
Painting by former U.S. Army and Coast Guard pilot honors the spirit and history of iconic Lakota warrior Eagle Elk

Airbus Helicopters Inc. commissioned artwork featuring UH-72A Lakota helicopter by Dallas artist and former helicopter pilot

GRAND PRAIRIE, Texas — For decades, descendants of the fierce Lakota warrior Eagle Elk shared stories of his bravery in battles and prowess in hunting.

Yet family members worried Eagle Elk's legacy would someday be forgotten. No longer.

An image of the iconic Lakota warrior is now portrayed in "The Spirit of the Lakota," a painting commissioned by Airbus Helicopters Inc. to capture the spirit of the UH-72A Lakota helicopter and the heritage of the Native American tribe for which it is named.

"We are so proud of Eagle Elk," said Robert Eagle Elk, the warrior's grandson, at the recent unveiling of the artwork at Airbus Helicopters Inc.'s headquarters in Grand Prairie. "We always told ourselves his time would come, and now it has. I believe he is with us in spirit."

Created by Dallas artist David Gail Smith, the piece features a towering image of the Lakota warrior Eagle Elk, as well as the rugged and versatile Lakota military helicopter in flight. The painting portrays Eagle Elk as being part of the open sky and mountains, watching over Earth.

This process began in March 2016, when AHI began a search for an artist to create a piece honoring both the UH-72A Lakota helicopter, which the company produces for the U.S. Army, and the Lakota people. Company leaders found Smith, a retired Army and Coast Guard helicopter pilot who is now studying art at Southern Methodist University.

Intrigued by the subject, Smith said the assignment married his past as a helicopter pilot with his future as an artist, as well as a longtime interest in Native American culture.

To research the subject, Smith read numerous books about Sioux and Lakota tribes, reached out to Native American experts and spent a day in Grand Prairie viewing and snapping photos of Lakota helicopters. He used Gouache paint, an opaque watercolor, to create the piece.

"I have great respect for Native American culture and heritage, so it was important that anything I create be respectful," he said. "This was an incredible opportunity to revisit my past as a helicopter pilot and tie it to my future as an artist. I was grateful for this opportunity."

Leaders at Airbus Helicopters Inc. consulted with the Oglala Lakota Sioux Tribal Council to ensure the painting was culturally accurate and respectful. Tribal council leaders referred the company to the family of Eagle Elk.

Family members were so pleased with Smith's painting they drove from South Dakota to Texas to meet the artist and attend the recent unveiling. Attendees included Robert Eagle Elk and Charleen Eagle Elk, the warrior's grandson and great-granddaughter, respectively.

Sebastien Delmaire, Vice President of Business and Strategy for Airbus Helicopters Inc., said the company set out to create a symbol that would capture the historic legacy of the people who inspired the name of the helicopter.

“We wanted to honor the legacy and memory of Eagle Elk and the Lakota tribe while celebrating the future of the Lakota helicopter,” Delmaire said. “This project has connected people, families, and nations to one another, and we are proud of our Lakota association.”

At the unveiling ceremony, descendants recited the oral story of Eagle Elk, who fought in the Fetterman Battle of 1866 and the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876 and was a close ally of the famed Lakota leader Crazy Horse. Family members offered a Native American prayer, sang a song about Lakota life and presented Smith and AHJ executives with tribal flags, sage, and other gifts.

Quoting a tribal leader, Charleen Eagle Elk, the warrior’s great granddaughter, said, “Behold this day, for it is yours to make.”

“You have made us very proud to be Lakota people,” she added. “We thank you.

Airbus Helicopters Inc. will present copies of the Eagle Elk-Lakota artwork, commemorating the rich history behind the aircraft’s name, as gifts to key U.S. Army leaders, foreign military officers and other customers and potential customers.

Smith is a Dallas-based virtual artist who works across mediums and disciplines. His art can be found at www.davidgailsmith.com.

About the UH-72A Lakota

The UH-72A Lakota is a multi-mission helicopter that was selected by the U.S. Army in June 2006 in an open competition following a rigorous evaluation. The Lakota is in use with Army and National Guard units, is also the Army’s primary flight training helicopter and is now in use with foreign military services for missions such as transport, medical evaluation and search and rescue.

About Airbus Helicopters Inc.

Airbus Helicopters, Inc. is the U.S. affiliate of Airbus Helicopters, the largest helicopter manufacturer in the world, and a subsidiary of the Airbus Group. Airbus Helicopters, Inc. manufactures H125 and UH-72A helicopters and markets, sells and supports the broadest range of civil and parapublic helicopters offered in the U.S. The product line represents the industry’s most cost-effective, technologically-advanced helicopters serving all markets and missions. The company’s headquarters and main facility are in Grand Prairie, Texas, with a large manufacturing and production facility in Columbus, Miss. For more information, visit www.airbushelicoptersinc.com.

For more information, please contact:

Bob Cox
Senior Manager, Communications
and Media Relations
Tel: 972-641-3525
Cell: 972-213-2038
bob.cox@airbus.com