

There was a yearbook type album of the 123rd Aviation Battalion sold in 1969. Inside this book there were these words:

**"Mission"**

Provide Americal division with:

- \*Aviation support for division headquarters and assigned and attached elements.
- \*Aerial reconnaissance and security means having limited offensive, defensive, or delaying capability.
- \*Tactical air movement of combat, combat support, and combat support units.

Former and present commanders.

LTC John L. Holladay, Armor  
8 Dec 67 - 27 Jul 68  
Cathedral City, California

\*LTC John N. Brandenburg, Infantry  
28 Jul 68 - 21 Jan 69  
Portales, New Mexico

LTC Raymond V. Brown, Field Artillery  
22 Jan 69 -  
Willingboro, New Jersey

(An article in the February 2, 1969 Falcon had San Antonio as his home town)

Command Sergeant Major  
O.C. Hendrix  
10 Jul 68  
Batesville, Mississippi

SGM Lawrence E. Tyson, Hacienda Hts, CA

During 1968, the 123rd Avn Bn compiled an impressive record. A Company supported the America's ground units by hauling 1,482 tons of cargo in over 3,736 sorties, and in the process killed over twenty VC/NVA and medevaced over 94 persons. B Company learned their tactical lessons well, killing over seven hundred VC/NVA and destroyed over 575 structures in 27,510 sorties.

Historical review. The 161st Assault Helicopter Company was part of the 14th Aviation Bn. They went all over Vietnam until after Task Force Oregon. The 161st gunship (Scorpions) platoon became B/123 Company Warlords, the slick platoon (Pelicans) became A/123 Company Pelicans, the maintenance (Roadrunners) 406 T.C. detachment remained with the 123rd Avn Bn. Most people wouldn't know much about this except our mess hall had the scorpions and pelican emblems painted on circular wooden shields. There was an album for the 161st Aviation Company created in 1967. This is the history of the 161st Company and therefore the history of the 123rd Avn Bn.

The 161st Aviation Company came into being on 25 August, 1965, at Fort Benning, Georgia, and was built up to full strength by November of the same year. The Pelicans, Scorpions, Service Platoon, 406th TC Detachment and the 449th Signal Detachment set sail for the Republic of Viet Nam and landed at Qui Nhon, which proved to be no the location of the company site but only the nearest village.

The actual company area turned out to be a scrub covered hill in the An Sou Valley 12 miles west of Qui Nhon, Lane Army Airfield, as it was designated, was built from the bottom up, largely through the efforts of the personnel stationed there. Living in tents, the men erected their own quasi-permanent living quarters or "hooches" and Christmas dinner heralded the first "sit-down" meal for the company. In January, 1966, the unit was assigned to the 52nd Aviation Battalion, located at Pleiku, to effect combat operations.

Assigned to give Direct Support to the Republic of Korea's "Tiger" Capital Infantry Division, the 161st Aviation Company concentrated its area of operations in the Phu Cat mountains just North of Lane Army Airfield. The Pelicans, "slicks", flew Delta models while the Scorpions, or "Guns", drove armed "B" models. From their very first combat assault, the Pelicans were known for their attitude of "only the best will do". Throughout their operations at Lane Army Airfield, the Pelicans compiled an extremely meritorious record and earned a well deserved reputation of being completely dependable in any situation. The Scorpions first mission was to provide suppressive fire for the "slicks" during combat assaults. This fire was so effective that the "slicks" sustained a minimum number of hits from enemy fire. Always on Standby, the Scorpions saved many lives due to the fact they could provide a high volume of accurate suppressive fire for combat units on short notice. One action commander was wounded. The crewchief on board the aircraft was saved by wearing a chest protector as he took a direct hit in the chest. The crew of the downed aircraft was plucked to safety by the crew of another 161st helicopter.

June Also saw the 161st in the lead of the 14th Battalion's first major airlift. On June 25th the 161st joined her sister companies the 176th and the 174th in moving two entire infantry battalions. The lift took approximately 5 hours.

On 15 July a trawler, loaded with arms and ammunition was making its way along the coast of South Vietnam when it was run aground by the Navy. Two Scorpions and a Pelican flare ship were dispatched to the scene, and proceeded to help the Navy finish off the trawler. The following morning the 161st and her sister companies joined forces in lifting Koreans into the area to check for Viet Cong and to capture the supplies on board the trawler. July also saw the conclusion of Operation Malheur.

In August, the 161st was kept busy with rescuing the personnel on board a medical evacuation helicopter that crashed near QuiNhon and going to the aid of an Air America twin engine aircraft that crashed near Tam Ky.

August also saw the opening of Operations Benton in the mountains northwest of Chu Lai, and the 161st Aviation Companies' second mortar attack.

Just three days prior to the local South Vietnamese elections on August 30th, the 161st had between 40 and 50 rounds of enemy mortar fire fall in their perimeter. Luckily no one was hurt and no damage was done to the aircraft.

September marked the ending of Operation Benton and the beginning of Operations Cook and Wheeler. It also proved to be a month of disaster for the 161st.

September 29th started out with only a few aircraft flying, but by mid-afternoon every aircraft that was flyable was put in the air. By the end of the day the 161st had 3 aircraft shot down by hostile fire while two other aircraft were grounded due to extensive battle damage. One crewmember was killed in action and two pilots were wounded with many others sustaining minor injuries. 29 September was truly a black day for the 161st Aviation Company.

October was another fairly quiet month for the very efficient general support company. The biggest moment of the month was when ships were dispatched to search for a marine who was last seen drifting out to sea on an air mattress.

In November things began to pick up again, the 161st began to send ships up to Landing Zone Baldy in support of the 1st Cavalry Division. During November the 161st was also playing hero again with rescues. The 161st sent 3 ships to rescue the survivors from a sinking South Vietnamese fishing boat.

November 28th saw the 161st hit for the third time by enemy mortar fire. The first round fell in the area at approximately 2255, and the last rounds hit at 0345. Small arms fire was also received on the perimeter. During the early morning hours a ship equipped with a firefly light was dispatched to aid the flare ship was presumably shot down and crashed into the South China Sea. All four crewmembers were killed in action. (This may have been the first mission for one of the crewmembers, Nix?. It was speculated that the aircraft was hit by an artillery flare based on the evidence found from the crash wreckage.) During the period with the Americal Division, the 161st's unending efforts have led to the recommendation of forty individuals for the Distinguished Flying Cross, fifty-six for the Bronze Star, sixty-eight for the Army Commendation Medal, eight Army Commendation Medals with "V" device for valor, 160 Air Medals, forty-five Air Medals with "V" device for valor, and thirty-four Purple Hearts.

In reputation and honors earned, as in hours flown and passengers carried, the 161st Aviation Company holds its place as one of the finest helicopter companies in the Republic of Vietnam.

This is the DFC citation to Donald O. Smith of the 161st Avn Co dated 24 April 1967.

AWARD OF THE DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS

SMITH, DONALD O - SPECIALIST FIVE E5 United States Army 161st Assault Helicopter Company, 14th Aviation Battalion, 17th Combat Aviation Group, 1st Aviation Brigade, 17th Combat Aviation Group, 1st Aviation Brigade, APO 96307.

Awarded: Distinguished Flying Cross

Date action 19 June 1966

Theater: Republic of Vietnam

Reason: For heroism, while participating in aerial flight, evidenced by voluntary actions above and beyond the call of duty in the Republic of Vietnam: Sepcialist Five Smith distinuished himself by exceptionally valorous actions on 19 June 1966 while serving as crew chief on an armed helicopter during the support of a beleagured infantry company near Tuy Hoa. The company had been held for two days in a valley by a Viet Cong battalion that was firmly entrenched on surrounding hills. On three occasions, Specialist Smith's gunship was requested to cover medical evacuation helicopters that flew into the besieged unit. Completely disregarding his own safety while receiving intense hostile fire, he pinpointed the most active enemy emplacements and sprayed them with devastating fire. Although his aircraft received numerous hits, Specialist Smith never wavered at his gun position, doing his utmost to protect the evacuation mission. His fearless and accurate gunnery accounted for 42 insurgents killed on the hills around the ground unit. He struck the Viet Cong with such a disruptive effect that the infantry company was able to move from its position for the first time in two days. Specialist Smith's outstanding courage and devotion to duty were in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service and reflect great credit upon himself, his unit, and the United States Army.

There are several books out about My Lai. It is interesting to note that there are several members of the 123rd Aviation Bn mentioned in these books. The viewpoint of these authors is rather negative and anti-war, although there is merit if you can maintain your balance. The book written by General Peers has a section on the involvement of B. Company, 123rd Avn. Bn..

There is a "Vietnam Experience" Time Life series of books out. The array of battle lists the 123rd in the "Army at War" The one book, "Passing the Torch", has a great explanation of how America got involved in the war.

The book "Death Valley" included operations by the 123rd Aviation Battalion. General Tackaberry (196th Brigade Commander) was mentioned as a reference in the book. Listed in the bibliography are articles from "Time" and other magazines dealing with the action around Hiep Duc beginning in August of 1969.

The book Hunter Killer Squadron by Matthew Brennan. Describes Aero Scout operations. Some of the action mentioned takes place in our AO. It is a very interesting book for anyone in the 123rd.

Another book "Brennan's War" has more of the ground war takes place in our AO, and there are interesting maps (Brennan does make a negative comment about the Americal Division being the worst division in Vietnam).

A book on "Colin Powell" written by Warren Brown includes a picture of an crashed A/123rd helicopter that JCS Colin Powell crashed in.

The movie, "Platoon Leader", is a movie that describes action in the area around LZ English (Bong Son) with the 173rd.

I enjoyed the first year of the television series, "Tour of Duty". It depicted Americal Division forces and was the most realistic cinema produced up to that time. The 196th LIB was depicted in the action.

There is a "Big Picture" tape of the Americal Division showing clips WWII and then covering Vietnam. The 10,000 day war is the best video that I have ever seen on Vietnam. I have taped it from it's television broadcast on Public television. The CBS special on Vietnam was one of the worst, most negative, opiniated video I have seen on the war.

I am attempting to get movies converted to video for anyone who would want to see this material. Louis Connors, Wayne Bradley, and Richard Waldner have several reels of movies from the 123rd days.

Someone in the "Pelican" pilot's group also has movies. Tony May has some footage from Colonel Louis H. Gelling that they are preparing.

The pilot's favorite book is "Chickenhawk" by Mason. It describes the experiences of a helicopter pilot in the 1st Cav division.

I was rather surprised reading "The New Face of War" by Malcolm W. Browne. The author analyzed the problems of Vietnam so well that it is hard to believe that it was written in 1965. The book could have been produced after the war ended. This analysis was as good as 20/20 hindsight.

Where the Orange Blooms is a book often mentioned for the Vietnamese soldiers point of view. Gives an idea of what life was like for the ARVN before and after the fall of Vietnam.

A very good book on the VC perspective is "The Tunnels of Cu Chi".

The Survivors - by Zalin Grant. Book about Americal POW's captured and held in I corps. Has Frank Anton (Jan 5, 1968, Pfister door gunner, Lewis crewchief) of the 71st firebirds and men of the 196th LIB (David Harker & Jim Strickland (D company Jan 8, 1968), Willy Watkins & James Daly (A company January 9, 1968) and Isaiah McMillan & Tom Davis (B company March 12, 1968), captured in Happy Valley. Three men from Tony May's unit were captured the day of his first big firefight. The story of the Caucasian V.C., Garwood, is covered in the book.

"Chargers" the only book known to me written about the 196th LIB by F. Clifton Berry, Bantam Books.

"It Doesn't Take a Hero" by Norman Schwartzkopf has some history of the Americal Division. It mentioned LZ Dottie and LZ Charger.

There is a map of the "Rocket Pocket" around Chu Lai.

Another book (made into movie) that took place in the Americal AO is "Friendly Fire". A map is shown of the incident area.

There were some Vietnamese medals that we were never quite clear about. Some people said that we were authorized and others said we weren't. It was confusing. Everyone wore the medals, but individual orders were not issued. I think the medals were authorized for anyone serving in Vietnam. I found this in the mid 1969 issue of "Tour 365" magazine regarding the Vietnam Service medal (striped medal like the South Vietnamese flag):

(Updated to current values from an article found in the VFW magazine.)

#### Vietnam War Campaigns

Campaign*	Inclusive Dates
Advisory	March 15, 1962 - March 7, 1965
Defense	March 8, 1965 - Dec. 24, 1965
Counteroffensive	Dec. 25, 1965 - June 30, 1966
Counteroffensive phase II	July 1, 1966 - May 31, 1967
Counteroffensive phase III	June 1, 1967 - Jan. 29, 1968
Tet Counteroffensive	Jan. 30, 1968 - April 1, 1968
Counteroffensive phase IV	April 2, 1968 - June 30, 1968
Counteroffensive phase V	July 1, 1968 - Nov. 1, 1968
Counteroffensive phase VI	Nov. 2, 1968 - Feb. 22, 1969
Tet 69 Counteroffensive	Feb. 23, 1969 - June 8, 1969
Summer-Fall 1969	June 9, 1969 - Oct. 31, 1969
Winter-Spring 1970	Nov. 1, 1969 - April 30, 1969
Sanctuary Counteroffensive	May 1, 1970 - June 30, 1970
Counteroffensive phase VII	July 1, 1970 - June 30, 1971
Consolidation I	July 1, 1971 - Nov. 30, 1971
Consolidation II	Dec. 1, 1971 - March 29, 1972
Cease-Fire	March 30, 1972 - Jan. 28, 1973

\*For purposes of the Vietnam Service Medal the cutoff award date was March 29, 1973.

Any member of the Army who is serving or who has served in Vietnam or contiguous waters or air space in accordance with AR 672-5-1, is authorized to wear a battle star on the Vietnam service ribbon for each period in which he served in Vietnam.

Captain Jack Webb transferred out to a unit with more action. He invited me to come with him as his crew chief. I wanted to, but at this point I was more interested in getting out the action than getting things hotter. It was a couple months later that we were told Captain Webb was shot down and killed I felt a great loss. I had thought he had gone down with the newspaper reporter in the "Million Dollar Hill" action, but in "Death Valley" the crew of the helicopter is listed and his name is not there. Others I have talked to had seen him in Ft Rucker after returning from Vietnam. An article in the August 25, 1969 Monday "Stars and Stripes" I believe refers to this action as follows:

Near Helicopter Crash Site.

GIs Take Strategic Hill From Reds

Landing Zone Center, Vietnam (AP) - American infantrymen met little resistance Saturday as they captured a rocky knoll from where entrenched enemy forces had blocked efforts to reach a downed American helicopter for four days.

Four companies of the U.S. Americal Div., totaling about 250 men, occupied Hill 103 at dusk.

From their vantage point, they were in a position to move to the site of the helicopter crash about 1,000 yards away. Presumably the final drive would come Sunday.

The helicopter, carrying seven soldiers and an Associated Press photographer, was shot down by enemy gunfire Tuesday. All aboard were believed killed. Efforts to reach the scene produced the biggest battle of the Communists' fall campaign. (The action was around Hiep Duc)

More than 500 North Vietnamese regulars are thought to have died in the fighting which broke out last Sunday when American patrols bumped into enemy patrols believed positioning for an attack on the nearby district town of Hiep Duc.

The action intensified the next day and swelled into heavy fighting after the helicopter brought down. American losses were estimated at nearly 40 killed and more than 169 wounded.

But Saturday the advancing Americans met only sniper fire as they approached the hill. When they reached its crest four enemy mortars crashed in on them. U.S. casualties were six wounded.

The hill had been steadily pounded by artillery bombs and napalm for 23 hours prior to the assault, which began just after midday. Officers believed the enemy pulled out from their steel-reinforced bunkers during the early morning.

A maze of bunkers still lay between the blackened hill and the site of the crash, but officers said the enemy probably had pulled out from the low ground as well. But with the capture of hill 102, the major obstacle was overcome. Heavy machine guns on the knoll had inflicted serious losses and damage on American troops and helicopters for days.

There were three more articles in the Americal Scrapbook about the Summer Offensive around Hiep Duc:

**(1) Fierce Fighting Continues Near Da Nang**

Saigon- Increasingly bitter resistance from North Vietnamese regulars apparently determined to turn a helicopter crash site into a major battlefield sent casualties on both sides soaring Wednesday and Thursday as the Allies poured reinforcements into a mountain valley 32 miles south of Da Nang.

At least 103 Reds and two GIs were killed in stiff fighting Wednesday three miles north of the Americal Div's 196th infantry

brigade headquarters and early reports listed another 121 Communists killed Thursday although details of that fighting were not available.

As of late Thursday, U.S. officers had reported upwards of 400 North Vietnamese killed since the fighting flared last Sunday, more than half of them in the past two days. U.S. casualties were at least 25 killed and 150 wounded, according to field reports.

More than 1,200 Allied troops have been committed to the field with more in reserve. The fighting moved through its fifth day in area called the Rice Bowl about five miles east of the key district town of Hiep Duc.

U.S. fighter bombers had flown 17 strikes by mid-afternoon nearly twice as many as all of Wednesday and dropped 118,000 pounds of high explosives and napalm.

By late afternoon, three U.S. Companies were still in contact - some of it heavy- about three quarters of a mile from the scene of the helicopter crash.

The U.S. troops were encountering enemy bunkers with interlocking fields of fire and equipped with recoilless rifles as well as small arms and the .51 cal. antiaircraft guns that posed a grim threat to resupply and medical evacuation helicopters.

Several helicopters were riddled by bullets Thursday as they flew in and out of the area. Associated Press photographer Horst Faas reported from Landing Zone Center, a mountaintop fire base two miles from the fighting, that one helicopter loaded with wounded men barely made it to the fire base after being shot full of holes.

U.S. officers said they were puzzled by the North Vietnamese selection of the battlefield, which is familiar to U.S. troops and is covered by an umbrella of artillery fire from three American bases.

U.S. officers here had speculated that the North Vietnamese 2nd Div. was bent on a major attack on the key district town of Hiep Duc last Sunday when U.S. patrols ran into the moving enemy and the battle began.

This heading was shown under a picture of the missing photographer.

Associated Press photographer Oliver Noonan of Norwell, Mass., was reported missing in action Tuesday. A helicopter he was in was shot down over jungle terrain about 20 miles south of Da Nang. Searchers were unable to reach the area immediately.

## (2) GI's Trap 5000 Red Troops on 'Million Dollar Hill'

Saigon - August 22 (UPI) Hundreds of American infantry men fighting in 120-degree heat were reported gaining ground Friday on strong North Vietnamese forces defending "Million Dollar Hill" 240 miles northeast of Saigon.

Military sources said the men of the U.S. Americal Division apparently had a full North Vietnamese division of 5,000 troops boxed in and that the Communists could not escape without taking heavy casualties.

The U.S. Command said more than 400 North Vietnamese had been killed in the five days of intense fighting this week around the hill near Tam Ky. American losses were placed at 15 dead and 75 wounded.

"Million Dollar Hill" won its nickname last year when five American helicopters were shot down on its slope in a single assault. The battle this week when North Vietnamese gunners shot down a U.S. Helicopter, apparently killing all Americans aboard.

Fighting has raged around the hill and at the northern and southern ends of Que Son Valley, a 10-mile basin wedged between rugged mountain ridge lines rising up from the South China Sea coast.

Intelligence sources said it was believed that the entire 2d

North Vietnamese Army Division was up to 5,000 seasoned men was operating in the valley 25 miles inland.

The division includes support units and 15 antiaircraft companies armed with 30 heavy caliber machine guns sources said.

A unit of 200 U.S. troops has been trying to reach the scene of the helicopter downing to retrieve the bodies. About 400 North Vietnamese, aware that the GIs would try to get in, were dug into trenches and peppering American lines with machine gun fire.

**(3) GIs Kill 100 in Battle: Allies Pour in Troops**

**Fighting in Da Nang Foothills is Heaviest of Red Offensive**

Saigon- Three companies of U.S. infantrymen killed more than 100 North Vietnamese 31 miles southwest of Da Nang Thursday as the Americans battled their way toward the wreckage of a downed helicopter in which eight men are believed to have died.

It was the fifth day of hard fighting in the rolling foothills 21 miles south of Da Nang, where sweeping American and South Vietnamese forces have run into heavy resistance since Sunday. Associated Press correspondent Richard Pyle reported from the area that hundreds of reinforcements, including South Vietnamese infantrymen and U.S. Marines, poured into the battle zone.

By nightfall, more than 1,200 U.S. and South Vietnamese were committed to the biggest sustained battle since the Communist command launched its fall campaign August 12.

Military spokesmen claimed that more than 400 North Vietnamese killed in the fighting since Sunday. Many were slain by artillery, dive-bombers and helicopter gunships.

At least 27 Americans have been killed and another 150 wounded, field reports said. Pyle reported that medical evacuation helicopters were running all day, lifting out American casualties.

The helicopter was shot down Tuesday amid heavy fighting on the ground. It caught fire in the air when hit, then exploded when it hit the ground and witnesses said all aboard must have been killed.

Aboard the helicopter was Associated Press photographer Oliver Noonan of Norwell, Mass., who had been covering the fighting and seven soldiers, including a battalion commander, Lt. Col. Eli P. Howard Jr., 41, of Woodbridge, Va., the father of five children.

(The article goes on about the battle, but Captain Jack Webb was not mentioned directly. It really hurt, when I heard he had been killed. I had almost gone with him when he transferred to get more action. Now I haven't been able to confirm his death.)

I found this article in the library in "South Vietnam, US-Communist Confrontation in Southeast Asia. Volume 4, 1969", by Facts on File Inc.. It is another wording of the same action, but shows how this tied in with other action the 123rd was involved with.

American troops sweeping an area 20-30 miles south of Da Nang Aug. 17 came on a force of 1,200 North Vietnamese troops ready to attack a refugee camp at Hiepduc. Savage fighting raged in the sector through Aug. 20 during which 218 enemy troops and 16 Americans were killed. U.S. wounded totaled 66. 2 companies of the American [sic] Division's 169th [sic] Light Infantry Brigade had been "reinforced by 600 troops after sustaining 40% casualties in the fighting Aug 19. The 2 U.S. companies suffered the heavy losses while breaking out of a North Vietnamese encirclement.

U.S. troops killed at least 650 North Vietnamese in a fierce battle in the Queson Valley 30 miles south of Danang Aug. 17-26. More than 60 Americans were listed as slain in the fighting. The clash broke out when 1,200 troops of the U.S. Americal Division and South Vietnamese soldiers Aug. 17 found about 1,000 North Vietnamese entrenched in a complex of bunkers and tunnels. The battle assumed its greatest intensity Aug. 20 when the allied force stepped up its drive in an effort to reach the wreckage of a U.S. command helicopter shot down by ground fire Aug. 19. U.S. infantrymen fought their way to the stricken 'copter Aug. 25 and reported that all 8 men aboard were dead. Among the victims were

Lt. Col. Eli P. Howard Jr., 41, commander of the division's 3d Battalion, 196th Light Infantry Brigade. AP photographer Horst Faas reported that some of the American soldiers had questioned whether reaching the helicopter was worth the heavy battle losses. But staff officers said that the drive for the helicopter was only part of the overall operation. The fighting to get to the aircraft had reached its climax Aug. 23 when U.S. soldiers captured a knoll, known as Hill 102, about 1,000 yards from the wreckage. 4 companies of the Americal Division, about 250 men, occupied the hill against light resistance. The knoll had been a major obstacle to the American advance. North Vietnamese machinegun emplacements there had inflicted serious losses and damage on U.S. troops and helicopters. U.S. units had attempted earlier to outflank the hill but had to withdraw under heavy fire.

During the fighting in the Queson Valley, an American infantry company had first defied an order to go into combat Aug. 24 and then changed its mind. The company's commander, Lt. Eugene Shurtz commander of Company A of the 196th Light Infantry Brigade, was transferred to another assignment with the division. Neither he nor his men were disciplined. Company A had been ordered to move down Nullon Mountain to recover the bodies of the 8 Americans killed in the helicopter downed Aug. 19. The unit had attempted to make the push during the 5 previous days but was thrown back with heavy losses. Shurtz phoned Lt. Col. Robert C. Bacon, battalion commander, that his men refused to carry out the mission because they "simply had enough-they are broken." Bacon dispatched his executive officer and a sergeant to Company A to "give them a pep talk." The sergeant, Okey Blankenship, confirmed that the men were exhausted and that they complained they were being pushed too hard. But Blankenship sharply admonished the men for refusing to obey orders and finally persuaded them to move out of their position; they followed him down the slope of the mountain. Bacon said Aug. 27 that the incident "was certainly a contributing factor" in relieving Shurtz of his command, but it "was not solely based on that." Bacon explained that he had been dissatisfied "with the progress the company was making" and felt that Shurtz did not have "the experience to handle the job." Shurtz said Aug. 29 that only 5 men of Company A had refused to go into combat. The 5, he said had "desired to see the inspector general rather than move with the company," but the "remainder of the company was ready to go." Some members of the unit interviewed in the field Aug. 29 denied Shurtz' statement. They conceded that 5 soldiers at first had balked but "the whole company definitely was behind the refusal."

#### NIGHT TAIL ROTOR FAILURE - BY THE BOOK

At approximately 0200 hours on 7 May 1969, WO1 Alexander P. Cameron, Co A, 123rd Avn Bn, "Pelicans," was aircraft commander of a UH-1D assigned to support a medevac mission south of the Hoi An River. By providing continuous illumination over known enemy positions, a safe evacuation of the injured personnel was accomplished. Upon completion of the mission WO1 Cameron directed his aircraft for the return flight to Chu Lai.

The pilot, WO1 John R. Elwell, Co. A, 123rd AVn Bn, was flying at this time. They were approximately due east of LZ Baldy at 3,500 feet along the coast, when the aircraft had a complete loss of directional control. WO1 Cameron contacted the "Warlord" gun team, Co. B, 123rd Avn Bn, and advised them of their situation. The gun team said they would follow them back to Chu Lai.

When the tail rotor failure occurred the aircraft yawed about 80 degrees to the right. WO1 Elwell immediately decreased power and started a descent. This caused the aircraft to spin, so WO1 Cameron told the pilot to increase airspeed and power. By doing this the aircraft streamlined into a 30 degree crab.

Co. A operations and Chu Lai East tower, the intended point of landing were contacted. East tower told WO1

Cameron they would have crash rescue standing by when they landed.

The crew reacted extremely well in the emergency situation. After the initial failure, the crew chief, SP5 Leslie W. Hines, and door gunner, PFC Thomas Lewis Jr., immediately jettisoned the flare barrels. They noticed the tail of the aircraft was throwing sparks and informed WO1 Cameron of that particular situation. A small fire was ignited, but extinguished itself quickly.

About 5 miles out from Chu Lai Base, WO1 Cameron took the controls and landed the aircraft without further mishap. WO1

Cameron stated the actual landing was exactly as had been taught by the company IP's during check rides. It was a school book type landing. It is fortunate that he had been instructed in this type of emergency earlier, for without this knowledge, he would have lost the aircraft.

Another section of the June 9, 1969 Aviation Safety newsletter had this.

Under Precautionary Landings:

- a. 7 May 1969, UH-1D, A Co., 123d Avn Bn. While flying back from LZ to Chu Lai ACFT had complete tailrotor failure. AC executed successful running landing with no damage to acft. No injury. (This is a summary of the tr failure).
- c. 15 May 1969, UH-1D, A Co., 123rd Avn Bn. AC (aircraft commander) heard grinding noise while in flight and experienced hydraulic failure. Made precautionary landing with no damage to acft. No injury.
- d. 16 May 1969, UH-1H, A Co., 123rd Avn Bn. Acft was flying in vicinity of Hill 29 when engine oil temperature began to rise and engine chip detector light came on. AC made precautionary landing at Hill 29. No injury.
- e. 18 May 1969, UH-1D, A co., 123rd Avn Bn. While hovering prior to take-off a high frequency vibration was felt in the pedals and the acft. It stopped after approximately one minute so acft took off and vibration again started. AC returned to heliport and landed. No injury (Poelman, Mr McCaig, and Raikes. Hanger bearing went out on the tail rotor shaft.)

Under Incidents:

- a. 18 May 1969, OH-6a, A Co., 123rd Avn Bn. On shut down at low RPM, ARVN Ch-34 hovered nearby causing blades to flex down and strike tail boom. \$50.00. No injury.
- b. 24 May 1969, UH-1H, A co., 123rd Avn Bn. On final approach, rotor was set off friendly booby trap. Minor injuries. (Wood and ? on 867).
- c. 25 May 1969, OH-6A, F Trp, 8th CAV. On landing the pilot rolled the throttle off to flight idle. Pilot noted that N1 was at 68% and he then asked the observer to roll his throttle to bring the N1 to 62%. The observer rolled his throttle to full and before the pilot could correct this error the acft came to a hover and fell through spreading the skids. \$200.00. No injury.
- f. 30 May 1969, OH-6A, B Co., 123rd Avn Bn. On VR mission acft was at tree level and hit tree breaking three chin bubbles. No injury.

Other units had several combat damage in this newsletter. This seemed to cover an entire month.

There was a lot of excitement in A Company when this happened:

The article was in the March 30, 1969 edition of the Southern Cross.

#### **Nab Enemy Trying To Elude Cav Chopper Crew Leads Rout of Fleeing NVA**

Tam Ky- A camouflaged mass of NVA soldiers were discovered and eventually routed by the quick actions of an Americal helicopter crew in a post-TET attack near here.

Twenty-nine of the enemy were killed, six enemy soldiers including an NVA battalion commander captured, and numerous weapons and packs plus a .51 anti-aircraft weapon were confiscated in the encounter.

#### **Cav Flushes NVA**

A UH-1D Huey "Slick" commanded by WO Walter Seger (Warren Mich) was flying a visual reconnaissance mission in support of the 1st squadron, 1st Cav. when he discovered a large group of enemy troops fleeing from a tree line a short distance from the advancing cavalrymen.

"Enemy troops were moving down the opposite side of the hill, just out of range of the Cav", Seger said. They had tree twigs attached to their helmets and back packs, and they ran in a crouching, doubled over position so there appeared to be 35 or 40 tumbleweeds blowing over the side of the hill in all directions."

The chopper made its first pass through the center of the disorganized mass, killing several NVA.

Firing as they retreated, the enemy tried to hide in the hootches at the top of the hill. The A Co. "Slick" took several hits as the action continued.

"We could feel the ship shudder as the rounds hit.", said SP4 Terry Bennett (Veneta, Ore.) crew chief of the 123rd Avn. Bn. chopper.

"They were firing armor-piercing .30 cal shells and it appeared as if thousands of rounds were directed at us. I took one through the sleeve of my jacket and the co-pilot's neck was grazed as a bullet went through the roof.

#### **Cobras Clean Up**

After we expended our machinegun ammo we continued to fire with our M-16 rifles until the Cobras arrived.

"Then I dropped smoke grenades marking the hootches containing the NVA and the Cobras completely devastated them with rockets.

When the Cobras finished, 1st Cav. armored cavalry assault vehicles attacked the hill, completing the job.

From the January 1969 Americal Log.

On Nov. 11, 1968 the division's two longest continuing operations, Wheeler/Wallowa and Burlington Trail, came to an end. The latter ended after seven months, the former one year to the day after it began.

Operation Wheeler/Wallowa, which started as two separate operations and combined on Nov. 11, 1967 was designed to seek out and destroy elements of the 2nd NVA Div. working in the area northwest of Chu Lai. It was primarily conducted by the 196th Bde.

During the operation, 10,020 of the enemy were killed, while only 683 U.S. soldiers were killed by hostile action.

Operation Burlington Trail controlled by the 198th Bde., was launched April 8, 1968, north of Chu Lai. Its mission was to open the road from Tam Ky to Tien Phuoc, under enemy control for four years. The "Brave and Bold" were supported by the 1st Cav. and the 26th and 39th Engr. Bns.

Operation Burlington Trail resulted in 1,948 enemy dead. Americal losses totaled 129.

Operation Russell Beach was started January 13, 1969 and ended February 10, 1970. This was a pacification program for the Batangan peninsula. A Co. 123rd Aviation Bn. was involved in transporting refugees to a relocation center. I remember the enormity of the refugee center set up by Quang Ngai, there were over ten thousand people in this camp. 210 Viet Cong were killed during the operation (Tour 365 said only 139 enemy killed). This was the first time anyone had made a serious attempt to pacify this area. It had a twenty year infrastructure. After this operation we had orders to shoot any living creature seen in the area (Free fire zone). Pigs, cows, or people it didn't matter the area was to be clear of any friendlies. (My Lai was in this AO). Operation Vernon Lake II, Hardin Falls and Fayette Canyon ended

February 28, 1969. Vernon Lake II began November 2, 1968 was done by the 11th infantry brigade southwest of Quang Ngai killing 455 enemy. Hardin Falls resulted in 78 enemy kills. Fayette Canyon

started December 15, 1968 was done by the 196th and 198th northwest of Tam Ky, resulting in 327 enemy dead.

I was surprised to find this paragraph in the Tour 365 magazine from mid 1969.

\* South of Da Nang lies the An Hoa/Nong Son industrial complex, where South Vietnam's only coal mine is being developed with the aid of French and German investment. Germany has provided machinery for the construction of chemical plants near this complex and has funded many millions of dollars in long term capital investments. Such a project will not only create jobs for the people in the surrounding areas, but also stimulate many other sectors of the economy and provide benefits far above the initial investment.

Casualty statistics provided in the "Tour 365" magazine

<u>Item</u>	<u>1966</u>	<u>1967</u>	<u>1968*</u>
Enemy Killed	55,436	83,386	181,146
Hoi Chanks	20,242	27,178	18,171
Vietnamese Abducted	3,507	5,357	7,776
<b>Vietnamese Civilians</b>			
Killed	1,618	3,707	5,389
<b>ARVN Casualties</b>			
Killed	11,953	12,716	17,486
Wounded	20,975	29,448	60,928
<b>FWMF Casualties</b>			
Killed	556	1,105	979
Wounded	1,591	2,318	1,997
<b>US Military Casualties</b>			
Killed			
Army	3,073	6,514	9,333
U.S.	5,008	9,535	14,592
Wounded			
Army	18,363	33,556	59,838
U.S.	30,093	62,025	92,820
Army troop strength	230,000	320,000	335,000
All Services	389,000	486,000	533,000

(\*Friendly casualty figures are not available for Feb. 1968)

For 1968 there were 335,000 Army troops in Vietnam and 69,171 wounded or killed. This would tell me that there was a twenty per cent of chance of being killed or wounded if you spent 1968 in Vietnam in the U.S. Army. The part that is scary, is that it was quoted that only 12% of the units were actively engaged in combat. The remainder were providing support in relatively safe rear areas. If your unit was in an active combat role, there was a high probability of being nicked up.

I have read that there were 3.3 million servicemen who served in Vietnam. Another surprising statistic was that by 1969 there were more Marines killed in Vietnam than in WWII.

The UH-1H helicopter had the following statistics:

Accommodation: Crew of one and up to 14 passengers or 3,880 pounds of freight.

Powerplant: 1 1,400-shp AVCO Lycoming T53-L13 turboshaft with 220 US gal of fuel. (consumption 3.5/4.5 gallons per minute)

Performance:

maximum speed. 138 mph  
service ceiling 19,400 ft.

Dimensions:

main rotor diameter 48 ft.  
length(fuselage) 42 ft.  
height 14 ft. 4.5 inches.

I copied this following article from the May 1969 "AMERICAL" magazine, because it mentioned two helicopter missions that

A. Co 1st flight platoon supported. One mission was the Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol, the second was the C&C mission for the 198th infantry brigade. Tillman would have probably been involved in the LRP mission, and it was probably someone from my first flight

platoon that had the 198th C&C (but also could have been second flight). The initial reconnaissance may have been done by our B. Co. LOH's and the gunships may have been from our B. Co Warlords.

### LRPs Make 'Hide-and-Seek' an Art

By SP4 ALFRED ANTHONY Jr. 198th Inf. Bde.

In the midst of an endless sea of bright green, a small group of men sit hiding. Like animals of the forest, they look no different than their surroundings. Their clothes, their boots, even their skin is colored green. Bush hats are pulled low on their heads.

Each carries 69 pounds of gear and has rations for five days; each holds a Russian weapon or M-79 grenade launcher and AR-15. One man looks down at the radio by his side, checking the frequency. His friend takes a compass reading with his map to get an azimuth. Another, his eyes peering through the foliage, watches for the enemy.

They are LRP's — Long Range Patrol members who know their job and wear their black berets with distinction. These teams of elite guerrilla fighters penetrate terrain where in the past only the enemy has stalked. Their assignment: find, report, and, if necessary, fight "Charlie."

Two of these teams, working for the 198th Inf. Bde., wait on Chop Vum Mountain, well to the northwest of the "Brave and Bold" AO. They are on a "hunter-killer" mission.

One team is called Ohio; the other, 500 meters to the west, Kentucky, and the enemy is familiar with them both. Ohio has been here before, and knows the terrain as well as the enemy. Kentucky is new to this area, but has outwitted "Charlie" before in other places.

Ohio's men, led by SGT John Dane (London), an ex-British Army commando, sit looking down the slope of the mountain. In the center of the broad valley they see an ordinary Vietnamese reed and bamboo hootch. An aerial reconnaissance team the day before noticed an unusual concentration of military-age males in the area. "Traffic seems a little too organized," observes Dane. "Let's have a look."

Quickly, expertly, silently, they are down and in, just eight meters from the hootch's walls, close enough to read "Charlie's" tired face. Kentucky, led by SGT Tom Robertson (Jackson, Mich.) closes in from another angle.

Ohio's men tread softly; their lives depend on their stealth. The small hootch is not as innocent as it appears. It contains an enemy hospital. It is empty, but the LRP's are extra cautious—no reason to get careless now.

Assistant Team Leader SGT Clarence Avery (Anniston, Ala.), probing the ground outside of the hootch, discovers a hollow spot. Inside are medical instruments, detailed surgical instructions, and documents. With few words the well-trained men complete their search and turn to leave.

As if with a stage director in the wings, the teams act as one man move across a rice paddy. They have radioed for extraction. Five of the men spread out into a perimeter, deep in the heavy muck. In minutes the throbbing sound of the "bird" filters through the heavy canopy surrounding the men. It appears over the trees and begins to settle on the LZ. Suddenly, from deep within the thick leaves, two enemy machineguns open up on the men and the helicopter. The pilot drives the chopper hard into the sky, although he takes seven hits. With a broken oil line, the helicopter aborts the extraction and limps back to LZ Bowman and safety.

The LRP's are pinned to the mud, getting heavier fire each minute. CPL George F. Moreno (Tucson, Ariz.) lifts his head long enough to fire an M-79 smoke round into the enemy position. The 198th's command a control chopper flies in to the rescue, blanketing the marked VC with hits M-60s.

"The ship's all that saved us," Moreno later said. "The copper kept them down just long enough for us to get back out of the paddy."

Five men are wounded, and, with the coming darkness, they must spend the night in this forsaken place. Their heavy return fire now gets them from the edge of the paddy to the safety of the mountain's shadow, and its foliage closes behind them. Moving up the narrow trail, climbing higher, they contact the enemy again. Firing LAWs (light anti-tank weapons), one VC is killed and one wounded.

Team Ohio sets up a protective observation post: Kentucky climbs Chop Vum. Nosing through the triple canopy, they find the bush gives way to a clearing, and there, right at the mountain's peak, they discover a fortress of giant wooden planks. A strange structure compared with the delicate hamlets dotting the valley's floor—there are now windows or doors.

SGT Tom Steele (Chelsea, Mich.), assistant team leader, and Moreno climb in through a thin slit between the walls and roof.

What they have come across is a building formed like a safe. "Recoilless rifle rounds!" shouts Steele's excited voice, muffled by the enclosure surrounding him. "Armor-piercing rounds, HEAT rounds, mortar fuse caps."

Ohio moves up to join Kentucky, and they set up a hasty night laager. During darkness, the Viet Cong are relentless with their M-79 fire. Steele bravely stays atop the captured ammo bunker, under fire, guarding the prize.

The morning of the next day turns the spiteful blackness of the sky to a hazy gray. The 198th Inf. Bde.'s Co E, 1st Bn., 6th Inf., led by 1LT Warren G. Randolph (Charleston, S.C.), is coming to help. SGTs David Swires (Bayard, Colo.), Dane, and Steele, along with CPL. Moreno volunteer to remain behind when the other LRP's are finally extracted. The four battle-toughened soldiers led the infantrymen to the ammo cache and the hospital.

Once again atop Chop Vurn, Dane and Moreno plant two pounds of C4 explosive, amid the thump of M-79 rounds and the staccato of machineguns. In the wake of the giant blast, the four LRP's again try for extraction.

Gunships rip across the sky now as the quartet dodges across 600 meters of rice paddies to the chopper's LZ. The crouch in the center of the wet field, again taking everything the determined enemy can throw their way. E co. tries to protect them from the surrounding woodline. Nobody knew whose helicopter it was that dropped down in the middle of this hell, but as Moreno remarked, "Man am I thankful for that bird that got us out."

The mission speaks for itself. The LRP's leave Chop Vurn Mountain and the valley below, having destroyed the enemy's supply of heavy ammunition, a number of documents, and killed 14 Viet Cong. On the trip back to LZ Bayonet, a tired, but satisfied SGT Swires speaks with a slight smile on his face: "Those VC were shooting at us, not at the company out there... We must have got them mad."

The VFW has not had a very good relationship with Vietnam Veterans. We were given the cold shoulder after returning from Vietnam. I joined because of a classmate in college. There were no other Vietnam Veterans in the club to talk with. So unless I wanted to talk about WWII, I was an outsider. Only recently is anything substantial being written about the war in their magazine. This appeared in the April 1992 issue:

## WAR IN THE BOONIES: VIETNAM, 1965-1973

by Richard K. Kolb.

More than 2.6 million Americans served on the soil of Vietnam over an eight-year period. Their collective sacrifices, at the behest of the nation, are only now beginning to be understood and acknowledged.

It will be a war between an elephant and a tiger. If the tiger ever stands still, the elephant will crush him with his mighty tusks. But the tiger will not stand still. He will leap upon the back of the elephant, tearing huge chunks from his side, and then he will leap back into the dark jungle. And slowly the elephant will bleed to death. That will be the war in Indochina.

Ho Chi Minh, North Vietnam's leader.

And so it was. For GIs on the ground, it all began inconspicuously at a place call Binh Thai, nine miles southwest of Da Nang. On April 22, 1965, a Marine patrol from the 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion engaged the Viet Cong for the first time.

Forty-four days before, March 8, the first U.S. ground combat unit - 3rd Bn., 9th Marines, 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade - had arrived in Vietnam. Members were confident, and even cocky. and why not? They were American fighting men from a country accustomed to winning.

Within four years, the number of GIs in Vietnam peaked at more than a half million. And they came in for high praise. "Having fought in three wars," said Gen. William Westmoreland, U.S. commander from 1964-68, "I am convinced the United States never fielded a more professional force."

Wrote a newspaper correspondent: "I have never been more impressed at any time in my life with the courage and judgment and understanding and dedication and integrity of young men than I have been in this war.... They are as good as the Americans of Revolutionary days or any men in all the wars ever fought."

### In the Boonies

After the fact, President Lyndon Johnson declared all of Vietnam a combat zone and authorized hostile fire pay in April 1965. The battleground was as diverse as Americans had ever fought over, encompassing three distinct regions in a country stretching the same length as the distance between Pittsburgh and Savannah.

At the souther tip was the Mekong Delta, characterized by rice paddies, nearly impenetrable mangrove swamps and remote forests. In the Central Highlands, mountain jungles and bamboo 15 to 20 feet high covered the steep slopes.

From the demilitarized zone (DMZ), which separated North from South Vietnam, south 750 miles ran the Truong Son (Annamese) Mountains where peaks rose to 8,000 feet. Terrain - dense rain forests, plunging rivers and tortuous ridges - proved brutal for the foot soldier.

Climatic conditions added to the misery. Furnace-like heat, drenching humidity and choking dust engulfed GIs in the summer. In winter, monsoons produced torrential downpours and flash floods. The men who survived in the bush dubbed their tropical stomping ground the "boonies", as had GIs who preceded them in other Asian wars.

### Fielding and Expeditionary Army

To sustain the war in Vietnam, the U.S. ultimately sent 2.6 million men to the actual war zone. Despite notions to the contrary, the majority were enlistees in the regular armed forces. The Vietnam-era's highly inequitable draft supplied only 25% of the manpower. However most of the Army's combat arms were filled by draftees after the war's first year.

As it turned out, only 9.7% of draft-age males actually served in Vietnam. Two-thirds of all men of the so-called "Vietnam generation" avoided active duty; 60% evaded any type of military service.

The burden of serving, and combat in particular, was not shared equally. In Vietnam the ration of support to combat troops was 5:1. Perhaps 14% of GIs actually fought while another 15% provided close combat support. Others stationed at firebases were regularly exposed to enemy action, too. But at a peak strength in April 1969, of 543,400 troops, only 80,000 were in the field attempting to engage the enemy.

Consequently, many men in the field resented the lack of shared risk. And a new term - REMF (Rear Echelon Mother F....) - came into being, "Those REMF's don't even know what Vietnam is all about," said one grunt, echoing the feelings of many. Yet every trigger-puller fully understood the vital role played by those in the rear.

## Array of Battle

Each of the armed services contributed a large number of units to the war effort. The largest, as usual was the Army. It fielded seven full divisions - Americal (23rd), 1st Cavalry, 1st, 4th, 9th, 25th Infantry, and the 101st Airborne. At times the America's 11th, 196th, and 198th Infantry brigades fought separately.

Another five independent combat brigades - 1st Aviation, 1st of the 5th Mechanized Infantry Division, 2nd of the 82nd Airborne Division, 173rd Airborne and the 199th Light Infantry - operated separately. So did the 11 Armored Cavalry Regiment and two squadrons of the 1st Cavalry Regiment. Also, Field Forces I and II each had two artillery groups along with combat advisers.

Supporting these combat units were the 525th Military Intelligence Group, 18th and 20th Engineer brigades, 1st Signal Brigade and the 18th Military Police Brigade. Service was provided by the 1st Logistical Command and the 44th Medical Brigade. Four transportation commands were among the numerous commands. Of course, all divisions also had attached supporting units.

Marines ashore fell under the umbrella command of the III Marine Amphibious Force (MAF). Both Marine divisions - 1st and 3rd - had four infantry regiments and an artillery regiment. The 1st Marine Aircraft Wing contained six Marine Air Groups. Also a Special Land Fleet - was maintained for amphibious operations.

Naval Forces (Vietnam) operated several task forces - Coastal Surveillance, River Patrol, River Assault, and Sealords. The shallow-draft boats constituted the famed "brown-water navy." Also land-based was the 3rd NAVAL construction Battalion (Seabees).

Offshore the "blue water navy" consisted of the 7th Fleet's Carrier Striking Force on "Yankee Station," about 100 miles out in the Gulf of Tonkin. "Dixie" Station was in the South China Sea. In addition, there was the Naval Gunfire Support unit as well the Amphibious, Mobile Logistic Support and Vietnam Patrol forces.

As part of the Navy, the U.S. Coast Guard supplied cutters of Squadrons One and Three which patrolled inshore and along the coast. Various shore duties were performed by several details and detachments.

Naval aviators braved over North Vietnam, what according to some accounts was the most intense anti-aircraft fire in the history of air warfare. "There is no way to defeat barrage fire," observed Cmdr. John B. Nichols. "Pilots could dodge and jink to evade aimed fire, but in a dive through a sector filled with smoking, crackling flak there was no point."

Land-based air operations were carried out by the 7th Air Force (the 2nd Air Division until superseded in early 1966). Elements of the 13 Air Force based in Thailand and the 834th Air Division were under the 7th. Strategic Air Command (SAC) units on Guam, Okinawa, and in Thailand conducted bombing missions. Military Airlift Command (MAC) transported cargo and passengers and evacuated casualties.

At its peak, the 7th AF controlled more than 700 and strike aircraft. There included various wings - tactical fighter, air commando, reconnaissance, airlift, special operations and strategic. Other units such as the 3rd Aero Rescue & Recovery Group performed special functions.

All told aerial combat downed 193 North Vietnamese aircraft. The U.S. lost 89 planes (51 were Navy), mostly in the war's early years.

Air power's role in Indochina cannot be overstated. "Not only in South Vietnam but also in Laos and Cambodia, and in particular the U.S. Air Force, prevented the Communists from achieving victory," wrote the editors of "The Vietnam Experience."

This was "This was as true in 1972 as it had been in 1968 and 1965. Only when that weapon was finally withdrawn did North Vietnam triumph."

In addition to regular units, each service organized special operations outfits. The Army had the 5th Special Forces Group (Green Berets) and Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol (LRRPs/Rangers/75th Infantry); Marines had the Force Recon; Navy had the SEALs (Sea Air Land); and the Air Force had its special operations wings.

Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), also fielded an elite, joint unit known as the Studies and Observation Group (SOG). Its 2,000 operatives came from the Green Berets, SEALs, Force Recon and 90th Special Operations Wing.

#### "Aggressive to the Point of Fanaticism"

All this tremendous armed might was arrayed against a force of about 500,000 Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldiers. For the first few years, the People's Liberation Army, or VC, carried the burden of fighting. But after the 1968 Tet Offensive, the NVA constituted 70% of Communist combat strength in the South.

Communist troops were motivated by a quasi-religious concept called *dau tranh* ("doctrine of struggle"). Anti-Americanism was an essential ingredient in the soldier's indoctrination. "Our comrades felt no pity," said one NVA. "They knew they had to kill as many Americans as possible."

"We had been told to slaughter as many imperialist soldiers as we could since, if the number of American dead mounted, the American people - who dislike this war - would overthrow their government."

On the same token, Hanoi was willing to tolerate casualty rates higher than even acceptable to the Japanese during WWII. North Vietnamese Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap said: "The life and death of a hundred, a thousand, tens of thousands of human beings, even our compatriots, means little."

As a result, the NVA and VC may have been the most determined enemy America ever faced. Communist tenacity in battle earned the admiration of many a GI. Marine Maj. Gen Lewis W. Walt felt the NVA were "aggressive to the point of fanaticism. They fought bravely and they fought well, and very few surrendered."

#### Humping the Bush

Combating such a fanatical foe forced GIs to face the enemy on his own terms: that meant on the ground. All of America's modern weaponry aside, at its fundamental, the war in Vietnam was a war of ground pounders. And in the end, that's how its outcome was decided.

Vietnam was, indeed a grunt's struggle. More than 80% of U.S. combat casualties were suffered by that branch. Nothing typified the war better than the age old patrol. For the grunt - known as 11 Bravo or "Bush" in Army parlance - that's what the war was all about.

Cpl. John Clancy, a veteran of the 196th Infantry Brigade in I Corps in 1967, capsulized the life of a typical grunt best: "Most patrols were boring. Some led to fights, about three in 10, but they were small ones. Really large fights happened less than 10% of the time. We were always confused, always mixed up, always asking 'Where are we going? What are we doing now?'

These "walks in the sun," with men laden with up to 70 lbs. of gear, produced acute physical strain, especially when hacking through thick, tangled undergrowth. Elephant grass lashed flesh, heat sapped energy and sun created a never-ending thirst. Then there was jungle rot, cuts, bites, and sores, complements of insects and parasites.

Leeches were among the worst. Land species averaged one inch, but green and brown water leeches reached almost a foot, and when engorged with a grunt's blood looked like a bloated cigar.

John Yeager, a sergeant with Co. C, 2nd Bn., 502nd Inf., 101st Airborne Div. in 1966-67 aptly described the feeling of bloodsucker. "When they are on you, you can't feel them bite, and you're often so sweaty in the jungle that you reach inside your shirt and rub your hand across them and never feel them. They're as slimy as you are sweaty."

Exposure to the elements, and filth, were a way of life for "boonie rats." Wet most of the time and chilled to the bone in monsoons, they were left vulnerable to a host of unhealthy conditions. Immersion foot, for example, ate away at the soles of the feet.

Chow time was hardly a cause for celebration, even when hungry. "Charlie rats," better known as C-rations, were

gastronomical disasters best known for causing diarrhea. Men in the field sometimes cut holes in their fatigues to allow quick exit (Rash-producing underwear was rarely worn in the field.)

A smell pervaded the bush. Unwashed bodies, stagnant pools of water, rotting vegetation and the stench of death after a battle produced a nauseating odor.

Home for many grunts and gunners, especially in the war's latter stages, was the Fire Support Base (FSB). It consisted of a battery of six 105mm howitzers atop a tactical feature. Field artillery provided harassing and interdiction fire, reconnaissance by fire and direct support missions for grunts.

Life was bleak, to say the least, on these hills: isolation and loneliness, dust and mud, heat and humidity were routine. There was the monotony of outgoing shells and fear of incoming mortars and rockets. And firebases were dangerously exposed to sapper attacks and full-scale assaults.

Firebase Ripcord, under siege by the 6th NVA Regiment for three weeks in July 1970, was finally abandoned. Its defense cost the 2nd Bn/ 506th Infantry, 101st Airborne, 61 KIA and 345 WIA.

In late March 1971, FSB Mary Ann (196th LIB, Americal Division) lost 30 KIA and 82 WIA in a sapper attack (This was the greatest single U.S. combat loss in four years.) Less than two months later, a direct rocket hit on a bunker at FSB Charlie 2, killed 29 Americans and wounded 50 of the 1st Bde, 5th Mechanized Infantry Division.

#### Adapting to a Unique Combat Situation

Since Vietnam was, simply put, a war of attrition, the enemy body count was paramount. Certainly not unique to this war (it was common in the static stage of the Korean War), it became all-consuming as the only measure of success.

The 9th Infantry Division, for instance, awarded a Sat Cong ("Kill Viet Cong") badge to each soldier who proved a VC kill. The problem was that counting bodies was a highly imprecise method of gauging progress. Most casualty figures were estimated, not confirmed. And exaggeration was common practice.

Battlefield tactics were clearly dictated by terrain and politics. Ground tasks were confined to search and destroy missions, clear and secure operations and security. Declaring the enemy home base off limits prevented anything further.

During the first four years of the war, large-scale offensive operations sept the South. Operation Starlite in August 1965 was the first. The biggest included Attleboro (1966), Junction City (1967) and joint ones - such as Resolve To Win and Complete Victory - with the South Vietnamese in 1968.

Junction City boasted the war's only U.S. combat jump. The 173rd Airborne Brigade's 2nd Bn. of the 503rd Infantry (845 men) along with Battery A, 3rd Bn., 319th Artillery, jumped at Katum on Feb. 22, 1967. Only 11 minor jump injuries were sustained.

Classic set piece battles were fought, too. The Battle of the Ia Drang Valley in 1965, lasting 35 days, was, according to Westmoreland, "as fierce as any ever experienced by American troops." The elite 1st Cavalry Division decisively defeated the NVA in this first encounter.

But what made Ia Drang even more important was that it proved the viability of airmobility in war. This was the greatest tactical innovation of the Vietnam War. Air assault, aerial reconnaissance and scouting and helicopter medical evacuation drastically altered modern warfare.

Another environmental adaptation was the concept of riverine warfare. To cope with the watery world of the Mekong Delta, a joint Army-Navy task force known as the Mobile Riverine Force was activated in mid-1967. It combined the 5,000 men of the 9th Division's specially trained 2nd Brigade with the Navy's Riverine Assault Force (TF 117).

Bloody battles continued during 1967 and 1968 and on into 1968. At Dak To in the Central Highlands, the 173rd Airborne Brigade fought over Hill 875 for five days in November 1967. One defender remembered, "You didn't know where to go, you didn't know where to hide. You slept with the corpses. I slept under Joe. He was dead, but he kept me warm."

Tet 1968 saw 80,000 Communist troops take the offensive against 105 cities and towns throughout South Vietnam. A total of 81,000 lives were lost, including 3895 Americans killed in action and 14,300 civilians. But the VC were finished as an effective fighting force. As one former VC later admitted, "At Tet you Americans killed most of our best people." The Communists lost over 58,000.

Hue, the ancient imperial capital, witnessed 26 days of house-to-house fighting in February 1968. The 1st Marine Division exacted a terrible toll on the enemy, but the Communists butchered 5,000 civilians after occupying the city.

Meanwhile, Khe Sanh, held by 6,000 Marines, was besieged by four NVA divisions for 77 days. Until relieved through Operation Pegasus in early April.

Intense combat occurred long after the Tet Offensive. In what was perhaps the last battle in which the body count determined victory, several battalions of the 101st Airborne Division killed 630 NVA on a hilltop called "Hamburger Hill." The four-assault operation between May 10-20, 1969, created a furor stateside.

Nevertheless, Col. Joseph B. Conmy expressed admiration for his men: "No matter how tough the job is, the American soldier gets the job done. He might hat the hell out of it, but he never quits. On Hamburger Hill, they might

have grumbled, but my God, they were thee when the chips were down! They eventually went up that hill and took it!" For taking Hill 937 (Dong Ap Bia), the 101st's 3rd Brigade was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation.

#### Vietnamization Disengagement

America's part in South Vietnam's ground war reached a turning point in July 1969, when President Richard Nixon withdrew the first combat unit. From this day forth GIs were simply buying time for Saigon's troops to take over their war.

Under the new strategy of a "protective shield of containment," U.S. infantry companies and platoons often went into the field at half strength or less. Changed enemy tactics - that is, relying less on actual contact - made the war even more frustrating.

"A man cannot release any adrenalin against a mine or booby trap," said one officer. "We train him to be a skilled, aggressive infantryman, and then his skills never get to be used. But he still bears the fears and stresses of combat. It can be very debilitating."

As the second decade of the war dawned, the GI was being asked to sacrifice in a cause his own country had forsaken. Yet the vast majority persevered. "The front line soldiers of the 1970 Army in Vietnam were still tough, young, and lean", wrote military historian Shelby Stanton. Line units were composed of men in excellent fighting trim, who exhibited great courage, resourcefulness, and dedication."

In an effort to fortify the South Vietnamese, two major incursions were launched to destroy NVA sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia in the early '70s. As one GI said, "It was going to make the war that much shorter."

During the first, in Cambodia, U.S. strength peaked at 30,000 in May 1970. The invasion was highly successful in that it netted the biggest arms cache ever captured in the war.

The South Vietnamese move into Laos in 1971, however, was far less successful. During Operation Lam Son 719, American helicopter pilots experienced the most intense fire of the war: 108 helicopters were lost and 618 damaged. But disengagement proceeded apace.

Operation Jefferson Glenn, undertaken by the 101st Airborne Division and concluded Oct. 8, 1971, ended U.S. participation in major ground operations. On Nov. 12, Nixon declared Vietnamization a success and confined American grunts to strictly defensive roles such as patrolling "rocket belts" near cities.

America's ground war stopped near Da Nang, where it all began, on Aug. 11, 1972, the 3rd Battalion, 21st Infantry, 196th Infantry Brigade, stood down after making the last U.S. patrol three days before.

Four months later a final U.S. bombing campaign over Hanoi persuaded the Communists to sign the Paris Peace Accords on Jan 27, 1973. By March 29, the last GIs had departed Vietnam.

### Paying a Premium Price

America paid a heavy price for its crusade in Vietnam. The deadliest year, because of the Tet Offensive, was 1968 when 14,314 American lives were lost. An all-time weekly high of 543 KIA and 2,547 WIA occurred Feb. 10-17 of that year. The worst single day was Jan. 31, 1968, when 246 GIs died throughout Vietnam.

Nearly 90% of U.S. casualties resulted from company sized engagements. Combat deaths were caused by small arms (51%), fragments (36%), and mines/booby traps (11%). When it came to wounds, though fragments were the cause in 65% of the cases in the Army.

But only 19% of the hits resulted in death versus 29.3% in WWII. And only 2.6% of those admitted to hospitals died. The lives saved were attributable to 10,000 medics as well as Navy corpsmen in the field, courageous "Dust Off" helicopter crews and a dedicated medical corps at in-country facilities.

Ironically, skilled life-saving created one problem: 20% of Vietnam wounded suffered multiple wounds. (In WWII, the rate was 2% and 3% in Korea.) Some 23,214 Vietnam vets returned 100% disabled as a consequence.

Another category of casualty was the prisoner of war. Virtually all were tortured and 114 died while in captivity. Some 650 POWs made it home. At war's end 2,543 Americans remained unaccounted for.

Ultimately, the South Vietnamese paid the highest price - loss of their country. In the spring of 1975, Saigon controlled 80% of the territory and 90% of the population. "In the final analysis," John Kennedy had said a decade before, "it is their war. They are the ones who have to win or lose it." And so it was two years later.

But to many veterans, the war was not lost, at least not by GIs. Wrote veteran Robert S. Miller: "I know it bothers a lot of vets when they hear about 'our defeat in Vietnam.' I don't even remember the surrender! We won our battles, nearly all of them, and certainly all the major ones."

Said another veteran: "We won the war, that's what kills us. We fought the North Vietnamese to a standstill and bolstered the South Vietnamese army and government. But we can't persuade anybody of that."

## Back in the World

The one-year tour, while not unique to Vietnam (it was used in Korea, 1951-53), guaranteed a serviceman would be back home - one way or another - within 365 days (13 months for Marines). DEROs (Date of Expected Return from Overseas) gave way to "short timer's fever."

"We had a saying in Vietnam," said Medic Scott Gauthier. "AS soon as you set foot on Vietnamese soil, you're dead. Mark yourself as dead. And from that point on, all you are doing is fighting for the right to go home again, to live again. That was the incentive we had."

Once aboard the "freedom bird" the trip to "the world" (States) was rapid. The brief ride home allowed no time to sort out the searing experiences of war. Compounding this were oftentimes hostile receptions that greeted GIs.

"None of us will ever forget those incidents," wrote vet B.T. Collins in Reader's Digest. "even though we knew the were perpetrated by a relative handful who seemed to delight in reviling their country. What hurt more was the embarrassed silence of the majority, who stood by and let it happen, who turned away without acknowledging the sacrifices was made in a long and terrible war."

Yet when surveyed by the Harris Poll seven years after the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, a full 90% of Vietnam vets said they were proud to have served their country. In April 1990, a Gallup Poll revealed that 87% of the American people held Vietnam vets in high esteem.

Way back in August 1969, on the pages of VFW Magazine, Lt. Gen. Frank T. Mildren foresaw this turn of events when he wrote: "The leaders of tomorrow's America will be found in the ranks of the loyal and determined fighting men who return from Vietnam."

His foresight proved highly accurate.

### Vietnam War Casualties 1964-1973

Military Service	Troop Strength	Peak		
		Combat Deaths	Other Deaths	Wounded In Action**
Army	359,800	30,904	7,274	96,802
Navy*	36,500	1,631	925	4,237
Marines	81,400	13,082	1,754	51,392
Air Force	58,400	1,739	842	931
Total	536,100	47,356	10,795	153,382

\*Coast Guard included under Navy. Coast Guardsmen peaked at 400 in Vietnam. Five were killed in action and two died from non-hostile causes; 59 were WIA.

\*\*Wounds not mortal exclude 150,375 GIs not requiring hospital care.

Those who died as a result of wounds long after the war and in accidents going to and from the war zone (determined later) have been added to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, bringing the total to 58,183.

\*\*\*End of VFW article \*\*\*\*

## Aero-Scouts Get Hot Indoctrination

by SPEC 5 Bruce MCILHANEY. Stars and Stripes staff consultant.

CHU LAI, Vietnam - "My platoon was split into three groups with at least two platoons of charlies after us," said S. Sgt Richard Fapka describing the situation facing his newly formed aero-scout platoon of the Americal Div.'s 123rd Aviation Bn.

The platoon, which works with a spotter helicopter and two gunships at its call, was searching a VC haven in Quang Ngai province called the "Rock Pile." Two Viet Cong were spotted and one shot.

Bunkers scattered throughout the boulder-strewn hill yielded a large pile of Communist uniforms and documents. Then Fapka called for a demolition team to destroy the bunkers.

"The demo team blew one escape route but could not get up a narrow crevice leading to a cave on the top of the hill where I thought the two VC were hiding," he said.

One of the scouts armed with only a pistol started up the crevice.

"He was just an arm's distance from the top when they started sniping at him and the two squads I left at the bottom of the hill came under machinegun fire," said Fapka of Detroit. The demolition team and Fapka's scouts took cover behind a pagoda on the side of the hill. A machine gun began firing from just above them, the rounds landing close. "I think the unwounded VC ran and brought back the rest of this force. The fire came closer and I decided we'd try to break through the thicket below us and rejoin the other squads to come back up for the man on top."

Running through the thicket with enemy fire all around six scouts became entangled and were forced to go back to the pagoda.

At the bottom of the hill Fapka's men beat off a group of pursuing enemy, killing one.

I spotted 20 to 30 charlies going straight for our LZ but with just four men I couldn't take them on. Then our gunships arrived and the VC fire slackened off."

After linking with the remaining two squads, the seven men on the hill were found to be alive and safe.

"It's our job to go in and investigate trouble spots, but those charlies were too strong for us to handle," said Fapka. "For the first contact it was a tough one to break in on, but we didn't loose [sic] a man."

This article appeared in the September 3, 1969 Americal Division paper, "Southern Cross".

### LOH Provides Check On Enemy

Chu Lai - During the past two hundred or so years, the science of war has changed. If Daniel Boone were to view the techniques of reconnaissance, for example, the famed Indian fighter would be amazed at the changes. In Daniel's day, "recon-trip" meant perhaps sneaking across a river and getting a "look-see" at the enemy.

Today's modern Army, however, employs aircraft to perform this task. One such craft, the Light Observation Helicopter, (LOH) plays a large role in "scouting the enemy" in the area.

Recently, about eight miles west of Duc Pho, a LOH from the 123rd Avn. Bn. received heavy small arms fire. The chopper returned the fire, killing two NVA in the area. A further search of the area revealed several unoccupied hootches and enemy bunkers.

After pounding the complex with airstrikes and artillery, C Co., 4th Bn., 3rd Inf. was combat assaulted into the area. The 11th Bde. soldiers searched the complex which contained about 90 bunkers.

Found in the camp were a .51 cal. machinegun destroyed by small arms fire, several NVA documents, and an NVA killed by the airstrikes. D Co., working in the same area, discovered the bodies of nine NVA also killed by the airstrikes.

Daniel Boone might not understand the methods the Army uses today, but he would certainly approve of the effectiveness of helicopter reconnaissance. (Americal IO)