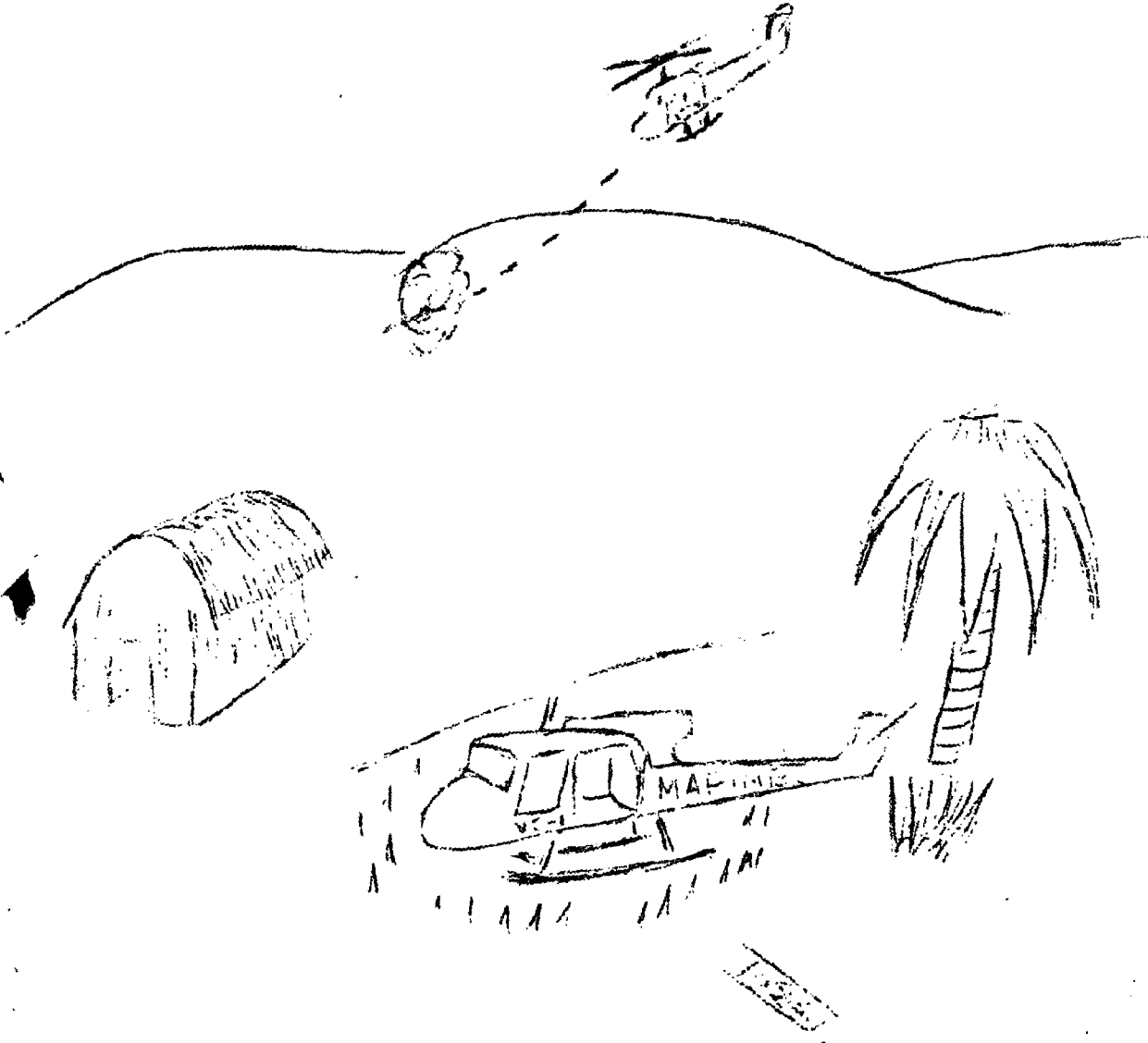


VMO-2

*HIST*

IN ACTION



*VMO-2*

*HIST*

*in Q. 1700*

MMAF VIETNAM

## MARINE OBSERVATION SQUADRON TWO IN THE REPUBLIC OF VIET NAM: 1965-1966

On 29 April, 1965, three Marine GP tents were erected near the southwest corner of the old airstrip at Da Nang, Republic of Viet Nam, and VMO-2 joined the ranks of American units engaged in assisting the Vietnamese people in their struggle to defeat the Viet Cong.

Under the direction of CWO Leonard GEORGE, Squadron Adjutant, and Squadron First Sergeant William BOYD, the advance party soon had the camp sufficiently ready to accommodate the rest of the Squadron Minus, represented by nine aircraft and their crews waiting aboard the USS PRINCETON after a hurried departure from Okinawa. On 3 May, six UH-1E's led by LtCol George BAUMAN, Squadron Commander, flew into the country, and a new chapter in Marine Corps Aviation history was begun.

As part of the Ninth Marine Expeditionary Brigade, the pilots and crew members of VMO-2(-) soon overcame the novelty of being the first Marine armed "Hueys" to go into combat. Experience came fast, and both men and machines performed well in meeting the challenges of a new type of war. On 4 May, the Squadron's three O-1B's got into action, flying the first of hundreds of perimeter recons that were to become routine in the months ahead. The next day it was the UH-1E's turn, as two of the gunships began construction of their soon-to-be legendary reputation by flying armed escort for medevac aircraft of HMM-162. As soon as air gunners could be trained and qualified on the Nui Son Ga range, the armed helicopters assumed fully the task of providing armed escort for helicopter operations of MAG-16(-).

By mid-May, the 9thMEB had become the Third Marine Amphibious Force, and the Squadron, augmented by three more O-1B aircraft joined from HMM-163, was participating heavily in the historic regimental landing at what was to become known as Chu Lai. Operating from both an LPH offshore and the airfield at Da Nang, Squadron aircraft performed numerous missions in all phases of the landing, providing visual reconnaissance, armed escort, artillery spotting, and pathfinder assistance, and acting as Tactical Air Controller (Airborne) for fixed wing aircraft. These tasks performed in helping establish the Chu Lai enclave soon became standard functions for the Marine Huey in the counterinsurgency situation.

Soon after arriving in the Republic, VMO-2 experienced its first taste of Viet Cong anti-aircraft fire. During the Chu Lai operation a UH-1E received two hits, neither of the rounds doing serious damage to the aircraft or causing injury to personnel. The aircraft promptly responded by delivering a strafing attack on the village from which the rounds had come. Later in the month, near Da Nang, similar incidents occurred, and the response was the same. It was clear that the enemy himself had a hard lesson to learn from the Marine Hueys.

Enemy fire was not the only hazard faced by aviators in Viet Nam. On 2 June an O-1B returning from the perimeter patrol crashed and burned in turbulent Hai Van Pass, killing the pilot, 1stLt Richard HEISTER, and his aerial observer, Captain Werner LUTZ. An unsuccessful but valiant rescue attempt was made by GySgt CURTO and SSgt CLOGSTON, who leaped into the jungle from a hovering air-

craft in order to reach the burning wreckage.

The Squadron's first combat casualties occurred on 26 June, when a UH-1E flying armed escort for a helilift by HMM-365 was fired on from a village northwest of Chu Lai and received three hits. Metal fragments flew into the legs of the pilot, Captain Anthony COMMON, and his gunner, LCpl Marc CZOMBA, but neither <sup>was</sup> injured seriously. The aircraft neutralized the enemy fire by attacking the village with rockets. Three days later the Huey's potential for fire suppression was fully realized, when two of the aircraft on a reconnaissance south of Chu Lai received moderate small arms fire and minor damage from an unfriendly village. Both Huey's replied with machineguns and rockets, destroying twenty buildings in the town.

As the hot Vietnamese summer of 1965 unfolded, VMO-2 was heavily committed in an extensive operating area. O-1B's flew daily reconns of the Da Nang, Hue Phu Bai, and Chu Lai enclaves, while the UH-1E's flew escort and cover wherever the Marines moved in expanding their perimeter. Squadron aircraft ranged from Quang Tri in the north to Quang Ngai in the south, and flew as far inland as the string of tiny outposts along the Laotian border. In July, all remaining personnel and aircraft of the rear element were transferred from Futema, bringing the Squadron at Da Nang to full strength, with nine UH-1E and seven O-1B aircraft. Major Robert TILLY became Executive Officer, and VMO-2 now consisted of several aviators who had flown the O-1B in Viet Nam prior to the arrival of the Squadron, as well as the veteran Huey pilots. Among the latter was MSgt Frank BAKER, one of the few enlisted pilots still on active duty in the Marine Corps.

In addition to its combat missions, the Huey came to be indispensable as a liaison aircraft for field commanders and visiting dignitaries alike. Virtually all of the "VIPs" making inspection tours of the Da Nang area were carried by aircraft of the Squadron. In June, the Secretary of the Navy had been one such distinguished passenger. Before the end of July, the Hueys transported the Secretary of Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Commander of the United States Military Assistance Command Viet Nam, and senior officers of all five branches of the armed forces, including the Commandant of the Coast Guard, the Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific Fleet, and the Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific. In addition, commanding generals of the III MAF and the First Marine Aircraft Wing and commanding officers of subordinate III MAF elements utilized the UH-1E to carry them to positions within their tactical areas of responsibility.

The month of August saw the Marines engaged in large offensive operations near the Chu Lai and Da Nang enclaves, and VMO-2 once again had a role in the making of history. On 13 August, four Hueys took part in America's first night helicopter assault, preceding the transport helicopters to the LZ area northwest of Da Nang. Their mission was to attract and suppress hostile fire, but none was encountered and the Hueys then acted as TAC(A) for the flare plane and provided armed escort for the troopships during the post-midnight landing.

On Operation Starlight, the highly successful campaign against two Viet Cong regiments south of Chu Lai, O-1B aircraft flew TAC(A)

missions during the assault, and UH-1E aircraft flew escort, close air support, and TAC(A) missions throughout the operation. Anti-aircraft fire encountered was frequently intense, and the Hueys received several hits, including four from fifty-caliber weapons. Most heavily hit was VS-6, which took eight rounds on 21 August, the most taken at one time by a squadron aircraft during 1965. Despite the damage, the pilot, 1stLt Norman EHLERT, was able to fly the plane back to Da Nang for repairs. In another incident, Major Donald REILLY and LCpl Marc CZOMBA, pilot and gunner of a UH-1E heavily damaged by enemy fire, brought back the crippled plane against heavy odds. CZOMBA used a stick to plug a hopelessly ruptured fuel line, and the Major called on his exceptional flying ability to get the aircraft to friendly territory on the remaining drops of fuel. In spite of all the hits received, only one injury was sustained, SSgt Donald MIELKE being wounded twice in the leg.

During August another important mission was assigned to the UH-1E. Equipped with a loudspeaker system, the aircraft was used in support of psychological warfare operations, dropping leaflets over Vietnamese villages while ARVN personnel aboard broadcast to the people.

On Operation Piranha, the September sequel to Starlight, intense anti-aircraft fire was again encountered south of Chu Lai. Six out of eight aircraft committed received hits, and Major Edward KUYKENDALL, GySgt BROWN, and LCpl STARNER were wounded, none seriously. The success of the Squadron in this operation was largely due to the fine work of the Maintenance Section, which dispatched a crew to Quang Ngai and by the evening of the battle had all damaged aircraft flying again.

During the year, the Maintenance Section, under the supervision of 2ndLt BURCHETTE and MSgt ROGERS, continually accomplished the impossible in the fight against battle damage, corrosion and excessive wear experienced in RVN. Over 150 hits were received by Squadron aircraft, and working conditions under which the Squadron operated were frequently unfavorable. On one occasion, engine failure resulted in the crash of a UH-1E in enemy territory south of Da Nang. With Marine tactical air rushed in to provide security, the Huey was disassembled by a maintenance crew consisting of GySgt CURTO, SSgt SULLIVAN, Sgt THOMAS, LCpl CZOMBA, LCpl SMITH, Cpl GRIFFITH, LCpl HEARNE, and LCpl PRICE, after which it was evacuated by an H-37.

September was a month of transition for the Squadron. On the first of the month, VMO-6 reached Viet Nam, and VMO-2 was increased by several helicopters and men from the new unit, which eventually took over most of the commitments to the south of Tam Ky. The simultaneous withdrawal of all armed US Army helicopters from I Corps, however, left VMO-2 Hueys with expanded responsibilities in northern RVN. On 12 September, the Squadron moved to its new home at the Marble Mountain Air Facility, and the O-1B pilots from the pre-Huey days were transferred to Futema for rotation home. The "V" in VMO now became but a vestige of the past, as the faithful fixed-wing reconnaissance planes were left in retirement on the edge of the Da Nang airstrip.

The all-Huey Squadron continued exploiting the versatility of its aircraft for reconnaissance as well as armed escort missions. In September it assumed what was to become its most rewarding mission, that of airborne medical evacuation. Ready to depart at a

moment's notice, the standby medevac slick, with its armed escort, responded quickly to calls for the evacuation of wounded, sick, or injured American and Vietnamese personnel, twenty-four hours a day under all but the most adverse weather conditions. On one occasion, a request for emergency evacuation arrived at 0200 from the border outpost of A Loui. Flying at 6,000 feet over uninhabited mountains and dropping through clouds to find the tiny airstrip, the Hueys accomplished their mission well before daylight, saving the life of an ARVN officer severely wounded by a grenade.

On 3 October, the Hueys were involved in an engagement in the area of Le Son (4), south of Da Nang. They were used initially to escort a troop lift and to stand by for close air support as the infantry unit moved out. When contact with the enemy was made, the medevac aircraft arriving on the scene assumed the role of TAC(A) as the gunships made strafing and rocket runs. Relief was provided as hostile fire against both ground troops and aircraft became intense. The two newly arrived Hueys received hits but remained on station to direct the landing of reinforcements. After making repeated attacks and directing fixed wing airstrikes on enemy positions, the lead aircraft landed under fire to evacuate wounded Marines. After refueling and rearming at Da Nang, the Hueys returned to the battle, directing operations into the evening. For his crucial actions, the flight leader, Captain Robert SMITH, was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Pilot skill and aircraft capability combined again on the tenth of October, when an armed UH-1E flown by Captain COMMON performed the evacuation of several wounded from the scene of a fierce engagement near the border outpost of Ashau. The aircraft had to drop through a gap in the high jungle canopy and use its rotor wash to beat down the elephant grass in order to land. Once loaded, take-off could be effected only after all ammunition and excess gear had been jettisoned, and then only because of the pilot's precision in executing a right spiral, but the mission was accomplished and several lives were saved.

As the combat crews were achieving a high degree of proficiency in air operations, the Viet Cong brought the war to VMO-2 on the ground. In the early minutes of 28 October, several dozen of the enemy infiltrated the Marble Mountain Air Facility and used charges to destroy the bulk of the UH-1E's (only one was actually flyable after the attack), as well as several other aircraft. Although American material losses were high, they cost the VC heavily in men killed or captured, and personnel of VMO-2 were instrumental in resisting the enemy and keeping Marine casualties to a minimum. The Squadron had many heroes that night, such as LCpl ACTON, who tended the wounded with a complete disregard for the bullets still flying around him, and SSgts HATHAWAY and DANIELS, who led the Squadron alert platoon into timely action.

There were casualties however, and VMO-2 had more than its share of them. Chief GELIEN, the Squadron's Navy Corpsman, was killed in action, as was LCpl ROWLAND. Seriously wounded were GySgt WOOD, Cpl BARKIN, and LCpls PAPP and STARNER, all directly engaged with the enemy on the flight line; as well as Cpl SCOTT, LCpl SEE, and PFC RYNDERS. Two pilots, 1stLt JENNINGS and 1stLt DECHANT, were wounded while they and 1stLt John MASTERS fought off VC who had them caught in the area of the ready room. Another pilot who

had been standing by at the line, Captain Benjamin MEHARG, earned the Bronze Star for his actions.

Augmented with planes from VMO-6, the Squadron soon recovered from the attack and was back in action by the beginning of November. A new mission was assumed, that of providing relief on station to maintain an aerial observer airborne during the hours of darkness, for a continuous visual reconnaissance of the Da Nang and Marble Mountain areas. Later, while participating in operation Blue Marlin, northeast of Tam Ky, the squadron lost the services of one of the dedicated aerial observers who performed long and demanding hours of flying with the unit. On 17 November, while the Huey in which he was riding was attacking an enemy target, Captain Bobby COLE was hit with a round of hostile fire, resulting in serious injury to his leg.

During November a UH-1E became permanently assigned to MAF headquarters as the personal plane of the Commanding General, Major General WALT. Captain COMMON, the General's pilot and senior aide, was assigned to the MAF as temporary additional duty, as was his crew chief, Cpl BOHNER.

On 19 November, a UH-1E piloted by 1stLts Norman MAHALICH and Robert BAILEY performed the rescue of two swimmers who had been swept out from the Marble Mountain Beach. The aircraft hovered over the rough sea while two crew members, LCpls CARRINGTON and ERKSON, and the Squadron Flight Surgeon, Lt SAMPSON, USN, went out on the skids to reach the swimmers. In a delicate operation, the swimmers were then towed to shore.

The final month of 1965 was an active one for the Squadron. Harvest Moon was the biggest operation since Starlight, and once again the Hueys were heavily committed. A prologue to the operation, which took place to the south of Da Nang, occurred on 8 December, when an ARVN unit in the area was encircled by the Viet Cong. Four Americans with the unit succeeded in gaining the attention of aircraft which directed a Huey flown by Major James GILLIS, Squadron Executive Officer, to attempt a rescue. Setting down in the center of advancing Viet Cong elements, the Huey evacuated the Americans and one ARVN. The next day, the Major was awarded the Silver Star personally by CGFMFPAC, LtGen KRULAK.

As Harvest Moon commenced on 9 December, heavy contact with the enemy was maintained, and Squadron aircraft were committed to a variety of missions. One Huey acted as TAC(A) for the operation, while two others flew reconnaissance to find targets in the area. All of the Hueys expended large amounts of their ordnance during the day. Even the two command helicopters and the Commanding General's escort Huey became directly involved, delivering fire and performing medevacs during the heat of the fighting. As night approached, the recon Hueys attempted to evacuate some seriously wounded Marines from a unit still under heavy Viet Cong fire. The lead aircraft attempted to land in the darkened zone and was immediately hit by enemy machinegun fire, causing it to crash from an altitude of fifty feet. The pilot, Major REILLY, died of wounds received, and his crew - 1stLt John CHESTER, LCpl OETJEN, and LCpl OWENS - were injured in the crash. The loss of Major REILLY, Squadron Operations Officer, was a heavy one, for the performance of the highly decorated aviator (who had received the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry and been nominated for several high American awards during his tour in RVN)

had always been inspirational, as he constantly placed the needs of others ahead of his own safety.

On 10 December, the fighting continued to be relentless, and Squadron aircraft continued to put forth a maximum effort. Two Hueys performing TAC(A), pathfinder, escort and medevac missions flew a total of 23.8 hours, keeping a steady pressure on the VC and assisting various units all over the battle area. Stopping only to refuel and to replenish their ordnance, the aircraft killed and wounded several of the enemy and evacuated thirteen wounded Marines. The leader of the flight, Captain Richard CARR, was awarded a well-deserved DFC for his untiring efforts. Another UH-1E was acting as TAC(A) for airstrikes and a helilanding when it encountered heavy enemy fire and a fifty-caliber round tore through the leg of the co-pilot, Colonel YUNCK, Operations Officer of the 1st MAW. While Sgt THOMAS applied a tourniquet, the pilot, Major KUYKENDALL, immediately flew to a field hospital, in time to save the Colonel's life. Returning to action, the Huey continued as TAC(A), and expended its ordnance on several VC targets, destroying at least one enemy mortar.

Squadron Aircraft continued to support Harvest Moon, but were spared from further serious incident. One more hit was received, when a Huey piloted by BGen CARL took a round through the rotor blade, but the aircraft made its way to a safe area without difficulty.

On 17 December, the medevac aircraft performed a mission at the Thuong Duc outpost, an area where hostile fire had frequently been encountered. As the aircraft was departing the outpost, an enemy bullet passed through the cockpit, wounding the pilot, Captain MCALLISTER, in the leg. Although in great pain and losing blood, the pilot was able to direct the return of his aircraft (flown by a co-pilot making his first trip in a Huey) to Da Nang.

During the Christmas period, the Squadron was saddened by the death of 1stLt John SCHMID, one of its aerial observers, who was killed in action while performing his duties with another squadron.

The year of 1966 was ushered in by Marines of the III MAF with an impromptu display of flares and tracers, witnessed from the air by two Hueys of VMO-2 who, typically, were beginning the year hard at work on a medevac mission. Although January proved less strenuous than December, the Squadron flew in excess of 1,000 hours and participated in three major operations. Long Lance and Mallard were two operations designed to exploit Harvest Moon, but little contact with the enemy occurred, and the Hueys experienced no heavy engagements, providing support as reconnaissance, escort, and medevac aircraft. Double Eagle, which took place to the south of Chu Lai, directly involved only VMO-2's liaison aircraft, which carried the Commanding General on several trips to the area of operations.

The Vietnamese holiday of TET brought a truce to the Marines, and the Hueys were employed on psywar broadcast and leaflet dropping missions in an attempt to persuade enemy troops and their sympathizers to return to the Government. During January, also, the Squadron was able to contribute substantially to the civic action phase of the war on the ground. In a project co-ordinated by 1stLt Ward THOMPSON, Squadron Intelligence and Civil Affairs Officer, VMO-2 used funds contributed by people in the states to aid in the reconstruction of the school house in My Thi hamlet, and made a welcome

contribution to the old age home in Da Nang.

During January the Commandant of the Marine Corps visited RVN, and the Squadron was privileged to provide transportation for him. The Commandant was one in a continuing series of distinguished visitors flown by Squadron Hueys. The Air Force Chief of Staff and the Army Chief of Staff were added to the list of ranking military officials flown, and several members of Congress and a number of show business celebrities were also carried. In November one passenger had been Mr. Graham MARTIN, US Ambassador to Thailand, whose son, 1stLt Glenn MANN, had been killed in action with VMO-6. In December, the Squadron had carried LtGen THIEU, Chief of State of the Republic of Viet Nam.

In February's 28 days, the Squadron flew a record number of hours (1218.6). VS-1, with LCpl H. H. FRENCH as crew chief, flew 135.3 hours, the most for any one aircraft in one month.

Most of the hours for February were accrued on routine missions, but on the twenty-third of the month the Huey gained recognition as the vital instrument in saving the lives of seventeen members of a reconnaissance patrol. Late in the afternoon, the patrol was surrounded by an estimated battalion of Viet Cong deep in Elephant Valley (itself named for an earlier encounter by VMO-2 O-1B pilot Captain James LIVENGOOD) and radioed for assistance to two reconnaissance Hueys led by LtCol BAUMAN. Since the weather prevented fixed wing aircraft from attacking, the Hueys conducted continuous rocket and strafing runs in a close air support mission which thwarted the attacking Viet Cong and eventually resulted in thirty enemy killed. As dusk approached, two more Hueys came to provide relief and directed H-34 aircraft in to evacuate the patrol, which escaped without a single casualty.

Flight time for March once again represented a new monthly high, as Squadron aircraft logged 1391 hours and were involved in some of the heaviest engagements of the war. The month began with a night operation east of Hue Phu Bai, and in the early morning hours of the first, two Hueys attacked a fleet of Viet Cong boats in the Cau Hai Lagoon, damaging thirty and preventing the enemy from landing a reaction force against ARVN units sweeping the coast. Four days later, the scene had shifted a hundred miles to the south, where Marines succeeded in trapping a Viet Cong regiment west of Quang Ngai. Four UH-1E's from VMO-2 were committed to this action, which was termed Operation Utah, and which saw fierce fighting on a large scale for several days. Squadron aircraft encountered intense anti-aircraft fire and received several hits, but sustained no casualties, while flying as TAC(A), delivering suppressive fire, and performing med-evacs in the heat of the battle.

On 10 March, the Viet Cong hit the Ashau outpost in force, and VMO-2 joined the helicopter rescue operation launched in support of the defenders. Two UH-1E's escorting HMM-163 succeeded in reaching the outpost in mid-afternoon, after weather had hampered operations for several hours. The flight leader, Major Clifford REESE, was under constant and intense anti-aircraft fire, but maintained covering support while the second aircraft, flown by Captain James RIDER, landed on the enemy-infested airstrip to evacuate the crew members of a downed transport helicopter. The Huey was nabbed by fleeing

defenders and crashed twice as it attempted to take off, finally achieving flight with no fewer than 16 passengers aboard in addition to its four-man crew. Having expended every round of their ordnance, the Hueys then returned safely to Hue Phu Bai. Meanwhile, four unarmed Hueys, led by the Squadron Commander, had reached the Ashau area to provide TAC(A) and medevac support. They remained on station until their fuel was dangerously low, in spite of deteriorating weather conditions. During the next two days, four other Squadron aircraft were committed to the evacuation of Ashau, and helped recover all survivors while under continuous enemy fire.

Miraculously, the Squadron sustained no casualties during the Ashau operation, but two weeks later the constant exposure of the Huey to enemy fire resulted in injury to another of its pilots. On 26 March, 1stLt John MASTERS was wounded in the leg while escorting HMM-164 on a trooplift south of Da Nang. His aircraft was fired on during a low pass over a suspected Viet Cong position and received a total of twelve hits, a record for a single aircraft in one incident.

February and March saw the influx of new personnel, coming to replace those due for rotation home. Among those aviators arriving were Major PLAMONDON, who became Operations Officer, and Major MATHEWS, transferred from Group Headquarters. Among those leaving was Captain Donald VACCA, who with two Viet Nam tours totaling over a thousand hours of flight time behind him, probably had more combat hours in the Republic than any other Marine Aviator. Also leaving were LtCol BAUMAN and the other personnel who had come ashore back in May.

As the Squadron completed its first year in Viet Nam, it could look back on twelve months of outstanding achievement. Its aircraft had flown well over ten thousand hours in combat, performing 10,000 sorties. On 600 medevac missions, the Hueys had evacuated 1300 cases. The officers and men had been recommended for many awards, including one Navy Cross, one Legion of Merit, and three silver stars, as well as sixteen Distinguished Flying Crosses, twelve Bronze Stars, seven Navy and Marine Corps Medals, sixty Navy Commendation Medals, thirty-one purple hearts, and over one thousand Air Medals. But the real story, of course, could not be reflected in the statistics, nor has it been adequately recorded in words. The real story exists in memories of monotonous hours of flying, of repairing aircraft late into the night, of terrifying near misses and of more terrifying hits, of frustrations and disappointments and occasionally of satisfaction with the results of one's work. And so the real story can only be known to the people who lived it, to the officers and men of VMO-2. But they know it is one of which they can be truly proud.

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