

Hard Flying, Soft Landing

AN EX-VIETNAM PILOT DONATES FOUR HELICOPTERS
TO THE VIETNAM CENTER



Vietnam era AH-1 Cobra gunship

Chuck Carlock flew “Charlie” helicopter gunships for seven months in Vietnam but decided they were too dangerous, so he switched to Huey troop carriers. His first mission in one of those was nearly his last.

Carlock’s Huey and others were taking American soldiers out of a PZ, a pickup zone. He was commanding the lead chopper and another pilot was flying it.

“When you take off, you call back through the flight to make sure everybody’s up,” Carlock says. He called the last pilot in line and got a reply no rescue commander wants to hear.

“I left one.”

This PZ was a rice paddy, so the soldiers and their packs were wet, muddy and way too heavy. The soldier still in the mud was one too many for the last helicopter to take off. Carlock and his pilot circled back.

“The North Vietnamese got closer and closer and there were bullets hitting all around us,” Carlock says. “We landed and sat there long enough, maybe five or 10 seconds, but the soldier was scared to death and wouldn’t get up out of the mud. One of the other soldiers finally jumped out of our helicopter, picked that guy up and threw him in.”

Carlock lived to tell this tale and many others. In fact, he put his Vietnam experiences into two books, the second called “Firebirds,” available in paperback.

He has also restored several helicopters that

saw action in ’Nam, finding pieces here and there and assembling them in barns on 40 acres where he lives south of Fort Worth. Recently he gave four of the restored birds and a load of spare parts to Texas Tech’s Vietnam Center.

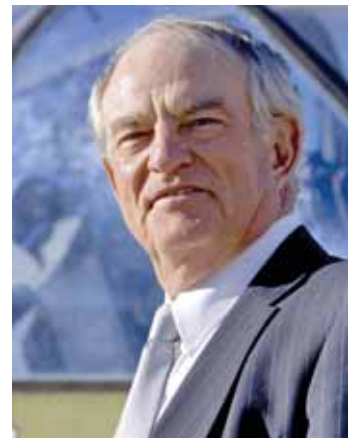
“I wanted to put them somewhere they might be kept forever,” Carlock says. “I’ve got enough stuff for my own museum but I’ve seen what happens to those. Guys set up museums after the Civil War. As the people got older, their museums fell apart. That’s what happened with World War II museums too. One of my sons-in-law even wanted to build a truck stop and mount my helicopters on poles all the way around it.”

This certainly won’t happen at The Vietnam Center, where Carlock’s beautifully restored AH-1 Cobra gunship, OH-58 observation helicopter, TH-55 trainer, and UH-1 Huey multipurpose helicopter will be on permanent display one day soon.

“Until we can raise enough money for our new building, we’ll keep them stored indoors and bring them out for special occasions and events,” says Steve Maxner, deputy director of the center.

— KARL WOLFSHOHL

For more information on Carlock’s donation, go to: www.vietnam.ttu.edu/vietnamcenter/carlock. Or for photos and other information from his days as a Vietnam helicopter pilot, go to: rattlerfirebird.org/vietnam/pictures/ChuckCarlock.php



Chuck Carlock