

# SKY SOLDIERS

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PART RECRUITMENT POSTER, PART AERIAL DEMONSTRATION LESSON, THE U.S. ARMY SKY SOLDIERS IS A UNIQUE FLIGHT TEAM THAT REGULARLY WOWS AUDIENCES WITH A GROUP OF EX-MILITARY, NOW CIVILIAN PILOTS.

Story and Photos by Greg L. Davis





**ABOVE** Sky Soldiers in parade. Four black and gold AH-1F Cobra attack helicopters of the Sky Soldiers Precision Flight Demonstration Team fly in extremely close echelon left formation during a cross-country mission. The team is made up of retired military pilots who now pass along their knowledge and insight to young people seeking careers in aviation.

It's been said noise and speed are what attract people to air shows. One act, though, the United States Army Sky Soldiers AH-1F Cobra Precision Flight Demonstration Team, has broadly disproved this adage, stealing the spotlight away from military jet teams and captivating audiences like no other.

Sky Soldiers team members are retired military veterans, flying with the Army Aviation Heritage Foundation (AAHF) on a voluntary basis. They fly a demanding air show routine because of their love of country and dedication to aviation — particularly U.S. Army aviation. Each member is determined to give back to their profession by inspiring others to fly and/or possibly join the military.

### THE AIRCRAFT

The Sky Soldiers have a fleet of five smartly painted black and gold Bell AH-1F Cobras. Four fly in demonstrations with the fifth being used as a maintenance 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 Sky Soldiers Cobra pilots throughout the day during air show events. Having an aircraft on display where people can see and touch it while talking directly with the pilots is just another departure from other military demo teams, whose aircraft are parked far away from the crowds and whose pilots show up and depart in police-escorted motorcades.

The five Cobras retain the standard look associated with the flat-paneled glass cockpits of the F-model. They are FAA certified in the experimental category and can only undertake flights in day VFR conditions. Eventually, all

will carry modern GPS navigation systems mounted under the pilots' head-up display (HUD), but for now only three have been modified in this way. The modification creates a look-alike panel under the HUD with the exact same dimensions and weight of the original.

Aircraft released to the AAHF have also been demilitarized so the nose-mounted M-197 20-millimeter rotary cannon can't function. The barrels have been capped with a welded-in metal plug, but the ships have otherwise retained their full capabilities, just as when they served on the front lines around the world.

At the close of the 2007 season, the AAHF had two additional F-models awaiting FAA certification and paperwork, while two more were scheduled to be brought up to flying status during the winter months. This gives the Sky Soldiers nine flyable Cobras for the 2008 air show season. Only five ships will be taken to air shows for display, the remainder will provide added flexibility, so the team can even out flight hours and adjust to maintenance and phase inspection schedules.

### THE ORGANIZATION

AAHF was founded in 1997 by Mike Brady, a former soldier whose career ended with an unforeseen medical disqualification while he was enrolled at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. After a whole other career with civilian airlines, Brady decided to start giving back to his community and nation with the creation of AAHF. The organization's goal has been preserving the history of army aviation through educational outreach programs and the restoration and flight of significant army aircraft. Its oldest ship is a Second World War L-4 Grasshopper observation plane.

Brady's own private collection of historic army aircraft bolster the AAHF's fleet, making it one of the most successful organizations of its kind in the entire world. Each of Brady's personal aircraft are leased to the foundation for \$1.00 US a year. This includes the only remaining flyable TAH-1P Cobra



**OPPOSITE TOP** Four Sky Soldiers Cobras fly in diamond formation just a half rotor disk apart, while trailing smoke for the camera.

**OPPOSITE LEFT** Retired CW-3 Patty Meek at the controls of an AH-1F.

**OPPOSITE RIGHT** Two Sky Soldiers Cobras cross paths in dramatic fashion during an air show appearance in Ft. Worth, Texas.

**OPPOSITE BOTTOM** The sun glints off the gloss black and gold paint of a Cobra as the pilot dives from the sky.

**BELOW RIGHT** The Sky Soldiers team poses with one of the AH-1F Cobras during a visit to Bell Helicopter in Ft. Worth late last year.

trainer and early model OV-1B Mohawk.

The AAHF currently has three chapters, starting with its headquarters in Atlanta, Ga., where most of its aircraft collection is found. A second, known as the Wiregrass chapter, is at Blackwell Field in Ozark, Ala., near Ft. Rucker. The third is the Redstone Arsenal Technology chapter, located in northern Alabama.

The U.S. Army AH-1F Cobra Demo Team is a subset of the AAHF Sky Soldiers, the flying arm of the AAHF. Although the Cobra team only flew its first full season of air show performances in

2007, the AAHF Sky Soldiers have been participating in air shows, with a popular army aviation re-enactment show, since 1999. The key element of this show has been the Vietnam-themed air assault program, which uses AH-1, OV-1, UH-1, OH-5 and CV-2 aircraft.

### GETTING FLYABLE COBRAS

At the same time Brady and his team were successfully operating the AAHF, the U.S. Army's first dedicated attack helicopter — the AH-1 Cobra — was being retired and relegated to open storage at Ft. Drum, N.Y., 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 or legacy. In fact, the 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 retrieve some of these irreplaceable aircraft for the AAHF. His rescue plan was implemented with high-level support from Army leadership and even congressional representatives, who'd become familiar with the goals of the organization and saw the validity of rescuing a few "lowly snakes."

Even with high-level support, though, there



## THE TEAM

The U.S. Army Sky Soldiers demo team is made up of a volunteer pool of about 15-20 pilots, qualified to execute the demanding demo program flight card. Since the team is composed of volunteers, it needs to have a large pool since not every pilot can get time off of work or away from family to make the team's practices and air show schedule.

The group has 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, nine Bronze Stars and 130 Air Medals. All are superior aviators with many serving as maintenance test pilots (MTPs), instructor pilots and some as test pilots during their military careers and afterward as civilians.

The Cobra demo team leader is retired lieutenant-colonel **Peyton DeHart**, a former U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) AH-1W Cobra pilot and now Net-Jet corporate pilot. Because of his extensive formation training and operational experience, DeHart was the most qualified to train and then certify the former army aviators who fly with him on the team.

**Skip Lam** is another regular face on the team. A retired army lieutenant-colonel and master aviator with over 7,100 flight hours, Lam has worked extensively in Hollywood movies — flying helicopters to shoot aerial scenes and performing as a stunt pilot.

**Patty Meek**, a retired chief warrant officer 3, is the team's only female pilot, and, according to Mike Brady, "brings class to this group." Meek is also a certified airframe and propulsion mechanic, an MTP and served with distinction during Operation Desert Storm.

Retired lieutenant-colonel **John Woodward** is the Sky Soldiers' deputy

lead and full-time maintenance officer for the AAHF (one of the few paid positions within the organization). Woodward is a senior aviator, MTP and combat veteran. He is responsible for restoring and maintaining not just the AH-1s, but all the AAHF's aircraft.

Among the unsung heroes are full-time mechanic **Daniel White**, and director of army programs **Shanda Elkins**, a retired sergeant-major with the USMC. Elkins also serves as the Cobra demo team's energetic narrator during air shows.

AAHF founder Mike Brady speaks highly of the volunteers and lets it be known that, "These guys are continuing to serve and contributing to our national cause in a time of need. This is born out of a true devotion to the soldiers in the field today."

One important thing to note, and one that was emphasized by almost each Sky Soldier crewmember, is the fact that they are all expert pilots who have come a long way in their careers because of their association with army aviation and rotary-wing flying. Lam's message to other rotary-wing pilots is one that emphasizes the "importance of proficiency and one's aircraft knowledge." He also said that building on a solid skillbase and knowing emergency procedures will make for better pilots overall. He concluded by saying all pilots should strive to "develop [their] art, skills and dedication to professionalism."

were still some major setbacks. Finally, though, after three years, the foundation was able to take delivery of a fully intact AH-1 Cobra that could be returned to flying status safely.

### THE SHOW

Air show performances are what set the Sky Soldiers apart from other precision flying acts. That and the fact that there hasn't been a full-scale helicopter demo unit performing in front of audiences in North America since the U.S. Army's Silver Eagles disbanded 35 years ago.

While jet teams garner attention by performing choreographed maneuvers in formation, punctuated by occasional outbursts of afterburner, the Sky Soldiers captivate audiences with the steady drumbeat of the Cobra's main rotor blade slicing through the air, all while maintaining a constant presence at or near show-center. Jet teams are restricted to no closer than 1,500 feet away from the crowd line. The Sky Soldiers' helicopters, meanwhile, can perform just 500 feet away, demonstrating their agility and showcasing each pilot's expert skills.

The only time the Sky Soldiers aren't almost directly in front of the audience is when they set up for an impressive four-ship attack run. During this maneuver, all four aircraft go from level flight to nose-down attitude, while maintaining their position in formation less than one rotor disk apart from each other. At major air shows, shortly after they push-over and begin their dive down toward the ground, pyrotechnics blast off at show center with fire and noise that both astounds the audience and simulates the impact of rockets.

Each Cobra demo team show starts with the departure of the four aircraft from the tarmac about 10 minutes before the show starts. After departing, they position themselves in a holding area to the right of show center (seen from the spectators' point of view) for a grand entrance in the form of a fly-by from right to left, and then 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, which includes four-ship formation passes, wing-overs and pairs of opposing solos, flying in front of the crowd and then reversing their direction of flight with awe-inspiring return-to-target maneuvers.

The spectators hardly have to move their heads to keep all the aircraft in sight as they captivate you not by zipping past and out of sight, but by flying to "the edge of the air" right in front of you, as J.R. (Skip) Lam, Sky Soldiers spokesperson and team member, describes it.

One of the most impressive maneuvers is known as the "Cobra dance." During this exhibition of superior airmanship, two Cobras turn to face each other while hovering just feet off the ground. Then, they each lower their nose and begin flying around an imaginary point on the ground while continuing their moving "face-off" with absolute precision. Once the circle is completed three times (and everyone's dizzy), they break off to pair with the remaining two helicopters for a final wing-over and break to land. A quick hovering bow from the helos as the announcer reads off the crew names brings the show to an end. At some shows, the pilots in the front seats depart the aircraft to meet enthusiastic crowds, while the aircraft are repositioned for final shutdown.

### THE ARMY CONNECTION

When the AAHF finally got permission to receive and fly the AH-1F Cobras, senior leaders within the U.S. 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.





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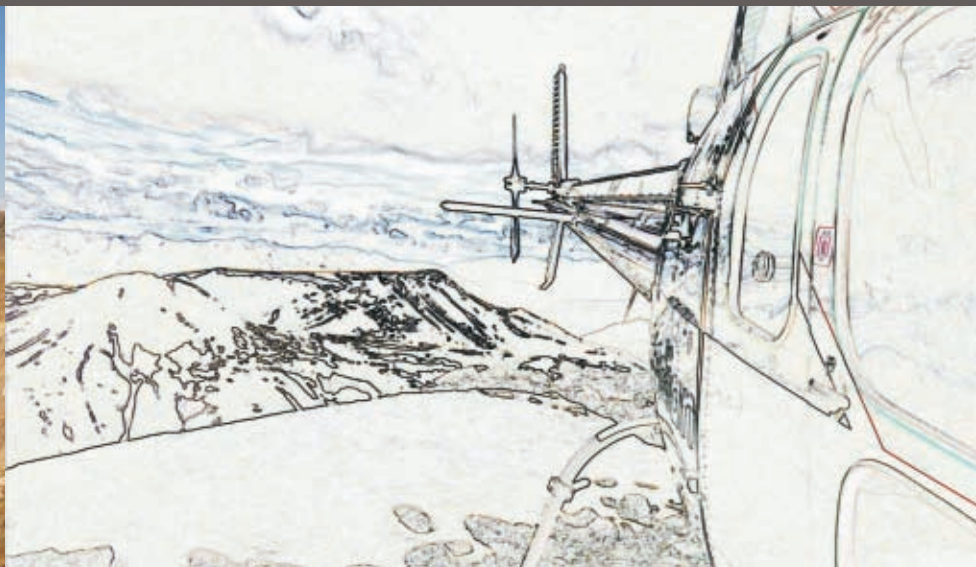
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The \$2.1-million sponsorship deal brought with it the name "U.S. Army" Sky Soldiers, and requires: a specific number of appearances by the team at public events; adherence to U.S. Army branding of the aircraft, team and message; and working with specialized recruiting teams who accompany the Sky Soldiers during their appearances.

Although the sponsorship amount is negligible compared with the army's total budget, it is money very well spent. The Sky Soldiers have far exceeded the goals set for them by the army in regards to exciting potential recruits and getting them to talk with the army about a military career.

In addition to the U.S. Army, others have generously stepped up to sponsor or offset the team's costs, including Bell Helicopter Textron (the

maker of the AH-1 Cobra), and Sherwin-Williams Corp., who donated the specialty paint. U.S. Helicopters, a Bell Helicopter subsidiary, painted three of the Cobras, while Legends Aircraft Paint painted the remaining two. Volvo Corp. of America, meanwhile, donated a new truck, which tows the trailer that is leased from Spevco Inc. for just pennies on the dollar.

#### STEALING THE SHOW

The U.S. Army Sky Soldiers final air show performances for 2007 occurred in Fort Worth, Texas, on Oct. 20 and 21, 2007, in front of about 175,000 people. The blue skies above and warm temperatures were perfect for the spectators, but windy conditions made for challenging flying. The strongest winds were encountered on Sunday,

A Sky Soldiers Cobra sits on one of the playing fields at Keller High School in Ft. Worth, Texas, during a recruiting visit. Over 600 teenagers came out to see the aircraft and learn about army aviation. **Chris A. Neill Photo**

during their final show, and topped out at 38 knots! No worries, though, as the team increased its distance slightly, allowing the pilots to safely execute their maneuvers without missing a beat. This added distance gave the pilots a little more aircraft separation, but didn't impact the presentation to spectators on the ground.

As Sunday's Fort Worth performance, and the 2007 air show season, came to a successful end, Mike Brady commented from the announcer's table with a sense of awe, knowing the velocity of the winds the team had just fought: "If those aren't some of the best pilots, then I don't know who is!"



*A top aerial photographer and aviation photojournalist, Greg L. Davis has almost 20 years experience covering both civilian and military aircraft — including eight years in the U.S. Air Force as an aerial/combat photographer and military photojournalist. He currently lives in central Texas with his wife and young daughters.*



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