Bristling with an assortment of machine guns and rockets, the Seawolf UH-1B Hueys were always overloaded when they lifted off for a mission. (Photo by Jim Koepnick/EAA)

Riders ON THE Storm

ATTACK OF THE NAVY'S LITTLE-KNOWN SEAWOLVES

BY **LT. CMDR. BUD BARNES, USN, RETIRED** AS TOLD TO AND WRITTEN BY **JAMES P. BUSHA**

"Riders on the storm. Riders on the storm. Into this house we're born. Into this world we're thrown."
–The Doors, 1971

Seawolf Formation

In 1967, the U.S. Navy established Helicopter Attack (Light) Squadron Three, commonly known as HA(L)-3, unclassified call sign: "Seawolf." The in-country formation and disestablishment in 1972 was a historic first.

The Navy stood up three "brown-water" task forces to combat communist infiltration along the coast and interior waterways.

Operation Market Time operated "Swift Boats" patrolling along the coast and initially the large rivers. Operation Game Warden operated "patrol boats, river" (PBRs) on the canals and smaller rivers, while the Mobile Riverine Force supported the Army's 29th Division, which had its own integral air support (helicopters) and forward air controllers for Tac Air. Game Warden was supported on a catch-as-catch-can basis by individual U.S. Army aviation units until they finally cried "uncle!," relating they had more than they could handle supporting their own units, let alone covering the Navy's growing needs. That situation spurred the call for integral support of Game Warden—hence, the birth of the Seawolves.

HA(L)-3 initially consisted of nine detachments, each with two helicopter gunships and two four-man crews per Huey, stationed in various locations throughout the Mekong Delta. They were based aboard barracks ships positioned in the large rivers and on offshore LSTs (landing ships, tank).

The Army ended up loaning the Navy 30 to 35 "war-weary"

When the Seawolves were formed, the U.S. Navy had to go to the Army and "borrow" nearly three dozen Hueys, all of which were war-weary machines that Navy crews worked hard, day after day. (Photo courtesy of the National Naval Aviation Museum)

UH-1Bs. After the Navy repainted and rearmed the Hueys, the Seawolves proceeded to carve a name for themselves in the history books. I was just a small part of it when I arrived in 1969.

Right: Bud Barnes (left), with his orange Mae West life jacket, and Elden Fry (right), who was assigned to the PBRs, pose during Operation Sling Shot. (Photo courtesy of Bud Barnes)

Below: The Seawolf Hueys operated off of small "carriers" converted from transports within a short flying distance of shore. (Photo from I-net)

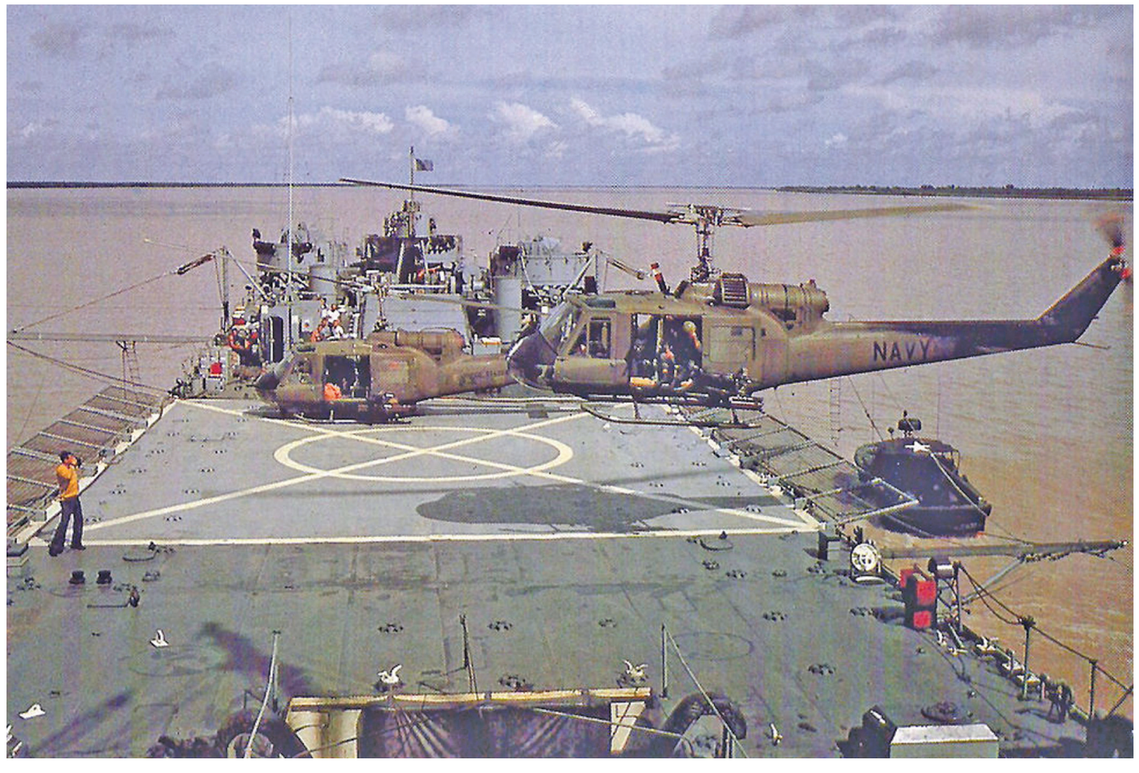
Learning the Ropes

By the time I finished training in 1968, most of my flight time, including my carrier qualification, was in fixed-wing aircraft, like the North American T-28 Trojan. For me, Navy advanced flight training (helicopter pipeline) consisted of 20 hours in the TH-13, then another 50 in the H-34 Choctaw. I received orders to report to "Mother Rucker" (the Army's Fort Rucker, Alabama) for a qualifications course in the Bell Huey. I had never seen a turbine helicopter until laying eyes on the Huey in January 1969.

One of the great things about the Huey was that I didn't have to manipulate manifold pressure nor rpm as it was done automatically. The UH-1B was powered by a Lycoming T53-L-5 turboshaft developing 960shp (shaft horsepower). The twin main rotor blades spanned 44 feet with a 21-inch cord. The cabin could accommodate seven passengers or an assortment of weapons systems. The "Q" course provided a limited exposure to the various weapons systems that were constantly updated in-country.

I became a real believer in what the Huey could do during one of my first training hops. At the end of the flight, we were pretty light on fuel, and it was cool in January upon returning to base. The instructor put the Huey into a hover, chopped the throttle, set it down, picked it back up, and turned 360 degrees. I was horrified, given my limited H-34 (fully articulated rotor head) background. All I thought was, "We're going to die!" Now, I could appreciate all the inertia in the Huey blade system. To say that I was impressed was an understatement. I had a very experienced Army warrant-officer instructor who had just returned from a tour in Vietnam, and he was showing me how to stay alive. The syllabus consisted of 25 hours with a couple of night hops that included performing a dozen "full" auto rotations on little partially paved strips with smudge pots lining the edge of the runway for light. I had never done a night full auto before.

We also did one contact navigation landing in a confined LZ (landing zone). About half of the transition-qualification course was ordnance training: 2.75-inch Mighty Mouse rocket firing from the right seat and machine-gun runs from the left seat. I had to wait until flying with a gun team to experience the "full-meal deal," with gunners opening up in the back—that got my attention! After throwing some holy water on me, coupled with a three-week orientation in San Diego, California, including survival, evasion, resistance, and escape, I was off to Vietnam.



The right-door gunner zeros in on his target with his .50-caliber machine gun. (Photo by Jim Koepnick/EAA)

In Country

As fresh "nuggets" (first-tour pilots) right out of flight school, six of us arrived the same week in early March 1969. We received three days of orientation, including an ops briefing by a "seasoned" nugget who had arrived three months earlier. His words of wisdom are remembered to this day: "I will tell you what was told me when I arrived. Look around the room, as 50 percent of you will have a catastrophic emergency in the next year." The six of us were sent on to our various detachments. Two of the six were lost within two months. I was lucky: I only had two catastrophic emergencies during my tour.

I was initially assigned to Detachment 1 in the lower Ca Mau Peninsula. We were operating off

SEAWOLF 324 SPECIFICATIONS

Army Serial Number: 63-12923
Navy Modex Number: 324
Turbine engine: Lycoming T53-L-13A, 1400hp
Rotor diameter: 44 feet
Fuel capacity: 168 gallons
Empty weight: 4,900 lb.
Gross weight: 8,500 lb.
Max airspeed: 120 knots
Armament (inert, replicas)

- M2HB .50-caliber right-door guns
- Dual M60 7.62mm left-door guns
- M134 "Mini Gun" 7.62mm
- Dual M158 7 shot, 2.75 rocket pods
- M79 40mm "Chunker"
- M16A1 crew weapons
- M1911 .45-caliber crew pistols
- Smoke grenades
- 10,000 rounds of ammo

HUEY FACT The prototype UH-1 Huey first flew in 1956, and while production officially ended in 1987, the basic machine lives on in the current production UH-1Y. The Huey was the first helicopter that employed a turboshaft engine. The Lycoming T53 was installed above the fuselage and close to the main rotor unit, just behind the gearbox unit. This allowed for a much larger cargo hold and the capability to transport a greater load.

Above: The left side of the Huey was manned by a door gunner who operated dual M-60 7.62 machine guns, while the front-seat pilot operated the M134 7.62 "Mini Gun" and dual 7-shot 2.75-inch rocket pods. (Photo by Dennis Bergstrom/EAA)
Below, left: Death's door: The sighting mechanism used by the left-seat pilot to fire rockets and Mini Gun. (Photo by Tyson Rininger/EAA)
Below, right: From "top hat" to trigger, the stick grip of the Huey had an assortment of buttons and switches. (Photo by Tyson Rininger/EAA)

HUEY FACT The UH-1 holds the world record for flying the most combat hours of any aircraft in history. Some 17,000 Hueys flew 26,733,403 sorties alone during the Vietnam War. More than 21,166 hits by enemy fire were recorded with 4,128 Hueys lost in combat.

the large LSTs supporting PCF (patrol craft fast) Swift Boats, which had been operating since November 1968 on the smaller rivers of the Nam Can forest area. Our LST was anchored just outside of rocket range from the shore. Flying a heavily loaded (actually, overloaded) Huey off a steel deck in hot, humid weather required coaxing the bird into a hover. With skids free, engine topped out in a 2-foot hover, the trick was to back up with your tail hanging over one side as you began your thwart-ship's deck run, a "full" 50 to 60 feet. When you got to the opposite deck edge, the Huey basically fell off, pointed downward toward the water 20 feet below. Then you had to pull out, staying in "deep ground effect" 3 feet above the water, praying that in a couple of seconds you would acquire transitional lift, taking a deep breath, and continuing to hold altitude until acquiring the magical 82 knots (lift over drag max) to achieve the best climb rate.

Have Guns Will Travel

We worked primarily in concert with the Swift Boats, which had done a fabulous job earlier dealing with offshore infiltration, essentially shutting it down. The PCFs now began patrolling areas that weren't previously covered in the lower Nam Can. The boats were not really made for the small rivers because they had too high a profile, but at least they were heavily armed. The Swifts that we worked with would go to certain little villages supported by regional/providential Vietnamese troops (similar to our National Guard), embarking them with an advisor. Sometimes Cambodian mercenaries with Special Forces advisors would embark. Our job was to support their operations. When they came under fire, we scrambled within three minutes of a call. We were primarily a reaction force, so when we got the call, day or night, sunshine or monsoon rain, we flew to the fight.

Most of the missions were only between five and 15 miles away. The real bugaboo was that there wasn't a lot of training for those missions—it was all on-the-job learning. We typically flew 75 to 100 hours a month, 24 hours on call and 24 hours off. Many times, we flew three times a day. You would put in a strike, hustling back to the LST for a "hot turn" (no shutdown), taking on fuel while the gunners rearmed as they swept out hundreds of expended 7.62 rounds. A fresh set of M60 boxes, made up by off-duty gunners, were shoved aboard. Each gunner had over 1,500 rounds of 7.62, and the flex guns had

Like a ghost from the past, this Seawolf combat-veteran Huey was restored and preserved so that the memories of those who paid the ultimate sacrifice would never be forgotten. (Photo by Phil High/EAA)

History of Seawolf 324

Bell UH-1B Huey, serial number 63-12923, was built in 1963 and delivered to the U.S. Army in October 1964. By 1965, it was in Vietnam and experienced its baptism of fire on April 8, when it took three hits to one of its skids. Two weeks later, it was brought down by small-arms fire and incurred major damage. It was sent back to the States for repair and returned to Vietnam in March 1967. Serving with the 1st Cavalry Division in A Troop, 1st Squadron, 9th Air Cavalry, it was again damaged in February 1968. The Army said good-bye to the battle-weary Huey in November, "loaning" it to the U.S. Navy where it began flying with the Seawolves.

This particular Huey was more like a "flak magnet" because it was heavily damaged again in October 1969 and didn't return to the Seawolves until November 1970. Its total hours at that time were 3,198, when it was assigned to Seawolf Detachment 9 and given the modex number 324. On May 28, 1971, it was hit again, this time by a 75mm recoilless rifle. It was determined that the damage was "minor" as the crew performed an emergency medevac and flew an injured sailor to a nearby surgical hospital.

The last military flight of 324 occurred on February 29, 1972, when HA(L)-3 returned the Huey back to the Army, where it was crated and shipped back to the United States. In October 1973, it was loaned to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Langley Research Center until August 1975.

Huey 12923, with hundreds of others, was placed in long-term storage at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Tucson, Arizona, with a total of 4,390 flight hours. It would languish in the hot desert sun for the next 16 years before being rescued once again.

A UH-1E Huey gunship of HAL-3 Seawolves flies cover over a group of U.S. Navy PBRs over the Mekong River Delta in South Vietnam during 1968. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)

MEDALS FOR THE SEAWOLF

In its time, HA(L)-3 probably was the most decorated squadron in the U.S. Navy, with 44 Seawolves killed during the five years of combat. During the Vietnam War, the men of HA(L)-3 were awarded the following:

Navy Crosses	5
Silver Stars	31
Legion of Merit awards	2
Navy and Marine Corps Medals	5
Distinguished Flying Crosses	219
Purple Hearts	156
Bronze Stars	101
Gallantry Crosses	142
Air Medals	16,000+
Navy Commendation Medals	439
Navy Achievement Medals	228
Presidential Unit Citations	6
Meritorious Unit Commendations	2
Vietnam Meritorious Unit Commendation	1

roughly 1,000 rounds each. Our lead bird was equipped with a .50-caliber gun in the right door. The left door gunner had two, freely held M60s with a total of three barrels. After a lengthy firing, the gunners had to remove a "red-hot" barrel to avoid "cooking off" a round. The barrels would get so hot that the gunners could light their cigarettes. The 2.75-inch Mighty Mouse rockets had their own set of issues.

We flew as a pair in a gun team, 500 feet apart, with the lead ship at 1,000 feet and the trail ship at 1,200 feet. With fighter aircraft, you stack down, but in helicopters, you stack up (i.e., the trail ship has to maintain rotor clearance). The principal tactic for delivery was to get a mark on the ground, or if you were patrolling, upon receiving fire, the gunner would throw out a smoke grenade for a marker. We had a pole that clipped in between the cabin deck and overhead on each side. A soda can with the top removed was duct-taped to the pole and a smoke grenade inserted, pin pulled, with the spoon held in place by the can. All the gunner had to do was to throw it out. The lead aircraft would normally be "first in," but if the trail had a better fix, then the lead would come in behind. The first rocket fired would usually be a "Willie Pete" (high-explosive white phosphorus) to better mark the target. The next firing run would typically be pairs of high explosives. Shooting a rocket from a helicopter is a very imprecise science. Rockets seek the relative wind, and consequently, keeping your aircraft in trim with minimal power correction is paramount to a good delivery. By far, the more precise weapons system was the Mark I Mod 0 gunner.

If the troops on the ground or one of the boats popped a smoke, they would not tell us the color until we called it, thus avoiding a possible VC (Viet Cong) trap. Once communications were established, the fire team leader would determine the attack plan. As the first aircraft rolled in the door, gunners would fire forward and, in the break, would transition to firing aft as the trail ship commenced firing. That was an attack pattern called a "daisy chain." The whole idea was to keep constant fire on the target.

The front office of the UH-1B Seawolf Huey. (Photo by Dennis Bergstrom/EAA)

HUEY FACT During the peak of the Vietnam War (1970-1972), the U.S. Army was training more than 3,000 pilots and 21,000 mechanics per year to keep the helicopters flying.

But it wasn't only enemy fire that we had to worry about, especially in the dry seasons when the water level went down. As the Swift Boats engaged their .50 calibers, sometimes ricocheting rounds could rise above our attack pattern. At night, I've seen tracer ricochets burn out at more than 1,500 feet. We had to communicate with each other all the time, but in the heat of combat, things can go south in a hurry.

I recall one mission in May or June of 1969 when, around midnight, we got scrambled from the LST on the South China Sea side of the Nam Can. The SEAL boat had gone on an operation and made a fatal mistake of crossing the same point three times. On the third crossing, they really got hosed, disabling their boat. They were outnumbered and outgunned, so we were scrambled. I could see the firefight up ahead and was able to determine where the SEAL rounds were going on the riverbank, setting up a good angle for our fire. Gunner Keith Jasman was in the right door and placed exceptionally accurate fire, expending everything he had on just one pass, completely stopping enemy fire. We had launched into a clear moonlit night. Returning to the ship, we were just ahead of an incoming monsoon wave. The rotor blades had barely come to a stop when we went zero-zero in heavy rain. With mangrove swamps and 80-foot-high trees, there was no location to have landed ashore.

Had we landed 15 minutes later, I probably wouldn't be relating this story. That was pretty much the mentality in those times: "You just have to do what you have to do." But on the other hand, there was license (a good set of rules of engagement) so that we could get it done!

Bud Barnes hails from Arkansas and is the son of a World War II Navy veteran. Bud flew 700 missions in Vietnam. He is retired from the U.S. Navy and from American Airlines, having flown more than 20 types of military aircraft and six commercial jets on four continents. He currently serves as president of the Seawolf Association.

HUEY FACT
The UH-1B Seawolf Huey was flown by the pilot (right seat) and copilot (left seat) with more than 140 cubic feet of passenger room behind them. Depending on the mission, the rear sliding doors on either side could be removed to accommodate two door gunners, eight fully armed SEALs, or three stretchers.