

Rotor Thunder



Chris Jones, gyropilot and instructor, flies Phil Connolly's Huey 509 from Wesham

The Huey story started many years ago. The Vietnam war finished whilst I was still a teenager but the iconic scenes of the Hueys flying into battle and the ones of Hueys being pushed off ships into the sea to make room for more evacuees will stay with me and many others for a lifetime. The HU-1H nicknamed the Huey lives on not only in the memory of troops who served in South east Asia but many countries still use them today, however today was my day to fly in the Huey.

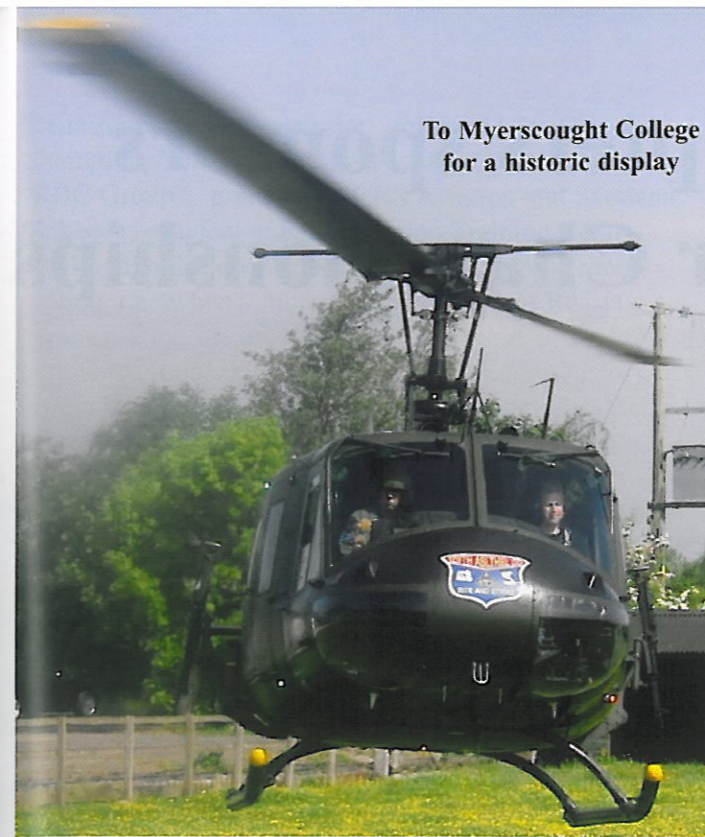
On arrival at Wesham, the home of the only flying Huey in the UK, I was greeted by Phil Connolly, the aircraft owner, and the duty pilot Neil Airey. The pilots had completed the pre flight checks and we were good to go. The flight would take us towards Fleetwood then over Pilling sands and then into Myerscough College at Bilsborrow, which was our destination for the day. Phil then informed me that Neil had been called away to fly the Air ambulance and wouldn't be able to make the flight to Bilsborrow, so, it would be just us two making the flight. In that one moment I had gone from grunt in the back to co pilot in the left hand seat,....unbelievable!

I didn't need asking twice (just in case they changed their minds). My experience has been as a gyroplane instructor and examiner for the past twelve years, with over 5000 hours, I have just a few hours on R22s,44s and a Bell 47 and I wasn't about to give up a seat up-front in a Huey.

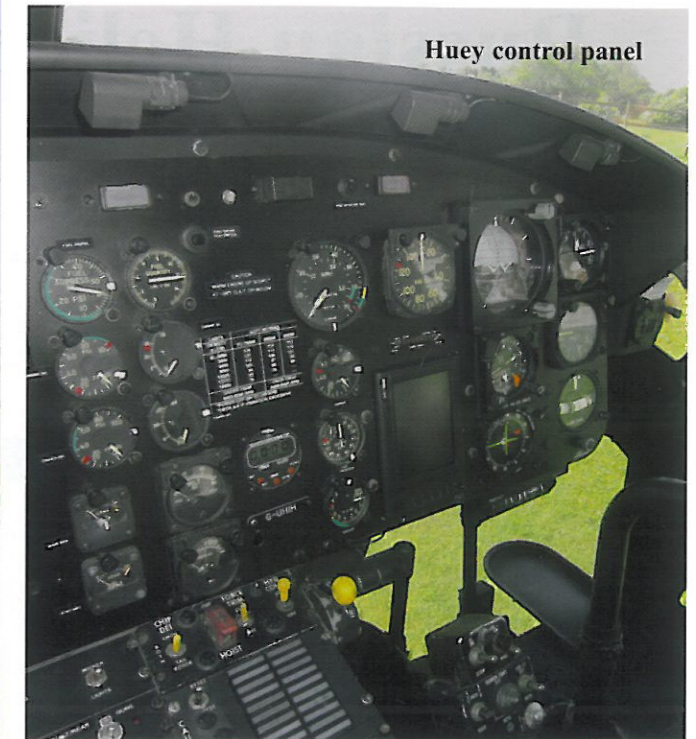
I was buckled up, Phil climbed in and after we had completed the pre flight checks we were ready to go. The turbine fired up, the needles flickered into life, the rotor RPM increased, the needles stabilized. Phil looked across and with a smile raised the collective, compensating for yaw with right rudder, and we left the ground.

The thunder of the rotors pulsed through my body and I knew I was within the beating heart of the Huey. I followed through with the controls, but I knew this was Phil's time; the years of refurbishing her, the mountains of paperwork he and his team went through to get her flying (never mind the expense) and, hardest of all, convincing his wife Jo that it was a good idea. He was smiling to himself and I could tell he was a very happy man.

We climbed away and headed for Fleetwood. Phil levelled out at 1000 feet and after talking to Blackpool he



To Myerscough College for a historic display



Huey control panel

handed me control. Following slight over-controlling in roll, which often happens with my own students I centralized the cyclic and allowed the old girl to fly. She did just that as though she knew better and didn't want to be interfered with. We maintained 100 knots at a thousand feet and she was a beauty to fly, less vibration than I was expecting and, with the sound of the rotors keeping a smile on my face, I tried a few turns and a bit of climbing and descending and it was like flying an old friend.

Whilst still flying, I looked down through the open window and saw our shadow on the beach, the very same view thousands of troops must have had whilst flying over the beaches and Mekong Delta of Vietnam. I then took a look behind me at the empty rows of seats which would have been filled with scared, wide eyed young troopers willing to give their lives for their country.

Huey 509 was built in 1972 and joined 129 Assault helicopter Company in Vietnam, completing 108 flights logging some 559 combat hours until being returned to the US in February 1973. The full history and Phil's dedicated purchase and rebuild can be found at www.huey.co.uk

My time in 509 was coming to an end. We had departed Wesham at 10.00 and were due into the show no later than 10.30, so Phil took the controls and commenced the descent towards the landing area. His ground crew were in radio contact and guided us in over some tall trees and past several electric pylons. Phil had got the wind direction and speed from Blackpool so the lack of a windsock didn't cause a problem but it is reas-



Chris Jones and Huey 509 outside the hangar

suring when you have one in sight. The Huey approached with the slap of the rotors to announce our arrival, you could almost picture the sight and sound of the Huey approaching over the trees and into the LZ to drop off troops and pick up the wounded. Fortunately, that was in the past and now 509 is in semi retirement, Phil landed like a true professional, right on the H that the ground crew had marked out.

Phil's vision has allowed us to see the Huey and the Loach OH6 fly, his next dream is to bring over the Cobra which will complete the dream of a Vietnam memorial flight. All this costs a zillion pounds and the whole project needs support so please visit the website www.huey.co.uk and visit them at the shows.