Voices of Connecticut Veterans: Kjell Tollefsen and the Huey

EILEEN HURST

Kjell T. Tollefsen, aka “Troll” or Black Widow 45, was a Warrant Officer in the 188th Assault Helicopter Company (AHC), proudly serving his adopted country as a “Huey” helicopter pilot in Vietnam from November 1967 to November 1968. The story of how Kjell Tollefsen, a small boy from Oslo, Norway, came to the United States and fought valiantly for his new country during the Vietnam War is a fascinating one. How did the five-year Nazi occupation of Norway during World War II influence Kjell’s decision to enlist in the U.S. Army in 1967? Quite a bit. Kjell’s father was a soldier in the King’s Guard in Oslo, Norway when World War II broke out. Once Germany invaded and occupied Norway, Kjell’s father became part of a ten-man unit in the underground resistance. Toward the end of the war, when the unit was exposed, the Tollefsen family escaped to Sweden and later returned to their homeland with the fall of the Axis powers. An American soldier stationed in Norway to assist with reconstruction befriended Kjell’s father. This soldier, not knowing that his act of kindness would lead to the development of a future American hero, sponsored the Tollefsen family to emigrate to Connecticut when Kjell was only two and a half years old. As Kjell grew up in Clinton, CT, his family always felt a sense of gratitude for what the U.S. had given them. The Tollefsen family possessed a true appreciation and understanding of freedom, an appreciation that can only be fully understood by those who have been deprived of freedom.¹

As a boy, Kjell always wanted to fly. His dream was to become an astronaut, and he loved hanging around the small Griswold airport near his home. A pilot for Trans World Airlines further sparked the boy’s desire to fly when he took Kjell up in a private airplane a few times. When this same pilot told Kjell about the U.S. Army accepting boys out of high school for flight training, Kjell jumped at the chance to become a pilot and the opportunity to give back to his country. Unlike most of the young men at that time, Kjell actually wanted to go to Vietnam. It was the spring of 1966, and the war was starting to heat up. Kjell wanted in.

After basic training at Fort Polk in Louisiana, Kjell went to Fort Wolters, Texas as a Warrant Officer candidate for the first half of his flight training. The initial thirty days were grueling, both physically and mentally, as the Army culled the field to only the toughest recruits. As Kjell explained, “They weren’t going to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars of their time making you a pilot unless you could
handle the rigors of all of that. They just wanted to be sure you could stand that psychological pressure early on.” After the first month, 40% of the class “washed out.” Kjell was among those who survived, and continued his flight training for an additional three months. Half of the time was spent in the classroom, and the other half spent training in OH-13 helicopters left over from the Korean War. Kjell described them as a “pretty basic aircraft, but not easy to fly.” He completed the second phase of his flight training at Fort Rucker in Alabama, where he spent five months in combat flying, basic instrument flying, and weapons training.

At Fort Rucker, Kjell was trained to fly the iconic Bell UH-1 Iroquois, the most widely used helicopter in the Vietnam War. The origins of the UH-1 date back to the Korean War, during which the Bell 47 was used primarily to deliver food and supplies to the front lines, and for medical evacuation of the wounded. Helicopters in the Korean War were slow, underpowered, and noisy. Yet a few men recognized its value for medevac wounded soldiers and its tremendous potential for far more. In 1954, the U.S. Army implemented a competition to design a modern helicopter that would be used primarily for medical evacuation. They wanted something with more lift capacity, more power, and more speed than the Bell 47. The Bell Helicopter Company had an advantage because they had already designed the H-13D using a revolutionary new gas turbine engine, which was far superior to the former reciprocating piston driven engine. In response to the competition, Bell modified the H-13D and renamed it Bell Model 201. At the same time, the Lycoming Company was working on the XT53 turbine engine with Army support, but had no specific application in mind for its use. Bell and Lycoming joined forces to produce the prototype that won the bid for the Army contract. The T53 was a 700 horse power, light weight, compact, reliable engine able to run on a variety of fuels. In June of 1955, the U.S. Army contracted with Bell to produce the first three test helicopters named XH-40. Nine pre-production helicopters followed in the next few years, each expanding and improving on the previous model. At this time, the Army started using a new system for designating aircraft, so the H-40 became the HU-1, which stood for “Helicopter, Utility.” The Army traditionally named helicopters after North American Indian tribes, so the HU-1 received the official title of Iroquois. The HU designation quickly gave rise to the nickname “Huey,” which became the name most commonly used, and recognized far more often than the official Iroquois.²

Thus began the love affair with the Huey, which continues for many today. The Army took delivery of the first HU-1A in June of 1959. These first Hueys lacked armament, and acquired the additional nickname of “slicks.” The Huey moniker stuck with the aircraft as Bell continued to improve the helicopter. Bell made improvements to enlarge the cabin, increase the load lift, and to add armament. Even when the helicopter designation system converted to the Air Force’s system in 1962, and the HU-1 was re-designated UH-1, the Huey kept its nickname.

The next big development for the Huey came in the early 1960s with the development of air mobility tactics. With the increased power of the HU-1A, new battlefield tactics became a possibility. General Hamilton Howze, an ex-cavalryman, is
largely responsible for seeing the potential of utilizing the Huey in combat. In 1961, Howze chaired the Tactical Mobility Requirements Board (aka the Howze Board) to investigate new tactical theories. Howze was convinced of the value of using helicopters instead of trucks to move troops and supplies over difficult terrain and into remote areas. The board tested Hueys in all types of conditions, missions, and weather, and submitted their recommendations to the Army. Based on those recommendations, the Army created the 11th Air Assault Division at Fort Benning, Georgia to test and experiment with helicopter tactical training. This became a turning point in how soldiers would ride into battle. In less than four years, the Army would find out exactly how critical this decision was. Air mobility was born.\footnote{Citation needed}

The 11th Air Assault Division continued to test and improve air mobility concepts and tactics. The aircraft became as essential to the ground units as were trucks and armored vehicles. One of the tactics with which they experimented was the use of the helicopter as a command and control post. Although this was a new concept, it was quickly and widely implemented throughout the Vietnam War. Additional new, untried techniques and tactics included formation flying, employing suppressive fire from the air around landing zones (LZ), resupply, reconnaissance, air communication, and airspace control. Results were so successful that the testing terminated ahead of schedule. While there were some weaknesses discovered, most notably the relative slow speed, lack of armor, fragility and the vulnerability of the helicopter especially when flying low near enemy fire, the positive elements far outweighed the negative, and on June 28, 1965, Secretary of State Robert McNamara announced the creation of a new airborne division. Exactly one month later the new unit, the 1st Cavalry Division (formerly the test 11th Air Assault Division) was the first combat unit ordered to Vietnam, with 434 helicopters (mostly Hueys).\footnote{Citation needed}

Over the next decade Bell produced many variants of the Huey. It was continually modified and upgraded based on lessons learned on the battlefield. Gunships accompanied the unarmed slicks on missions, providing fire support. Yet the added weight of the armor and weapons on the gunships made them slower than the slicks. The introduction of the Hueycobra AH-1G in 1966 was the solution to this problem. It was a specially designed gunship armed with 3,000 pounds of rockets, grenades, and guns, and twice as fast as the standard Huey. Kjell had the opportunity to test drive the Hueycobra while training at Fort Benning, but never flew it in combat.

It was the development of air mobility tactics that insured the dominant role the helicopter played in Vietnam. By the time Kjell enlisted in 1966, the Army was training pilots in new tactics and techniques. Kjell graduated from flight training at Fort Rucker in 1967, proficient in both flying and air mobility tactics. He reported to Fort Benning, GA, where a new unit of helicopter pilots was being formed as part of the buildup for Vietnam. While stationed at Fort Benning, Kjell recalls his debut into the movie business. At the time, the movie The Green Berets, starring John Wayne, was being filmed with a mock up of a Vietnamese village created at Fort Benning. Kjell was one of the pilots who did the actual helicopter flying for the movie.
The reality of combat helicopter flying was, however, soon to come. Kjell and his new unit, comprised of sixteenslicks, eight new Hueycobra gunships, and one command and control aircraft, flew their helicopters to California, where they were loaded on an aircraft carrier and shipped to Vietnam. The men returned briefly to Fort Benning, packed their gear, and headed to San Francisco where they boarded the old World War II troop ship, the USS Walker, for transport to Vietnam. Upon arriving in Vietnam at Cam Ranh, the pilots disbursed to other units throughout the country. Kjell’s assignment was the 188th Assault Helicopter Company (AHC) at Camp Rainier in Dau Tieng, located in III Corps close to the Cambodian border. Camp Rainier was an old French Michelin Rubber Plantation converted into a military base. During the Vietnam War, soldiers were not transferred with entire units, but rather rotated in and out of country as individuals to insure that a unit who had been in Vietnam for a year would not lose more than 15% of its personnel in a month. Soldiers were regularly “infused” into units. In November 1967, Warrant Officer 1st Class Kjell T. Tollefsen was just another newbie or FNG (fucking new guy) in the 188th at Dau Tieng. The 188th had a reputation for being “a somewhat difficult unit,” and Kjell remembers feeling “excited and frightened all at the same time.”

The 188th descended from the World War II 2026th Quartermaster Truck Company and in 1966 was re-designated as the 188th Aviation Company (Air Mobile Light Aircraft), activated at Fort Campbell, Kentucky and assigned to 101st Airborne Division. The 188th AHC was the first aviation company to arrive in country with the new UH-1H and HU-1C helicopters (23 H models & 8 C Models). The 188th had been flying in Vietnam for eight months when Kjell arrived. Like all new pilots, Kjell flew the first few weeks as co-pilot with the more experienced pilots. As a newbie, it took a little practice to become comfortable flying in combat because there were so many critical things occurring simultaneously that required the pilot’s attention during a mission. When questioned about the first missions he flew out of Dau Tieng, Kjell described what it was like. “It’s almost overwhelming early on. There’s a lot happening. We always took fire for the most part. It was a fairly aggressive unit that went into some very difficult areas, and the first time on short final, when you’re doing a final part of an approach, into a landing zone with a bunch of other aircraft around you, with fire going on, there’s a lot of radio chatter going on, and you’ve got troops on board that are getting off. You bring the troops in for a battle and then get out quickly again. And all that is almost overwhelming early on because you’re not used to that much activity happening. You had three radios going off at the same time. You’ve got gunfire, returning fire, and troops getting off. The aircraft commander I was with was just as calm as could be because he’d been doing this for a while. You became very accustomed to all of that. That was routine.”

Kjell quickly adapted to the demands and pressures of combat flying and became skilled enough to command his own aircraft. His first helicopter was a Huey UH-1H, tail number 66-16176. The call sign for the unit was the Black Widows, and Kjell’s individual call sign became Black Widow 45. Each pilot also had a nickname by which they could identify each other. Because of Kjell’s Norwegian heritage, he was
dubbed “TROLL,” a tag that he painted on his helmet and the door of his helicopter. For good luck, on every mission he carried one of those troll dolls (dressed in a hippi outfit) famous back in the 1960s. In fact, it became a good luck charm for the entire crew. If Kjell forgot to bring it from his barracks, one of the crew would bring it to him. Amazingly Kjell still has the troll today.

What did it take to be a Huey pilot? First, there are a few very critical differences to keep in mind between a fixed wing aircraft and a rotary wing aircraft, or helicopter. Unlike fixed wing aircraft, a helicopter drops like a rock when it does not have power. One cannot put a helicopter on autopilot because it takes the constant use of both hands, individual fingers, and both feet to actually fly “the bird.” It takes tremendous coordination and focus. When asked to describe the specific skills required to fly a Huey, Kjell simplified the explanation: The pilot has a cyclic (much like a joystick) on the floor between his legs that controls the direction the helicopter goes. The grip (handle) of the cyclic has a trim tab operated by the thumb and the radio on/off button operated by the index finger. The pilot’s left arm operates the “collective” (a lever that goes up and down) which controls the vertical motion of the aircraft. The thumb of the hand on the collective operates another trim. Each foot operates a pedal that determines the clockwise or counter clockwise movement. The pilot performs multiple tasks at the same time. When flying a gunship, there are even more controls for operating the guns. In addition to flying the aircraft, the pilot was also constantly scanning his surroundings, on the alert for any problems. The pre-flight walk around outside the aircraft included checking sixty-three separate items in ten different areas, ending with inspection of the most crucial element, the
rotor hub, better known as the “Jesus nut.” Failure of this part causes what is classified as a “non-survivable” crash. Once inside the aircraft, there are eighty-four additional items to check on the pre-start and start checklists.

The altitude at which helicopters in Vietnam flew was drastically different from fixed wing aircraft. Helicopters rarely flew above 1,500 feet. They preferred to fly the “nap of the earth” at 100 feet or less. Pilots flew low and fast to avoid visual detection by the enemy, giving the enemy less time to see and hear the helicopter approaching, sight in, and shoot them down. This ability to fly low is one of the elements that made the helicopter so valuable in the Vietnam War.

It also took a special mentality to be able to fly into the chaos of battle, yet remain calm; to remain hovering at a standstill while the enemy tried to kill you; to extract dead soldiers or assist wounded ones who often needed immediate medical care, and whose blood was covering the floor of the aircraft; to supply, medevac, and resupply continuously, only stopping to refuel; and then to turn around and willingly do it all over again. The men skilled enough, and perhaps crazy enough, to perform this job were young and daring “hot rodder” types who lived on adrenaline; men like Kjell Tollefsen. They were a special breed of warrior. The pilot had to be prepared for any disaster that could materialize from any number of directions or causes; ranging from accidents, enemy fire, mother nature, or mechanical failure, to being shot down, wounded, or trapped in “Indian country” (over the border into Cambodia). They never knew what they were flying into, but Kjell was always prepared for the unexpected. On each mission, in addition to his Army issued .38 pistol, he carried a bag packed with an old M-2 carbine, an over-and-under M-16 with a grenade launcher underneath, ammo for the guns, and a couple of blocks of C-4, and detonators. If his helicopter went down in enemy territory, he planned to grab the bag and be able to hold out for at least a half-day. When asked about living with constant danger, Kjell explained that they got accustomed to flying at a high level of intensity day after day. He said, “You lived on the adrenaline. It almost became part of what you looked forward to – oddly enough, looking back on it.”

The helicopter pilot mentality might best be summed up in news correspondent Harry Reasoner’s tongue in cheek description, which hangs in the Operation Office of the Illinois Army National Guard: “Helicopter Pilots are Different.” As Reasoner explained, “The thing is, helicopters are different from planes. An airplane by its nature wants to fly, and if not interfered with too strongly by unusual events or by a deliberately incompetent pilot, it will fly. A helicopter does not want to fly. It is maintained in the air by a variety of forces and controls working in opposition to each other, and if there is any disturbance in this delicate balance the helicopter stops flying immediately and disastrously. There is no such thing as a gliding helicopter. This is why being a helicopter pilot is so different from being an airplane pilot, and why, in general, airplane pilots are open, clear-eyed, buoyant extroverts, and helicopter pilots are brooders, introspective anticipators of trouble. They know that if something bad has not happened, it is about to.”

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For slick crews, the work was endless and the missions varied; they did everything. Kjell flew missions that included inserting and extracting troops in and out of battle, delivering supplies and ammo, and medevac wounded and dead soldiers. Often slicks medevaced wounded soldiers if they arrived at the LZ before the “dust offs” landed. Slicks shuttled back and forth from the base to the battlefield as needed. They had about an hour and half of fuel, so on the return runs to base, to save time, they employed a dangerous refueling technique called a “hot” refuel, in which they refueled the helicopters without turning them off.

One of the memories that Kjell cannot shake from Vietnam is the sight and smell of his chopper after returning from some missions. “Cleaning up after a mission was sickening in itself,” explained Kjell. When soldiers were in the midst of a fierce battle, those killed in action (KIAs) were left to be retrieved later while the wounded were evacuated immediately. At the end of the battle, the slicks returned to a cold LZ for the dead. Kjell recalls the overpowering stench of the bodies piled into the helicopter in 100 degree temperatures. In those instances, he would try to “crab” the helicopter (sidestep it) to get a breeze flowing through the chopper. Kjell explained, “You became numb to death around you. You were just packaging that away.”

Kjell normally put in a ten to thirteen hour day of flying. Pilots were allowed to fly a maximum of 140 flight hours in a rolling thirty day period, but most of them would fly with another crew on their days off, or they lied on their paperwork and flew every day. They wanted the dangerous missions, not the safe ones. The more they flew, the better they got. None of them wanted to lose their edge.

While at Dau Tieng, the 188th flew support for the Special Forces located at nearby Tay Ninh East, commanded by the famed Bo Gritz. Kjell especially enjoyed flying for the Special Forces. The Black Widows often flew the Special Forces on covert missions over the border into Cambodia (code name Rapid Fire V). It was on one such mission that Kjell experienced his first helicopter crash. They had inserted Special Forces unit B-36 and some Cambodian mercenaries and returned to refuel. An hour and half later the team was receiving heavy fire and called for immediate extraction. They later discovered that the team unknowingly landed right into the middle of a battalion size force of North Vietnamese. Early in the war the Special Forces stayed in the field for days at a time, but as the war escalated, it frequently became only hours before they were detected by the enemy, which often required immediate extraction. On these occasions, the pilots knew that they would be flying into a hot LZ. They knew they would be taking fire, but they always went. They also knew that if they went down with their aircraft, they would be listed as MIA (missing in action) in Vietnam, not Cambodia.

On this mission, the Special Forces already had two KIAs and several wounded. It was a tricky extraction because the Hueys had only one possible approach, which was also the only means of egress. Kjell was flying with Richard “Dusty” Rhodes in the second helicopter in the formation when they started taking fire at about 1,000 yards out. Under a constant barrage of heavy fire in the LZ, two of the wounded and the two KIAs were thrown into the helicopter. The chopper got transitional lift and
climbed above the tree line under unrelenting fire. Kjell can still remember the puffs of smoke in the cockpit as each round hit the Plexiglas windshield. At one point he remembers seeing one of the KIA’s body jump as a round hit it. Suddenly, in the midst of alarms going off and the engine losing oil, they had to make a quick decision. There were two options: drop back down into the hot LZ, or try to reach a small clearing that the command and control flying overhead observed about one “click” (kilometer) further into Cambodia.

They opted for the clearing and, after the engine cut out, managed what Kjell termed a “semi-controlled crash.” The aircraft then rolled onto its side. When Dusty released his harness, he fell on top of Kjell. The crew struggled to get out and met at the front right of the aircraft, the designated meeting point for such an incident. Only three of the crew showed up. They were missing door gunner John Newcomer. They located him with his head trapped under the aircraft, but with his arms and legs flailing, so they knew he was alive. As two back up Black Widows landed to assist, the wounded passengers immediately set up a perimeter. Kjell described the scene, “One guy had a belly wound where you could see part of his intestines hanging out—he is now setting up a perimeter for us.” One of the rescue Hueys was Kjell’s wingman, George Jones, flying “Summer Wine.” After they discovered that it was the gunner’s helmet strap that was hung up, Kjell cut the strap, and the men, “basically ripped his body from underneath and out of the helmet,” breaking his collar bone and ripping his ear in half in the process. They had already spent about twenty minutes rocking the aircraft in an attempt to move it. Meanwhile, the circling command and control helicopter was observing the enemy closing in on the grounded men, and insisting that the crew should abandon the trapped man. The Air Force could not come in with an air strike because they could not get approval to cross the border into Cambodia. None of the men on the ground were willing to leave Newcomer. The wounded men from Kjell’s helicopter and the ones from Jones’s helicopter were, by now, were engaging the enemy at the perimeter. Fortunately, gunships arrived and provided fire while the crew and other men were extracted.

Kjell and his crew later counted more than thirty bullet holes in the helicopter after it was lifted back to the base. That was not enough excitement for the day. Nonetheless, George Jones, the pilot who had rescued Kjell and his crew, continued to fly into the original hot LZ extracting the remainder of the Special Forces. Jones was ultimately shot down and two of his crew seriously wounded. Fortunately, all survived the crash and were medevaced. When asked about the events of the day, Kjell commented, “That was one of the more difficult days. Special Forces lost a lot of guys.” What he did not say was that thanks to the Black Widows many lives were also saved. It is no wonder that the Special Forces and army grunts on the ground made a point of asking for the “spider people” when they had missions into Indian country.
While at Camp Rainier, Kjell had another opportunity at celebrity fame. It was not due to the tricks of their pet monkey, Fuquere, who flew on most missions. Rather, some of the soldiers, Kjell included, possessed musical talent that almost landed them on the Ed Sullivan Show. In December of 1967 there was a competition at the “Black Barons” officers’ club in Cu Chi, and the winner was promised an appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show. The Black Widows had a great group of guitarists, vocalists and a drummer, and entered the competition. Kjell was one of the singers. They did, however, have one dilemma: One member of the group was not an officer, and admittance to the officers’ club was exclusive. So, for one night, drummer Dave Miller became an officer, donning an uniform borrowed from his band-mates. The Black Widows won the competition and a trophy, though they never made it onto the Ed Sullivan show because, as Kjell said, “They had more important things to do.”

Kjell flew out of Dau Tieng from November 1967 until March 1968, when the Black Widows relocated on short notice. They flew north, uncertain of their destination, until they reached 1 Corps near the DMZ (demilitarized zone), where they were assigned to work with the Second Brigade of the 101st Airborne. They were officially reassigned to the Screaming Eagles in August 1968, but retained their Black Widow call sign. Their new “home,” in the middle of a barren rice paddy, was 65 miles north of Da Nang and 36 miles southeast of Khe Sahn. After their first night of sleeping in the open, they set up a new base at what became LZ Sally. They all filled
and lugged sand bags to make protective bunkers for themselves and their aircraft, and put up tents which became barracks. To make the tents with their dirt floors more livable, they used the wood from ammo crates as floor boards and covered their cots with mosquito netting to keep the rats from crawling on their bodies as they slept. When asked about the primitive living conditions, Kjell responded that it was, “not as bad as the troops in the field who were in the absolute worst situation, so we had it good compared to the people we were supporting during the day.”

![Tent living at LZ Sally. Original in the possession of Mr. Tollefsen.](image)

After erecting their own tents, the Black Widows put up their Officers’ Club tent, which they named the Widows’ Web. It was as primitive as their living quarters, but included a bar with any kind of booze they could get their hands on. The tent leaked, so they used ponchos to keep out the rain. When they were not flying, this is where the Black Widows could be found. To deal with the stress of the missions and help put the horrific images of war out of their minds, the men used black humor and booze (lots of booze). They made fun of anything and everything. They did not linger on death. They drank heavily, often hung over the next day. They flew hung over, and occasionally flew drunk. Kjell remembers that Doc Hannah would give them three pills for hang-overs, but never knew what he was taking. The Widows’ Web served their own special drink called a “Thunderclap,” which consisted of a shot or two of everything behind the bar topped off with beer. There was also a special seat called the “Hero’s Chair (a helicopter seat), to go with the drink. Anyone
caught telling war stories or bragging had to sit in the Hero’s chair, drink a Thunder-clap, and retell the story. It was considered an embarrassment if you were sent to the chair. Another bit of fun was when a Black Widow had too much to drink and passed out, his friends placed him in a body bag, then dragged him back to his tent. Kjell woke up more than once in a bag.

Kjell Tollefson in the Hero’s chair. Original in the possession of Mr. Tollefson.

When the Black Widows moved north, their mission was to fly support in and around the Ashau Valley and Khe Sahn. They were one of the first units to fly the new Huey H Model with the Lycoming T-53 turboshaft engine. Kjell described it as having more power, more capacity, more load lift, and the ability to hover at a higher load level. He also explained that temperature and humidity, both big factors in Vietnam, impacted how much a helicopter could lift. The new location in the north also required different flying tactics, which they learned quickly. During his eight months at LZ Sally, Kjell continued to fly almost daily, logging 1,100 hours of direct combat time while in Vietnam.

It was flying out of LZ Sally that Kjell experienced his second helicopter crash. It was less dramatic than the other two crashes, if one can say that an aircraft crash lacks drama. Kjell explained that they were hit while flying along the shoreline, lost transmission fluid, and “crash landed” on the beach. They were picked up by another unit while an Air Force F-4 Phantom, returning from a bombing run in the north, provided cover. After walking away from two helicopter crashes, one might wonder
if his luck was pushing the odds. Yet Kjell survived one more helicopter crash before leaving Vietnam. It was on one of his missions in the Ashau Valley while flying into a landing zone when they took heavy fire which brought the Huey down. The aircraft rolled on its side, but fortunately did not catch fire. Kjell and his crew were extracted by the helicopter coming in behind.

While at LZ Sally, Kjell had the opportunity to fly a very unique helicopter, called a “Smoke Ship.” There were only a few of its kind in Vietnam. Kjell flew “Black Widow Smokie,” Tail number 16155, with crew chief Ted Alley and door gunners Ron Pieuch and Doug Spies. The “Smoke Ship’s” mission was to fly in advance of troop insertion and lay down a plume of smoke to cover landings. The smoke screen was designed to mask the field so the enemy could not pick off American soldiers as they were jumping out of the hovering slicks. Kjell explained that low viscosity oil, stored in a bladder under the back seat of the helicopter, was pumped into the hot exhaust of the engine to produce smoke. He remembered, “You’d make a very low-level, high-speed run virtually on top of where the bad guys were, right in front of them, and drop this layer of smoke right on the ground. So you’d be tree tops or ground level at 120 knots – nothing more fun than flying fast...
and furious for a helicopter pilot. Remember we were young and crazy – smoke billowing out the back of the aircraft and guns blazing on both sides, and you’d have two gunships supporting you on either side laying rockets down for you, putting down suppressive fire, so you had bombs blowing up on both sides of you. The VC [Viet Cong] and the NVA [North Vietnamese Army] were shooting at you, but not very accurately because we were going so quickly.” Kjell took hits every time he flew Smokie. It sounds very dangerous, but the crazy young helicopter pilots loved the thrill of flying Smokie into an LZ. Kjell’s superb skill on such missions is evident in the note his commanding officer wrote in the 188th Black Widow Aviation: “The Aircraft Commander, CWO Kjell “Troll” Tollefsen (Black Widow 45) could fly Smokie through the eye of a needle.”

Kjell Tollefsen laying down smoke. Original in the possession of Mr. Tollefsen.

Kjell has the deepest respect and affection for his crew. Although the Black Widows have forty names engraved on the Vietnam Memorial Wall in Washington D.C., none of the KIAs is from Kjell’s crews. A Huey crew was usually just four men: the aircraft commander, the co-pilot, the crew chief, who also served as a door gunner, and a second door gunner. Each of the gunners carried an M-60 machine gun, and in addition to flying, shooting, and assisting the wounded, the crew also maintained the helicopter at the base. Kjell reminisced, “They were amazing guys that we flew with.” The entire crew was trained in the basics of first aid. Kjell recalls one mission
where he was needed to assist the crew while the co-pilot landed the aircraft because there were too many wounded soldiers with serious bleeding for the crew to tend. One soldier had part of his leg blown off and the blood was pouring out. All Kjell could do was pinch off the bleeder with his fingers and hold it until they landed. Because crews usually stayed together until one of the members rotated out and a FNG came in, they became very close. Kjell always felt responsible for keeping his men alive, but he stresses that it was the crew working together and looking out for each other that kept them all alive. He knew that without a good crew, you did not survive for long in Vietnam. It is still difficult for Kjell to put into words his feelings for the crew. In the 188th Black Widow Aviation he wrote:

Memories as vivid as yesterday, and yet impossible to describe. Faces of great friends, but no longer able to remember their names. Extreme emotions of closeness and admiration for crews and pilots, but I haven’t seen them in 32 years. There are a lot of problems with reliving or describing memories of the ’67-’68 Black Widows. I’m sure a shrink would tell us that we have repressed our memories as a defense, but I prefer to think of it as senility. There’s hardly been a day that I don’t reflect on those times, but it’s evolved into fond memories and humorous stories.7

Kjell received two Distinguished Flying Crosses (DFC) for his heroism in Vietnam. The first was for actions performed during the downing of his helicopter in Cambodia while extracting the Special Forces. That the incident occurred in Cambodia does not, however, appear in his military record because the U.S. was not “officially” in Cambodia. That does not faze Kjell. He has the medal, and the photo taken of him receiving it. Kjell was awarded his second DFC for a mission flown outside of the old provincial city of Hue. The NVA, disguised as fishermen in sam pans, were floating downstream through flooded rice paddies. As Kjell’s helicopter approached, they fired on him, and he returned fire. The NVA jumped into the shallow water and tried to hide under the boats, breathing through reeds. After more than an hour engaging the enemy, Kjell had to return to base because he was running out of fuel, but not before “Monster One” and “Monster Two,” the Navy’s hovercrafts, arrived to capture the NVA.

One of Kjell’s more memorable experiences from the war is the humanitarian aid they provided to a leper village. Lepers were segregated from the rest of the population and left to take care of themselves. The Black Widows supplied food, and occasionally medicine or other supplies they had. Another of Kjell’s happier memories was the ten days he spent in the Philippines training in jungle survival to prepare for the event that he was shot down in the jungle.

At the end of his tour, Kjell, like many of the men leaving Vietnam, was not happy. On the day he flew out, Kjell was sitting in his helicopter preparing to fly a mission when a clerk ran up to the helicopter to report that his tour of duty was complete. There had been no notice; no time to prepare. He simply got out of the aircraft, changed his clothes, packed, left notes for his buddies, and boarded a plane for the U.S. The plane ride was eerily quiet. No one spoke. To Kjell, “It felt like
you were leaving something behind.” He left the country the same way he entered it, as a lone soldier. He was unprepared for the homecoming he received in San Francisco. Anti-war protesters yelling epithets at the soldiers in front of the processing center prevented the returning heroes from using the front door. They resorted to departing out the back gate. That unforgettable “welcome” home in November of 1968 is one of the primary reasons that Kjell has not shared a great deal about his experience in Vietnam. As he explained it, “No one wanted to talk about it.”
Kjell caught a flight to New York and slept on the floor at the Port Authority because he had little money. The next morning he caught a train to New Haven, CT, and then started to walk the twenty-three miles to his home in Clinton. He still gets emotional when recalling the kindness of an older man who stopped and gave him a ride home. For some unknown reason, Kjell had the feeling that the stranger was another soldier from a different war. Maybe he understood.

After some rest and relaxation (R&R) at home, Kjell returned to Fort Rucker for training in flight instruction. By this time, there was an insatiable demand for helicopter pilots in Vietnam. The Army could not produce them fast enough. Kjell, accompanied by his wife, served for a year in Germany teaching pilots. To Kjell it was as if someone had flipped a switch. His life was the complete opposite of his year in Vietnam. While in Germany, he flew one mission a day along the Czech border watching for Russians, who did the same thing. There they were, side by side, Kjell flying along the border of the Iron Curtain and a Russian pilot flying on the opposite side. They usually waved to each other. Life was so different. When Kjell’s obligation with the Army ended, he wanted to re-up and return to Vietnam, but chose to leave the service because his first daughter was due to be born. He was discharged and served as a helicopter pilot in the Reserves and then the National Guard for 12 years.

What legacy did the Huey and the men who flew it leave? The Vietnam War was the proving ground for the helicopter. It received a baptism by fire and rose to meet the challenges and obstacles of combat. Early in the war, the decisive defeat of the NVA in the Ia Drang Valley in 1965 overwhelmingly proved the combat value of helicopters. The Huey became the most important Army aircraft, and the most recognized symbol of the Vietnam War. It provided the American forces with the ability to transport men, equipment, and supplies rapidly to inaccessible locations, anywhere, anytime, to combat an enemy who appeared and disappeared just as quickly back into the jungle. Helicopters flew more than 36,000,000 sorties in Vietnam.

Even the end of U.S. involvement in Vietnam is marked by an unforgettable image of a UH-1 Huey atop a building in Saigon with a line of frantic Vietnamese climbing a ladder, desperate to flee Vietnam as the North Vietnamese closed in.

When Kjell Tollefsen thinks back to his Vietnam days, he speculates about the lives he and his crew were able to save. He wonders how many children and grandchildren would not be in the world today if it were not for the rescue and medevac missions they flew. He has good reason to think this. Injured soldiers made up 390,000 of the total number of people transported by medevac helicopters in Southeast Asia. Yet the cost was high. More than any other aircraft, Hueys suffered in Vietnam. The Army alone lost almost 2,500 helicopters to hostile fire, more than 50% of them Hueys, and another 2,075 to accidents. More Army pilots were killed than from any of the other military branches, with 564 pilots killed in action, and 401 killed from accidents and other causes. Two thousand four hundred sixty five aircrew members died in Vietnam.
The war also left incalculable scars on the men who fought it. For Kjell, it was a life changing event that continues to influence him today. He admits that he lost his faith while in Vietnam, no longer believing that a higher power is concerned with the day-to-day actions of humankind. Kjell vividly recalls the horrific scene in the Ashau Valley as he flew out dead and wounded soldiers, thinking at the time, “If anybody is in control of this, they’re not paying attention.” Kjell chooses not to let his experience make him bitter, noting that he, “enjoys every day more intensely,” and that “when monsters come out and haunt you in your mind, you focus on the better things.” Kjell also keeps life in perspective with a good deal of humor. In the big picture, Kjell’s military duty left him with a deeper love of his adopted country, and for those who served, especially the men who lost their lives.

The helicopter continues to evolve; so too does its role in combat. Yet Kjell and those who flew the Huey in Vietnam will never forget the familiar whop, whop, whop of the rotor, the feel of the cyclic in their hand and the beautiful silhouette of the Huey. Nor will the countless men whose lives were saved by a “slick” coming to the rescue ever forget the welcome sight of a Huey and the airmen who flew them.

And because he and so many other soldiers did not get the homecoming they deserved:

Welcome home, Kjell!
NOTES

1 All personal background information and quotations are from Kjell Tollefsen, interview by Eileen Hurst, December 5, 2008.


7 Detra & Johnson, *188th Black Widow Aviation*, 73.

8 For detailed account of the Ia Drang Valley Battle, see *We Were Soldiers Once... and Young* by Lt. Gen Harold Moore and Joseph Galloway (New York: Random House, 1992), I view this as one of the top five books on the Vietnam war.

