

BEHIND THE LOGO: A CONVERSATION WITH BILL ACKLEY

The Original Creator of “Chargin’ Charlie” — In His Own Words

A companion interview to the feature article on the origins of the RED HORSE logo

INTRODUCTION

Before “Chargin’ Charlie” became the global symbol of RED HORSE, it began with one Airman, a vision, and a handful of improvised art supplies in Vietnam. In this exclusive Q&A, **Bill Ackley** shares the story in his own words — unedited, unfiltered, and exactly as he lived it.

THE INTERVIEW

1. How did you get selected to design the RED HORSE logo?

Bill: Right after I finally got off the nasty Rock Crusher, Msgt Massey came to me and said at their staff meeting (Capt Currin, Chief Hovevar, Msgt Goff, and Msgt Massey), they discussed getting a person added to the staff that had drafting skills because they did not have the time to wait on engineering to do the many projects Airfields was involved in for the next year. I don't know exactly why they chose me out of the entire squadron, but they somehow knew that I had taken drafting in high school. Sgt Massey asked if I would like to come to Airfields and work on the Capt's staff as an illustrator. Well, I knew this was a great opportunity so accepted.

2. What was the process like? How did the idea come together?

Bill: We worked on several projects and in March 67, Capt Currin said the Colonel wanted to know if I or anyone I knew could come up with a logo for our squadron because he wanted us to be known across the base and stand out by painting the logo on our vehicles. I told the Capt, I was pretty sure I could do it. Within an hour I had a vision in my head, a red horse sitting on a bulldozer and carrying an M-16. No help, no suggestions.

I do remember trying to figure out the supplies since we didn't exactly have a neighborhood Walmart. One of my Hootch mates was Jerry Drake who was a clerk in the Colonel's office. I decided on some paper and pencil to draw it, a ruler, and figured crayons would be good to work with for the project. Then I would need stencils, tape, and scissors to make piece parts of the finished product and spray paint.

Once I got what I needed in a couple days, I sat down with my idea.....we were a unit called RedHorse, we were in a combat zone, and we were a heavy equipment squadron. The only colors I needed were white for the background for the equipment, black, yellow, and red. Within 2 days, I had my drawing.

3. Who reviewed the logo and what was the reaction?

Bill: I first shared it with my boss, Sgt Goff, then Sgt Massey....both really like it.....then to Chief Hocevar for final critique, he really liked it, so took it to Capt Currin, for approvals with NO changes. Then Capt Currin then took it to the Colonel.....BINGO. All he wanted to know was how fast I could I get the logo painted on jeeps first. All I needed was my stencils and spray paint. Then about a week later, I had the first one painted on the Colonel's jeep.

Now, I am pretty sure it was Colonel (General) Meridith at that time, because Col Carey was due to leave in Feb. I was actually really proud of myself that the first eyes to see it loved the way it looked and especially it being our commander.

4. What elements of the design were intentional?

Bill: I wanted the horse to be the focal point of the drawing and show he was a "dirt boy" doing what a "dirt boy" does best on a piece of construction equipment in a combat zone. The M-16 was the gun we were all issued and indicates we were in a war zone.

5. What happened after you left the Air Force? When did you first learn the logo lived on?

Bill: Here is the little weird part. After I got out of the AF in Aug 68, I only had memories and did not ever know what happened to the organization, RedHorse. No computers or cell phones to keep up with world or military news. When I was attending Louisiana Tech, I bowled on the men's bowling team and one of the guys I bowled with was Mike Merryman. His dad was a career AF Chief and his brother an AF officer. Mike graduated in '72, married and moved to Nebraska. Every year, we bowled in the National tournament and eventually Mike moved to Las Vegas.

Sometime in the late 80's or real early 90's, he called me and asked didn't I once tell him I was in the AF and part of the Redhorse unit...I said yes, why? He sent me a copy of the NASCAR Truck series with the Redhorse logo on a truck hood (#17). I was shocked. It was the very first time I saw my drawing (changed a lot but still my original design) outside of Vietnam!

I immediately started searching for a contact as to where, how, and why my design had shown up on a NASCAR truck. I remember sending a letter to NASCAR to get in touch with someone in the AF to talk to and get some info. I was so surprised, proud, happy, sad, and confused to see something I did show up over 20 years later.

6. How did you reconnect with RED HORSE?

Bill: Next thing I knew, I received an e-mail from the 820th with several names (one was Monk). I replied, sharing who I was and my part in the creation of the logo in 1967. They replied, indicating they were forwarding my info to Msgt David Sommers with the 554th in Guam because he was the 554th Historian. I replied and thanked them and waited for David to contact me. It took a few days, and I received an e-mail from him.

I was pretty overwhelmed that not only was Redhorse alive all these years, but grew and was a pinnacle part of the USAF. David shared that many times the guys would sit down and talk about the who, what, wheres, why, and when "Chargin' Charlie" was born. I shared many pictures with David and he wanted to be sure they were going to be part of the new building RH was constructing on Anderson AFB.

7. What did you think when you discovered the RED HORSE Association and saw the modern versions of the logo?

Bill: It was several years later when I heard about the Redhorse Association from my friend, Jay Baird from Riverside, CA, who I served with me in the 554. I googled it, joined as a life member, and posted a lot of the pics on the site. It was also, the first time I actually saw a Redhorse Chevron.

I was really proud to see it and saddened at the same time. Here is something I initially created and someone has probably made a lot of money selling a design they did not create. Then it struck me....it is different if they change or alter the original, so they can get away with it.

My design had a red horse, yellow bulldozer, black treads and blade, and was carrying a M-16...not a M-1. It also has a white lightning bolt instead of yellow. There are now a few other added things like dirt or exhaust behind the dozer and Charlie blowing.....which were several things I had planned to do with a brush after getting all our equipment stenciled since those enhancements would not have worked with a stencil.

8. Did you think RED HORSE would survive beyond Vietnam?

Bill: Honestly, at the time, I don't think anyone believed the "Redhorse" concept would have lived on past the year or two we spent in Vietnam and it would just revert back to a CE Squadron. I think General Merideth had a great vision and fought to keep the vision alive.....maybe the design helped a little, at least I would like to think so.

I would have liked to have met him and asked him face to face about his thoughts, but the fact he never personally came to me but sent his approval through Capt Currin was good enough for me at the time.

9. Do you have any regrets?

Bill: The one regret I have is it was never included on my APR because at the time it was not important, but designing the asphalt for the first parking ramp for C-123's in Vietnam was noteworthy.

10. What would you want younger RED HORSE Airmen to know?

Bill: I think I covered your questions except for the younger airmen out there. Gosh, how do let the thousands of young airmen out there being assigned to the best unit in the USAF know the story behind "Chargin' Charlie"? He came to life 59 years ago this month. I was only 20 years old at the time.

I am so pleased to see my creation (even if a little altered) is alive and well. I am happy I attended the 50th, 58th, and 60th Anniversary and got to see so many old and new Horsemen. I am saddened my friend Jay Baird passed away 2 years ago; he would have loved being at the 60th. Another friend I worked with at BellSouth for 25 years was in the 555th at the same time, I was in 554th and would have loved to come but was remodeling his home.

Hope this helps and I truly thank you for this effort you are willing to do for me and "TO the HORSE!"

CLOSING NOTE

This interview is intended as a **companion reference** to the main feature article on the creation of the RED HORSE logo. It preserves Bill Ackley's voice exactly as he shared it — a living piece of RED HORSE history.