



Huey lift draws big crowd

Danie M. Huffman

wdreporter2@yahoo.com

August 18, 2008 11:48 am

— With patriotic music playing in the background and dozens of American Flags waving to the tunes, more than 1,000 spectators came to view the UH-1D 65-10068 Huey helicopter lifted 20 feet, where it will rest at the future site of the National Vietnam War Museum on Highway 180. In 1966, the Huey was the lead chopper ferrying troops to an airstrip near Trung Lap with seven other helicopters during the war.

In the midst of the third flight, it broke formation after the aircraft sustained heavy gunfire from a school, killing Crew Chief Spc. 4th Class Ernest “Ernie” Palmieri.

Senior Pilot Capt. Doug Hopkins served as the aircraft’s commander that day, and recalled his flight as Palmieri took two hits, the first being just below his chest protector and the second between his eyes.

They immediately flew to the nearest field hospital at Cu Chi base.

Hopkins said Palmieri died before they arrived.

Hopkins drove from Euflula, Okla., to watch the ceremony Saturday. He said his visit was bittersweet.

“I think about [Ernie] and his family a lot,” Hopkins said. “I’m grateful for being spared and for those who gave the supreme sacrifice. Today is one day to honor them.”

He went on to describe Palmieri as being respected and admired by his fellow troops.

“He was one of the best,” Hopkins said.

As he stopped to pose for a few photographs before the Huey was lifted onto its post, Hopkins inspected the aircraft, finding a shell casing in the engine compartment. He tucked it into his pocket saying it was probably one of the bullets that hit his comrade.

The ceremony began with a prayer, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance.

Gen. Nathan Vail opened the ceremony by saying he would go to his grave “resentful.”

“We won that war ... ,” he said. “Another piece of the puzzle [is] being placed today.”

Richard Gaurkee, president of the museum’s board of directors, said many may wonder why they chose the Huey to adorn the front of the building.

Gaurkee added each war has a symbol and the Huey was the ultimate symbol for the Vietnam War.

“Every time they see the motor blades, they can almost taste being on the ground again,” he said.

Jerry Staggs said every soldier who went into combat was transported in and out of Vietnam by a Huey. They were also used as gunships, aerial ambulances, command and control aircrafts, artillery spotters, resupply aircrafts and psychological warfare platforms as well as troop transports.

The 068 served three tours in Vietnam, including one with the 71st Aviation Company “Rattlers,” the lift platoon, Company C 101st Aviation Battalion and the 1st Transportation Battalion, Aircraft Maintenance Depot aboard the USNS Corpus Christie Bay.

Displayed in front of the Huey is an excerpt from Crew Chief PFC. Ron Seabolt’s log.

“Feb. 22, 1966” was the date marked on the log. “Today I flew a new ’66 D model on a CA. It was the start of the biggest offensive in the war. The 71st was the lead element. It was the No. 3 ship in LZ. 068 was No. 1. We received heavy fire with Maj. Jackson being hit and lead being shot down.”

Other artifacts have been donated or purchased for display at the museum.

Four other helicopters will call the museum home, including two additional Hueys, an OH6 and an OH23. A fifth chopper, a TH55, is currently being assembled by Staggs, who operated the crane for Saturday’s lift and served with the Black Cats.

The museum will include a miniature wall, which will be graced by 58,000 names of those killed or missing in action during the Vietnam War. The project is expected to be complete by the end of next summer.

The next event held at the museum will be Nov. 8. The ceremony includes a dedication for the replica of Camp Holloway Memorial Wall built in Pleiku, Vietnam. More than 1,000 attendees across the country are expected to show for the event.

For more information or to donate to the museum, log onto www.NationalVNWarMuseum.org.

Copyright © 1999-2008 cnhi, inc.