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HISTORY OF THE
173RD ASSAULT HELICOPTER COMPANY
1 January 1966 - 31 December 1966

ANNUAL SUMMARY

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January 1966, began the movement of the 173rd Assault Helicopter Company. Personnel taking leave over the Christmas Holidays were required to sign in on or before 26 January 1966, 3 days prior to the units final PCR check. Due to the unavailability of equipment the units readiness date was delayed until 15 February 1966. Final PCR checks were 100% complete prior to that date.

The company was deployed overseas in four phases which included a minimum essential equipment element, main body, advanced party, and an aircraft movement element.

The minimum essential equipment element was transported by truck to Savannah, Georgia. Here it was loaded on the barge Harvard Victory, and departed 6 February with 1 officer and 2 enlisted men arriving in Vung Tau, Vietnam on 18 March 1966.

The main body element consisting of 44 officers and 151 enlisted men departed Columbus, Georgia, 15 February 1966, aboard a DC-6 aircraft. Upon arrival at Oakland, California, 16 February 1966, they boarded the USNS Nelson M. Walker. The Walker sailed on the 18th of February arriving in Vung Tau, Vietnam 10 March 1966. From Vung Tau the 173rd was flown by Air Force C-130's to its new home, Lai Khe, later to become known as "Sherwood Forest."

The advanced party, composed of 7 officers, departed Travis Air Force Base, California, by C-141, on 24 February 1966 and arrived at Ton Son Nhut Airport in Saigon on 26 February 1966. From here they were flown to the 11th Aviation Battalion Headquarters at Phu Loi where they received an in-country orientation and training. After training with the 128th Assault Helicopter Company, the party joined the unit at Lai Khe.

On the 26th of February 1966, the aircraft carrier Britton departed Oakland, California with the unit aircraft movement element - 4 officers, 20 enlisted men, and 24 UH-1B and B model helicopters on board. The Britton docked at Vung Tau on 18 March 1966 and the aircraft were flown off the carrier. After completion of modifications, the Hueys were flown by the company pilots to Lai Khe, with the last aircraft arriving 25 March 1966.

From the period 18 March to 31 March 1966, the unit, not yet being operational, flew missions with other companies and assisted the 11th Aviation Battalion with administrative flights.

The Robin Hoods, as the 173rd is known, continued throughout the month of April in a non-operational status. However, the unit was committed heavily in Operation Birmingham beginning 29 April 1966. Ten Robin Hoods and four Crossbows, 173rd gun ships, went into Tay Ninh Province to support the 11th Aviation Battalion. With Battalion assisting in spare parts, the company continued this support until 10 May 1966, when the company was in fact declared operational. This date was later accepted as Unit Day for the 173rd by the Chief of Military History in Washington, D. C..

The month of May actually begins the Robin Hoods tradition. 13 May saw the start of Operation Alamo. The 173rd supported Det-B 33 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne), 1st Special Forces, and airlifted a total of 3,196 troops into VC controlled landing zones over a few day period. They made resupply runs, and evacuated seriously wounded CIDG and USSF troops from remote hostile

areas, often under fire.

On 17 May 1966, seven Robin Hoods working out of Loc Ninh, set a record by hauling 849 troops in one day. The records show that during the week of May 10 to 17 the unit flew a total of 1,457 sorties, hauled 3,918 passengers, 22 tons of cargo and logged 502.4 combat assault hours.

On 27 May 1966, a Viet Cong supply cache was located only ten miles west of the 173rd base camp. Two days later, with the airlifting of the 1st/16th Inf. on the objective. Thus Operation Skybolt I was a complete success, capturing 16 tons of peanuts, 1½ tons of salt, 2½ tons of flour, 1000 uniforms and numerous other foodstuffs, utensiles, garments, and building materials.

The Commanding General of the II Field Force Vietnam has noted the accomplishments of the 173rd while in support of the 145th Aviation Battalion, 25th (US) Infantry Division on 3 June 1966. Under the leadership of Major Glen M. Ebaugh, the unit reacted with such "decisiveness and professionalism", that the operation was a complete success.

Operation El Paso II started on 2 June 1966 and lasted throughout the month. While operating in the area of Loc Ninh, Quan Loi, An Loc, Song De, and Minh Thanh, the company compiled tremendous statistics of accomplishments. A total of 4,782 sorties, 8,529 passengers, 448 tons of cargo, 62 medevacs and 635.5 combat assault hours and 1657 hours flown during the operation.

Even though the month of June was filled with the rigors of war, the Robin Hoods found time to launch an educational program in the Vietnamese village of Lai Kho. SP/4 Auzenne, the classroom instructor, taught English, French, Arithmetic, and simple mathematics.

The Robin Hoods spent the first week of July ROW at Loc Ninh and Quan Loi in support of Operation El Paso II.

On 8 July the unit was dispatched to Quan Loi at about 2030 hours, where they remained the rest of the night. The following day they moved about 5 miles south and stood by with the 2/28th Infantry, poised to strike and seal off a counter ambush already in progress. As they waited, they watched "Gun A Go Go" (armed CH-47) making gun runs along with a massive airstrike about 3 miles south of their location and listened to 90 MM's of tanks and 50 calibers on APC's of the 1/4 Cav tearing the 272nd Viet Cong Regiment apart. The Robin Hoods stood by with their loads of "grunts" to sink the hooks. After air and artillery preparations, they took-off and dropped their loads in to sweep the VC positions.

This turned out to be one of the most successful battles fought by the 1st Division in Vietnam. By body count, 238 Viet Cong were killed plus the capturing of numerous crew served weapons and several helicopter loads of individual weapons and anti-tank rockets. Unfortunately, several American soldiers lost their lives in addition to the loss of 5 APC's and 2 M48 tanks. However, all things considered, it was a major victory for 1st Division and the 173rd Assault Helicopter Company again showed its stature and professionalism by playing a key role in smashing the crack 272nd Regiment.

From the 11th to the 15th of July the unit supported 3rd Bde, 1st Div with resupply and recon missions. On the 15th and 16th the Bde moved back to base camp at Lai Khe to recoup from 45 days in the field. Of course they were lifted by Robin Hoods - who else!!

20 July found the Robin Hoods on standby at Cu Chi. However, they did not standby long, as they were called upon to lift American dead from an area to the northwest of Cu Chi. The evening before, the "Little Bears" had lifted a company of the 25th Division into the area for recon purposes. As the flight took-off, "Charlie" hit from all sides inflicting heavy casualties. When the troops were extracted, it was reported that several dead were in the area. 18 hours later the Crossbows located another KIA in the landing zone. The KIA's were lifted to the Dust-off pad at Cu Chi.

The gunships had their share of excitement that day too. While making firing runs over the VC location, they spotted concrete bunkers, prepared trench systems and enemy troops shooting at them. Both ships took several hits. However, the Robin Hoods' luck held and they all returned to Sherwood Forest with some grizzly memories, but safe.

23 July found the Robin Hoods lifting an ARVN battalion into the southeastern edge of the VC infested Iron Triangle to raid a base camp. The slicks didn't draw much fire, but the Crossbows did, and they brought the wrath of Robin Hood on "Charlie" by killing 4.

The 173rd Assault Helicopter Company spent the remainder of July working various missions of resupply and support of the III Corp Area.

During the first few days of August, the Robin Hoods received many red scarves, which were given to each crew member to protect his neck from the harness and flak vest. The idea was conceived by Major Farmer, the Crossbow platoon leader, and the scarves were made and donated by Girl Scout Cadette Troop 537. The scarves quickly became part of the Robin Hood regular uniform.

13 August began like a normal day, with the units only mission in "administrative" lift of one battalion from Phu Loi to Phuoc Vinh. While enroute, word was received that a Viet Cong company had been located about 10 miles west of Phu Loi, on the Saigon River. The mission was immediately changed and one battalion from Phu Loi and two from Lai Khe were lifted into the area. As the final lift came into the LZ, they received fire on short final. At this time, it was noticed that no artillery or airstrikes had been put in the hot area.

In an attempt to expedite the operation, the Command and Control Ship flown by Major Palmertree and LT Hart with the 1/16 battalion staff aboard made a high speed marking run over the Viet Cong positions to mark them for an airstrike. On this run SP/4 Charles Plumb received a VC bullet through his right leg. However, the mark was good and the airstrike put in making it safe for the slicks to land their troops. SP/4 Plumb was taken to the hospital where X-rays indicated that he would recover in fine shape.

The next day (14 August) after only light contact was made, the Robin Hoods began extracting the infantry back to Lai Khe. On the next to last lift, the Viet Cong began mortaring the LZ and opened up with small arms fire. Second ships took hits from scrap metal and bullets as well as Major Ebaugh and PFC Carter being slightly wounded. As a result of this fiasco, Major Ebaugh recommended that a security force of not more than 10 helicopters load the last lift out of the LZ in an effort to prevent such a calamity. This practice has since been adopted by the ground commanders of the 3rd Brigade.

15 August was another routine day with a short eagle flight to the northeast of Lai Khe. The slicks encountered light sniper fire and killed three Viet Cong. It must have made "Charlie" mad because at 2300 that night he began a mortar attack on Lai Khe that lasted until 0425 and a total of 129 rounds. A light fire team and one slick had been scrambled in an attempt to locate and destroy the mortar positions. As fuel ran low and the weather turned bad, the ships began to return. All were landed and shutting down, when Crossbow 421 flown by CPT Bayer called in on short final. The next anyone knew 421 was upside-down in a crumpled heap that was once a UH-1D helicopter. All crew members survived with broken legs being the most serious injury. How? No one knows.

After an extremely long night, the Robin Hoods took-off at 0550 for several combat assaults around the sugar mill southwest of Cu Chi. In the middle part of the afternoon, CPT Roos and WO Howe off-loaded some supplies at the sugar mill. As they came to a high hover to avoid people standing around, the short-shaft failed and the ship fell. The crew walked away with WO Howe missing 3 front teeth, as the ship suffered major structural damage. The day had been a long hard one for the Robin Hoods. It was not over yet. They had one short troop lift to make before going home. Once again on the final lift out of the LZ, "Charlie" opened up with small arms and mortars. Several ships took hits but no one was injured and they all returned to Sherwood Forest. The unit spent the next few days on 3rd Corps stand-by, which gave it a much needed rest.

The calm was nice, but it didn't last long. On the 25th of August, the 1st Brigade ran into the Phu Loi Battalion, reinforced by a heavy weapons company. The 173rd was called upon to lift troops and supplies into blocking positions around the trapped VC unit. It was a tough battle, with the VC shooting down an Air Force helicopter with recoilless rifle fire. However, the Robin Hoods came through again with no hits and no injuries.

The mission on 30 August was to support the 25th Infantry Division out of Tay Ninh. All lifts had gone well and the day was almost over when our Battalion Commander, LTC Starker, asked to fly on one of our ships. He and LT Connors flew together and picked-up a load of troops. On the first lift into the LZ sniper fire was encountered. On short final, two rounds severed one of the control links to the blade of LTC Starker's and LT Connors's ship. They lost all control and the ship fell into the LZ. The gunner and one infantryman were pinned beneath the aircraft and the infantryman drowned in the extremely wet rice paddy before the aircraft could be lifted. And so ended August. This had been a particularly trying and long month but the Robin Hoods all made it and started September in good spirits.

From the 10th through the remainder of the operation, the Robin Hoods were involved in the resupply of the units in the field and led every combat assault that took place. As a result of their outstanding leadership and superior performance, the Robin Hoods were cited by General De Ruy and General Hollingsworth. General Hollingsworth presented Major Rice with the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Bronze Star, the Air Medal for Valor and Commendation Medal for Valor for his support and leadership. General Hollingsworth then directed that all flight crews should receive and award their professionalism; skill, and hardy endurance.

On 15 November, the last combat assault of operation Attleboro turned out to be the hottest landing zone thus far encountered. The jungle clearing which was the LZ had been prepared by punji stakes ten feet high and large enough to damage rotor blades and tail rotors. As a result all flights had to land in the northern corner where the stakes were not so plentiful.

When departing the landing zone on the first lift, Major Rice was hit in the elbow. Major Jim took the controls and flew to Tay Ninh to medical aid. Mr Cole, flying number 2 in the lead flight, took charge and led the four ship flight through the remaining three lifts. Five ships were hit during the lift, three going down in the landing zone. However, none were Robin Hoods. Major Rice was evacuated to the States where he was reported to be in good condition.

Two days later the Robin Hoods extracted Darkness and began the extraction of the remaining units bringing operation Attleboro to a close. The 173rd Assault Helicopter Company had put forth a Robin Hood effort piling up an unprecedented 3629 hours flown. A tremendous requirement had been put upon the maintenance personnel who maintained an outstanding 83% aircraft availability. Also for their part in operation Attleboro the Robin Hoods were awarded a total of 153 awards.

After Attleboro the unit was put on lighter duty for about ten days to give the pilots a rest and give maintenance a chance to catch up on the aircraft.

Thanksgiving was an occasion at Sherwood Forest. The mess personnel prepared a tremendous turkey dinner with all the trimmings. Everyone came to the mess hall with camera in hand to record the event.

On 28 November, Robin Hood lifted Darkness from Di An to the Hung Sat zone - a tideland marsh area south of Saigon and long time haven for two Viet Cong battalions. The unit operated out of Vung Tau where Darkness had their staging area. The Robin Hoods were treated well by the infantry and in turn did another good job in supporting them in the Hung Sat zone.

The Robin Hoods returned to Lai Khe on the 12th of December where the rest of the month was spent primarily on missions for 3rd Corps Headquarters. Christmas and New Years came and passed while everyone longed to be with their wives and families. As the old year was ushered out the Robin Hoods looked back on a successful year and a job well done.