

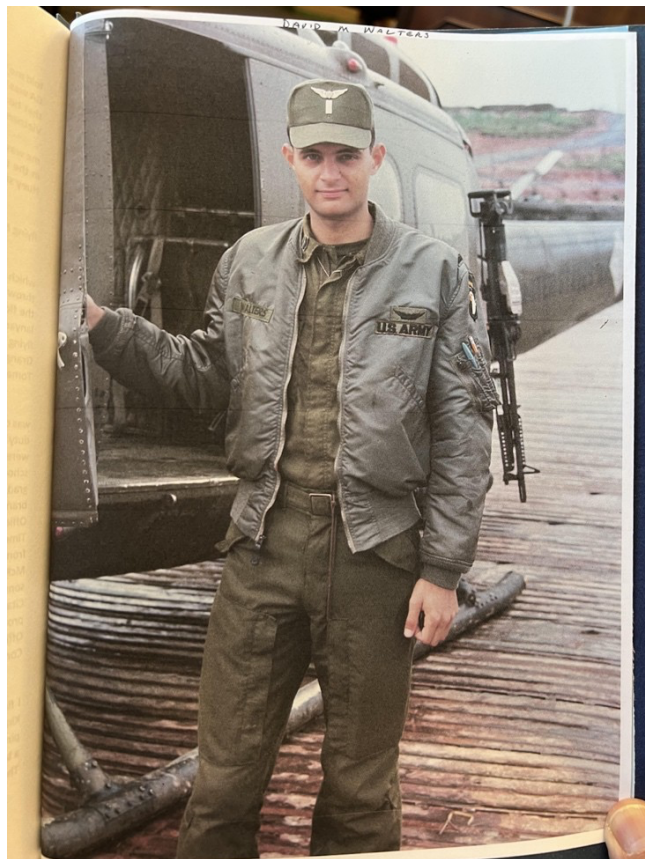
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**From the Jungles of Vietnam to the Nuclear Intersection of the World:  
The Adventures of David M. Walters**



*Then 1st LT. Walters posed outside of his Huey in Vietnam, 1969.*

“Soldiers’ being blamed for political decisions” are the words that David M. Walters, Sr., used to describe the public memory of Vietnam Veterans. It was a generation genuinely misremembered. If there were one objective for my interview with David, Vietnam Veteran, Huey Pilot, and General’s Aide, it would be to set the record straight. Popular media in the

United States, especially immediately after the Vietnam War, painted many of America's heroes as vagrants, men with broken minds; the country took out their frustrations with the politics of the War with those being forced to fight it. This interview with former Army Captain David M. Walters counters misconceptions about Vietnam's veterans by providing a prime example of the exemplary service of a generation.

David's father was a Citadel class of 1942 graduate who was fighting against the Germans with the 10th Armored Division when David was born. David surmised that "my early life was tied very much to my father's service in WWII." His mother, an oil canvas painter, would also work on three of the portraits that can still be seen on The Citadel's campus today: one of Ted Bell, the most decorated member of the class of 1942, in the Daniel Library; one of Alfred Chapman, the Regimental Commander of the class of 1942, also in the Daniel Library; and one of General Seignious, class of 1942, in Seignious Hall.



*The portrait of General Seignious displayed in Seignious Hall.*

David's connection to The Citadel was never in doubt. When asked if he always wanted to go into the military, he responded, "I always wanted to come to The Citadel because my father had come. And I graduated high school, and I only applied to one school—which made the Guidance counselor frantic—but I only applied to The Citadel and came to The Citadel." This determination would be rewarded, thankfully, with his admission to the class of 1967.

Matriculating in the fall of 1963, he was assigned to Bravo Company in 1st Battalion and started pursuing a major in Business Administration. While many know that the first year at The Citadel is one filled with additional duties and hardships, one major event made David's first year stand out a little bit more—the assassination of John F. Kennedy. After that, something on



*David M. Walters's senior year photo, 1967.*

campus changed. David had always known that he wanted to touch the clouds, and he would get his commercial pilot's license while in his senior year of college with the requisite 40 hours of flight time through the Army's Aviation Program. He said, "We went out to Charleston International Airport and were given 40 hours of flight time and a full ground school course. 40 hours was the minimum that you could go for a pilot's license." This would go on to serve him well as he was commissioned into the Signal Corps to become a helicopter pilot.

It was right before leaving for flight school on February 3rd, 1968, that he got to marry the love of his life, Lucy Grange Jones. Having a habit of tradition, he met his wife in the same manner that his new father-in-law had. He explained, "we went to Church my freshman year, Parents' Day Weekend, and our fathers saw each other—they were classmates. So my wife's father and his wife invited me over for Sunday dinner, and that was [also] how he had met his

wife at Sunday dinner when he was a cadet.” David joked that “being quick on my feet, a year and a half later I asked my wife out.” And finally, four years later, they were together, as husband and wife, before David’s first big test in the Army: Flight School.

He would first attend the basic piece of Flight School at Fort Wolters in Texas from March to July of 1968 before being moved to the Stewart-Hunter complex in Georgia from July to November 1968. It was during these courses that he received instruction directly from pilots who

had come back from Vietnam. One of the pieces of advice that always stuck with him was something that his instructor had said while practicing emergency night landings. He told me, “The instructors said ‘If you have an engine failure during night, it’s just like during the day: You get control of the aircraft, slow it down, turn on your landing light, and bring it down. So, you turn on your search light, and if you don’t like what you see, turn the light out.’” During graduation, David would fly in the head chopper, leading his class as newly minted Army aviators.

David’s eventual arrival in Vietnam was never a surprise for him. He said, “When I got orders to go to flight school, it removed all doubt. But it was really pretty helpful that there was no wondering, ‘Am I gonna get sent to Vietnam?’ My orders to flight school were PCS, which means permanent change of station, PCS to Vietnam, TDY flight school en route to Vietnam. So we knew before we went to flight school that we were going to Vietnam.”



*David & Lucy at St. Philip’s Church.*

Thus, it was on January 20th of 1969 when he arrived in the country. David woke up bright and early and saw that the TV was on and airing the inauguration of Richard Nixon. He would then arrive at the airport and depart the United States, flying from island to island in the Pacific and eventually ending in the air outside of Vietnam. He vividly recounts the most surprising thing he saw on his way in: a sky filled with flares. Now, they had been trained in flight school to drop these flares from their helicopters to aid in getting the troopers on the ground to see in the darkness. He recalled, “As I was approaching Vietnam, there must have been close to a hundred flares that I could see from altitude.”



*David in his flight cap, holding his helmet, 1968.*

Getting off the plane, he said, “It felt as though I had been hit with a wet rag.” But this was far from the end of his journey. After finding out that he would be assigned as a pilot for the 101st Airborne Division, a unit that his father was well familiarized with during the Battle of the Bulge a quarter of a decade earlier, he would have a 10-day lesson on infantry tactics. From there, he traveled North, into the Mountains of Vietnam, to Camp Eagle. Here, one of his first acts of business was calling home on what was called a MARS radio. After waiting hours in line, he was able to speak to his wife, Lucy, and, in between the *krschhhh* of the radio static and the operator having to end each romantic phrase with an “Over,” wish her a happy anniversary. Getting her his mailing address without directly saying it for security’s sake was a difficult task as well. From that moment on, they would exchange letters as often as possible.



*A map of the AOs in Vietnam with associated aircraft, produced by a door gunner in David's Company.*

Serving as a pilot, David would have many interesting characters on board his helicopter. Some were from SOG or the Special Observations Group, a component of U.S. Army Special Forces. SOG was conducting Long Range Reconnaissance Patrols (LRRP) in Laos, which was technically outside of US operational capacity: since the North Vietnamese were using the mountains in the region to smuggle men and weapons across the border, they had to go there. The map featured above, illustrated by a door gunner from the same Unit as David, signified several different things: The red borders were major political boundaries; the different helicopters on the side were the different ones utilized throughout the war; and alongside the helicopters were the patches of the Units that would have flown them.



*The Aviation Helmet that David wore throughout his time in Vietnam & Berlin.*

None of these missions were easy. But some of them carried an almost unbearable toll. Sometimes, it's the missions that you don't go on that haunt you as well. David told a story of one of his superiors and friends named Captain Dwight Thornton. Thornton was

a pilot, and he had a distinct feeling that he wouldn't make it through the war. As David says, "He told me that when he was on R&R (Rest and Relaxation), he would wake up with nightmares that he had been killed." But Thornton had received a new billet as the Liaison officer for the 1st Brigade, and in this role, would have to fly only three hours a month to maintain flight pay.

David remarked that "he brightened up when he got his Liaison job because he thought he wasn't going to get killed after all." David's roommate was in charge of releasing the weekly flight schedule and reminded David that he had been assigned a non-combat standard mission for the next day. But, when David woke, he looked at the clock and saw that it said 9:00 am, and he asked his roommate why no one had woken him up for his mission. His roommate responded that Thornton had taken it to get some time in. David recalled waiting for him to return, explaining that "later that afternoon, a Warrant Officer came by and asked, 'Did you hear about Thornton.' and I said, 'Hear what?'" David then learned of the death of Captain Dwight Thornton. While completing the nonessential mission, Captain Thornton had been called in to aid in an ongoing combat situation and had been hit. Both he and his copilot died. This story reveals a glimpse of the true heroism of this generation. Despite fearing not making it home to

his wife and children, Captain Thornton knew that he was a man with a job to do and he pushed this fear aside to complete the mission, a true act of selfless service. This doesn't stop the mourning, however. As David put it, "That was a...different kind of moment, when you find out someone else died where you might have died."

It was about halfway through his tour in Vietnam that David was able to take some R&R and see his wife in Hawaii. He mentions remembering not knowing if this reunion would take place: "When I was in Saigon, I heard that TWA pilots were on strike, well my wife had had tickets on TWA since I'd left for Vietnam. But one of the guests that had come to the wedding was an executive at United Airlines, and he got my wife tickets on United. But I didn't know any of this, so I didn't know if I was going to see her when I got there."

Nevertheless, he saw her when he arrived, and they set out to have the best week they could in that tropical paradise. Although David recalled what one of his NCOs had told him before departing, "Lieutenant, don't do like I did. I got sick when I was on R&R in Hawaii to see my wife, and I went to the infirmary, and they wouldn't let me go. I stayed in the infirmary the whole time I was there." David took that advice to heart: "I got sick in Hawaii, and I did not go to the infirmary. My wife nursed me, and after a couple days I was well enough where we rented a car and drove around a bit," ending that week with what he jokingly recalls as possibly the first selfie ever taken. After this R&R, David would have three months left in Vietnam.



*David and Lucy in Hawaii, 1969.*



With the average lifetime of Huey pilots being measured in minutes and the year 1969 coming to an end, David M. Walters received a call unlike any he had gotten up to that point. It was from General Seignious—the soon-to-be U.S. General of Berlin, roommate of his father, and classmate to his father-in-law—looking for a new aide-de-camp (assistant). He wanted David to join him in Germany. Traveling straight from Asia to Europe, David would arrive in February of 1970.

When arriving in Berlin, he encountered an environment that was almost a complete 180 from where he had just come but was still shrouded in fear of the Cold War. David explained, “Berlin was divided into four sections. The Soviets had East-Berlin, the Americans the Southern Section of West Berlin, the British the Center Section, and the French the Northern Section.” Each of these powers had its own section of the city and was part of the occupying coalition government known as the Allied Control Council.



*Captain David Walters (left) pictured with General Seignious (right) in Berlin, 1970.*

David was also one of the few Americans whose work in the Army took him into East Berlin on some occasions. David compared the two Berlins:

“West Berlin had flourished under a Capitalist form of Government and friendly occupation. All of the bomb damage was gone, all of the war damage had been repaired, and it was a flourishing economic system in West Berlin. And you go across into East Berlin, and there are still bullet marks on the sides of the buildings and almost no recovery since WWII, and this is 25 years later. It is a real testament that we have a good system of government worth fighting for.”

One of the most influential experiences for David was when he entered the gates of Spandau prison, whose guard duty was rotated among the four different nations and was meant to house one type of prisoner: high-ranking Nazis. By the time David arrived at the prison, there was one prisoner left, Rudolf Hess. Hess was the deputy leader of the Nazi party; he had been captured in 1941 after flying solo and parachuting into Great Britain to attempt to negotiate the United Kingdom’s exit from the Second World War. David recounted, “I was in Rudolf Hess’s cell, and it was a prison cell. It was very stark. And I was almost as close to him as I am to you. [He was] a rather diminutive man. His cell was not plush at all. It was interesting to meet the number two man in the Nazi regime in that setting.”



*The Berlin Brigade Patch on the right shoulder of David's Flight Jacket.*

During this time, David never forgot how to fly. While the helicopters had to stay lower in the sky due to the commercial air traffic, David was an active member of the Aviation Attachment of the Berlin Brigade, a position that can still be seen on his pilot’s jacket. But David couldn’t remain at this post forever, and when the choice came about whether to get out of the Army or stay in, he had one simple criterion: Can I still fly? The answer was, unfortunately, no. David M.

Walters had been commissioned as a Signals Officer, and the Aviation branch of the United

States Army had not been established yet, meaning that he would have to spend the next five to eight years of his commission behind a desk. He said, “I think I would have been tempted to stay if there was an aviation branch, but I think that after World War II with the Air Corps breaking away from the Army, they were paranoid that we’d do it again.” Instead, he chose to come back home to the United States and, more specifically, Charleston.

Captain David M. Walters would separate from the Army in September of 1971 and come back to Charleston to work for his father-in-law at the car dealership Jones Ford, Inc. Today, he runs the business and is the father to two sons, one, David M. Walters Jr., a Citadel Grad and current member of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences Advisory Board, and Michael A. Walters, a graduate of Covenant College, and an



*A portrait of David, featuring his signature Aviators and his class ring, unveiled Spring 2023.*

Ordained Minister in the Presbyterian Church in America. In Vietnam, his call sign was Kingsman 12, as they would park their Hueys at their base known as “The Castle,” and this has remained his email for the last 30 years. David Walters is a man who represents his generation, a generation that sacrificed for our country. He explained that “the media portrayed Vietnam Veterans as mal-adjusted vagrants, and almost all of the Vietnam Veterans I know are very well adjusted.” They were men who came back to little thanks and no parades yet continued to build the American dream. Welcome home, David. And thank you for serving the Charleston and Citadel communities well for the last 50 years.