



One More Mission

25th Inf. Div. LLC's UH-1H Huey

Story by **Connie May** and **Phil Myers**, Photography by **Lyle Jansma**

▲ With Vietnam Veteran helicopter pilot Ray Murphy at the controls and co-pilot Brent Marker in the right seat, the 25th Inf. Div. LLC's UH-1H Huey has become a common sight in the skies over Concord, CA. Based at Buchanan Field, owners Michael Haus and Christopher Miller utilize their UH-1H to offer rides to Veterans through a program set up in conjunction with Denver Mills and the Concord Vet Center.

THEN AND NOW, Huey UH-1H 65-09961, was called to serve. It was recently tasked with one more mission, not like those it proved itself a rugged, dependable aircraft in the hot, humid, jungles of Vietnam amid enemy fire nearly 45 years ago, but in the high desert of northern Nevada on a clear, calm early fall day in 2011. She's a true combat veteran that served years in war torn Southeast Asia, sustaining many instances of combat damage from enemy fire. Through multiple combat tours from 1967 through 1970, this 1965 UH-1D persevered.

Of the missions all Hueys were asked to perform, arguably none was more important than the evacuation of wounded. One of this Huey's documented combat encounters took place on September 5th, 1968, when Ser# 65-09961 ('9961) was called upon to complete a medical evacuation in a hot LZ. As '9961 was flown by its young, brave US Army crew, who were determined to get the wounded out of the combat zone and into an Army hospital, an enemy RPG exploded near the Huey's right side, sending shrapnel through the aircraft and damaging communications

equipment, electrical components, and aircraft structure. Undaunted, '9961 continued flying and successfully completed its mission of mercy.

On September 16, 2011, an impressive 43 years later, she sprang into action again, heroically transporting injured to a local medical center after a horrific plane crash claimed the lives of a veteran air race pilot, Jimmy Leeward, and ten spectators, and injured 75 others at the National Championship Air Races at Reno-Stead airport in Nevada. On that



Friday afternoon the Huey, the most identifiable symbol of the Vietnam War, epitomized the goals of the National Aviation Heritage Invitational (NAHI): to bring restored aircraft in original flying condition to Reno. This nearly 45 -year-old rotary wing aircraft and her crew showed she still has what it takes to conduct medevac operations.

It was the Unlimited Gold Class Heat (2A) of the air races that afternoon and Leeward was piloting #177, the P-51 *"The Galloping Ghost"*. According to the National Transportation and Safety Board's report, a piece fell off the aircraft after Leeward completed several laps and made a steep left turn toward the home pylon and grandstand. The plane banked suddenly left, then right, turned away from the racecourse and pitched into a steep nose-high climb. The plane then rolled and plunged nose-first into a box seat area in front of the center of the grandstands. Infamous photos show a missing trim tab on the horizontal stabilizer, and eerily Leeward was not visible through the canopy.

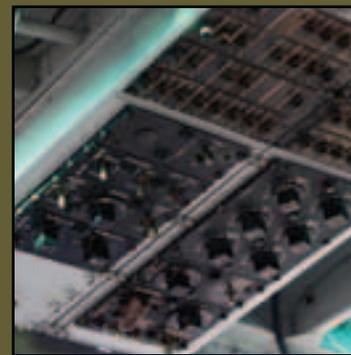
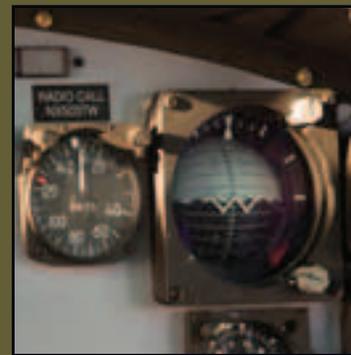
Approximately 200 yards east of the impact the 1965 Huey owned by the 25th Infantry Division Huey LLC sat in the NAHI static display area. The Huey and her crew took part in the annual event that not only attracts the most accurate restorations of vintage aircraft, but also gives spectators something to look at between races and air show acts. Each year the Invitational hosts a competition for restored vintage, classic, warbird, and large aircraft. This was the first year that two helicopters, '9961 and a 1970 Bell Cobra, graced the static display area. The Huey and Cobra were popular attractions at Reno and were visited by many veterans and air racing fans throughout the week. In fact, there was one fan who spoke to Huey pilot Ray Murphy earlier that day who could not have foreseen a fateful reunion merely 30 minutes later. When they met again they were in the middle of what looked like a war zone, when Murphy and his crew of angels flew the man and three others to Renown Medical Center in Reno. The man was one of the critically injured, who suffered a hit by debris on the back of his head, and one of his Achilles tendons was cut. His calf was shredded and his shoulder separated.

Co-owner of the Huey, Christopher Miller was able to get in touch with the injured man by telephone after he had been released from the hospital. "The man said that just 30 minutes before the crash he had been in our area talking to Ray," Miller said. "He returned to the box seats area and when the plane was coming down he started to run. The next thing he knew, as he came to, he was on a stretcher and couldn't believe he was being loaded onto the Huey, and he recognizes Ray's face."

◀ (top-left) The simple elegance of the UH-1H's instrument panel.

◀ (middle-left) The cabin form is demonstrated in this night-time image.

▼ (below) Gauges and panels mastered by young Army pilots 45 years ago as they took soldiers into battle.



◀ (bottom-left) 65-09961 participating in a training flight at the Upstate SWAT Competition while serving with the Anderson County Sheriff's Office Rescue Team in South Carolina.

► (top and middle-right) Distinctive to the Huey design is the large windshield and nose glass that offered pilots good visibility. Through the nose bubble the rudder pedals can be seen.



▲ (above) One of the more interesting markings on 65-09961 is the “Electric Strawberry” emblazoned on the nose and flight deck doors. The division patch, adopted in 1953, is a taro leaf that represents Hawaii, where the division was formed, and a lightning bolt that represents of the manner in which the division performs its assignments.

► (bottom-right photos) Since 1965 many hands have touched these controls, flying 65-09961 into battle, on rescue flights, and now taking veterans on “healing flights.”

► (op-bottom-right) Interesting details—a navigation light and panel honoring the POW/MIA flag.

All four of the injured survived and Murphy has since heard from two of them, including the man who had visited him at the static display. The man was able to phone Murphy to personally thank him. One of the others got in touch with him via email. “That meant so much to me,” Murphy said. “We’re glad we were there to help.”

Immediately after the crash a sheriff approached the helo display and asked for help. The owners and ground support crew started putting on the ground handling wheels, and with help of the Cobra crew and others, they wheeled the 6,000 pound helo out of the static area and onto the ramp, got the Huey fueled, and prepared to go. Co-pilot Tim Horrell shared his experience:

“I was near our helicopter and watched the warbirds take off for their heat. Except for when they pass in front of you, the race is kind of slow, and I was looking at a Navy Douglas TA-4 Skyhawk (in the static area) when the Mustang impacted about 200 yards away. I looked up, not knowing what had happened, and saw the debris field spreading across the ramp. I didn’t realize it had impacted in a populated area and I stayed in our area, as most people did. I could smell 100 octane fuel a few minutes later. None of us knew how extensive it was. After a few minutes or so, the owners and our ground support crew started putting on the ground handling wheels and getting the bird ready to wheel out of the display area. I thought, you got to be kidding, what the hell we are going to do?”

“When someone said mass casualties, I understood. And as I understand it, an event official had requested us. The aircraft was rolled out of the display area, fuel added, two jump seats removed, and the bench seats folded up. We (myself and chief pilot Ray Murphy) cranked up and hovered over to just outside the debris field. Two stretcher cases and two ambulatory patients were loaded. During this time we’re trying to figure out where we are going to land with these people. Ray and I don’t know where the hospitals are or which one we’re supposed to go to, but it turned out to be Renown Hospital. A guy who assisted loading the patients ended up behind our seats and said he knew where to go, so we took him along.

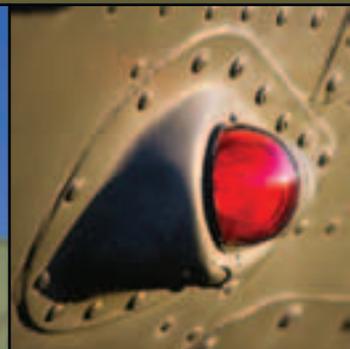
“While we sat with rotors turning, waiting for the patients to be loaded, a medical A-Star helicopter landed next to us. We departed first and headed for Reno. Ray was handling the radios and I was flying. Pretty soon the A-Star is passing us on the right, so I kept him in sight and followed him to Renown. He took the helipad so we landed in a park next to the hospital. I was seated and Ray was outside the aircraft in a VHPA T-shirt assisting the patients. We hauled back to Stead expecting to fly another load, but were





Built in 1965 at the Bell Helicopter factory in Fort Worth, Texas, 65-09961 entered service with the U.S. Army in June 1966 and was first deployed to Vietnam a year later in 1967. Today, 25th Inf. Div. LLC's UH-1H is painted to represent its service while in service with the 25th Infantry Division, Cu Chi, South Vietnam.

▼ (bottom-middle and left) The Huey's main rotor (left) and tail rotor (right) design offered extreme reliability and controlled agility.





told that was it. We shut down and the aircraft was rolled back inside the static display area.” Veteran Dustoff pilot Tim Horrell finished with, “I always wanted one more mission!”

The Huey has seen a lot of action in her life. In 2006 pilot Tim Horrell came across her and had her restored at Northwest Helicopters of Olympia, Washington, to 25th Infantry Division colors. Horrell said, “This particular Huey has combat history and both she and I served with 25th Infantry Division out of Cu Chi, South Vietnam, although not at the same time. It didn’t take long to decide that this would be a neat tribute to the 25th Infantry Division. I’d had enough of seeing 1st Cav markings on this and that aircraft, so move over 1st Cav. and let the 25th Infantry in!” The 25th Infantry Division stood between Saigon and Cambodia in the Cu Chi area famous for huge tunnel networks, which earned it the moniker “The Iron Triangle.” Thousands of 25th Infantry Division combat veterans identify with this beautifully restored Huey with deep emotions.

The deal was made with the helicopter company and after eight months of restoration, in which the aircraft was completely stripped and disassembled, Horrell took delivery in the spring of 2007. The Huey is basically 1950s technology, simple to work on, and maintenance support is available. Horrell explained, “Amazingly, after 40 plus years there are still plenty of parts available, although quite expensive. In country there were many add-ons, or equipment that was slipped-in or attached, to enhance the mission. After Vietnam there were some modifications to Army UH-1Hs, such as wire strike kits, two antenna mounts on the nose, painting the cockpit black, and adding some small exterior lights for its new night vision role. Except for a few minor items this aircraft now looks as it did in 1969.” Two VHF radios and a new transponder have been added to the center console, and the original radios remain. A white VHF antenna was added to the top of the aircraft, and an ELT was added so that it can fly in today’s world. The nose mounted pitot tube was recently relocated to the roof. Except for Dustoff, every Huey had M-60’s or greater.

The Bell Huey UH-1H and Serial Number 65-09961

In response to a US Army need for a new helicopter for cargo and medical evacuation duties, Bell Helicopter introduced a new breed of rotorcraft that was the first to utilize a turbine engine. The first flight of the XH-40, the UH-1 prototype, took place on October 22, 1956. Flight performance of the new design proved so successful that the Army agreed with Bell’s assertion that the aircraft was well suited to troop transport, in addition to the original cargo

and medevac specifications, resulting in additional orders. The first operational Hueys entered service with the 101st Airborne Division, 82nd Airborne Division, and 57th Medical Detachment. In 1962 the 57th was the first US Army unit to fly Hueys in Vietnam. Although the official US Army designation of the UH-1 was the “Iroquois,” because the first designation of the helicopter was the HU-1A, the helicopter earned the nickname that stuck... “Huey.”

Early versions of the Huey (UH-1A, -1B, -1C) had a shorter cabin which restricted troop carrying capabilities so the D-model was introduced with a longer fuselage with a larger cabin area. To accommodate this design change the UH-1D had a larger main rotor (48 ft. vs 44 ft.), a longer tail structure, and the more powerful Lycoming T53-L-11 engine that was rated at 1,100 shaft horsepower. Just over 2,500 UH-1Ds were manufactured and served with the US Army and various nations. Many UH-1Ds were later converted to UH-1H models, which included a more powerful T-53-L-13 engine, and repositioning of the pitot tube to the roof from the nose.

Huey 65-09961 was purchased by the Army in June 1966 and delivered in November of that year to Dugway Proving Grounds, Utah. In June 1967 ‘99616 began its combat experience assigned to the US Army Vietnam Flight Detachment (USARV Flt Det), an assignment that lasted until August, when it was shipped back to Bell Helicopter, most likely for its upgrade to the UH-1H specifications. In November 1967 she was assigned to the 355th AVN CO of the 4th Army, Fort Sill, OK. July 1967 found ‘9961 assigned to the 1st Army’s OPM SEA NITEOPS, then to Thailand the following month with the 44th Engineer Group. In November 1968 this Huey was assigned to the unit for which she is now proudly dressed, the 25th Aviation Battalion of the 25th Infantry Division.

After serving for six months with the 25th Infantry Division in one of the most hotly contested regions of South Vietnam, ‘9961 was shipped back to the United States in May 1969 where she was placed into storage for two months, then into maintenance where she was prepared for a return trip to Vietnam. From October 1969 through June 1970 the Huey served three units: the 118th Assault Helicopter Company, the 68th Assault Helicopter Company, and the 165th Transportation Company (Direct Support) of the 34th General Support Group.

In July 1970 ‘9961 was transferred to Korea where she flew with various units through June 1974. At that time she was shipped back to the United States where she underwent maintenance before being issued to the National Guard. Her military record ends in December 1975 after accruing 3,683 flight

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◀ (op-top) The 25th Inf. Div. LLC, working with Denver Mills at the Concord Vet Center, offer veteran flights free of charge in the Huey as way to “jump start “ the healing process for many Veterans. While some veterans find it hard to climb into the Huey’s troop compartment for the first time in over 40 years, all attest to a sense of conclusion after returning from a flight.

◀ (op-bottom photos) A walk-around offers unique details of the Huey’s military configuration, including the medical emergency kit, military web seating, and the military identification panel.

hours. After serving in the military she flew with the Anderson County Sheriff's Department in South Carolina before eventually ending up at a restoration shop in Olympia, Washington where she was returned to her 1960s glory.

In 2010, Horrell sold the Huey to business owners Michael Haus and Christopher Miller of the San Francisco bay area. Horrell could not ask for a better match for the Huey than Haus and Miller, who are passionately dedicated to the preservation of their Huey and the mission of their organization. The 25th Infantry Division LLC is a nonprofit corporation based at Buchanan Airfield in Concord, California. In addition to operating the Huey, the group also provides education and visual materials about the history of the 25th Infantry Division and the vital role the Huey played in the Vietnam War. Today UH-1H 65-09961 is a testament to Vietnam era history that, along with a dedicated crew, honors our veterans who fought so bravely during the tumultuous conflict. The Huey and her crew regularly give rides to veterans, and the distinctive "thumping" sound can be heard for miles when participating in parades, veterans and military events, and fundraisers throughout the greater San Francisco/Oakland Bay area. The healing power of connecting a combat veteran with his past, in union with his fellow veterans and the Huey, cannot be overstated.

The individuals and at 25th Infantry Division, LLC are a steadfast example of American patriotism with firm dedication to our nation's past and present armed forces. Co-owner Chris Miller offered an example of their outstanding members: "Ray Murphy is dedicated on a daily basis with our mission. He gives his time and shares his skills tirelessly, and mentors our young co-pilots as well. Ray retired after putting in his twenty in the Army, then went on to a career with the FAA for another 25 years or so. He has been an active aviator for all of those years and his breadth of knowledge and experience is impressive, not to mention he is just a cool guy and we love him dearly. Ray is the man!"

All members of the crew share a special bond, and certainly what they did on September 16, 2011, strengthened the brotherly bonds. There were many acts of courage that day, as the community and aviation family came together as one to help brothers and sisters in need. The actions of the 25th Infantry Division Huey were just one of many acts of valor on that dark day and there is no doubt their quick response and decisiveness saved lives. Although the mission statement of the 25th Infantry Division Huey LLC doesn't expressly state it, one could say it's not necessary to state the obvious. They're always ready for one more mission. 🇺🇸



Photo: Liz Margerum / Reno Gazette Journal

▲ ▼ (top and middle) While participating in the NAHI static display at the the 2011 Reno Air races, Michael, Christopher, Ray and their team of volunteers were witnesses to the tragic crash of the P-51 "The Galloping Ghost". Within moments Ray, with the help of the dedicated team of volunteers, began to reposition the Huey and prepared to assist in transporting victims to Renown Medical Center in Reno. In the days following the accident, Michael, Christopher, and Ray would learn that all of the victims they transported for medical aid had survived their injuries.



Photo: Ron Kaplan



▲ From left: Photo plane pilot, Tyler Peterson; Co-owner, Christopher Miller; Co-Pilot, Brent Marker; Pilot, Ray Murphy; Owner, Michael Haus; Crew Chief, W.J. Paculba



Pancho and the Diamondheads

A Crew Chief and UH-1 961

Story by **Greg Morehead**

From Fort Rucker, Alabama a 19-year old Army aviation mechanic's boots stepped on Vietnamese soil ten days before Christmas, 1967. Far from his hometown in Texas, Gonzalo "Pancho" Salazar was assigned to B-Company of the 25th Aviation Battalion, known as the Diamondheads. Their assigned mission was attack support for the ground elements of the 25th Infantry Division and their primary equipment consisted of eight UH-1C gunships (later AH-1 Cobras) and two UH-1D Hueys ("slicks"). Pancho's new home was the Diamondhead's base at Cu Chi, Vietnam, which was roughly 25 miles NW of Saigon. Known by some as "Hell's half acre," their base was within an area of operation that included the most heavily contested region of the war-torn country.

Replacements in the Diamondheads were treated well by their more seasoned comrades because it was obvious the "new guys" would soon be counted on in combat. Immediately after Pancho's arrival a tall, handsome Alabama crew chief took him under his wing. Edward Pike was a likeable young soldier who became a true friend to Pancho. Pike loved being a crew chief and expressed passion in flying on his UH-1 Huey, tail number 961. As the 1968 Tet Offensive commenced Pike jumped aboard 961 and flew off with his Diamondhead brothers to support the 25th Infantry, who were engaged in intense fighting. He left full of life, a model soldier and human being. When '961 returned it carried the body of Edward Pike, who had been shot through the head with a heavy caliber enemy round. On his 45th day in Vietnam, Pancho lost a good friend and 961 needed a new crew chief. Pancho knew what he needed to do—he volunteered to take 961.

Because B-Company was the attack element of the 25th Aviation Battalion, 961 was called on to perform many duties that the slicks of A-Company (Little Bears) were not tasked with. Fellow Diamondhead Ron Leonard expressed their combined affinity for their trusty slick: "961 was

our old Smoke Ship. Innumerable medals had been earned in that ship. It still had the bullet holes of honor and battle scars it acquired with us in Vietnam. It had rescued LRRP teams from certain death, it had medi-vaced dying soldiers to the 12th Evacuation Hospital who otherwise wouldn't have survived, and it had rescued downed pilots and crews. Yes, she was a hero herself.

While various pilots from the Diamondheads would take them into battle, Pancho and his door gunner, Jack Mosley, were assigned as permanent caretakers of 961. Frequently pilots James D. Skelton and Jerry Boyington handled the job up front. One of the many missions in 961, which these four men were decorated for heroism, took place on June 13, 1968. When needed, smoke screen equipment was installed on 961 that injected diesel fuel into the exhaust to create a white cloud behind the helicopter as it flew low, between the enemy and friendly positions. Usually 961 was escorted by two gunships when laying down smoke, but on this day the enemy was within 50 yards of the 2nd of the 27th Wolfhounds, 25th Infantry. They were too close to risk gunship passes so the 961 crew made multiple screening passes, drawing enemy fire and effectively returning fire. The crew of 961 laid down smoke through multiple passes for four hours, lasting into the darkness of night. The citation for award of the Air Medal with V-Device stated: "...During smoke screening passes, Specialist Salazar placed extremely accurate fire on enemy positions, thus allowing friendly units to advance and retrieve their casualties. Although constantly receiving intense enemy fire on every pass, Specialist Salazar, with complete disregard for his own safety, continued to place devastating fire on the hostile emplacements..."

It was only one of many memorable missions for the crew of 961 for which they were awarded medals for valor—just another day for Pancho and the Diamondheads. 🇺🇸



▲ Crew Chief Edward Pike



▲ Gonzalo "Pancho" Salazar



▲ "Pancho" and Jack Mosley (door gunner) with 961 (2002).