Clovis Jones, Jr.

July 15, 1963 - May 27, 1986
Vietnam, Japan, Philippines,
Guam, Singapore, United States

Divine Moments

An Interview with Clovis Jones, Jr.

By Jamie Guido, Cactus Shadows High School

Clovis Jones, Jr. was born on December 14th of 1945 in Dawson, Georgia. He enlisted in the army on July 15, 1963, for the purpose of becoming a pilot. However, he would serve a tour as an infantryman in Vietnam and get to visit multiple locations such as Guam, Singapore, the Philippines, and Japan.

At the age of four years old, he already knew he wanted to become a pilot. Reactions from his peers after his revelation were a mix of fear and admiration. The origin of Clovis's fascination with planes was indirect in the sense he was never told about a pilot's profession. It sparked from a lesson in Sunday school, where Clovis and his peers received cards containing Bible verses and a picture. One specific card included a picture of Jesus Christ with sheep lying about his feet, and one day while playing in a shaded, sandy road, he noticed altocumulus clouds in the sky that caught his attention and reminded him of that card he acquired in Sunday school. While beholding the clouds in the sky, the thought came to him that he wanted to become a pilot. He considered it a strange reaction to claim he would like to become a pilot when he never recalls hearing the word before the moment he said it.

Clovis recalls two more what he names "divine moments" which influenced him further to pursue his desire to become a pilot. Pecan orchards were on either side of his family's property. While playing in one of the orchards at age 12, he noticed two jets that he remembers as F-86s. The jets were flying north, made a turn to the west, and disappeared. Shortly they both came flying back to the east below the limbs of the pecan trees about two feet off the ground. The lead pilot's helmet was eye level to Clovis as he watched in complete awe. This amazing event left him with eyes as big as saucers and the feeling he felt at four years old of wanting to be a pilot.

His third divine moment occurred while he was an upperclassman in high school. He saw around a hundred helicopters from Fort Benning flying south by southeast in a huge formation that seemed to blanket the sky. Standing in fascination, again he knew what he wanted to do.

While still in high school, Clovis set out to rent an airplane. He started by

getting a job as a janitor in his church, which paid $14 per month, although he needed $20 to rent an airplane and pay the instructor's fee. Clovis understood his earnings were not going to be a sufficient means of achieving his dreams. When recruiters came to his school, he surpassed his peers in aptitude tests including the aptitude test for aviation. Instead of Warrant Officer Flight Training, the recruiter placed him in Airborne Infantry. At Fort Gordon in Georgia he became the top trainee in his Basic Training Company, C-8-3.

In Clovis's senior year he wrote a term paper on Vietnam and declared war with them inevitable; two years later in August of 1965 he boarded the *USNS Geiger* in Savannah, Georgia, that would carry him to the Vietnam War. On the ship to Qui Nhon, the most memorable aspect was the unbearable heat. Clovis remembers that his skin peeled two times from spending daylight hours on the deck of the ship. When he left for Vietnam he was a point man in Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry (Airborne), 1st Air Cavalry Division; however, he was transferred to Headquarters Company while at sea. Being docked in a harbor in a war zone was not the safest place so unloading was welcomed. Getting off was a relief for Clovis from the heat and humidity. The Headquarters Command Section boarded a Sikorsky S-64 *Skycrane* helicopter with an attached people pod and flown to "The Golf Course." The main heliport at Camp Radcliffe near An Khe was a combination of flat and rolling terrain that was beautifully landscaped and manicured like any top level PGA golf course—hence, its name. After landing they walked to their company area where they received a briefing, pitched pup tents, and were sent on a mission that night.

In Vietnam, part of Clovis's time was spent pushing papers, but he also delivered the troops their mail and spent his time as the liaison man between Battalion Headquarters, the unit commanders, and platoons deployed on operations. He created a connection with the people to whom he delivered mail and they shared with him care packages, news and music from home, and their personal lives. Having these relationships, the most devastating part of the job was having to document and verify soldiers Killed In Action (KIAs). Clovis found it very straining to identify people he knew. During missions in the field, when the casualties came back in the helicopters, they were laid on the ground covered by ponchos, after which Clovis had to match the information on the Graves Registration form, the Company Roster, and dog tags, retaining one portion of the Graves Registration form for the Battalion's records. The dog tags were usually worn around the neck on a chain, and one on each boot. Sometimes they were placed between the teeth of the KIA, depending on what part of the body was left. He had to write the notices to the recorded next of kin, although sometimes the "official" next of kin were not always someone with whom the soldier still had a close relationship. So, Clovis wrote an additional letter to a person he knew the individual was closest to. He never received a letter in response, but he continued to do so, knowing it was the right thing to do. One buddy was killed by friendly fire 15 seconds after Clovis walked away from him. The most traumatic experience, though, was his attempt to remove a bullet from the head of one of his buddies from Detroit, thinking this would bring him back to life. These were men who had shared family photos with him, or food or music they had received in the mail he delivered. He admitted he cried over these deaths when he was 19 years old, but soon got to the point where he didn't cry at the deaths of his fellow soldiers. It was years later that he cried when he talked about these losses.

Clovis's tee shirt with a map of the Ia Drang area

Clovis was deployed on missions with the line units. He found himself at the Cateckia Tea Plantation after headquarters was deployed to the Ia Drang Valley in October of 1965. Shortly before pulled out of the Valley on November 13, 1965, the 1/8th Cavalry was aware there was a battalion of North Vietnamese moving west through the plantation. Clovis thought perhaps an attack was imminent, but eventually it was discovered the North Vietnamese were pulling back

because the plantation boss paid protection money to the NVA. As a point of history, November 14, 1965, was the date that the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry were inserted into LZ X-Ray and soon surrounded by NVA Regular soldiers. This fight is depicted in the movie *We Were Soldiers* and chronicled in the book *We Were Soldiers Once and Young*.

Clovis's Cateckia Tea Plantation jacket from the Pleiku Campaign

During Operation Bong Son I, Clovis drove a jeep daily for weeks. Its floor was covered with sandbags, a .50 caliber machine gun mounted on the hood, an M60 machine gun mounted on a monopod, an M79 grenade launcher with ammunition, hand grenades, smoke grenades, and his M16, carrying mail and other documents from An Khe to Bong Son—alone. Clovis had the feeling that he was in a sniper's scope at one point or another. On occasion, when deployed with Charlie Company, he served as point man with his old squad. To be a point man, one has to have a keen sense of navigation and be able to observe his surroundings with a careful eye. Clovis divulged that he believes we have more than just five senses, and these senses, such as that feeling of ultra-awareness, would be essential to a point man. Another task in this job description is to find booby-traps and avoid them. One of the more notorious traps was the punji stake—a sharpened bamboo stick covered in feces and sharpened enough to penetrate boots.

Some of the weaponry supplied was subpar, such as the M16. If a round were left in overnight and the weapon fired the next morning, only one round would fire and the weapon would jam because the cartridge would not eject. This problem persisted until the chamber of the weapon was chrome-plated. The guns had to be cleaned and maintained constantly. The AK-47, a Russian assault rifle, was deemed a more appropriate weapon because it was not as high-maintenance. The gun could be left in the mud and still fire at a moment's notice. The leading edge men acquired chromium-plated M16s. Some men preferred to go back to M14s, but Clovis always preferred the M1 as he found it a more stable weapon. Unfortunately, there were none in Vietnam to be issued to his unit.

During his first tour, Clovis says he was on the go almost every day. He found himself in Pleiku, Cateckia Tea Plantation, Plei Me, Mang Yang Pass, An Khe Pass, Happy Valley, Phu Cat, Qui Nhon, Bong Song, and Camp Radcliffe. It seemed as though he was always in a jeep, truck, or helicopter, going to or from someplace. Clovis understood the danger around him. Of course, things happened and people became frightened, but he knew he needed to push through.

Clovis departed nearly a month early from the airport at Camp Holloway in Pleiku and got rotated back to the United States. He had applied to flight school again and again during his time in service. At a later time, Clovis discovered he had been accepted to flight school but his division was not letting any of its soldiers leave the war zone to attend any schools back in the U.S. The recruiters at the Oakland Army Replacement Depot were attempting to have Clovis reenlist, but not knowing he had been accepted to flight school, he left the Army.

Clovis attended Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia, in the fall of 1966 by accepting a scholarship he was offered; he studied pre-med for one semester. Toward the end of this first semester, he received a phone call from the Department of Army, inquiring if he was still interested in flight school. Of course, he responded positively. Clovis had agreed to attend flight school not only because he had been dreaming of doing so since he was four years old, but partly because he had kids as young as 14 waiting for him in his room all the time wanting to hear war stories. His roommates were not too fond of this and neither was Clovis. He found himself leaving early in the morning and

CLASS 67-25 B-4 6TH W O C COMPANY
U. S. ARMY PRIMARY HELICOPTER CENTER--FT. WOLTERS, TEXAS

FIRST ROW:
TODD, JOHN E.
VEHLING, ROBERT W.
VEHLING, RICHARD W.
VASQUEZ, RODERICK M.
VAN EATON, ERROL E.
WITTKOP, DAVID P.
WATTS, RICHARD A.
WHITE, THOMAS J.
WOODROW, DAVID M.
TOMLINSON, DAVID C.
WATTERS, DAVID M.
PERRY, STEPHEN JOHNSON
SALSER, TERRY L.
MONROE, ROBERT B., JR.
MURRY, OTTO, IV
WOOD, TOMMIE E.

SECOND ROW:
TORTELLO, VERNON D.
TOWLE, BRUCE A.
JONES, CLOVIS, JR.
WHILAND, CYRIL F.
WOMACK, EDWIN C.
TURNER, NORM M.
ZARRANO, A. L.
WRIGHT, DENNIS FREDRICK
BURNS, DAVID A.
ESCHENT, JOACHIM WALTER
UEBLER, ROY N.
WEATHERLY, JOHN M.
WARD, JAMES G.

THIRD ROW:
YONICK, ALBERT R.
WENTHERSON, FRED
WILSON, JOHNNIE T
WOOD, WAYNE T.
WESTMORELAND, ALLEN R.
TIFFANY, HAROLD E., III
WOLFF, LESLIE D.
WILLIAMSON, ROBERT L.
WICKWARE, MICHAEL S.
BICKS, JOSEPH E.
HESS, GERALD L.
WILLIAMS, LLOYD L.
WILSON, TIMOTHY JOHN
VIGEN, ROBERT G.
LEE, NATHAN S.
ROBINETTE, HARVY N.
TOWNE, MARK L.

Clovis's graduating helicopter class at Fort Wolters, Texas

coming home late at night to avoid being interrogated. This was not a good situation for him.

Command Sergeant Major Herbert P. McCullah from Fort Campbell was like a second father to Clovis. He kept up with where his troops were discharged as well as those on active duty. Consequently he knew that Ernie Wheelwright had been drafted as fullback for the Atlanta Falcons and was living in Atlanta. Sergeant Major McCullah connected the two of them because they had served in the same unit at Fort Campbell in 1964. Ernie picked Clovis up every Friday he was not playing a game out of town. This was a saving grace for Clovis from being around kids all the time. The transition from being surrounded by men he respected to professors who were just "talking heads" and fourteen-year-old kids was drastic; however, being around someone whom he could relate to made college life much more tolerable.

Clovis reenlisted at Fort Campbell in February 1967 for the purpose of attending flight school and reported to Sergeant Major McCullah's unit. Following the annual IG inspection, Sergeant Major McCullah took Clovis to Division Headquarters for in-processing. The personnel sergeant and McCullah had known each other for years, so McCullah had Clovis assigned to his unit. His unit was over a year behind in suspense dates (dates by which you must have documents turned in to a higher headquarters). Clovis was assigned to Battalion Headquarters as an S-1 Clerk. Some troops coming back from Vietnam suffered from substance abuse. There was a marked lack of morale that was not a part of the environment Clovis was accustomed to. He worked early in the morning and late at night, thoroughly processing paperwork. By May of 1967, he had caught the unit up in the paperwork and suspense dates. Coincidentally, during his first R&R trip he had met a pilot to whom he disclosed he wanted to be a pilot, and the pilot had remembered him. This situation worked out to where Clovis was doing work the battalion needed to have done, working for a pilot whom he respected, and of course for Sergeant Major McCullah.

Clovis went to the Warrant Officer Primary Flight School at Fort Wolters, Texas, where he flew H-23 helicopters. After completing the PreFlight portion of Warrant Officer Flight Training, a student could be assigned to a fixed-wing class or a rotary-wing class. He found himself in a rotary-wing class, but it didn't matter too much to Clovis because he just wanted to fly. In primary he learned control over the helicopter and the technique for hovering, as well as takeoff, landing, steep approaches, and landing on more challenging areas such as pinnacles and confined spaces. The instructors there were infamous for cutting the power on a person as a test to see if he could find a safe landing spot, but if they did not want him to take it all

the way to the ground, he would be told to recover at 100 feet. One of the more challenging parts of flight school was hovering because there are multiple factors to consider inside the helicopter as well as conditions outside the helicopter to compensate for. The helicopter is an extension of the pilot, so if the pilot is stressed and erratic, the helicopter will act correspondingly. If the pilot is calm and concentrated, it will be easier to control the helicopter.

Throughout flight school, Clovis was a very diligent pupil. As a former pre-med student, he took a similar approach to flight school as a doctor would to medical school. He wanted to know every part of this helicopter inside and out, just as a doctor would need to know the human body like the back of his hand. As a Black man going through primary, there were a lot of people who would have liked to see him fail. Even the grading system was skewed against Clovis. If he deserved 100% on a test, the system was worked so it would not allow him anything over the mid-80s. He could not just make his way through school trying to match other students; he had to transcend other students in his academics. Clovis took on this challenge not only to make it better for himself, but for the next Black person coming along, with the idea that they would be judged correspondent to his actions. There was also a group of White Power students attending the same school as Clovis, claiming they were members of the Ku Klux Klan as if to scare him, but Clovis had been to hell and back and was not afraid of "anything that walks, crawls, or flies." No one would room with Clovis for fear he would be attacked by these men, but it was definitely okay with him to have a room to himself. He was not going to listen to those cowards who were telling him they were going to beat him up in the middle of the night. In a sense, Clovis felt like he was back in combat because he had to be constantly on watch. Eventually these threats subsided, although through these series of events he learned that even though people mistreat you, you should not mistreat anyone.

Clovis knew going into his second tour that it would not be as difficult as the first because instead of being on the ground, he would be in the air. Being at the controls with firepower was an advantage. In 1968 Clovis flew into Tan Son Nhut Airbase in Saigon on a C-141, then on to Phu Bai on a C-130. Phu Bai was the nearest airport to Camp Eagle, his new home for the next year. His unit, the 4th Battalion, 77th Aerial Rocket Artillery was based on the west side of Camp Eagle, which was more expansive than Clovis's experience on his first tour. In Camp Eagle there were actual buildings instead of tents, and a mess hall when he arrived. Clovis was in the Advance Party for A Battery, and after preparations were made for the main body that was yet to come, he was sent on missions. There was only one battery, initially, to cover the entire area of operations, and his platoon was sent to Camp Evans to cover the northern section of the area. Clovis's obligations were to support troops on the ground in terms of firepower. He could fire as close as 50 meters from friendly troops. He flew the perimeter on a regular basis, but noticed whenever there were woodcutters, there were mortar attacks other than on Sunday nights.

Clovis's model helicopter

From the time that the First Battery of Aerial Rocket Artillery (ARA) helicopters arrived at Camp Eagle, mortars were fired at 6:00 p.m. every Sunday, like clockwork. The woodcutters were taking mortar rounds from Hue and positioning them so they could be used to attack Camp Eagle. These deposits of ammunition were mapped, and a coordinated artillery raid was executed at midnight by four *Cobra* attack helicopters led by Clovis, with illumination provided by conventional artillery. This raid prevented Camp Eagle

from being attacked the night when every U.S. military base was attacked from the DMZ to a few miles north of Da Nang. That night and into the next day was the longest amount of time Clovis spent flying a helicopter without getting out of the helicopter or shutting the engine down. The need for ARA support meant Clovis spent about 15 hours in his helicopter.

On his second tour there were long-range patrols—Special Operations missions—seemingly run from the States. Sometimes there was a huge disconnect between the patrols on the ground and the people who thought they were running the operation but were not physically on the scene. The person giving orders did not know what was happening and so Clovis would do what he knew was necessary no matter what was coming through the radio; he would deal with the consequences later.

There was one mission near the A Shau Valley. It was night and raining at the time. Clovis's wingman decided to go back, but Clovis heard the firefight over the radio. He figured as long as he could read a map and navigate, he was going to shoot for the men on the ground. Thankfully they had strobe lights. Clovis only had two chances here. He closed one eye and shot the first rocket, losing night vision in that eye from the glare of the rocket. Firing continued until the ground commander said they would be okay for the night. With no night vision left, navigating his way back was going to be a challenge. So at full power he made climbing turns until above the mountain tops and further climbed to 14,500 feet above the clouds and flew east for approximately 30 minutes until out over the South China Sea. Then he descended toward the radio beacon at Phu Bai Airport. Breaking out of the clouds, he saw the lights of Phu Bai and then flew back to Camp Eagle.

Every day he was on a mission he was shot at, but never hit. He managed to save troops from getting killed and injured, partly due to his experience from being an Infantryman on the ground during his first tour. The closest he ever got to being hit was south of Camp Eagle. He was shooting for an infantry unit, flying parallel to a ridge line. A ground guy notified him he had taken fire, but Clovis could not hear shots in the closed *Cobra*. He decided to break left while his wingman went in to shoot. Clovis came back in again, only to be told he was taking fire. He notified his wingman he was going to break right this time to engage his target. This put him head-on with the guy shooting at him. Clovis shot rockets his way until he saw the bunker and knew where to aim. He closed in on the nearby mountain before pulling up and off the target.

About once a month, the men had fun at Eagle Beach. For a day or two they were allowed a stand-down to drink beer, play in the water, and be crazy. The battalion got together other nights to watch movies and listen to music. Clovis did experience more discrimination on his second tour compared to his first. There was one award he had earned but did not receive because it was reported that Clovis had caused a crash, although he had saved lives and the helicopter. Years later, Clovis read the report and saw it had been changed. Fitting his approach to setbacks, Clovis took away a life lesson from his hardships. He feels it is better to earn an award you did not receive than to receive an award you did not earn. Clovis spent a year on his second tour in Vietnam from December 10, 1968, to December 10, 1969.

Clovis became an academic instructor at Fort Rucker, Alabama, and stayed there for about a year and a half. While at Fort Rucker, the army decided there was a race relations issue so they pulled two instructors, one black and one white, from every major service group and sent them to Fort Benning. It was there someone from the Pentagon asked Clovis, "Why are you [only] a Second Lieutenant?" Shortly thereafter, he was promoted to First Lieutenant. It was only a matter of days after this that he became a Captain.

Clovis attended an advanced course as a student at Fort Sill, which was like a Master's degree in Field Artillery. After the advanced course he was assigned to the 2nd Battalion of the 2nd Field Artillery, which was tube artillery. His battalion commander was against Black officers. Clovis was denied a command position, even though he had all the required credentials. His commander would give him tasks at which he thought Clovis would fail. He was bent on trying to ruin Clovis's career. He was the reason Clovis finally decided to leave the Army in 1973.

After leaving the Army, Clovis joined the Georgia National Guard. There he was treated much like how McCullah treated him. With the Guard he received a fixed-wing transition. His job transferred him to California where he was recommended to Hughes Helicopters, primarily because of the connections he had in the Georgia Guard, and was offered a position to work on the *Apache* program. He worked there from the first months until Howard Hughes died.

After he was laid off, Clovis returned to

Clovis after successfully landing a Cobra *without a 90-degree gearbox or tail rotor*

Atlanta for one year of Pre-Medical school while still flying for the Guard. He could have been a good doctor, but flying was his passion. Clovis became a Xerox corporate pilot and later flew for Western Airlines, Air California, and FedEx in Memphis, which lasted for 22 years. In 2005 he retired from FedEx.

Throughout his service, Clovis came upon many profound lessons. He learned and understood situations people can only wish to understand. One of those things is that one person has influence. Become the person you want the world to see. Every person is here for a reason, is one of a kind, and has talents no one else has. War is destructive, not glorious, and fighting leads to more fighting. One should listen to the voice inside himself. Write down hunches, capture your thoughts, and engage in perpetual learning.

In August of 2014, Clovis was inducted into the Organization of Black Aerospace Professionals Hall of Fame. He was chapter President of the Arizona Chapter of the Tuskegee Airmen, which was an honor because he had the chance to befriend his heroes. Clovis experienced a few rough recent years. He underwent knee surgery, which required a six-year recovery, and was simultaneously diagnosed with all four strains of salmonella and Lyme disease. Following his recovery, he found himself in two car accidents within a two-year span. Ever since retirement, it has been one challenge after another, but Clovis is now on a recovery from all these setbacks and desires to fly again.