

Huey 823

By Tom Knapp



This historic military aircraft is scheduled to be flying as part of the 2019 MVPA International Convention.

Caption



Caption

Mike Caimi and Jim Haga were chatting several years ago about Haga's experiences during the Vietnam War when the men, both aviation enthusiasts, proposed the notion of buying and restoring a Vietnam-era Huey helicopter so they could fly it.

For Caimi, a former U.S. Navy veteran who served as a fire control technician aboard two fast attack submarines in the 1990s, it would be realizing a boyhood dream to pilot the iconic aircraft.

"Ever since I was a little kid, I've been fascinated with helicopters and flying," Caimi, who lives in the Brandywine region of Pennsylvania, said. "Hueys were one of the first helicopters I ever came in contact with — I remember, it was a photo in a Funk & Wagnalls, and I was hooked."

For Haga, who lived at the time in nearby Downingtown, it would be a homecoming of sorts. A combat veteran of the 155th Assault Helicopter Company, he piloted Hueys and other helicopters to support the U.S. 4th and 25th Infantry, 5th Special Forces, 23rd ARVN, and ROK Tiger Divisions in Vietnam in the late 1960s. He gave up flying for more than 35 years after coming home from the war.

The Huey — formally known as the Bell UH-1 Iroquois — was, according to the Vietnam Helicopters Museum, the most common utility chopper used in Vietnam. Fully loaded, the workhouse helicopter could transport up to 10 soldiers. It could fly 400 miles on one tank of fuel, with a top speed of 120 knots.

To many veterans of that war, its distinctive profile and WHUP-WHUP-WHUP sound are both familiar and chilling reminders of their days in combat.

And Caimi and Haga wanted to buy one, fix it up and get it back in the air. It wasn't just for their personal enjoyment, Caimi explained; they devised a twofold mission to educate younger Americans about the Vietnam War and the Huey's vital role in it, and to provide an avenue of closure for veterans still struggling with their past.

But they couldn't do it alone. In 2011, they formed the nonprofit Liberty War Bird Association, made up mostly of veterans, based at Lancaster Airport in south-central Pennsylvania.

Then, they started raising funds.

"We thought it was going to be simple. People were going to love this idea," Caimi said. "It didn't quite happen that way. It took a little more time than we thought."

They got their Huey in 2015.

It started in a bidding war for a Huey from the 155th, Haga's former unit, but they lost to another buyer. Then they got wind of a former helicopter mechanic in California who owned one — he'd bought it in 2012, hoping to sell it for parts — and they flew out to take a look.

"With the help of the local VFW and group member Larry Wade, they "scrounged enough money for a down payment" and trucked the Huey home.

"At the time, Jim and I didn't really know what we had," Caimi said. "We didn't really grasp the reality of what we were getting into."

Designated Huey 823, their bird had a storied past.

Manufactured in 1966, the Huey saw hard use in Vietnam from 1968 to 1970. First deployed with the 101st Aviation Battalion, it was sidelined after an engine failure and crash landing. Following extensive repairs, it was transferred to the 170th Assault Helicopter Company.

"It served as a Slick," Caimi explained. "Slicks were the troop carriers, carrying troops in and out of combat."

Its wartime service over, Huey 823 was overhauled and assigned to Fort Rucker, in Dale County, Alabama, where it was used as a training helicopter until 1975. It was put to use by the Oklahoma National Guard until 1994, when it was decommissioned and given to the aviation maintenance school at Texas State Technical College. There, Caimi said, "it basically sat in a hanger until 2012."



Caption



Caption



Caption

In 2015, missing its main rotor blades and far from being airworthy, Huey 823 posed a challenge for the Liberty War Birds. They needed money for parts and maintenance — Caimi said they've raised about \$500,000 to date, and still need at least \$100,000 more to cover costs — plus some 17,000 man hours of labor by a dedicated core of volunteers working most weekends in the Dutch Country Helicopters hangar at Lancaster Airport.

One donor — Caimi didn't give his name but said he's nicknamed "The Rooster" — attended a speech by two of the War Birds and wrote them a check for \$115,000 to buy a new set of main rotor blades.

"Last year, in August, we completed the restoration," Caimi said proudly. The Federal Aviation Administration certified the Huey for flight.

For Haga, unfortunately, that was the end of the story. Now retired, he moved west just one day after Huey 823 got its FAA airworthiness certificate.

Haga, in a 2016 newspaper interview, said he wanted to get the bird in the air at least once.

"There are a lot of Vietnam veterans who would love to do that — have that one last flight," he said.

And he did, Caimi said. Before moving, Haga "had the opportunity to get a couple of hours flying the helicopter."

Huey 823 is 66 feet long, more than 8 feet wide and 14 feet tall from rotors to skids. It weighs about 9,500 pounds. A ragged line of sheet metal patches high on the left side show where enemy bullets ripped through its side.

Painted matte black at some point during its post-war career, the Huey was being repainted to its original olive drab color, along with markings similar to its time with the 170th, in February and March of this year.

Back in 2016, Haga said Vietnam veteran Russ Mowry came to see the Huey at the U.S. Army Heritage & Education Center in Carlisle, Pa. Mowry, Haga said, piloted Huey 823 during the war, and he also painted its original nose art. While in Carlisle, Mowry repainted the nose with a fire-breathing dragon and a curvy, bikini-clad woman, each representing a unit call sign: "The Flying Dragons" and "The Bikinis."

"First and foremost, we wanted the helicopter to look like it did when it was Vietnam," Caimi said. "That was our mission, to bring it back."

That also included stripping out some updates made over the years while still adhering to current FAA standards. The instrument panel, for example, looks the same as it did when it came off the assembly line in 1966, Caimi said.

Its engine wasn't airworthy, he said, but they cannibalized it and two others to build one fully certified engine. A fuel tank was missing and another was in



Caption



Caption



Caption

"suspect condition," Caimi noted, but they were able to get replacements built.

Caimi still marvels at the way the War Birds — nearly 40 members strong — grew as word spread. Veterans, many of whom served in Vietnam, flocked to the cause, and some had practical experience working on Hueys or other aircraft that was invaluable to the work.

Army veteran Kevin Schnetzka, for instance, joined the effort when he walked up and helped Caimi install grounding wheels on the Huey. It turns out he's a U.S. Army veteran with years of experience in helicopter repair. Larry Wade Sr., a U.S. Navy vet, joined the team and, as past state commander of the Pennsylvania Veterans of Foreign Wars, was instrumental in getting VFW support for the project.

They also picked up Alexis Lake, an Army veteran and former aircraft mechanic who works as a post-traumatic stress disorder therapist.



Caption

“We’re going to encounter a lot of Vietnam veterans, and not every time they see the Huey will it be a pleasant experience,” Caimi explained. Lake is on hand, he said, to ensure veterans aren’t traumatized by the experience.

But the War Birds want Huey 823 to be seen, he said. And, already, it’s been making the rounds.

“It seemed like, almost every weekend, a different Vietnam veteran would come by,” Caimi said. “One weekend, a gentleman and his wife popped into the hangar out of the blue. They were just driving by and he heard the Huey. He had to come to the airport to see it.”

Another man, a former medic, walked into the hangar and burst into tears. It took about 20 minutes for him to regain his composure, Caimi said.

“All he ever saw were dead and dying and wounded soldiers,” he explained, “so his memory of the Huey was pretty painful.”

An older veteran was stunned speechless when he saw when he spied the Huey at a public event. A former door

gunner, he asked to climb aboard. He wept as he settled into the seat.

“Then he started to smile,” Caimi said. “He jumped out of that Huey like a 19-year-old kid. It was remarkable to see.”

People can learn more about Huey 823 at libertywarbirds.com.

“We’re at the hangar almost every Saturday,” Caimi added. “People are welcome to come out.”

They’re also building a schedule for the Huey at various events. Eventually, Caimi said, he hopes to cover the region from New England to Virginia. Someday, he said, the group would like to procure more helicopters and establish a museum in the hangar providing historical context for the fleet.

“I see this as a living organization,” Caimi said. “People should have an opportunity to see and touch and maybe fly in a Huey.”

