

# **Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association**

## **HISTORY SUMMARY**

**By Larry Clark and Mike Law in 1990**

### **INTRODUCTION**

**This document will provide some insight into the early days, the founding, of the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association (VHPA) and give details about those early days and the people who gave the initial direction to this large organization. If a name has been overlooked or a deed not mentioned, please know that it was not intentional. Now after 6 years, some of the memories are a little fuzzy and some of the notes have been misplaced, but these are the facts as we know them.**

**It is intended that this history will be maintained and updated each year with the current events concerning the VHPA so that a complete story about this organization will be available in one document.**

### **IN THE BEGINNING**

**The single most important event in the history of the VHPA was the vote that was taken at the first reunion by those 66 pilots who were present. The issue was if we should form an association and continue to try and find more members and hold future reunions or if we should enjoy this reunion and drop back into the shadows with our memories of flying helicopters in Southeast Asia. The vote indicated an overwhelming desire to continue. At that point in time, the VHPA was given birth. Then came the next order of business, to vote on a set of rules to operate by and officers to govern this new organization. But, first lets look back to the years before this first meeting, to see what brought this first group of pilots together in Phoenix, Arizona on June 16, 1984.**

**Larry Clark, the founder, was employed by Petroleum Helicopters, then Air Logistics and finally Sperry Flight Systems after leaving the U.S. Army in 1968. At each of those jobs, he was in constant contact with some of his former flight school classmates, and many other Vietnam helicopter pilots. The conversation would, at some point, always turn to war stories about flying in combat or the typical "what ever happened to good old what's his name ..." The war stories were always better than talking about the routine civilian flying that they are performing today. In the war story game of "one-up-manship", only a good RVN tale could top one of "there I was in south Louisiana on my way to the oil rig ...." scenario.**

**This group of former Vietnam helicopter pilots continued to see each other on a routine basis and in their travels, kept in touch with other Vietnam pilots who could add more war stories and also update the whereabouts of another pilot whom had not been seen in years.**

**They were lucky because they found work in the civil helicopter industry after returning from Southeast Asia and were able to continue with their first love, flying helicopters. So many other pilots returned, and not finding flying jobs, went back to school and obtained training or degrees in other fields which took them totally away from aviation. The whereabouts of these pilots was an unknown and continues today to be the hardest task in trying to locate all of the former pilots to inform them about the existence of the VHPA.**

**Larry also routinely attended the various aviation industry trade shows, such as the Helicopter Association of America (HAA) event each winter. This also afforded him a chance to see other former Vietnam era pilots who worked in the helicopter industry as pilots, executives for suppliers and manufacturers. As the 20th anniversary of his graduation from high school**

(1983) approached, several of his high school classmates were planning a reunion which Larry did attend. He began to think about what he did after high school and the fact that the 20th anniversary of his graduation from flight school was also approaching (May 1985).

Through the years Larry had kept in contact with only three or four of his 65-3 classmates. He had never heard of anyone trying to have a class reunion for flight school classes, but if people could do it for high school classes, why not try. So at the HAA convention held Feb. 13 to 15, 1983 in Anaheim, CA the initial effort to find former classmates started. Larry began by talking to other pilots about his idea. Many offered encouragement, but few knew how to locate anyone other than their own close friends.

It became apparent early on that other pilots also wanted to find classmates and thought that the idea of a big class reunion at Ft. Rucker was a good idea. So Larry began what he thought would be an easy task of locating a few pilots, sorting them by class number and holding a party at one of the future HAA shows or the remote possibility of finding more of his classmates and having an even larger party at Ft. Rucker on the 20th anniversary in May of 1985.

Larry knew several people connected with some of the aviation industry publications, so he approached them to see if they would run a free notice that he was looking for former Vietnam era helicopter pilots for the possible result of holding a reunion. Rotor & Wing, Flying, Business & Commercial Aviation and HeliCopter World were the first to print the notice. This was mid 1983 and within a few weeks, Larry's home mail box was filled with letters everyday from all over the world.

At about the same time that Larry wrote to the various aviation publications to ask for their help in trying to locate former pilots, he also sent out about 30 form letters to those close friends who he had known over the years, and was sure that they had flown in Vietnam. If you were one of the lucky ones to receive one of these first letters, and still have it, you have a true VHPA collectors' item. Replies from these letters and word of mouth about Larry's efforts, began to pay off with more letters and phone calls. The encouragement was the fuel that kept Larry and his wife Terrie going with the effort to find more pilots. It was very apparent that other pilots also wanted to know what ever happened to "good old what's his name ..."

By September of 1983, a name had been developed by Larry for this group, the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association, and the first logo, the dark silhouette of a UH-1D with white letters of VHPA inside the helicopter outline, was being used on letters and application forms. Members were asked to supply the same basic information that is now asked for on the application forms. The call sign information was not asked for initially, but was added to the application form later so that a T-shirt could be made using the call signs of the various units. The first call sign T-shirt listed only a few unit call signs that Larry and Dave Grieger could think of from memory. The idea of a cross reference of units to call signs was to come along a year or so later from Mike Law the Data Base Chairman.

In October 1983, another general information letter went out to all who had responded. It set the theme for the VHPA and explained the short-range goals of publishing a directory, holding a reunion and just having fun. Trying to locate more pilots and gather more data for the directory was still the primary goal. In order to have a summer reunion, there would need to be many more pilots responding in order to justify the effort. Larry invited everyone to see him in Las Vegas at the January 1984 HAA Convention.

Toward the end of 1983 there was almost daily contact between Larry and other early supporters such as Dave Grieger, Dolph Todd and Mike McDonald. Larry's wife, Terrie, was

even more busy, answering the phone and talking to the many who called. Pilots wanted to know if we had been in contact with a certain pilot who they were looking for, or wanting to know when and where the next meeting was going to be held, etc. etc.

One of the other organizations that printed a notice about the forming of a group of Vietnam era pilots, was the Helicopter Operators of Texas (HOT) which led Mike McDonald, Howard Horton, Ron Wright and Jesse Miller to join the VHPA. Dave Grieger found out about the VHPA through a friend, Cary Shelton who had sent him an early application form. Cary had been in touch with Bob Mason's wife. Patience, after reading Bob's book Chickenhawk. Bob Mason is one of Larry Clark's former classmates whom he was searching for and had found. Dave Grieger was already involved in numerous other Vietnam Veteran groups and had attended several LZs or welcome home gatherings. Dave's knowledge of these events was very beneficial in helping to get the first group together.

By now a newsletter of one sheet, was being sent out to those who had sent in their personal information. The theme of the newsletter was to inform the reader as to what was going on toward the reunion, and to encourage them to try to find more pilots. One of the early questions asked by those sending in their information was "who are you and why are you doing this?"

It was understandable that many veterans were skeptical about giving out information about themselves and their personal experiences to total strangers. A portion of one early newsletter dealt with this, explaining to all who Larry and Terrie were, and why they were trying to pull this group together. The point was stressed that all information was treated confidentially and the member would not be placed on some mail list to start receiving junk mail.

From the phone calls and letters, it became apparent that a reunion was needed and a directory of the data that had been collected should be printed and made available. So Terrie and Larry, over the Christmas holidays, began the planning needed to hold a reunion and print the directory.

The plan for the first reunion was to hold a one day meeting, over a summer weekend, in Phoenix. June 16 was selected after talking to several hotels about available dates. Each person attending the reunion would receive a T-Shirt with the Huey VHPA logo and unit call signs, plus a directory of those pilots who had been located. Somewhere along the way, a pilot had sent in a list of U.S. Army pilots who had been killed in Vietnam. This list came from Ft. Rucker and was believed to be somewhat correct. This list was also printed in this first edition of the directory. Of course we learned later that this list was not complete, and we continue today to try and put together a correct list of KIA/MIA helicopter pilots.

For those who could not attend the first meeting, they could order by mail a copy of the directory and a T-Shirt which would be mailed just after the reunion. Thus the first directory was printed at a local Kwik Kopy for a total run of 500 copies. Many pilots only wanted the directory and no shirt, so the first shirt order to Dave Grieger was on June 2, 1984 for 240 shirts. Dave shipped the shirt order to Larry and Terrie in time for the reunion only two weeks later.

The next newsletter contained pre-registration forms for the reunion and asked for the registration and meal fees. By March 20, 1984 Terrie and Larry opened a separate bank account to handle the checks that were being received. In addition, various pilots were sending checks and cash in the amounts of \$5.00 or \$10.00 along with their applications to help defray the cost of printing and postage. This was greatly appreciated because up to this

point in time, all printing and postage had been from the pocket of Larry and Terrie with some unknown help from Larry's employer, Sperry, late at night at the copy machine.

The first VHPA check was written for \$4.77 to Action Printers to purchase a rubber stamp with the VHPA address. Larry and Terrie were getting tired of hand printing all of those return addresses on everything that went out. All items that were mailed, were sent first class, so that if someone had moved, it would either be forwarded on to his new address, or returned to VHPA. Larry felt that he had worked too hard to find a former pilot, to then lose him just because he moved and did not notify the VHPA of his new address.

In the process of trying to locate pilots, Larry came across the Dust Off Pilots Association in San Antonio, Texas. He obtained a copy of their member directory and made a mail out to each of their members to solicit VHPA members. Another important thing that he received from the Dust Off Assoc. was a copy of their constitution and bylaws. He had been collecting the same documents from other organizations, but the way the Dust Off Assoc. was established and operating seemed to be the best starting point for the VHPA. He then adapted these into a draft document for the VHPA and made copies for each pilot who was attending the first meeting. If those attending wanted to continue with an official organization, then he was ready with a draft constitution and bylaw document and had planned an agenda to accept the documents and conduct the first election.

A survey questionnaire was sent out to all of the pilots in Larry's data base to ask for inputs as to how much should the annual dues be set at, what should a member receive for his dues, how often should there be reunions, what time of the year should reunions be held and what topics should be contained in the newsletter. Larry received over 80 replies that set the theme for the association. This information was provided to those at the first business meeting so that the original bylaws could be written and the organization started.

#### **THE 1984 FIRST REUNION IN PHOENIX, AZ**

Just one week before the first reunion, things looked very dark for the VHPA. There had been only 18 pre-registrations and some of those were calling to cancel! At this point Larry and Terrie seriously considered canceling all of the arrangements that had been made at the hotel and just have those few who did show up over to the back yard for a pool party and cookout. Larry got on the phone and tried to contact each pilot directly to determine how many were really coming. Many had said they would attend, but had not registered. Were they really coming? Yes, there now appeared that there would be possibly 20 to 25 attending and most were bringing their wife or girlfriend. So on with the show. A final meal count was given to the hotel 24 hours before the dinner, and the actual count was well over the estimate, but everyone, even last minute walk-ins were accommodated with a meal from the hotel kitchen.

Just prior to the reunion, the local newspapers and TV stations were contacted by Larry to see if they would cover this meeting and with the media exposure, try to find more pilots. An article appeared two days before the reunion, and resulted in more than 10 local pilots being located and some of them attending the reunion. With two TV stations airing a short spot on the evening news, even more local pilots came out of the woods, but too late to attend the reunion.

During the first business meeting, it was decided that if anyone was interviewed by any media reporter, they were to down play any political views about the war, any feelings for or against any particular person or cause, and to talk about what we did with the helicopter, and about our close friendship with fellow pilots. This has remained the theme of the VHPA and has

helped to make it the success that it is today. Many pilots belong to the VHPA only because we do not take any side in a debate, nor support any particular cause for or against the various issues, and we remain a social only gathering point for all pilots regardless of their feelings or views.

A total of 66 pilots and 35 wives or girlfriends attended the first reunion. The names of the 66 pilots are listed below:

Alshire, Randy	Law, Mike	Richards, Jon
Bartrum, Dave	Lee, James	Ringer, Bill
Borszich, Butch	Leonard, John	Robertson, Gary
Christian, Mark	Logan, John	Ronnigen, Carl
Clark, Larry	Lynam, Donald	Ross, Greg
Conley, Joe	Miller, Mike	Ruh, Tony
Crabbs, Rick	Morgan, John	Searcy, Roger
Dykhouse, Rodney	Murphy, Tom	Smith, Robert
Ellis, Jim	McCaig, Richard	Stringer, Paul
Ennis, Tony	McDonald, Mike	Sutch, John
Freeman, Richard	Nelson, Erv	Thompson, Jim
Fulcher, Jim	Norgard, Don	Todd, Dolph
Gould, Roger	Novak, Brian	Topalian, Charles
Grieger, Dave	Palmer, John	Uster, Paul
Hansen, Mark	Patrick, Lane	Wallace, Ron
Hilderbrand, Don	Payne, Bob	Waltz, Robert
Hofer, Tom	Peterson, Christian	Wilson, Michael
Horton, Howard	Pettis, Ron	Wood, Bill
Hutchinson, Dan	Preston, Loren	Wright, Ron
Janus, Russ	Putnam, Ira	Wright, Wayne
Kelley, Alexander	Rheams, Bill	
Kendall, Fleming	Rhine, Bert	

At that first meeting after voting to continue as an organization and adopting the first constitution and bylaws with some changes from the draft document presented by Larry, the vote to elect officers was held. Those running for office were as follows:

**For President/Vice President**

Don Hilderbrand  
Bill Ringer  
Mike McDonald  
Bill Woods  
Bill Rheams  
Mark Hansen  
Alex Kelly  
Brian Novak

**For Member-at-Large**

Mike Law  
Mike McDonald  
Roger Gould

The pilot receiving the most votes was elected President with the runner up being named Vice President. The top three under Member-at-Large were named to serve one, two and three year terms based upon the vote count. Thus the first VHPA officers were Don Hilderbrand as

President, Bill Ringer as Vice President, Mike Law three year term as Member-at-Large, Mike McDonald as two year term Member-at-Large and Roger Gould as one year Member-at-Large. Larry Clark was asked to be the first President, but declined as he felt that he could better serve the new organization as the Executive Director and he would continue to be the focal point for processing incoming mail, printing and mailing of the newsletter and handling the financial affairs of the VHPA.

From that first meeting, various committees were formed. A membership committee was directed to try to find more pilots who could become members. A reunion committee, headed by Ron Wright was directed to arrange for the next reunion in Houston. Ron volunteered to head the committee, and since he and his committee members, Mike McDonald, Howard Horton, and several others in attendance at the first reunion all lived in Houston, that was selected as the site for our next reunion.

The Committees and their Chairmen were:

Arrangements	Ron Wright
Public Relations	Brian Novak
Data Base	Mike Law
Membership	Mark Hansen
Nominating	Bill Rheams

Dolph Todd volunteered to become the first newsletter editor but later had to decline due to his employer going out of business and Dolph moving across the country to find another job. So for the next few issues, Larry and Terrie continued to edit, print and mail the newsletter. Roger Gould became the newsletter editor in late 1984 and moved this important publication into a whole new dimension with letters from members, the "What Is It" photo and so many other features that make it a joy to read. The newsletter is one of the most important items of membership and is most anxiously awaited by the membership.

The original draft constitution and bylaws that Larry presented to the membership for approval included provisions for a category of membership called "Associate". This was for our former instructors and classmates who did not go to Vietnam and for the door gunners and crew chiefs to enable them to join, but not have full voting rights nor hold office, in the VHPA. This was voted down at the first business meeting and thus removed from the final VHPA documents. It again came up the following year in Houston and was again voted down. However we did encourage the formation of the crewmembers association and continue today to help them if we can, and may someday hold our reunions in the same city.

While the men conducted the first business meeting, the wives and girlfriends held an informal get together which was led by Terrie Clark. They found out that by talking to other wives, they had so much in common, being married to helicopter pilots. They were amazed to find out that the men were so much alike in their likes and dislikes, the way they lived and even in the women that they had married. Of course the U.S. Army only selected those individuals who were of a certain physical and mental standard for flight school. At each reunion it is amazing to see most of the pilots look like they could be brothers due to the physical characteristics and the "family resemblance" in the way we talk and act. Our wives were the first to spot this standard behavior in their husbands and have discussed the way we are at their own VHPA meetings at several reunions. This informal group of the ladies, later became known as the "Tag-alongs".

Immediately after the end of the business meeting, two members approached Larry Clark and wanted to pay their life membership dues of \$300.00. It was a race between Ron Wright and

**Rick Freeman to see who could produce a checkbook and present their payment first. Rick Freeman won and became the first dues paying member with the honor of holding membership number L0002 with Ron Wright, the runner up, becoming L0003. L0001 was given to Larry Clark in honor of his efforts in founding the VHPA and to compensate him for some of the expenses that he covered from his own pocket to get the VHPA off the ground.**

**Hughes Helicopters, now McDonnell Douglas, had recently moved to the Phoenix area, and they were building the new Apache AH-64 at their new plant. Jim Thompson, one of the VHPA members who worked at Hughes, was invited to bring along a slide and film show to present after dinner about the Apache. The film that was shown made all of the old Cobra pilots wish that they had a chance to fly one of these new machines. You could see that someone had learned something about how to build a gun ship from our experiences in Vietnam.**

**At this first dinner meeting of the VHPA, a continuing tradition was started that continues on today. A single place sitting would be made and left vacant, for those missing pilots who were lost in action and could not be there with their friends that night. The idea for this came from the U.S. Air Force "River Rats" which is a group of pilots who flew raids in North Vietnam. At their dinners they set an empty setting for the "missing man". Our special guest of honor at this first VHPA dinner was Pam Taylor, the widow of William Brad Duncan.**

**After the dinner and presentation by Hughes Helicopters, the group retired to the pool area to party. As luck would have it, there was a wedding party next door to our dinner, and they had almost a full keg of beer left over and asked if we would like to have the keg for our group. Little did they know that they were talking to a group of helicopter pilots. With the empty keg eventually floating in the hot tub around midnight, the party was in full swing and lasted well into the early hours of Sunday morning.**

**The hotel later said that our group had set a new record for the most people in the hot tub at one time. The hotel also had to drain and clean the hot tub the next morning and found many parts of various pieces of clothing or bathing suits in the bottom of both the hot tub and swimming pool. This party prompted the design for the "I survived the first reunion" T-shirt which only those in attendance were able to purchase. This party was the first in the series of "survivors parties" held after the last night of each reunion.**

**Some of the members who could still navigate the next morning were invited over to Larry and Terrie's house for a pool party. This was Larry's way of getting help to collate and staple the directories plus stuff and address the envelopes for the mailing to those who did not attend, but had ordered a directory, T-shirt or both.**

**The selection of an official VHPA logo was accomplished after the first reunion. There were several designs which were submitted by several of those who attended the first reunion. The choices were sent out to the Executive Council for a vote with the design of Dave Grieger being selected. This is the official VHPA logo that now appears on shirts, tie tack pins, patches, window decals, coffee mugs, flags, banners, billboards, magazine ads, even wrist watches.**

**Just after the first reunion, Larry contacted a local Phoenix lawyer to arrange for the VHPA to be granted non-profit status by the IRS. The necessary forms and reports were filed and the IRS granted the VHPA non-profit, war veterans, status. This status was necessary so that a special bulk rate for mailing could be obtained. Even though we never intended to hire any employees nor pay any of the volunteer members of the Executive Council, we still were required to obtain all of the necessary IRS approvals and numbers. The VHPA operates on a roll over accounting method, with any money remaining at the end of the year, rolled over to the next year to continue to support future operating expenses. Every effort was made to**

ensure that each member who paid his annual dues of \$20.00, received full value back each year. For example the printing and postage cost of the newsletters and directory, plus any tie tac pin, patch, certificate, window decal or whatever, would just about equaled the \$20.00 dues paid.

The first 4 Members who joined the VHPA, were Life Members. By April 1985, just 10 months after forming, there were 25 Life Members out of a total dues paid membership of 355. This was quite a vote of confidence in such a young organization. We were concerned that too many would buy Life Memberships and that we would not have enough annual income to operate with over future years. Thus it was agreed to early on that the Life Membership dues would be maintained in a separate account and that only the interest from that account would be used for the general operating fund.

A post office box was opened on June 18 but mail continued to arrive at Larry's home address for several more years as copies of old application forms were made and passed on to a friend. The original address still lives on in some parts of the world even today. Members would write that they just saw an article in a magazine about the VHPA and wanted to join. The article would be more than four years old!

In January 1985 a Bulk Rate Mail Permit was obtained to save postage cost and mail newsletters and future directories at a lower cost. Being a non-profit organization, allowed for a lower bulk rate cost. The first bulk rate mailing was the February 25, 1985 newsletter which consisted of 50.8 pounds of mail or 1049 individual pieces to all 50 states. Overseas and APO mail was still sent using normal first class postage.

To give you an idea of the volume of mail that was handled thru Larry and Terrie's living room and into the U.S. Postal system, here is an example. During the period of May to November 1985, 45 sacks of VHPA mail weighing 552 pounds and consisting of 18,385 individual pieces were mailed thru the Bulk Rate Permit account. Each mailing had to be sorted and bundled by zip code and state. As it came time to mail out such things as dues reminder post cards, a small party would be called at Mike McDonald's house with several local members invited to sit and paste on address labels to thousands of cards in between having a brew and telling a few war stories.

Where did all of these mail labels come from? Mike Law and his magic computer data base. At the first reunion, Mike made the statement that he worked for United Airlines in the data processing area and that he owned his own home computer! He was immediately volunteered to become our first records and data base chairman. By handling all of the data that was sent in by the members, Mike could also become involved in his first love, the history of the Vietnam helicopter pilot. For more than 10 years, Mike has been doing genealogy research on his own family and has published a newsletter which is sent to hundreds of his family members. This experience would prove to be most valuable to the VHPA. With his computer he could track the various members, flight school classes and units. He came up with the idea of enlarging the KIA data base by using the information from The Vietnam Memorial (The Wall) which he had visited in Washington. He also provided the unit and call sign cross reference that has become a standard listing in each membership directory. Mike and his wife Dianna have spent thousands of hours at computer key boards entering the data that was supplied by the members.

Mike and Dianna visited Larry and Terrie on July 4, 1984, just after the first reunion, to collect the member data that Larry had received to that point. To Larry and Terrie this was a very traumatic moment. Turning over all of their beloved files on each member. Almost like giving up your first born to a stranger who they had only met two weeks before. Mike could sense this feeling as he boarded the plane back to Denver, and made a point of making Larry and

Terrie feel comfortable with the fact that he would tend and care for each member file with the same concern that they had over the past years.

Soon Larry bit the bullet and got himself a personal computer so that he could process the mail that arrived each week before sending the application forms on to Mike Law. Larry would open the mail, remove any check for dues and deposit these into the VHPA bank account, issue a member number, log the name and address into his computer files and then send the application form on to Mike. If a pilot wrote asking for more information, then a complimentary copy of the last newsletter was mailed which included an application form. Each year, a post card was sent to each member to remind them to pay their annual dues, plus the annual membership directory was mailed only to active members.

For each new member, a copy of the latest newsletter was sent along with a copy of the latest membership directory until the annual supply was exhausted. In addition a VHPA patch or window decal was included for the first few years with a tie tack pin sent to all new members and renewals in 1985. Larry had a local teacher use calligraphy to letter each member certificate that was sent to all new members. For all Life Members, a special patch and golf shirt logo was developed by Dave Grieger.

All of this printed material, envelopes, merchandise and other supplies and files, was slowly taking over not only an extra bedroom at Larry's house, but at times, the entire house. During a major mailing of newsletters or directories it was almost impossible to walk through the living room and one could forget about eating at the dining room table, it was covered with boxes.

Don Hilderbrand, the first VHPA President resigned from office in late 1984, due to personal business pressures which prevented Don from having the large amount of time that the young VHPA required. Bill Ringer assumed the duties of VHPA President for the remainder of Don's term and then at the July 4th reunion in Houston he assumed his title of President for the next full one year term.

Due to the efforts of Larry Clark, space was obtained at the Helicopter Association International (HAI), formerly HAA, convention held in New Orleans in February 1985. Booth space was provided for free, with the only expense that of rental cost for a carpet and table to place in the booth. Dave Grieger drove in from his home in Georgia with his car loaded with VHPA T-shirts. During the three days of the HAI show, many shirts were sold, new members signed up and numerous war stories told around our booth. It turned out that several of the senior management of various helicopter manufacturers and suppliers were in fact former Vietnam Helicopter Pilots who found out about our organization because of the booth provided by the HAI. In fact, the leadership of the HAI contains several VHPA members.

There were numerous Gulf Coast helicopter pilots in attendance at the New Orleans HAI show and they were drawn to the VHPA booth. There was a lot of interest generated in our forthcoming reunion in Houston that was now slated for July 4th. Many of the pilots who joined in New Orleans and then later attended the reunion, stated that it was because of our appearance at this trade show. Being seen at the show gave the VHPA a certain credibility.

## **THE 1985 SECOND REUNION IN HOUSTON, TEXAS**

One of the main reasons to hold the reunion in Houston, was to draw from the large number of pilots who fly along the Gulf Coast in the offshore oil support business. Many new members joined and many new faces showed up at the reunion from this large group of helicopter

pilots. In years to follow, it became a normal occurrence that the local draw of the reunion will generate more new members and by moving the reunion each year to a different city, in a different part of the country, we would see many new members and also see some members for the first time who lived in the local area of the reunion.

The hotel site in Houston also attracted many new members since it was located across from Astro World, a major amusement park, and on a busy freeway. The hotel sign alone caught the eye of several pilots who were just driving by and stopped in to see what and who we were. The Astro World location allowed many members to bring along their families and make a full vacation out of the reunion weekend.

For the Houston reunion, the same old problem arose as the year before in Phoenix. Just prior to the reunion, only 39 had pre-registered and Mike McDonald was ready to pull his hair out trying to plan with the hotel for rooms, meals, etc. Mike had taken over the task of Reunion Chairman after Ron Wright moved to Florida due to a job change.

The lack of pre-registered members caused some problems with hotel rooms the first night, with some members having to take rooms some distance away because the group that was in the hotel ahead of the VHPA decided to stay over another day. It also rained and caused the outdoor Texas Bar-B-Q to be moved inside, but for guys who flew in the monsoons of Vietnam, this was all taken in stride.

Local TV and radio coverage was also a way that many new members found out about our group. As soon as the noon news or the 5 o'clock news would run an item about our reunion, the hotel phone would start to ring with pilots who wanted to know more. One of our members, Bob Beaudreault, is the anchorman for the evening news on Houston's KTRK channel 13. He wore his original solo cap and reported live from our reunion for his segment of the news on July 4th. In the background of his broadcast, we were having a race to see who could open a can of C-rations the fastest with a P-38 can opener. Bob did an excellent job of explaining this strange action to the TV viewers at home and had provided a short film clip that told our story to his TV audience.

The theme for the Houston reunion, was a trip back in time. The reunion committee pulled this off with great success in several ways. First, as a part of the pre-registration, they had to know your flight school class cap color. Upon check-in at the reunion, each member was issued the appropriate colored hat for his class. During the reunion, it was a sea of red, green, yellow, blue and many other colored baseball hats.

During the business meeting, the election of officers was held with the following members running for office:

**For Vice President      For Member-at-Large**

<b>Mike McDonald</b>	<b>Dave Owens</b>
<b>Greg Ross</b>	<b>Dave Grieger</b>
<b>Ron Wright</b>	<b>Gary Holmes</b>
<b>Paul Uster</b>	<b>Paul Uster</b>
<b>William Vanover</b>	<b>William Vanover</b>
<b>Bill Rheams</b>	<b>Bill Rheams</b>
<b>Joe Bonesio</b>	<b>Mike Baskin</b>
<b>Jay Elliott</b>	<b>Ken Fritz</b>
<b>Bruce McInnes</b>	

With Mike McDonald receiving the most votes as Vice President and Dave Grieger filling the Member-at-Large position of Roger Gould who had completed his one year term. Since Mike McDonald still had one year left to serve as Member-at-Large, the runner up for the Member-at-Large election, Dave Owens, was chosen to serve out the remaining year of Mike McDonald's term so that a full Executive Council would be seated for the next year.

The Committees and Chairmen for the upcoming year were:

Membership	Ron Wright and Joe Schreiber
Reunion	Jay Elliott
Public Relations	Chuck Neubert
Historical	Dan Hutchinson
Records/Data Base	Mike Law
Nominating	Bill Rheams

The newsletter editor continued to be Roger Gould.

The wives auxiliary was headed up by Kathy Uster. Kathy along with Wendy McDonald made a great effort to establish an auxiliary for the wives of our members. Several problems arose that far offset the benefits that would result from making this group a formal association. Thus it was decided to continue to meet on an informal basis at the annual VHPA reunions and the wives would continue to help with registration duties and other activities that would be of benefit to the VHPA.

In addition, Marty Thielman was given a special assignment to gather information about a group tour back to Vietnam. Marty in fact did make a return trip to Vietnam and wrote about his experiences in the VHPA Newsletter. Additional information about his trip and the details of how to go about a return are at VHPA headquarters, and perhaps some day we can hold a reunion in old Saigon.

A ladies fashion show was put on by Wendy McDonald and some of the other wives during the wives meeting. Coffee for the business meeting and wives fashion show was provided by the Mineral Wells Chamber of Commerce who attended the reunion in hopes of having us commit for a reunion at Ft. Wolters. We listened to their pitch, and decided to hold our 1988 reunion in Ft. Worth with a day trip to visit the old Fort and the city of Mineral Wells.

At the luncheon after the business meeting, a large hotel ballroom was transformed into a field kitchen serving line. Upon entry into the ballroom, the smell of canvas overwhelmed each hungry attendee. A GP medium tent was erected through which each person entered. There in the chow line, was large metal trash cans with immersion heaters, but alas we did not have the mess kits to dunk into the hot water. We were served a typical field meal, from Mermite cans, by people dressed in Army cook whites. We were then told to sit at these bare military looking tables and eat with plastic utensils while listening to Armed Forces Radio Network tapes which had been recorded many years before. Yes it accomplished the desired effect, it took us all back to a place years before. Here were men explaining to their children what all this was about. The field kitchen, complete with a Duce and a half and a Jeep with trailer which contained ice cold beer, was supplied by a local National Guard unit and was somehow driven across the hotel carpets and the tent and kitchen set up to the amazement of the entire hotel staff.

An outdoor static display of helicopters was provided by the Army who flew in a CH-47, OH-58, UH-1 and AH-1 with a TH-55 and OH-6 being provided by the Houston Police Air Wing. These were parked in an open area, between the hotel and Astro-World. This aircraft display

and both the arrival and departure, drew large crowds of onlookers and many of our members who shot hundreds of photos.

A bus tour to the nearby NASA facility was done on July 5<sup>th</sup> with part of the members and families touring NASA. The buses became locked into one of those Houston freeway traffic jams on the return. It was hot and the group was thirsty, which called for a beer stop at the closest convenience store to clean out the store beer cooler. This bus trip as to be only a preview of the famous bus #8 adventure at the 1988 reunion.

To continue the theme of a journey back to Vietnam, the evening dinner was our R&R in Hawaii. leis were placed around the neck of each person entering the banquet room. Paul Uster appointed himself in charge of "Lei-ing" each of the ladies as they entered. The Hawaiian style ham and vegetables along with the island style dresses and shirts put everyone in the R&R mood. The most memorable attire of the evening had to be Ken Bunn who was wearing a simulated grass skirt while accepting his award for the worst war story contest that was held during the reunion.

Bob Beaudreault, under the guidance of Mike McDonald, had prepared a terrific video about the Vietnam helicopter pilot and the VHPA. It used film footage from the ABC TV library along with recent video shot by Mike McDonald at Ft. Wolters as it appears today. With Bob's narration and the music of Billy Joel, it was shown after dinner on a wide screen projection system and the emotions and feelings that were present in the room, during and after the 20 minute showing, were something to behold. The video told our story, and gave a feeling of pride within each of us, that nothing had ever been able to accomplish before. Immediately everyone wanted a copy of the tape, and Bob has made copies available to all members. The tape has been shown at all gatherings of the VHPA, including chapter meetings. It continues to bring out a good feeling among all pilots who have viewed it and to those who have seen it before, it continues to generate a feeling of pride from within each and every time it is seen again.

The Houston Police Air Wing provided our security during the entire reunion. With many kegs of beer provided free by Budwiser, there was a need for some type of police security, and who better to look after a bunch of helicopter pilots, than a group of helicopter pilots. Several of our members are pilots for the Houston Police, and this made for some interesting flying routines over the hotel pool area even into the night. When the police helicopters would switch on their searchlights, many of those in the swimming pool area would lower certain parts of their bathing suits and turn their back sides toward the light thinking that the light in the sky was the moon. Some members and wives even performed this maneuver during daylight hours from the top of the hotel buildings for those who could not be there for the night time show.

The Houston Police Air Unit even prevented our members from trying to drive to a local store to purchase more beer during the survivors pool party. During the wee hours of the morning, the policemen drove our members to the convenience store so they could buy the beer. We owe a great deal of gratitude to these fine gentlemen from Houston and special thanks goes to Sergeant Robert E. Tessier.

Some of the wives, especially Wendy McDonald, Kathy Uster and Carolyn Wright, started something that continues today, that is one of those "you had to be there to appreciate what happened" events. In brief, when Ron and Carolyn moved to Florida it was said, in jest, that the only way Wendy and Kathy could afford to visit was for them to work their way to Florida. Carolyn said that she had an extra bedroom that they could use, and she could hire them out as "Madam Carolyn's Girls". Thus was born the tradition of "Madam Carolyn" with a gift given

each year to the girls and to the "Madam" with appropriate speeches as to the amount of income over the past year. The "Ladies" are dressed in very interesting costumes all during this skit. This is typical of several small side "happenings" at each reunion each year that get better every year. The trick is to find them, know what hotel room and what time the actors will appear, and one should be prepared for almost anything.

Another traditional appearance that should be noted here, is the appearance of the person with the funny nose. This helicopter pilot is also known to perform various acts which include the famous "one armed fiddler", "how to pull up your socks" and other routines that must be seen to be believed. Again one must be alert to find out where and when these "shows" will occur.

Shortly after the reunion Joe Schrieber and his crew obtained a copy of the FAA list of all active commercial rated helicopter pilots in first the eastern half of the USA and later the western half of the USA. These two special mail outs of the famous blue flyer, to over 20,000 pilots resulted in a blue wave of paperwork each time Larry Clark opened the VHPA mail box in Phoenix. The time put in by Joe Schrieber and the other members of his committee to print the flyers and stick on all of those labels, was well worth the effort. Once the blue flyers were ready, Joe sent them to Phoenix for mailing through the Bulk Rate Permit and it was only a few days before new members began to join and within a week, the cost of the mail out had been more than paid for with new member dues.

This flood of new members also loaded down the record keeping of the Data Base Chairman, Mike Law, and his fingers were kept busy loading all of this new information into his computer. We were starting to get a better picture of the total number of units, flight school classes and call signs that were used in RVN. All of this activity started Mike and Larry to thinking about how they were going to handle the VHPA workload as the organization continued to grow. The search for help began, but will be covered later under the discussion about AAM.

At the Houston business meeting, a discussion was held as to where future reunions should be held. One idea was to hold them at different times of the year, because many of the pilots who are working today are the busiest during the summer months and are unable to attend a summer reunion. Thus the idea for a winter gathering was generated. As stated earlier, we had a booth at the 1985 HAI convention, so we again approached the HAI to see if we could obtain booth space, but we were unsuccessful. However, the VHPA did arrange to host a hospitality room with cash bars and hors d'oeuvres. A copy of our VHPA video tape was running on a TV set and always had a large crowd around watching. Again there were new members signed up on the spot and many old friends seen for the first time in many years.

These mid winter gatherings will continue and are social events, with the business meetings and elections being held only at the summer VHPA reunions.

Before the next reunion in Washington, D.C. on July 4, 1986, Bill Ringer would be transferred by Hughes (MDH) to Singapore and Mike McDonald, the Vice President, would assume his duties and direct the reunion efforts for our third reunion.

### **THE 1986 THIRD REUNION IN WASHINGTON, D.C.**

A ceremony was held early on Sunday morning at "The Wall" with about one hundred members in attendance. Mike McDonald made a short speech about the significance of the wall and our being there on this special occasion. Then Mike and Larry Clark carried a floral arrangement, consisting of the VHPA logo with flowers surrounding the emblem, down the

walk to the center of "The Wall" with local TV and many member cameras recording the moment. With the VHPA floral arrangement placed in the center of the V, both Mike and Larry stepped back and saluted. The members were then free to visit the wall and locate the names of their class mates and friends who did not return. Within a few minutes, some of our members who fly for the U.S. Park Service conducted a fly over of The Wall with three helicopters. The Wall is located inside a restricted airspace area, and only certain military or Park Service aircraft can operate in this airspace. This was a special honor to the VHPA and our fallen comrades who live in our memories with their names engraved in the dark stone.

At the Washington, DC reunion, 44 new members were signed up. These were the result of the word getting out that we were in town and that we were having our reunion.

The Membership Committee had proclaimed as their slogan "2000 in 86" which means that they wanted to obtain 2000 members by the time of the 1986 reunion. In fact member number 2000, James Goldthorpe, was in attendance and received a special hat and shirt that proclaimed him "Member Number 2000".

At the annual business meeting, the election for officers had the following running for the two open positions:

**For Vice President      For Member-at-Large**

<b>Dave Owens</b>	<b>Greg Ross</b>
<b>Paul Uster</b>	<b>John Chesnut</b>
<b>Joe Schreiber</b>	<b>Rand L. Clark</b>

**Dave Owens**  
**Richard Freeman**  
**Michael Clark**  
**John Harris**  
**Ben Prieb**

Dave Owens won the Vice President position and Greg Ross was elected to serve as Member-at-Large.

The various committees and their chairmen were as follows:

<b>Membership</b>	<b>Ron Wright and Joe Schreiber</b>
<b>Reunion</b>	<b>Jay Elliott, later to be replaced by Paul Uster.</b>
<b>Historical</b>	<b>Dan Hutchinson</b>
<b>Records/Data Base</b>	<b>Mike Law</b>
<b>Logo Committee</b>	<b>Bob Sharp</b>
<b>Public Relations</b>	<b>Steve Michaud</b>

Roger Gould continues as the newsletter editor.

The new Logo Committee was named at the request of Mike Law who requested that they look into the cost impact if the VHPA were to change our logo, and further to start the process of finding a new logo that would be voted on by the Executive Council and the members at next year's business meeting.

At the reunion luncheon, the special guest speaker was Les Norris, a retired Sikorsky test pilot who was the first helicopter pilot to perform an autorotation, the first to fly above 5000 feet and the first to fly cross country when he delivered the first R-4 to the U.S. Army at

Wright-Patterson Field in Ohio. After lunch he autographed copies of his book and continued to talk and tell his war stories. He later said that he felt like a father to all of these helicopter pilots who went to war and really proved what the helicopter could do to not only fight, but also save lives.

At the VHPA dinner, the VHPA flag and the American Flag were carried into the room and presented by The Presidential Color Guard which is made up of men from all of the services. The after dinner speaker was Retired General Westmoreland. His speech provided some insight into how the Vietnam War compared to past wars and a comparison of the soldier in Southeast Asia to those of World War II. He explained how the helicopter made it possible to conduct the war, and that the normal means of movement over land with trucks would have been nearly impossible. He himself was a rated helicopter pilot and he related well with his audience of almost 500 pilots and wives.

After the dinner, at the "survivor's party", a man was seen on his room balcony making rude comments about helicopter pilots in general. His room was located by a raiding party, but he would not open the door, so the helicopter pilots did the next best thing, they and all of their friends drank all night and charged everything to this gentleman's room number. Nothing was ever said the next morning as he paid his large bar tab and checked out of the hotel under the cover of daylight while the well oiled pilots slept in the deck chairs around the pool.

During 1986, the Executive Council started efforts to create a full time staff and a permanent office site for the VHPA. The VHPA headquarters was quickly out growing the extra bedroom at Larry Clark's house. As the Executive Director was putting plans together and evaluating the costs involved in a temporary or permanent staff, Mr. John Frank joined the VHPA and listed his present occupation as a manager of a company that managed associations. It was not long until phone calls and letters started to flow and the relationship with AAM began.

Aviation Association Management or AAM is the small company that John Frank operates that is the headquarters for the Cessna Pilots Assoc. and the Flying Farmers Assoc. and several other aviation related groups. In this way, the VHPA can share with the other groups the office staff and even the building costs so that the cost to our members is much less than if we had our own dedicated employees.

Mike Law, Mike McDonald, Roger Gould and Larry Clark all met with AAM and negotiated the first agreement in Wichita on January 31, 1987. A transfer of records, files and supplies to Wichita occurred on February 9th and AAM was up and running. The VHPA Phoenix checking account was closed on February 20 with all funds transferred to the new account in Wichita. It was a smooth transition with the next issue of the newsletter being printed and mailed from Wichita and the Long Beach 1987 reunion being processed and recorded by the AAM staff. A much improved membership service is provided by AAM with a dedicated VHPA telephone line for members to call and with credit card charge available for everything from dues to VHPA products.

Please note: The following is an outline that needs to be completed. If you can contribute to this history, please contact the [webmaster](#):

## THE 1987 FOURTH REUNION IN LONG BEACH, CA

topics.....

Long Beach.....Queen Mary, Spruce Goose....

**Nancy Oster ????? AAM as our First Sgt.**

**Pat Paulsen after dinner entertainment**

**Fire Works**

**static display in parking lot**

**dance???**

**lunch speaker Blue Ghost Story...**

**Larry Clark stepping down as Ex. Dir. Mike Law new Ex. Dir.**

**Jay Elliott was the winner of the Vice President election and**

**Paul Uster was elected to be a Member-at-Large. Those serving on the various committees were:**

<b>Membership</b>	<b>Joe Schreiber</b>
<b>Public Relations</b>	<b>Mike McDonald</b>
<b>Historical</b>	<b>Dan Hutchinson</b>
<b>Records/Data Base</b>	<b>Paul Erway</b>
<b>KIA/MIA Data Base</b>	<b>Gary Roush</b>

**Roger Gould continues another year as the newsletter editor.**

**???? VHPA Mid Winter gathering at HAI in Anaheim ???????**

**SAFT America sponsorship of the Winter Gathering at the 1988**

**HAI Convention. Walt Pretzman SAFT Marketing Manager. Special thanks to Dave Owens for setting up this gathering and obtaining the SAFT sponsorship.**

**Our video tape story about helicopter pilots in Vietnam was always running and drew a crowd for each showing. Pilots would leave, go to another hospitality suite, grab a friend and bring them back to see the tape. The turnout was more than double that of the previous VHPA gathering in Anaheim two years before.**

## **THE 1988 FIFTH REUNION IN FORT WORTH, TEXAS**

**topics.....**

**Ft. Worth hotel, party 50's dance, etc.**

**Wolters, loading the rock**

**city of Mineral Wells program**

**lunch, beer by Coors**

**July 3, 1988 proclaimed "Larry Clark Day" in Texas**

**visit to stage field**

**people thrown in pool at the Holiday Inn**

**dinner speaker Carter Harmam flew the first helicopter rescue**

**in 1942 in Burma with a Sikorsky helicopter.**

**election of vp (Roger Gould) and mem at large(Gary Slaughter)**

**member 3000 xx name ? x**

**rock painted while on truck enroute.**

**the business meeting, changes in by-laws.**

**THE 1989 SIXTH REUNION IN CHICAGO, IL**

**THE 1990 SEVENTH REUNION IN PENSACOLA, FL**