

# *Last flight of CH-46 'Phrog' a poignant reunion for Marine*

Johnson, helicopter  
were together in Nam

**By Jim Hamilton**

Saturday, Aug. 1, U.S. Marine Corps aircraft bureau number 153369, a Boeing Vertol CH-46 Sea Knight, dubbed the Phrog, made its final flight to the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C.

For Lt. Col. Joe V. Johnson (USMC-Ret.) of Louisburg, one of

more than 150 invited guests and 3,500 spectators at the ceremony, it was "the greatest thing that's happened since retirement from the Marine Corps."



**Joe Johnson**

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# • Johnson shares military memories



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"This thing inspired me," Johnson continued. "Seeing all these pilots — the guy that tracked me down was one of my pilots over there (Vietnam)."

Johnson took 10 days to drive back east, take in the ceremonies, revisit Quantico and renew old friendships.

"I was really pumped when I got back from the trips," he said.

The formal flyover and ceremony that Saturday, as well as a reception the previous evening at the National Museum of the Marine Corps near Quantico, Va., were part of the celebration and retirement of the tandem rotor CH-46 assault, evacuation and general workhorse helicopter that had served the Marine Corps since 1964 — including service in Vietnam at a cost of 106 aircraft between 1965 and 1975.

That aircraft is being replaced with the Bell Boeing MV-22B Osprey tilt-rotor transport.

Representative of all CH-46 aircraft that served the Corps in 51 years and logged an estimated 3.8 million flight hours, 153369 will remain in the Smithsonian for about a year before becoming a permanent addition to the USMC Museum.

## HMM 364 'Purple Foxes'

Added to the USMC inventory in March 1967, the aircraft was retired with nearly 14,800 flight hours, including service in Iraq from 2007 to 2010. However, for Johnson and others at the farewell ceremonies, their ties to 153369 went back to Vietnam and the illustrious HMM 364 "Purple Foxes" squadron.

The son of a career Marine with service in three wars, Johnson began his USMC career as an enlisted man in basic training at Parris Island, S.C., in 1967. After completing extensive advanced helicopter training, Johnson qualified as a crew chief for CH-46 aircraft.

"I ended up in Vietnam on my 22nd birthday," he recalled. "It was May 1969. I was assigned to HMM 364, the Purple Foxes. ... YK19-CH-46D, 153369, was my first aircraft as

crew chief. I had that aircraft five months."

That was the same bird Johnson watched touch down at the Smithsonian 46 years later — Aug. 1, 2015 — while choking back emotions of long-past combat missions out of Marble Mountain, Republic of Vietnam, and the men he served with.

It was on one such mission then Lance Cpl. Johnson was hit by four rounds in the center of his "bullet bouncer" and blown into the cockpit.

The aircraft pilot, 1st Lt. Larry Britton (USMC Lt. Col., retired), recalled they were evacuating a recon team from a densely jungled, mountainous area in Quang Nam Province on Sept. 9, 1969, while under fire from the Viet Cong, clearing the landing zone with two gunners returning .50 caliber machine gun fire.

"Lance Corporal Johnson, who had picked up his personal M-60 machine gun, was leaning out the door, blazing away. Just as we cleared the LZ and were attempting to climb out of range, Lance Corporal Johnson came flying backward into the cockpit and landed flat on his back on the center console. He was dazed and bewildered, initially, but soon he came to. ... He sat up, felt around on the front of his bullet bouncer, which had four holes in it, and said, 'Sir, I've been shot, but I'm not bleeding ... Those SOB's shot me.' As soon as I realized that Sergeant Johnson was indeed not hurt, I broke out laughing because the way he said it sounded like he was accusing the VC of cheating by shooting at him."

Britton was awarded a Gold Star in lieu of a second Distinguished Flying Cross for his actions that day, and Johnson received the Single Mission Air Medal with Bronze Star.

## Johnson brought wounded bird, crew home

After five months as crew chief on 153369, Johnson was reassigned to a new YK20-CH-46D shuttling VIPs in Vietnam but was soon back in combat with that aircraft.

Johnson was crew chief on another harrowing mission southwest of Da Nang on Sunday, March 8, 1970, when the pilot, 1st Lt. Joe Devlin, was hit in the neck and killed instantly by an AK-47 round that also hit co-pilot Maj. Fred Locke in the right wrist.

An automatic reflex caused the pilot to throw the aircraft into an unbalanced right and left yaw and nose-down flight condition.

Locke was unable to overpower the flight controls with his injured right hand. Immediately crew chief Cpl. Johnson pulled the collective stick up, allowing the aircraft to gain altitude. He then pulled the dead pilot's seat rearward, which freed the controls and leveled the aircraft.

Related Locke, "Managing the flight controls became uneventful; my right wrist hurt like hell. I said, 'Johnson, do you know how to fly this bird?' The crew chief responded, 'Yes Sir, but I have never landed one.'"

Air flow through the CH-46 had covered the Plexiglas windshield and all of the cockpit flight gauges with blood from the pilot's fatal left carotid exit wound, making it impossible to see out.

Johnson sat on the dead pilot, cleaned necessary flight instruments and the windshield in front of him, and radioed his emergency, while flying the aircraft back to Marble Mountain Air Facility.

Locke was in shock and kept passing out during the return flight, on and off the controls, but did manage to assist in making a safe landing at the medical center adjacent to Marble Mountain Air Facility.

Post-landing, both pilots were removed by awaiting corpsmen, while Johnson shut down the aircraft and prepared it for the crew who towed it back to the squadron at Marble Mountain Air Facility.

Their actions that day earned Locke the Distinguished Flying Cross and Johnson the Silver Star Medal for Gallantry in Action, crediting him with killing four enemy soldiers, as well as saving the aircraft, the three surviving crew members and himself.

### A distinguished Corps career

Much like the CH-46's combat service in Vietnam, Johnson's Southeast Asia tour was just the beginning of a long career with the Marine Corps — a career marked by steady advance through the ranks.

In February 1974 Staff Sgt. Johnson was commissioned a warrant officer, promoted to chief warrant officer-2 two years later and selected for the Limited Duty Officer program and made a first lieutenant in July 1979.

By July 1981 he had attained the rank of captain and in another five years put on the gold cluster of a major. In September 1990 he was promoted to lieutenant colonel, the rank he held upon retirement in October 1996.

Johnson's personal decorations include the Silver Star Medal, the Legion of Merit, two Meritorious Service Medals, the Single Mission Air Medal with Bronze Star, the Air Medal with 24 awards, the Navy Commendation Medal with Combat V, three Navy Achievement Medals, the Combat Action Ribbon, the Good Conduct Medal with Bronze Star and Combat Aircrew Wings.

Additionally, he has the National Defense Service Medal (2), the Vietnam Service Medal with two star clusters, the Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal, the Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal, the SEA Service Deployment Ribbon, the Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross with palm, Meritorious Unit Commendation Ribbon (2), Meritorious Mast, and both Rifle and Pistol Expert Badges.

Johnson served in a series of aviation posi-



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

**Sgt. Joe Johnson, crew chief, at one of the guns on his CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter in Vietnam.**

tions as a USMC officer, stationed both stateside and overseas at mainland Japan and Okinawa. For more than five years, he was a Marine Corps senior aviation maintenance engineering officer, one of only four in the Corps and the most highly decorated.

The can-do attitude that typified Johnson's performance throughout his career earned him the nation's third-highest military decoration, the Legion of Merit, awarded following his retirement to his farm near Louisburg in October 1996.

That citation, signed by the commandant of the Marine Corps, recognizes Johnson for "exceptional meritorious conduct in the performance of outstanding service while serving as aircraft maintenance officer, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, III Marine Expeditionary Force, Marine Forces Pacific, Okinawa, Japan, from July 1993 through September 1996."

In 1996 Johnson retired to a secluded acreage east of Louisburg.

Like many veterans with distinguished military careers, he has made the Ozarks his home. Old Glory and the Marine Corps flag fly outside his house. Military memorabilia, photographs and awards are found in every room. Once a Marine, always a Marine; he still wears his dress uniform and decorations on special occasions — Veterans Day programs, parades and so forth — still ramrod straight, still Col. Johnson.

To his friends and neighbors, though, he's just "Joe"; but as with so many other veterans quietly retired to the back roads of these Ozarks, something in his demeanor and the glint in his eye says there's more than a congenial mien to Joe Johnson. It's the easy smile of "J.J.," crew chief of the Purple Foxes 153369.

*Material for this article was provided by Lt. Col. Joe Johnson, USMC-Ret., and supplemented with information from the "Purple Foxes" HMM/VMM 364 Squadron website, hmm-364.org.*

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CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

**Sgt. Joe Johnson, crew chief, at one of the guns on his CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter in Vietnam.**