

# 13th COMBAT AVIATION BATTALION



## *Guardians of the Delta*

The terrain is similar no matter where you travel. There are rich rice paddies criss-crossed by canals and tree lines, producing nearly three-fourths of all the rice grown in South Vietnam.

Forty percent of the Republic's population of 16 million call this rich rice bowl their home. Since ancient times the Mekong Delta

has been a coveted prize tempting emperors, despots, warlords and soldiers of fortune from both Asia and Europe. It is not surprising that with war once again raging in this troubled land, nowhere is the contest more bitter or fierce than in the Mekong Delta.

"This is where the war began," asserts LTC Billy I. McRill, com-

mander of the 13th Combat Aviation Battalion. "And when it's settled, it's going to be settled here."

The battalion's headquarters, and three of its combat units, are located in Soc Trang, only a few miles south of the area where the mighty Mekong fans through the fertile land on its path to the South China Sea. The remaining three tactical units are based in nearby Can Tho.

The pride of the members of the Guardian Battalion is based not only on the unit's outstanding combat record, which becomes even more eye-opening each day, but also on the proud history of the battalion.

The forerunner of the Thirteenth, the Delta Aviation Battalion Provisional had the same auspicious start on July 4 as George M. Co-han, the composer of patriotic musical works. This Provisional Yankee Doodle Dandy came into being on July 4, 1963, with its headquarters at Can Tho.

By October of the following year, the newly-created Thirteenth was moved into the Republic and merged with the Delta Aviation

**Slicks from the 162nd AHC hit the LZ.**





**Story by  
SP4 G. Jay Dunn**

Battalion Provisional. It wasn't until October, 1968, that the battalion headquarters was moved to Soc Trang.

However, to pick up the history of the battalion, it is necessary to go all the way back to September 19, 1962. That's the day when the 93rd Transportation Company departed Da Nang and relocated in Soc Trang under the new name of the 121st Assault Helicopter Company. The Tigers, utilizing the banana shaped CH-21 helicopters, thus became the first Army aviation company in the Delta.

A charter member of the battalion, the 121st still maintains a combat record that is second to none. In April of this year, when the Guardians established a battalion record of 563 enemy killed in a single month, the 121st was responsible for the Tiger's share of that figure: 199. Under their present commander, MAJ Henry T.

Brown, Jr., that figure was also a record for the company.

The 121st is one of six maneuver elements which comprise the battalion, whose total enlisted men and officers nearly triple the number in an infantry battalion. Four of the six combat units within the battalion are assault helicopter companies similar to the 121st. These companies use Hueys both as gunships and slicks.

In addition to the 121st, the 336th AHC Warriors were also a charter member of the battalion. Located on the opposite end of the Soc Trang Army Airfield, the Warriors are not opposite the Tigers in any other way. Under their affable and successful commander MAJ Thomas M. Kilpatrick, the Warriors have established an outstanding combat record. It is as an air mission commander for the Warriors that CPT Stanley Q. Coss has established one of the finest reputations in the Delta.

The 162nd and 191st AHC's, each based in Can Tho, did not



**SP4 George R. Pommerening scans hostile territory below.**

**Ships of the 13th provide superior mobility for ARVN's, the Delta's Infantry.**





join the Guardian Battalion until September, 1969, but they are both first rate members.

MAJ Thomas E. Beauchamp, CO of the 162nd Vultures, has distinguished himself in that position, and executive officer CPT George A. Hawkins has a combat record which ranks among the best. The spirit and efficiency of the 162nd can be illustrated by Specialist Four Tiodolo Falcon, Jr., a door gunner on the Vulture Command and Control Ship May 2. From an altitude of 1500 feet Falcon used an M-60 machine gun to destroy a Viet Cong sampan.

Like the 162nd, the 191st AHC is superbly led by MAJ Victor S. Connor, and its executive officer, CPT Fredrick L. Evors, who has compiled a distinguished combat record. The success of the 191st is depicted by the fact that its personnel always occupy a proportionally high number of positions at battalion awards and decorations

ceremonies.

The 221st Utility Airplane Company was a charter member of the Delta Aviation Battalion Provisional when it was assembled in 1963. The Shotguns, who maintain the only fixed wing aircraft in the battalion, fly reconnaissance missions with 0-1 "Bird Dog" aircraft.

Although the shotguns confirmed 505 enemy killed last year, their major mission is aerial reconnaissance. Each pilot is given a sector of 1,000 to 1,500 square miles which he patrols daily. Any change in enemy position or activity must be noted by the pilot, whose job it is to be thoroughly familiar with the terrain. Because substitute pilots cannot know the area as well as regular ones, a Shotgun aviator never takes a day off, averaging between 110 and 140 hours per month.

Besides aerial surveillance, the observers, who ride in the back seat of the single-engine planes,

adjust artillery and Naval gunfire.

"We often are called on to mark the area of friendlies and targets for our gunships," says MAJ Jimmy J. McGraw, company commander. "Because our ships require less maintenance we have more of them available. Their fuel requirements are less than that of the helicopters, so we can remain on station longer."

The newest member of the battalion is the 16th Air Cav, which vastly increased the flexibility. The Cav, under the command of MAJ Robert L. Philips, uses Hueys as lift ships only.

The gunships are the fast, powerful Cobras, which remain at higher altitudes than the guns of the AHC's do. The low-altitude work is done by the exciting little light observation helicopters which buzz around virtually at the tree tops seeking out the enemy. The LOH platoon for the Cav is nicknamed the Outcasts with "Low

**This CH-21 Shawnee of the 1962 Soc Trang Tigers was one of the first aircraft in the Delta.**





Level Hell" stitched on the platoon emblem.

Unlike the mathematical axiom, the 13th Battalion is greater even than the sum of its parts. Since the withdrawal of U.S. ground troops from the Delta, the bulk of the operation of the battalion is to provide aerial support for the Vietnamese ground elements. Battalion pilots are requested to attend ARVN awards and decorations ceremonies at the rate of nearly a dozen a month. It is a rare day, indeed, when the combat results of the battalion do not exceed those of the ground divisions. During a two month period in 1970, the Guardians accounted for 1,021 enemy killed and destroyed nearly triple that number of sampans.

In spite of the heavy combat commitment of the battalion, both the combat casualties list and the accident rate are exceptionally low.

"The low accident rate is attributed to LTC McRill," asserts CPT Thomas S. Catalano, Adjutant. "We have a great many young officers here. Initially the experience factor is quite low. Every incoming officer is given a pep talk stressing safety by the Colonel before he even reports to his unit. Our accident rate is habitually below the USARV and First Brigade standards. Often it is the best in USARV; better than many units who fly only VIP missions."

CPT Catalano is the officer who best described the Guardian Battalion esprit de corps to an officer newly assigned to Soc Trang. You are now part of the Thirteenth," Catalano told the newcomer. "That makes you famous."

**A maintenance man works long hours in a hangar to prepare a ship for action.**

HAWK

