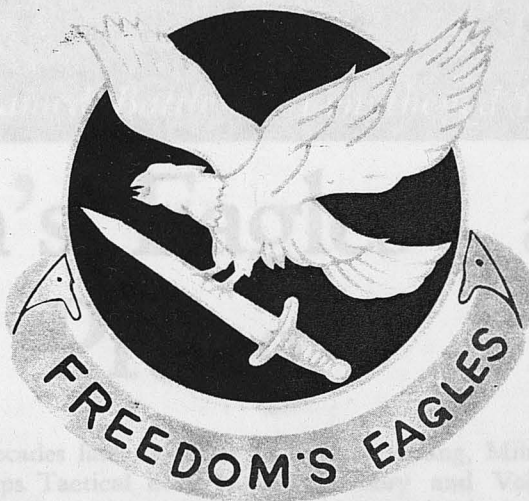


HAWK MAGAZINE salutes

17th Aviation Group (Cbt)



Formed in Saigon on December 15, 1965, the 17th Aviation Group (Cbt) transferred to Nha Trang in March 1966. The Group's name, "Freedom's Eagles," denotes the 17th's participation in numerous actions in Vietnam, the latest of which was staged in the Ban Me Thuot—Pleiku areas.

From October through December 1969, companies of the 17th Group combined and coordinated their efforts in a single operation, with a single goal. Hueys, Chinooks, Cobras, and Skycranes worked together from one operations center to support the isolated firebases and ground operations in this area near the Cambodian border. Using the characteristics of the different helicopters to the utmost degree, the 17th Group operations sent skyward from 40 to 50 ships each day to do a job that could be done only by aviation.

Three companies, doing three different jobs at the same time, worked together on the same re-supply mission to efficiently and successfully complete the task. This is the sort of cooperation and teamwork that was necessary in an operation of the immense scale that was staged out of Ban Me Thuot, and the professional attitudes and capable personnel of the 17th Group provided nothing less.



The Army's List of Famed Battles Is Lengthened by One.

“Freedom’s Eagles” at Bu Prang

Twenty-five years ago, on December 19, 1944, Brigadier General Anthony C. McAuliffe was given the order: “Hold Bastogne.” And so began one of the most important battles of World War II. It was no secret that the enemy needed Bastogne and the entrance it afforded to a wider complex of roads leading west.

Here in Vietnam, two and one-

half decades later, a sector in the II Corps Tactical Zone has come under heavy attack. This enemy wants the sector just as badly as the Germans wanted Bastogne.

Since late October, the “hottest” area in II Corps Tactical Zone has been in the Dar Lac-Quang Duc sector of the western Central Highlands. Located in this sector are such encampments as

Bu Prang, Mike Smith, Duc Lap, Dory and Volcano. These bases stand in the way of enemy supply routes from Cambodia and are therefore a major threat to the communist aggression in the south.

The responsibility of aviation support in the area is assigned to the 155th Aviation Company “Stagecoaches” at Ban Me Thuot. When mortar and rocket attacks

Choppers provide Bu Prang’s sole means of supply.



Crane lifts “cat” over Bu Prang’s airstrip.





361st "Snakes" aid in thwarting the month-long assault.

began at Bu Prang in late October, the job of resupply, medevac and low-level reconnaissance outgrew the 155th. Due to the heavy burden, various other companies from the 17th Aviation Group (Combat) were called upon to assist.

During the month-long action at Bu Prang and the surrounding area, Hueys, Cobras, Chinooks, Sky cranes, LOHs and Bird Dogs from the 17th's "Freedom's Eagles" were controlled from a consolidated operations center (COC) set up by the 10th Aviation Battalion (Combat) at the home of the 155th. From October 28 to November 30, COC was coordinating a daily average of 24 Hueys, 12 gunships, 9 Chinooks and one Sky-crane, all from the 17th CAG. "Freedom's Eagles" choppers flew

5,000 sorties during that time period accumulating 5,300 hours of flight time.

COC continued to control the operation after the enemy action subsided at Bu Prang, such as scheduling a crane to transport a bulldozer to Mike Smith to help dig in for the offensive that they felt certain was imminent, or coordinating re-supply by Chinooks and Hueys, or planning escort missions by gunships.

Chinooks from the 179th and 243d Aviation Companies, Sky cranes from the 355th Aviation Company, Hueys from the 92nd, 48th, 281st, 170th and 155th Aviation Companies flew daily re-supply missions to Bu Prang. Cobras from the 361st Aviation Company flew cover for the re-supply, and Bird Dogs from the

185th Aviation Company were invaluable in surveillance and reconnaissance.

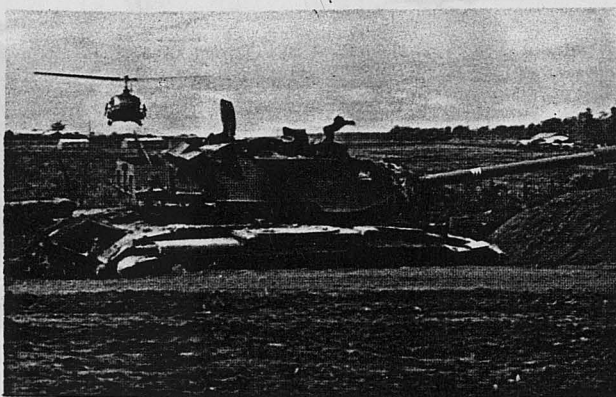
"Without the continuous re-supply, it would have been impossible to hold for any length of time. They were our sole means of supply. Many times they would drop in their 'hooks' and then set down to pick up casualties," said LTC Franklin W. Collins, of Company B, 5th Special Forces Group at Bu Prang. "Many times the Chinooks and Dustoffs had to be waved off because the risk was too great to set down for a second. The pilots have been great and the 'gutsiest' men I've worked with," he continued.

Frequently what is scheduled to be a routine supply mission ends with the crew risking their lives for the mission's success. There is always an element of danger.

Picture a "Stagecoach" slick from the 155th as it approaches a fire support base (FSB) at 95 knots and 30 feet. Ahead is FSB Mike Smith on top of a knoll in the Duc Lap area. During the dry season, it is one of the dustiest places in Vietnam and during the rainy season, one of the most muddy.

The inhabitants of Mike Smith, members of an ARVN regiment, their American advisors and two U.S. artillery batteries, live and work in bunkers, many of them underground. Their mission is to give artillery support to the Duc

Stagecoach slick approaches Mike Smith.



Heavy action forces night-long maintenance.



**Story and Photos by
SP5 Chas'Boots
and
SP4 David R. Wood**

Lap area.

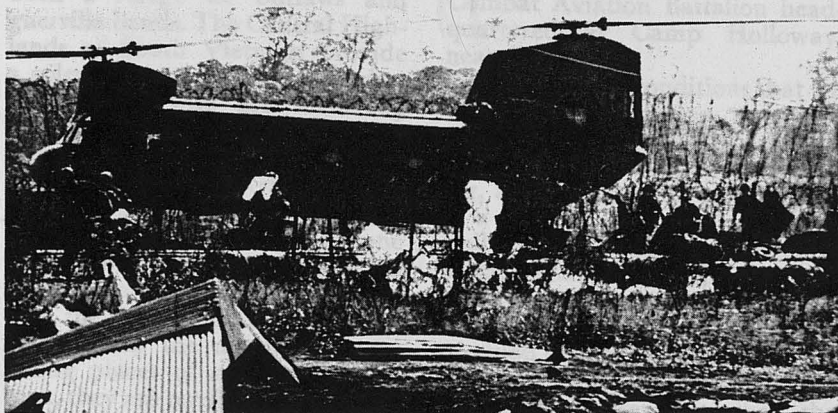
As the chopper sets down outside of the perimeter, a huge cloud of red dust rises and hangs over the area for minutes after it shuts down. The pilots get out and head for the camp. The crew stays with the ship.

The hill on which Mike Smith is located is like all the others in the area. There are no major settlements nearby. A year ago this hill had no strategic value. Now it is the home of American and ARVN artillery units, and a major roadblock to enemy supply lines from Cambodia.

The two chopper pilots enter the camp and head for the American command bunker. There they meet with LTC Leo Boucher, 45th ARVN Regiment senior advisor and official coordinator of U.S. forces in the Duc Lap area, and are briefed on the mission that they are to perform—re-supply the outpost on Volcano.

Volcano is similar to any other outpost in the area, except that it is perhaps smaller and definitely "hotter." As soon as the action at Bu Prang subsided, Volcano began taking daily, sometimes hourly, and more often continuous barrages of rocket and mortar rounds.

Vital men and supplies arrive at Bu Prang.



When the call comes, a Dustoff ship responds.

At the other end of Mike Smith, a Chinook makes its approach, hovers, drops off a sling load of supplies, and departs. A truck pulls out of its bunker, loads up and drives across Mike Smith to transfer the supplies to the Stagecoach ship.

On the first mission of the day to Volcano, food and ammunition are dropped. The chopper is on the ground less than 20 seconds. In those few moments, supplies are unloaded and the dead and wounded are loaded to be medevaced from Mike Smith.

In resupplying the "hot" encampment, choppers sometimes fly in under the pounding of rocket and mortar rounds and often are chased out by the same. VC and

NVA gun crews have every square meter of the base zeroed in; and if a chopper pilot keeps his ship on the ground longer than 30 seconds, he is inviting death.

The route out of the Volcano, like the route in, is through enemy territory and is covered by heavy and light machinegun positions. The chopper flies over hills and valleys with continuous cover from above and behind by two Cobra gunships from the 361st "Pink Panthers."

After returning to Mike Smith, in relative quiet and temporary safety, the crew is able to breathe easier. There will be more missions during the day, but they do not think about them. They have made it through this one, and the men on the Volcano have been temporarily sustained.

This was just another mission for the men of the 17th Aviation Group. But to the men on the Volcano, that chopper popping up and over the hill and into their camp meant life. "There are no words to describe the effectiveness of aviation on top of that hill," said LTC Boucher. "The Volcano is no picnic in any way shape or form." The men who fly the helicopter into the Volcano have to be there. They are the life line to every man on the top of that hill.



"Flying Dragons" Light Charlie's Fire

52nd Combat Aviation Battalion

Mountainous areas have always been a refuge for outlaws and guerrilla bands. The Central Highlands of South Vietnam provide a splendid stronghold for the desperate men who are menacing that nation's government. Mountain peaks which stretch 7,000 feet into the clouds, triple canopy jungle, natural caves, and over all, as rugged a terrain as anyone would find on this globe, abound in the Central Highlands.

If the conditions are excellent for secreting the movements and hiding places of small groups of men, they are terrible for men who fly in search of these desperados.

Such is the task of the 52nd Combat Aviation Battalion headquartered at Camp Holloway, near Pleiku.

"The adverse conditions that we fly in include jutting mountain peaks, deeply gorged valleys, ground fog, morning fog, evening fog, and 200 foot tall trees. There is a lack of horizontal LZ's, as well as a lack of emergency landing areas. During the respective seasons there are sudden monsoon storms, marginal flying conditions, or vision defying dust bowls. These are more difficult to contend with for the helicopter pilot than the Viet Cong or the NVA," says LTC

Patrick O'Grady, Commanding Officer of the 52nd.

The "Flying Dragon" is one of the largest assault helicopter battalions in the Republic of Vietnam.

The 189th Assault Helicopter Company, commanded by MAJ John P. Ratliff, the 170th Assault Helicopter Company, commanded by MAJ Douglas H. Snell, the 361st Aerial Weapons Company, commanded by MAJ John L. Deryck, and the 179th Assault Support Helicopter Company, commanded by MAJ John E. Pirkle are all located at Camp Holloway. The 57th Assault Helicopter Company is based at



Plans for the day's operations are discussed by CIDG camp commander and "Ghost Rider" pilot.

Kontum and commanded by MAJ John D. Charles. The 119th Assault Helicopter Company has recently made the move from Pleiku to An Khe under the command of MAJ John P. Fernald.

The 52nd's mission is to provide airlift support throughout the Central Highlands with priority given to the 4th Infantry Division. Their policy is "to get the job done."

The "Flying Dragons" are spread from Kontum to the north, to Ban Me Thuot in the south (some of their assault helicopter companies have a portion of their

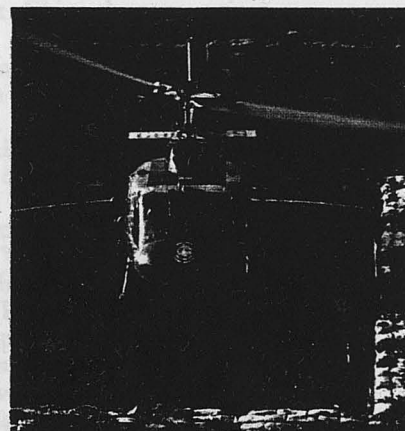
gunships based at Ban Me Thuot). On any given day a ship from any of the 52nd's companies might find itself flying anywhere in II Corps. As the need arises, the different companies are assigned their missions.

Recently two Bird Dog airplanes providing reconnaissance for the "Famous" 4th Infantry went down somewhere in the northwestern section of II Corps. The main portion of the search went to the 189th "Ghost Riders," but the 361st "Pink Panthers" supplied some Cobras for cover and the 119th "Alligators" provided a few ships for search craft.

If the operation calls for it, it is not unusual to see ships from several different "Flying Dragon" companies "marry up" and work together on a mission.

The 52nd pulls every kind of a mission from combat assaults, to resupplying fire bases, to inserting long range patrol (LRP) teams, "snoopy" flights, "scorpion" flights, medevac, providing cover for convoys; the list is never ending and ever varied.

Inserting LRP teams in II Corps is a challenge to any helicopter pilot's skill and courage. There are very few good landing zones in the up and down terrain of the Central Highlands. Most



A "Ghost Rider" slick is eased into its revetment wrapping up another day.

often "hover holes" must be cut into the thick jungle-like forests to enable the ships to get close enough to the ground for the LRP team to jump out. Pathfinders or another LRP team might walk in with axes and cut a hole in the trees big enough to accommodate a chopper. Sometimes the Air Force is called in to drop their 10,000 pound "Daisy Cutter" bombs to blast a hover hole. Either way, there is inevitably a mere few feet of clearance for the slick's rotor blades as the pilot gingerly lowers it toward the ground. Often, due to the stumps left from the cutting or explosion, a log platform must be constructed on which the helicopter can land so that its underside is not punctured. This provides, at best, a rocky resting place for the chopper's skids.

Contending with all these obstacles should create ulcers enough, but when Charlie arrives and begins to throw lead, it can make an old man out of a young pilot in a very few minutes. And yet this type of flying is only to be expected of the men who fly the Gladiator, Ghost Rider, Bikini or Alligator slicks of the 52nd.

The "Flying Dragon" gunships work very closely with the different units of the "Famous" 4th. The Avengers, Pink Panthers, Crocodiles, Buccaneers, and the Cougars all are masters of close aerial support for the infantry.

Flying into a rough LZ a 119th "Alligator" slick prepares to extract a LRP team.





A team of "Shrimp Boat" mechanics removes the rotor blades from their CH-47 Chinook.

"They would rather have us out there supporting them than the artillery," says CW2 Dennis L. Santos, a 119th Crocodile pilot. "We not only have voice to voice contact with them, but frequently eye to eye contact as well. Even in the jungle when we can't see exactly where they are, all they have to do is set off a smoke grenade and inform us as to the distance and direction the enemy is positioned in relation to the smoke."

Close aerial support is the word with the 52nd. They believe that right down near the enemy is the best place not only to do a job on Charlie but, in most instances, a safer position from which to fight. Even the 361st Pink Panthers, the only entirely Cobra outfit in II Corps, believe in the low level style of attack. Their craft supposedly is designed for firing from 1000 feet or higher.

"If you are low level and coming right at the enemy, they don't have much of a chance to get fire on you. During the siege of Ben Het only ten of the Panther aircraft received hits and we were using low level exclusively," said CPT Teddy Hampton, a 361st pilot.

The theory must have some validity, for in one day during the Ben Het siege, four Panther Cobras were given credit for 175 enemy killed.

The 52nd is also given the task

of resupply to any unit in II Corps that cannot be supplied by ground transportation or that is in need of the materiel at short notice. The slicks of the battalion do a portion of the supply missions to the outlying fire bases, but the brunt of the resupply work falls to the 179th "Shrimp Boats."

Like most Chinook companies in Vietnam the 179th will, and does, haul anything in their ships. "If you can rig it into a 7,000 pound load, we'll carry it either inside the ship or slung under it," noted one of the Shrimp Boat pilots.

Unlike most Chinook companies in Vietnam, the 179th often supplies locations over a mile high. This attitude restricts their load capacity to 7000 pounds. They have an answer for this restriction, however. Gradually they are replacing their present ships with new "Full C" model Chinooks which have new, improved and larger engines. At the altitudes the Shrimp Boats operate, the new craft is able to carry loads up to 10,000 pounds.

The 52nd Combat Aviation Battalion is a big organization that covers an enormous amount of the most formidable territory in Vietnam. If there is a job to do they are the ones who will get it done.

A "Cougar" gunship awaits orders on the day's mission at a remote fire base in the Central Highlands.



HEADHUNTERS



219th Seeks Hiding Enemy

The O-1 "Bird Dog," like its canine counterpart, locates the quarry and guides the hunters in for the kill. In Vietnam, the quarry is Charlie. The Bird Dogs are single-engine, high-winged monoplanes, and among the men who fly them are the pilots of the 219th Aviation Company (Utility Airplane).

Pilots of the 219th, located at Camp Holloway in Pleiku, fly an estimated 1,600 missions per month, racking up an average of 2,000 air hours. The company's aviators and aircraft spend roughly 75 per cent of this air time performing visual reconnaissance (VR).

In 1966, the 219th officially a-

dopted the name "Headhunters" because of a special low-level type of VR which it originated and successfully employed to find the VC in the rugged Central Highland terrain. The technique was chillingly simple. When the pilot spotted a likely area, he pulled the nose up, dropped a wing and dived "down on the deck" for an eyeball-to-eyeball look. "At times the Bird Dogs flew so low that pilots could peer under the eaves of jungle huts," said CPT Clifford R. Ward, a 219th aviator.

If the Headhunter drew fire or observed the enemy, he marked the location with one of the aircraft's rockets and climbed to a safe altitude. "It's frustrating to be shot at

and not be able to do anything about it directly," said CPT Ward. But, the variety of responses available to a Bird Dog pilot provides some degree of compensation.

Circling from a safe altitude over the target, he can command more firepower than could ever be carried by any other aircraft. Gunships, artillery, mortars, and infantry assault forces are only as far away as the switch on his radio. CPT Ward admits that Bird Dogs are not fired on as frequently now as they were earlier in the war. Though the VC used to like shooting at the slow, low-flying aircraft, over the years they have learned the price for their brief target prac-

tice and found it too expensive.

In addition to VR, the 219th performs several other vital functions. They include flying convoy cover, assisting in radio relay, helping the artillery establish registration points and providing limited personnel transportation.

The company is divided into four platoons which support four different groups. The first platoon supports the Pleiku sector. The second platoon is detached and split into two sections supporting the Civilian Irregular Defense Group troops advised by the 5th Special Forces and Kontum Province. The 52nd Artillery Group and II Corps area are supported by the third platoon, and appropriately, the fourth platoon supports the 4th Infantry Division. With the exception of the second platoon, all the unit's aircraft are based at Camp Holloway near Pleiku.

In certain high-risk areas covered by these platoons, the pilots employ a special dual-ship technique for safety. If one aircraft goes down, the other pilot can mark the location and call for help.

Since its activation in 1965 at Ft. Hood, Tex., the company has received a Valorous Unit Award with a streamer embroidered "Plei



A marking rocket is placed in its tube.

Story and Photos

by

SP5 Richard

M. Emerson

Me," and a Meritorious Unit Commendation with a streamer embroidered "Vietnam 1965-1966." When the unit first landed in Vietnam in 1965, it was the largest fixed-wing aviation company in the country.

Currently commanded by MAJ David Nauman, the unit has had nearly five years to build on the tradition displayed in its colorful Headhunter patch. The Headhunter is depicted on the patch with wings denoting flight capability. He is shown armed with a telescope representing the primary duty of visual reconnaissance and a 2.75 inch rocket representing target marking capability. The green in the costume represents the lush Central Highlands over which the pilots fly.

The enemy must be found before he can be fought. Vietnam's jungles make this a difficult task, but the 219th's Bird Dogs continue to make the job easier by serving as the long range eyes of the infantry and artillery.



Long hours in the air mean long hours of maintenance.