

From High School to Gunships

Patrick J. Coakley, Chief Warrant Officer 4 (Retired),
United States Army

by Joe Del Campo

As a youngster, Patrick always wanted to fly, a passion he carried with him after graduating high school in Bristol, Connecticut in 1985. He had two goals in mind: Fly for the military which would satisfy his career goal and, more importantly, by doing so, he would accomplish goal number two: serving his country.

He entered the U.S. Army on January 22, 1991, with the intention of beginning Warrant Officer Candidate School and Initial Entry Rotary Wing Training, which he accomplished in April 1992, earning an appointment as a Warrant Officer 1, qualifying as a pilot in the UH-1H Iroquois and AH-1 Cobra Helicopters.

He was first assigned as company level AH-1F Cobra gunship pilot at Camp Eagle, South Korea; then in 1995 as an AH-64 Apache gunship pilot at Fliegerhorst Kaserne in Hanau, Germany. He was deployed to Bosnia (Operation Joint Endeavor) on missions that included stability/support operations and joint peacekeeping efforts.

"We were there to help keep the peace. The idea was to maintain such a presence that we never would have to fire our weapons." Although there were incidents of fighting on the ground, they never had to employ the heavy weapons systems used aboard the Apache Gunships.

In 2003, he volunteered to be deployed to Kuwait as part of the coalition buildup prior to the invasion of Iraq (Operation Enduring Freedom) and as part of the initial invasion of Iraq (Operation Iraqi Freedom) which included the first group of AH-64A Apaches to enter Iraq.

The first time he engaged the weapon systems aboard the Apache gunship in Iraq he utilized the 2.75-inch folding fin rocket which he fired at enemy personnel fighting our troops on the ground. When asked how he felt after firing that rocket at human targets, Patrick replied, "If you are psychologically prepared to serve in the military, your job is to engage the enemy and to conduct wartime operations in accordance with the directives of your chain of command. You should be good at what you do. Engaging the enemy with high-quality weapons is a last resort, and taking of a human life is something you should never enjoy."

"There's a survival instinct that works there, where the gunship pilots are supporting our troops on the ground, making their life a lot easier. The Apache is an excellent tool to do that, specifically designed for that purpose, which it does very well."

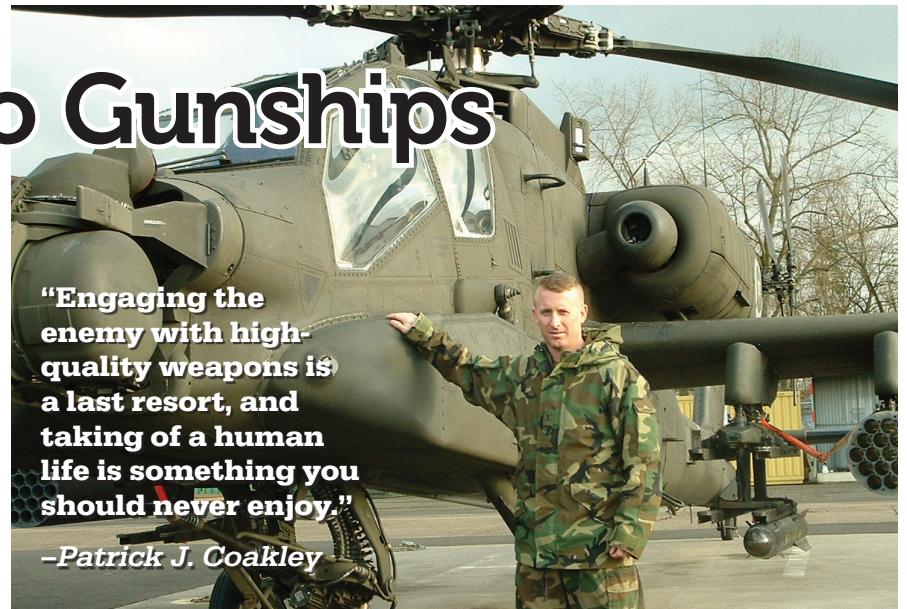
Up to this point in time, Patrick's helicopter never took fire

from the ground. That would soon change.

He and his wingman were sent on a night/day op over the city of Karbala in support of US ground troops already inside the city. Patrick could hear incoming rounds hitting the Apache, knocking out the Target Acquisition and Designation System in the nose of the aircraft, punching holes in the rotor blades and armor around the Copilot-Gunner's position. In the Apache Gunship, the Pilot-In-Command normally occupies the back seat.



Patrick with a model of an AH-64D Longbow Apache Gun Ship which he flew on combat missions in Iraq.



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Patrick Coakley standing by an AH-64A Longbow Apache Gun Ship which he flew in Bosnia on peace-keeping missions during the mid-1990's.

"As pilot in command of the aircraft, the primary thing on your mind is the safety of your opposite seat crewmember in front of you. When you get hit, your first thoughts are: I'm in formation with another aircraft and I need to let the other guy know right now which way I'm going to turn, and then I need to perform whatever evasive actions necessary to get out of there."

Moving to a safe area, he assessed the damage; test fired his weapons, and then returned to support the troops on the ground, remaining there until he was relieved by two other helicopters.

When asked what he was most proud of during his 20-year career, he replied, "While serving as a Battalion/Task Force Aviation Safety Officer in Iraq during my last deployment, we flew over 28,500 AH-64D Longbow Apache hours and 12,000 OH-58D Kiowa Warrior hours, accident- and incident-free and we did not suffer any combat-related casualties. That's a big deal when you consider that the deployment lasted fifteen months."

"Flying can be a very hostile environment, not just in combat operations, but movements to and from combat/training areas, including peacetime operations. Gravity is a constant: what goes up will come

down, and if you don't have respect for Mother Nature, sooner or later she'll get you. Arrogance is one quality in aviators that will get you killed."

Patrick's last active duty assignment was as an AH-64D Longbow Apache Technical Assistance Field Team Chief and Aviation Safety Officer as part of US Government's Foreign Military Sales program to the Kuwait Air Force. He retired on July 1, 2011, with the rank of Chief Warrant Officer 4.

Patrick received a Bachelor of Science in Aviation Management, and was awarded Master of Aeronautical Science from Embry Riddle Aeronautical University. He holds the following civilian pilot licenses: Commercial/Instrument Rotorcraft-Helicopter, Commercial/Instrument Airplane Single and Multiengine Land. Several of these ratings were acquired with the assistance of his GI Bill benefits.

Patrick serves as a consultant for Creative Designs, LLC which designs, imports, and installs luxury European furniture. His hobbies include snow skiing, surfing, tennis, running, sailing and motor sports. He lives in Vero Beach with his girlfriend, Dagmar.

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