

Gone but not forgotten..

Army Retires Legendary UH-1 Huey

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YAKIMA, Wash. -- An icon of the Vietnam War, a faithful conveyer of American troops across the globe and savior to countless lost or injured civilians, the Huey helicopter's long Army service is ending. For the medevac detachment at the Army's Yakima Training Center, that distinguished career concluded Wednesday. More than 50 years after the first models lifted off, the Army is retiring the few single-bladed UH-1 variants still sitting on the flightline. Wednesday's retirement ceremony at the training center was a bittersweet moment for the pilots, crewmen and passengers who came to know the Huey as a reliable machine for both combat missions and stateside duties, most notably civilian search and rescue. Chief Warrant Officer Joseph Long, part of the Training Center's Air Ambulance Detachment, is probably one of the last Vietnam-era Huey pilots serving today. He was recalled to active duty in 2002 because the Army didn't have enough Huey-trained pilots. Long had the honor of piloting the last formal Huey mission at the training center as part of the flyaway retirement ceremony on the parade ground. Sitting on his left was retired Lt. Col. Bruce Crandall, who received the Medal of Honor for flying 70 wounded troops out of Vietnam's Ia Drang Valley in 1965. Long said newer helicopters have been threatening to push the Huey out of service for 30 years. "It just never happened," Long said. "It was always pulling a mission." The Huey is considered the most widely known modern helicopter, thanks to numerous Hollywood depictions and the characteristic "whoop-whoop-whoop" sound made by the spinning main rotor. "It's an iconic aircraft. It's an amazing thing to be able to fly something that everybody knows," said Maj. George Johnson, commanding officer of the training center's medevac detachment. The Huey was well known in its role as a medevac chopper and its pilots earned a reputation as the "cowboys of aviation" for their willingness to fly whenever, wherever, however if somebody needed help under fire. The bird was nicknamed "Dustoff" for the cloud of dirt kicked up on takeoff, a name still given to medevac crews. But the Huey also served as a troop transport and air assault platform, part of the military's decision to broaden the Army's aviation aspect for the "helicopter war" in Vietnam. Seven thousand flew in Vietnam; more than 16,000 were made. The Huey differed from its predecessors by use of a turbo-shaft engine that took up less space. "There's no doubt that without this aircraft, we couldn't have done what we did there in Vietnam," said retired Col. Phillip Courts, commander of the Army's Ninth Aviation Brigade in Vietnam and a guest speaker at Wednesday's ceremony. Courts told how he once led a group of 35 Hueys from Fort Lewis to Portland before heading east along the Columbia River on their way to the training center. Hoping to find a path through bad weather, he punched ahead of the rest of the choppers but ended up having to land. The crew spent the night grounded and then flew toward Union Gap, where a shortage of fuel forced him to land short of his destination. "I had to live with that for several years, but the story ended well," Courts said. Many who boarded the Huey could tell the same story. Even when the Huey crashed, it often held together well enough to spare the occupants from major injury. Don Morris, a retired Army command sergeant major from Ellensburg, on Wednesday recalled surviving crashes in the jungle and a rice paddy. "They could take the abuse and keep on going," Morris said. Other helicopters carry more technology and are better outfitted for today's military. But fans of the original Huey know that their favorite helicopter could stay in the air for another 20 years. The seven Hueys in the training center fleet will be turned over to the Air Force to serve as training aircraft. At least will two remain in service at Fort Rucker, Ala., the epicenter of the Army's aviation program, an Army spokeswoman said. Even though Wednesday's retirement flight was limited by fog, Crandall said he still enjoyed the chance to go up one more time in an active-duty Huey. "That's the best helicopter ever built up to now,"

he said. © Copyright 2011 Knight Ridder/Tribune. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.