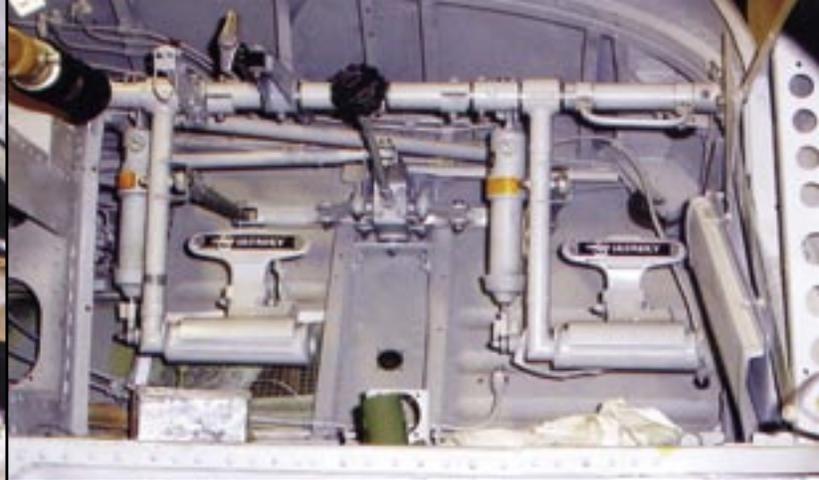
After the reunion Weiss got together with some other members of his former squadron and decided to pursue the project. They formed a non-profit, membership based organization called the





Marine Helicopter Squadron 361 Veteran's Association and started looking for a helicopter. "In May 2000 four of us went to Arizona searching for UH-34s. We spent three days in Tucson looking at UH-34s and we found close to 300 aircraft, but they were all Army veterans. We could not find any Marine UH-34s. We were about ready to buy an ex-Army hulk and restore it when I spoke with Jake Dangle of Dangle Aviation, one of the largest suppliers of S-58 parts and overhaul services. He told me that he couldn't see a bunch of Marines restoring an Army helicopter and told me that I needed to go to Cochise, Arizona and talk to John Haertsch. I called Haertsch and he told me he had about 25 hulks in his storage yard. I asked him if he had a list of serial numbers or bureau numbers, which he did, and he faxed it to me. I contacted all the commanding officers and some pilots of our unit from 1963 thru 1969 and asked them for Bureau Numbers of aircraft that were in our squadron. Once I got that list I compared it with the list from Cochise and found that he had five UH-34s that were associated with the 361st during the Vietnam era."

Once again Weiss traveled to Arizona to inspect the airframes, focusing on the five that served in 361. He describes what he found. "They had purchased them from someone who had gotten them as government surplus. They were stripped like cars in a junkyard to support other flying S-58s or UH-34s. Haertsch son still flies three of them in heavy lift operations. I believe one is still piston powered while the other two are turbine conversions." Weiss selected the one that looked the best and Haertsch showed him all of the original military paperwork and logbooks. Weiss



was able to verify that the UH-34D had been assigned to his squadron three times during the Vietnam period. The group made a deal for the gutted helicopter and trucked it home to Jamesport, New York, where it arrived in July 2001.

When the UH-34 arrived in New York the team recognized they had a daunting task before them. The work that would be required was deemed to be worth the expected \$350,000 expense because of the helicopter's history as an original 361 machine. "While the interior was completely gutted, the Marine Corps insignia and Bureau Number were still visible on the exterior. With the logbooks we have been able to track down the original pilots that are active in the association, and many have been able to visit the project. This is what made it unique. Even though it looked like a piece of junk, it had some meaning to it."

After unsuccessfully trying to locate a facility to restore the helicopter at local Long Island airports, the association moved it to a rural building where the restoration commenced. This would be an all volunteer effort, and as any such undertaking, many indicate they will assist, but ultimately it comes down to just a handful of dedicated individuals. Weiss, whose home is only fifteen minutes from the project works nearly every day. Others have made repeated trips from long distances to help out. One veteran from Napa, California comes to New York five or six times a year, many times driving his truck and picking up parts from across the country on the way. In May 2004, the project hosted a mini-reunion for twelve former members of 361 and HMM-362. A field



tent and cots were borrowed from the local USMC unit and an encampment similar to what the men lived in Vietnam was erected. For two weeks the men, many who had not seen each other since their service days, worked alongside the regular volunteers.

Sponsorship for the project has been tough to come by. ~~Weiss approached Sikorsky, now a division of United Technologies for help, but the company flatly refused, citing liability concerns, "If we weren't going to fly it, they might have helped, but as it is, they wouldn't even help us with manuals."~~ Other companies involved in helicopter operations have been more helpful. "One company that overhauls rotor blades stepped forward and gave us a set of four re-certified main rotor blades with 800 hours of operation remaining. Another company overhauled a transmission for us that has a time-between-overhaul of 500 hours. We received two zero time overhauled 1820-94s from an individual who had purchased them surplus, still in the military storage cans. Over the life of the project we have only raised about \$80,000 in cash, so without these donations, we wouldn't be anywhere close to where we are now." A second UH-34D, valuable as a parts source, was donated by Jim Moriarity.

2005 would be a landmark year for the restoration team. By early in the year the 'Seahorse' had reached the point where space in the project building was becoming an issue. The association was offered an opportunity to relocate to Long Island Mac Arthur Airport in Islip, New York. This new location will provide the group with ample hangar space as well as meeting rooms, office and classrooms. While they awaited the new facility to be prepared, the men continued readying the helicopter for flight. By November UH-34D BuNo. 150570 in its original HMM-361 markings as YN-19, was ready.

For the first flight Larry Turner and Ben Cascio were selected as the flight crew. Turner, a former HMM-362 pilot currently operates UH-34s in the heavy lift role and also flies two restored UH-34s for another veteran's organization. 150570 took to the air for the first time in thirty years on November 13, 2005, the result of an estimated 20,000 volunteer hours over a four year period.

Now that their UH-34D is flying, what is next for the group's members? They plan to take the helicopter on the road visiting airshows and veteran's events. Toward that purpose they have located and purchased a trailer that will allow them to transport 150570 by road to preserve the time limited components that all helicopters seem to be plagued with. The project continues to have an emotional impact on those involved, according to Weiss. "We had a guy come out and join us recently. It is his dream to get his hands back on this machine and fly in it again. We also have a volunteer who was a pilot who got out in the 1960s, right after the Cuban Missile Crisis. He has taken the time to go get re-certified in helicopters. Now he will need to get re-qualified in the UH-34 and then he can help promote this machine. He is nearly 70 years old. That is dedication. We get a lot of people who stop by our barn after seeing our spare machine sitting outside. Several have said, 'this thing saved my life in Vietnam.' We are trying to save a piece of history." 🇺🇸

