

Veteran Marine helicopter pilot Capt John Boden, seated in cockpit, went to England in July 2019 to visit the history enthusiasts who have been restoring this Huey for their Vietnam living history display. He gave the group his stamp of approval for authenticity. From the left: Stuart Beene, Paul Turner, Martin Luscombe, Boden and Damon Hatcher.



COURTESY OF STUART BEENEY

Putting History Back Together

Telling the Story of a Marine Helicopter Squadron Through a Rebuilt Huey

By Nancy S. Lichtman

After his second tour in Vietnam, Sergeant Rick Ault returned to the United States on a flight that landed in San Francisco. The soldiers and Marines on board the airplane were warned to avoid the protesting civilians assembled in the airport. That was easier said than done, according to Ault; the protesters were determined to deliver their “make love not war” message by hurling insults and spitting on Ault and his fellow servicemembers as they made their way through the terminal.

Recalling that day still makes him shake his head in bewilderment and anger 55 years later.

“The worst time we had in Vietnam doesn’t compare to walking into San

Francisco airport,” said Ault, a crew chief who flew 580 combat missions with Marine Observation Squadron (VMO) 6 during two separate tours in Vietnam.

Like many other Vietnam War veterans, Ault rarely spoke about his Marine Corps service in Vietnam after he came home. It’s not that he regretted his service—on the contrary, he was proud of the men who served alongside of him and what they had accomplished together. Because of the reception he had received in San Francisco and the anti-war mood in the country, Ault decided he would keep it all to himself and get on with his life.

Now, decades later, Ault is no longer reluctant to talk about his time in country as a crew chief for the Bell UH-1E Iroquois, more commonly known as

the “Huey.” But it wasn’t his family and friends or even his fellow veterans who got him to open up. It was a group of living history enthusiasts based in southern England who got Ault talking. The amateur historians were in the process of restoring a Huey and they had some questions about the helicopter. Ault and some of the other veterans of VMO-6 connected with them to tell them as much as possible about the helicopter and what it was like to serve in Vietnam. What began as a series of technical questions soon became a friendship. And before long, a group of British civilians became the unofficial legacy keepers of VMO-6 and the Marines who served in the squadron—even flying to the United States recently to be special guests at a squadron reunion.

What began as a series of technical questions soon became a friendship. And before long, a group of British civilians became the unofficial legacy keepers of VMO-6 and the Marines who served in the squadron.

MAG-36 UK

Stuart Beene, Damon Hatcher and Martin Luscombe along with brothers Andrew and Peter Seal are a group of friends in Southern England who share a passion for military history. As part of a group called Rolling Thunder, The Vietnam Experience, they put together a Marine Corps living history diorama that represents Hue City during the Vietnam War. They display their diorama at military history shows in England. Each year, for several years running, they would change up the diorama they created, said Stuart Beene, one of the display builders. And then in 2017, Beene had an idea for what would become the jewel in his group’s restoration crown. Beene saw a used Huey helicopter for sale and figured, if he and his mates all pooled their resources, it should be no problem to buy and restore it. Sure, why not?

www.mca-marines.org/magazines/leatherneck/

Bird 18 is tied down at Polar Helicopters in Manston, Kent, England. (Photo by Stuart Beene)



RODOLFO GONZALEZ

Rick Ault served two tours in Vietnam. The amateur military historians from “MAG-36 UK” dubbed their restored Huey “Bird 18” in honor of Ault, who was a crew chief for Bird 18 while serving with VMO-6.

“Basically, we like challenge,” Beene said during a video call in late spring, 2021. “A challenge” is certainly one word to describe aircraft restoration. They bought the aircraft and promptly got to work.

Using their contacts in Vietnam War Facebook groups, the British history enthusiasts located several veterans of Marine Observation Squadron-6,

including Ault, and with their help, they were able to begin to work out what needed to be done to make their helicopter resemble a Marine Corps UH-1E Huey. Because Ault and several others from VMO-6, including M.C. “Red” Trivette Jr. and Peter Greene, were so generous with their time answering questions about the Huey and sharing photos from their time in country, the



M.C. "Red" Trivette Jr., pictured here at a squadron reunion in Florida, in October 2023, was among the veterans of VMO-6 who answered questions about the squadron and the Huey. His input helped make the restoration more authentic.

RODOLFO GONZALEZ

With the VMO-6 veterans on board and the identity of Bird 18 decided, the research began to find out how to make the Huey look authentic to the time period. They also started to learn about this group of Marines and what it was like during their service in Vietnam.

by the crew chief and the door gunner, the Huey crews were often called upon to support infantry Marines by delivering fire on enemy positions. "Most 19-year-olds don't even have their own car," said Ault. "I had my own helicopter and a bunch of bullets." The Huey crews were also tasked with insertion and extraction of special operations teams.

"I never turned down any opportunity to fly," said Ault, adding that those missions were among his favorite. "Everything puts you a little bit closer to the razor's edge and the razor's edge was where we were most comfortable."

Attention to Detail

Maintaining a Marine Corps helicopter is no easy task. It takes months of school followed by even more on-the-job training.

Restoring a Bell UH-1 Iroquois to represent a bird from a Vietnam-era Marine Corps squadron despite having no formal aviation maintenance training

A Historical Perspective

Decommissioned Jan. 1, 1977, VMO-6, can trace its roots back to the early days of Marine Corps aviation. The squadron arrived in Vietnam in 1965. Using the call sign "Klondike," the aircrews flew as gunship escorts for larger transport helicopters. The pilots and crews also maintained 24-hour medical evacuation alert, often serving as the lifeline for wounded soldiers and Marines on the ground.

Armed with M60 machine guns, used



The Bird 18 crew used old photos as their guide and created a TK-2 Weapons platform for the Huey. The M60 machine guns are bespoke replicas created for the project. Several original rocket pods were sourced and then deactivated for use on the helicopter. (Photo courtesy of Stuart Beene)



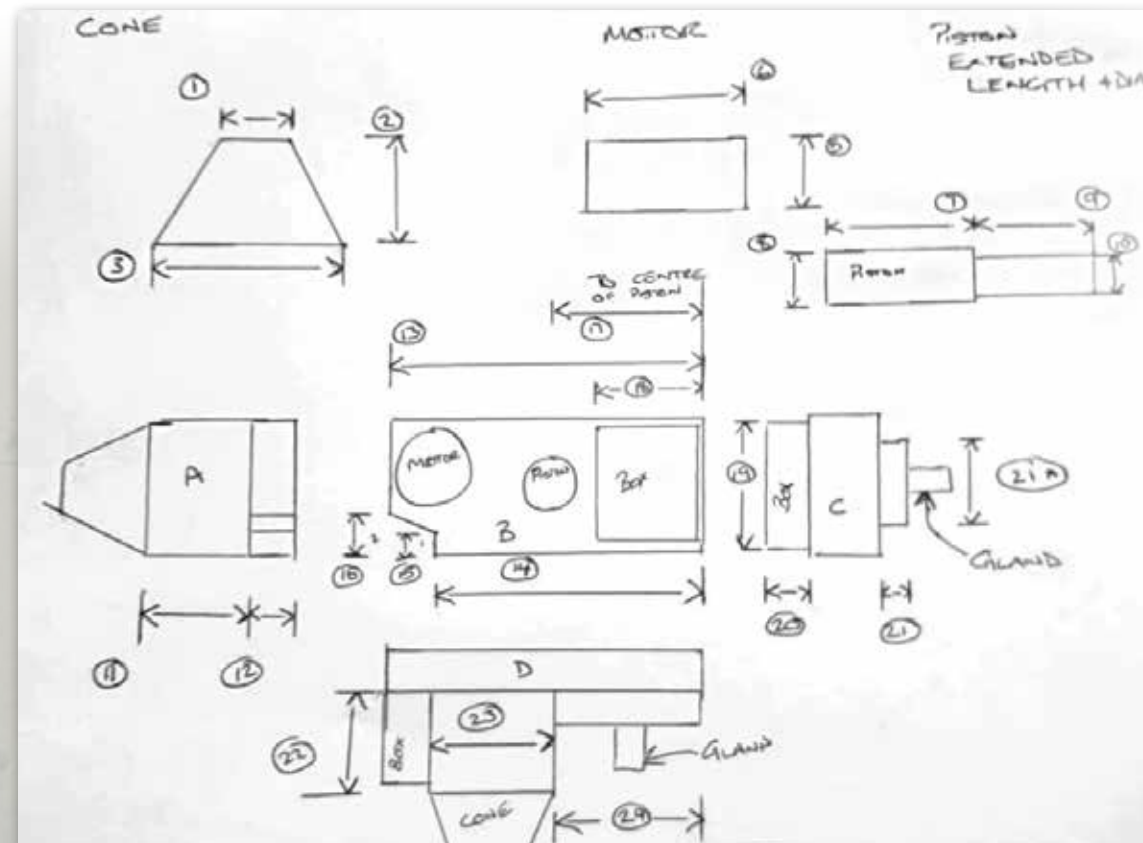
COURTESY OF STUART BEENEY

Above: Several of the VMO-6 Marines said the winch looked exactly like the real thing. The two cable guides on the arm are from gym equipment.



MARTIN LUSCOMBE

Below: To create the hoist for the Huey, Bird 18 team member Martin Luscombe turned to old photographs to approximate how to build it. He said it was "unnerving" to cut into the helicopter since there was no room for error. He used an old innertube, cut it to shape and glued it in place.



MARTIN LUSCOMBE

Before getting started with fabrication of the hoist, Martin Luscombe created a set of plans based on photographs. He built it all out of cardboard first to practice.

VMO-6 at Quang Tri, in about February 1969. The CH-46s from HMM-262 are visible in the background. In the foreground, the Marston matting ramp is where Hueys were staged before going into the hangar for maintenance. The crane, center, was used during rotor head and engine removal.



MGYSGT TOM CONSTANTINE, USMC(R)



USMC

VMO-6 pilot Capt Stephen W. Pless, far right, was the recipient of the Medal of Honor for a harrowing rescue mission on Aug. 19, 1967, which saved the lives of three soldiers who were under attack by the enemy. Pless' crewmembers, GySgt Leroy Poulson, left; LCpl John Phelps, second from left; and copilot Capt Rupert Fairfield, second from right, were each awarded the Navy Cross.

member of the MAG-36 UK group built by hand using basic power tools.

"I'll give anything a go," said Luscombe, who said he fell into living history presentations almost by accident. He went to help a friend drive a jeep home from a living history event, but when he got there, he realized that the vehicle didn't have doors, so he bought a military jacket on site to wear and keep himself warm.

He ended up enjoying himself and "next thing I knew I was buying a Huey," said Luscombe, who has worked to create parts that look like the original, often using only old photographs as his guide. "Stuart will give me a job and I'll do it," said Luscombe.

John Boden was among the squadron veterans who connected with the Bird 18 project online and often provided

seems highly improbable. Yet the MAG-36 UK crew have managed to make it look easy. And there's no cutting corners for them; they are sticklers for authenticity.

"For us, detail is key. It's got to be right," said Beeney, "every detail counts."

They have spent hours studying photos to learn everything they can about how the squadron's Hueys looked during the 1960s in Vietnam.

"I'm very, very proud of what they've done ... they've put so much time and effort into it," said retired Master Gunnery Sergeant Tom Constantine, who was a door gunner with VMO-6 in Vietnam in 1968. Constantine, an avid photographer during his tour in Vietnam, couldn't have imagined that some of his images would help guide a complicated restoration project half a century later. Constantine said he was amazed at how many parts have been made by the MAG-36 UK crew.

Sometimes parts for the helicopter can't be sourced, so the restoration crew fabricates replacement parts using whatever material is available.

Often the fabricated parts look so good that even the Marines who flew and worked on the Huey cannot tell the difference. One such part was the hoist for Bird 18, which Martin Luscombe, a



COURTESY OF STUART BEENEY

Boden spent several days at the show where he was given VIP treatment not only by the Bird 18 crew, but by show attendees who seemed impressed that a U.S. Marine who was Vietnam War veteran was in their midst.

feedback and photographs to assist with the restoration project. In July 2019, his curiosity got the better of him so he went to England to have a look at the helicopter for himself. He timed his visit to coincide with the War and Peace military history show which meant he had the opportunity to see the Rolling Thunder group and Bird 18 on display. "I was flabbergasted," Boden said. "In fact, seeing the War and Peace Show was overwhelming, the size of it, the people and the time and effort expended."

Boden spent several days at the show where he was given VIP treatment not only by the Bird 18 crew, but by show attendees who seemed impressed that a U.S. Marine who was a Vietnam War veteran was in their midst. Boden fielded questions all day from those who stopped by to look at the Huey, amazed at all the interest in his firsthand experience in combat. "They treated me like I walked on water," Boden said. "It was embarrassing." It was an interesting juxtaposition for Boden to have so many British citizens pay respect to his Vietnam veteran

Visitors to the We Will Meet Again military show in England in September 2021 had the opportunity to learn about the U.S. Marine Corps and the Vietnam War from the MAG-36 UK display.

Bird 18 team member Martin Luscombe sets up the display at the War and Peace military show in England during the summer of 2019.



COURTESY OF STUART BEENEY

status after the unpleasant reception he had received from his own countrymen after his return from the war. He was also pleasantly surprised by how quickly he connected with Beeney and the rest of the Bird 18 restoration team, remarking that it was reminiscent of his Marine Corps days. "I was instantly part of the group ... [we were all] giving each other a ration of crap, having a beer," he said. "I was like part of the family right from the get-go."

The Reunion

Marines who serve together form something akin to a tight-knit family—particularly those who have faced deadly circumstances together. And it doesn't matter how much time has passed, when veterans gather for reunions, the years melt away and it's just like the old days. The members of VMO-6 are no exception. "When I look at these guys, I see them as they were when they were 25, not as they are now," said Ault at the squadron's



NANCY S. LICHTMAN



Above: Rick Ault, left, a crew chief with VMO-6, and Stuart Beene, of the Bird 18 team, were finally able to meet in person at the squadron reunion in Pensacola Beach, Fla., October 2023. (Photo by Rodolfo Gonzalez)

Left: After the VMO-6 reunion in Florida, the Bird 18 team traveled to northern Virginia where they visited the National Museum of the Marine Corps and placed a wreath on the VMO-6 memorial in Semper Fidelis Park.

most recent reunion in Pensacola Beach, Fla. “I haven’t seen [some of] them in 50 some odd years and yet your mind still has this vision of a person who, when you first met, was 19, 20 years old.”

Through the restoration of an old Huey, a group of British military history enthusiasts have been brought into that family.

Having spent years connecting with VMO-6 Marines online, Stuart Beene, Damon Hatcher, Martin Luscombe, Andrew Seal and Peter Seal came to the U.S. in late October to attend a VMO-6 reunion in Florida. They spent several

days participating in all the planned activities along with the members of the squadron and their families. And much to their surprise, the squadron members embraced them as their own.

“It was an absolute honor and privilege to be invited over to the reunion and to spend quality time with these amazing people,” said Peter Seal of the Bird 18 team. “It’s something I shall never forget, and I shall cherish for a very long time.”

“I mean, when they refer to you as ‘brother,’ you’re saying ‘hang on a minute, I’m a Brit, never served, but

you’re calling me brother?’ and then you’re given a VMO-6 stein and it says ‘Honorary Member’ on it ... hang on a minute, is this real?” Beene said. “This is their moment, it’s not ours, it’s their moment ... but we’re being included.”

At the reunion, the MAG-36 UK team took every opportunity to learn everything they could about the Huey to continue to make Bird 18 as authentic as possible. Throughout the week, they asked the Marines as many questions as they could about things they had been unable to find out through their research.

Right: During the VMO-6 squadron reunion in October, the veterans placed a wreath at the “Wall South” at Veterans Memorial Park in Pensacola, Fla. (Photo by Rodolfo Gonzalez)

“I mean, when they refer to you as ‘brother,’ you’re saying ‘hang on a minute, I’m a Brit, never served, but you’re calling me brother?’ and then you’re given a VMO-6 stein and it says ‘Honorary Member’ on it ... hang on a minute, is this real?” –Stuart Beene

They covered a range of things, from the most technical “where was the pitot tube placed” type of questions to the broader issues about what it was like to fly the missions in Vietnam.

In addition to numerous technical questions about the helicopter, the Bird 18 crew was equally interested in hearing personal accounts from the Marines they met. “The stories we can get this week from these guys help us to tell the story,” said Damon Hatcher, adding that storytelling is at the heart of what they are trying to accomplish with their living history presentations.

While in Pensacola the reunion attendees visited the grave of VMO-6 pilot and Medal of Honor recipient Major Stephen W. Pless, who died in a motorcycle accident shortly after his return home from Vietnam. The reunion also included a memorial ceremony for those VMO-6 Marines who were killed in action, including Corporal Rodolfo “Rudy” Gonzalez, who was killed in 1966, just a few days before he was scheduled to return home. Gonzalez’ nephews attended the Pensacola reunion in hopes of connecting with Marines who knew their uncle. “The love the [squadron] has for each other has validated and confirmed the commitment Uncle Rudy had for country and his fellow Marines,”

Right: Cpl Rodolfo “Rudy” Gonzalez was assigned to VMO-6. He was killed in action just a few days before he was scheduled to leave Vietnam. Cpl Gonzalez was born in Mexico and immigrated to Texas; his nephews are petitioning to have their uncle posthumously awarded U.S. citizenship.



RODOLFO GONZALEZ

Above: Jerry Gonzalez, left, and Rodolfo Gonzalez, both of whom are professional photojournalists, are the nephews of Cpl Rudy Gonzalez was killed in action while serving with VMO-6 in Vietnam. They attended the squadron reunion in Florida to to record interviews with the Marines and Bird 18 team and to learn more about their uncle’s Marine Corps service.



COURTESY OF JERRY GONZALEZ



RODOLFO GONZALEZ

Members of VMO-6 gathered for a group photo during their reunion in Pensacola Beach, Fla., in late October 2023.



RODOLFO GONZALEZ

MAG-36 UK, left to right: Peter Seal, Andrew Seal, Stuart Beeny, Damon Hatcher and Martin Luscombe, at Veterans Memorial Park in Pensacola, Fla., October 2023.

said Gerardo “Jerry” Gonzalez. “We ... know that his ultimate sacrifice has not and will not ever be forgotten.”

Paying tribute to those who didn’t come home is another key aspect of the Bird 18 display, said Beeny, adding that he sees the helicopter as a tangible memorial to VMO-6 Marines who were KIA in Vietnam.

“So They Don’t Get Forgotten”

When MAG-36 UK sets up their display at a military history show, the bedrock of their motivation is to teach people about military history. That’s why authenticity and accuracy are so important to them. Many people only know about the Vietnam War through what they’ve seen in the movies and on TV. That’s not always an accurate reflection of how things were.

By giving visitors to the Bird 18 display an opportunity to not only view the helicopter, but to sit in the aircraft and learn about the men who flew missions in the Huey, the Vietnam War is being taught to a new generation of people. “It’s about keeping [the] story alive,” Andy Seal said.

People are drawn to the helicopter when it is on display around England and when they take a closer look at the Huey, that’s the opportunity for the Bird 18 crew to educate people and tell them not just about the aircraft, but about the men who flew and maintained them.

“Telling the story to others ... and sharing that knowledge to the wider public,” is what this project is about, Andy Seal said.

The Bird 18 group take great pride in giving visitors to the display an understanding of what it was like to be part of a Huey crew in Vietnam—not just with information from books, but through the stories they’ve heard firsthand from the Marines who were there.

By giving visitors to the Bird 18 display an opportunity to not only view the helicopter, but to sit in the aircraft and learn about the men who flew missions in the Huey, the Vietnam War is being taught to a new generation of people.

“The fact that we have become heavily involved with continuing the legacy of VMO-6 is an amazing achievement, I cannot think of any other group of civilians who have been allowed to do this,” said Peter Seal.

The Huey was a great helicopter, said Boden, who flew 750 missions during his tours in Vietnam, but it was the Marine air crews and aircraft maintainers who

turned the Huey into the incredible tool it was. “One without the other would never work,” Boden said. And through their interactions with the VMO-6 Marines, the British reenactors developed a keen understanding of that. “In fact, Bird 18 itself was a perfect example of [how] the machine and the men working together were what made it work,” Boden said.

“The helicopter is a symbol for the squadron’s history,” said Boden. “They started rebuilding a helicopter ... they are now the keepers of the history.”

Through their dedication to educating the public about the history of Marines in Vietnam, the history presenters of MAG-36 UK have caught the spirit of Semper Fidelis, which is so deeply ingrained in every Marine. They will carry it forward for every member of VMO-6, keeping their stories alive.

Author’s note: Special thanks to John Boden, Col Ed Kufeldt, USMC (Ret), Rodolfo Gonzalez and Jerry Gonzalez. For more about Bird 18, visit: www.usmc-huey.co.uk.

Author’s bio: Nancy Lichtman is the Executive Editor of Leatherneck. She is a member of the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association, the Experimental Aircraft Association and the Society for Professional Obituary Writers. She is the 2023 winner of the General Roy S. Geiger Award for Marine aviation writing. 🇺🇸