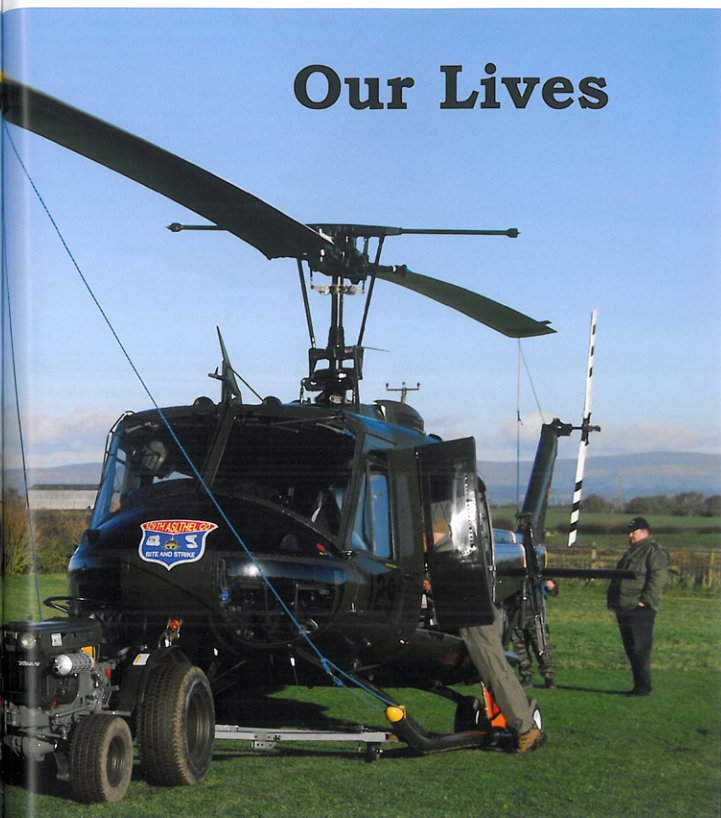


# Days of

Sven Atkin  
visits Phil Connolly's Rotorhead Utopia  
near Preston in Lancashire



# Our Lives



Over the last few years, there has been a dearth of new rotary wing aircraft on the British Air Show scene. However, this is starting to change thanks to one man's passion for and commitment to the preservation of rotary wing history, as well his obsession with helicopter aviation.

Phil Connolly, a helicopter pilot and successful busi-

nessman, from Wesham near Preston in Lancashire, has, after a Herculean effort, acquired and restored two iconic U.S. Army helicopters from the Vietnam War. The first is 'Huey 509', a Bell UH-1H Iroquois, originally flown with the 129th Assault Helicopter Company. The second is 'Loach 011', a Hughes OH-6A Cayuse, formerly flown with the 20th Transport Company as an



The Huey, Loach, and the Cobra  
when it arrives, are part of a  
Vietnam re-enactment display



aero scout. These unique helicopters are becoming a sought after and highly desired popular spectacle on the airshow circuit.

Phil opened his hangar doors on two dates in 2012 and invited the public to come and see these amazing aircraft, with opportunity to get 'up close and personal'. The events are strictly by online ticket booking only and are restricted to numbers on a first come first served basis. At just £5.00 per person for a visit, I jumped at the chance, having seen both helicopters perform at my local air show at Southport Seafront in September. They had created a long lasting impression on me (as all helicopters do!) and I had hoped an opportunity like this might present itself.

I arrived escorted by my family at Phil's hangar and we were greeted by his marketing assistant, Joanne Beswick, who gave us a very informal, friendly and relaxed brief of the day's events planned for us as visitors. We were also given a raffle ticket each (adults only) and it was explained to us that one of the aircraft would be pulled out of the hangar and a lucky winner of the raffle draw would get to sit in the helicopter, whilst it was ground run. This just added to the excitement!

As we entered the hangar, it was like stepping into helicopter heaven. Both the Huey and Cayuse were in their places looking every bit as new as they would have done coming off their factory production lines and waiting to be flown. What is immediately obvious about Phil's hangar, is how precise, organised and beautifully laid out everything is. The amount of helicopter memorabilia and aircraft parts is stunning, and it feels like a

living museum to rotary aviation, it is superb. A true 'rotor head's utopia'!

We weren't the first to arrive and there were other people in conversation with Phil and his team, talking about the helicopters and their experiences. There were also some chaps dressed as American GI's to give that authentic Vietnam feel, they were, I believe, from a Vietnam War re-enactment group.

It was a cold November day and there was free juice, tea and coffee available, as well as mulled wine for those adults who weren't driving. The ever present top-line Haribo sweets were available for kids of all ages, in exchange for a donation, to the North West Air Ambulance Charity. Captain Neil Airey, a good friend of Phil's and one of the team's pilots, (who also happens to fly one of the NWAA's EC-135T2 helicopter, based at nearby Blackpool Airport) explained to the children how the air ambulance works.

Upstairs, there is a warm and comfortable conference room with a television and DVD where a video was shown, detailing the history of Phil and the team's odyssey to bring these aircraft 'alive' again. These films were shown every half hour and were very interesting. There is also an array of die cast helicopter collectables and many different military helicopter related pictures, framed news articles and aircraft parts on display.

Whilst we were watching the video, the Loach was being towed out to its landing platform outside the hangar for the 'ground run'. When the film ended, everyone quickly assembled outside in the bright sunlight ready for the raffle to be drawn. There was an air of anticipation and I'd compare it to being the helicop-



ter equivalent of a Golden Ticket being handed to Willy Wonka for entry to his factory, only this time, the prize was a seat onboard the Loach. Joanne asked one of the visitors, my son in fact, to draw a ticket (unfortunately he didn't draw mine!) A round of applause was given to the winner, who was as surprised as anyone as he'd popped to the bathroom during the draw!

Phil and his winning passenger were soon in the aircraft. Following the external pre-flight checks, the whine of the Allison 250 turbine kicked in as the rotor blades began to spool up. We were able to assemble along the fence with our cameras so we could watch the ground run. Once the engine had run up ready to fly, Phil lifted the Loach into the air and proceeded with some low level manoeuvres before transitioning away for some high speed passes over the enthusiastic guests. This allowed us some excellent photographic opportunities. All too soon, the Loach came into land and Phil touched down gently, back on the trolley. Phil's passenger was all smiles (who wouldn't be?!) as he got out and a friend of his had recorded everything on video and still camera. What a memento!

By now, my wife and seven year old son were ready to leave, having indulged me long enough. I'd not really had the opportunity to get the pictures I was after of Huey 509, so I returned on the next Huey Hangar Day with a good friend of mine, Chris White. Like me Chris has an interest in older aircraft and old cars, and is also a very talented photographer.

The next visit, I was recognised straight away by Joanne, who asked us not to reveal the format of the day to anyone, as they had plenty of other visitors. I was hoping that the Huey would again be rolled out and ground run. Chris commented on what a perfect type of place this would be for him to restore his original Mini and the usual conversation ensued, if we won the big one on the Euro Millions Lottery, what we would do with it!

The great thing about these visits is that you are invited and allowed, to photograph, sit onboard and ask anything you like about the helicopters. Nothing is too much trouble for Phil and the team. They are all extremely knowledgeable and you can strike up some very interesting conversations with anyone there, including the team and many other like minded guests.

I set to work getting the photographs I wanted and got to sit in the back of the Huey. The width of the cabin is surprising, and it still amazes me that it has such capacity to carry virtually anything you can get onboard, with just one engine. Every inch of the helicopter is in pristine condition and the smell inside the aircraft is distinctive but hard to convey. If I had to describe it in a few words, military and purposeful



Known as the Cayuse or Loach in Vietnam



PHOTOGRAPHS BY SVEN ALKIN





A hangar for enthusiasts

would be particularly apt.

We met Rob Tierney, another pilot from Phil's team. Rob was responsible for flying an Argentinian Huey, captured intact, during the Falklands War. Subsequently, he displayed the Huey (G-HUEY) at airshows on behalf of the RAF Benevolent Fund. Rob also happens to restore vintage Mini's, so he and Chris swapped tips and had a thoroughly engaging conversation extolling the virtues of their particular marques. I learnt a lot myself too! Combining our love of helicopters and vintage motoring was an unexpected, pleasant surprise, and just shows how entertaining and engaging these events are.

As I'd hoped, the Huey was pulled out of the hangar and preparations were made for the "ground run". Again the weather was perfect for flying but was still a little chilly. Phil and the team busied about the aircraft and the draw was done for two people to go onboard the Huey. I thought my luck might be in this time and perhaps Chris and I would be fortunate enough to have our numbers drawn in the raffle. No such luck I'm afraid, as our tickets weren't drawn however the opportunity to photograph such a unique helicopter more than made up for this.

The whine of the Huey's turbine soon gave way to the slap of the rotor blades as the helicopter was wound up. Neil Airey went through the internal pre-flight checks and slowly lifted '509' into the hover. There was an audible cheer from the crowd, only just heard above the sound of the Huey, as Neil pedal turned the aircraft 360 degrees. This gave us all different angles of

the helicopter to photograph. '509' then transitioned away at low level for some gentle general handling at low speed. A few minutes later, the distant thud of the rotors heralded the return of '509' and Captain Airey brought the aircraft into an atmospheric hover with the cacophony of the Huey's presence ringing in our ears.

To some people, this may have been just a lot of noise. To me, it was the sound of amazing achievement, charisma, filled with emotion. I have to admit it, this occasion brought a lump to my throat knowing something of the history of this airframe, what it has been through and the lengths Phil and his team have gone to, to ensure its resurrection. As Neil brought '509' to a gentle touchdown, I couldn't help but feel very lucky to have had the opportunity to experience these helicopters in such close quarters and be acquainted with the people who make it happen.

As the Huey was pulled back into the hangar, all of the guests were chatting away about the flight and I was talking with Ken Dutton and his young son, Kevin. Very worthy of a mention in this article, Kevin is an official member of the Huey Team and has set up his own website, dedicated to the Huey and in particular, 'Huey 509'. It is an excellent resource and has plenty of information and photographs to enjoy, with links to other helicopter related information too. I would urge any of you to have a look as it's truly worth it.

After perusing the well stocked gift stand that the Huey Team have and our visit came to an end, Chris and I agreed that a flight in a Huey was definitely added to our bucket lists. We also resolved that if other





Open day in the hangar

visits to see Phil and his helicopters arise, we would be there in a heartbeat.

Phil's aspiration is to have a Bell Cobra, 'Cobra 734', flying alongside the Huey and Loach in the not too distant future. This, I can't wait to see! Having three such iconic aircraft available to be seen on the UK airshow circuit would be nothing short of awesome....!

I would like to thank Phil Connolly, Jo Connolly, Joanne Beswick and the rest of Huey Team for hosting these great events and giving us the opportunity to enjoy

such fantastic helicopters and create a great experience. It was a total privilege on both occasions and wish you all the very best for the future.

For further information please check out the following websites:

[www.huey.co.uk](http://www.huey.co.uk)

<http://hueyfanclub.weebly.com>



Huey in the hover



Sven with the Huey 509