

Feature Article - Interview of Steven William Knight by Benjamin Edward Knight, April 3, 2023

Benjamin Knight

Dr. Maxwell

Advanced Composition

"I wanted to fly."



Steven William Knight was born on a cold winter's night in December of 1955 in Detroit, Michigan. As a young man, his family moved 20 miles outside Detroit to live off 20-Mile Rd. "It was good, it was typical 1950s *'Leave It to Beaver'* kind of existence. Dad was a carpenter, so the work was seasonal, and mom did a real good job of making a dollar stretch out." As Steven Knight is my kin and one of my closest uncles, I quipped about a family rumor that horse meat was once on the menu during leaner times. We shared a horse laugh, and he squashed that rumor, saying, "there is exaggeration amongst siblings, I suppose." Around 1967, the Knight family moved to a larger house in Utica, the house my father grew up in. Being the oldest of six children, my Uncle Steve was about to leave the nest and start his grand adventure into the Army.

"I wanted to fly. "

Steve made his rounds at the local recruiting station with resolve to fly and to help people. The first choice was the United States Coast Guard. They said, "Sorry, son. You need a college education." This was the response from all the military branches until he sat down with the Army recruiter. They told him about the warrant officer program in which they would pay for his education to teach him to fly. He did eventually earn his degree, post-flight school, and after he wore his "hand-sewn-on mosquito wings" as a Private just after basic training. In fact, while thumbing through a folder of his documents, I laid eyes on a whopper of a paycheck: \$283 as one month's pay. That didn't last forever; it was about ten years into his Army career that he went to Ft. Rucker and Ft. Campbell to earn his degree in Professional Aeronautics. "It gets you a diploma," he explained with a smirk. "I'm not sure how you use that degree, but it gets you a diploma."

They say the rich man is someone who enjoys what he does for a living and, therefore, never has to work a day in his life. This is true for my uncle. "I wanted to fly," he told me. That was the reason Steve started down this path, why he excelled in his profession, and how he made a living for his family.

"I wanted the excitement. I wanted to do some real work. "

About 10 years into my Uncle Steve's Army career, he filled out the applications to join a unit at the tip of the spear. At this time, little was known about the Night Stalkers of the 160th other than the fact that if you wanted to make a difference and get in the action, that's the place

for a pilot. “I wanted to be where they were doing something...I had been to Fort Sill at the back end of the spear. I had been to Germany, but it was still not action and, at this time, post-Vietnam, there wasn’t action... It was a peace time Army... I wanted the excitement, I wanted to do some real work.” Of course, he succeeded in this and made plenty of meaningful



Steve Knight after running a marathon at the original marathon course.

contributions to the 160th throughout his career.

As a testament to this success, my grandpa, James Edward Knight, who was drafted to the Army and served bravely in Korea, was very proud of his son and the work he did. My uncle wanted to follow in his father’s footsteps:

“I wanted to see if I could, in fact, do those things that grandpa did, or the rest of the American man did during World War II and World War I.”

One of the highlights from his contributions to the 160th was teaching new pilots how to perform aerial refueling in the Chinook helicopter. He was one of the first pilots qualified to do so and developed the policies and procedures for young pilots to perform this successfully. “It was really a lot of fun, and I liked that a lot,” he told me. For those who don’t know, this is when helicopters fly a large stick in front of the helicopter into a refueling point that is dangling in the air from a hose, just under a large plane. “Probably the most fun or the best times I’ve had was while I was air refueling. Being able to plug an air refueling probe into this basket, while it’s all flying, is satisfying. It’s cool!” I could see the joy in his eyes as he told the story: “From day one they teach you not to hit nothing while you’re flying, and here we are intentionally smacking into things.”



Posing for a picture with his trusty Chinook. General Schwarzkopf is posing in the picture as well.

CW5 Knight also played his part in major military operations: Operation Just Cause, Operations Desert Storm and Desert Shield, and Operation Uphold Democracy. For Operation Just Cause, he explained, there were two possible missions: “I was the overall Army Chinook planner. We had two different missions, one if Manuel Noriega, which was the bad guy that we wanted to get, was out in the West. We would go out there and do that, and [for the second], there was another place called Rio Hato, which is his vacation home, we were going to go there. So for both of those missions, I oversaw the two planners.”

When discussing the import of Operations Desert Storm and Desert Shield, he said:

We were stationed way out west...in Saudi Arabia, and we were taking Special Forces guys deep into Iraq and dropping them off and coming back out. They would then hunt for scuds—if you remember, scud missiles were the missiles the Iraqis were using—and the main deal was we wanted to keep Israel out of the war, so we didn’t want Iraq launching any scuds into Israel. And they could reach us from western Iraq, so we took these teams. They went about their business hunting these scuds, and apparently it worked because Israel didn’t get into the war.

After President Bush came on television and declared that the war was over and everyone was out, CW5 Knight was still bringing our boys back from Iraq. He recalled a night mission when the moon was not quite up yet and there was low visibility on the way in; returning home the moon had risen. He was taken aback once he was able to see what was beneath him only by about 100 feet, what they had been flying over all night: military positions, anti-aircraft artillery, and the enemies’ barracks and positions. I remarked that his guardian angels must have been working that night, he responded with this: “You know, they weren’t motivated. We really have a real good military because the soldiers, the sergeants and the junior officers know the mission and if the CO gets killed, somebody will step up and take that. Other militaries don’t do that; in

other militaries, if you're not told 'shoot over there,' then they don't shoot. Perhaps they got their nose punched so hard that they didn't engage us."

For Operation Uphold Democracy, he said, "We loaded up on the USS America and steamed down there for the—how did the Navy call it—Haitian vacation on voodoo station." This was a non-combat operation that could have certainly been trouble. CW5 Knight was in charge of the command-and-control helicopter and loitered above Port-au-Prince while the other guys went in. "That would have been a bee's nest; we probably would have had some midair collisions. It was really a lot of helicopters in a very small space." Fortunately, President Carter and General Powell went in and negotiated a peace, calling back the hounds of war. This resulted in a stand-down order, and they got to spend six weeks on ship in voodoo station. This is the location of a very important realization for my Uncle Steve: "I would not have done very well in the Navy... water over here, water over there...go down into your space, wake up the next day and water over here, water over there." He shook his head to rid his mind of the monotonous feeling of ship life.

Leadership Lessons

My Uncle Steve has been a great example of leadership and service for our family. His son, Mathew, served as an infantryman in the Marine Corps; my brother, Sam, is currently serving as a pararescueman in the Air Force; my cousin Jason is currently serving as an officer in the Army; and I am currently serving in the Marine Corps and plan to commission as an officer. When asked about what leadership lessons he would give us from his time in the service, he said: "Take care of your troops. That's number one. You, of course, need to know their names,

know their families, know their situation so that when something happens you are able to guide them, or help them, so that they can be your best Soldier, your best Marine, your best Airman.”

“Lead by example,” he said, “You don’t tell them to do something that you wouldn’t do.” Steve told me a story of when he was a young pilot, out on the flight line, and he sees an old W4 (Vietnam pilot and his experienced senior) reach down and pick up a cigarette butt. “Here’s a guy that’s 28 years in the military cleaning up, doing the thing that the Private does. That’s what you need to do.”

“Competence is certainly a big deal. If the person can’t do the job, then you almost got no use for ‘em. As a young leader, you’re supposed to mentor them and move them into where they can do those things, and I get that, but it’s very discouraging and it’s difficult to be around a person that isn’t competent at what they’re doing.”

I asked about tips in keeping healthy relationships with your significant other and family. “You better have a good woman. There aint no way you can get through it all without a good wife. She must be able to do all the things she needs to do while you’re away. All the things you would normally do while you are there, she needs to be able to do all those things. And then when you get home, she has to be able to step back and let you do those things that she has been doing because it’s your job.”



Left to Right:
Sherry Knight (Spouse)
Megan Long (Youngest Daughter)
Mathew Knight (Son)
Ashlee Wagoner (Eldest Daughter)

We had a chuckle as we have felt this before and can only marvel at the strength of the military spouse. “It’s adventure and fun for the service member to do these things that we do, but the family is still at home.”

He relayed for me a typical dialogue involving a servicemember going on deployment:

“I got to go to work.”

“Where you going?”

“Well, I can’t tell ya.”

“When you going to be back?”

“I don’t know.”

This is a conversation that takes the devotion and faith of a military spouse to be able to handle. Find the right person, someone truly special, he said. “You try to give the family more; you try to make up—of course you can’t make up for lost time—but you try to do that. Again, it falls back on the wife. She’s the lynchpin.”



Having ourselves a horse laugh during our interview.

Steve gave some practical advice for the service member about the importance of taking care of yourself: “Be a stud, be a machoman when you are around your buddies, when you’re out doing your duty. When you go to the medical people and get something done medically, be a wimp. Tell them this hurts, that hurts, this hurts, so that in the end of things, you can have it documented.” This is something often overlooked in the rough and tough culture of the military, but it can have implications in veteran care after active duty.

“You do it because it’s the right thing to do.”

“You don’t do it for accolades or do it to be remembered, but it’s nice to be remembered.” These final thoughts of the interview speak to the humble and generous character of Steven William Knight. He will certainly be remembered, and his actions and sacrifice for our country will not soon be forgotten. Our convivial visit and interview allowed me to learn some things about my uncle I never knew. In addition to the time with my aunt and uncle, I’ll treasure this interview. It allowed me to document this important career of service for our family, the military, and fellow Americans.



My wife, Aimee, and I enjoying a pre-interview burger and fries with good company.