

Vet's reunion with copter 'a true blessing'

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A reunion of old war buddies conjures images of ill-fitting uniforms, stories of battles and tears for those who never returned. On Wednesday morning, a different type of reunion took place at Haverfield Aviation on Emmitsburg Road in Gettysburg.

Stuart Cline of Eau Claire, Wisconsin, went to Haverfield to meet up with his Huey helicopter, the one he flew in Vietnam 50 years ago.

Standing in the hangar beside the helicopter, now painted blue and white, Cline said several years ago he was contacted by a man from Reno, Nevada, saying he had the helicopter and he wondered whether Cline wanted to see it. Cline said he thought about it for about three years, when his brother Jeff said it was a "bucket list" item. When Cline replied to the man in Reno he learned the helicopter was sold to a company in Pennsylvania.

Recently, Cline went to Haverfield's homepage and clicked on the employment form. "I just wrote that I wasn't looking for a job, but that I would like to see the helicopter," said Cline.

The email made its way to Stan Braun, director of maintenance services of Haverfield, who spoke with Cline to make the reunion happen. "It's kind of miraculous," said Cline. "My brother lives in Delaware, so I came to visit him, and we came here."

Cline spent from 1968 to 1969 in Vietnam as part B Co. 227 AHB (assault helicopter battalion). He was 19 years old, fresh out of flight school, when he started his tour in Vietnam. "When we first started flying, they used to call us 'magnet ass,'" said Cline, who apologized for his language. "I took 17 rounds in my first three days."

"As part of an assault battalion, I would pick up troops and move them to another landing zone, we called them LZs," he said. He also ferried supplies, food and ammunition to ground troops. "I also hauled wounded, but mostly KIA (killed in action)," Cline said somberly.

Cline said he flew about 800 hours during his tour of Vietnam. "Except for the two months you didn't fly because you got blown up," his brother Jeff said with a grin.

Cline recalled the time he was hit by mortar fire. "I remembered my army training that said to drop to the ground when you hear mortar fire. But, everyone else was running," he said with a smile. "I looked at my right arm. It was bloody and my hand wasn't working. And all I could think was I won't be able to drive my car," said Cline. His car was a stick shift.

Cline said he was grounded for a month by one army doctor. He waited the month and another army doctor told him to come back in a month. By this time, Cline felt he was healed so he simply reported back. "No one kept any records," he said.

Cline noted his confidence was at a low point when he reported back, but an officer, Dave Strickland, took him on a flight to just deliver mail. "It was a no pressure flight, and everything went well" said Cline. "When we got back, he said, 'You are an aircraft commander.'"

While Cline was hoping to just see the helicopter for a few hours, instead Braun arranged for him to take a ride around the area with pilot Jim Prosser. "They have been super gracious," he said.

It was an honor to meet Cline and present him with two challenge coins, Braun said.

A team of young mechanics towed the Huey out of the hanger and prepared it for flight. Prosser and Cline walked around the helicopter and Prosser answered each of Cline's questions.

"It was amazing," Cline said after returning from the 40-minute flight. "We were up for a while when, he (Prosser) said, 'OK, you take the controls.'"

"It was an amazing adventure, a true blessing," said Cline.