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# THE DUSTOFFER



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# President's Message



**G**reetings, fellow DUSTOFFers, family, and friends. First, let me say how honored I am to serve as your Association President. I have been a member since I was a 2LT. I am also blessed to have my best friend, John McMahan, serving beside me as Vice President. John brings a wealth of energy and ideas to the Executive Council.

I know that everyone is saddened by the postponement of the 2020 reunion. The EC made the right choice in the interest of safety for all our members. We remain on glide path for a re-check back at Fort Benning in April 2021. Please stay tuned for details.

Our world has changed forever. We all will have to adapt to a different way of day-to-day living. As we establish our "new normal," my promise to you is to keep Dustoff at the forefront of my efforts and to build momentum for the Association going forward.

As always, please feel free to provide any insight and/or recommendations at any time throughout the year, either to me or a member of the Executive Council. I'm proud to be a member of our organization and look forward to seeing you all at Fort Benning in 2021!

DUSTOFF!

Dave Zimmerman  
President, DUSTOFF Association

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# THE HERO PROJECT IN AFGHANISTAN'S "VALLEY OF DEATH," A MEDEVAC TEAM'S MIRACLE RESCUE

THE ASSAULT TARGETED A KEY TALIBAN TRAINING CAMP IN AFGHANISTAN'S KUNAR PROVINCE. THE MISSION WAS FAILING. THE WOUNDED WERE DYING. THE MEDEVAC TEAM TOOK OFF ON THE PERILOUS MISSION TO SAVE THEM ...

by Tony Dokoupil and John Ryan, published in Newsweek, November 12, 2012

The first bodies came on the first day of the operation. It was a Saturday, hot and quiet, the wind spinning eddies of sand around Forward Operating Base Joyce in eastern Afghanistan. Out of the midmorning silence came the crackle of a hand radio. "Medevac! Medevac! Medevac!" said the dispatcher, and eight camouflaged figures—the helicopter crews of DUSTOFF 73 and

DUSTOFF 72—darted out of their tents, a rehearsed riot of belts and straps, buckles, and Velcro. Usually, going by the manual, it takes more than an hour to prep a Blackhawk helicopter for flight. But both of these birds were airborne within five minutes, the pilots still blinking sleep from their eyes.

The call came from a unit in Operation Hammer Down, a mission to clear Taliban training camps in the Watapur Valley, just over the border from Pakistan's most dangerous tribal regions. The same terrain stymied the Soviets in the 1980s, and controlling it was an elusive centerpiece of the war against the Taliban and al Qaeda. Every summer U.S. forces charged in by the hundreds, but every fall the bad guys were back again, and the cycle repeated. This mission was meant to be the last dance, a crucial partnership with the Afghan National Army before the Obama administration began unwinding the war.

It broke down almost immediately. Before dawn, a lumbering Chinook transport helicopter clipped a tree line and crash-landed high in the mountains, stranding a platoon of infantry Soldiers. At least two other platoons were ambushed at dawn as they moved into the valley. By midday, the medic calls were stacking up like bids at an auction. The most urgent came from Gambir, a village notched into the mountainside, where 40 Soldiers dug in against the onslaught. The first in command was already dead, shot in the neck as he moved to higher ground to organize an evacuation. Now a skinny black private was slowly choking on his own blood, his jaw shot away.

Inside the cockpit of DUSTOFF 73, the pilot, Chief Warrant Officer Erik Sabiston, 38, stared out from behind dark shades. Back at base he was known as a joker, the guy who carpets a Red Sox fan's locker with Yankee paraphernalia. But not in the air. Now Sabiston talked maneuvers with co-pilot Kenneth Brodhead, 44, one of the most experienced fliers in the Army. Behind them were two relative rookies, 24-year-old Specialist David Capps, the crew's technician, and next to him the medic herself, Sgt. Julia Bringloe, one of the few women on the front lines. They were flying over a region where more than 100 Americans have died fighting, a many-named series of valleys known among some veterans by only one: the "Valley of Death."

There was no way to land in Gambir; the fighting around the gravely wounded Soldier was too intense. Trees burned; buildings smoldered. Taliban reinforcements

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streamed in from a network of caves and the homes of sympathetic locals. Over the next few hours, while American gunships tried to clear Gambir for an emergency landing, the two DUSTOFF helicopters knocked down their rescue lists elsewhere. There was a patient with shrapnel in his thigh, two patients with gunshot wounds, and then two more with the same. Neither helicopter landed; instead, Bringloe and the other medic were hoisted down on hooks, and then hoisted back up along with the stricken. No shots were fired, no enemy engaged. It was almost like a training day.

Then Sabiston swung the helicopter toward Gambir. The village came into view all at once.

"It looks like a war movie," Sabiston thought to himself, "like *Apocalypse Now*." A hot tide of adrenaline rushed through him.

Capps, who flew with an American flag wrapped beneath his body armor, thought of his son, just five months old. Bringloe, whose own son was 11, hung I.V. bags and set up monitors, prepping the cabin for more patients. Then, as the chopper approached, she dipped into a stash of gummy bears, trying to steady her nerves.

Their sister ship made the first attempt at the rescue. The Soldier with the missing jaw was positioned near a mud hut built into the cliff, surrounded by tall pine trees. As the helicopter moved in for a hoist, however, the Taliban opened fire. A rocket-propelled grenade arced over the tail and into the rock face. A spray of small-arms fire was more accurate. It caused catastrophic damage to the hydraulic system. As another day in the desert turned toward a cloudy and moonless night, the sister ship peeled off for an emergency landing. Something heavy settled in the minds of Sabiston, Brodhead, Bringloe, and Capps, the crew of DUSTOFF 73: they were the only medevac crew left in the sky.

It was June 25, 2011, and what happened over the next 48 hours has become one of the most decorated missions in aviation history. Newsweek was able to re-create it in full for the first time, drawing on military records, interviews with the participants, and other published reports. And yet what makes the story so special is not

the details of those days—the shark-toothed terrain, thin air, and thinner margins—but the weirdly pedestrian nature of it all. The Army air ambulance corps is the only fully equipped emergency fleet in the military, and heroism is inscribed in its basic job description. Its helicopters are on the front lines of a parallel war effort, a mission not to take lives but to save them—and, almost unbelievably, it is a mission that is working.

If you are wounded in action in Iraq or Afghanistan, you have a more

**Then there is Bringloe, whose journey is perhaps the most roundabout and almost certainly the most interesting.**

than 90 percent chance of coming home with a heartbeat. That is the best survival rate in the history of war: up from 76 percent in Vietnam, 70 percent in World War II, and don't-even-ask-because-you're-dead before that. This new calculus is one of the only consistent bright spots to come out of a decade of bloodshed, the result of a system that ferries Soldiers from wherever they fall to a field surgeon, usually in less than an hour, and home for even more specialized treatment, often within a week. But it all depends on that first response, the helicopter ride nearly every wounded warrior has in common. "It's almost sacred," says Sabiston, the pilot.

None of the DUSTOFF 73 crew took a straight path to the job. Sabiston joined the Navy reserves as a teen in Virginia, shifted to the Army after the attacks of September 11, and qualified for flight school after six tries. Capps, a high-school wrestler from Nebraska, enlisted as a teenager with a vague interest in learning a trade, and sharp memories of towers burning on a basement television. Brodhead was a tuba player who left the South Florida of Miami Vice for an Army band, qualifying for pilot school a decade later. Since then, his flights have saved the lives of hundreds of Soldiers, including the first-ever quadruple amputee. He could have retired years ago, he says, but an Army medevac crew

once saved his wife and unborn twin sons, flying them from rural California to San Diego for a complicated birth, and he is the kind who believes he owes a debt.

Then there is Bringloe, whose journey is perhaps the most roundabout and almost certainly the most interesting. She is a former student-body president, the daughter of an engineer, and yet she dropped out of college and ended up digging ditches and hauling lumber for a living. By her late 20s, she was working as a contractor in Hawaii, where she married and had a son.

But she tired of building houses for rich people. She also noticed that when co-workers were hurt—dropped from ladders, separated from fingers—she had an uncanny ability to stay calm and help them. So, why not be a medic? To pay for the training, she enlisted. "My family and friends thought I had completely lost my brain," she recalls, and in a sense she had. It was 2007, and even the recruiter said, "Ma'am, you do know you'll be going to war?"

Under the Geneva Conventions, medevac crews are supposed to be immune from fire, but the Geneva Conventions are often ignored. In the six months following Operation Hammer Down, for example, Army medevac helicopters—which rescue not only Soldiers but civilians—were shot at 57 times. There is a collective toll to pay for floating around unarmed in combat, an anecdotally higher rate of emotional problems and frequent casualties. In essence the medevac mission has not changed since it was created—50 years ago this year. The banner outside the DUSTOFF 73 barracks in Jalalabad says, "burning gas to save your ass." But the patches they wear into battle are inscribed with a darker motto, the final words of Maj. Charles Kelly, the first medevac commander, shot through the heart as he refused orders to fly away from a dangerous rescue site in Vietnam. "I'll leave," he said, "when I have your wounded."

Back at the mud hut in Gambir, the condition of the private with the lost jaw was deteriorating, and his platoon's first sergeant made desperate calls from the ground.

"Just land," he pleaded. "Get him

off this mountain.”

DUSTOFF 73 was ready to try, but the fighting was out of control, and at least for now, they obeyed orders from base to wait for a clearing. The ghost of Charles Kelly notwithstanding, a dead medevac unit is pointless, and the loss of the last unit in the valley would have been tragic. With an electronic ping another mission announced itself in the command center’s computer—“the PTSD machine,” as some call it. It was a comparatively minor call, a case of severe dehydration, but the need to protect the depleted Soldier was preventing his unit from joining the fight at the mud hut, so Sabiston accepted the mission. He guided the helicopter a few kilometers away and several thousand feet higher, to where the patient was waiting amid a spiked forest of 10-foot pine trees. It was windy and almost full dark, the hardest time to fly. “The worst possible situation to do a hoist in,” he thought.

Bringloe was behind him thinking the same thing. She strapped herself onto a yellow hook, leaned out over the tree line, and stepped into air. She was 160 feet up in the evening sky, and the wind spun her like a circus performer all the way down. On the ground she had to lie flat for a minute to recover her bearings. Then she crawled to the Soldier, a big guy, she thought, although in truth they are almost always bigger than her. She secured him on the hoist, climbed on herself, and signaled to Capps to reel them in—10 feet off the ground, 20 feet off the ground, 30 feet off the ground ....

The wind gusted, sending her and the patient swinging, and it did not take a Ph.D. in physics to see what would be waiting for her as she swung back past the center line: the spiked club of a dead pine tree. From above, Capps could see Bringloe twist her body, absorbing the collision with her left leg, and pushing off, lest she end up snagged like a lure in tall grass. She succeeded, but the tree took a divot of flesh out of her shin and sent a spidery crack through her bone. The nurse who met them on the ground thought Bringloe was the patient. But she simply washed out her own wound and limped back to the waiting helicopter.

“You okay?” Capps asked her.

“Yeah, yeah,” she said.

“You need to quit?” Sabiston added, with a half smirk. He knew she wouldn’t.

It was now dark, and from the sky Gambir glowed like a dying campfire. While the average combat medevac mission takes just 39 minutes from tarmac to tarmac, hours had passed, and the first sergeant on the ground was sure they were down to minutes before they lost the kid who had lost his jaw. One of the darker realities of America’s 90-plus survival rate is the

**The only way to land an eight-ton helicopter on a mud roof is . . . to just kiss the roof line with one wheel light as a pat on the head.**

unfathomable gore, the bullets to the face and missing limbs, the result of an enemy who aims where the body armor isn’t. Every fifth or sixth pickup is so bloody that Bringloe and company have to hose someone out in the helicopter. She braced for that kind of pickup or worse.

“In an honest assessment of myself,” Bringloe later said in a sworn debriefing, “every cell in my body was against going back” to the mud hut. The location “was still out of control with ground forces taking fire in at least three directions,” she continued. Bringloe knew she had to control her fear to perform, but she had another reason: she is a woman in combat, one of the few and, therefore, one of the scrutinized. Some people still argue that women are not outfitted emotionally for combat, and Bringloe has always tried to prove such naysayers wrong. “I try to conduct myself in the military not as a woman but as a Soldier,” she later explained, “because we’re talking about a job, not a gender.”

It was too dark to perform another hoist. Brodhead and Sabiston talked through maneuvers. “Land on the roof!” urged the first sergeant below. This was not a sane idea, even in perfect conditions. The only way to land an eight-ton helicopter on a mud roof

is not to land at all, but to just kiss the roof line with one wheel, light as a pat on the head. All DUSTOFF pilots practice this on boulders, testing the mechanical limits of the aircraft in the thin mountain air. But the air is never this thin, and the space is never this tight. There were trees growing through the roof itself.

Sabiston tried it from his side, but could not find enough space, so he pulled up after three attempts. “You’re leaving us?” the first sergeant radioed. Brodhead took the controls to try from his side. With more than 5,000 hours of flight time, much of it under fire, Brodhead was in the region as senior flight instructor, a teacher of teachers. If he couldn’t do this, it couldn’t be done.

Down, down, down he descended, the solid high-pitched whine of the rotors blanketing the mountain. Afraid to lose another medevac, Apache and Kiowa gunships created a ring of protective fire.

“The aircraft was shaking,” remembers Sabiston, “and it was beautiful, just like the Fourth of July.”

Because Blackhawks do not have rearview mirrors, Capps and Bringloe leaned their heads out the windows, coaching Brodhead into the parking space.

“Left two inches. Hold.”

“Right one inch. Hold.” Every few seconds the concussion from a missile rippled through the cockpit, as the other American helicopters tried to suppress the enemy. “It’s just the Kiowas,” Brodhead yelled to calm everyone down. “It’s OK! It’s just the Kiowas.” Right about then a Taliban rocket-propelled-grenade team appeared on a nearby roof, aimed, and was blown away by a blast of a 30mm American machine gun.

Moments later they were trading weight with the hut. Bringloe later said she felt “a bit like being under water for too long and finally accepting the fact that it’s time to take that first breath of water into your lungs.” She threw open the bay door and stepped into a firefight. The dust stung her nose and burned her eyes. She yelled for the wounded. Three men climbed on board, two of them propping up the third, the young black Soldier, his eyes rolled upward as if in prayer.

He was eerily quiet. Most seriously wounded patients scream louder than the engines. In the blue light of the cabin, Bringloe threw a breathing tube into one of the private's nostrils, opening up a breathing path, and ran an I.V. into his arm. She is trained to IV any available limb, drilling into bone if needed. She stanchied the bleeding with gauze soaked in a clotting agent, but even as she worked, she thought it was pointless.

"We're too late," she said over the intercom.

The next morning the crew awoke back at Forward Operating Base Joyce in the same clothes they wore the night before, except Bringloe's camo was spotted purple where blood had soaked in. The memory of the rest of the mission is a blurred tape with a few slow-motion sequences that none of the participants will ever forget—Bringloe rappelling down a 20-foot boulder, Sabiston hovering at the crest of a 10,000-foot ridge line, the aircraft wobbling at its mechanical limits, Capps throwing his legs outside the helicopter to catch an empty plastic body bag before it floated into the tail rotors—and the final two rescues: the kind of dramatic ending the unrelenting sameness of war almost never provides.

They both star Bringloe, who dropped onto the roof of the mud hut in Gambir to pick up a dead body. Bullets flecked the landing zone and sizzled past her ears during the hoist back up, a full 15 seconds of exposure that had the boys in a nearby Apache cheering the bravado. The whole time, Sabiston and Brodhead somehow held a perfect hover, knowing that their seats were designed to flip down into operating tables because bullet-ridden pilots are that common. At last they pulled away to safety, and Brodhead saw the oddest thing in a field not 200 yards away: a soccer game. In the U.S. kids stop for fire trucks, but here a helicopter flies through a bullet shower, and the game plays on.

They had to go back up the mountain for the last hoist. For three days the weather had been bad but flyable. Now it was like someone had kicked a roll of insulation over the sky. Bringloe was dangling 50 feet below the helicopter with a patient when it hap-

pened. In a matter of seconds clouds enveloped the aircraft, blinding everyone on board. Looking up, she could only see her cable disappearing into a wet gray nothing. "Hold on," she told the patient. "They're going to fly out of it." Sabiston and Brodhead radioed in about the emergency conditions, a total whiteout, and flew up through the canyon on instruments alone. For several minutes they rose, long enough for Bringloe to be cabled into the hold, and then all at once they popped up above the clouds.

**"Someday that kid is gonna be sitting on his porch with his kid or his grandkid in his lap, living his life, not dead. . . . That is your reward."**

They had rescued 14 Soldiers, made three critical resupply runs, recovered two dead bodies, and nearly died every day for three days straight. Now they flew back to Jalalabad, showered, and got online to friends and family. They did not talk to each other about the mission, but they all understood it was special, even before they got the news that every one of their hoists survived. The skinny black kid was already out of the country, in fact probably on board a big ol' freedom bird headed for a warm, dry hospital in Germany, where he would get another reconstructive surgery before one more transfer back to America.

"Someday that kid is gonna be sitting on his porch with his kid or his grandkid in his lap, living his life, not dead," one of the other DUSTOFF pilots told Sabiston later that night. "That is your reward. Knowing that you helped him get there." But there would be other awards, as well. This past winter the three-day adventure of DUSTOFF 73 was named Air/Sea Rescue of the Year, the top honor of the Army Aviation Association of America.

Over the summer Bringloe flew to New York for the USO awards, where she won Woman of the Year, appearing alongside the first female four-star general, Ann Dunwoody, and the first

female president of Lockheed Martin, Marillyn Hewson. But the biggest prize was yet to come.

At ceremonies at Fort Drum and Fort Rucker last month, Bringloe, Brodhead, and Sabiston were given the highest prize in aviation, the Distinguished Flying Cross. Major Kelly, the original Mr. DUSTOFF, had won his own for a similar mission, "a tricky mountain rescue, landing on a spot between trees [with] one skid off the ground," according to a report in his hometown newspaper. He was killed a few weeks later, before he even knew he was nominated. These three were luckier. They were honored for "conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action," their citations began, and for Bringloe it was especially high praise. She is just the seventh woman ever to receive the award, and only the fourth for combat experience. One of the others is Amelia Earhart.

These days Brodhead is finally thinking about retirement. Capps has already gone there, taking with him the Air Medal with Valor, which he won for Operation Hammer Down. Sabiston is teaching down at Fort Rucker, Alabama, enjoying a break in the action, and Bringloe is preparing to redeploy next year. She recently graduated from a course for advanced medics, a new effort in the Army's push for a perfect war, a fight without dying. As more troops come home from the Middle East, there are naturally fewer casualties this year than in years past. But that does not mean the battle is done. A month after the heroics of DUSTOFF 73, Army intelligence picked up new activity in the training camps, an effort to resupply after Operation Hammer Down. ■

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# Unmanned MEDEVAC of the Future

*Author unknown*

The concept of the MEDEVAC aircraft as a dedicated platform to rescuing injured Soldiers from the battlefield originated with MAJ Charles L. Kelley, the Father of MEDEVAC. His vision of an Army unit that had the sole mission of going to retrieve injured Troopers and return them to advanced medical care was visionary in his time. Now the current wars have seen survival rates skyrocket, due to the use of the UH-60 Blackhawk MEDEVAC aircraft. As an unarmed aircraft, however, the dangers linger that the aircraft can be fired upon, and it cannot protect itself.

MAJ Kelley knew this as he hovered his Huey above a hot LZ near Vinh Long on July 1, 1964. The aircraft not having weapons was a big target, and as bullets struck the Huey from all sides, Kelly remained calm and simply told the ground force, "I'll leave when I have your wounded." MAJ Kelly was shot and killed in the crash of the Huey immediately following his statement. The Army is not ignorant to the dangers faced by MEDEVAC pilots and crews today. The Army is considering a radical new direction for MEDEVAC, by using unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) for MEDEVAC purposes.

The Army recognizes that having trained en-route care treatment personnel is the best option, but at what cost? Aircraft are damaged from bullets or RPGs during a mission, putting the crew at risk. It is a risk they are willing to accept, but the Army is looking to mitigate this risk. The near-peer type adversary will not allow the U.S. Military to have complete and unchallenged control of the airspace. The two types of support that are in jeopardy are "first, how to get medical supplies out to the field if no aircraft or crew are available, or if the flying conditions won't permit it. Second, how to get wounded Soldiers from the field back to treatment facilities in the rear, without using manned aircraft"

(Lopez, 2017).

The concept is that a UAV Medevac vehicle will fly to a grid point obtained off of the 9-Line MEDEVAC Request and land. The ground crew would approach the UAV, open the

## The thought of having robots provide medical care seems to many that we may have entered the "Jetsons" era of travel and medical treatment.

doors, and place the wounded Soldier into the aircraft. The aircraft would then take off and "return home" to deliver the wounded Trooper to medical personnel for advanced treatment.

During a MEDEVAC mission, time on the ground for the aircraft is when it is most susceptible to enemy fire. The goal of the crew is to remain on ground for no longer than necessary to pick up the injured Soldier. One problem that has not been figured out is how to provide en-route patient care to these Soldiers who may require it during their trip to the medical facility. The critical care Paramedic has been developed over the last five years to bridge this gap and provide advanced medical care while in flight.

Flight Paramedics progress through almost a year of training between Joint Base San Antonio, TX, and Fort Rucker, AL, before being released to the force. The unmanned MEDEVAC platform does not have this asset onboard, obviously, due to the name. The craft could have medical tools onboard that can be hooked to the patient prior to take off from the site of injury, however, this could take more time that will allow the MEDEVAC aircraft to become a bigger target, as seconds on the ground tick away. "The service says it is considering various types of autonomous

vehicles, including UAVs, unmanned ground vehicles, unmanned boats, unmanned submarines, and unmanned amphibious vehicles. The U.S. Army also wants autonomous systems capable of helping with medical treatment of injured Soldiers, including analytical and decision support tools, it says" (Reim, 2019). The thought of having robots provide medical care seems to many that we may have entered the "Jetsons" era of travel and medical treatment.

One other MEDEVAC mission that can be picked up by UAVs is to deliver medical supplies to the front lines of the conflict. The conflict of the future with a near-peer adversary will greatly reduce the supply chain from the back to the front. "A noteworthy emphasis given at the 2017 Air War College war games found that, unlike Iraq and Syria, where the U.S. has enjoyed relative aerial freedom, North Korea's robust air defenses would eliminate, or at least degrade that advantage" (Keller, 2019). This degraded air space will not only affect our ability for Close Air Support of the ground force, but also resupply of important materials. The UAV MEDEVAC aircraft could be used in this aspect to deliver medical supplies to forward medics, while not placing anymore crews in danger. This concept has already been thought about and brainstormed. "Separately, the U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps have said they are working together on a Joint Tactical Autonomous Aerial Resupply System (JTAARS) concept. As part of that joint initiative, the services want UAVs able to carry 136-636kg (300-1,402lb) of cargo. These UAVs must have at least a single-flight-leg minimum range of 43nm (80km). And the aircraft should be able to take off and land vertically" (Reim, 2019). The future of these vehicles and supply missions is still in development.

The notion of unmanned MEDEVAC aerial platforms seems like some

futuristic vision, but the Military is seriously researching the capability. A notable event that occurred prior to September 11 was Air Force pilot Capt. Scott Francis O’Grady, who was shot down over Bosnia. “Ejecting from his F-16C and spending almost a week dodging Bosnian Serbs until he was retrieved by U.S. Marines, a saga that would later serve for the inspiration for the 2001 action film *Behind Enemy Lines*” (Keller, 2019). Although this story had a good ending for the Air Force pilot, it has become one of the stories associated with UAV use in combat. The ability to place a machine in harm’s way without endangering human life can be looked at as the best-case scenario.

Other options currently being researched by Sikorsky include optionally remote vehicles. “The H-60 Blackhawk platform, which it aims to retrofit into any variant of the UH-60 Black Hawk. Retrofitted ‘optionally piloted’ Black Hawks could be flown by a pilot, autonomously, or in blended fashion, for instance, where the aircraft’s flight control system autonomously flies a route, which could be adjusted ad hoc by the air crew” (Reim, 2019). Other options include an unmanned aerial vehicle that would follow a manned aircraft to the destination, and then break off

and land to pick up wounded or to drop off supplies.

The unmanned aircraft is a growing field in the Army. More and more pilots, mechanics, and communication specialists for these drones are developed every day. The layout of the Combat Aviation Brigade now includes a UAV battalion for reconnaissance and delivery of weaponry to targets. They also allow for monitoring of the ground forces during operations and can stay in the air for much longer than other rotary winged aircrafts. The concept of unmanned aerial vehicles has already proven its use in target acquisition and delivery of pin-point fires on targets. In the future, the military may use the unmanned aerial vehicle for MEDEVAC, resupplies, or to transport Soldiers around the battlefield, making our next battlefield look like something out of a *Star Wars* movie. It will be interesting to see what is developed in the future as technology continues to advance. ■

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#### About the Author

Kristofer Meals is an active-duty Army Sergeant First Class, currently stationed at Fort Rucker, AL, as an Instructor at the United States Army School of Aviation Medicine (USASAM). During his 12-year career, SFC Meals has been a combat medic for 6-1 CAV, 1st Armored Division, 4-319th Airborne Field Artillery Regiment, 173rd Infantry Combat Team (Airborne), and 3-82 GSAB, 82nd Combat Aviation Brigade. He has held several leadership positions, including Senior Line Medic to Platoon Sergeant. SFC Meals is currently a senior instructor/writer for the Flight Medic Program and instructs the last course as they progress through their training, the AMEDD Aviation Crewmember Course (AACC). He has been happily married for more than 11 years and has three daughters.



COL (R) Merle Snyder (right) presents the DUSTOFF Aviator of the Year award to CPT Samuel R. Stalons, at Ft. Bragg, NC.  
(Story on page 18.)



# Retiring the Last Huey

*A speech by CW4 Lawrence Castagneto, May 17, 2011, at Ft. Rucker, AL, upon the retirement of the last Huey.*

**T**hank you, sir. I would like to thank MG Crutchfield for allowing me to speak at this event and try to convey in my own inadequate, meager way, what this aircraft means to me and to so many other Vietnam veterans.

First a few facts: as a Vietnam Veteran Army Aviator, I would like to thank everyone for coming to this special occasion, on this, to be honest, very sad day, the end of an era—an era that has spanned over 50 years. The retirement of this grand old lady, “Our Mother,” the Huey.

It was 48 years ago this month that the first Huey arrived in Vietnam with units that were to become part of the 145th and the 13th Combat Aviation Battalions, both units assigned here at Ft. Rucker today. While in Vietnam, the Huey flew approximately 7,457,000 combat assault sorties, 3,952,000 attack or gunship sorties, and 3,548,000 cargo supply sorties. That comes to over 15 million sorties flown over the paddies and jungles of Vietnam, not to include the millions of sorties flown all over the world and other combat zones since then. What an amazing journey! I am honored and humbled to have been a small part of that journey.

To those in the crowd who have had the honor to fly, crew, or ride this magnificent machine in combat, we are the chosen few, the lucky ones. They understand what this aircraft means, and how hard it is for me to describe my feelings about her, as a Vietnam combat pilot, for she is alive, has a life of her own, and has been a lifelong friend.

How do I break down in a few minutes a 42-year love affair? She is as much a part of me, and to so many others, as the blood that flows through our veins. Try to imagine all those touched over the years by the shadow of her blades.

Other aircraft can fly overhead, and some will look up, and some may not even recognize what they see. But when a Huey flies over, everyone looks up, and everyone knows who

she is, young or old all over the world. She connects with all.

To those who rode her into combat, the sound of those blades causes our heartbeat to rise and breaths to quicken in anticipation of seeing that beautiful machine fly overhead and the feeling of comfort she brings. No other aircraft in the history of aviation

**I can still hear the sound of those blades churning the fiery sky. To us, you seemed beyond brave and fearless.**

evokes the emotional response that the Huey does for combat veterans. She is recognized all around the world by young and old. She is the ICON of the Vietnam war, U.S. Army Aviation, and the U.S. Army.

Over five decades of service she carried Army Aviation on her back, from bird dogs and piston powered helicopters with a secondary support mission, to the force-multiplier combat arm that Army Aviation is today.

Even the young aviators of today, who are mainly Apache, Blackhawk pilots, etc., who have had a chance to fly her, will tell you there is no greater feeling, honor, or thrill than to be blessed with the opportunity to ride her through the sky. They may love their Apaches and Blackhawks, but they will say there is no aircraft like flying the Huey. It is special.

There are two kinds of helicopter pilots: those who have flown the Huey, and those that wish they could have.

The intense feelings generated for this aircraft are not just from the flight crews, but also from those who rode in back... into and out of the “devil’s caldron.” As paraphrased here from *God’s own lunatics*, Joe Galloway’s tribute to the Huey and her flight crews and other Infantry veterans’ comments:

“Is there anyone here today who does not thrill to the sound of those Huey blades? That familiar whop-

whop-whop is the soundtrack of our war—the lullaby of our younger days. It is burned into our brains and our hearts.

Those who spent their time in Vietnam as a grunt, know that noise was always a great comfort. Even today when I hear it, I stop to catch my breath and search the sky for a glimpse of the mighty eagle.

To the pilots and crews of that wonderful machine, we loved you, we loved that machine.

No matter how bad things were, if we called, you came—down through the hail of green tracers and other visible signs of a real bad day off to a bad start. I can still hear the sound of those blades churning the fiery sky. To us, you seemed beyond brave and fearless. Down you would come to us in the middle of battle in those flimsy thin-skin chariots into the storm of fire and hell. We feared for you, we were awed by you. We thought of you and that beautiful bird as “God’s own lunatics” and wondered who are these men and this machine and where do they come from? They have to be “Gods Angels.”

So with that I say to her, that beautiful lady sitting out there, from me and all my lucky brothers, who were given the honor to serve our country, and the privilege of flying this great lady in skies of Vietnam—Thank you for the memories. Thank you for always being there. Thank you for always bringing us home regardless of how beat up and shot up you were. Thank You!

You will never be forgotten. We loved you then, we love you now, and will love you till our last breath.

And as the sun sets today, if you listen quietly and closely, you will hear that faint wop, wop, wop, of our mother speaking to all her children past and present who rode her into history in a blaze of glory. She will be saying to them, “I am here. I will always be here with you. I am at peace, and so should you be, and so should you be.” ■

# An Old Pilot's Tale

by Ben Knisely, February 18, 2020

I have often considered a relationship between the stages of a basic aviation “traffic pattern” and the chronological stages of our age of life. Consider the following:

- The *climb out* from takeoff is representative of our teenage years. We are just checking to see if all systems are in the green, and the power is adequate. It is a great feeling as we gain altitude.
- The *crosswind turn* is synonymous with our 20s and 30s. We are “trimming” up our ability to maintain flight and becoming comfortable with where we are heading. The “hum” of the engine is music to our ears.
- The *downwind leg* is the same as our productive years of our 40s, 50s and 60s. The wind is behind us and pushing us to full speed, and we discover the limits and edges of our flight dynamics.
- The *base leg* is our “retirement years.” We slow down, make that 90-degree turn, drop the first set of flaps to reconfigure our “lift component” just a little, pull back on the throttle some, and begin to drop a little altitude.
- The *final approach leg* is synonymous with our “winter years of life.” It’s time to set the power lever to a minimal notch just above idle. Final flaps are engaged. When we hit the five-mile “gate,” tower gives us clearance to land. We acknowledge and put the gear down and begin the glide slope that is a direct path to a landing touchdown. (Somewhere between the gate and the threshold, we are “committed” and know that a “go-around” is no longer an option.)

Each of us can find ourselves somewhere along that flight path. You may adjust the duration of the legs based on the length of the runway God has given you to land upon, but the principals and functions of flying the pattern never change and are the same for all of us.

Today at age 75, I find myself clearly on the final approach phase of the traffic pattern. The “outer marker” green light is beginning to flash, telling me that I am in the vicinity of the “gate.” It is probably time to drop the gear and set to final flaps and begin to focus on the touchdown spot, but if I reduce the airspeed just a little more (keeping above stall velocity) — just maybe I can hold off on putt’n the “gear down” and setting final flaps for just a little while longer. Hot digity and God willing — that’s my plan!

—DUSTOFFer—

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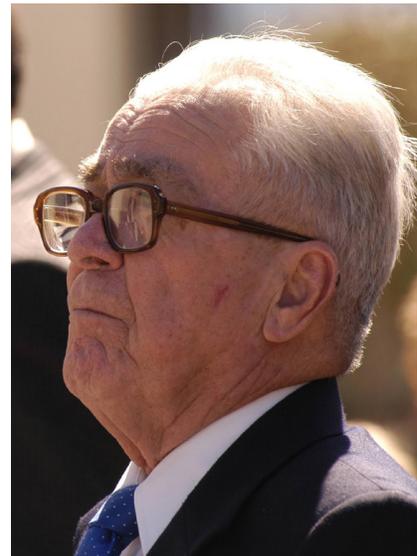
## Michael Novosel, Dustoff Pilot

by Marc Leepson, The VVA Veteran, March/April 2017

VVA’s Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Chapter 542’s official name is Capital Chapter 542, Michael J. Novosel Medal of Honor Chapter. After retired Army Chief Warrant Officer Mike Novosel died in 2006 at age 83, the chapter adopted the new name to honor him and his award for his extraordinary heroism under fire as an 82nd Medical Detachment Dustoff helicopter pilot on October 2, 1969. That day Novosel saved the lives of 29 men pinned down by enemy fire near the Cambodian border’s Parrot’s Beak, making 15 hazardous trips into a white-hot shooting zone to save them

CWO3 Novosel, a native of Etna, Pennsylvania, was a 43-year-old father of four in 1964 when he joined the Army. He had been a B-29 bomber pilot in World War II, and he was a commercial airline pilot and a lieutenant colonel in the Air Force Reserve when he enlisted to fly Army helicopters. During his two Vietnam tours, he flew more than 2,000 hours in combat during his 2,500 missions. And he rescued 5,589 wounded men. The main street at Ft. Rucker, Alabama, which runs past the Army Aviation Museum, is named for him.

Chapter 542 carries his name “with the utmost pride. By doing so, his inspirational leadership, unflinching bravery, devotion to family and country, as well as his quiet determination, become constant reminders of what we hope to emulate in our activities.” ■



# In 1940s Burma, a New Kind of Flying Machine Joined the War: The Helicopter

## Toward the end of WWII, the strange new craft became vital in guerrilla warfare.

by Bob Bergin, *Air & Space Magazine*, August 2019

Few people had seen one in the fall of 1943 or would have known what it was if they had. But shortly after a prototype impressed official U.S. Army Air Forces officials at Wright Field in Dayton, Ohio, the helicopter became part of an unconventional strategy to defeat the Japanese in Burma. Its first call to military service came when U.S. Army Air Forces Lieutenant Colonel John Alison went to Wright Field in Dayton, Ohio, to find out what a helicopter could do.

**B**y the time of his 1943 Dayton visit, Alison was already an ace. Flying Curtiss P-40s and leading the 75th Fighter Squadron—part of a task force commanded by General Claire Chennault after his fabled American Volunteer Group had disbanded—Alison came to the attention of Army Air Forces Chief Henry “Hap” Arnold.

Arnold, who was constantly devising new ways to use airpower, enlisted Alison and his friend Phil Cochran in a Top Secret project. Both Alison and Cochran had built reputations as daring leaders who improvised when traditional tactics failed. Alison had won a Distinguished Service Cross for an experimental night interdiction flight in China.

In a series of interviews in 2001, I talked with Alison about his Air Force career (he died in 2011 at age 98, having earned the rank of Major General before he retired) and about his partnership with Cochran, a friend of cartoonist Milton Caniff and the inspiration for the character Flip Corkin, a flight instructor in the popular *Terry and the Pirates* comic strip.

Cochran, who led hit-and-run attacks from Tunisia on Axis forces, was once described by the journalist Vincent Sheean, who served in North Africa, as “a kind of electrical disturbance in human form.” These were the two pilots Arnold selected to build the first U.S. group of Air Commandos, a term he coined for pilots who would insert, supply, protect, and extract ground forces in the Burmese jungle, deep behind enemy lines.

Of the two, Alison was the more diplomatic, but his attempts at nego-

tiation with a manager at Wright Field were initially unsuccessful. He remembered trying to persuade the program officer to sign over several of the Sikorsky YR-4s the Army was testing there. “We need six of these,” he said. The manager, he recalled, said, “No.”

**“Nobody questioned us,” he said, adding that Arnold’s approach was, “Damn the paperwork, get out there and fight!”**

“You can’t have them,” he told Alison. “They’re not ready for real-world conditions. The rotor blades are laminated, wood pieces glued together. In the hot climate you want to take them to, they’re liable to come apart. There’s just so much we don’t know about them.”

Alison thought about that. “Well, the mission we’re going on will be pretty dramatic,” he said. “We can take six of your helicopters and your testing gear to India and test them in real conditions. Then we’ll go rescue some people in the jungle who are in real trouble. That will get Sikorsky great publicity.” The manager was not moved, and Alison went back to Washington empty-handed.

Cochran, in the meantime, newly returned from North Africa, traveled to Britain to meet the commander of the Special Force, a controversial British irregular warfare expert, Orde Wingate. Wingate had recently returned from a punishing guerrilla raid into Burma, though his irregular forces had managed to penetrate 200 miles into the jungle.

It took Alison and Cochran about a month to establish their air commando unit and its armada of more than 300 aircraft: among them, 13 C-47



*In eastern India in 1944, Carter Harman (standing, left, next to his co-pilot) had the extremely rare job of helicopter pilot. The maintainers with him, members of the 1st Air Commando group, were among the first to service helicopters in the field. (USAF)*

transports and 150 gliders to fly the Chindits, as Wingate called his guerilla fighters, and their mules into the jungles of Burma. A squadron of 30 P-51A fighters and 13 B-25 Mitchell bombers would be the artillery for the ground troops; a light airplane force of 100 Stinson L-5 Sentinels and 20 Stinson L-1 Vigilants would fly the wounded back to India. They were not sure where the helicopters fit in, but they were confident in Arnold's support. Alison recalled: "We had a secret weapon, wrote up our memorandum, signed it General Barney Giles. Giles allocated resources for Arnold." Alison knew he had the protection of the Chief of the Army Air Forces in case anybody questioned the signature. "Nobody questioned us," he said, adding that Arnold's approach was: "Damn the paperwork, get out there and fight!"

In the end it took a conference where Alison had to convince a panel of generals that the helicopters were necessary at a time when no one really knew much about how helicopters could be used.

The Sikorsky that Alison got was designated the YR-4B, the "Y" meaning it was still in "service test," and the "B" that it had 20 horsepower more than the original model. It was built of fabric-covered steel tubes; "a shoebox with windows," somebody

called it; its 200-horsepower, seven-cylinder Warner 500 radial engine was installed in the rear of the cabin. Theoretically, the YR-4B could carry a pilot and passenger at 65 mph for about 100 miles. High heat and humidity would affect its performance significantly.

The air commando unit started moving their aircraft and more than

**. . . found the only place nearby where a light aircraft could land, a sandbar on the river. But the injured men could not reach the river on their own. The call went out to send in the "eggbeater."**

500 personnel to India in November 1943. (The following year, it was designated the 1st Air Commando Group.) Each of the six helicopters went in its own Curtiss C-46. "The first one to almost reach us was in a C-46 that crashed in a thunderstorm about 60 miles from its destination," said Alison. That helicopter was destroyed, and its pilot was killed. Another helicopter arrived without a tail rotor. "The rotor was put on another C-46 that went somewhere else," said

Alison. "It took us two months to find it. The people who received it wondered, What the hell is this? They had never seen a tail rotor before.

On March 5, 1944, under a full moon, 61 Air Commando GC-4A gliders, towed by C-47 Dakotas, lifted the first element of the British Special Force Chindits into central Burma. Thirty-five of the gliders and 350 Chindits made it to the jungle clearing, which they ironically named "Broadway." The first order of business was to build a landing strip with a bulldozer that arrived in one of the gliders. Completed that night, the strip made it possible for 64 more C-47s to insert more troops. Each night over the next few nights, 100 Dakotas landed. By March 10, 9,000 troops and 1,100 mules and horses had been delivered. With the close air support of Air Commando P-51A fighters and B-25 bombers, the Chindits began taking on the Japanese army. The Air Commando light airplane force of L-1s and L-5s transported injured and wounded troops back to India, dropped supplies to mobile columns, and spotted targets for the Soldiers on the ground.

"When we got the Air Commando into the jungle, the fighting we were doing was 150 miles behind Japanese lines," said Alison. "[The] helicopters wouldn't go 150 miles. To get to our airfield in the jungle, the helicopter pilot had to stack the passenger seat with tins of petrol, fly half-way, and then find an open area and land to refuel. The local Burmese would spot him right away, and then they would try to run out to him." Because Commandos feared drawing the attention of Japanese troops, they discouraged the curious villagers from approaching what must have been to them a wondrous sight. "We had six P-51s overhead," recalled Alison. "They would have to strafe out in front of the running villagers, and the villagers would stop and turn back."



*In 1943 Burma, leaders of the Air Commandos (from left) Phil Cochran, John Alison, and former Flying Tiger Arvid Olsen—confer as they invent ways of conducting air missions to provide cover for special operations. (1st Air Commando Association)*

For a time, the helicopters were not called on for rescues. The light airplane force carried out evacuations and other duties very effectively on landing strips—usually a smoothed-out rice field—that were often shorter than the 900 feet specified for the Stinsons.

Then on April 21, 1944, an L-1 Vigilant, carrying three wounded British soldiers, was hit by ground fire and crashed in a rice paddy. All four men in the airplane made it into thick jungle as Japanese troops closed in. Having spent much of my life poking around Southeast Asia, I have learned that the Burmese jungle can be hard

to penetrate. It must have been a good hiding place.

Nevertheless, an Air Commando L-5 spotted the small group from the air, then found the only place nearby where a light airplane could land, a sandbar on a river. But the injured men could not reach the river on their own. The call went out to send in the “eggbeater.”

Carter Harman had been an Army Air Corps biplane instructor before volunteering to fly helicopters. In India barely a month when the L-1 went down, he was instructed to fly from India’s Lalaghat airfield to Taro in northern Burma, 600 miles of jungle with a

5,000-foot mountain in the way, right at the ceiling of the YR-4B. Harman stripped his YR-4B of excess weight, loaded four jerry cans of fuel, and set out. At Taro he was told to fly on to the Chindit base called Aberdeen, another 125 miles south. He reached it on April 25. ■



*Precursor of the YR-4B, the Sikorsky XR-4 was designed for the Army Air Corps. In 1942, it flew a five-day, 761-mile journey from Sikorsky’s Connecticut plant to Wright Field in Ohio, the first cross-country trip by helicopter. Today it is in the National Air and Space Museum.  
(Dane Penland / NASM)*

# A Couple of Hoist Missions

by Allen Rhodes

The last four months of my tour I was flying with the 68th Med. Det. out of Chu Lai, as Dustoff 82. Pretty routine missions for the most part, though flying about 10 miles off the coast to an island was different for sure. Hoist missions were part of the usual, though not too frequent. But something unusual almost always happened with me on a hoist. This mission was no different—two urgent U.S. casualties, cold LZ. Launched and coordinated gunship support en route. Arrived on station with the guns (Sharks) and identified the smoke drifting up through the trees and got in position. Crew chief sent the jungle penetrator down, and then it was just a matter of monitoring instruments (I let the pilot do this one), monitoring guns, and sweating out the lift.

Well, with just two wounded, we told the grunts on the ground to put them both on the penetrator, which they did. Crew chief says, “Taking up slack, taking on weight, load is off the ground and coming up.” Then suddenly the bird lurched, and I hear an excited, “It broke, it broke, it broke right the \*\*\*\* off!” Fortunately, they were only about six feet off the ground and suffered no further injuries from the fall.

What’s next? Reel in the cable and haul for Chu Lai and another hoist—second-up was on a back haul to Da Nang, so we were the quickest option, got the hoists swapped out and headed back to the pickup site. En route, we hear another aircraft on the tactical frequency—Danger 66 (the battalion commander). He got involved, had the unit move down slope about 100 meters to a small clearing, which he could get into in his Loach/OH-6. We listened as he went in, loaded both casualties on the Loach, and flew to a nearby Firebase, where we picked up the casualties and took them to the MTF in Chu Lai.

## Next one—

As with the first mission, this hoist had a surprise for us, as well. All seemed to be going well. We ID’ed the smoke, got in position, sent the penetrator down, and waited for the wounded grunt to be loaded. The gunships (Firebirds) were orbiting though way too high for my comfort, maybe 1000-1500 feet above us. Thankfully,

we did not receive any fire, as their reaction time from that altitude would have been a bit slow.

Back to the hoist—the crew chief announced that he was taking up slack, taking on weight, and started the lift. Engine instruments were in the green, torque was well below our max, and it seemed routine, and then the crew chief’s announcement came over the intercom, “Crap! The hoist quit, it just quit.”

A quick scan showed all the circuit breakers were good, and the pilot’s controls did not work, either. Our only option was a high hover to lift the wounded grunt above the trees

**But when they popped smoke, and I saw the location, I did not like it one bit.**

and take him to a location where we could land and load him up, which we did. Got to the closest Firebase flying slowly, set him on the ground, and had them unhook the penetrator, while the crew chief and medic pulled in the cable, which the crew chief had cut once the wounded was safely on solid ground. Got the cable all squared away and the soldier loaded and headed for the Evac at Chu Lai. Hard to tell from the guy’s expression if he was more relieved to be out of the jungle or off that penetrator.

## Ever Fly Under a Tree?

Here we go again—multiple urgent U.S. casualties, unit in contact. Crew is in the bird, rotors turning, when I get to the bird with the mission sheet. Off we go, and when we get in contact with the unit, things had calmed down, and they were no longer receiving incoming. But when they popped smoke, and I saw the location, I did not like it one bit. They were in the bottom of a very narrow, steep valley, with a sandbar/gravel bar as the LZ. Oh, well, with the winds, only one way in—from the upper end of the valley flying a really steep approach, which turned out to be uneventful until we were about 50-100 yards from the pickup site and started taking fire from both sides of the valley, though

just small arms. We were committed, so we continued, landed, and picked up the casualties. The peter pilot was a new WO1—Harry Neuling—and don’t ask me how I can remember his name after 50 years. Got ’em loaded and realized our flight path out gave us just two options.

We could do a 180 and fly back up the valley over the same flight path we came in—knowing the bad guys were on both sides of the valley, and we would be right in their sights, low and slow. Our other option was to continue down the valley—but. A large tree had fallen and was lying across the valley side-to-side about 50 yards ahead of the LZ, though it was fairly high above the creek level where we were sitting. I made a quick decision to go down the valley and not try to climb over the tree into the bad guys’ view, but rather would fly under the tree. I can still see the look on the pilot’s face. He was a second tour guy, having spent his first tour as a grunt/LRRP. But this was his first experience flying under a tree. Well, the story has a happy ending—plenty of clearance under the tree, and we were dropping the wounded GI at the surgical hospital before Harry said a thing.

We refueled and repositioned to the first-up pad, and I went in and filled out the after-action report, while the rest of the crew got the bird ready for the next mission. I thought I had heard the last about it until a couple of nights later at a hooch at the hospital where we generally hung out (and enjoyed our liquor rations). I was bartender that night, since I was first-up the next morning, and my commander, Ed Bradshaw, came for a refill. He looked at me, shook his head, and said, “I don’t want to hear any more stories about flying under trees, Lieutenant.”

All I could do was stammer out, “Yes, sir,” and that was the last I heard from him, though I never flew with WO1 Neuling as my pilot again.

—DUSTOFFer—

## New Entries on the Flight Manifest

Jason Bouchard  
 Steve Canter  
 Vincent Gebhardt  
 Gary Hagen  
 Craig MacDonald  
 Eric Neutkens  
 Robert Olson  
 Susan Romano  
 Ronald Truitt  
 Richard Varriale  
 Terry Wilson



## Financial Report



CATEGORY	1/1/2020 6/30/2020	OVERALL TOTAL
<b>Income</b>		
Interest Income	\$ 32.71	\$ 31.71
Membership Dues	600.00	600.00
Memorial Donations	200.00	200.00
Reunion Income	2,050.27	2,050.27
Sales Income	1,183.67	1,183.67
<b>Total Income</b>	<b>\$ 4,066.65</b>	<b>\$ 4,066.65</b>
<b>Expenses</b>		
Newsletter Publishing	\$ 328.20	\$ 328.20
Operating Expenses	1,969.32	1,969.32
Reunion Expenses	784.37	784.37
Sales Expenses	3,585.72	3,585.72
Scholarship Fund Exp.	20.00	20.00
<b>Total Expenses</b>	<b>\$ 6,687.61</b>	<b>\$ 6,687.61</b>
<b>Overall Total</b>	<b>\$ -2,620.96</b>	<b>\$ -2,620.96</b>
<b>Total Bank Accts.</b>	<b>\$57,158.62</b>	<b>\$57,158.62</b>

## Nominate Your Hero for the DUSTOFF Hall of Fame

DUSTOFFers, don't let our legacy go untold. The Hall of Fame honors those who exhibited our ethics and standards in their actions and their contributions to DUSTOFF. Do your homework. Find out about that man or woman who made a difference in your career by his or her inspiration. Research your hero and nominate them. Deadline is May 1. Details are on the dustoff.org homepage. Click on the Hall of Fame tab on opening page for information. It's OUR Hall of Fame; let's make it complete.

## We want your stories! Share them in *The DUSTOFFer*

*The DUSTOFFer* would like to publish your article. If you have a recollection of a particular DUSTOFF or MAST mission, please share it with our members. If your unit has been involved in an outstanding rescue mission or worthwhile program, please submit your essay about it to *The DUSTOFFer*. Don't worry about not being the best writer. We will edit your material professionally. Send photographs with your article or attach them to your e-mail.

Send typed, double-spaced, hard copy to the address below, or e-mail your article to ed@dustoff.org or jtrus5@aol.com.

Please send your submissions to:

*The DUSTOFFer*  
 P. O. Box 8091  
 San Antonio, TX 78208

# Remembering a DUSTOFF Hero: MG Spurgeon Neel

By Al Burris and Dick Scott, compiled by Vince Cedola

A short time ago, Jerry Rose and Vince Cedola sent out a Wikipedia testimonial about Major General Spurgeon Neel, whose actions could grant him the title of the “Father of MSC Aviation.” Soon after that went out, they received the following letter from Al Burris, an old timer pilot. Al tells us about some of his personal history with General Neel and the beginnings of MSC Aviation.

Vince, I appreciated the email. Here is some related information. I was a member of the first class of MSC officers to go to flight school. We reported to the Aviation School at Ft. Sill, Oklahoma, in February 1953. Upon graduation, most of us went to Korea and were spread among the four MDHA units (32<sup>nd</sup>, 49<sup>th</sup>, 50<sup>th</sup>, and 52<sup>nd</sup>), spread across the peninsula with MASH units. I was in the 52<sup>nd</sup> with Howard Huntsman and Bill Brooks. We were attached to the 46<sup>th</sup> MASH. We were attached the 1<sup>st</sup> Hel Amb. Co. Provisional, attached to the 30<sup>th</sup> Med. Group, commanded by LTC Spurgeon Neel. The provisional company was commanded by a line officer LTC aviator. Follow-on MSC graduates were spread among the four detachments as they arrived in country. LTC Neel vis-

ited the MASH and MDHA units frequently. I flew him often when he was coming to visit us. Upon returning from my three-year assignment with the 31<sup>st</sup> Medical Group in Darmstadt, Germany, I was assigned to the team that activated the Aeromedical Research Unit at Ft. Rucker. Spurgeon

**Neel told me it was for my own good, for my career, and to quit complaining.**

was the Commander of Lyster Army Hospital. We had almost daily contact. My next assignment was in the Aviation Branch, OTSG for three years, before taking my turn as commander of the 658<sup>th</sup> Prov. Air Amb. Co. in Vietnam 1966-67. General Neel is indeed the father of MSC Aviation.

A few days later, Vince received an email from Dick Scott, another of the old timer pilots, telling about his relationship with the General.

MG Neel was a tough and dedicated doctor—a flight surgeon who went through the Navy Flight Surgeon program and actually soloed in fixed-wing aircraft. He knew what he want-

ed and did not hesitate to go after it.

As my mentor for most of my aviation career, it was a continuing learning experience, even to my last ass-chewing in Washington when I turned down his offer of a BG star because I refused to return to Washington as chief of MSC assignments. He had already given me his BG stars when he was promoted to Major General.

My first run-in with him was in Ft. Rucker, Alabama, in the 50s after I had been assigned to ground duty at Ft. Rucker upon graduating from Flight School. At Ft. Sill, Oklahoma, I was finishing my ground tour as Exec of Hq and Svc Co. Bill Hammett (Avn Advisor to TSG) had come through Ft. Rucker and promised me my first choice of assignments (Germany). Two weeks later I got orders for Korea. Neel told me it was for my own good, for my career, and to quit complaining. Fond memories.

Both Al and Dick gave Vince permission to share their stories, and we would like to have many more Soldiers to jot down your experiences with General Neel and send them to Vince, so they can be shared.

—DUSTOFFer—

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## Jaw-Dropping Heroism

The film, *When I Have Your Wounded*, demonstrates that the techniques developed by the pilots, medics, and crew chiefs in Vietnam are still in use in the military today. The final third of the film examines state-of-the-art DUSTOFF operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“The legacy forged by Vietnam DUSTOFF pilots is arguably one of the most important advancements in military medicine,” Cheryl Fries said in an interview. “We wanted people to know about both the jaw-dropping heroism of the men who forged it and that of those who have followed in their footsteps.” The film includes a look at Patrick Zenk, who commanded a medevac unit in Afghanistan—and whose father, Bruce, had flown DUSTOFF in the Vietnam War.

“We knew this was a fantastic opportunity to capture this fantastic story,” Fries said. “Some things have changed—the helicopter, the technology, the gender of the crews—but that ‘no hesitation’ ethos has carried forward for half a century, and we will never know all the lives it has made possible.”

The Fries also tell the story of Marine Kevin Hanrahan, whom they filmed after he was severely wounded and dusted off in Afghanistan and was recuperating back home. “Being able to meet and follow Kevin Hanrahan and his family was a powerful personal experience for us filmmakers,” Cheryl Fries said. “We hope that showing his ability to come back home to his wife and daughter symbolizes the true and sacred importance of the mission and the heroes who have put their own lives on the line to do it.”

Cheryl and Patrick Fries received the VVA President’s Award for Excellence in the Arts at the 2004 Leadership Conference in Nashville, Tennessee. They were honored for their Vietnam War helicopter documentary, *In the Shadow of the Blade*. ■

# Consultant's Corner

by COL Rick Ortiz

I was asked a week ago to write an article for *The Dustoffer*. Without hesitation, I said yes. I was inspired by the opportunity to contribute a message that I hoped would have value. I thought that with all the current craziness going on, topics would flow onto the paper. They did not. The work week started, and I struggled with what to write. What did you want to know? What is important to many of you now? I took a few stabs during the week, but no joy.

Then, yesterday, I had the good fortune to attend a small 67J dinner hosted by Robe Howe. Nate Forrester, Sam Fricks, and Scott Farley rounded out what turned out to be an exclusive night of comradery. (Thank you, Rob, Nate, Sam, and Scott) I woke up in the morning thinking of how special the night was, and then it hit me. These guys and their very special spouses symbolize the excellence of the 67Js and the underlying secrets of our profession. Please let me try to connect these dots.

As the consultant, one of the top questions I get from our 67J community at all ranks is, "What opportunities are there for me?" This question is normally associated with frustrations of officers spending too much time in MEDEVAC companies; feelings that there is a lack of talent management, post-command opportunities, worries about promotion potential, or discussions of being a bastard child in both Aviation and Medical branches.

But thinking back to last night, I recall listening to Rob, Nate, Sam, and Scott share stories—stories that impressed me. They talked about tough trials and tribulations. Their stories were of personal leadership challenges within MEDEVAC companies, challenges in battalion command and even at brigade command. The stories were followed by drinks and laughter. I witnessed these top 67J leaders highlighting their own unique approach but all with a common thread—leadership excellence through selfless commitment to duty and passion for Soldiering. I realized that their experiences directly correlate to many of the

stories I have heard from past exceptional 67J Dustoffers who forged our Dustoff legacy today.

Yes, it hit me. It is about leadership. That is the 67J value proposition to the Joint Force, the Army, Army Medicine, and Army Aviation. 67Js are superior leaders. They routinely experience diverse and uncertain assignments and missions. They are groomed in decentralize operations and expeditionary mindsets. 67Js are forced to adapt with agility to uncertain and ambiguous environments, as well as complex and vague situations. They do this knowing that they have no-fail tactical missions and clear eye on the strategic ramifications of their profession. The output of all these inputs are 67Js who are comfortable with being uncomfortable. They are calm, collected leaders who are critical thinkers and arguably on-the-job trained strategic leaders.

That makes no sense, Rick. There is no way you can say that from sitting around drinking with a few good men. Well, I can say a lot of things after a few drinks, but in this case, yes I can. To validate my assertions, I assessed our current senior 67J populations and found ample proof.

Here is what I found. Out of 19 67J COL/LTC(P) in the inventory 15 have or will be commanding at the O6 levels (79%). Keep in mind that we only have three authorizations for 67J at the Colonel level, but we have historically sustained a COL inventory exceeding 600%. That means we have consistently performed extraordinarily well in the O6 boards to include at least three colonels being picked up for O6 without O5 level command.

Let me try to personalize all this by connecting all that with what is coming up in the ranks, and it is hard to dispute the leadership excellence of 67Js.

COL Dave Zimmerman was activated to take 65th Med BDE this summer. COL Y. R. Summons taking command of 62d MED BDE. COL Rob Howe changes out of 1st MED Brigade Command in Jan '21. COL Dan Moore changes out of command of the

old 28th CSH and is already on track to take his second (Level II) command summer '21. COL Tanya Peacock was activated for MEDDAC Japan, and COL Dirk LaFleur relinquishes command of PHC-C and takes over as Director APPD. While two LTC (P)s, Nate Forrester and Mer Carattini, are on their way to resident War College this summer.

At the Lieutenant Colonel level we have four 67Js going in or out of command. LTC Sam Fricks relinquished command of 61st MMB and will be the Deputy Director of Medical Evacuation Concepts and Capabilities Division in Ft. Rucker. LTC Scott Farley relinquishes command of the 615th Aviation Support Battalion and will be the SGS for III Corps. LTC Duryea will take command of the Field Hospital in Ft. Polk in March of '21. Meanwhile, LTC Brian Tripp was activated for O5 Centralize Selection List command in Italy.

Ten Major level commands have already or will change out this summer. C/2-4 MAJ Zach Mitchell replaced MAJ Ernie Severe; C/1-52 MAJ Matthew Clark will replace MAJ William Keller; C/3-2 MAJ Justin Stewart will replace MAJ Drew Wilson; C/2-501st MAJ Suzannah Morrison will replace MAJ Robbie Flowers; C/6-101 MAJ Doug Hill will replace MAJ Russell Scott; Flat Iron MAJ Brandon Paniagua replaced MAJ Amanda Charlton; C/2-1 MAJ David Preczewski replaced MAJ Jon Spikes; USAAAD JRTC MAJ Ralph Salazar took command USAAAD NTC; MAJ Chase is taking command from MAJ Todd Perry; and in USAAAD Yakima MAJ Jason West is taking command from MAJ Nolan Roggenkamp

We also have the following 67Js going to resident Command General Staff College: MAJ Cody Sneed, MAJ Drew Wilson, MAJ Tom Barth, MAJ Matthew Perry, and MAJ Amanda Charlton who is deferred to FY21.

Finally, 10 company grade 67Js took command or relinquished command of various CPT level company commands throughout the Army.

**Corner, continued on page 20.**

# 2019 DUSTOFF Association Awards

Originally established in 1995 as the DUSTOFF Crewmember of the Year and DUSTOFF Rescue of the Year, our awards program was expanded to recognize outstanding members of the DUSTOFF community at individual levels of DUSTOFF Aviator of the Year, DUSTOFF Medic of the Year, and DUSTOFF Crew Chief of the Year, in addition to the Rescue of the Year. Generous support of these programs is provided annually by our corporate sponsors. Sikorsky Aircraft division of Lockheed Martin provides trophies for the unit, as well as all crewmembers of the DUSTOFF Rescue of the Year award. AirMethods provides funding for the trophy awarded to the DUSTOFF Medic of the Year. Breeze Eastern provides funding for the trophy awarded to the DUSTOFF Crew Chief of the Year award. Currently, the DUSTOFF Association is funding the DUSTOFF Aviator of the Year award through donations by several Executive Council members.

Normally, these awards are presented at the annual reunion. However, as were many other events this year, the DUSTOFF Reunion was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Efforts are currently underway to have members of the Executive Council, along with our corporate sponsors, travel to the home station of the awardees and make the presentations.

**The DUSTOFF Rescue of the Year for 2019** was a mission flown by the Nebraska Army National Guard G Company 2-104th General Support Aviation Battalion. In March of 2019 historic flooding struck Nebraska. The combination of heavy rainfall from the “bomb cyclone” and snow melt caused large-scale flooding along the Platte, Missouri, and Elkhorn Rivers. On March 14, the levees along these waterways failed, and water flooded into fields, towns, and roadways. By the afternoon, the Nebraska Army National Guard was responding to calls for assistance from several county and city officials. The Nebraska Army



*DUSTOFF Rescue of the Year crew: CW2 Nathan Dooley, Pilot; SGT Aaron Winberg, Crew Chief; CW3 Josh Schaaf, Pilot in Command; SSG Lawrence Lind, Medic.*

National Guard Aviation assets were activated at 17:00 to conduct immediate search and rescue efforts within devastated communities throughout Nebraska.

Swift water rescue hoist missions would be conducted under Night Vision Goggles (NVG's) with sustained wind of 40 knots and gust to 50 Knots. The temperature would be 35 degrees. On March 14 at 21:00, a seven-person firefighting team was responding to a call from residents, as part of a large flood response near Arlington, NE. The team's two airboats capsized, leaving all seven firefighters in rushing, ice-cold water. NEARNG UH-60 #556 was over 60 miles away with only 45 minutes of fuel remaining when called to respond.

All seven were still clinging to the overturned boats. Four previous rescues had been conducted by this crew when the boats capsized. Both boats were located directly under power lines. There was no possible landing site. At the time, the aircraft was in a critical fuel status, 500-600 pounds. The crew made the decision to perform the rescue immediately, as going for fuel and returning would have been fatal for those firefighters in the water. All six were rescued and taken for medical care, one in critical condition with hypothermia. Two additional rescues were performed that night, following the night hoist mission. The crew that night conducted six continuous flying hours, performing extremely high-risk rescues under the most demanding conditions, saving 17 civilians and two animals.

**The DUSTOFF Aviator of the Year is CPT Samuel R. Stalons.** Captain Stalons, a highly skilled and experienced combat aviator, currently assigned to Charlie Company 3-82nd General Support Aviation Battalion (GSAB), embodies all the positive aspects of an Army Aviator and DUSTOFFer. CPT Stalons has served in the active aviation component for 16 years, first beginning Army flight training in February 2004, and now as a DUSTOFF aviator. He has served Army Aviation in three operational deployments to Afghanistan, with two previous deployments as an infantry Marine, and currently serves as the Area Support MEDEVAC Platoon (ASMP) leader for C/3-82 GSAB DUSTOFF.

With a career spanning over 21 years, CPT Stalons is an excellent example of a DUSTOFF aviator. As a previously branched Aviation warrant officer aviator, Sam demonstrated a typical DUSTOFF mindset. On one occasion in Farrah, while providing a month-long MEDEVAC chase mission, a unique mission presented itself that would change Sam's future aviation plans.

The MEDEVAC received a 9-line from a Marine infantry unit based at an FOB between Farrah and Bastion: three Marines had critical gunshot wounds to the chest. Upon takeoff, the MEDEVAC aircraft experienced hydraulic malfunctions and returned to Farrah, unable to continue the mission. Informing the TOC at Kandahar of the problem, they were told that



*DUSTOFF Aviator of the Year, CPT Samuel R. Stalons*

there were no other Army or Air Force units able to respond to the 9-line, and the Marines would have to be ground evacuated. Sam realized the severity of the situation and requested that the medic and medical gear from the broken MEDEVAC aircraft be transferred to his aircraft, so he could launch a single ship to answer the 9-line. The MEDEVAC platoon leader agreed, but the TOC in Kandahar denied the request for single ship flight for risk reasons. CW2 Stalons departed nonetheless, understanding that the Marines would likely die on the two- to three-hour ground evacuation, due to the severity of their wounds.

CW2 Stalons landed at the POI, picked up the wounded Marines, and transported them to Nightingale, the Role 2 at FOB Bastion. Sam refueled and returned to Farrah single ship, where he was met with armed guards and returned to Kandahar immediately.

The command threatened to remove him permanently from flight status and push UCMJ proceedings for his actions. Sam's reply was simply, "Did they live?" The sacred contract with the fighting man or woman on the ground was more important than his career, which he had willingly risked saving the lives of those three Marines. The answer to his question was yes, all three had lived. In the end, Sam received only a slap on the wrist and was free to continue his aviation career.

Then as a new Medical Service Corps aviator and returning from another deployment in December 2014, Sam was selected to stand up the Army's newest Air Ambulance Detachment in Ft. Benning, Georgia, in May 2015. Upon arrival, he was presented

with a unique challenge: to create a unit and their mission from nothing. Sam was the only Soldier in the detachment for two months, and the only officer for four months, all while accepting and inventorying 11 MES sets, six aircraft, ordering new class VIII, and procuring all of the daily living needs of the detachment.

CPT Stalons is now a member of C/3-82 as a DUSTOFF platoon leader. He remains dedicated to the DUSTOFF mission and mentorship of the next generation of DUSTOFF aviators and medics. CPT Stalons's resilience and professional manner, steadfast courage, and commitment to his Soldiers and the mission has led to the successful accomplishment of the DUSTOFF mission, in both training and real-world environments.

**The DUSTOFF Medic of the Year is SSG Danielle Black**, nominated by her previous commander while serving in C Company 6-101 Aviation Regiment. She is now serving at the schoolhouse at Ft. Rucker. As a young Private First Class, she earned her Expert Field Medical Badge on her first attempt in 2011, while serving as a medic at the 121st Combat Support Hospital in Korea. Serving with C/7-101st, SSG Black became an indispensable asset to the Eagle DUSTOFF team.

In 2013, she deployed to Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, where she treated dozens of patients in the volatile Wardak Province in Central Afghanistan. After returning from Forward Operating Base Shank, then-SGT Black attended the Critical Care Flight Paramedic Course to earn the coveted F3 identifier. After finishing the CCFP course, SSG Black



*DUSTOFF Medic of the Year,, SSG Danielle Black*

was assigned to C/6-101st Aviation Regiment (Shadow DUSTOFF) and returned to Ft. Campbell, KY, where she soon completed the UH-60 Aircrew Member Standardization Course.

Shortly after her arrival, SSG Black became the first and only female to complete the demanding Special Operations Aviation Medical Indoctrination Course (SOAMIC). As the company's senior medical flight instructor, she was responsible for the pre-deployment training of 25 flight paramedics. SSG Black prepared each of the 25 paramedics to provide life-saving medical care in harsh environments and under intense pressure. No matter how difficult the situation, SSG Black has always performed to the highest standard.

During a Taliban attack, SSG Black and her team were tremendously tested. In a 36-hour period, they flew five missions, including one involving 11 patients. In total, they cared for 15 severely wounded patients, of which SSG Black treated nine. Given SSG Black's involvement with a majority of the patients, the FST Commander asked her to present her portion of patient care during these missions as part of the Joint Theater Trauma Conference, a weekly conference of Joint Medical Agencies around the world. SSG Black's briefing helped further develop and refine patient care processes throughout theater.

SSG Black's tireless work ethic was also crucial to the unit's success in conducting expeditionary operations.



*DUSTOFF Crew Chief of the Year,  
SGT Eric Cook*

On nine separate instances, her team repositioned to an austere site to cover U.S. and partnered forces operating outside the traditional MEDEVAC “golden hour” ring as part of an Expeditionary Advisory Package (EAP). During these forward operations, SSG Black and her crew were called upon numerous times to evacuate and provide care to wounded Soldiers in the most dangerous of environments and situations. Ultimately, SSG Black flew more hours and completed more missions than any other crew member in her platoon.

**The DUSTOFF Crew Chief of the Year is SGT Eric Cook.** SGT Cook previously served with All American DUSTOFF before his current assignment with Mountain DUSTOFF. His expertise and knowledge have contributed greatly to the development of his platoon’s relatively junior Non-Rated Crew Members with little to no deployment experience. Within four weeks of in-processing at Ft. Drum, NY, SGT Cook deployed to Afghanistan for a second time, now in support of Operation Freedom’s Sentinel with Mountain DUSTOFF.

SGT Cook regularly assisted his flight paramedic counterparts with patient treatment, due to minimal personnel at his forward location. On one specific occasion, DUSTOFF received a mission for three CAT A patients after an IED blast struck a ground element during a clearance operation.

Upon arrival to the POI, SGT Cook immediately sprang into action loading patients onto the aircraft, while simultaneously maintaining security.

Once the patients were loaded on the aircraft, SGT Cook immediately began assessing patients and aiding the flight paramedic. He began applying pressure to control bleeding on a patient with a blast injury to their lower leg, thus allowing the flight medic to focus on the other two patients whose injuries required more immediate attention. SGT Cook maintained his care until the Forward Resuscitative Surgical Team (FRST) received the patients. SGT Cook has already provided over 1,500 hours of MEDEVAC coverage, enabling U.S., NATO, and Afghan ground forces to perform operations with continuous MEDEVAC support. SGT Cook trained more than 50 U.S. Military and partner forces in safely loading and unloading patients from a UH-60/HH-60 Blackhawk.

Since arriving in country, SGT Cook has forward staged at various austere sites for more than 45 days, requiring him to conduct aircraft maintenance with minimal external support. SGT Cook serves as one of two Technical Inspectors (TI) in the platoon, increasing combat power by ensuring continuous MEDEVAC coverage.

SGT Cook successfully served as a maintenance NCO, supervising and assisting in the completion of various 40-Hour, 120-Hour, and Phase Maintenance Inspections, as well as unpredicted and unscheduled maintenance. The leadership and expertise displayed by SGT Cook is directly impacting unit mission readiness each day by maintaining a superior overall operational readiness rate of 90%.

It is with great pleasure and honor that the DUSTOFF Association recognizes these great men and women of DUSTOFF. They truly are great representatives of the entire DUSTOFF Family of Warriors of Compassion.

—DUSTOFFer—

**Corner, continued from page 17.**

They are CPT John Alderete changing out of HHC 6-101; CPT Robert Callahan taking a recruiting company command this summer; CPT Jeffrey Crook taking command of Honduras Detachment by replacing MAJ Cody Sneed; CPT Kenneth Danos took detachment command of USAARL; CPT Daniel Harritt took command HHC 1-52 Alaska from CPT Jeffrey Crook; CPT Christopher Howell took command F/3-25 GSAB from CPT(P) Jason West; CPT Armando Valencia took command of HHC 3-2 GSAB, Korea; MAJ Dawn Herron relinquished F/2-3 GSAB to CPT Teddy Ivanco 15A, (former FSMP leader in C/2-4); and MAJ Thomas Barth relinquished command A 2-501st to CPT Jennifer Zanghi.

That is a lot of superior leaders. All symbolize the overall talent and character of a fairly small community hovering just around 290 phenomenal men and women.

Make no mistake about a few 67Js drinking and telling stories. The reality is that 67Js have infinite opportunities because they are proven leaders. Challenge them with any job, and they will excel. They will tell stories of trials, tribulations, and excellence. This does create a problem for them. That problem is called choice. 67Js will struggle with choice because they are talent that our Army wants and our Soldiers deserve. This is a good problem to have, a blessing to the hard profession known as DUSTOFF. I remain proud, honored, and humbled to be part of this exclusive group of men and women, past and present.

—DUSTOFFer—



# From the Executive Director

## A 25-year perspective on the DUSTOFF Association

by COL (R) Dan Gower, Executive Director, DUSTOFF Association

I was a new Colonel on Fort Sam Houston. I had been there just over a year and made it to the DUSTOFF reunion. It had been several years since I had been to one, having been assigned to Graduate School, Ft. Rucker, Graduate School again, and then to Ft. Riley. Bob Romines was the President of the Association, and our current VP was removing himself from the normal transition into the role of the President of the Association.

At the business meeting that year the assembled crowd voted to have Bob serve two terms as President. Bob asked me to serve as his VP. The year was 1995. In the 25 years since that reunion I have served as VP, President, Treasurer, and then Executive Director. I have made the DUSTOFF Association my “pay-it-forward” volunteer job.

As I look back on those 25 years, there are many programs and challenges that I can refer to as “good stuff.” The Association has come a long way from its inception in 1980. DUSTOFF has evolved, as well during those years. The Vietnam War provided a solid foundation for the legacy of service to our fighting forces. The 1980’s provided a period of growth and modernization. The 1990’s were yet another period of change for our profession. Through it all, the legacy of Charles Kelly remained vibrant and relevant. The Association, formed from the efforts of Thomas “Egor” Johnson, continued to “chug along.”

During the time I have worked as the Executive Director of the Association, we can cite quite a few cardinal events and programs that have served to give our fellowship relevance beyond the hospitality room at the annual reunions. Let me point to just a few. Early on it was decided and instituted that we should honor those DUSTOFFers who went well beyond the normal selfless service as members of our Hall of Fame. The first class of inductees was formed from those DUSTOFFers, who were members of the Army

Aviation Association of America and were already in the (Quad-A) Hall of Fame. Major Charles Kelly, MG Pat Brady, MG Spurgeon Neel, CW4 Mike Novosel, and CW2 Louis Rocco were inducted to our Hall of Fame on 17 February 2001. Forty-Six men now are enshrined in our Hall of Fame.

**As I look back on those 25 years, there are many programs . . . I can refer to as “good stuff.” . . . Through it all, the legacy of Charles Kelly remained vibrant and relevant.**

Recently, we formed a “blue-ribbon panel” to review our Hall of Fame procedures and processes. Voting in this all-important program has remained with the membership of the Association. However, in the past six years the numbers of members who take the time to vote has decreased by nearly half, while membership continues to increase.

The Quad-A Hall of Fame was originally a membership vote, but that organization changed many years ago to allow nominations to originate in the normal way. But voting has been assigned to an executive board and members of the Quad-A Hall of Fame. We are considering that method, among others.

At times during the early years of our Hall of Fame, there were attempts to cease nominations and to do away with the Hall of Fame all together. I can remember a passionate speech by Egor at one reunion that very clearly defended the Hall of Fame and set the tone for future decisions. The DUSTOFF Hall of Fame remains enshrined on the Hall of Fame Wall at the Army Medical Department Museum.

Since our early reunions, our Killed in Action boards were always present at the reunion. One board has all our

heroes from the Vietnam War—all 214 of them. The second board has those who died in the conduct of actual TOE missions since that time in peace and in combat. Shortly after the attack on the World Trade Centers, we undertook a program to place brick pavers at the AMEDD Museum. Through an aggressive fund-raising program, we raised over \$15,000 to place a paver there at the base of the Hall of Fame Wall for our KIA DUSTOFF brothers and sisters.

In 1998, I spearheaded the efforts to upgrade the Memorial Huey that stands in front of the AMEDD C&S. Through some fund-raising and arm-twisting of then MG Jim Peake, we dedicated the plaza in honor of MG Spurgeon Neel, as the Spurgeon Neel DUSTOFF Memorial Plaza, with the memorial helicopter as the centerpiece. Since that time, we worked a deal with the Army Aviation Museum for a replacement Huey, since the original bird had deteriorated due to the Texas heat and exposure to the elements.

Maintaining a relevance to the current force has long been a goal of the Association. The first awards were made in 1996 to SSG Scott Spiva (Crewmember of the Year) and the 571st Medical Company (AA) (Rescue of the Year). In those days we were struggling financially to maintain a semblance of ability to do more than hold reunions. To that end, we established an awards program, the first awards being made sometime in 1997 (if my memory serves me—check the trophy to be sure). We reached out and found corporate sponsors to provide funding for the trophies. John Soehnlein was our “go-to guy” at Sikorsky, and they gladly took up the sponsorship of the Rescue of the Year award. They still provide the trophies for that award.

The original individual award was the Crewmember of the Year award, which often went to medics. That award was originally sponsored by

**Director, continued on page 23\.**

# From the Wiregrass

## MEDEVAC In LSCO—Advancing to Meet the Challenge

by Mr. Michael Pouncey, MEDEVAC Analyst, MECDD

**O**ur Army will be challenged in unique ways by armed conflict in the Future Operational Environment (FOE). Large-scale combat operations (LSCO), against peer or near-peer adversaries, will present problems not encountered in recent operations. We expect LSCO to be more dangerous and difficult for the medical evacuation, or MEDEVAC force to operate—but it will not be impossible.

To operate effectively, we must have a well-grounded understanding of LSCO, a sound grasp of the inherent risks, and take a clear-eyed approach to mission analysis and execution. Perhaps the most critical adaptation required is one of mindset. We have become habituated to a risk calculus that accepts relatively little risk in operations. We have become so reliant on our dominance of air and ground lines of communication that some believe we cannot operate without it. We have become so used to relying almost exclusively on aero-medical evacuation that many have forgotten the ground component to MEDEVAC. To an extent, we have forgotten how to plan, coordinate, and execute in dynamic environments at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels. To be successful in the future, we must overcome the thinking we have cultivated in recent operations and expand our mindset to match the demands and dynamics of LSCO.

### Lethality of LSCO

We can accept that LSCO in the FOE will present us with more lethal environments. We cannot accept that this increased lethality precludes our ability to conduct MEDEVAC. Some believe that, because of the risk to MEDEVAC, assets will be greater than what we consider acceptable risk in our current operations, we will cease to conduct MEDEVAC. We must understand that future battlefields will be more dangerous for the entire force, not just for MEDEVAC. As articulated in the Multi-Domain

Operations (MDO) concepts, our forces intend to operate on these more lethal battlefields, and so will MEDEVAC. We must accept that the threshold for acceptable risk in LSCO will be significantly different than today.

As we look to potential LSCO in the FOE, some only consider the ca-

**Failing to evacuate will jeopardize the medical mission and the operational mission.**

pabilities that adversaries bring to the fight. They assess the unopposed impact these adversaries could have—and draw a number of flawed conclusions. They fail to acknowledge that the U.S. military—and our allies and partners—will bring significant opposition to battle. An assessment of the opposed impact of adversary capabilities provides a much different picture. It acknowledges the challenges, but also highlights the opportunities. While operations in LSCO in the FOE against a peer/near-peer adversary will be difficult, they will not be impossible.

### Evolving Combat Casualty Care

The scope, scale, and tempo of casualties during LSCO will present distinct challenges to the MEDEVAC force—but will also make MEDEVAC an imperative. Failing to evacuate will jeopardize the medical mission and the operational mission. Failing to evacuate will jeopardize the medical mission by risking culmination of forward medical treatment facilities through overwhelming the capacity of medical care or through consumption of medical supplies faster than they can be replenished. Failing to evacuate will jeopardize the operational mission through the drain on combat power required to secure/protect the accumulating casualties and through the drag effect these accumulated casualties will have on movement and

maneuver. Not evacuating in LSCO will not be an option.

The scope, scale, and tempo of casualties in LSCO will require the full commitment of the MEDEVAC force—air and ground. Adversary lethality and reach will require MEDEVAC assets to be arrayed through the entire breadth and depth of a theater of operations. The scheme of evacuation must carefully position ambulance assets—and dynamically reposition them to anticipate casualty flows and react to contingencies. Despite the evacuation capacity that MEDEVAC assets bring to the Force, there will likely be times when this capacity is exceeded. Accordingly, commanders must complement MEDEVAC with casualty evacuation, or CASEVAC, assets and condition the Force to provide lift of opportunity when required with the least impact to their primary mission/task.

In LSCO, we must expect our adversaries to have the ability to interdict lines of communication (LOCs), thereby impeding battlefield access to MEDEVAC assets. However, an adversary's ability to interdict our LOCs will not be uniform across space and time. An adversary's ability to interdict LOCs will be greatest where he can mass effects.

Simplistically, the adversarial effects will diminish with distance from the physical location of his assets. We can expect the greatest interdiction of LOCs in the vicinity of brigade combat teams in contact and to diminish, in terms of effects or duration of effects, through the depths of the division and rearward. We can also expect an adversary's ability to interdict LOCs to be greatest at, or near, the outset of a campaign and to be diminished over time, assuming a degree of success by U.S. forces, as U.S. forces penetrate and disintegrate adversary capabilities and exploit opportunities for movement and maneuver. The key throughout is to get our MEDEVAC assets as close as prudently possible to the patient needing evacuation. We

**Director, continued from page 21.**

Breeze Eastern, the manufacturer of most of the rescue hoists we use in our aircraft. Christine Hawk was and remains our “go-to” person there at Breeze-Eastern. With a desire to honor the “whole crew” concept of what it takes to put a DUSTOFF aircraft on the ground to rescue the wounded, we expanded the awards program in 2006 to include an Aviator of the Year, Crew Chief of the Year, and Flight Medic of the Year Award. Air Methods took up the sponsorship of the Medic of the Year, and Art Torwirt and Jim Wingate, among others, became great friends of our mission and the Association. Christine Hawk and Breeze Eastern took up sponsorship of the Crew Chief of the Year. The Aviator of the Year Award has bounced around between a few other sponsors and is now funded by the DUSTOFF Executive Council Members.

Over the last 24 years, we have seen some outstanding DUSTOFFers selected to receive those awards. I will confess that during the last few years, the challenge of getting commanders to take the time to nominate their people for these awards has been “daunting” at times. Yet, every year we tend to find those brave men and women

who wear the mantle of Charles Kelly’s last words with distinction and honor.

In 2005 we established a partnership with the Quad-A Scholarship with the DUSTOFF Association Mike Novosel Scholarship. That was a great

**Those who served in Vietnam never got those welcome home ceremonies. Today’s Warriors get that welcome they so richly deserve.**

financial step forward, as we were able to provide \$15,000 to the Scholarship Foundation Fund that was matched by the fund. The rules of that fund provide for a set percentage of funds each year to provide a scholarship in perpetuity, depending upon the investments that are made on behalf of the fund. Those rules allow us to award a \$1,000 scholarship to members of the Association, their families, and their immediate lineage (children, grandchildren, etc.). We have been able to provide that \$1,000 each year since.

The added benefit is that each year somebody who applies using our por-

tal into the competition will go on to win one of the other scholarships available. Some years we have seen two, three, and four of our folks win scholarships. The other aspect of this program is that Quad-A looks to us to provide evaluators to review the scholarship applications. COL (R) Doug Moore and COL (R) Rick Agosta have worked tirelessly to evaluate those applications over a long time. Thanks, guys, for that work.

A personal goal of mine has been to welcome home DUSTOFF Warriors from deployments. Over the years I have had the distinct honor to visit on probably 50 occasions units returning from combat. From Hawaii to Germany and almost every post in the CONUS, I have had the privilege to shake thousands of hands and present them with a DUSTOFF Association coin.

Those who served in Vietnam never got those welcome home ceremonies. Today’s Warriors get that welcome they so richly deserve. Travel has become much more difficult for me these days, and the trips have grown fewer and fewer. Other members of the Association have graciously traveled to welcome home our DUSTOFF Warriors, like Ben Knisely, Dennis Doyle,

**Director, continued on page 24.**

**From, continued from page 22.**

cannot afford to cede any advantage to the enemy that he has not actually taken from us.

What this means is that the MEDEVAC force will have the battlefield access it requires to evacuate patients over much of a theater of operations. In these areas, achieving the 1-hour evacuation standard for urgent and urgent-surgical casualties should be doable. Based on the reach and lethal capabilities of adversaries, we should expect wounded throughout the depth of the theater of operations. Evacuation from points of injury (POI) will be possible in some areas. Where units are in contact with enemy formations, however, our ability to achieve the one-hour evacuation standard will likely be challenged. Wherever evacuation is delayed, our prolonged field care capabilities will be used to mitigate the risk to patients—buying time

until evacuation can be conducted.

### **Balancing Evacuation Capabilities**

The scope, scale, and tempo of casualties in LSCO will require the effective and efficient employment of MEDEVAC assets. It will require a mission command structure that can achieve unity of effort/purpose in highly dynamic situations. This begins with the theater medical command deployment support, or MEDCOM-DS, providing top-down guidance and direction—for the overarching scheme of MEDEVAC and reaches down through medical brigades and medical battalions and through corps, division, and brigade headquarters for bottom-up refinement. These elements must be able to dynamically plan, coordinate, and execute MEDEVAC operations that are integrated into and synchronized with schemes of maneuver.

Not evacuating our sick and wounded in LSCO is not an option.

Failing to evacuate may cause us to lose today’s battle—as the backlog of casualties/patients causes a cascade of medical and operational culmination on the battlefield. Failing to evacuate often enough—with its impact on Soldier morale and national will—may cause us to lose the next battle, the next campaign, and the next war. While MEDEVAC will be difficult in future LSCO—it will not be impossible.

We must adapt our mindset to the operational environment in LSCO. Without a mindset that understands the challenges and refuses to cede any advantage to an adversary that the adversary has not actually taken away—we cannot be successful. Cultivating and inculcating such a mindset must be a high-priority effort moving forward.

**—DUSTOFFer—**

# No Compromise—No Hesitation

The enduring legacy of the DUSTOFF program in Vietnam

by Marc Leepson, The VVA Veteran, March/April 2017

**W**hen I have your wounded. Those were the words U.S. Army MAJ Charles Livingston Kelly growled before taking a bullet in the chest, while flying his DUSTOFF Huey helicopter into a hot LZ near Vinh Long on July 1, 1964. Those words—which Kelly barked out when a sergeant on the ground urged him not to risk landing—have been adopted as the credo of the U.S. military men and women pilots, medics, and crew chiefs who do the highly dangerous humanitarian work of flying into combat areas to evacuate the wounded.

Charles Kelly's story is at the heart of the 2012 documentary, *When I Have Your Wounded: The DUSTOFF Legacy*, produced and directed by the husband and wife team of Patrick and Cheryl Fries. Narrated by Charles Kelly's son, Charles L. Kelly, Jr., this first-class documentary traces the history of DUSTOFF from their bare-bones beginnings in Burma during World War II, to their still-rudimentary use in the Korean War, as they worked in conjunction with the first Mobile Army Surgical Hospital (MASH) units.

The movie concentrates on the revolutionary and startlingly successful use of the Bell UH-1 Huey during the Vietnam War, starting in April 1962 when the first "air ambulance" arrived in country, and ending with the 1973 U.S. combat (and flew for) the pioneering 57th Medical Detachment (Air Ambulance) in Vietnam, sometimes known as "Kelly's Krazies." He lived by the words that became the unit's creed: "No compromise. No rationalization. No hesitation. Fly the mission. Now!"

A "gruff, stubborn, dedicated Soldier who let few obstacles prevent him from finishing a task," Kelly was the first DUSTOFF pilot "to exploit fully the possibilities of the medical helicopters," Peter Dorland and James Nanney of the U.S. Army Center of Military History wrote in *DUSTOFF: Army Aeromedical Evacuation in Vietnam*. Within six months after taking over the 57th, Kelly "set an example of courage and hard work that DUSTOFF pilots emulated for the rest of the war."

Kelly and his men regularly flew dangerous missions at night and in all kinds of weather. "He fought his way to the casualties and brought them out," Dorland and Nanney wrote. On one such mission, heavy enemy fire forced him to turn back from the LZ before he could get the wounded on the chopper. An hour later, Kelly "tried to land exactly the same way, through enemy fire, and this time he managed to land the patients safely."

Kelly's goal was "saving lives, no matter the circumstances; get them out during the battle, at night in weather, whatever. Get those patients," Patrick Henry Brady, who flew with Kelly, wrote. Brady later received the Medal of Honor for the courage under fire piloting a DUSTOFF in and out of hot LZs while evacuating 51 seriously wounded men near Cue Lai in January 1968. ■

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**Director**, continued from page 23.

and others.

For about 25 years the DUSTOFF Association website was maintained free of charge by Ron "Huey" Huether. Huey flew with the 15th Medical Detachment and is a member of the DUSTOFF Hall of Fame. The DUSTOFF Website was always a first-class operation, thanks to Huey. Last year, we transitioned that "rock" out of Huey's "rucksack," and the website is now hosted by a fellow Volunteer Firefighter friend of mine, Don Black. The movement from the HTML-based website to the "WordPress"-based website is a long, slow, and detailed process. Slowly but surely, it is beginning to take shape.

In the early days of the Reunions, a few people wanted to develop a store with DUSTOFF Products for sale. But the economies of scale and the amount of cash flow provided by our membership's purchasing habits was far from

enough to make it profitable. So the Association took that on and funded the purchase of inventory. That inventory has grown to a level of nearly \$50,000. The store has resided in my home for all those years and now occupies a 12'x24' room in a structure I own on some land near my home. We make money in some years, and we lose money in some years when we must replenish inventory. But we buy in large enough quantities to provide a reasonably priced line of DUSTOFF products.

Membership continues to increase each year. The demographics of our membership have changed. From a largely commissioned officer membership, now it is an almost equal number of new members from both commissioned/warrant officer ranks, as well as enlisted ranks. We have also seen leadership of our Association with representatives of both commissioned and enlisted DUSTOFFers. Currently we have nearly 1,400 active members

with a database that indicates we are nearing the 3,000-member milestone. The delta in those two numbers represents two things. One is the ever-changing status of accurate mailing addresses and the inevitable "Closed Flight Plans" of our aging population. Currently, the Association offers two levels of membership, Officer/Warrant Officer/Civilian Life membership, and Enlisted Life Membership. Our membership fees are the lowest of most any veterans' organization.

In 2004 the DUSTOFF Association was incorporated in the State of Texas as a tax-exempt entity. That action also changed our status with the IRS. Formerly we were tax-exempt. This action also provided the Association the status of tax-deductible, as well. The benefit of that is that donations made to the Association for memorials and to support programs can be used for income tax purposes of the person making the donation. Each

**Director**, continued on back cover.

# Aloft and Afraid

by Robert B. Robeson, 236th Med. Det., Viet Nam, Lincoln, NE  
Published in *Military*, Volume XXXI, No. 6, November 2014

**A**lthough this urgent medical evacuation mission occurred over four decades ago, my thoughts often return to that night in late March 1970—and the God’s love and protection—especially when it is rainy, foggy, and overcast. Everything seemed to come apart at once in my U.S. Army, Bell, UH-1H “Huey” helicopter on that fateful midnight flight.

## Life in a War Zone

The first seven months during my combat tour as commander and operations officer of the 236th Medical Detachment (Helicopter Ambulance), located at Red Beach on the southern edge of Da Nang Harbor in Da Nang, South Viet Nam, provided a long list of unpleasant experiences. This included having seven helicopters shot up by enemy fire, crewmembers wounded, and being shot down twice.

Many times, during those close encounters with danger and death, approximately 800 evacuation missions at that point, there was an unsettled feeling of fear and vulnerability. This may have been because all of our flights were single-ship missions, but I always knew we were never alone, as long as God was near. Having been raised in the home of a Protestant minister and having my parents, their church congregation, my newlywed wife, and others praying with and for me, I was intimately aware that, with God, all’s well, even when all doesn’t appear to be that way.

On February 3, 1970, I was promoted to commander of our 50-man and six-helicopter unit. A month later, enemy action in our 5,000-square-mile area of operations increased dramatically, and our mission of evacuating casualties from both sides of the fighting became more chaotic by the minute.

In one month, our 13 pilots were collectively shot up or shot down in 16 different aircraft. We went through our entire authorized inventory of unarmed helicopters nearly three times. We begged and borrowed birds from higher headquarters. It was a unit

commander, pilot, and maintenance officer nightmare.

At one point, we were down to two flyable aircraft. One was being flown by my maintenance officer on field standby duty at Landing Zone Hawk Hill, about 32 miles south of our unit headquarters. The other was designated for missions closer to home and for

**Three American infantrymen had been seriously wounded by small arms fire. They scrambled to evacuate them before “zero-zero” visibility became a reality.**

backhauling patients from the battalion aid station at Hawk Hill to a variety of hospitals in Da Nang for further medical treatment.

I was on flight duty in Da Nang when our operations radio-telephone operator informed me that my aircraft maintenance officer at Hawk Hill had called requesting another helicopter. He had been experiencing sudden power surges in his Lycoming jet turbine engine during tactical approaches that were accompanied by “strange noises” from the engine compartment. He did not have time or the necessary equipment to look into these mechanical problems in the field because so many missions were being called in. I alerted my crew, and we flew out to evaluate the situation.

## Bad Timing

This mechanical and logistical development could not have occurred at a more inappropriate time. It was nearing dusk when we arrived, and a massive storm system was beginning to envelop the entire coastal region along the South China Sea. I had chosen to fly out on the deck, a few feet above the ground, the entire 32 miles in order to keep a low profile from the enemy and because a solid cloud deck was concentrated at about 600 feet

above actual ground level.

After talking to my maintenance officer at Hawk Hill, we both agreed that the best decision would be to switch aircraft. We intended to land his ailing bird with a couple of routine and priority patients for Da Nang, and then I would fly back low-level again, before the bad weather had an opportunity to potentially ground us for the night. As long as my crew was there, the northern half of our operational area was without medevac support, and our aircraft maintenance crew in Da Nang could not deal with the apparent engine malfunction.

As we were preparing to load these patients, the field site crew received an urgent medevac mission. Three American infantrymen had been seriously wounded by small arms fire. They scrambled to evacuate them before “zero-zero” visibility became a reality.

Now I could not leave because of the apparent severity of their wounds. If they lived, and as soon as they were medically stabilized, my crew would have to backhaul them to the 95th Evacuation Hospital on China Beach in Da Nang in an effort to enhance their chances for survival.

The field site crew returned in less than 30 minutes. It was not a pleasant sight. Two of these young Soldiers had sucking chest wounds, and the third was wounded in the head and extremities. I watched as doctors and medics worked feverishly to save them in this primitive medical setting. Seconds and minutes began to tick away like a slow-fuse time bomb. I knew from experience it could be hours before the doctors determined that these infantrymen were capable of making the 25-minute flight to Da Nang.

## Impossible Scenario

Feeling angry at the sight of comrades in pain and such dire straits, I walked outside to check on the weather. It was completely dark by then, except for perimeter lights outlining a series of bunkers encircling the entire base. A thick and eerie fog had rolled

in off the surrounding rice paddies. It was beginning to rain, and a heavy layer of low-lying clouds hung above the fog like a ghostly presence. I realized we were now knee-deep in multiple dangers and dilemmas.

Standing alone outside, I knew our crew had been placed in an extraordinary and dangerous position. It was becoming apparent to me that I would probably have to fly our wounded bird into IFR (instrument flight rule) conditions, if the lives of three critically wounded Americans were to be preserved. This would also have to be accomplished with a rookie “peter pilot” straight from flight school.

From my perspective, it all came down to two alternatives. I could ground our helicopter for the night, due to the weather and apparent engine problems, and probably doom these patients, or I could take off and hope we would be picked up by radar for a GCA (ground-controlled approach), at Marble Mountain Airfield on China Beach in Da Nang.

I knew the odds were good that nobody else was crazy enough to be flying in such abysmal weather. The prospect of having an upsetting mid-air rendezvous in the clouds with another aircraft, before being picked up by radar, was not my biggest concern. I could only hope that the cloud tops would not extend so high that VFR (visual flight rule), conditions would not be present when, or if, we were able to break out on top. I had done that many times before, but with more experienced copilots and mechanically safe aircraft. I had not done it with a jet engine reportedly making strange wheezing noises.

If we experienced engine failure, I would have to immediately autorotate and descend on the energy in our rotating main rotor blades alone, rather than the engine. This would occur in blind instrument conditions at night with only one shot at a landing, a major challenge, even in daylight. If we broke out of the clouds before reaching the ground, I would either have to land in the middle of the night in “bad guy” territory or the South China Sea . . . with three critically wounded patients and a crew of four.

### **In God’s Hands**

“Dust Off” flying was an occupation chock full of danger and uncertainty on every mission. As an aircraft commander, I often assumed personal responsibility for suspending flight rules and regulations in favor of what appeared to be the best of several less-than-desirable alternatives on behalf of our patients.

In this instance, it would mean attempting to safely transport these infantrymen to the 95th Evac where surgery might save their lives. It was

**I made the command decision that we would leave as soon as our patients were stabilized. The rest would be in God’s hands.**

a colossal gamble. But in combat, as in other areas of life, I had discovered that you do not always do what you want to do. You do what you must.

With rain dribbling from the bill of my military baseball cap and down the back of my neck, Psalm 121:8 came to mind, “The Lord will guard your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forever.” This verse was a figure of speech for “everything you do.” It affirmed that God watches over His children all the time, in every circumstance, and forever.

I knew this flight would be another of those “going out” times in war when a pilot cannot be reasonable or rational. And, sometimes, it is when you most want not to go that you most have to go. I made the command decision that we would leave as soon as our patients were stabilized. The rest would be in God’s hands.

### **Perilous Flight**

It was after midnight when aid station physicians informed me that our patients were prepared for evacuation. We had been waiting over six hours.

In an attempt not to traumatize my rookie copilot with graphic details of what might happen once airborne, I acted as though this was just another normal Dust Off mission. He would learn, in time, that you never know

what is possible in combat or life unless you try. The three patients were carried out and locked into our litter rack in the cargo compartment, one above the other, before our medic and crew chief slid the doors shut.

My decision to lift off into fog, clouds, rain, and dead of night, was a definite act of faith. I prayed silently and quickly for our safety and that of our patients before “pulling pitch” with my collective control and tiptoeing into the heavy, cotton-wood mist hanging over the aid station landing pad. Thick clouds swallowed us, at 100 feet, like the closing of a gigantic mouth. Scanning my instrument panel in a continuous motion, I climbed to 3,000 feet before breaking out on top above the storm system.

A yellow egg-yolk moon hung like a round lantern in the northwest sky, tossing strands of golden light across a carpet of billowy gray clouds covering the earth from horizon to horizon. The clouds were like a bed of scattered ashes, holding no warmth or light.

I made initial UHF radio contact with the Marble Mountain tower and was quickly switched to approach control. The approach controller asked for my heading, altitude, and approximate location. Then I requested a GCA with a low approach to the 95th Evac, a short distance up China Beach to the northeast. This medical facility lay under the shadow of mysterious Monkey Mountain, situated between Da Nang Harbor and the South China Sea.

“Dust Off Six-Zero-Five,” the controller directed, “turn left to a heading of three-five-zero, maintain VFR on top and three-thousand. Squawk two-two-three-three.”

My copilot dialed “22333” into our transponder, which transmits position-identifying signals, and activated the “ident” switch.

I flew toward Da Nang for what seemed like minutes.

“Six-Zero-Five, be advised I have negative radar contact,” the controller noted, matter-of-factly.

A moment of stunned silence enveloped the cockpit. My copilot turned and looked at me for a reaction or course of action. What do you mean you have negative contact? I thought to myself.

# Closing Out the Flight Plan

**G**ambrills, MD — CW3 Max Edward Tucker, retired U.S. Army, age 82, passed peacefully in his sleep in the early morning hours on Sunday, February 23, 2020. After battling late stage pancreatic cancer, he was fortunate to live out the remainder of his life in his own home with the help of hospice care and his loving family.

Mr. Tucker is survived by his children and their spouses, Tina Dykstra, Patricia & George Abitante, and Susan & Dean Harrison. He also leaves behind five grandchildren, Julia and Anna Dykstra, Miki, Alissa, and Max Abitante, as well as his great grandson, Gavin Good. His wife, Chieko Watanabe Tucker and son, Max Edward Tucker, Jr., who died in infancy, preceded him in death.

Mr. Tucker was born on August 24, 1937, in Warrensville, North Carolina, to Rev. Frank and Edith Rowland Tucker. He was the fourth child of seven children. He is predeceased by Elizabeth (Betty) Jones, James Tucker, and Mabel Miller, and survived by Patsy Troell, Nancy McNeill, and Larry Tucker.

Mr. Tucker served honorably in the U.S. Army for 28 years. His service included multiple tours in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. During the Vietnam War, Mr. Tucker served with the 50th Medical Detachment as a DUSTOFF pilot and was awarded the Bronze Star for heroism. He met his wife during his first tour in Yokohama, Japan, and they were married shortly thereafter.

Mr. Tucker was an avid golfer well into his 70s. He enjoyed having his family and friends around his pool in the summertime, listening to country music, drinking MGD, and eating crab. He also enjoyed spending time at his favorite watering hole, Perry's, watching football, playing Keno, and shooting the breeze with all his friends.

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“Turn right to zero-four-five and maintain three thousand,” he continued.

In the red glow from our instrument panel, I verified the correct transponder code. Then I activated the “ident” switch myself. Another silence seemed to drag by as slow as a turtle on a racetrack.

I suddenly felt like a fool for having risked so much. Then I heard, for the first time, “strange noises” coming from the engine compartment. I guessed we were somewhere over the South China Sea near the coastal town of Hoi An, if my mental airspeed, time, and distance calculations were anywhere near accurate. If I descended slowly over the ocean, a chance existed that one of the mountains rising from the Cu Lao Cham chain of islands—located eight to 11 miles off the coastline—could become a flight hazard. It was an emotional and real truth. For some unknown reason, radar had not been able to locate us, and I was quickly running out of options.

“Six-Zero-Five, I still have negative radar contact. State your intentions.”

“Marble approach,” I broadcast, “we are having engine problems, and there are three critically wounded U.S. aboard. I would recommend trying

again to get a fix on us before it gets worse.” It was my decision that had put us in this position, but I felt compelled at that moment to entice this controller to share a bit of my stress and responsibility, too.

In the brief interlude that followed, I offered up another silent prayer, while my copilot sat in his armored seat as rigid as an Egyptian mummy. He was undoubtedly thinking it was going to be a long war for him if every flight was like this one.

As had happened many times before on other missions, all that was left for me to do was to hang onto my cyclic stick, collective control, and a total faith I had had since a child in an all-knowing and all-seeing God.

The controller's voice again broke the radio silence. “Six-Zero-Five, turn right to zero-niner-zero, maintain three thousand.”

Banking east, I felt isolated and afraid that our patients might not have much sand left in their hourglasses.

After another interminable pause, I heard the controller say, “Sir, I have radar contact eighteen miles south-east.”

For an aviator adrift above a foiling sea of clouds, with three lives hanging in the balance, the difference between, “negative contact” and “I

have radar contact” is like the difference between a wet match and a flamethrower. Although I felt alone during those distressing and dangerous moments, I really was not. The answer to my prayers came in the words of Mark 5:36, “Do not be afraid any longer, only believe.” I did, and God took care of the rest.

I could tell by the tone of the controller's voice that he was as relieved as I was. He provided vectors to the final approach course and talked me down around three massive rock formations jutting hundreds of feet above the white sandy beach near the southern approach to Marble Mountain Airfield. These formations were the basis for this airfield's name.

We broke out of the clouds as we neared altitude minimums. I had always loved the magnificent and exotic appearance of Da Nang at night from the air, but the extensive lights of the city were even more lovely and special this moment in time. ■



**Director, continued from page 24.**

year we file a form 990 with the IRS documenting our financial status.

So that is a long-winded history of my involvement in our beloved Association. Where do we go from here?

In part, this history is a precursor to the largest issue at hand. For about two or three years now we have been discussing the transition of the Executive Director's duties from me to my successor. I will be the first to state that having somebody be the continuity and the workforce who does the work of managing the affairs of the Association is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, there is that continuity. There is institutional memory. There is somebody who makes things happen. I have been honored to do all of that as a part of my service and paying-it-forward volunteerism.

The other side of that sword is the fact that there is a "single-point-of failure." I routinely state that if I wake up "drooling in my salad," nobody knows what to do next. Passwords, checking accounts, points of contact with supporting organizations, business processes, store order processing, Website management, reporting to the IRS, membership applications, etc., etc. The list goes on and on.

Put your mind at ease and fear not. I do not plan on retiring anytime soon. I am still in the fight and still on the job. And my labor of love for this Association has not diminished. But I have seen men age and develop resistance to change over the years. I have seen programs beginning to become "stale" with familiarity. And I did not serve 27 years on active duty and 12 more years working for the Army, and not recognize that leadership can and will change over time, bringing fresh perspectives and new ideas to the mission. My 25 years serving this organization have been an enriching experience in leadership, perseverance, tolerance, and gratitude. I cherish every moment.

The time is approaching for a change at the helm of this great Association. Our Vietnam-era DUSTOFFers are an aging fleet who will be replaced by the Blackhawk generation. I invite you to look into your heart, and if there is a desire to serve in this capacity with a willingness to devote the time and energy to "continue the march," come up on the net and let us have a discussion. There are many ways to address this challenge. One way is for the different aspects of the job to be taken up by others, e.g., the DUSTOFF Store. The Executive Council remains the elected leadership, per our Constitution and By-Laws. But the Executive Director's position, as established in those documents, can and will remain the long-term institutional memory and stability over time, as Presidents come and go.

Proud to serve!

DUSTOFF

Dan Gower, Executive Director, DUSTOFF Association

—DUSTOFFer—

## DUSTOFF Association Membership Application/Change of Address

- I want to join the Association as a Life Member  
Officers and Civilians \$100.00 One-time fee  
E-9 and below \$ 50.00 One-time fee

- Check here if change of address, or e-mail change to [executivedirector@dustoff.org](mailto:executivedirector@dustoff.org)

Rank \_\_\_\_ Last name \_\_\_\_\_ First name \_\_\_\_\_ M.I. \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing address \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail \_\_\_\_\_ Spouse's name \_\_\_\_\_

Home phone \_\_\_\_\_ Work phone \_\_\_\_\_

Send check or money order, payable  
to DUSTOFF Association, to:

DUSTOFF Association  
P. O. Box 8091  
Wainwright Station  
San Antonio, TX 78208

You may register online using your credit card at <http://dustoff.org>.