

The World's Top Military Aviation Magazine

# Combat AIRCRAFT

**EXCLUSIVE!**  
NORTH KOREAN  
AIRBASES

**SPECIAL  
REPORT**

**USAF IN KOREA**

**PAST & PRESENT**

**New air-to-airs**

**Commander interview**

**Satellite images**

# EAGLE

*in crisis*

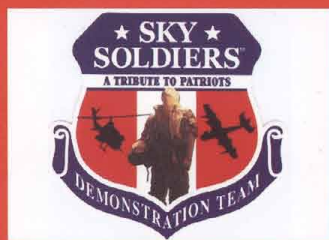
**PLUS!**

**Flying the X-35**

**F-35B unveiled**

**AMC boss interview**

**Aviation in Iraq**



**SEA MONSTER** The mighty 'Mail'



# SKY SOLDIERS

## The US Army's new helicopter demo team

report & photos: Greg L. Davis



***It's been said that noise and speed are what attract people to airshows. If that's the case, then the adage was broadly disproved during the 2007 season, when one act with just the opposite attributes stole the show from military jet teams and captivated audiences like no other. This was the US Army Sky Soldiers team of AH-1F Cobras.***

**T**he Sky Soldiers stand apart from their counterparts, the Thunderbirds, Blue Angels and the Army's Golden Knights, in many ways. These include the fact that the pilots are all retired military veterans flying with the Army Aviation Heritage Foundation (AAHF) on a voluntary basis. Their mounts are five smartly-painted, overall black and gold marked Bell AH-1F Cobras. Four aircraft fly in the actual demonstrations with the fifth being used as a spare. Unless there is a major problem that

requires the team to use this fifth aircraft, it is usually parked on static display and manned by a rotating crew of Sky Soldiers Cobra pilots throughout the day.

The five demo team aircraft have all had the slow-air-speed indicator/hover vane removed from the right side of the cockpit area, but otherwise retain the standard look associated with the flat-paneled glass cockpits of the F-model. The aircraft are FAA-certified in the experimental category and can only undertake flights in day VFR conditions.

They wear their N-numbers on the tailboom. Eventually, all of the AH-1s will carry modern GPS navigation systems mounted under the pilots' head-up displays, but for now only three have been modified. This modification creates a look-alike panel under the HUD that has the exact same dimensions and weight of the original, so it doesn't detract from their original appearance.

At the close of the 2007 season, the AAHF had two additional F-model Cobras awaiting FAA certification and paperwork.

opposite: **Sky Soldiers on parade!** Four stunning black and gold AH-1F Cobra attack helicopters of the Sky Soldiers precision flight demonstration team fly in extremely close echelon left formation. The aircraft wear the Army colors and hold US ARMY titles along with goarmy.com as the US Army Recruiting Command sponsors them.

right: The sleek lines of the AH-1F pass overhead, with smoke generated by the Sanders SCSG-5H pods hung from the stub-wings. The Sky Soldiers team is part of the Army Aviation Heritage Foundation based in Atlanta, Georgia, and is the only military branch demonstration team represented by retired members of the armed forces.

below far right: Two Sky Soldiers AH-1F Cobra attack helicopters cross paths in dramatic fashion during an air show appearance at Fort Worth, Texas.

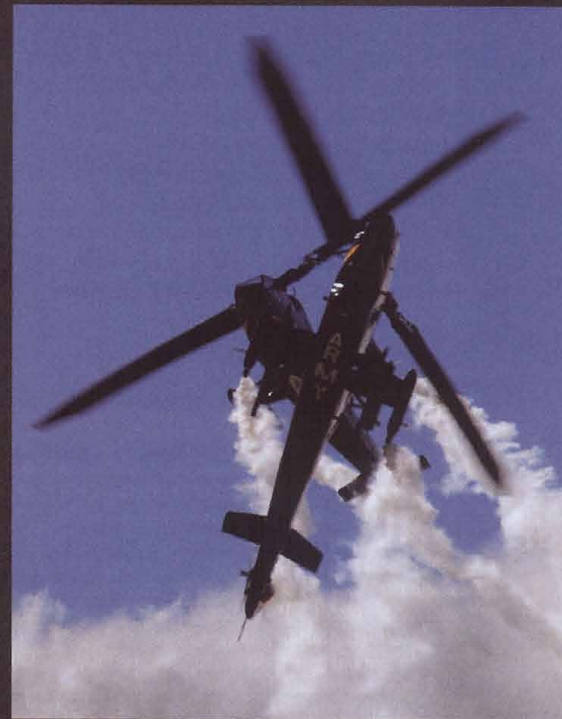
below right: Flame from the smoke pod lights up part of the underside of a Sky Soldiers AH-1F Cobra as it lands at The Pecan Patch glider strip during a practice demonstration.

Two more will be brought up to flying status during the winter months to make a total of nine flyable AH-1s to support the 2008 air show season. Only five aircraft will be taken to airshows, but the extra examples will provide added flexibility to the team so they can even out flight hours and adjust to maintenance and phase inspection schedules.

Before the Sky Soldiers, there hadn't been a full-scale helicopter demo team performing in front of audiences in North America since the Army's Silver Eagles disbanded 35 years ago. The steady drumbeat of the Cobras' main rotor blades slicing through the air while maintaining a constant presence at or near show center makes the Sky Soldiers act appealing in itself, coupled with the team's close lateral separation limit of 500ft from the crowd.

The only time the Sky Soldiers aren't almost directly in front of the audience is when they set up for their impressive four-ship attack run. During this maneuver, all four aircraft go from level flight to a nose-down attitude while maintaining their position in formation less than half a rotor disc apart from each other. At major airshows, shortly after they push over and begin to dive, pyrotechnics blast off at show center, simulating the impact of rockets.

Each Sky Soldiers show starts with a fly-by from right to left, after which the AH-1s peel away to land in front of the crowd. Remaining on the skids for mere seconds, the Cobras are off and running again as they continue their routine that includes four-ship formation passes, wingovers and pairs of opposing solos. One of the most impressive maneuvers is the 'Cobra Dance'. During this, two Cobras turn to face each other while hovering feet off the ground.



They each lower their noses and begin flying around an imaginary point on the ground, continuing their moving 'face-off' with absolute precision. Once the circle is completed three times, they break off to pair with the remaining two helicopters for a final wingover and break to land, following a quick hovering bow.

### **The AAHF and the Sky Soldiers**

Mike Brady is the founder of the AAHF and serves as the group's President and Chief Executive Officer. Brady is a former US Army soldier, who, after serving for a few years, was attending the US Military

Academy at West Point when an unforeseen medical disqualification ended his hopes of continuing his career. After his discharge, Brady began a new career in which he would eventually play key roles in five different airlines, a number of which he owned personally. After selling his final airline business, he entered 'retirement' at a relatively young age and now devotes most of his time to the AAHF.

The AAHF (which currently has three chapters) was founded in 1997 with the goal of preserving the history of Army aviation through educational outreach programs and the restoration and flight of

significant aircraft the service has used. The organization's oldest aircraft is a WW2 Piper L-4 Grasshopper. Brady's own historic Army aircraft bolster the AAHF's fleet, each of his personal machines being 'leased' to the AAHF for a token \$1.00 a year. These include the only remaining flyable TAH-1P Cobra and an early model OV-1B Mohawk.

The AAHF Sky Soldiers have been participating in airshows with a popular Army aviation re-enactment since 1999, the key element being the Vietnam themed air assault program using AH-1, OV-1, UH-1, OH-5 and CV-2 aircraft. The Cobra demo team gave its first full season of performances in 2007.

At the same time as Brady and his team were successfully operating the AAHF, AH-1 Cobras were being retired from Army service and relegated to open storage at Fort Drum, New York, after over 30 years of operational service. As the final Cobras received little, if any, fanfare upon retirement, it became clear few were interested in doing anything with the aircraft to preserve its history. In fact, the US government planned to donate or sell virtually every 'good' airframe available to foreign countries through the State Department's Foreign Military Sales program.

With this knowledge in hand, Brady hatched a plan to attempt to retrieve some of these AH-1s for the AAHF so they could be returned to flyable status one day. Initially, the plan was to have additional Cobras to beef up the Foundation's Vietnam combat re-enactments. His 'rescue plan' was

implemented with high-level support from Army leadership and even Congressional representatives, but even so, there were still some major setbacks. It took over three years to finally take delivery of a fully intact AH-1 Cobra that could be returned to flying condition. The aircraft that were released to the AAHF have been demilitarized, so the nose-mounted M-197 20mm rotary cannon can't function (the barrels have been 'capped' with a welded in metal-plug), but they are otherwise authentic service helicopters.

### Funding the team

In 1997, the AAHF Sky Soldiers began performing their Vietnam Air Assault routine at air shows throughout the US. As the years went by, Mike Brady and his team became well-known and liked by veterans, airshow performers and key leaders in the US military, especially those involved with Army aviation.

When the AAHF finally got permission to receive and fly the AH-1F Cobras, senior leaders within the Army were presented with the idea of somehow working with the AAHF

to keep the aircraft in front of the public with some kind of sponsorship. Evidently, the Army identified a need to better showcase aviation career fields at about the same time Brady was seeking permission to operate the Cobras, so the two ideas made for a perfect marriage. Because the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have been keeping all Army aviation assets fully engaged, there was no chance of fielding a demo team with current front-line aircraft. Some expert salesmanship and solid business plans coming from Brady led the Army to see the inherent benefits of using historic aircraft to accomplish their respective goals.

above: A Sky Soldiers Cobra kicks up spray from the water below it to allow a rainbow to reveal itself in the mist. This AH-1F, serial 66-15283 (N830HF), has played its part in generating interest towards military service, especially in aviation careers, over the course of the year.

below: USMC LtC (Ret) Peyton Dehart is surrounded by students as he tells them about his life in aviation and answers questions about his AH-1F Cobra attack helicopter. Dehart and his co-pilot landed the Cobra on the school's soccer field during a visit to drum-up interest in the US Army.

bottom: The Sky Soldiers pose with one of the classic AH-1F Cobra attack helicopters while visiting the Bell Helicopter/Textron plant in Fort Worth. 2007 marked the first full year for the Sky Soldiers on the air show circuit.

## SKY SOLDIERS PILOT

The 15-20 Sky Soldiers demo team pilots boast an impressive combined total of 68,000 flight hours, with an amazing 5,400 hours logged in combat. Between them, they have 10 Distinguished Flying Crosses, 9 Bronze Stars and 130 Air Medals. Leading the core team of Cobras is LTC (Ret) Peyton DeHart, a former USMC AH-1W Cobra pilot who now flies for NetJets. DeHart has over 26 years of service with combat time in Grenada, Beirut, and Operations 'Desert Storm' and 'Iraqi Freedom'. J. R. 'Skip' Lam mostly flies the 'slot' position. He is a retired US Army LTC and Master Aviator, a qualified Instructor and Developmental Test Pilot, who now works for a major defense contractor involved in the Cobra Foreign Military Sales program. Lam can also be found in the cockpit flying helicopters to shoot aerial scenes for movies or as a stunt pilot in major Hollywood films. CW-3 (Ret) Patty Meek is the team's only female pilot, a certified Airframe and Propulsion mechanic and Maintenance Test Pilot who now mainly flies UH-60s as a MTP for Army Fleet Support under contract to the Army at Fort Rucker, Alabama. LTC (Ret) John Woodward is the deputy lead and full-time maintenance officer for the AAHF, one of the few paid positions within the organization. Woodward, a Senior Aviator and MTP and 'Desert Storm' combat veteran, is responsible for restoring and maintaining not just the AH-1s of the demo team but all the AAHF's aircraft.



above: J.R. 'Skip' Lam pilots a Bell AH-1F Cobra attack helicopter of the Sky Soldiers demonstration team. The team's pilots are all military veterans who have a combined flight time of over 68,000 hours!



right: Extreme close-up of two AH-1F Cobras during the impressive 'Cobra-dance' maneuver, a skillful piece of flying during which the two aircraft 'face-off' with each other while the pilots pivot their aircraft around one central point.

below: Four Sky Soldiers AH-1F Cobra are silhouetted by the reflection off Lake Dallas as they arrive in the Dallas/Fort Worth area in the late October afternoon, ready to pass along their knowledge and insight to young people seeking careers in aviation.

bottom right: Four of the Sky Soldiers AH-1F Cobras are ready for bed after a day of practice in Atlanta, Georgia.



The final nod came from the Army in February 2007 after the Commanding General of the Army Aviation Warfighting Center (AAWC) at Fort Rucker, MG Virgil Packett, met with Skip Lam and others to alleviate concerns and rumblings from within the Army aviation community about having retired aviators representing Army Aviation as a whole.

When the Army announced its plan to support the team, it came with a \$2.1-million deal using money pulled from the Army's Recruiting Command. When compared to other military aircraft demo teams, the budget provided by the Army is negligible, at best. Considering the Army sponsors everything from NASCAR to Bullriding to the All-American Bowl (American football), the money spent on the Sky Soldiers has been some of the most effective at exciting potential recruits and getting them to talk with the Army about a military career, according to insiders familiar with Army recruiting goals. In fact, the Sky Soldiers have far exceeded the goals set for them by the Army. Money from the Army's sponsorship mainly pays for maintenance and upkeep of the aircraft along with fuel and initial purchase of 'branded' items like

a massive airshow chalet tent, chairs and other one-time purchases. Others have generously stepped up to sponsor or off-set costs associated with the team's operations.

The US Army and the AAHF work closely with each other to put together the Cobra team's schedule. The process can take a period of weeks to months before a final plan is solidified. One of the key factors in scheduling is the 800-mile self-imposed limit the AAHF abides by, because that's about as far as you can fly a Cobra under day VFR conditions in one day.

### Future expansion

With a warehouse full of 'rescued' Cobras waiting to be returned to service, the Sky Soldiers will have airframes available to expand their operations outside of the

800-mile radius from Atlanta. They hope to do this by opening additional 'chapters' so that the Cobra Demo team (or teams) can appear from coast to coast. Early talk indicates that a chapter may be established in the Dallas/Fort Worth area to cover the central US while a third chapter would likely be established somewhere in the west. The expansion will fall under the AAHF's auspices; the Foundation will probably add other airworthy Army aircraft to its roster through direct purchases or via donations.

For the moment, though, the five Cobras are performing superbly. Their final airshow performances of 2007 occurred at Fort Worth, Texas, on October 20-21 in front of about 175,000 people, but in less than ideal conditions with winds topping at 38kt. Nonetheless, the Sky Soldiers didn't miss a beat. We look forward to more of the same in 2008. □

*The author would like to thank Mr. Mike Brady, J.R. 'Skip' Lam, Peyton DeHart, Patty Meek, John Woodward, Brian Callahan, Shanda Elkin, Dan White, and Chris A. Neill. Additional thanks go to*



Additional information can be found at the AAHF website [www.armyav.org](http://www.armyav.org)