

# Resurrection of a Loach



**John Roxbury's  
OH-6A  
WB #76067**

**STORY AND PHOTOS BY JAMES BUSH  
WB #5791**

**M**arch 28, 1970. Clouds of dust and dirt erupt from Vinh Long air base as two Hughes OH-6 Loach (Cayuse) helicopters belonging to the Blackhawks, Comanche Troop 7th Squadron, 1<sup>st</sup> Air Cavalry, begin their ascent into the fading sun of South Vietnam. The mission at hand entails a final perimeter check around the compound to look for any Viet Cong motor or rocket troops concealed in the brush below.

Known as “last flight” and normally flown as a “Pink Team” (hunter-killer team) with an AH-1 Cobra gunship in tow, the Loach would ac-

quire targets by flying very low and then mark those targets with colored smoke for the Cobras flying overhead. But today the mission would be flown without Cobra support. Bristling with mini guns, the Loach was a formidable weapon in its own right against hostile adversaries.

## **The OH-6 Loach in Vietnam**

In 1960 the U.S. Army solicited bids for the light observation helicopter (LOH) program, a small, maneuverable, light attack, and recon helicopter, and Hughes Corporation's model 369 YOH-6A Cayuse won the competition.

With a height of just more than 8 feet and a single articulated four-blade main rotor system spanning 26 feet, the OH-6 LOH, better known as “the Loach,” made a very maneuverable and stable platform. The Loach used an Allison T63-A-5 285-hp turboshaft engine that gave the aircraft a rated cruise speed of 144 mph. Though the entire helicopter weighed less than a Volkswagen, the egg-shaped passenger compartment carried four to six passengers (with rear seats folded) with minimal drag. With more than 40 cubic feet of rear cargo space, the Loach could be fitted with all sorts of armament systems, including



side-mounted six-barrel 7.62 mm machine guns or a M60D 7.62 machine gun operated by an observer/door gunner. Its high rate of acceleration of 0 to 70 mph in five seconds allowed the Loach to get in and out of “trouble” (mainly “in”) very quickly.

Used in Vietnam for visual observation target acquisition, for recon, and as a command and control ship, the Loach’s primary

and greatest role was that of the “hunter” in the Pink Teams: acquiring targets and then drawing enemy fire for the Cobras. The Loach could take an extensive pounding from enemy fire because of its high forward speed, small shape, and excellent maneuverability. If a Loach was shot down, however, that did not mean it was dead. Some Loaches were shot down three to four dif-

ferent times since the aircraft was easy to rebuild and maintain. The Loach could be maintained in the field with a standard army toolbox and a small assortment of specialized Hughes Corp. tools. Loaches began arriving “in country” (Vietnam) in early 1968 and were immediately pressed into service, replacing Korean-era OH-13 Sioux and OH-23 Raven helicop-



John Roxbury on the steps of a CH-46 in Vietnam circa 1970.

ters. Up to four Loaches could be gently packed into the back of a C-130 for delivery to the field.

In September 1968, the U.S. Army purchased Hughes OH-6 Cayuse (Loach) serial number 67-16350. On the fateful day of March 28, 1970, Loach 16350, flying in tandem with another Loach, began to scout the area around Vinh Long for enemy activity. About two “clicks” [Note: one click = one km] outside of the compound, the ground below the low- and slow-flying Loaches erupted with enemy automatic weapons fire. Multiple rounds struck and damaged vital flight components, causing Loach 16350 to fall from the sky like a wounded bird. With 1,673 flight hours accumulated during its short life, Loach 67-16350 lay on its right side, never to fly again in Vietnam. The official military report lists the following damaged systems: Personnel: (1) WIA

(wounded in action); Structure: flight controls and tail rotor. These types of “injuries” normally result in a total write-off for most combat aircraft, especially during wartime conditions, when it was easier to cannibalize the remains for spare parts. But the Loach was a different breed that set itself apart from the norm. In June 1970, 16350 left Vietnam and arrived in Culver City, California, to begin the first of two major restorations. Loach 16350 would be rebuilt to better than new condition!

### Earning His Wings

About this same time, a young, adventuresome United States Marine Corps aviator arrived in Vietnam. Flying CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters out of Marble Moun-



PHOTOS COURTESY OF JOHN ROXBURY

Loach No. 16350 after being shot down.



JAMES BUSHIA

The cockpit of John's OH-6A helped earn the Most Authentic award at EAA AirVenture 2002.

tain, Da Nang, John Roxbury earned his wings the old-fashioned way. After enlisting in the Marine Corps in 1967, John was eventually accepted into Officer Candidate School and scored in the top 5 percent of his class, allowing him to be placed into an inter-service flight program. John earned his helicopter wings at Mineral Wells, Texas, flying the Hughes TH55A Osage. He then received his twin-engine rating in the venerable CH-46 before being sent to Vietnam. He stayed in the Marine Corps flying the CH-46 until his retirement in 1988.

Having acquired his airframe and powerplant certificate and inspection authorization rating just before leaving the Corps, John soon found that retirement was not a word he liked or even cared to use. He returned to Minnesota and the love of old and unique warbirds. John soon found himself employed as director of maintenance for Amjet Aircraft owner Wally Fisk and his unequalled collection of exotic aircraft this side of Chino, California's Planes of Fame Museum. Wally's collection included an Avro Shackleton, Fairey Gannet, Douglas A-1 Skyraider, two Fairchild C-123 Providers, a B-25 Mitchell, a MiG 17 and a MiG 21, a P-51 Mustang, and other assorted warbirds.

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"My only task," John said tongue-in-cheek, "was to keep Wally alive no matter what it took!" Keeping those birds flying was no easy task. John said that many of the foreign warbirds, especially the British planes, in Wally's flock were the hardest to work on and maintain. John successfully completed 10 years of employment with Wally before parting ways to look for a helicopter of his own to restore.



This "most authentic" aircraft even includes the gunner's post!

**John Meets the Loach**

Knowing that his budget wouldn't allow for a CH-46, John began to look for an economical, fun, fast, and easy-to-maintain helicopter. And one more thing: It had to be a warbird! In late 1999, John found exactly what he was looking for, and he purchased Hughes OH-6 serial number 67-

16350. Theoretically, the Loach was in certificated flying condition, but when John purchased it, nothing electrical worked, some instruments were missing, and the T63-A-5 engine needed to be replaced.

When John began the second restoration of 67-16350, he replaced the interior, adding new



tory and found that after it returned to the United States for rebuild in 1970, it re-entered military service in 1972 at Fort Rucker, Alabama, then on to Edwards Air Force Base in 1973 with the 6<sup>th</sup> Army for aviation systems testing. Its last stint was with the New Jersey National Guard from April 1974 through December 1975, accumulating a whopping nine hours of flight time!

### **An Award Winner!**

John's persistence and workmanship on his Loach earned him an award for Most Authentic warbird at EAA AirVenture Oshkosh 2002. Although not as glamorous as some of the World War II fighters and bombers, John's Loach is a true warrior nonetheless. Having served valiantly in combat and bringing its crews home to safety earns this warbird a place of honor on any flight line.

When John's not flying around in his Loach defending the skies over Minnesota from the ever-present danger of "cheeseheads" infiltrating from Wisconsin, he spends his time working on another pet project—a TH55A Osage.

"The TH-55As were so light and maneuverable, fast and fun!" John said, reminiscing about his training days at Mineral Wells. John found a 1967 model in "original" condition for sale in Kansas. While researching the aircraft's logbooks and comparing them to his own set of military flight books, John found that this particular TH55 carried him aloft on his fourth flight of helicopter training! Knowing John's dedication and preservation to history, his Osage project has all the makings of a future winner at EAA AirVenture! ✈

seats, new instrumentation, a new gyro system, and an intercom. John chose the military stock paint scheme of the New Jersey National Guard per the military spec of a Loach coming back online from rebuild. John also replaced the "old" T63-A-5 engine with the T63-A-700 engine that is commonly installed in the Bell Jet Ranger. To add authenticity, John added some "toys" to his Loach. A non-functioning M-60 machine gun is attached to the rear of the fuselage, awaiting its door gunner. Colored smoke canisters hang gingerly from the Loach, ready at a second's notice to mark suspected enemy targets. John also flies with the original flight suit and helmet he wore in Vietnam, sort of a "good luck charm" that appears to be working.

John's admiration and respect for the Loach crews goes back to his own Vietnam days. "These guys were like kamikazes, no fear of anything, a crazy bunch of pilots. But also, some of the bravest men in aerial warfare," said John. When John purchased his "pet" Loach, he researched its military his-



John Roxbury at EAA AirVenture 2002.