

Ed “Too Tall” Freeman: Warrior

by Brian Ruby

Thirty-six years after the battle of the Ia Drang valley, November 14-16, 1965, Ed “Too Tall” Freeman was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor “for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty.”

As Executive Officer of the 229th Assault Helicopter Company, Captain Freeman played an important role in supporting the U.S. Army’s 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) during the battle. This battle was significant for two reasons. It was the first regiment-sized engagement between the U.S. Army and North Vietnamese Army regulars. It was also a significant operational test of the U.S. Army’s airmobile concept.

Ed “Too Tall” Freeman graciously agreed to this impromptu interview during HELI-EXPO 2006. Mr. Freeman had a long and illustrious military career, first serving in the U.S. Navy, then as a U.S. Army infantryman in Korea, where he earned a battlefield commission, and as a U.S. Army helicopter pilot in Vietnam. After retiring from the Army as a Major, Mr. Freeman continued to fly a variety of missions for the U.S. Department of the Interior.

ROTOR: Mr. Freeman, thank you very much for contributing your time to this interview. Let’s start with a little background—where were you born and raised?

Freeman: I was born on a farm in Neely, Mississippi, on 20 November 1927.



White House photo

President George W. Bush presenting the Medal of Honor to Ed Freeman, July 16, 2001.

ROTOR: When did your military career start?

Freeman: I quit high school at 17 and joined the Navy, in 1945. The only reason I went in the Navy is my mother wouldn’t let me go in the Army. I had a brother who was on Luzon island and he got a grenade in the face; he was in the infantry. I had a brother who was in the Navy and he was in the Philippines, in air-sea rescue and he didn’t get a scratch. So, she put two and two together and said, “that Navy is the safest place for you to be, and I’m not signing,” of course I was 17; she said, “I’m not signing, I’ll sign for the Navy, but not for the Army.” So I accepted, that’s how I wound up in the Navy.

ROTOR: That’s a great story. When you were in the Navy, what was your MOS (Military Occupational

Specialty, i.e. job description), and rank?

Freeman: I was a Seaman First Class, and I was the Skipper’s gig operator. Do you know what that is?

ROTOR: What used to be called a coxswain?

Freeman: Gig is his personal little boat that he goes to shore on, when in a port.

ROTOR: Ok.

Freeman: And then, after that...I applied to radar school, and when I got out of the Navy I was a radar operator, but my enlistment was up and I was leaving. I did not care for the Navy that much. I don’t like ships that much.

ROTOR: After the Navy, what did you do?

Freeman: I was in the Navy two

years, then came back and finished high school. I joined the Army after I graduated from high school in 1949. They sent me to Germany for four years, and I was over there, training. The Korean war broke out in 1950. I volunteered to go to Korea and they delayed it; I didn't get there until 1951.

ROTOR: What was your MOS in the Army?

Freeman: I was an engineer in the Army. When I got to Korea, they made us infantry. You know, of course, the engineers, combat engineers would do both. They cross-trained to fight, or do anything.

ROTOR: You made it to Korea in 1951, and what was your rank, then?

Freeman: In 1951, I was a Sergeant First Class (SFC). I was a SFC when I got there, and then I was promoted to Master Sergeant (MSgt). That was in four years and 11 months from the day I entered, from Private, I was a MSgt.

ROTOR: You made MSgt in four years?

Freeman: Four years, 11 months. I had them figured out.

ROTOR: That's impressive.

Freeman: I studied hard, took a lot of classes, and was a good soldier, because I knew that was my life, you know. I was going to be a lifer, that's what I chose, and I loved it, every minute of it.

ROTOR: In 1951 you made it to Korea, you were a SFC, and they said, "now you're infantry?"

Freeman: Sent me to, to Korea and I joined the 11th Engineer Combat Battalion, and I was given a sector of responsibility on the line at the time...like any regular infantry organization. We fought up and down the peninsula, there, you know, up and back a number of times. We couldn't figure out who was going to settle on what real estate and eventually we ended up at about the 48th parallel, somewhere in there...Now it was 53, the peace—ceasefire talks had been going on a long time.

ROTOR: That was the stalemate period?

Freeman: Somebody decided we should take Pork Chop Hill. Pork Chop was a five-fingered mountain top, facing North, and I was on Alligator Point, which was the farthest one to the East, and that was my mission, my unit's mission, and I took a company up there, of engineers fighting as infantry. There were 257 of us...started out, and I brought 14 off the hill, but not all of them was killed, a lot of them were just wounded and had been evacuated.

At the end of the battle, General Van Fleet, who was the commander of the 8th Army, and all forces in Korea, came up that hill, and decided I should be a 2nd Lieutenant...he gave me what is known as a battlefield commission.

ROTOR: How did you go from infantry officer to helicopter pilot?

Freeman: I'll back up, I had frost-bitten feet earlier on, 'cause all we had was combat boots. They summoned a medevac helicopter to come haul me to the local MASH hospital. This guy came up, and they took me to the helicopter, and I looked at him, he had a black leather jacket on, and he was clean shaven, looked like he had been fed pretty well and I said, Jesus, I've gotta be one of them. It took two years to become one of them, because of my height. They wouldn't let you fly if you were six foot four, you had to be six feet or less. Eventually, they changed the regulations, and for the remainder of the time, I flew.

ROTOR: I understand you met your wife at around this time?

Freeman: I met her in Columbus, Georgia when I got back from Korea. She had a brother, who married a gal from Georgia, when he was in jump school during World War II, and he settled there. She was down visiting her brother. A bunch of us 2nd Lieutenants went out and...I wound up with her as a date and of course, as they say, the rest is history, after 52 years now.

ROTOR: Have you had any children?

Freeman: We had one son, and we

adopted one son in Bogota, Colombia. I was working in Columbia, teaching the Colombian Air Force how to fly Hueys, and she came down, and we adopted a boy there, and he is now 42 years old. And doing very well, lives here in Boise, both of our sons live here in Boise.

ROTOR: What about grandchildren?

Freeman: One grandson who is in the Navy, an air traffic controller...in Fort Worth, Texas.

ROTOR: Fantastic. That must make you proud?

Freeman: Oh, absolutely, he's a fine young man. Loves his job.

ROTOR: You earned your pilot's wings in 55? What was your first operational assignment?

Freeman: Yes, in 1955, I started flying. I learned to fly in the Sierra Mountains in California. Right out of flight school they assigned me there, and they had nothing to do. No missions. So I took it on myself to go up in the mountains every day with sandbags on the helicopter, and teach myself how to fly in that environment. If I hadn't, I would've died because nobody around there paid much attention, nobody, everyone was kinda lackadaisical, there were about 65 pilots with no mission and they all just milled around.

ROTOR: When was this exactly?

Freeman: Fifty-seven, well 56-57 when I got out—first assignment, Stockton California. Anyway, I decided that I should learn to fly this bird or else it was going to eat my lunch. So, I packed it full of sandbags and started working as high as I could fly up to the hills. And then I'd take off sand bags and go a little higher, and eventually a little higher, and I figured out the method basically how to make that thing do what I wanted it to do in those mountains, and I consider myself lucky, because it was strictly a trial and error type thing. The Army had never thought of war at altitude, you know, per se, nor with equipment, helicopters, especially.

ROTOR: What was the most interesting, non-combat flying you've done?

Freeman: Well, I had an interesting year in Iran...in the mountainous terrain, there.

ROTOR: What year was that?

Freeman: I believe it was 1958. I went to Iran, after the shortest time in Stockton. I was with a topographical mapping organization, and they shipped me to Iran for a year, TDY (Temporary Duty), I flew a Bell 47 model...and covered the entire country, mapping it, and it was very difficult terrain. It was high and hot, of course; we measured 147 degrees Fahrenheit on the Persian Gulf one day, because we had to take temps involved in our mapping, temperatures played a part in figuring the density, that's how I remember it was 147 degrees. It was very high and hot...you had to use some finesse or you wouldn't have made it through.

ROTOR: The Bell 47 being an earlier helicopter make, that was—I've read—that the earlier helicopters tended to be a little underpowered.

Freeman: Very underpowered. It was non-turbocharged, just a standard aspirated engine, you know?

ROTOR: Right. Can I ask about the circumstances for which you were awarded the Medal of Honor? I understand it didn't happen immediately?

Freeman: No, the action happened on the 14th day of November 1965. In the Ia Drang Valley, they called it. It's right near the Cambodian border, five miles from the Cambodian border. And our mission was to insert a battalion of infantry in a landing zone (LZ) called LZ X-ray. It was just a name, it didn't mean nothing other than the fact to keep everyone on the same page of music...and the intel told us there was possibly enemy in the area. That's the very words they used, there's possibly enemy there. Boy, were they wrong. They weren't possibly, they were there, three regiments of them, dug in on a mountain, just to our left flank as we landed in the LZ. And the LZ would hold about 16 helicopters...we eventually made it a little larger by blowing some trees

up, brought some engineers in, but we made four landings and not a shot was fired. I thought, "Jeez-" it was Sunday morning, by the way, I didn't know that for 20 years, "cake-walk, beautiful, no one's killing me today." And the fifth time we landed, they had arrived. They had come out of the caves that they dug up there in that hill, and they were ready to fight. They were all brand new soldiers, and they had walked, there were three regiments of them, and they had walked from North Vietnam, in uniform, and they were infantry and they wanted to fight the Cavalry. And they put on a show. Anyway, all hell broke loose and they destroyed a number of helicopters, and quite a few people. Many wounded.

ROTOR: That was the 2nd Cav?

Freeman: First of 7th, Custer's old organization. First of 7th Cavalry, and they were tough.

ROTOR: Ok, 1st of 7th, that was the first unit in?

Freeman: Right. We staggered back and got back to the pick-up zone, and a few minutes after we arrived, I'm looking around figuring out what will fly and what won't fly, I was second in command, and I knew he (Lt Col Moore) had to have help, soon, you know, eventually he had to have ammunition, because a basic load is all GIs carried. [The] Commander, Lt Col Hal Moore, now a retired three-star General, he said, "no more helicopters can come into Landing Zone X-Ray," he said, "you can't survive." We all looked at each other, and sheezus, I knew, having been in a war, you gotta have a lot of ammunition. Forty-five minutes later he calls back, and said, "I'm requesting one volunteer to bring in ammunition, water, and to haul out my wounded. And medicine." I was the oldest man in my organization, and I was the only one who had been in combat prior to that, so I was in command, and I said, "I got it," and I took off. And my crew started coming out...and jumping in the helicopter. And I said, "get out." They said, "no sir we're going with you, we're a crew." I told Frank Murrino, he was my co-pilot, I said, "this may be the

longest day of your life." He said, "yes sir, I know that." I said, "Frank, it may be the last day of your life." He said, "Yes sir, I know that." I said, "Then buckle in, we're outta here." And I flew 14 and half hours that day without shutting down—hot refueled—I went through three helicopters. When I was at the battle site, I would tell them to radio the staging area to have a new helicopter ready because the enemy shot out my radios.

ROTOR: Go on.

Freeman: And I would tell the people on the ground there to call and have a new helicopter ready, a flyable helicopter and have it loaded, so there was no turnaround time to speak of...and at 10:30 that night I made the last trip into there [guided by] a kid holding a flashlight. And the Colonel came out and says, "Don't come back, I got enough to last me until daylight." At daylight I was repeating the process, except by then I was joined by some more people and we started, they had pushed the enemy back to about 100 meters by then, up to that time they were looking right in your eyeball while they shot you. Eventually, we got more helicopters in and brought people, another battalion in.

ROTOR: And the second, sort of reserve battalion, the second battalion was the 2nd of 7th?

Freeman: Right. But anyway we went back in and did that, and nothing happened, you know, like somebody asked me one morning, "you woke up on the 15th, did you think you'd done something special?" I said "you're right, I done my job and I done it well."

ROTOR: You certainly did.

Freeman: And that was my job. And we had the tools, and the helicopter happened to be a good tool in combat, it was the lifeline of that organization. Without it, they were gonna die, there's no doubt, so not going was not an option.

ROTOR: Before you finish the story behind your Medal, what did you do after Vietnam?

Freeman: I had a couple of tours as an instructor...which I didn't enjoy much because every one of them is trying to kill you, and I hadn't done nothing to them. I didn't make a very good instructor, I don't think. I told my instructor pilots—I was flight commander—and I kept telling the guys, "don't be a critic, anybody can be a critic, be a teacher while you're in the cockpit with these kids."

We had 5,500 students in residence, in Mineral Wells, Texas, primary helicopter school for the Army. This was my last assignment before I retired. We were running three shifts a day, flying. And they were trying to spit those students out, you know, in droves.

ROTOR: What time period was this?

Freeman: It was 67, 68 when I was there. I retired in 69...but they were not going about it right, and I was assigned to flight evaluation and I had to give rides to these students before they could go to the next phase, and I flunked them. I flunked lots of them, because they just didn't have it. They were just holding onto the helicopter and the general called me in and fired me. He said, "You can't do this, you've got to lower your standards." I said, "You may lower your standards, but I'm not lowering mine, I just got back from there and it's more honorable to let the enemy kill you than it is to kill yourself. And this is what you're going to do—put a load of grunts on a helicopter, and if he can't manage his equipment, he's going to die, because people shoot at you, you've got an added thing when you go on a combat assault, you know." I said, "it isn't just jolly-ho, nice landing in the jungle, in a rice paddy, you are very busy, you got the radios crackling, people dying, and you've got to function, and you've gotta be in total control." I said, "I'm not doing it." "Well, I can respect your thoughts," he said, "but I have a quota to put out." You know, they pushed him for more pilots. I said, "I feel sorry for you, because you are doing the wrong thing."

ROTOR: Did he have a reply for that?



"Too Tall" talks to some of the attendees at HAI's Annual Membership reception at the Hilton Anatole, Saturday, February 25.

Freeman: Well, he said, "I understand, but you're still fired." And I said, "I appreciate being fired because I couldn't work for you if that was the means we were going to go with." Because you see, I don't lie. I'm straightforward and I know what I'm doing when I'm flying a helicopter, and when I'm teaching how to fly. I said, "If you just want to send them kids over to get killed, that's what you're gonna do."

ROTOR: After you retired from the Army, I understand, you continued to fly for the U.S. government?

Freeman: In 1991, I retired. Not from the Army, I retired after I got my 20...thought I could enjoy retirement because I was 39 years old. I started to work for the Department of the Interior (DOI). I was a check pilot for them, and did many, many different types of work throughout the Northwest, and parts of Alaska; I used to fly in the summer up there, we had an office up there.

ROTOR: What kind of flying, exactly, did you do with the DOI?

Freeman: The office was responsible for all government aviation contracts, and my job was to ensure the pilot of the company that was the successful bidder, could perform the duties that he was supposed to perform on the contract. Whether

herding wild horses, fighting wild-fires, whatever we required. I'd actually give him or them a check ride, depending on the contract.

ROTOR: Just to confirm their qualifications?

Freeman: And to make sure they could perform the duties. I did that for the last, for 20 years. I have 17,000 hours of helicopter time, for a total flying time of 22,000 hours...that's 36 years behind the stick—55 to 91.

ROTOR: I was wondering if you would relate any experiences that stand out as especially interesting?

Freeman: Well, the first time I went to work for the government, was for the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). I was a line pilot, and I was flying helicopters, and airplanes, when they needed an airplane pilot. I'm rated in both, but I prefer flying helicopters, but my biggest enjoyment was—and I liked giving check rides, don't get me wrong, it was a challenge and sometimes you'd get into some hairy positions—as line pilot for BLM. I got to herd wild horses, capture big-horn sheep, shoot coyotes, and just numerous other jobs that were very interesting and challenging. That was an excellent job, I had a brand new JetRanger...flew all over the country supporting



Troop insertion. This UH-1 "Huey" is similar to the three that Ed Freeman flew on November 14, 1965.

BLM people in many, many different fashions.

ROTOR: That does sound interesting.

Freeman: That was a super enjoyable tour.

ROTOR: Certainly sounds like it, the variety alone, but you left it?

Freeman: I had a promotion, a chance for a promotion, and I went from there to the office of aircraft services.

ROTOR: Office of aircraft services, do they focus on firefighting?

Freeman: I did a lot of firefighting, but some of it I did as a contract pilot before I went with the government, I was chief pilot for Intermountain Helicopters for a couple of years, and we had contracts with the government. I did quite a bit of firefighting, which is a really horrible job. Hot, high, and in under-powered helicopters, you don't want to do that for a living. At least I don't.

ROTOR: The story behind your Medal starts up again just after you retired as a civilian pilot, correct?

Freeman: There was a regulation in the Army that, at one time, if you hadn't recommended somebody for an award in two years, it was over

with. The statute of limitations ran out; in the 90s, early 90s, Congress changed that.

ROTOR: So, how did it happen?

Freeman: I didn't have anything to do with it, because I wasn't involved in anything like that, and when it happened, my boss, Bruce Crandall, he called me, says, "Ed, I'm recommending you for the Medal of Honor." He was my company commander, and I'd known him for 50 years. He and I soldiered together, our kids grew up, you know. He was in Libya, I was in Iran, then he was in Costa Rica and I was in Nicaragua. So we were always together doing our thing, not together, but in two countries, and I knew him well. I said, "don't waste your time, Bruce." You know, we're talking 30 something years, here. He said, "no, I'm going to do it."

ROTOR: The phone conversation took place in 92, 93?

Freeman: Yes, somewhere in the early 90s, I'm not sure of the exact year, and he did it. And then it stayed in the Pentagon four and a half years, the request did, the recommendation...and it stayed in the Congress two weeks. The congressman from Arizona...the Navy guy—John McCain—is the guy that took

it through Congress, and recommended it, and of course that's all Congress has to do is, they just recommend, and the Department of the Army has the option of not approving it or whatever.

ROTOR: And obviously they approved it.

Freeman: By the way, I recommended my co-pilot and crew for the Medal of Honor, too. It's been four years and nothing has happened, but it's such a process. There's a general officers, well first it starts out with a historical committee, to make sure the battle really happened. Then it goes to a full Colonels' committee, and then it goes to a Generals' committee, and then it goes to the Congress, and if it goes through all of them, and any one of those committees can disapprove, it's history.

ROTOR: There's no appeal?

Freeman: There is no more appeal, it's over. So it's got a heck of a journey to go, before it gets there. And you know, there's only been, to the best of my memory, 4,000 awarded in the history of this country, including every war we've ever fought¹. We had six million people in uniform in WW II...they don't do that lightly.

ROTOR: No.

Freeman: And I guess, rightly so.

ROTOR: Yes sir.

Freeman: But...I'm very happy to have it, and I represent those who didn't live to even be considered, and there were a lot of them, a lot of young men died, and a lot of good men died.

ROTOR: What year were you awarded the medal?

Freeman: July the 16th, 2001.

ROTOR: Ok, and was it President Bush—

Freeman: President Bush, George W., yup, and I had a wonderful time up there, they really treated me well. I'm the first living recipient he awarded, he has awarded a couple posthumously. I was in Washington for three

¹ According to the Congressional Medal of Honor Society web site, 3,461 Medals have been earned since the first was presented in 1863.

days, and he posed for photographs with my entire family—my grandchildren, my sisters, nieces, and friends that could show up. I had a limit that I could have because of space. The second day, they inducted me into the hall of heroes at the Pentagon, General Shinseki, who I like very much, is a tremendous speaker. He was also there when we went back and showed the movie, at the White House and at the Pentagon, to the general staff there. And the third day—

ROTOR: The movie you are referring to is *We Were Soldiers Once?*

Freeman: Yeah, we went back, after the movie came out—We went back and showed it at the White House, there's a 40-seat theater in the White House, and then we showed it to the General Staff at the Pentagon, the next night. But my third day in Washington, I got to lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown, and that was really an honor to me, I have been there many times, but naturally never got to participate in anything like that, and that was a wonderful experience.

ROTOR: I don't know if this is something you want published or not, but I've heard that they are working on a second movie, or—

Freeman: Second book. Now that's a, I'm not sure if they are gonna get it done or not, but they claim that—we were up to the 40th anniversary of the battle, in Washington, in November, and General Moore mentioned that they were working on another book, and somebody hollered, says, "What's gonna be the title, General?" And he said, "We Were Soldiers Once, and Thin." I think he's...kidding, but who knows...he's a tough hombre. He was tough on training and that saved a lot of lives. If you're trained to perform the mission well, your chances of survival are a hell of lot better. I've always figured combat is kinda like Texas Hold'em, the poker game. You need some skill, and you need some luck, and if you've got both of them and manage them well, you have a better chance of surviving. And I do play seven-card stud



Twirly Bird, Ed Freeman was a popular speaker at the Twirly Bird's Annual Membership Reception.

poker, every two weeks, with a bunch of pilots at the National Guard there in Boise.

ROTOR: Mr. Freeman, thank you very much again, for taking time away from your visit to

HELI-EXPO 2006, to answer these questions.

Freeman: Sure, if you need anything else, just holler. 📞

Brian Ruby is the Communications Assistant for **HAI**.

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