

# FROM HALIFAX TO VIETNAM, FOUR TIMES OVER



Charles Martin of Halifax, today (above) and during his wartime years in Vietnam (inset).

From humble origins, Martin went onto decorated Army career

By LIZA FULTON  
News & Record Staff

Growing up in the Town of Halifax at his home near the corner of the present-day Jiffy Store and Dollar General, Charles Martin was advised by then-Police Chief Woody Bane to join the military.

The advice from the late town chief, who would go on to become county sheriff, held up military service as a good way for Martin to stay out of trouble: "I was young and crazy," said Martin.

It was 1963, and that nudge from Chief Bane set Martin on the path to a decorated career in the Army, with four tours of duty in Vietnam, including action in combat. Martin rose through the ranks to become highly skilled helicopter mechanic. As a Staff Sergeant, he supervised crew

chiefs, gunners, and maintenance personnel assigned to a Cobra helicopter force with the First 101 Airborne in Phu-Bia. He later received the Bronze Star for his meritorious achievement in ground operations.

Martin rose from humble circumstances: one of nine siblings, with five brothers and three sisters, the way

they all survived was "we slept on top of each other," he recalled.

Before going to war in Vietnam, Martin had 15 weeks of basic training in Fort Jackson, S.C., then received advanced training for helicopters and tandem rotor helicopters at Fort Eustis in Virginia. Martin graduated as a

See MARTIN, page A8

## MARTIN

From page A1

Mechanics Crew Chief in May of 1963. He was given orders to go to APO-27 in Oakland, California.

"Nobody knew where APO-27 was, we went to the post office to ask," said Martin. (APO stands for Army Post Office.) Seven days later, he was placed on a helicopter headed to South Vietnam at Bien Hoa, the first of his four tours of duty in the Southeast Asia war zone.

Assigned as an H-21 Crew Chief, Martin was in charge of making sure helicopters were ready to fly and guns were loaded. For that first 11-month tour, Martin, along with a gunner, pilot and co-pilot, transported Vietnamese soldiers to join the fight.

Then Martin returned to Fort Eustis to train on a new helicopter, the Chinook.

"I didn't like the Chinook, it had too many maintenance complications," said Martin.

Martin was assigned to assist the 11th Air Assault in Fort Benning, Georgia. Martin traded off with a fellow crew chief to join to an outfit with a heavier craft, the Bell UH-1 Huey. President Johnson designated the 1st Cavalry 11th Air Assault as the First Call Air Mobile unit for Vietnam. Back across the Pacific he traveled.

"When we were en route to Vietnam, we had engine trouble and landed in Iwo Jima for the night to make repairs. We landed in the Cameron Bay the next day," said Martin of the trip.

His next 11-month mission was based in New Hana, in the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon. "We flew night and day, we flew from five hundred to a thousand feet in the air. It didn't matter how fast we flew and how close we flew to troops, no mission looked the same to me," said Martin. Every tour in Vietnam was for eleven months, unless your time was extended.

After more training in Fort Eustis, Martin graduated with Honors as Technical Inspector. He was certified on H-21, Chinook, Huey, 6-7 Whiskey, OH13, OH-23, CH-34, CH-37, and CH-54 Crane helicopters.

In 1967, Martin went back to Vietnam for a third tour of duty with the Fourth Infantry, this time assigned to a Cobra helicopter unit. The Cobra helicopters were categorized as light, medium, and heavy according to the amount of firepower the aircraft were loaded with. Martin was Ground Crew Chief, supervising 20 mechanics and four tech inspectors.

Next, Martin returned to Fort Walters, Texas for six months of further training. In 1969 he returned to Vietnam for a final tour of duty with the 4th Aviation Battalion. It was on this trip that Martin lost one of his best friends. The helicopter his friend was piloting was marked in the log book with a red "X," meaning it needed repairs and was not flight worthy. The UH-86 helicopter had a loose tail rotor. Only a company commander or maintenance officer could override the log book order to keep the craft grounded.

"It was 3:30 p.m. when I got the call to report to operations, the tail number was read over the radio as [the helicopter was] being shot down. The first thing in my mind, is 'who was piloting the helicopter?' I asked why the copter was flown, and the company officer nor no one else said

they signed off on it," said Martin.

His friend was found later at the crash scene, with two bullet wounds to the head. The crew chief was never found.

During that last tour, Martin was assigned to 158 Cobra Helicopters "the Red Skins" — as part of the First 101 Airborne in Phu-Bia. He was in charge of 24 Cobras: eight light, eight medium, and eight heavy. Then a Staff Sergeant E6, Martin supervised crew chiefs, gunners, and maintenance personnel. He got a free 30-day flight back to the U.S., traveling from Saigon to New Jersey to Halifax for 29 days of rest and relaxation.

His return to Vietnam came as President Nixon ordered the carpet bombing Vietnam in a futile bid to turn the tide of the war.

"Carpet bombing with B-52 bombs were dropping all over," recalled Martin.

"All radios were saying 'Save Khe Sanh' and send all Cobras to Khe Sanh. We got to Khe Sanh during the monsoon season. It rained for 30 days straight. We had all helicopters up on that mountain, and nothing was flying. When the rain stopped, the marines at the foot of the mountain were getting slaughtered.

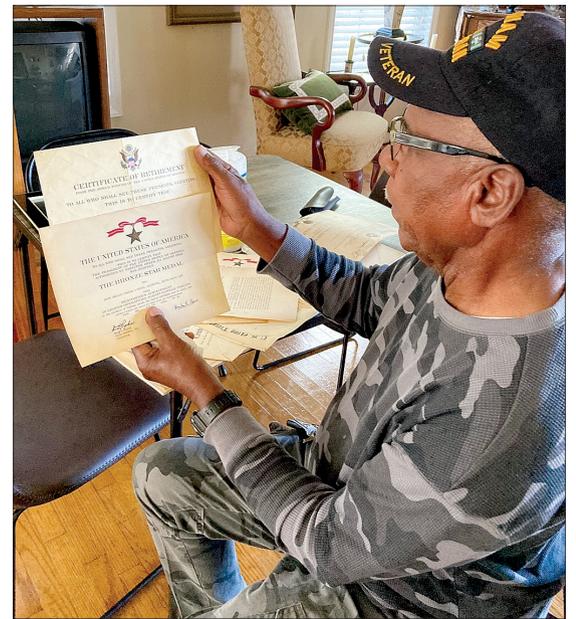
"One helicopter lost two hydraulic pumps, it could not fly or maneuver. We had two helicopters at our base in Phu-Bai needing parts. It was a no-no to cannibalize one to put [parts] on another.

I went back to Phu-Bai to get the needed parts and the helicopter came for me during the night landing in a sandbag revetment" a square formation of sandbags for a helicopter to land inside for protection. "While I was underneath the helicopter loading the nine barrel mini gun, the pilot accidentally keyed the mini gun when he meant to key the microphone.

"This caused the barrel to spin counter clockwise and snapped my finger. The medic came and repositioned my finger with a splint and the next morning I was sent to the hospital in Saigon." With only 13 days left on this tour, Martin was ordered to return to the States. By 2 p.m. that afternoon, I was boarding an ambulatory helicopter that carried soldiers in stretchers and other wounded service members who, like Martin, were able to walk away under their own power.

After stops throughout the U.S. as the helicopter headed east, Martin was last to disembark, climbing into a medic Jeep at Fort Lee to go to the hospital in Richmond.

Recovering from his injury, Martin was assigned to Fort Lee aviation, where he oversaw three plush Cobra helicopters, equipped with coffee makers, radio, and leather seats. Helicopters made for Colonels and Generals. Then in 1975, in Fort Campbell, Kentucky, where Martin served as 101st Airborne Aviation



Charles Martin holds up the certificate of his Bronze Star from Vietnam.

Chief Tech Inspector, pilots who were stationed here would see Martin's name listed on the inspections records.

"You had these raggedy helicopters in 'Nam," they would tell him. Martin smiled at the recollection, proud to know these helicopters survived along with him.

In 1977, Martin was reclassified from Aviation to Field Artillery as Chief of Fire and Battery, known as "smoke." He was ordered to go to Hunua, Germany

to oversee use of the new self-propelled Howitzer cannon. Martin made sure the guns were kept clean and ready to fire.

He returned to Fort Irving California and was stationed there until 1979. Moving to Fort Carson, Colorado, he was discharged in December of 1982 as Sargent First Class E7 Chief of Fire & Battery.

Martin received the Bronze Star Medal for his meritorious achievement in ground operations against hostile forces in Vietnam.

Eight years ago, he was diagnosed with prostate cancer, associated with Agent Orange which was used during his combat in Vietnam. Martin has completed hormone treatment, five days of radiation for five weeks, and 72 seed implants — and today is living cancer-free.

Martin moved back to Halifax in 1985. He is married to Gwendolyn Womack Martin, an LPN at Berry Hill Nursing Home. He also is the proud father of Kimberly D. Fearrington.

# Veterans Day Sale

*You Will Love Our Cars!*

**Your \$500 Test Drive Dealership!**  
COME IN, TEST DRIVE, & REGISTER TO WIN!

*Saluting Those Who Serve!*

<b>2015 NISSAN ROGUE</b> <b>\$13,772.00</b> 	<b>2017 CHEVROLET CRUZE</b> <b>\$15,182.00</b> 	<b>2019 NISSAN SENTRA S</b> <b>\$15,624.00</b> 
<b>2018 KIA FORTE LX</b> <b>\$15,994.00</b> 	<b>2017 CHEVROLET CRUZE LT AUTO</b> <b>\$15,990.00</b> 	<b>2018 SUBARU OUTBACK 2.5I PREMIUM</b> <b>\$23,158.00</b> 
<b>2019 NISSAN PATHFINDER S</b> <b>\$25,550.00</b> 	<b>2017 FORD EXPLORER XLT</b> <b>\$26,955.00</b> 	<b>2019 TOYOTA 4RUNNER SR5</b> <b>\$34,877.00</b> 

**90 Days No Payments with approved credit • 3 Mo., 3,000 Mile Powertrain Warranty**  
**FREE State Inspection as long as you own your car**

**1426 Wilborn Ave., South Boston, VA**  
(old Crowell Motor building)

**434-404-3527**

**www.terryofsouthboston.com**

MONDAY THRU FRIDAY 9 AM TO 7 PM • SATURDAY 9 AM TO 5 PM

Not responsible for typographical errors. Payments do not include taxes, tags and \$589 processing fee.