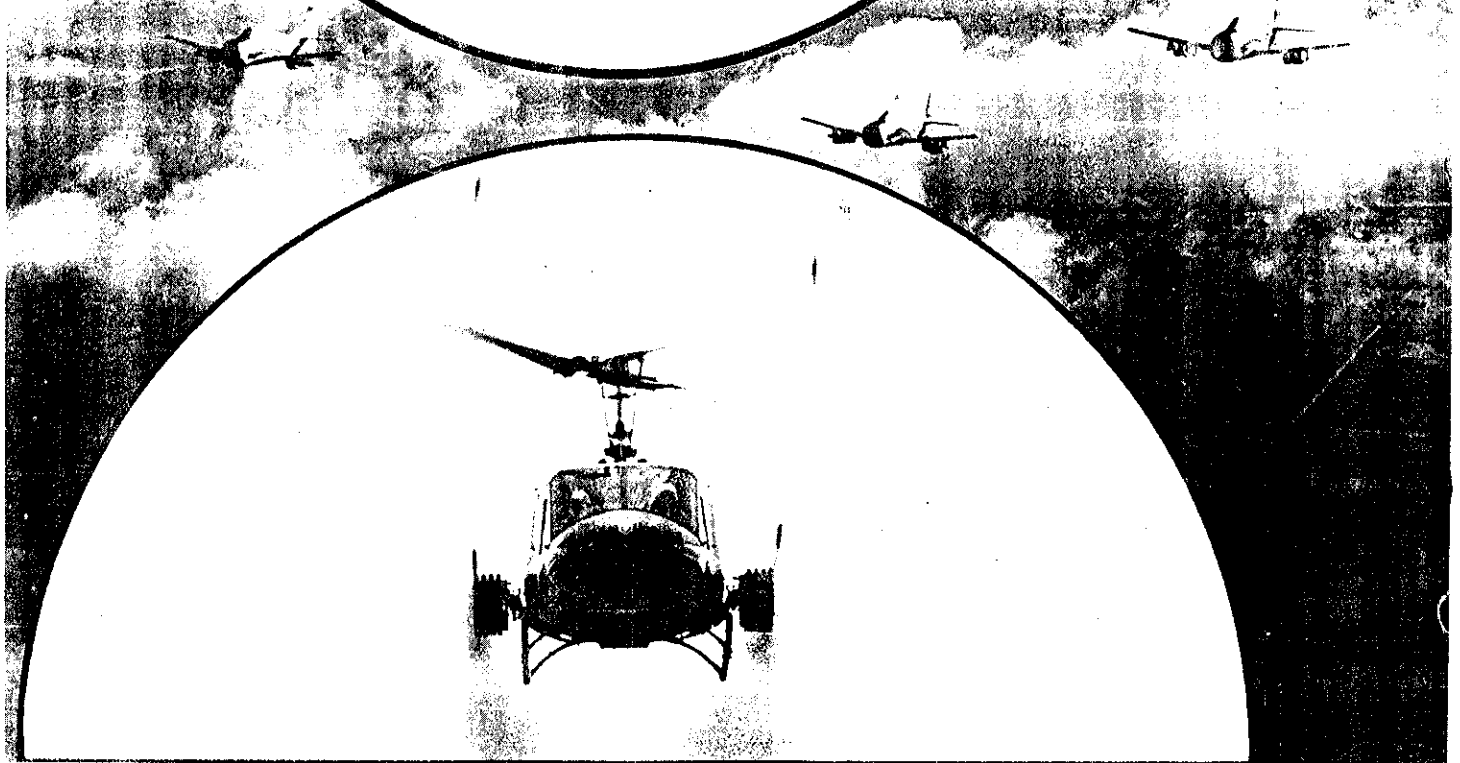


COMBATING a Viet Cong Ambush



William H. Smith

WE HAD JUST come in from a flight down south. Maintenance crews were still servicing the aircraft when we received word of the ambush. The report said that an ARVN (Army Republic of Vietnam) platoon, accompanied by an American advisor, had been ambushed by communist VC while on a rescue mission into a mangrove swamp. They quickly retreated to an abandoned outpost and called for help.

The old man immediately alerted both "Viper" and "Ringo"

armed platoons. To get one platoon off the ground as soon as possible, he had all personnel concentrate their efforts on servicing Viper's aircraft.

I received permission to ride with Viper control, and we were soon on the way. Forty-five minutes after receiving the report, we were flying over the old outpost. We found the situation critical. The VC were within 200 meters of the RVN troops. They were pushing hard, and it was evident that unless we could drastically

change the situation the men were lost.

An Air Force forward controller in a TO-1D arrived about the same time. He said he had come to direct the fire of four VNAF (Air Force, Republic of Vietnam) Skyraiders who were coming.

This was a stroke of good luck. By using the Air Force airplane as a controller, our control ship could act as an additional gun ship to give us more firepower. We immediately got him busy helping us, and we started our pattern of diving and hitting the

The sudden onslaught of lead and high explosives from the Hueys stopped the VC attack dead

VC whenever they dared move or fire a weapon.

The sudden onslaught of lead and high explosives from the skies had its effect on the VC. Their attack first faltered and then stopped dead. For 30 minutes we held them in check and even pushed them back a little.

But like other aircraft, helicopters can carry only a certain weight. This limits the amount of ammunition on board. When fire must be heavy, as it was here, ammunition disappears fast. In 30 minutes our Hueys were empty and we had to go back for more ammunition.

Fortunately we had pushed the VC back far enough that tactical fighter aircraft could operate without endangering friendly troops. We turned over the VC punching game to the four Skyraiders. They waded in and kept pressure applied where it was needed.

Back at the airstrip we hurried through an inspection of the helicopters while they were being rearmed and refueled. Five had received seven hits, but these were small caliber stuff and did not affect flying ability.

Two crew members had received minor shrapnel wounds, one on his chin and the other on his left elbow. We gave them first-aid and tried to get them to go for proper medical treatment. Both refused. They laughed at their minor wounds and said they wanted to finish the mission.

While we had been helping the ARVN rescue platoon, Ringo had gotten airborne. They had headed toward us, intending to relieve us so we could rearm, but on the way they learned the VC had attacked at two other points. When the rescue platoon was ambushed,

its home outpost sent out another platoon to try to rescue them. This platoon in turn was ambushed by the communists. The other attack was at the outpost itself. The VC probably reasoned the outpost had depleted its manpower so much that it would be a pushover.

The Ringo commander didn't make the mistake of dividing his strength in three different areas. Instead he made his aircraft available on call to the commanders of the besieged units and attacked specific concentrations as requested. This kept them busy all afternoon. Before the day was over every aircraft in his unit expended itself of ammunition at least four times.

In inspecting Ringo aircraft, it was found that every one of them had received hits. Fortunately none were serious. One American gunner in the Ringo platoon was seriously wounded in the right leg and later had to be evacuated to the United States.

After rearming and refueling we took off again for our besieged troops, but before we got there

we learned that the communists had retreated into the jungle. The four Skyraiders had gone to the home outpost to help there. Since our friends in the old outpost were now safe and the Skyraiders were at the home outpost, we decided to help the ambushed convoy.

But a radio call to the old man, who was flying with Ringo, changed our minds. The situation had changed. The main VC thrust was at the home outpost and the Skyraiders had their hands full. He wanted us to help them. He and the Ringo platoon were still busy hitting specific targets, mostly concentrations of VC back in the woods, and "Panther" (50 caliber) helicopters were helping the convoy.

The CO also gave us an interesting specific assignment. He said that about 5 minutes ago one of the A-1E Skyraiders had been hit and had made a crash landing in an area infested with communists. He wanted the helicopter I was riding in to go pick up the pilot. Only five people were on board our aircraft so we were the

Evacuation of 83 wounded RVN troops accomplished by UH-1Bs, American advisors, RVN med evac personnel



AMBUSH

logical choice. The old man said we could take two other helicopters along to ride shotgun.

We had no trouble finding the downed aircraft. It had landed in an open field of high grass and had not caught fire. But we saw no sign of life and at first we feared the pilot to be dead or captured by the VC.

The two other helicopters started orbiting the wooded areas surrounding the clearing, providing cover and suppressive fire. If any VC were there they would find it unhealthy to fire on us.

We came in alongside the downed aircraft. Its canopy was open and the pilot was missing. There was a movement in the

grass and everyone's trigger finger tightened a little. The grass parted and the pilot stood up, a smile on his face extending almost from ear to ear. He was not seriously hurt and had been hiding in fear of the VC. We took him on board.

When we rejoined our platoon we found the other helicopters busy making life miserable for the VC. For the rest of the afternoon we occupied ourselves that way, expending our ammunition and fuel supply four times before the communist had sense enough to retreat.

The Panthers made three passes, raking the VC with .50 caliber bullets. The VC in turn fired a few shots at the Panthers and took to the woods as fast as they could. As they did they received fire from this direction, too. The friendly troops, realizing that they did not have a chance against the attackers, left the trucks and hid in the woods. They were waiting for their chance to get back. The Panthers gave it to them. Many VC got away but enough died to make the ambush a costly venture.

When the action was finally over and the VC had crawled back into the swamps, it was found that 32 ARVN soldiers were killed defending their country. Eighty-three were wounded. We evacuated the more serious. Three American advisors were killed and five were wounded in action.

We lost a lot of equipment, but most of it was actually destroyed and did not fall into the hands of the VC.

We weren't able to determine exactly how many of the enemy were dead. Many were killed by aircraft back in the woods and

swamps, and others were killed by ARVN didn't want to go in there just to count dead VC. Then too, the VC followed their usual practice of removing many of their dead before retreating.

We estimated that 50 had been killed. We counted almost that many pools of blood or trails where the bodies had been dragged before they could be picked up and carried off. We also estimated that 80 were wounded. Among the equipment captured were one machinegun, two BARs, two sing, and four rifles. Also there were a lot of junk weapons made from lengths of pipe and hunks of lead.

As usual the old man held an after-action critique. He said that as the attacking force the VC had the advantage over us. Under normal conditions they could exploit this advantage to a successful conclusion. But the timely intervention of aircraft had changed things. Everytime the VC attacked he revealed his location, enabling us to hit him.

In his official report the old man advised that ARVN units should notify higher headquarters when they have convoy movements. That way we could be on the alert. Also he advised that all convoys be escorted by Bird Dog aircraft and that armed helicopters be stationed within 10 minutes flying time of any convoy, ready to intercept any VC giving trouble.

This narrative is based on an after-action report. The article is not a factual portrayal of events. It is written to inform Army Aviators about the general type of assignments to be expected on a tour in Vietnam.

