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Munson: Helicopter pilot on cloud nine as a member of elite squadron

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Written by
KYLE MUNSON

Nick Turner is one of 80 Marines trusted with transporting high-ranking officials.

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Minutes after clambering out of a VH-3D "Sea King" helicopter, Nick Turner is on the phone from Quantico, Va.

"We're supposed to be moving the vice president here shortly," the native of Elliott, Ia., says in a casual tone.

It's hard for me to relate. The only helicopter I've flown is the remote-controlled variety, and the only transport on my schedule this day is dog-walking.

Turner, 32, is a co-pilot and captain in the elite Marine Helicopter Squadron One - or HMX-1, Helicopter Marine Experimental One. Its 80 pilots, plus about 800 crew members, are charged with transporting the president, foreign dignitaries and other precious cargo.



Capt. Nick Turner, a pilot with Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 362, pilots a CH-53D Sea Stallion during a mission on Sept. 15, 2007. Turner was a member of the "Ugly Angels" before his current job in Marine Helicopter Squadron One. / SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

In one sense Turner is worlds away from the farm fields of southwest Iowa that he began to swoop across at age 6 with his father.

In another sense, flying a helicopter is the only mission, the only purpose he's ever known. Within the last few months he was cleared to fly as co-pilot with President Barack Obama on board and has done so

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Nick Turner, a native of Elliott, Ia., has logged about 3,200 flying hours in and out of the military. He recently was cleared to fly as a helicopter co-pilot with President Barack Obama on board, and he has performed that role three times so far. / SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER



Nick Turner, a Marine captain and native of Elliott, Ia., is one of the 80 pilots of the elite HMX-1 helicopter squadron that transports the president, members of the executive branch and foreign dignitaries. / SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

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three times so far.

Turner's father, Larry, started flying in 1965 as a Marine in Vietnam.

"It's one thing to follow in your father's footsteps," he says, "but it's another thing to do something that you completely love."

Turner has logged about 3,200 flying hours in and out of the military - compared with Larry, 72, who stopped counting at about 20,000 hours. He survived being shot down no fewer than five times.

"Ain't that about enough?" Larry asks when I catch him planted firmly on the ground at home in Elliott.

Larry returned home from Vietnam in 1967 to start Turner Copter Services, where he dusted crops, installed air-conditioning units atop Walmarts, ferried rock stars between gigs and spread seed and fertilizer for the state of Iowa, among other jobs.

"It was the only thing I knew how to do and do efficiently," Larry says.

It also put eight kids through college, Nick the youngest. Larry retired in 2006 and still has three helicopters in storage.

Before HMX-1, Turner ended up serving in the same "Ugly Angels" helicopter squadron that his father flew with in Vietnam.

You can think of a four-year tour of duty in HMX-1, "the Nighthawks," Turner says, a little like the progression through high school or college:

During your freshman year, it's all about learning the ropes.

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By the time you're a sophomore, you become a "qualified co-pilot" - Turner's current status.

When you're a "White House HAC (Helicopter Aircraft Commander)," sort of a junior, you can pilot anybody but the president.

The analogy breaks down during the fourth year, when only five pilots in the squadron become Marine One Pilots and are able to take the controls with the president on board. And those five pilots always handpick the next five pilots in succession.

Not that this will work in Turner's favor in his bid to become a Marine One Pilot, but HMX-1's legacy does claim western Iowa roots. The Marines' first official presidential helicopter pilot, Virgil Olson, is a native of Charter Oak, Ia. In 1957, he was designated the first and sole assigned pilot for then-President Dwight D. Eisenhower. A building at Quantico this year was named for Olson, 91 - a rare honor for a living Marine.

"Helicopters were kind of new in those days," Olson says when I catch him at home in Fort Belvoir, Va., in the middle of addressing a Christmas card to a fellow graduate of the Charter Oak High School Class of 1937.

"It was very demanding," Olson said, "because it was on call, and at that time I was the only qualified pilot."

Turner, who graduated from Griswold High School, went on to study and play football at Central College in Pella but returned home most weekends to fly with his dad. He's emphatic that his father in his heyday was the more accomplished pilot, because of his "uncanny ability to become one with the aircraft."

As a crop duster, Larry "put my skids right in the tassels almost," he says. "It's just the way I learned to fly."

He recalls shuttling Elton John between concerts in Iowa and laughs about how he scared the singer's bodyguard so badly that it "bleached him out," and he refused to talk to Larry after the first flight.

The fascination as a pilot, Turner says, is that unlike the more graceful and soaring airplane, a helicopter "continually has to be coaxed into the air." The challenge is to "control something that's physically out of control." So the old joke among pilots is that

helicopters are so ugly that the Earth's gravity simply rejects them.

In July, it was an airplane crash that claimed the lives of Turner's older brother, Tim, and brother-in-law, Tim McDonald, the pilot. Their World War II-era plane went down off the coast of Destin, Fla.

"I'd be lying to you if I'd say I don't think about it every day," Turner says. "We still don't even know what happened in that crash. A lot of my family members are still struggling to come to terms with it. I'm still harboring some anger and some disbelief that it even happened."

Turner, who nearly crashed himself in 2009 as a co-pilot during a mission in Afghanistan, grounded himself for a month after his brother's death to take a "long, hard look at myself to make sure I don't put my family in that situation again."

"But in the business I'm in, I can't dwell on things forever," he adds. "I've got to keep moving."

Turner lives in Stafford, Va., with his wife, Kimberly (of Colo, Ia.), and their four children ages 1 to 13. His goal is to become commander of a helicopter squadron and then retire to a life as a "struggling carpenter and Little League baseball coach."

"He's going to be a general," insists Larry. "I hope I live long enough to see it. I had a friend ask me the other day, 'You got any buttons left on your shirt?' "

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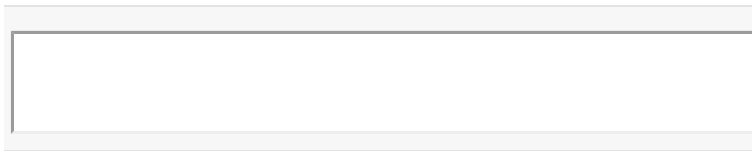
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