**There Are Still Heroes**

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In The Line Of Duty

It took only 40 seconds for the CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter to roll and sink

to the bottom of the ocean. That's all the time it took for one gunnery

sergeant to prove that heroism is not dead.

By Tony Perry

When the CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter, number 154790, lifted slowly off the

deck of the amphibious assault ship Bonhomme Richard on a sunny winter

afternoon, Marine Corps Gunnery Sgt. James P. Paige Jr. was right where he

wanted to be.

Paige had not been scheduled to take part in that training flight in which

the helicopter would ferry 12 Marines and one Navy corpsman to the oiler

Pecos for a risky, exacting exercise in "fast roping" down to a "hostile"

ship and taking control at gunpoint. He'd been on limited duty since

breaking a bone in his foot two months earlier and could have stayed aboard

the Bonhomme Richard, part of a pre-deployment exercise 14 miles off San

Diego.

Truth be told, Paige could have been back in his native New Jersey, drawing

a pension and starting a second career in law enforcement; at 37, he had

been a Marine since he was 16. He'd made tentative plans for the second half

of his life but instead had signed up for one final, yearlong tour of duty.

The lure of an assignment in sunny San Diego and the opportunity for

overseas deployment proved irresistible.

There were friends who could not understand the appeal of another year of

bone-rattling rides aboard the aging Sea Knights, another year of trying to

match the strength and endurance of young men half his age, another possible

deployment at sea away from his wife and their young daughter. But his

family understood.

Paige had never wanted to be anything but a Marine. As a kid he fashioned

his own Marine Corps dress uniform, complete with a red strip down the seam

of his jeans, and marched in Memorial Day parades. He left high school and

enlisted.

He was in the Military Police for a time before finding his true love:

helicopters. He trained as a helicopter crew member, a job that involves the

loading and unloading of men, equipment and weaponry with equal emphasis on

speed and safety. In the air, enlisted crewmen are required to assist the

pilots by looking outside the aircraft for obstacles and advising them about

speed and altitude.

As a fighting force that arrives from the sea and strikes quickly, the

Marine Corps is dependent on its helicopters and its men, particularly in

the senior enlisted ranks, who fly them. Being one of those men was the joy

of James Paige's life.

With a brief tour as a recruiter, Paige's career had comprised a series of

duty stations with helicopter squadrons, including the elite unit assigned

to Marine One, the helicopter reserved for the president of the United

States, his family and their guests. Paige served on Marine One during the

latter months of George Bush's presidency and the first months of the

Clinton administration.

A decade earlier, Paige had received a far different set of orders, also at

the behest of a president. His squadron was among those Marine units sent by

President Ronald Reagan on an ill-defined mission to serve as a stabilizing

force in war-torn Beirut.

Humberto Morin, who served on a helicopter crew with Paige in Beirut, said

Paige was the kind of Marine who was not afraid of dying, "only afraid of

not getting the job done right the first time."

On Oct. 23, 1983, Paige left the Marine barracks adjacent to the Beirut

International Airport shortly after 6 a.m., eager to get to work early.

A few minutes later, a yellow Mercedes-Benz five-ton open-bed truck packed

with explosives roared past sentries and over concertina wire and crashed

into the four-story barracks. The building was reduced to rubble in an

instant; 220 Marines were killed, more than any single day since the landing

on Iwo Jima. Eighteen Navy corpsmen and three Army soldiers were also killed

by the suicide-terrorist.

For 72 hours Paige frantically dug through the rubble, sometimes with

shovels and picks, sometimes with bare and bloody hands, hoping desperately

to find Marines who were still alive. At home, his family did not know

whether he was among the dead or the living.

He was not a man normally given to introspection, but after he returned from

Beirut, he told a hometown newspaper that he was forever changed by the

horror he had seen and that he felt "older inside." He was 21.

"He was a man when he came home--he had lost his innocence," says Paige's

sister, Ellen Prusecki. "The smell of death and the image of being unable to

rescue his fellow Marines never left him."

Like a number of Beirut survivors, Paige got a special tattoo on his arm,

"Oct. 23, 1983. Beirut, Lebanon. 241." And each year on the anniversary of

the terrorist attack, he would phone other survivors for conversations only

they understood.

IN THE LATTER MONTHS OF 1999, TROOPS FROM THE 15TH MARINE Expeditionary Unit

from Camp Pendleton, along with a helicopter squadron from Miramar Marine

Corps Air Station in San Diego, were training for a six-month deployment to

the Persian Gulf.

For six months, the Marines would be "on station," waiting to mount an

amphibious assault should Saddam Hussein threaten his neighbors, or possibly

to board an oil tanker on the high seas to enforce U.S. trade sanctions.

As a gunnery sergeant, one of the highest ranks attainable by an enlisted

man, Paige would be in the thick of things as a helicopter crew chief.

A gunnery sergeant, or "gunny," is a rank entrusted with a particular

responsibility to instruct younger enlisted men on how to get the job done,

how to act like Marines and sometimes how to stay alive when staying alive

is not easy. A smart junior officer takes his cues from a gunny.

By all accounts, being a gunnery sergeant was a job that Paige took very

seriously. John Sieke, Paige's older brother and an Air Force veteran,

remembers a conversation just days before the flight of the CH-46 Sea

Knight.

A friend, accompanying Paige to the airport where he would catch a plane to

California, was puzzled why Paige was staying in the Marine Corps; he could

have retired with 20 years and started to live a more normal life.

"My brother said: 'If I can save just one life by teaching these young

Marines what to do, then I've done my job,' " Sieke says.

Even in a profession where a "gung-ho" attitude is common, Paige was known

as a "lead-from-the-front" type.

Lt. Col. Matthew Redfern, commanding officer of helicopter squadron 166, was

not surprised when Paige requested permission to be part of the mission that

day, Dec. 9, 1999, even though the helicopter already had a full four-man

crew.

Paige had joined the squadron that summer and, as a crew chief who had flown

missions in Beirut under heavy sniper fire, served as a role model for

younger Marines. First to arrive in the morning, last to leave at night,

always concerned with maintenance, always eager to fly.

"Gunny was a hard-charger," says Redfern, who gladly granted permission.

As the helicopter lifted off, Paige, with more helicopter time than any man

aboard--1,849 hours--was manning the right-side gun position just behind the

crew door. After a two-month layoff with the busted foot, he was back in the

air and happy.

"When and if you fly with someone that senior to you, you learn things from

them," says Sgt. Robert Evers, who was seated on the opposite side of the

helicopter. "And if you ever turn down an opportunity like that you're a

fool."

IN THE MOST ROUTINE OF CIRCUMSTANCES, A FLIGHT IN A CH-46 SEA Knight

helicopter is no pleasure cruise. Even the men who love them curse them on

occasion.

Big (16 feet, 8 inches tall), bulky, noisy (communication is by headset or

hand signals) and given to eye-rattling vibrations, the CH-46 was introduced

during the Vietnam War. With careful maintenance and upgrades, it has

continued to be the Marine Corps' premier medium-lift, all-weather assault

helicopter. And it is not unusual for it to be older than the Marines

inside.

Miles of cable and plastic-coated electrical wire line the overhead of the

cargo portion. There are two doors in front and four windows that can be

used as emergency exits, and a 34-inch square covered opening in the floor

called the "hell hole"--for both emergencies and "fast-roping" exercises.

In the air, the CH-46 has a top speed of 166 mph, a range of 150 miles and a

maximum takeoff weight of 24,300 pounds. In the water, the dull blue-gray

hunk of metal doesn't float worth a damn. The Marine Corps has installed

emergency flotation devices to help its helicopters stay afloat long enough

for the crew to escape, but those devices presuppose an orderly, horizontal

landing.

At 12:47 p.m. the CH-46 lifted off from the Bonhomme Richard as the lead of

five helicopters on an exercise to train Marines how to "take down" a

hostile ship at sea. While SEALs boarded the ship from rubber boats, the

Marines would lower themselves hand over hand from a rope dangling from the

hovering helicopter. As part of the exercise, the Marines lugged assorted

weapons and breaching tools, including 16-pound hammers and 30-pound cutting

torches.

The crew sat on two benches running the length of the cabin. The CH-46 was

so packed that a first lieutenant had to squat on an ammunition can. Paige,

although senior to the other two enlisted personnel on the crew, was only

meant to be an observer.

The Sea Knight proceeded uneventfully to a designated holding pattern 10 to

12 miles behind the rear of the target ship, the oiler Pecos, manned mostly

by civilians. At 1:06 p.m., with 10 miles' visibility, a 3-knot breeze and

an air temperature of 60 degrees, Paige's helicopter was given approval by

the Pecos to begin an approach. At an initial speed of slightly more than

100 mph and an altitude of 100 feet, the helicopter headed toward the ship.

When the helicopter was about a quarter-mile behind the Pecos, Cpl. Adam

Johns, a member of the flight crew, told one of the pilots, Capt. James

Lukehart Jr., that the helicopter was "coming in fast."

"Yep, I'm going in fast," Lukehart replied as he slowed things down.

Lukehart and the other pilot, Capt. Andrew Smith, cut speed to about 60 mph

and kept the aircraft at an altitude between 65 and 100 feet.

Smith gave a one-minute warning so the Marines could unbuckle and prepare to

stand and lower themselves through the hell hole. Smith then gave a

30-second warning, by which time all the Marines were standing.

SEALs in boats behind the Pecos thought the helicopter was flying low;

perhaps the Marines planned to land rather than hover. Marines aboard the

CH-46 observed an inordinate amount of propeller wash in the water.

The chief mate aboard the Pecos, assigned as a landing safety officer, saw

the helicopter at 100 yards out and began to provide arm and hand signals

for the pilots to increase power and altitude. But he was dressed in white,

not the traditional yellow for landing safety officers, and Smith and

Lukehart ignored his instructions. At a routine briefing on the Bonhomme

Richard, no one had told them that the landing safety officer would be in

white.

Helicopter 154790 continued on its course.

A Navy captain aboard the Pecos screamed "power" into the radio, but the

CH-46 did not receive the instructions and neither pilot responded. The

white-clad officer began to motion frantically that the helicopter was

coming in too low. At the same time, Johns told the pilots, "Looking good

and keep driving it in."

As the Sea Knight reached the Pecos, Smith and Lukehart believed it to be 15

to 20 feet above the deck. But as the helicopter crossed the deck, Johns

realized that the aircraft was "losing altitude" and made a "power" call,

the first such call that Smith remembered hearing. Sgt. Evers heard a

thumping noise at the rear and thought it must be the sound of the aircraft

landing on the deck. "What's going on?" he demanded over his headset.

In a deviation from standard policy, Evers did not look outside the

left-side window. If he had, he could have seen that the left rear wheel had

hit a "man-overboard" safety netting at the rear of the Pecos.

A second after the thump, Lukehart's radio exploded with calls for "power,

power, power," issued by observers on the Pecos who could not see that the

wheel was fouled in the safety netting. Lukehart applied more power, and the

front portion of the helicopter began to lift. The rear section, in effect,

was anchored, and the helicopter lifted slowly, agonizingly, to an

unnatural, almost upright position.

"If you've ever been on a roller coaster, the tick, tick, tick of the big

hill before you get the momentum to go down the rest of the roller coaster,

that [was what it was like]," says Staff Sgt. Timothy Mueller, an

intelligence specialist with the Marines. "It felt like we were ticking

back. And then when we heard the engines scream . . . everybody in uniform

said, oh, s -- -- --!"

With the nose of the CH-46 straining upward, the helicopter rolled gently to

its left and crashed heavily into the ocean. It was so close to the Pecos

that spray hit the deck. The propellers exploded into thousands of pieces

and the helicopter began filling with water as it continued to roll over.

It had taken six seconds from the moment Evers heard the "thump" to the

crash.

The unbuckled Marines were thrown asunder. Heavy, sharp-edged equipment

floated everywhere. Safety lights failed. The helicopter's flotation device

failed to activate. The pilots' escape doors failed. Staff Sgt. Mark Schmidt

said later: "It was so dark that I couldn't see anybody's face."

Marines struggled to remember their safety training: wait for the helicopter

to stop rotating, find a reference point and move quickly to a window or

door. Men jumped or were pushed from the hell hole, the side doors and the

giant hatch at the rear. They tried desperately to shed the rifles and gear

that weighed them down. Some found their escape route blocked by bodies or

floating equipment. Others, who lost consciousness upon impact, were groggy.

Capt. Eric Kapitulik, the platoon commander, thought to himself: "I don't

want to die this way."

Smith, one of the pilots, clawed his way down the aisle of the cabin,

looking for open windows. In the darkness, he missed the open crew door.

Only on a second attempt did he find an open window.

Fear of death focuses one's attention rather sharply. Of the 11 survivors,

according to a Marine Corps investigation, only two recalled seeing anyone

in the moments before or after the crash "due to disorientation, shock,

rushing air bubbles, murky water or lack of light."

Those two remembered seeing Paige. While most scrambled for their lives,

Paige was pushing, shoving and heaving fellow Marines out the doors. Among

all the Marines aboard, Paige, sitting near a door, had one of the easiest

escape routes and was not burdened with heavy gear. A few swimming strokes,

and he could have been safe.

Instead, he stayed. Evers remembers seeing Paige saving others as the

helicopter stopped moving and began sinking rapidly. "As we were sinking,

there was some light. It was coming through the gunner's door and the hell

hole and the hatch and all the parts of the aircraft . . . I saw Gunny Paige

. . . Somehow he got more forward, and he was helping people out of the crew

door also. We went down. It got dark. I lost him. I couldn't see him

anymore."

No one knows how many Marines were saved by Paige. Some had been knocked

unconscious by the crash and only regained consciousness when they bobbed to

the surface.

Just 40 seconds after the helicopter's wheel had become ensnared in the

ship's safety fence, it was over. The Sea Knight sank in 3,900 feet of

water, with six Marines and a Navy corpsman still inside. One of the Marines

was James Paige.

The 11 survivors were plucked quickly from the water by crewmen in rubber

boats who had just delivered the SEALs. The helicopter sank so quickly that

there was no time to mount a diving attempt to look for additional

survivors. It took two weeks before the seven bodies were recovered by the

Navy's remote-control vehicle Scorpio. Autopsies suggested that several of

the dead were already unconscious when the helo filled with water.

At a memorial service a week later at Camp Pendleton, Paige received special

praise. With tears in his eyes, Redfern told 1,400 Marines and their

families that Paige had died as he had lived, "in the middle of the action."

A MARINE CORPS INVESTIGATION completed six months later faulted Sgt. Robert

Evers for not noticing that the left wheel of the Sea Knight was entangled.

It also noted that the preflight briefing was deficient. Evers has since

left the Corps; the pilots are back on flight status.

James Paige's ashes have been spread off the coast of Peleliu Island in the

South Pacific, scene of a Marine battle in World War II.

Last December, a quiet ceremony to honor Paige was held at Sayreville War

Memorial High School in Sayreville, N.J. Paige's widow, Marianne, accepted

the Navy and Marine Corps Medal on his behalf. She has moved to Pennsylvania

and attends East Stroudsburg University. She plans to "do what's best" for

their 3-year-old daughter, Annalee Marine Paige.

Marianne Paige bears no ill will toward the Marine Corps or any individual

Marine. She knew the risks of her husband's profession and accepted them.

One of her proudest possessions is a drawing of a CH-46 signed by members of

one of the squadrons where he served.

Ellen Prusecki, Paige's sister, is not surprised that her brother thought of

others rather than himself. Not after Beirut.

"If he had saved himself and left others behind, he would never have been

able to live with himself," Prusecki says. "He'd have just kept thinking: 'I

left my men.' "

The citation for Paige's medal, signed by Marine Commandant Gen. James

Jones, speaks of heroism and valor and how "in total disregard of his own

safety" Paige helped others escape.

Marianne Paige has a simpler explanation for Annalee, who still looks up at

passing helicopters and asks when her father is coming home: "Daddy stayed

in the water to help people. He stayed too long. That's why he went to

heaven. Daddy was a hero. Your daddy was a Marine."

Tony Perry is The Times' San Diego Bureau Chief

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Submittd,

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