



Interview with TSgt Paul “2T” Cartter

USAF Retired

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Crewmember of 44 ALPHA

By Colonel Paul Harmon, USAF (Retired)

ACJ: Hello it is nice to meet you. We don't know each other, but I was in the 20th SOS flying the MH-53s beginning in August 1988 and then elsewhere.

2T: Well once a Hornet, always a Hornet.

ACJ: Yes, that's right. I started this project to tell the story about the 20th SOS's involvement in the drug interdiction mission back in 1983. Information on the internet is scarce, but I finally made contact with former 20th SOS members involved with Op BAT: Rich Shurtleff, “Smokey” Hubbard, and Don Nieto and realized this could be much more than a single article. I received a treasure trove of documents and pictures from Shurtleff and Smokey, and had a long

conversation with Don Nieto and I realized that it has been 40 years and it is a perfect time to tell this little known chapter of the 20th SOS's and our Air Commando history. Let's get started: when did you enter the USAF and what did you do?

2T: I joined the Air Force in 1972 and was a weapons specialist at Nellis AFB. I worked in the gun shop. I was reassigned and moved to Hurlburt Field and the 20th SOS in 1976. The squadron didn't even have a helicopter when I got there. It was amazing when the first Huey came in...we all went out to see it and greet the crew.

ACJ: Where did you train to become a crewmember on the “N” model?

2T: All of our training at that time was done in-house, we got OJT (on the job training). The older and experienced aircrew members, who had flown the Huey, were our instructors.

ACJ: You joined the 20th in 1976 and by the time the unit picked up the drug interdiction mission in May 1983 you were a very experienced crewmember. I found out that your first deployment to the Bahamas was in late June 1983, about a month after it started and you flew 17 Op BAT missions between then and 9 January 1984, the day of the mishap. What were your first couple of missions like?

2T: They were pretty exciting. I remember we made a bust on a ship. We received information that a ship had run aground, so we went out and swept in on it. The ship was carrying 3,000 bales of marijuana, each weighing about 70 or 80 pounds each. The DEA and Bahamian police team



TSgt Paul '2T' Cartter in the Bahamas during Op Bat. (Photo courtesy of Paul Cartter)

arrested 11 guys! After a while a Bahamian patrol boat came and took the prisoners away. They were just the laborers. The “money man” escaped in a seaplane that took off right after we got there. I got a picture of him as he banked right over us.

ACJ: On 9 January 1984, you were put on standby at the Police College in the later part of the afternoon because there were two possible missions going on. The mission commander, Lt Col Hubbard, ultimately launched you guys on a suspicious DC-3 that made a drop northwest of Bimini Island and was heading northeast toward Freeport on Grand Bahama Island (GBI). Can you tell us about the night of the mishap, from a your crewman’s perspective?

2T: Yes, we were standing by and finally we were told to launched on the DC-3, as you mentioned. It dumped its load and landed at GBI and the police took four guys into custody. It turns out they were Americans. While we were waiting for the police and DEA to complete their investigation we walked in and the prisoners saw us in our US flight suits. They looked at us and thought thank goodness, like we were going to help them or something...and we just looked back saying no...

When we were ready to head home, we checked the fuel and it was right at the top, so we were good to go. We got started and headed back to home (Nassau, little over 100 miles away). We were just cruising along, we had the doors closed, and we were talking about what we were going to do over the weekend...just a general conversation...about 10 miles out from Nassau two master caution lights popped on. We had lost both of our fuel boost pumps, something electrical, I assumed. Captain Whitbeck made a radio call back to the mission commander, Lt Col Hubbard, and told him the situation. Sergeant Acha and I started to open the doors and then both engines quit. We were flying at about 500 feet above the water. I tried to pin my door open, but I lost the pin overboard. I moved forward to grab the life raft and Ed grabbed it as well, so I let him take it and he got it out of the aircraft. After we hit the water, two of our Bahamian policemen found the raft and got in, but Ed never got to it. I saw the raft one time but then it was gone; lost in the confusion. There was a nasty storm going on...about 8-10 foot waves, 24 knots of wind and pouring rain—just terrible conditions.

When we hit the water, I believe we were a little nose down and in a slight left bank attitude. I think the way we hit caused my door, the left door, to stay open. Ed Acha was over on the right side and I think when we hit (nose low and slight left bank) his door closed at impact and if he was in the door way it may have slammed shut on him and he couldn’t get out. I have gone over it and over it in my mind over the years and that is what I think happened. Everyone who survived, there were four of us, came out my door.

As the helicopter went into the water. Everything was black. I had my LPU (life preserver unit) on and had I deployed it right a way, it could have taken me back into the helicopter, but I was lucky. It was very disorienting, the shock of the impact, we hit hard. I broke my back in four places and dislocated my left arm. Two of my spinal injuries weren’t found and treated until about 20 years later.

ACJ: Okay, so now you are out of the helicopter and in the water with 8-10 foot seas and twenty knots of wind and rain. What do you do next?

2T: I initially began to sink with the helicopter. It seemed like 50 feet, but I’m sure it wasn’t more than 10 feet. I inflated my right life preserver, but I could not use my left arm; it was dislocated and in the middle of my back. So I only had one arm and I was ‘dead’ from the chest down

because of my back injuries. I had nothing and figured that I'd be dead before the sharks got me. I was in a lot of pain, but I guess the adrenaline kept me going.



Royal Bahamian Police crewmen on board a UH-1N awaiting takeoff. (Photo courtesy of Smokey Hubbard)

When I got to the surface, I inflated my left LPU with my right hand and it brought my left arm around, but it was still dislocated. Sergeant Ferguson, one of the Bahamian Police officers, saw that I was really hurt and he stayed with me in the water. He didn't go to the raft, when he could have. We could see the lights of Nassau, about 10 miles away. He rolled me on my back and it eased the pain, a little because it was easier than fighting with the moving currents. As I mentioned, Ferguson stayed with me, supporting my body and I was able to get my radio out and make some calls. I will tell you, I used all the techniques that I learned in water survival—it was like second nature—it all worked and helped me survive.

ACJ: So now you are floating in the water with Sergeant Ferguson and your making radio calls and trying to signal for help. Please pick it up there.

2T: Colonel Hubbard got the SAR started after he spoke with Captain Whitbeck. The Coast Guard in Miami launched a helicopter that was on Bimini to help. When the helicopter got close I tried to use my flares, but they were wet. I was able to make contact with the helicopter on my radio and the pilot told me that they were low on fuel. I said you have got to get us out of here. As he entered his hover, the pilot turned on his spot light and it lit up the entire area.

They did not have a rescue swimmer, so the crewman lowered the rescue basket. I told Sergeant Ferguson to go first because I didn't think I could get into the basket. When they lowered the basket back down for me, I could not climb in so I just hung on with my right hand and arm, shook my head, and they started hoisting me up...I was not going to let

go. When I got to the cabin door, the crewman grabbed my left arm and yanked me into the helicopter, in the process he popped my shoulder back into place. Finally safe in the helicopter, I passed out.

I woke up in the Nassau hospital and it wasn't a pleasant stay. They had cut off all my clothes and had me laying on a hallway floor; I was laying there naked. I stayed over night and they got me to where I could be transported. The next morning, I was medevac'd over to Homestead AFB and because of my condition I was taken to Miami's Jackson Memorial Hospital, rather than Eglin or Keesler. I was at Jackson Memorial several weeks and received great care. The orthopedic surgeon was the absolute best.

When I was first got to Jackson Memorial, the DEA told me that the Columbians had a bounty out on us. The DEA was concerned that the Columbians might try to take me out, so they placed an armed guard on my hospital room. They also moved me around quite a bit...I probably spent a night in the maternity ward for all I know. After a few weeks, when I was stabilized, I was transferred to the Veterans Administration Hospital across the street. It was a government facility, so the DEA felt I no longer needed an armed guard at my door.

ACJ: How were you feeling after you got settled into the VA hospital?

2T: I was in the hospital, a thousand miles away from anybody, by myself. I was suffering from my injuries and the loss of my crew and one night, after visiting hours, the nurse told me that I had visitors downstairs. I was on the 12th floor, but I told her I'd go down and meet them. When I got down there I see Lt Jim Schaffer and Lt Jack Hester standing there. They had come to see me. We immediately went down the stairs, out the door, got in a car, and drove to a bar! After a while, when the nurses couldn't find me, they reported that I was taken by the two men who came to the hospital. The Miami Police put out an APB (all points bulletin) trying to find me. They must have figured I was kidnapped by the Columbians! Well, when we finished our drinks, Jack and Jim took me back to the hospital, but they dropped me off at the Emergency Room entrance and took off out of the parking lot into the night.

ACJ: That is a great story!

2T: Yes, the experience that night was a good laugh, but I was so depressed and living in hell and when they showed up, it was just what I needed. That's the support of your comrades.

ACJ: "Support of your comrades," that's a part of our Air Commando story, we look out for each other. Also, I think it is interesting for people to know that you guys in the 20th were flying the Bahamian Police Strike

Force and the DEA into these drug busts. The Colombians read the papers. On the mission four of their smugglers were captured. It is not a huge leap that they learned there was one of the guys alive in Miami.

I found in the research that the USAF crews supporting Op BAT, were not authorized to carry weapons; no aircraft weapons and no personal weapons...at least not officially. The DEA agents were armed and the Royal Bahamian Police carried M-16s and sidearms.

What I am trying to bring out in the articles is that you guys were going up against the Medellin Drug Cartel smugglers and thugs. It was important work, there were a lot of drugs and a lot of money at stake and it was a serious and dangerous business.

2T: I just remembered something humorous ... I was going through my medical papers and found a Jackson Memorial Expired Patients' Property List form with my name on it! I still have it I still have the document framed on my wall.

Paul Cartter's Deceased Patient Property List (Photo courtesy of Paul Cartter)

ACJ: All these years later, coming up on 40 years actually, seeing the smile on your face while you are telling us some of the more humorous aspects of that very tough time in your life is worth every bit of effort we spend on this project.

2T: You know I've been through a lot of counseling and a lot of therapists and I learned to accept things. It was horrible, but I have to keep on, keeping on...putting one foot in front of the other. You know my birthday is in December and I was 30 years old in 1983. One month later I was in the crash. I had just turned 30 when everything happened and it was a rude awakening for me.

ACJ: So what about your road to recovery?

2T: I retired from the Air Force in November 1984. I started walking after the spinal cord injury, but my right leg was still paralyzed. I could still walk and I did that for many years...until 2015 when the accident came back to haunt me. The bones in my back that were repaired grew back and cut my spinal cord and I lost the use of my legs. The doctors determined that the injury was fully a result of the helicopter crash.

ACJ: Would you like to tell our readers anything about your crew? Your remembrances of them?

2T: Yes, Captain Whitbeck was an exceptional pilot. He was a natural at the controls...I had flown with him quite a few times and he could do anything with the helicopter beautifully. He became one with the helicopter, I believe. Lieutenant Hamby was fairly new to the unit. He had flown Hueys at Little Rock AFB before he came to the 20th SOS. The biggest thing I remember about him was he had one of Jim Croce's guitars. I thought that was just the coolest thing. [editor's note: Jim Croce was popular American folk/rock singer between 1966 and 1973.] Sergeant Acha—Ed and I always crewed together, we were a hard backend crew. We knew immediately what the other was doing and we worked together naturally, it was just awesome. I was his supervisor when he first came to the 20th, 1976 I believe, and we became the best of friends; we were close.

ACJ: I'm glad that you have the fond memories of your friends and nice things to say about them. They aren't here anymore, but those memories are what we keep in our hearts.

2T: While we have been talking about this it has brought up some memories. I escaped the helicopter and got to the surface, I started calling out for them, I was calling out their names, but no one answered...I just couldn't find them. It is a nightmare that I wish on nobody.

ACJ: We know that you overcame so much and later in your civilian life you got to give back to your community. Would you like to talk about that?

2T: Yes. You know being in the military, I loved the military...that was my whole world and I thoroughly enjoyed

it and to have it end, so abruptly, it was like, what do I do now? I drank pretty heavily for about five years. When I got sober, I learned a lot about myself...I had buried and hid a lot of things, from myself. Today, I have been sober for 36 years and once I got my head right, things started happening—good things.



Paul '2T' Cartter with Capt Dyke Whitbeck's family, Dyke's brother Craig, the captain's daughters April and Stephanie, and his wife Susan at Hurlburt Air Park during the memorial dedication for Op Bat. (Photo courtesy of Paul Cartter)

One day I bought a puppy, a redbone coonhound, and I stopped by the pet store and a woman there asked me if I was going to be in search and rescue? And I thought, now that's an idea and in 1997, I joined Southwest Rescue Dogs Inc. It was a search and rescue organization in Pima County Arizona that worked for the sheriff's office. I got into training and my dog got a couple of finds and even discovered a homicide that no one knew about. We were training and she picked up a scent and I went with her and she found the body.

More good things started to happen. I went to a training event in Oakland, California on the old navy base. The affair was run by a group of people with bloodhound dogs. I loved the breed so I got a bloodhound and started working with her and what a reward. She made several finds and then I got called to Quantico, Virginia to work with the FBI on the anthrax letter(s) scare in 2002...after 9/11. My bloodhound, Ginger, nailed a house in the suburbs of Washington DC and the FBI said that was all they needed for evidence in a prosecution. I became a dog person. I ate, slept, and drank water with my dogs in the wilderness in Arizona. I had very special times with that bloodhound—it was an awesome time in my life to be called by the FBI to go to Quantico. I did major training events with some expert bloodhound dog handlers in the Law Enforcement Bloodhound Association. They were all man hunters. It is an interesting profession that I never knew existed. Once I got into it, I thrived. I loved it. When my legs started failing me, I eventually had to discontinue doing it, but I worked 17 years with the dogs and absolutely loved it.

ACJ: That's a wonderful story—finding a passion and working with the dogs for 17 years helped you through some very tough times.

2T: Along the same time period, I joined the Arizona Disaster Medical Assist Team (DMAT). They deploy mainly in the United States, but also all over the world. I became the communications officer and worked there for about two years until my legs started hurting me and I had to withdraw from it. These days I compete in the Veterans National Wheelchair Games annually and we'll be going to Portland, Oregon this year.

Here's a fun fact, because of my work with the FBI in Quantico, they made me a founding member of Homeland Security. I have a certificate stating that I was one of the first members. After my recovery and the years since have led to a very rewarding time in my life—with the dogs and search and rescue, DMAT, and now, the veteran wheelchair games—all are things you never think are possible. It has been just great!



Paul Cartter in his tracked wheelchair and his current dog Thor in Arizona. (Photo courtesy of Paul Cartter)

ACJ: Paul, thank you for sitting down with us and talking about your time working with the 20th SOS Green Hornets and also sharing your perspective on the tragic events of 9 January 1984 that changed your life. Sharing your story about how you overcame your many challenges, as a result of that night, will be inspirational for our readers. Everyone has difficulties in their lives and your story might just help a few people know that they too can overcome the adversity and contribute to their communities and have a fulfilling life. Thank you.

