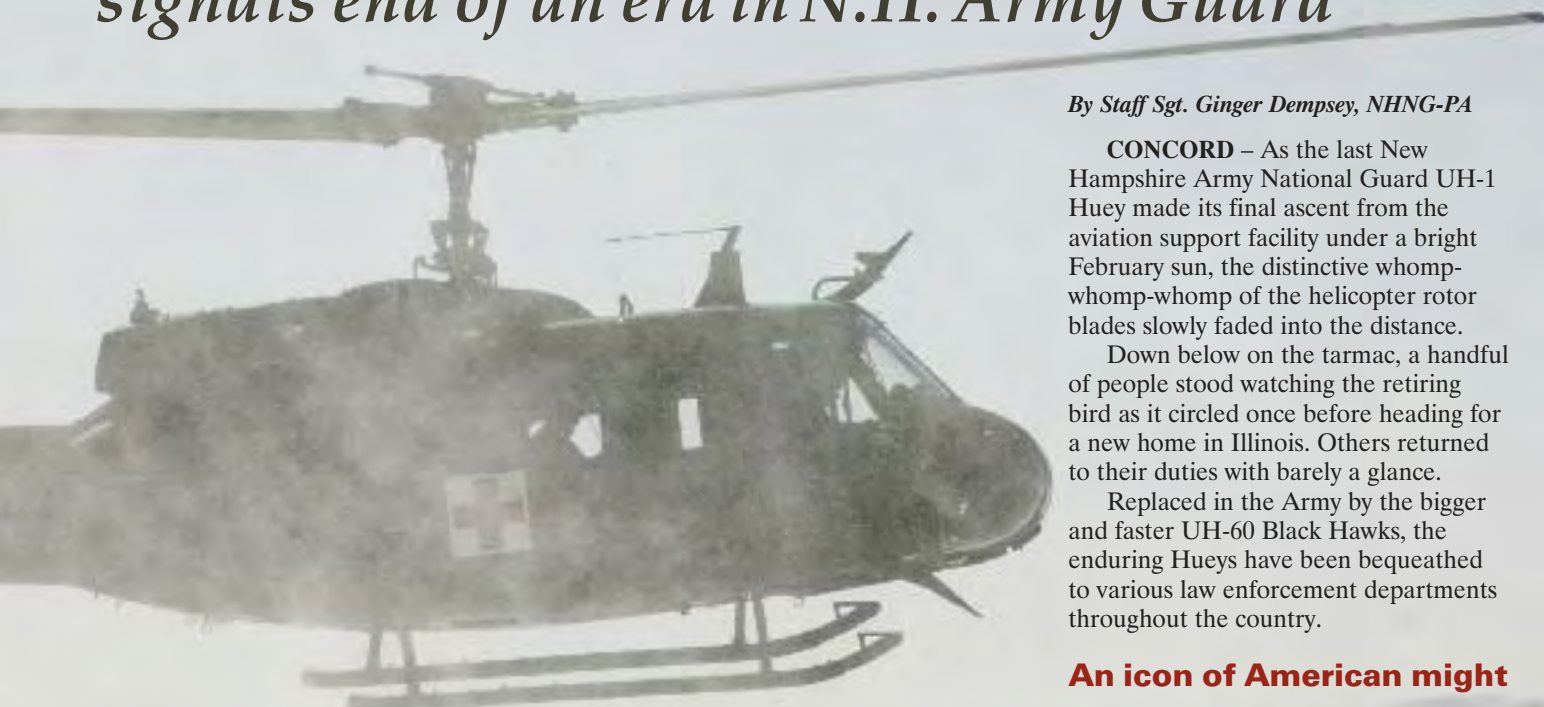


HUEY'S FINAL ASCENT

signals end of an era in N.H. Army Guard



By Staff Sgt. Ginger Dempsey, NHNG-PA

CONCORD – As the last New Hampshire Army National Guard UH-1 Huey made its final ascent from the aviation support facility under a bright February sun, the distinctive whomp-whomp-whomp of the helicopter rotor blades slowly faded into the distance.

Down below on the tarmac, a handful of people stood watching the retiring bird as it circled once before heading for a new home in Illinois. Others returned to their duties with barely a glance.

Replaced in the Army by the bigger and faster UH-60 Black Hawks, the enduring Hueys have been bequeathed to various law enforcement departments throughout the country.

An icon of American might

In its hey day, the Huey represented vitality and American might. It was a lifeline during the Vietnam War, ferrying troops, the injured, food, ammunition and other supplies. But with advances in technologies and demands of the battlefield, the Huey became outdated.

Retired Maj. Gen. John Blair, former Adjutant General of the N.H. Guard and a medevac pilot in Vietnam, knew the day would come when the Huey would be phased out. But now that it's finally happened, he took a few moments to ruminate on their loss.

"I was a little surprised to hear the Huey had left the inventory. They're old soldiers, and they were a big part of my life," Blair said. "They revolutionized the battlefield. Boy, I remember how excited we were when we got them in the late '60s. The Hueys just blossomed with our capability."

Blair flew 630 combat hours in Vietnam, 210 of those at night. To this day, he refers to himself as a medevac pilot when asked what he did in the military.

"It was always rewarding," he said. "There were many times I was shot at and missed, and there were many times I was shot at and hit — but no matter what, it was always rewarding. You were there to save lives, and you just did it."

Blair evacuated more than 1,400 patients during his tour in Vietnam.



Then U.S. Army Lt. John Blair, sitting, and a crew member pose with their UH-1H Huey during a break from their missions in Vietnam. Blair, the former Adjutant General of the N.H. Guard and a retired major general, began his military career as a Huey pilot, flying 630 combat hours in Vietnam.

Photo: Courtesy of Maj. Gen. (R) John Blair

“You know you helped somebody,” he said. “You know you contributed greatly. We were able to get troops to the center of the combat zone, fresh and ready to fight. We could also save lives and conserve the fighting strength.

“The Hueys were phenomenal machines; and were at that time the epitome of helicopter technology.”

That technology continued to evolve, and Army aviation modernization plans sought to improve operational readiness with a more maintainable fleet. When the call was first made to retire the Huey, the Defense Reutilization and Marketing Service of Battle Creek, Mich., stepped in. DRMS has been tasked since the mid-1970s with helping to dispose of all types of military surplus. The office, a part of the Defense Logistics Agency, first looks to move inventory to other entities within the Department of Defense. If there are no takers, DRMS looks to other federal agencies, or donates to state and local governments and other qualified organizations, according to the agency’s Web site.

DRMS facilitated a program to transition the Hueys to various law enforcement entities.

Finding a different niche

The Army first planned to convert its aviation fleet from the Hueys to the Sikorsky-manufactured Black Hawks in the 1980s and 1990s. The top priority was the active duty elements, so many National Guard units continued to fly the Hueys.

During that time, the work tempo for the Hueys did not slow. They became a workhorse for the N.H. Army Guard supporting state and local first responders with search and rescues, fighting wildfires, and other state emergencies.

When the 1159th Medical Company deployed to Iraq in 2005, the Hueys stayed behind to support state missions, while the unit’s fleet of Black Hawks went overseas.

In Iraq, the Black Hawks were stationed at five locations to provide adequate coverage throughout the country and timely life-saving transport to medical facilities. During the year tour, the unit conducted 2,385 missions and transported 3,895 patients. That’s a record the Hueys would have difficulty keeping up with, according to retired medevac pilot Thomas Clegg, who was deployed with the unit in Iraq.

“With the pace of the threat on the battlefield, which has only quickened, the Huey can’t compete,” Clegg said. “Technology has moved on. It doesn’t mean the Hueys are dead; it just means they need to find a different niche.”

A battle-scarred warhorse

The Hueys leaving is a double-edged sword, Clegg said.

He recalled days in Vietnam flying the Hueys as a combat assault pilot.

“You have to remember, helicopters came onto the scene relatively late in World War II, and played a limited role,” he said. “Vietnam really kicked it in, and they were something new.

“We were coming in with what was for the time a state-of-the-art machine – in our minds it could do no wrong. The Huey is an extremely forgiving aircraft, easy to fly, easy to maintain. It could take a lot of hits and keep on flying. There were missions we would get back [from] and start counting the bullet holes in the machine – we would be amazed it had kept running.”

Clegg logged 800 combat flying hours in Vietnam, more than 200 of them at night. He said the Hueys allowed them a false sense of security, and “that allowed us to extend our safety margin.”

He regrets what he fears is a philosophy that if it’s old, it’s no good.

“That’s a fallacy,” he said. “The Hueys have been a workhorse for so long, and they are still dependable and still usable. But it is time to take them off the battlefield and put them to other uses. I think it’s an excellent idea to shift the Hueys from the Army inventory to law enforcement.”

In February, the N.H. Guard passed on its last two Hueys to law enforcement outfits. One, manufactured in 1973, went to Atlanta. The other, made in 1971, was requisitioned by the Law Enforcement Aviation Coalition out of Winthrop Harbor, Ill.

“Bit by bit, we’re making the conversion,” said Ken MacNevin, a spokesperson for DRMS. “But there are still units out there still flying the Hueys. For example, in Hohenfels, Germany, the Hueys are still flown by the observer-controller teams during training exercises.”

New Hampshire’s former choppers, now donning police markings rather than the familiar red cross, will be used primarily for law enforcement work including SWAT operations, but also search and rescue and firefighting support.

“This was an era change, and I knew it was going to happen,” Blair said. “The Hueys changed the face of the Guard. I’m sad to see them go, but at the same time, the Guard is where I had hoped it would be – a full partner in the operational force. Now, the National Guard is getting the recognition it’s long deserved.” ❖



Chief Warrant Officer 5 Bruce Gokey, left, maintenance test flight evaluator, conducts pre-flight inspection of the last Huey on the NHARNG’s inventory with Chief Pilot Randal Olson of the Law Enforcement Aviation Coalition out of Winthrop Harbor, Ill., on Feb. 24 at the Army Aviation Support Facility.