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Late pilot loved Hawai'i, Army

By William Cole
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Growing up in White Bear Lake, Minn., Maj. Curtis Feistner loved to cross-country ski in the winter, but it was in Hawai'i's blue waters and among its tropical hills that he really hit his stride.

The Army Special Operations helicopter pilot, one of 10 U.S. soldiers killed Feb. 21 when their MH-47 Chinook helicopter crashed at sea off the Philippines, was stationed at Barbers Point from about 1991 to 1995.

"He loved Hawai'i," said fellow West Point grad Scott Storkamp, who worked in Army intelligence at Scho-field Barracks. He left the Army in 1993, and has lived and worked here ever since.

"He lived Hawai'i to the fullest. He did more in three or four years here than I did in 10," Storkamp said. "Any outdoor activity you could do in Hawai'i, he did it at one time or another."

The list included the Honolulu Marathon and Ironman. Feistner loved to scuba dive, and he hiked the cliffs of Moloka'i and the crater at Haleakala.

"He was a fitness guy — one of these guys always working out, really an outdoorsman," said Storkamp, a financial adviser with Paine-Webber. "He loved the people, too, and really got along well with the kama'aina."

Even when his other devotion, the Army's elite 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment — the "Night Stalkers" — took him first to Fort Campbell, Ky., and then to K-2 Air Base in Taegu, South Korea, Feistner would come to Hawai'i at least once a year for briefings at Pacific Command, and then add extra time to his visits to hike and see old acquaintances.

Storkamp went to Minnesota Saturday to give a eulogy for his lifelong friend. The two men went to White Bear Lake High School together.

Feistner's body was one of three recovered after the twin-rotor Chinook went down in deep water off the coast of Negros Island while ferrying U.S. Special Forces troops and supplies from Zamboanga city to Basilan Island as part of a six-month counterterrorism exercise.

Eight of the dead soldiers were part of Company E of the 160th, which Feistner, 34, commanded.

Two other crew members were Air Force para-rescuers with the 320th Special Tactics Squadron out of Kadena Air Base in Okinawa.

Witnesses reported the Chinook was on fire when it went down. Hostile fire was ruled out, indicating a possible mechanical failure.

"The investigation will continue for an indefinite period of time until the team determines the cause of the accident," Maj. Cynthia Teramae, a spokeswoman for U.S. forces in the Philippines, told Deutsche Presse-Agentur.

Storkamp said Feistner died doing what he loved: being a helicopter pilot, and being part of the same elite special operations aviation unit featured in the movie "Black Hawk Down."

"When I heard about the helicopter going down, I had a feeling he was on it," Storkamp, 34, said. "He was not the type of person to be back at headquarters. I knew he would be on the bird with the troops — that's the way he is."

He said his friend "loved the real hard-core soldiering skills along with being an aviator," Storkamp said.

Feistner embodied the 160th motto, "Night Stalkers Don't Quit," and expected a lot from those he commanded, but stood up for his troops, too, his friend said.

"I remember when he was activating (Company E), he fought real hard to get better housing for his troops," he said. "I think they were going to get something pretty low standard, and he fought and won that battle. Sometimes you put your career at risk to win those battles, but he did, and he got better housing for his soldiers."

Feistner was low-key as a commander, "not your Patton or MacArthur kind of guy," Storkamp said. "He was more of a common man. He had (his troops') respect because he was very humble."

Feistner was single, although he wanted a family. But his career in special operations "just didn't give him the chance," Storkamp said.

"He used to joke that if he retired from the service, he would come here (to Hawai'i) and start a helicopter tour service, or find some other excuse to live here," he said.

Now, Storkamp and his wife, who also counted Feistner as a friend, have to take solace knowing that he lived life to the fullest.

"He squeezed so much out of life in 34 years that I guess that means something to us," Storkamp said. "He wanted to make the most contribution he could make for his country, and that's why he was willing to go in harm's way. I know he felt that way particularly after Sept. 11."