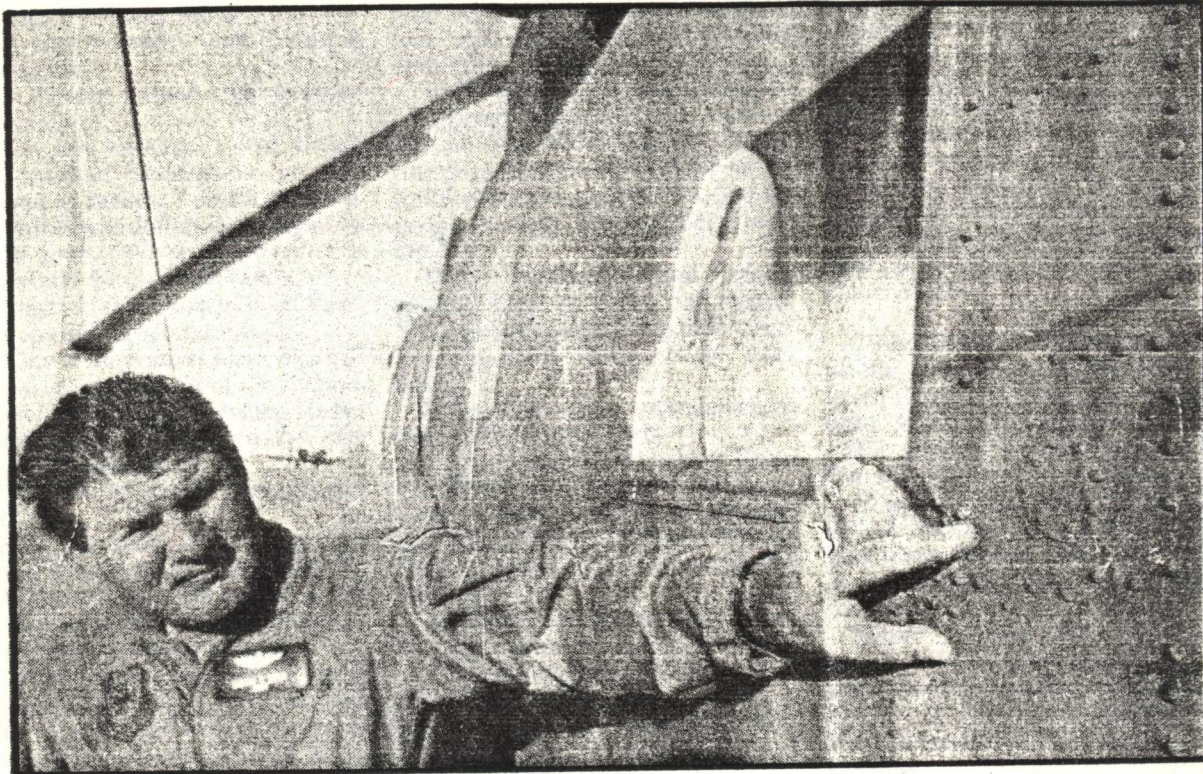


Hit by 107 bullets



GARY GAYNOR/Tucson Citizen

First Lt. Timothy Smith shows one of the patches covering a bullet hole in "Black Maria."

Bullet-battered Vietnam 'vet' still ready for action at D-M

By **PAUL L. ALLEN**
Citizen Staff Writer

"Black Maria" has had a charmed life.

How many other military vets — human or mechanical — could have survived 107 bullet holes and still be on active duty?

"Black Maria" (pronounced muh-RYE-uh) is a CH-3E "Jolly Green Giant" helicopter assigned to the 71st Special Operations Squadron, an Air Force Reserve

unit based at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base.

The airship, identified in official documents by its tail number, 676, was built by Sikorsky Aircraft in 1963.

Two years later it was hauling U.S. troops in Southeast Asia after the August 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident brought this country into the Vietnam conflict.

It and a sister ship — both painted flat black — were as-

signed to the 20th Helicopter Squadron under the 14th Air Commando Wing, according to Lt. Col. Lester E. "Ed" Smith, who flew "Black Maria" and other helicopters in the unit.

Smith said he doesn't know the source of the name "Black Maria," but it may have had something to do with the paint scheme.

Smith, 46, who arrived in

VIETNAM, continued/2A

CH-3E

63-9676

prior to the
AF Museum.

I worked on
this bird
with the 302nd
SOS

Vietnam 'vet' ready for duty

Continued from 1A

Southeast Asia late in 1966 and served there through October 1967, now is an Air Force Reserve officer at Gunter Air Force Base, Ala.

Though he flew "ol' 676" regularly, he was not at the controls when any of the bullets punctured its skin.

"I was one of the extremely fortunate ones," Smith said. "I got shot at, but I was never in an aircraft that actually took a round through it."

He barely missed that dubious distinction.

"On one mission, I was sitting (in another helicopter) on the ground as backup," Smith recalled, while 676 was delivering troops to a battle zone. "We were listening to the whole thing on the radio."

"Black Maria" took at least three hits on that mission, he said.

"One of the rounds went through the structural mount of the 'greenhouse,'" he said, referring to the plastic canopy that covers the pilots' compartment.

"It blew the whole 'greenhouse' out."

Had the pilot been taller, he would have been hit, Smith said.

A second bullet, he said, severed an electric cable that parallels the shaft controlling the tail rotor.

"It was within an inch or so of taking out the whole tail rotor system — and that would have put them in an uncontrollable situation," Smith said. "It was just one of those fluke situations."

Yet another round penetrated one of the main rotor blades, he

said, punching a 2-inch hole through it. It missed the spar — a critical area of the blade — by about three inches, Smith said.

"When that thing came back over, you could hear it coming from about 10 miles away. It sounded like a shotgun going off every time that blade went around — Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!"

He laughed at the memory.

The ship survived that incident and many others, even though it was routinely involved in critical situations.

Smith said, "The overall mission was pretty much like the current Special Operations mission — getting guys in the unit to wherever — infiltration and exfiltration, getting people in and getting them back out."

They routinely came under ground fire, he said, but added, "None of our people was killed during the time that I was over there."

Flying tactics have changed since those days, Smith said.

"We would fly anywhere from 6,000 feet to 10,000 feet. We were more worried about small-arms fire. We'd do a rapid descent and they try to get right back up to altitude."

Today the more serious threat is from surface-to-air missiles, he said, and helicopter pilots tend to fly at ground-hugging levels.

Smith said he returned from Southeast Asia in October 1967 and left the service.

He later joined the Air Force Reserve and served at Luke Air Force Base in the Phoenix area beginning

in 1975.

The reserve unit there had recently been restructured, and its H-34 rescue helicopters were replaced with H-3s that had been used in the Vietnam War.

Smith resumed flight status at Luke in 1977, and was surprised to see an old friend the first day out:

"When I saw that tail number out there on the ramp, I said, 'That's ol' 676. I haven't flown that thing in 10 years!'"

He still has fond memories of the helicopter.

"It is one of the better-flying H-3s," he said. "Each one of them has its own flying characteristics. That was always a very stable, smooth, good-flying airplane."

"In the opinion of the guys that flew it, it had pretty much of a charmed life."

"Black Maria," which ceased to be black when it was repainted in earth-toned camouflage shortly after Smith left Southeast Asia in 1967, remains an active part of the five-ship fleet at the 71st SOS.

It was used recently in the rescue of members of a Yaqui Indian ball team injured when the truck in which they were riding overturned.

Senior Airman John Klemack, public affairs spokesman for the unit, said 676 might one day end up in the Air Force Museum at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio.

For now, though, there is a job to be done, and the old workhorse, 676, is still able to accomplish it.