



201 TOURIST CENTER DRIVE, PO BOX 368, HAVELOCK, NC 28532



# AVIATION CONNECTIONS: NEWSLETTER

FALL 2024

[WWW.ECAVIATIONHERITAGE.COM](http://WWW.ECAVIATIONHERITAGE.COM)

Eastern Carolina Aviation Heritage Foundation

OCTOBER 2024

# You're Invited to the 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Partnership Event

"Hovercraft Heroes: Exploring Drones and Helicopters"



Tuesday, October 22, 2024  
6:00 p.m. - 8:00 p.m.  
at the  
Havelock Tourist & Event Center

Experience a sampling of foods and beverages  
and participate in STEM activities from  
this year's Summer Camp.

Can you maneuver a drone through an obstacle course and gently set  
it down on your constructed landing pad in less than 3 minutes?

It's going to be a night of fun, food, and networking!

RSVP at 252-444-4348 or [events@havelocknc.us](mailto:events@havelocknc.us)



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## Spotlight an Exhibit



### A-6E Intruder Monument

The A-6 Intruder Association designed and erected a Grumman A-6 Intruder Tribute Monument outside the Havelock Tourist & Event Center. The monument was unveiled on May 17, 2019.

The nine-foot tall black granite statue contains photographs and general information of the A-6 Intruder. There are pictures of the A-6 Intruder and the names of those killed or missing in action are etched on each side. The A-6 Intruder was a US Navy and US Marine Corps attack aircraft in service for 30 years, from the Vietnam War to the Gulf War. The plane was used for radar direct bombing and close air support. It carried up to eight tons of bombs.

Intruder Squadrons were in service at Cherry Point Marine Corps Base until the early 1990s. This monument is only the fifth such site in the country.

# The Summer of Love

## Steve Wolak-CH-47 door gunner in Vietnam-Part 2 of 3

Fall 2024 ECAHF Newsletter

By Barry R. Fetzer

ECAHF Historian

This is the second in a three-column series about my brother-in-law (my wife's brother), Steve Wolak, a Havelock, NC native and a Vietnam veteran and veteran of the NC Highway Patrol. The first of this series of columns covered Steve's early life in Havelock, and his basic training as a soldier at Fort Bragg and Fort Eustis, Virginia and fast forwarded to his time as a NC Highway patrolman. This second in this series focuses on his time as a CH-47B *Chinook* door gunner and a *Huey* door gunner in Vietnam. The third and final column in the series will focus on Steve's duties as a CH-47B crew chief.

A short note, again, on helicopter enlisted aircrewman. Those of us who have flown crewed aircraft, especially crewed helicopters, well, we owe our lives to these unsung heroes. They saved my own rear end 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 three columns.

As mentioned in Part 1 of this series, Steve Wolak 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.

Steve's dad, a USMC Master Gunnery Sergeant squadron maintenance chief stationed aboard MCAS Cherry Point (I never met him because he died before I met Steve's youngest sister, my wife), served in Vietnam. Steve's dad discouraged his son from 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. He wasn't interested in slugging it out in the "mud, and the blood, and the beer" as an infantryman, an MOS he was very likely to be assigned if he was drafted. So, volunteer he did, even though the commitment for volunteers was a three-year enlistment as opposed to the two-year enlistment for draftees.

Steve's dad, 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 repair school at Fort Eustis.

In the summer of 1970, just over a year after graduating from Havelock High, Steve Wolak was on his way to Vietnam where he would join his unit, the 178<sup>th</sup> Assault Support Helicopter Company, the *Boxcars*. After checking into the *Boxcars* as a helicopter mechanic or "wrench", Steve volunteered for door gunner duties for the extra pay, aptly categorized as "dangerous duty pay".



**The 178th Assault Helicopter Company Headquarters in Chu Lai, Vietnam, 1971. Note the sandbags weighing down the roof of the hooch against the ravages of typhoons. Photo by Steve Wolak.**

Door gunners had a risky job in Vietnam. Combat survival rates were low, hence the reason Steve kept the fact of his additional “dangerous” duties from his parents and sisters.



**Against his dad’s advice to “Don’t volunteer for anything”, in addition to door gunner on CH-47B aircraft, Steve also volunteered for door gunner duties on combat assaults in Huey’s with the 116th AHC (Assault Helicopter Company). Note the stowed M-60 D door gun next to Steve’s right shoulder. Circa 1971. Wolak Family photo.**

According to various sources on-line, stories corroborated by veteran Marines when I joined my first USMC helicopter squadron in 1977, “The life expectancy of a combat door gunner during the Vietnam War varied depending on the specific circumstances and the time period of the war. However, it’s important to note the role

was extremely dangerous. The conditions of combat, exposure to enemy fire, and the nature of helicopter operations in Vietnam contributed to the high risk faced by these individuals.” Another on-line source said, “Over 10% of Vietnam's casualties were helicopter crew members and most of that 10% were door gunners . The average lifespan of a door gunner on a Huey in Vietnam was only 2 weeks.”

While this on-line lifespan “data” is unverified, suffice it to say that door gunners’ jobs were perilous.



**116th Assault Helicopter Company (AHC) UH-1 “Huey’s” during a troop insert mission from Chu Lai, Vietnam, 1971. Note the stowed, M-60 D door gun.  
Wolak Family photo.**

Another on-line source wrote, “The door gunner position was not a particularly popular one due to the exposed position of manning a machine gun in the open door of a helicopter. According to popular legend, the door gunner on a Vietnam era Huey gunship had a life span of five minutes. This was obviously exaggerated but displays the hazards of this particular military job at the time.”



**A door gunner keeps a watchful eye from a 178th ASHC "Boxcar" CH-47.  
Photo by Bob Leahy**

Finally, one on-line source explained how to become a crew chief, a role Steve ultimately achieved in the CH-47B. “Enlist as a 15 series helicopter repairer and be

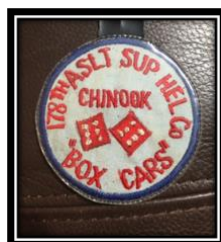
squared the hell away. If the command thinks you can run a helicopter crew, you'll go to crew chief school. Being a door gunner is only one of their duties, but hey, you get to *pew pew* for a bit before going back to being a wrench. So to recap: join as a helicopter repairer of some sort, ideally one of the birds that has guns on doors. Bust your ass from day one and don't suck. Learn where everything should be and what needs to be done. Make it happen. Be the most high speed, low drag PFC and then Specialist in your unit. Impress leadership and current crew chiefs. Go to school and *pew pew pew*."



**View of the *Boxcars*' home between revetments at Chu Lai. Rocket Ridge is in the distance. 1971 photo from Ray Mendez (3/B/1-6 Inf 1970-71) retrieved from the website <http://www.a-1-6.org/1-6th%20site/1st%20bn%206th%20inf%20web%20site%20off%20line/cdboxcar.html>.**

Well, Steve obviously “didn’t suck” and he “busted his ass” and impressed his leaders and his company’s existing crew chiefs. And he “pew-pew-pewed” and “wrenched” himself into CH-47B crew chief duties and responsibilities.

And while it certainly posed some maintenance challenges for the “wrenches”, the CH-47B *Chinook* was—and the current model is as well—a great aircraft. According to Wikipedia as well as the above website, “The CH-47B *Chinook* helicopter was a twin-engine, tandem rotor, medium transport helicopter with fixed four-wheel landing gear. It had a normal crew of three, with a crew chief. The rear loading ramp permitted straight-in loading and a sealed hull gave the aircraft an emergency water landing capability. It could carry 33 combat-equipped troops at 110 knots cruising speed. The external sling capacity was 16,000 lbs. With a flight endurance of 2 hours and 40 minutes, the aircraft could move over 15,000 pounds in a 50 nautical mile radius.”



**The *Boxcars* were assigned to the US Army's 23rd Infantry Division, Chu Lai, I Corps.**

Steve's OJT (On the Job Training) as a door gunner and his experiences, literally "under fire", especially those experiences involving troop lifts, helped build his own confidence and confirmed the confidence his leaders found in him.



**Steve's view from behind the "D" model M-60 (named as such because of the "D" shaped double handles on the weapon) in a CH-47 over Vietnam. Photo by Steve Wolak.**



**Steve Wolak manning the starboard side M-60 door gun in his *Chinook* in Vietnam.  
Wolak Family photo.**

As if being a door gunner in combat wasn't tough enough, Steve began adding responsibilities on his shoulders including, perhaps most importantly, that sense of

responsibility for the safety of the troops with whom he shared the cargo bay of his Chinook. Propelled to additional training and attainment of the skills leading him to being designated a CH-47 crew chief, I'll outline some of those experiences and duties in the third and final column of this series about Steve Wolak's service in Vietnam.



**“Soldiers from B Co, 1st Bn 6th Inf, load onto a CH-47B helicopter from the 178th ASHC at LZ Dottie preparing to move to Hill 43 (east of LZ Dottie) in September 1970. Note the gear strapped on the rucksack (keeping in mind that this is only what is visible in this photograph on the outside of the pack): 4 canteens; two bandoleers of M-16 ammunition (14 magazines); 1 box M-60 ammo; one clamor bag; one smoke grenade; and, one poncho. Additional items inside the rucksack probably include an additional bandoleer of M-16 ammo in clips rather than magazines; more ammo in a box for the M-60; trip flares; and, hand pop illumination flares.**

**When fully loaded with ammunition, food, and water, the rucksack could easily weigh sixty or seventy pounds.”**

**Note the double six Boxcars dice on the upper aft pylon of this aircraft.**

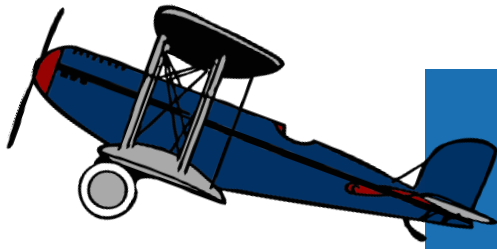
**Above photo and caption retrieved from: <http://www.a-1-6.org/1-6th%20site/1st%20bn%206th%20inf%20web%20site%20off%20line/cdboxcar.html>**



**Join us in protecting and promoting our aviation heritage!**

**<https://ecaviationheritage.com/>**





SAVE  
the  
DATE

Members & Sponsors Night

October 22, 2024

2025 Gala

February 21, 2025

## *ECAHF Creates New Mission Statement*

ECAHF Board of Directors felt it was time to pen a new mission statement which links with the current goals of ECAHF. With the guidance of Guy Nelson, the directors worked to design a concise statement that actually shares the beliefs and purpose of ECAHF. After several meetings and discussions, the new mission statement was completed.

*ECAHF Mission Statement: The Eastern Carolina Aviation Heritage Foundation honors aviation history and inspires and cultivates the next generation of leaders in aerospace.*



**2024  
National  
Night Out**





## Please Join ECAHF Each Year

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.

Together, by joining forces as members of ECAHF, we will help honor Marines' vital mission in advancing military aviation, a mission they've accomplished since 1942 when MCAS Cherry Point was commissioned as a USMC airfield. In addition, your membership will help influence a new generation of aviation enthusiasts and skilled workers for the future. Be a part of this challenging and exciting mission.

### Annual Membership

- Co-Pilot (Student) \$25.00
- Pilot (Single) \$35.00
- Squadron (Family Membership) \$50.00
- Wing (Business/Group Membership) \$250.00

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