

Fly-In Will Feature Restored 1963 Huey

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MENTONE – A 1963 Bell UH-1 helicopter at the Lawrence D. Bell Aircraft Museum is being restored to its original condition and will be on display Sept. 7 at a fly-in with some of the Vietnam War pilots who flew it on hand. “We acquired it through a government agency called TACOM and that agency basically disperses beyond-use vehicles,” explained Steve Rogers, museum board member. “It sends them out for parts or gives them to Legions or museums, places like that, that will keep them in good shape. Not necessarily in working order, but in good condition.” Every year, the museum has to send pictures of the 47-foot Huey to TACOM and note its condition and if they still need it. Technically, he noted, the government, not the museum, still owns the helicopter. As long as the museum takes care of it, however, the Huey is the museum’s.

Some Hueys on display end up getting rough-looking after being outside on display year after year in all kinds of weather. “It’s just kind of a disgrace because these machines have taken the G.I.s in and out of battle and fed them and kept them in the M.O.,” Rogers said. “And saved their lives pretty much,” added Marsha Scott, board member. “Vietnam War was based around vertical flight. Helicopters getting in and out,” Rogers said. “You had your guys on the ground that would clear a spot for them. As long as they could clear a spot, even when they couldn’t clear a spot, they would rappel in and ladder a lot of these guys out.” Bell Aircraft Museum got their Huey in 1995. It was placed in a caged area outside of the museum. Rogers said, “It just sat out there and got filled up full of birds. It’s a little difficult to appreciate in a caged area. The paint was faded pretty rough. Once the birds make it in, it’s pretty much all over, it’s messy.”

The museum decided to restore the helicopter a couple of years ago. It was pulled into the museum building Dec. 11, 2011. “We didn’t know how far we wanted to go with it,” Rogers said. “I began to research the serial number and I came up with what’s called Goldbook information. The Goldbook is information on incidents due to certain serial numbers.” The serial number on the Huey in Mentone is 63-08801. The 63 notes it was made in 1963. Using the Goldbook, Rogers found a few names connected to the museum’s Huey. He started “cold calling” all over the country some of the names he found in there. He started finding pilots that flew Huey 63-08801, for training and missions.

“This one, unlike a lot of the helicopters, was stationed in An Kahe, the Republic of Vietnam,” he said. “Usually helicopters, when they had a mission, everyone just went out and grabbed a helicopter and flew it. They weren’t designated for each person. If you’re an instructional pilot, your helicopter was your



Bell Aircraft Museum board members Steve Rogers (L) and Marsha Scott (R) stand in front of a 1963 UH-1 helicopter (a Huey) the museum is restoring. It will be on display at the museum’s fly-in Sept. 7. Vietnam War pilots who flew the helicopter also will be on hand at the fly-in. Photo by David Slone, Times-Union.



Once the 1963 UH-1 helicopter is restored, the public will be able to get inside the ‘Huey.’ Pictured is the inside of the helicopter Tuesday afternoon with work still to be finished. Photo by David Slone, Times-Union.

helicopter and whoever was in the second seat, you were training. Or if you were on a mission and that was your helicopter, whoever was in the second seat was considered your co-pilot."

One of the helicopter's instructional pilots Rogers found was Neil Stickney of North Las Vegas, Nev. As soon as Rogers told Stickney he wanted to talk to him about a helicopter, Stickney knew right away which helicopter Rogers was talking about. Stickney told Rogers he figured the "801" was pushed over a fleet carrier to make room for refugees when they were evacuating the country.

"He's kind of like me, he saves everything," Rogers said. "He sent me his whole collection of everything he had in Vietnam. So we basically have the flight records for the helicopter, for his time that he flew it. He sent me his flight helmet, his flight suits, all the original books and stuff that came with the helicopter. I actually talked him into sending me some letters that he had sent home so when we put our display together people can kind of read what the feel was from the pilot to home."

Scott said Stickney started giving the museum names of other guys he flew with. "It just kind of snowballed," she said.

Stickney and pilot Lee Huber, Columbia, S.C., are two of the men coming to the fly-in Sept. 7 in Mentone. Stickney provided the museum with photos of him and Huber sitting in the Huey in Vietnam. A third pilot coming to Mentone from Sweet, Idaho, is Robert "Buzz" W. Sisk, author of "Wing for the Valiant." Sisk's book mentions the 08801 in chapter six.

"The thing is, all the information we have, is basically for two years or a year and a half. And there's so much more because this thing – the first year we don't have documented yet," Rogers stated.

The Mel Gibson movie "We Were Soldiers" is about a pretty notable Vietnam War battle, Rogers said. While he doesn't have it documented yet, he believes 63-08801 was there in that battle because it came over on the same ship, the USS Croatan. The museum has a picture of the helicopters on the ship, but Rogers said they can't tell which of the many helicopters on the ship is theirs. The ship's trip to get the Hueys from port Aug. 13, 1965, in Mobile, Ala., to Vietnam took about 31 days, Rogers said.

On the nose of the museum's Huey used to be an ode to the James Bond 007 villainess Pussy Galore. She was painted on it by the same artist who did Bruce Crandall's helicopter, but it's since faded. Crandall is a retired U.S. Army officer who received the Medal of Honor for his actions during the Battle of Ia Drang. By the end of the Vietnam War, he had flown more than 900 combat missions.

"If we can find the artwork, we would clean it up a bit because (Stickney) says she was topless. It went right over the emblem," Rogers explained.

The majority of the static restoration of the Huey is expected to be completed by the "Rotors Above Mentone" fly-in. There are a few hard-to-find parts the museum is trying to get, and they can be expensive.

"We have had some (parts) donated, so that's been helpful, but it takes work," Scott said.

"We're still looking for parts and people that want to provide funding to finish this up the way we want and that is correct," Rogers commented. "A lot of people that work here put their own money into it because it's a passion and we want to see it done right. We're restoring it so people can enjoy it and see history, so to speak."

The fly-in starts at 10 a.m. Sept. 7, weather permitting, and a dedication program for the Huey will take place at 11 a.m.

"It's a dedication really in honor of all the Vietnam Vets," Rogers said. "Anybody that had anything to do with a helicopter in Vietnam, which really everyone had something to do with a helicopter. You either worked on it or flew into a mission on it, helped people with it. Somehow you were either taxied in it. Hueys touched everyone that were in Vietnam. That sounds cliché but lots of people call it 'Sounds of Hope.' When you hear that thing coming, you don't want to hear it leave unless you're on it."

Eugenia Fulkerson, an American Red Cross "Donut Dolly" during the Vietnam War, also will be at the dedication, Scott said. Donut Dollies were 627 girls just out of college who volunteered to go to Vietnam to provide moral support for the soldiers. They just wanted to make a difference, Rogers said.

Fulkerson gave the museum one of her uniforms and loaned another one to the museum for temporary display, Scott said.

The Red Cross also will have a blood drive at the fly-in from noon to 4 p.m. in recognition of Donut Dollies, she said. Appointments can be made online at redcross.org Walk-ins will be welcome.

A car cruise-in will be at the fly-in beginning at 10 a.m. to "whenever," Scott said. Foods will be available and patrons can talk to the Vietnam War pilots in attendance.

The museum is at 210 S. Oak St., Mentone. Its website is at www.bellaircraftmuseum.org