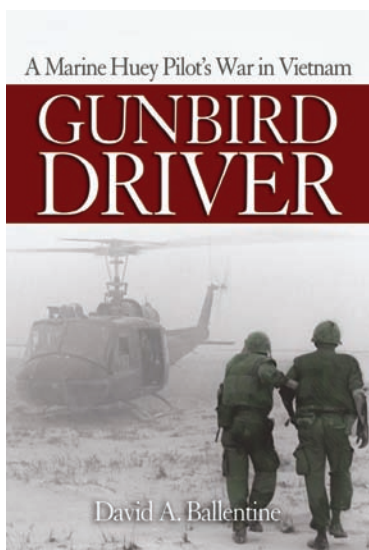


## **GUNBIRD DRIVER: A MARINE HUEY PILOT'S WAR IN VIETNAM**

BALLENTINE, David A. Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 2008, hardcover, 229 pages, \$33.98, ISBN: 978-1591140191

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David Ballentine's *Gunbird Driver: A Marine Huey Pilot's War in Vietnam* is a set of the author's memoirs from his tour as a Marine Corps lieutenant flying a UH-1E Huey in 1966-1967. What was immediately striking about the book was that the tasks assigned to him as a co-pilot and aircraft commander are strikingly similar to the contemporary tasks of tactical aviation despite the passage of 40 years. The Marine Corps doctrine governing the employment of tactical aviation differed little from contemporary Canadian doctrine on how tactical aviation can be employed. What differed was the nature of the airframe.

The book starts with a discussion of the UH-1E Huey and its specific characteristics. It was similar to the U.S. Army's UH-1B, but had additional specifications associated with being fit for sea duty and some limitations when compared with the Army. Early on, one gets a strong taste of the Marine Corps' sense that it is a 'poor cousin' to the U.S. Army with observations such as: "I flew a B model once at Hue with an Army lieutenant. I couldn't tell the difference

in how it flew, though I was envious of the copilot's ability to swivel the side-mount M-60s from his seat. Ours were fixed straight ahead; we had to be pointed at the target."<sup>1</sup> While he may have felt, as many in the Marine Corps have, that he belonged to the poorer and smaller of the two American armed services that engaged in land warfare, most Canadian readers would feel all the poorer if they read Ballentine's description of how many weapons his Huey carried. He stated that there were two M60 machine guns on each side as well as one for the Crew Chief and one for the door gunner for a total of six M60s. This was not all as there were 2.75" rockets mounted on both sides as well. It is no small wonder that this was nicknamed a 'Gunbird'.<sup>2</sup> While this was a significant amount of firepower, it left one wondering about how the volume and weight of ammunition affected the speed and range of the helicopter.

Ballentine belonged to VMO-6, stationed at Ky Ha near Chu Lai in the I Corps Tactical Zone (I CTZ). I CTZ was the area of operations primarily manned by the USMC in the northernmost section of South Vietnam. The acronym 'VMO' means Marine Observation Squadron. These squadrons were formed in the Korean War for the purposes of airborne forward air control (ABFAC) and airborne observation posts (Air OP) for the control of close air support, artillery and naval gunfire, but in the Vietnam War, they were primarily used for escorting transport helicopters as well as a series of other tasks. The latter included medevac, insertion and extraction of small units, reconnaissance, command and liaison, ABFAC / Air OP and resupply.<sup>3</sup> In short, they appeared to use the aircraft as much as possible for as many missions as possible within the airframe's limitations.

The book is divided into five different sections based on the author's time in country and level of experience. The first section discussed his arrival and time spent largely as a co-pilot for more senior pilots. The second section discussed his deployment aboard the USS Princeton and shipboard operations. This was the most fascinating part of the book as he described the special instructions associated with flying from a naval vessel with great detail in a very clear manner. Of note was his account of a command & liaison task where he almost ran out of fuel; this was instructive from both a leadership and technical perspective. The third section discussed his experiences in the middle of the tour; this was a pastiche of squadron life in camp and his most memorable missions. The next section was an account

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of escorting a deployment of a Special Forces team into the A Shau Valley in the face of a significant enemy presence. The conclusion was a summary of his departure from Vietnam and a snapshot of his life since the tour, where he left the Marine Corps to pursue a career in academia, but returned to military service after earning his doctorate in European History as the career prospects were poor at the time.

Readers, however, must take into account that Ballentine is merely trying to tell his story, that of a junior officer pilot, as he saw events at the time. This is not an academic work as the tone and language of the writing is very colloquial, thus capturing Ballentine's zeitgeist as a young lieutenant over 40 years ago. This, however, is somewhat hindered by the author's parenthetical comments about reminiscences; some of which come across as atonement for the behaviour of a young officer from the benefit of hindsight and the wisdom of greater experience. The writing style appears to have been a deliberate choice on the part of the author. By virtue of his experience (having retired as a Colonel) and his education, he is a far more capable writer. At present, he is a faculty member at Johnson City Community College, Overland Park, KS (Suburb of Kansas City) where he teaches introductory courses on Western civilization. He can be forgiven for the writing style as it suited the purpose of the book—to tell the story as it was experienced by the author.

This book would be of greatest interest to the Tactical Aviation community for obvious reasons. Yet it may be of interest to those that would want to see a glimpse of one helicopter pilot's perceptions of a series of different situations associated with different types of tasks—that is where this book has the greatest value.

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## Endnotes

1. David A. Ballentine, *Gunbird Driver: A Marine Huey Pilot's War in Vietnam*, (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 2008), p. xix.
  2. *Ibid.*, pp. xx-xxi.
  3. *Ibid.*, p. xxiii. Section 1, Chapter 2, B-GA-440-000 / AF-000, *Tactical Helicopter Operations*, (Ottawa, ON: Department of National Defence, 1998) states that tactical helicopters carry out the following mission types: Reconnaissance & Surveillance, Direction and Control of Fire, Provision of Fire Support, Combat Airlift / Tactical Transport, Logistical Transport and Communications Support.
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