

Dept. of Military Affairs: One Huey - Two Intersecting Lives

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VOLK FIELD, Wis. — During the Vietnam War, over 7,000 of the Bell UH-1 Iroquois, nicknamed the “Huey,” participated in various actions and roles, earning the title of “workhorse” and becoming an iconic symbol of the conflict. Equally as memorable and vital to our collective understanding of this era in American history, were the stories of sacrifice, courage, and heroism formed by the communal experiences of men and women that flew these indispensable birds of the sky. Inspired by this history are the parallel stories of one of these Hueys, its pilot, and the dedicated Airmen preserving its legacy.

Today, a Bell UH-1 Iroquois “Huey” sits quietly, basking in the warm Wisconsin summer, visited only by the occasional robin in this COVID-19 reality. Its rotor blades haven’t turned in decades, its landing skids fixed firmly to the ground, and the view from the cockpit only takes in the changing of the seasons. The final chapter of Huey 66-16171 takes place under the purview of the Wisconsin National Guard Museum at Volk Field Combat Readiness Training Center (CRTC), Camp Douglas, Wisconsin. Here, museum caretakers are entrusted with its legacy and where two individuals, decades apart and worlds away, would find a common connection to Huey 66-16171.

It was October 1967, and a young, 23-year-old Army captain by the name of Eustice Shiver found himself on his first tour in Vietnam. On one particular mission, he was flying Huey 66-16171 with the Ghost Riders, 158th Aviation Battalion, over the Laos-Vietnam border. Shiver, along with one other pilot and 11 Airmen in his Huey, began to take fire from Viet Cong on the ground. A single round entered and exited his left arm, but hit an Airmen directly behind him, instantly killing him. A second-round lodged in Shriver’s left leg, breaking the bone and traveling down the length of his femur, where it still resides today.

Shiver, the Airmen aboard, and the Huey itself were under a crippling barrage. The helicopter began to trail black smoke behind it, and its pilot knew he had to get to safety, fast. But the barrage of gunfire was too intense. Then it happened.

A Skyraider, flown by Air Force pilot, Maj. Franck Armstrong, dropped a napalm bomb on the enemy forces, ending the attack on Shiver's Huey and allowing his and the other Airmen's escape. After saving the lives of Shiver and his crew, Armstrong and his plane crashed into a nearby hillside, presumably killing him. To this day, Shiver continues to search for the remains of Armstrong and his aircraft. His mission is to bring closure to his widow and a final tribute to the man who saved his life.

Shiver stayed two weeks in the base's hospital before being transferred to a naval hospital in Japan and finally ending up back home in rehabilitation at Fort Gordon, Georgia. His military service continued, going back to Vietnam in 1970 for one year, returning to the U.S. to work as an aviation advisor, then at the Pentagon as an Infantry Task Force commander, and then 15 years in the National Guard in Wisconsin. Shiver would hold a few other posts before retiring in 2008 as a lieutenant colonel. He had turned the pages on numerous chapters in his life and military career, but one remained. And when he turned its page, he would be transported back to the fateful day in October of 1967.

Master Sergeant David S. Bingham, an Air National Guard crew chief assigned to 132nd Wing, Des Moines, Iowa, visited Volk Field numerous times since 2004. During one of these visits, he passed by Huey 66-16171 and noticed the toll that years as a static display had taken on the old bird. At this point, Bingham did not know the story behind the Huey but still chose to make it his mission to repair it. And he had a plan.

Bingham was the right Airman for the job, with nine years of experience in working on Hueys and similar aircraft. Couple that know-how with 29 years of work on aircraft, and he had the skills, knowledge, and passion for completing the mission. Initially, he reached out to the maintenance squadron chief for the 115th Fighter Wing in Madison, Wisconsin, Chief Master Sergeant Thomas A. Gates, for assistance. The plan they devised was to have the Huey 66-16171 elevators transported to the 115 FW, where it would be "reskinned." This means that the old sheet metal would come off, and new sheet metal would go on in its place, with the final step of a fresh coat of paint. Once this process was complete, Bingham would return to Volk Field and put the new skins back on the Huey.

In 2011, Eustice had some time on his hands in retirement and began researching the Ghost Riders on the Internet. He discovered that a few remaining team members would meet every other year to reconnect and share in their collective experiences from the Vietnam conflict. Eustice decided then and there that he was going to attend their next meeting, marking the first time since 1960 that he would reunite with his fellow Airmen from this era. Little did he know that this meeting would reveal a mystery long forgotten. What became of Huey 66-16171 after that fateful day in October of 1967?

At his Ghost Rider reunion, the Airmen Eustice reconnected with informed him that the Vietnam Helicopter Association keeps a listing of all helicopters by number. After some further research through this database, Eustice discovered a familiar tail number—66-16171. The retired military officer knew what he had to do. Come the spring of 2020; he would pack up his RV, leave his Florida home, and hit the road for a small National Guard museum in Wisconsin. A great adventure for the spring of 2020.

The grass would have been green when Eustice arrived at Volk Field sometime in May 2020. Only a few steps from the Wisconsin National Guard Museum itself, he would find the weathered rotor blades of the aircraft he once knew, Huey 171. His feet fixed firmly next to the landing skids that he once stood upon, he would hoist himself (with approval) into the cockpit and look out over the prairie before him—one side of the glass witnessing the present—the other remembering the past. It would be a bittersweet moment. Machine and man connected yet again as the years melted away, and an Airman recollected another chapter of his life. But this vision for Eustice would not come to pass, as 2020 became the year of the virus, of COVID-19.

That same May, Master Sgt. Bingham would come to replace the elevators on the old bird, probably the same time as Eustice's visit—the two men connecting over the Huey—Eustice sharing its past and Bingham preserving its future. Bingham would have learned from the pilot himself, the storied history of the aircraft and its crew. He would have related to Eustice how a local pilot had shown him the patches in the original skin where the bullets had passed through and impacted Shiver and his crew. Bingham may have stated that he was impressed by the story of heroism and courage from a past war. He would then go on to express an elevated sense of pride and duty in what he and his fellow Airmen would be accomplishing with preserving the old bird for future generations to connect with its history. And yet, like so many plans for 2020, this meeting of men, whose parallel stories were

interconnecting, never came to pass.

And while the parallel lives of Eustice and Bingham never physically crossed on the historic grounds of Volk Field, the restoration work on Huey 66-16171 did continue over the summer of 2020 through the dedicated efforts of numerous Airmen, past and present, with the new skins for the old bird being applied in August.

A number of individuals are to thank for this project including Chief Master Sgt. Thomas Gates, of the 115th Fighter Wing, who aided in repairing the elevators to be painted and transported, retired Master Sgt. Rick McDonald, who painted the elevators, the Iowa Army National Guard, which donated the paint, and Senior Master Sgt. Bobby Shepherd, of the 132nd Wing, who assisted Master Sgt. Bingham in removing the damaged elevators.

Bingham related the importance of a project like this, to not just a preservation of the past, but also a telling of an important story for present and future generations.

“Think about the history behind all those aircraft, he said. “Wonder where that aircraft has been and what it has done. Each aircraft has a story.”

And so, Huey 66-16171 sits waiting on the museum grounds, the sounds of jets training overhead a simple reminder of its legacy. The old bird waits to reconnect with a pilot from its past and for a return to normalcy when Wisconsin National Guard Museum visitors can once again learn its history and the further stories of the aircraft and military artifacts that comprise the museum’s collections. At the end of the day, these two parallel stories of Eustice’s past connection with Huey 66-16171 and the team Bingham worked with for its safeguarding represent a converging mission of history, of sacrifice, and preservation of the stories that are a part of our shared military heritage that no pandemic could thwart.