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AVIATION CONNECTIONS: NEWSLETTER

Summer 2024

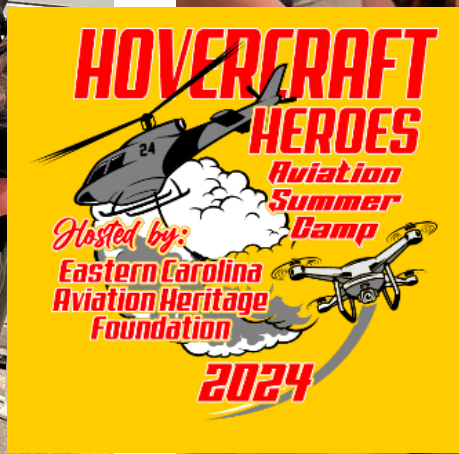
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Eastern Carolina Aviation Heritage Foundation

August 2024

2024 Summer Elementary School Engineering Camp





Due to Hurricane Debby, the 2024 13th Annual Fly-In was cancelled. It was a tough call to make, but in the interest of safety for all concerned, the decision was made on the Tuesday prior to the event on Friday to cancel. Below are lists of sponsors, donors, and STEM presenters that contributed or offered to provide items.

13th Annual 2024 Family Fly-In STEM Night



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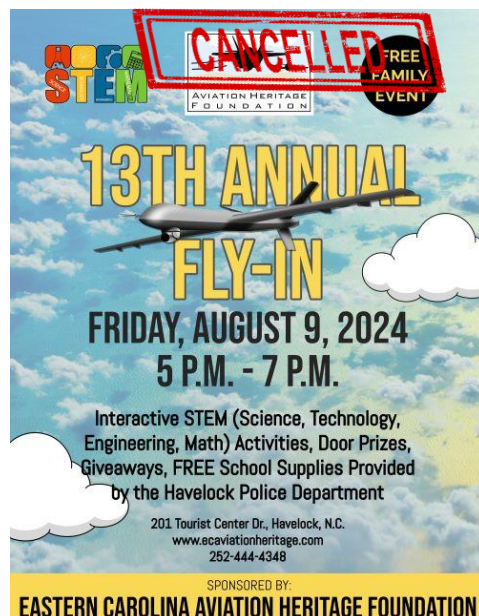
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Thank you to all the STEM Presenters!

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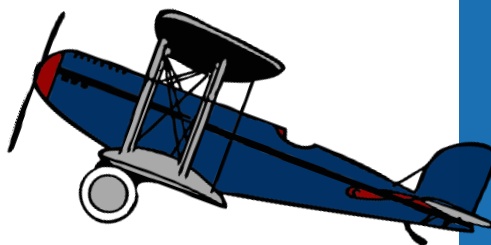
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**SAVE
the
DATE**

Members & Sponsors Night

October 22, 2024

2025 Gala

February 21, 2025



Spotlight on STEM Tours

The Cherry Tree House at Cherry Point brought two separate age groups of Summer Campers to the Tourist & Event Center for a tour of the facility and STEM activities. Forty-five 5-8 years old visited and approximately forty 9-12 years old visited a different day. In addition, Jones County STREAM students (ages 14-16) came to the facility for a tour and time on the AV-8 Simulator. A huge thanks to various Board members that assisted with the tours by manning numerous stations for the students to explore.



The Summer of Love

Steve Wolak-CH-47 crew chief and door gunner in Vietnam

Part 1

Summer 2024 ECAHF Newsletter

By Barry R. Fetzer
ECAHF Historian

This is the first of a two-column series on my brother-in-law Steve Wolak, a Havelock, NC native, a Vietnam veteran, and veteran of the NC Highway Patrol. This first of the series column will cover Steve's early life in Havelock and his basic training as a soldier at Fort Bragg and Fort Eustis, Virginia and fast forward to his time as a NC Highway patrolman. The second and last in the series (autumn 2024) will cover his experiences as a CH-47 crew chief and door gunner in Vietnam.

Over the years, we've reviewed in these ECAHF Newsletter columns many military officer pilots in my family and a few enlisted men (including my own dad, Bob Fetzer, a US Army Air Forces weather forecaster in WWII and my Uncle Bill Hay (my mom's half-brother) who crewed USMC B-25 bombers in the Pacific in WWII). This next series of columns transports us into the Vietnam era in the 1970's and to an enlisted helicopter aircrewman.

A short note on enlisted helicopter aircrewmembers. Those of us who have flown and commanded crewed aircraft, especially crewed helicopters (including me), we owe our lives to these unsung heroes. Enlisted aircrewmembers with whom I served saved my carcass more than once. My brother-in-law is my only relative to have crewed helicopters in the military and I'm honored to scratch the surface of his US Army service in this series of columns.

A "Jody call" is a call or song used by military leaders to instill esprit de corps, rally motivation, and help the troops maintain the cadence of a march. We used to sing one in the 1970's while marching that went something like this, "Left-right-left. Left-right-left. I want to go to Vietnam. I want to "keel" ("kill" but pronounced "keel") Viet Cong. I want to go to Vietnam. I want to keel Viet Cong. Bring it on down! One-two-three-four, One-two-THREE-FOUR!"

What makes a person volunteer for military service? Is it to see the world? Travel to exotic locations? Or is it to meet interesting people (**and then kill them** as we used to add somewhat irreverently...but not untruthfully)?

But for my brother-in-law, Stephen ("Steve") Wolak who graduated from Havelock High School in 1969, just as it was for many 1969 male graduates of high school in America, it was either volunteer for Vietnam or be drafted.

Despite that Jody call that Steve may have himself called out while marching at Army boot camp, he had no innate desire to "keel" folks he had never laid eyes on. And Vietnam was not the exotic location most young men in 1969 thought of when palm trees, sandy beaches, and bikinis came to mind. Vietnam was "nowheresville". Most young men had never even heard of Vietnam, let alone possessed a desire to travel there.

Steve's dad, a hard-nosed USMC Master Gunnery Sergeant squadron maintenance chief stationed at MCAS Cherry Point, actually HAD served in Vietnam. He discouraged Steve from volunteering—at least volunteering for the Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) Steve wanted.

If one is going to be drafted anyway, why not instead volunteer and have a chance to pick your own MOS instead of letting "the Man" pick it for you? Steve wanted to fly. And he wasn't interested in slugging it out in the "mud, and the blood and the beer" (well...maybe the beer...) as an infantryman, an MOS that was very likely to be assigned if he was drafted. So, volunteer he did, even though the commitment for volunteers was three years as opposed to the two-year commitment for draftees.

Steve was born at the old MCAS Cherry Point, NC hospital, his first home an apartment in what is now New Bern's Tryon Palace's "Stable Office". Back in 1949 the Palace's former stable building had been converted to apartments. It is, today, according to the Tryon Palace website, "the only remaining part of the original Palace

complex". As a result, Steve's mom, like most moms berating their kids for leaving doors open, couldn't ask Steve, "What? Were you born in a barn?" That's because, well, Steve...sort of...was born in a barn.

The family moved from Tryon Palace to a Cherry Point enlisted trailer park and, eventually with his mom and dad and three sisters who were born within a year and half of each other (his eldest sister born only 14 months after his own birth), he lived in a 300-some square foot travel trailer, the original "tiny-house".

His dad, being a Marine, deployed to South Vietnam and Okinawa, Japan and was overseas for each of his four children's births. This was (and is) not an atypical routine for Marines that went (and goes even today) something like this: leave home, return home, impregnate your wife, deploy for at least a year overseas leaving mom to bear their child alone, return home. Rinse and repeat.

By the way, Steve remembers that back then, the discombobulated rules were that a Marine's family ("if the Marines wanted you to have one, they would issue you one" as the old saying went) could not live on-base if the "sponsor" (the Marine himself) was not living there with them. So, when Steve's dad deployed overseas, they had to move the trailer to an off-base trailer park behind the old Davis Food Mart on US 70. That "if we want you to have a family we'll issue you one" rule was eventually rescinded and Steve grew up aboard MCAS Cherry Point in a trailer park until the family later bought a home in Havelock Park off Miller Boulevard.



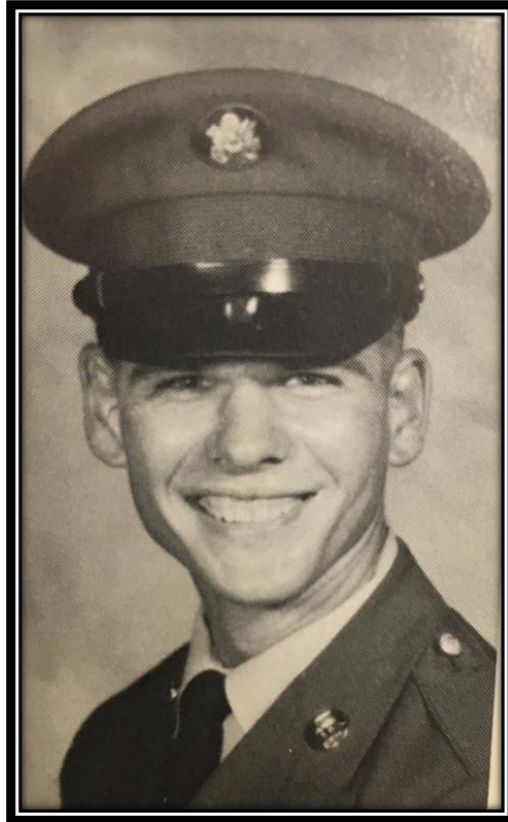
A travel trailer much like the one in which Steve, his three sisters, and his mom and dad lived in Havelock in the 50's and early 60's. Photo from on-line sources.

Growing up in 1950's and 1960's Havelock, NC, despite the small trailer living space, putting up with his three younger sisters trying to mother him, his harried mother, and his absent father, well, it was really an idyllic childhood of free ranging, tree climbing, creek fishing, town dump exploring, boyhood fun. Being a free-range kid prepared Steve well for his future, adult roles in life.

Steve would have graduated from Havelock High in 1967, the "Summer of Love", but was "held back" twice in elementary school, making him a "Mighty Fine in 69" graduate instead. Having the symptoms but testing for it not done back then, it was later suggested it was dyslexia that had held him back. But no matter. Steve's persistence, determination, and grit ultimately defeated his disability, that same grit helping him to succeed in life and bear life's ups and downs.

Steve's dad, even though he was a Marine Corps "lifer", pushed Steve away from the Marines and toward the USAF or the US Army for their better schools and MOS programs. When Steve graduated from Havelock High, he visited a US Army recruiter and took the test for Warrant Officer flight training. Unfortunately, he fell just short on the test, ultimately qualifying, instead, to attend CH-47 maintenance training at Fort Eustis, Virginia.

Steve was promoted to private E-2 out of basic training at Fort Bragg. He then was promoted to E-3 following his successful completion of helicopter maintenance school. Selected for five months of leadership school at Fort Eustis before being shipped to Vietnam, he was awarded E-5 (Specialist 5) upon graduation.



Steve Wolak's recruit training graduation photo, 1969. Wolak Family photo.



**Steve Wolak with his identical twin sisters at his basic training graduation at Fort Bragg, November 1969. I would marry the sister on the right 28 years later.
Wolak Family photo.**



Steve Wolak (second from right, top) at his graduation from the Fort Eustis, Virginia CH-47 Maintenance School, June 1970. Fort Eustis, according to an official US Army website, “became home for Army aviation maintenance training in June 1954, which evolved into the US Army Aviation Logistics School in 1983.” Wolak Family photo.

In the summer of 1970, just over a year after graduating from Havelock High, Steve Wolak was on his way to “exotic” Vietnam where he would join his unit, the 178th Assault Support Helicopter Company, the “Boxcars”. After checking into the Boxcars, Steve volunteered for CH-47 door gunner duties for the extra pay, aptly categorized as “dangerous duty pay”, as we’ll see in the second of this two-column series about Steve’s experiences in Vietnam and about Vietnam-era helicopter door gunners in general.

Door gunner’s combat survival rates were low. As a result, Steve kept the fact of these additional “dangerous” duties from his parents and sisters.

To end this first column on Steve Wolak, let’s fast forward to 1974, just a year after the end of Steve’s combat service in Vietnam and his honorable discharge from the US Army. Steve returned home, graduated from the NC State Highway Patrol Academy in 1974, and was photographed in uniform, having graduated into a bigger trailer than that in which he grew up in Havelock, this time in a Wilson, NC neighborhood.



Steve Wolak as a 1974 rookie NC State Highway Patrolman posing with his 440ci Plymouth Grand Fury patrol car. That car could fly! Wolak Family photo.

Steve wanted to fly in the US Army and, ultimately, he did. But he flew “in the rear with the gear” or “in the caboose with the boots” instead of up front in the cockpit of the CH-47. And while his dream of being pilot-in-command of a Huey “Gunship” or CH-47 may never have come to fruition, he realized that goal in a 440 cubic inch Plymouth as a NC Highway Patrolman in command of “flying” that big-engined Grand Fury patrol car at 110 MPH or more, chasing speeders and other bad guys, and responding to first responder emergencies.

By the way: the CH-47 cruises at 110 knots (127 MPH), not too much faster than Steve’s Grand Fury could do—and did do from time-to-time—and on terra firma.

It’s a crummy feeling to see those blue state trooper lights flashing in your rearview mirror...anytime...but especially if you’re doing 100 MPH in a 70 MPH zone.

I don’t write this from personal experience with that crummy feeling. Nope. Not me.



**Steve earned and proudly wore this US Army aircrew badge during his service.
Courtesy US Army.**

Next in the autumn 2024 edition of this newsletter: Steve’s CH-47 crew chief and door gunner duties in Vietnam and the tragic loss of his hoochmate.



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ECAHF needs your support to share the story of the advancement of military aircraft and those who have made it possible in eastern North Carolina. Your membership helps to provide resources to encourage students to acquire science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) skills through interactive exhibits and programs.

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