

Flying history grounded at McKinley firing range



Photo by Kari Hawkins

REDISCOVERED MEMORIES— Retired Master Sgt. David Brown, left, and retired Chief Warrant Officer 5 Mike Kather stand in front of an OV-Mohawk observation and electronic reconnaissance airplane that is part of an OMEMS training area at McKinley Range. Brown was a Mohawk technical observer who did four tours in Korea, and Kather is a Mohawk pilot who flew the aircraft during the 1980s and '90s.

Mohawk aircraft resurfaces as group celebrates reunion

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There's a lot of flying history on McKinley Range.

Amid the helicopters and an A-10 Thunderbolt airplane set up on the range for force training is an OV-1 Mohawk, a photo observation and electronic reconnaissance airplane used by the Army in Europe, Korea, the Vietnam War, Central and South America, Alaska, and Operation Desert Storm.

It is a military aircraft that is at the center of the 20th reunion of the OV-Mohawk Association Sept. 23-27 in Nashville.

Yet, the actual physical presence of a Mohawk on Redstone Arsenal was an interesting discovery for a former Mohawk pilot and technical observer who recently visited McKinley Range to see the military aircraft for themselves.

"Ten years ago, a friend (now deceased Mohawk pilot Mike Langer) told me a Mohawk had come to Redstone Arsenal at some time," said David Brown, a retired master sergeant and Mohawk technical observer.

"The Veterans Memorial Museum showed me pictures of the airplane out at Redstone Arsenal. So, I knew it was on the Arsenal. I just didn't know where it was."

With the reunion coming up, Brown got more curious. He searched Yahoo maps and found a satellite view of the Mohawk.

Coincidentally, he had recently met a former Mohawk pilot — Mike Kather — at a local Tennessee Valley Honor Flight event. Kather, who works for the Fixed Wing Product Office, was able to tell Brown where the Mohawk was located.

Brown also discovered that the Mohawk is the property of the Ordnance Munitions and Electronics Maintenance School. Brown received special permission from OMEMS to visit the Arsenal's Mohawk site, and, on Sept. 1, he, Kather and a group of Kather's co-workers met at McKinley Range to be escorted to the Mohawk.

Kather first discovered the Mohawk on an aerial map of Redstone Arsenal at Google Earth.

"You can't miss it. It has three tails and a funny looking bulbous nose," he said.

What they saw on the ground brought back memories, and showed the reality of decay and damage that is often the fate of aging and obsolete military hardware. The Mohawk's paint was faded, it was missing much of its instrumentation and its ejection seats, there was damage to the tail and it was in a general state of disrepair.

"There are so many guys that flew these," Kather said, reminiscing with his co-workers. "There are tons of guys and I'm one of the last ones. Some of those guys go back to the '60s."

The Mohawk's condition didn't mar Brown's memories of his four tours in Korea as a Mohawk technical observer. He recalled when he first fell in love with the idea of flying in a Mohawk.

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"I was stationed in Europe. I saw one flying around and decided I wanted to be up there rather than down here," he said.

In 1980, Brown transferred from the cavalry military occupational specialty to aerial intelligence specialist, and joined the 3rd Military Intelligence Battalion in Korea, where he was a Mohawk observer.

"I spent a lot of time surveying the border between North and South Korea. It was a great job because it was just you and a pilot flying and looking for targets," Brown said.

"We were looking for a lot of movement that showed something was going on or that North Koreans were up to something."

The Mohawk used the Side-Long Airborne Radar in its search for targets. The SLAR could look through foliage and map terrain, presenting the observer with a film image in just minutes after an area was scanned. The image was then split in two parts, one showing fixed terrain features and the other spotting targets. The information was then sent back to two ground stations through a datalink.

"This was real-time intelligence," Kather said. "The Army didn't want to wait until the plane gets back to process the film."

Other units flying the Mohawk were located at Fort Huachuca, Ariz., and the 15th Military Intelligence Battalion, Fort Hood, Texas; the 224th Military Intelligence Battalion, Savannah, Ga.; the 1st Military Intelligence Battalion, Wiesbaden, Germany; and the 2nd Military Intelligence Battalion, Stuttgart, Germany.

"When the Mohawk was retired in 1996 the last two units were in Korea and Savannah," Brown said.

Kather, a retired chief warrant officer 5, has 12,000 total flying hours in the Army's jets, helicop-

ters, RD12s, Mohawks and utility aircraft. He appreciated the opportunity to see the only Mohawk on Redstone Arsenal.

"In my job, we manage all the Army's current fleet. So this is a chance to see a part of history," he said, adding "when everything you've flown is in a museum, you know you're getting old."

Kather flew the Mohawk with the 2nd MI Battalion in the 1980s, the 3rd MI Battalion in the 1990s and the 224th MI Battalion from 1994-97. He explained to his co-workers the difficulties pilots had with the first Mohawk variant.

"The A model was called the widow maker," he said. "Engine failures were prevalent. When you took off at minimum speed, it had a tendency to flip right side over. They extended the wing 1½ feet on later models to increase the take off roll spring. The Mohawk had a huge engine and huge torque. As soon as it started to lose power, it required more and more airflow to lift it."

Even with the reputation of the earlier variant, Kather enjoyed the thrill of flying the Mohawk. It was designed to operate from short, unimproved runways, and to provide lots of maneuverability once in flight.

"It was a lot of fun because it would stall, fall and do loops. It was fully aerobatic. We had some nice tricks. It would do everything but aerial combat," he said. "For a short time, the Army did have rockets on them (along with heavy machine guns). The Mohawk is the only Army airplane to shoot down a MiG (North Vietnamese fighter jet). But weapons were taken off because the Army is prohibited from equipping fixed wing aircraft with weapons."

Brown and Kather remembered the challenge of working missions in the Mohawk.

"We would get graded on the film that came out of these things. The quality of the film depended on how steady the plane was and how accurate the SLAR was," Kather said. "It was important to the crew to get 100/100



Photo by Kari Hawkins

CLAIMING THE MOHAWK— David Brown attaches a OV-Mohawk Association sticker to the dash of the badly damaged Mohawk at McKinley Range. The association will hold its 20th anniversary in Nashville later this month.

— a 100 for the flight and a 100 for the coverage."

Taking film at 15,000 feet often left the technical observer in the dark as to what was actually going on down on the ground.

"We knew there was movement, but we couldn't tell what it was," Kather said. "But the ground stations could tell what it was from the film. At night, we used a flare and a strobe light to take film. But we didn't like doing that very much because it woke everybody up and made you a target."

As Brown examined the

Mohawk's cockpit, Kather talked about how pilots improvised with a coke bottle when ash trays were removed from Mohawks in the 1980s. Sure enough, as he was talking, Brown found a crumpled up Marlboro box and a Coke can in the Mohawk's cockpit. The discovery drew a laugh from the group. Brown then stuck a Mohawk sticker on the cockpit's dash.

Today, Mohawks can still fly, but they are no longer used by the Army. They can be found in military museums and with private owners.

Brown said there are 714 active members and 514 inactive members of the Mohawk Association. About 250 are expected at the late September reunion.

While Brown is very much part of the reunion activities, Kather indicated that he was not planning on participating in the reunion. But, as he left the McKinley Firing Range, he had a change of heart and started thinking how he could fit the reunion in on a weekend when he already had other travel plans.

"Maybe I could stop in on Friday," he said.