

# An Anbar Summer

By SSgt Carson D. Clover, USMC

I started my career in the Marine Corps as a CH-46E Sea Knight airframes mechanic at the peak of the “Phrog’s” golden era. The phrase “Phrogs Phorever” didn’t hold as true as expected; nevertheless, we felt invincible at the time. My first deployment was with the “Greyhawks” of Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron (HMM) 161. We deployed in February 2004 to the Al Anbar Province of Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom II. Our mission in Iraq was to perform casualty evacuations (casevacs). Effectively, we were aerial ambulances for casualties throughout the Al Anbar Province. In 2004, we were still in the beginning stages of the war in Iraq, and unfortunately, our services were in high demand.

Operating out of Al Taqaddum (TQ) Air Base, we were in the center of the “Sunni Triangle” between Fallujah, Ramadi and Baghdad. We were ideally located to be the first responders for the majority of the fighting. Due to the standing casevac mission, one lucky young officer always was posted on watch with the radios in the ready room. As soon as the “9-line” call

for help came through, someone would sprint out to our center courtyard and start wailing on a brass bell that we had mounted on a 4-by-4 post. At that sound, no matter what we were doing at the time, be it mounting a utility hydraulic pump, conducting engine washes, or “goin’ big” with a hand full of spades, we would drop everything and run to the flight line to ensure that aircraft launched as soon as possible. Lives depended on our ability to launch at the sound of the bell, and we took that mission seriously.

Any crew who were tasked with casevac would always be close by and have their gear staged on the aircraft. In the time it took aircrew to get their gear on and in position, all maintainers on hand would have blade ropes off, intake covers pulled and the auxiliary power unit fired up. Our standing guidance was to have the wheel chocks pulled so the aircraft could be taxiing out within 15 minutes of a call.

By the end of our first month, our response time was within five minutes and the aircraft was often breaking deck by 10. If that bell rang, every member of our unit knew lives were on the line. The seriousness of that sound sharpened our ears, and we became accustomed to seeing

our lieutenants and captains sprinting across the gravel—something that at first we junior Marines found quite comical. It didn’t take long, however, for us to realize how vital those sprints were.

The day of July 5, 2004, rolled into existence in the exact same routine as did every other in that “Groundhog Day” environment. It was “FOD (foreign object debris) walk,” which is an aviation term for a very thorough “police call” of the flight line. As our day-crew shift was coming in, most of us knew of, and some even saw, the predawn launch of aircraft 110, one of our CH-46E helicopters, and one AH-1W Cobra attack helicopter, in response to a casevac. This was nothing unusual because we were on 24-hour alert and already had seen more than 12 calls in one day within the first 96 hours of July.

This particular morning at FOD walk would be infamously different. Suddenly, officers came running out of the ready room. Some were shouting, but there was no bell. The first thing I noticed was their faces.

There always had been a sense of urgency and determination, but this was different. It looked like fear. By this time



COURTESY OF MCAS MIRAMAR, CALIF.

A Boeing-Vertol CH-46 Sea Knight, also known as a “Phrog,” sits on a taxiway in Iraq during a 2004 deployment. A workhorse in Marine Corps aviation, the CH-46 was in service from the mid-1960s until 2015.

we all had stopped walking, and instead, we were watching and listening. I picked up on bits of shouting, “They didn’t call in” or “They’re not answering,” but before I could decipher more, the bell started screaming to life with new veracity. At the same time, the quiet distant patter in the background that most helicopter squadron Marines grow accustomed to quickly grew to an angry thunder. I turned, already knowing subconsciously that something was off, and saw a helicopter coming in from the wrong approach direction.

One of our helicopters was flying lower and faster overhead than I’d ever seen. It was no more than 50 feet in the sky and moving far too fast to be coming into one of our parking spots. It buzzed past and shot straight for the taxiway parallel to the aid station. As I heard the APUs (auxiliary power units) from the standby crews spool up, I also heard what some officers were saying to the staff noncommissioned officers. “That’s his! That’s the CO’s ‘bird!’”

In that moment of heightened senses, everything snapped together instantly. Something was wrong. As some of the Marines already “in the know” started running toward the flight line and the taxiway leading to medical, I gave chase. Still being a vibrant, young corporal at the time, I found myself catching and surpassing some of my more “seasoned” superiors.

As we rounded the corner and started down the active airstrip, the commanding officer’s aircraft came into sight. We reached the aid station just as the next two aircraft, now on an internal casevac, came up behind us. Having no idea what to expect or what it was we thought we could do, a dozen of us just stood there frozen in the dust cloud kicked up by the rotors, waiting for any information or direction to be given to us. It was then that two corpsmen came down the ramp of the CH-46 on either side of our CO.

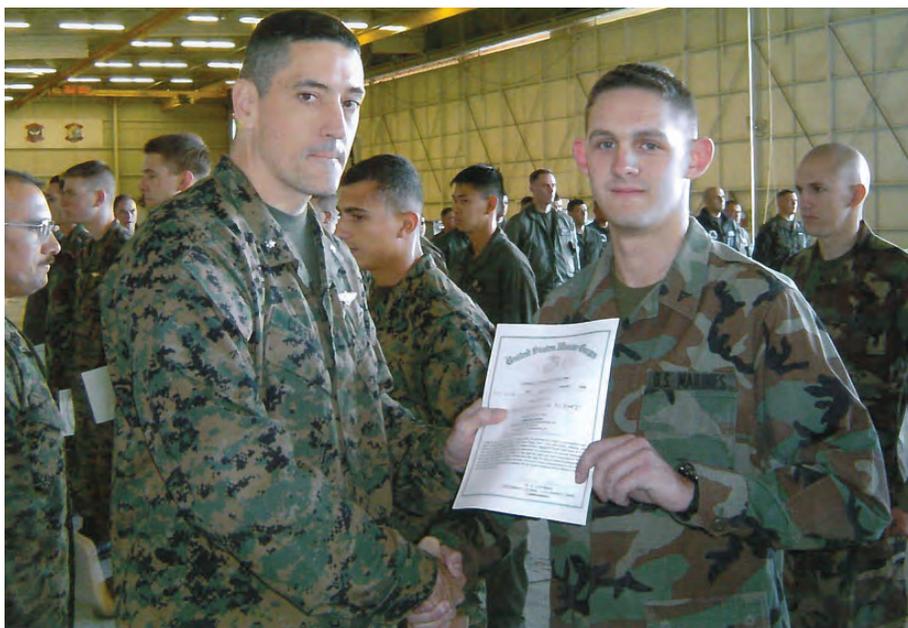
Lieutenant Colonel David “Stretch” Coffman was not given his call sign by accident. LtCol Coffman was “a mountain of a man”! Although I am 6-foot-1, I still had to tilt my head to look up at him. But it was not just his height; he was big. His aura was magnetic. His booming cannon of a voice and hard jawline were rivaled only by his eyes, as sharp as an eagle’s. They could warm your heart or freeze your soul, depending on why you were in his office. When he entered a room and started to speak, everyone listened. First contact may start off slightly intimidating, but the passion and intelligence in what he said would leave everyone in a room hanging on his every word.

And now, this man, who had promised us that he would do everything in his



COURTESY OF SSGT CARSON D. CLOVER, USMC

**The Marines in the airframes work center were responsible for all structural and hydraulic repairs for the CH-46s during HMM-161’s deployment. Back row from left to right: GySgt Mark Arvizu, Cpl Josh Griffiths, Cpl Aaron Owens, Cpl Jordan Mordhorst, Cpl James Brownell, Cpl Carson Clover, Cpl Natividad Herrera, Cpl Luke Molvarec and Cpl Zachary Schuessler. Front row from left to right: LCpl Rob Greenwaldt, Cpl Evan Price, Sgt Herman Galindo III, SSgt Jason Vigness and Capt Scott Schuster.**



COURTESY OF SSGT CARSON D. CLOVER, USMC

**Then-LtCol David Coffman, left, awards LCpl Carson Clover a Meritorious Mast Award a few days prior to their deployment to Iraq.**

power to ensure that we all returned home safely, was being led away. What once was a white bandage pressed against the side of his face could now pass for a red bandana. Blood ran down his neck and seemed to glue his skivvy shirt to his chest, despite the surrounding rotor wash.

The senior members of the squadron quickly moved in and followed him into

the medical tent. The copilot, First Lieutenant Steve Clifton, then came out walking, but he too was bleeding from his face. The “Dash Two” aircraft pulled up before we had a chance to process it all and LtCol Coffman was taken to the aircraft. Then they were gone. The only thing we could hear or understand through the sound of the blades overhead was “Baghdad.” That



The CH-46 that LtCol Coffman was flying when he and his copilot were wounded by small-arms fire was extensively damaged in the airframe as well as the hydraulics and avionics components.

COURTESY OF SSGT CARSON D. CLOVER, USMC



COURTESY OF SSGT CARSON D. CLOVER, USMC



COURTESY OF SSGT CARSON D. CLOVER, USMC

When the CO's war-torn Phrog was inspected, holes from at least 40 rounds were found in the aircraft. Note the bullet holes in the fuselage just above the ramp in the above left photo, and the holes along the side of the helicopter in the above right photo.

name was all we really needed to know because Baghdad was the location of the closest hospital. The medical facility in TQ only could handle minor injuries, and apparently, our commander required a higher echelon of care.

After being instructed to return to our spaces and await word, the walk back was nearly silent. All of those who weren't on the flight line when the bird came in or hadn't had the uncontrollable urge to sprint after it were just standing around. I didn't have answers to any of their questions. All I knew was that our CO

was shot and that they flew him away. Understanding the nature of our mission, when we flew injured personnel out, it was always in hopes of helping them, but it was known that their injuries were almost always grave. Helping strangers and sending them on was one thing, but now one of our own was gone. He was our leader, our mentor, the head of our family. The uncertainty that builds behind that idea is mind-numbing. All we knew was that our CO was shot and they flew him away.

Within half an hour, the executive offi-

cer, LtCol Jim Kennedy, and the sergeant major, SgtMaj Charles Booker, brought us into a school circle and provided details for us.

After responding to a casevac, the CO and 1stLt Clifton were flying northwest of Fallujah when their aircraft took large amounts of small-arms fire from both sides of their flight path by anti-coalition forces. This barrage caused multiple system failures to include a punctured hydraulic pressure line and a flash fire that traveled throughout the entire cabin.

A 7.62 mm round penetrated the cockpit

and hit LtCol Coffman directly in his protective chest plate. This caused the projectile to fragment and ricochet. One of those pieces shot upward and struck LtCol Coffman again, this time ripping right through his jawbone. Other fragments flew across the cockpit striking 1stLt Clifton, causing minor facial wounds. A rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) exploded on the aft ramp of the helicopter, creating a fireball that burned two-thirds of the way through the cabin and injured the aircrew. The gunfire also struck the avionics closet and damaged both internal and external communications. Even while flying under only hydromechanical power and with no communication or navigational capabilities, LtCol Coffman was able to assist 1stLt Clifton in flying their damaged bird back to TQ.

Within a day we learned that LtCol Coffman had been stabilized in Baghdad, sent to Ramstein, Germany, and then processed to National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md. Doctors there would have to reinforce the injured section of his jaw with a titanium mesh. He would then have his jaw wired shut for some time to allow it to heal properly. Fear and uncertainty created a kind of lethargy that lasted a few days. Even without our CO, we still had a mission to accomplish and aircraft to maintain. We knew that bell would ring again and that someone else would need our assistance. We pushed through and found new focus.

Once the CO's damaged Sea Knight was towed back to our line and into a maintenance hangar, we called on a civilian team from Al Asad to assist in inspecting the war-torn Phrog. They discovered holes from at least 40 rounds throughout the airframe and damage to several hydraulics and avionics components.

The following weeks proved to be both busy and challenging. During July 6-10, both the living spaces and the flight line work spaces were hit by almost a dozen mortar and 107 mm rocket indirect fire attacks. The Greyhawks were fortunate to sustain no further injuries. Without the casevac tempo ceasing, HMM-161 also hosted the aviation combat element from the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit and familiarized them with the missions and area of operations; hosted LtCol Oliver North, USMC (Ret) and his news crew for a few days; and also were paid a visit by the Commandant, General Michael W. Hagee.

By the end of July, we had flown 114 casevac missions, transporting almost 200 injured personnel throughout Iraq, one of whom was our very own.

Even though the pace did not slow in August, there were several reasons to be



COURTESY OF BGEN DAVID COFFMAN, USMC

**LtCol Coffman, left, and his copilot, 1stLt Clifton, stand behind the corpsmen and crew who were flying with them on July 5, 2004. Coffman returned to Iraq to see his squadron home at the end of their deployment. It took hundreds of maintenance hours, but the CO's Phrog was repaired before his return.**

hopeful. We organized teams within the maintenance department to focus on returning the damaged aircraft to the fight. Airframes mechanics began patching holes, replacing and fabricating lines and performing structural repairs. Avionics technicians started rewiring all of the burnt wire bundles and replacing components. All of the divisions in maintenance devoted any manpower or free time they had to the task of reviving this aircraft. Within a mere 33 days and hundreds of maintenance man-hours, we called for a test crew, and aircraft 110 flew that same

day. After being riddled with bullet holes and having had an RPG explode across the tail, the bird was back on task awaiting the next ring of the bell.

With our relief squadron coming in and the advanced party members returning home, the light at the end of the tunnel burned brighter when we heard that LtCol Coffman had not only been released from the hospital, but had made it back to Marine Corps Air Station Miramar, Calif., to greet our first wave home. His jaw was wired shut and sutures still fresh, but he was there.

However, none of that prepared us for Aug. 22. That evening, as we were forming up to receive some kind of word about our upcoming retrograde, shock and elation rippled through the masses as LtCol Coffman stood there in front of us! Not three days after the doctors cut the wires in his jaw, our CO boarded a plane and made it back to us. This action proved to us that he would keep his word that we all would return home together, and on our terms. That was the day I realized that our Marine Corps heroes are not just names we repeat or read in the pages of history books, but that they are here serving in our ranks now, their stories just not yet told.



USMC

**Coffman received a Purple Heart for his wounds in Al Anbar. Now BGen Coffman serves as the Deputy Commanding General, I Marine Expeditionary Force and Commanding General, 1st Marine Expeditionary Brigade.**

*Author's bio: SSgt Carson Clover is the airframes staff noncommissioned officer in charge for Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron (Reinforced) 163 at MCAS Miramar.*

