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A "Deans" Slick Pilot's Story

by

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120th Aviation Company, August 1966 – February 1968

For then Captain Dave Measels, the "Best of Times in the Worst of Times" as a slick pilot in the 120th Aviation Company, the "Deans" of Army Aviation, was preceded by a few years. After flunking most of his courses at Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas, Dave enlisted in the Army in August 1961. Several years later, he completed Infantry Officer's Candidate School at Fort Benning and applied for flight school. In 1963, the demand for aerial targets was still fairly low, so it was not until the fall of 1965 that he made it to Fort Wolters with the "Blue Hat" class of 66-6. The highlight of his primary helicopter training was the OH-23D engine failure while solo. Dave reports that is "damn quiet" when the engine quits. He made a perfect touchdown without further damage to his helicopter. These were the days before "Broken Wing" awards to commend pilots for such events. In June 1966, Dave arrived in Vietnam on orders to the 1st Cavalry Division, but was diverted to the 117th Aviation Company on the beach at Dong Ba Thin. After several months of flying with the "Beach Bums" in support of the 101st Airborne Division in the Pleiku area, at one of the nightly operations mission briefings, it was announced that a volunteer was needed to go to the 120th Aviation Company "somewhere down south." Against his belief not to volunteer for anything, Dave said he would go. So much for the myth that only the best pilots were selected to go to the 120th!



When Dave arrived at Tan San Nhat Air Base in August 1966 after one of those great U.S. Air Force C-123 flights out of Pleiku, he was put aboard the Dean's ¾ ton cargo truck "shuttle bus" to the Deans slick pilots' villa on Cach Mang street in Saigon. Dave could hardly believe his good fortune at being delivered from a tent cot in the sand to a villa with running water, clean sheets, and a real bed. He found that missions in the 120th were indeed varied. The Deans supported the Headquarters, United States Military Assistance



Command Vietnam (MACV) and flew the Commander (COMUSMACV) who was during his tenure Generals William Westmoreland and Creighton Abrams. When Dave arrived, the slicks were all UH-1 "B" models except for one "D" model allegedly obtained solely for flying the press, but seldom used for that purpose. He found it strange that any bird and crew could be scheduled to carry General Westmoreland on the theory that if they were sabotaged, it would be tough to figure out the right one. The aircraft were also a stark contrast to those used by other generals in country. The Dean's birds were unpolished and did not have the plush seat cushions favored by most general officers.

Other diverse missions included support of the U.S. Air Force by flying the beacon used by the B-52 bombers for their final course into the "box" for "Arc Light" missions. The Arc Light missions required two aircraft with one flying a tight orbit at 500 feet above ground level over a known reference point. The second bird was to assume the orbit if the first was shot down. When clouds obscured the reference point, the beacon bird sometimes flew close enough to the box to see the bombs as they passed by the door. After the strike, the fun part was the low level passes over the box for bomb damage assessment. Those B-52s sure killed a lot of trees! Later in his tour, Dave took some of the eight engine B-52 pilots out to a box to give them an up close view of their work. As we cranked, he yelled "COMING HOT ON NUMBER ONE", followed by "COMING HOT ON NUMBER TWO" and by the time he got to four, they realized they were being had.

Another fun mission was the U.S. Navy SEAL team insertions in the Rung Sat Special Zone between Saigon and Vung Tau. The Rung Sat took on a much different flavor after Captain Rogers and his Razorback gunship crew was shot down by an RPG. The wingman said they took one up the "hell hole" and the rotor blades stopped turning before it inverted into a ball of flames. Dave returned to the pad just afterward and Major Ralph Gonzales, the Operations Officer, took the left seat and Captain Ray Sandlin, the Razorback Platoon Leader, climbed into the back. At the crash site, he dropped Ray to the muddy marsh as low as the scrub trees would allow. After a few more low level orbits, Ralph wanted to join Ray on the ground so Dave dropped in again. Ralph jettisoned the door and jumped his 200 plus pounds out into the mud. It took full forward cyclic to get the ship stabilized and gain a little slow airspeed. Those on the ground were able to locate the remains of one of the crew members and we loaded all on board for the return to Saigon Heliport just before dark, but it was not until the next day before the pilots were found in the seats of that burned out bird and the other crew member was found. Dave still recalls that was a tough and emotional flight to make.



Dave decided that even after several hydraulic failures and run on landings to the helipad at Saigon heliport, flying slicks was boring and asked to transfer to the Razorbacks, the 120th's gunship platoon. On his first mission with the Razorbacks and firing the four flex M60 machine guns at a Viet Cong position west of Saigon, Dave was hit in the left leg and right arm. Dave took that as a bad omen for being a Razorback and went back to slicks after getting out of the hospital.

The Deans also flew air assaults to insert ARVN soldiers into LZs around Saigon. On these, the Razorbacks flew the more traditional armed escort. Other slick missions included flying the MACV brass out to the field, flying the Saigon press corps out to get the latest hot story, support to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and many a "pigs and rice" mission. The best part of the slick missions over a 90 mile radius from Saigon was the "dead time" waiting on our passengers at the Special Forces camps where we would load up the bird for a visit to the local free fire zone. Nothing like letting the door gunners shoot up ammo while the green beret types tossed out grenades, used their M-79 grenade launchers, and fired M-16s at targets of opportunity.



After flying enough that the Huey became an extension of his hands, Dave was made an instructor pilot (IP) and then the unit standardization IP. Dave had great fun shooting touch down autorotations to the rice paddies around Saigon and to the runway at Long Thanh. He also recalls switching the engine fire warning light with the master caution light, then turning the hydraulics off, which caused the red FIRE light to come on, then the crew ignored the passengers as they panicked trying to get the crew's attention. Slowly but surely, the Dean's slick B models were replaced with D models, then eventually with H models. The Razorbacks kept their B models until Dave departed for the United States in February 1968. The Razorbacks had it tough getting out of Saigon heliport with a loaded rocket bird. The Razorback door gunners pulled the barrels on their flex guns on short final into the heliport. Dave recalls they lost a crew member when he fell out of the bird while removing the barrels on short final and fell onto the road between the heliport and the BX.



Earlier, Dave mentioned the villa in Saigon where the slick pilots lived. The Razorback villa was a short walk down the street. He recalls that one night CBS television reporter Morey Safer visited the Officer's Club bar to film for one of his TV stories and the Razorbacks were being their usual wild bunch. As Morey asked one what he did, he replied "I fly a gunship every day killing Vietnamese.... uh, I mean Viet Cong." Actually, he was right on both! Dave always wondered how that story went over in the States.

Eventually, Dave fell for Kim, the villa club Assistant Manager and bartender, and they were married in December 1967. As of this writing in August 2004, they have been married for over 37 wonderful years. They had two sons and both served as Army soldiers. They returned to Fort Wolters in February 1968 and Dave trained as many pilots as possible so he would not have to return to Vietnam.



That worked until 1972, when Dave returned to Vietnam where he was an airmobile advisor to the VNAF helicopter squadrons at Pleiku Air Base. In 1973, he was assigned to Fort Riley, Kansas to command the 335th Aviation Company "Cowboys." At that point, he became dissatisfied with the challenge of Army Aviation. The Cowboys had captains as XO, operations officer, and platoon leaders and the warrant officers were all Vietnam experienced. Flying air assaults on Fort Riley was just too automatic. In Germany, he took his first battalion command as an infantry major and saw the leadership challenge was in other than Army aviation.

Dave's over 31 years of military service has included command of three companies, two battalions, and the 2d Infantry Division Support Command in Korea. Dave's awards and decorations include the Distinguished Flying Cross, Defense Superior Service Medal, Legion of Merit, Meritorious Service Medal (with 3 Oak Leaf Clusters), Air Medal for Valor (with 35 Oak Leaf Clusters for Service), Army Commendation Medal, Air Force Commendation Medal, Purple Heart, Senior Army Aviator Badge, Parachutist Badge, Expert Infantryman Badge, and the Army Staff Identification Badge. During his Army service career, Dave received his Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Tampa and a Master of Science degree from the Florida Institute of Technology. Military service has taken them to Korea twice, Germany, Vietnam twice, and eight states in the USA. After serving as the Deputy Director and the Director of Plans and Operations, Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Logistics, Headquarters, Department of the Army in his second tour at the Pentagon, Dave ended his Army career as a Colonel in 1992.



Dave looks back on his time with the Deans and wonders about where today finds company commanders Fred Farner, Tom Daly, and Richard Beck; pilots Ralph Gonzales, Frank Hunt, John Jones, Vincent Olson, Ray Sandlin, Ira Greeley, Linc Shibao, Dave Johnson and many others; the myriad of other great warrant officer pilots, and the crew chiefs, door gunners, and maintenance folks who pulled it all together in the "Best of Times in the Worst of Times."

In the civil sector, Dave worked as a senior logistics analyst for three different defense contractors located in the National Capital Region until he retired from Science Applications International Corporation in 2001.

Dave and Kim relocated from Virginia to Texas in 2001 to position themselves to care for Dave's age 85 mother. In 2002, they completed their home in Waterwood Estates on Cow Bayou in Orange County just northeast of Bridge City, Texas. They currently enjoy the retired life and being together in their 38th year of marriage. If your travel takes you to this neck of the woods, please do not hesitate to stop in for a visit.



Dave and Kim were fortunate to have two wonderful sons. Their first, Drew, is a Salt Lake City, Utah police officer. Drew has provided Dave and Kim with two super grandchildren, Haley, age 7, and Max, age 3.



The Measels' youngest son, Robert, died tragically in 1998. Robert had one beautiful daughter, Elizabeth, age 9, who currently lives with her mom and step-dad in Kentucky.



In addition to enjoying the retired life and being together, Dave and Kim are taking time to travel. They spent the 2003 Christmas-New Year holiday period with Drew and his family in Salt Lake City. In 2004, they attended their Vietnam helicopter reunion in Springdale, Arkansas followed by enjoying much of Branson, Missouri and in November they visited Vietnam. In 2005, they returned to Vietnam. In 2006, they will travel by car to visit Branson, Kentucky, Northern Virginia, and Florida and will fly out to Portland, Oregon. In 2007, they plan another extended trip to Vietnam.



Dave 2005



Kim 2005

God Bless You All!

