

Hooch-mates Reunion

By George Van Riper

One of my roommates in Vietnam sent me the picture (on opposing page) about two years ago. He asked, "George, what are we doing in this picture?" I wrote back, "Mike we are standing in the Red Rotor Lounge in the back of our hooch. We all have a glass of cognac in hand, or nearby. We all have a cigar in our hand, in our mouth, or nearby. The date was 3 December 1969. We are celebrating the birth of my son Geoffrey Van Riper." Our sixth roommate CPT Ned Beatty took the picture. Ned died five years ago due to complications from exposure to Agent Orange.

Miraculously, from left to right looking at the picture. 1LT Mike Sells, CPT Walt Dickinson, CPT Mike Southerland, CPT George Van Riper, and CPT Marc Wolff are all still living and have reasonable mobility for a group of 76 (Wolff) - 80 (Van Riper) year olds.

The first four in the lineup have been in contact with each other for the last thirty years or so thanks to the internet and the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association's roster of thousands of Vietnam pilots. The last member in the picture, Marc Wolff, popped up less than a year ago living in London, England. After a series of video teleconferences, we realized that none of us was getting any younger and if we wanted to join back together, we better do it soon. One man is unable to travel so the other four decided we would come to him in Spokane, Washington on 19 June 2023-two from Texas, one from Oregon, and one from England. The main goal of this reunion was to recreate the original photo of 3 December 1969.

The complication of who would take the

picture was resolved when my son Geoffrey, now age 53 and the reason for the 3 December 69 celebration, volunteered to travel with me and take the new photo of the same group standing in the same order as the original photo. You can see that this worked out very well. We found that we are still a "Band of Brothers". We flew to bad places, did dangerous things, scared the hell out of our crew, our passengers, and ourselves, and laughed about it in the club at night. I am proud to be one of them!

We had a wonderful four days in Spokane staying in a large B&B Walt Dickinson rented for us. It only took a few minutes together and fifty-three years slipped away. Lots of memories of our lives on Ky Ha Heliport, Chu Lai, RVN, a hundred war stories resurfaced. They all began with "hey, do you guys remember..." followed by fits of laughter. Yes, we all remembered!

We were hosted by the CG of Fairchild Air Force Base and given an "in the hangar" review of the much improved, twin-engine UH-1 the Air Force is still flying. We got to climb in (now with some difficulty) and marvel somewhat at the cockpit and gauge displays (GPS and FLIR) that were unfamiliar to us Old Guys. The Air Force officers, and enlisted personnel were gracious hosts. This was followed by a demonstration of Air Force Search-and-Rescue personnel parachuting from the updated UH-1. Just watching we could tell that the 'new Huey' was much stronger than the ones we flew fifty some years earlier. A real testament to Bell's ageless utility helicopter to still be serving today.