

HISTORY
of the
117th Assault Helicopter Company
(UH-1)(A)

VOLUME I

History of the 117th Assault Helicopter Company (UH-1)(A)
APO San Francisco 96279

2 November 1961 - 1 May 1968

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Foreword

Before one begins to writh, compile and edit a history such as this, a great deal of research is necessary. My predecessors in this position accomplished a great deal in their reports on the progress of the 117th Assault Helicopter Company. I would like to acknowledge the following men for without their efforts much less would have been accomplished:

CW2 Fred O. Bell	8th Transportation Company	2 Nov 61 - 31 Dec 62
Cpt William E. Gee	117th Aviation Company	1 Jan 63 - 31 Dec 63
1Lt Roger A. Gellenbeck	117th Aviation Company	1 Jan 64 - 31 Dec 64
WO1 John T. Mayers	117th Aviation Company	1 Jan 65 - 31 Dec 65
Cpt Robert J. Barker	117th Aslt Hel Company	1 Jan 66 - 31 Dec 66
WO1 Stephen M. Walker	117th Aslt Hel Company	1 Jan 67 - 31 Dec 67

CW2 Robert A. Skiba
Unit Historian
117th Aslt Hel Co

PROLOGUE

On 2 November 1961, at 0800 hrs the 8th Transportation Company was placed on alert orders to prepare to move to an unknown destination to participate in a training exercise. Major Charles M. Hardesty immediately took steps to bring the unit to 100% TO&E strength. During the next few days the unit was shrouded in secrecy and engaged in hard work.

Speculation within the unit was rampant. As the unit was a designated STRAC unit it was generally felt that this alert was a training exercise to determine the preparedness of the company. As the days progressed it became more obvious that the unit was actually going to move. Its destination was still unknown.

At 0700 hrs, 8 November 1961, 15 H-21 "Shawnee Banana" helicopters of the 8th departed their home station at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina and took up a westerly course. The flight was uneventful due to the close coordination and the superior maintenance performed by the crews. The first overnight stop was at Birmingham, Alabama. Succeeding nights found the aviators of the 8th in Shreveport, Louisiana, Ft. Worth, Texas, Carlsbad, New Mexico and Phoenix, Arizona. Finally on 14 November, the first leg of their odyssey ended at the Sharp General Depot in Stockton, California. With the broad Pacific now before them, an overseas assignment was quite evident. The question still lingered - where?

On 17 November, the entire complement of men and equipment at Ft. Bragg was airlifted to Alameda Naval Air Station in Alameda, California. Immediate preparations began for shipment. Two aircraft were loaded aboard the freighter, USNS McGRAW, six H-21's and four H-13's were loaded aboard the civilian freighter, THE HAWAIIAN PILOT. The remaining H-21's were prepared and loaded aboard the jeep carrier, USNS CORE. On the 18th of November the USNS McGRAW departed -

sailing west. She was followed on the 20th by the HAWAIIAN PILOT. At 1930 hrs on 21 November 1961, the USNS CORE sailed west under the Golden Gate Bridge into the gathering darkness of the Pacific night. Destination: Unknown.

On 11 December 1961, after 20 days of speculation and anticipation the USNS CORE joined its two sister ships at the docks of Saigon, Republic of Vietnam. The odyssey had been completed and the men of the 8th Transportation Company learned of their assignment: To fly direct combat support for the South Vietnamese Army.

21 December 1961 to 25 June 1963

THE EARLY YEARS

PART I

THE 8TH TRANSPORTATION COMPANY

Having arrived in Vietnam, the men began to work in earnest to prepare for the tasks ahead. On 21 December, the unit was of loaded onto Asian soil and the first billets were erected in "Tent City" on Tan Son Nhut Airfield, Siagon. The following day found the 8th engaged in a mission to familiarize the Vietnamese Army with the H-21 helicopter and heliborne operations. On 23 December the 8th became an integral part of a joint operation against a Viet Cong radio transmitter site. This operation was distinctive in that it was the first combat operation performed by U.S. helicopters in the Republic of Vietnam. It was a small but significant incident which paved the way for the massive helicopter operations to follow.

Elated by their history making success the men of the 8th eagerly accepted the mission of 5 January 1962 to attempt to rescue a Military Assistance Advisor Group sergeant from Viet Cong hands. Unfortunately their second combat mission failed in its objective. Nevertheless, invaluable lessons were learned to improve heliborne operations. On 10 January, the 8th packed its bags and moved to Qui Nhon, about 300 miles northeast of Siagon. This moving around was going to become a habit. Their mission was to support the Vietnamese Army in the II Corps, Combat Tactical Zone. This was the beginning of a series of moves which would eventually take the unit over nearly 80% of this wartorn land. The unit set up their own "Tent City" in the center of Qui Nhon and prepared for operations. At this time a very important modification was incorporated on the aircraft. Each H-21 was stripped of all excess weight to include the two vertical stabilizers. This weight removal was necessary so the men could add a 30 caliber machine gun to the fore and aft cargo doors.

On 13 January, the unit began a series of combat assaults, support, medical evacuation, training, resupply and reconnaissance missions for the Vietnamese Army. This general support mission continued through the year. Major Hardesty continued his leadership of the 8th through a great variety of "firsts" for Army Aviation in Vietnam. He was transferred to Okinawa on 5 June 1962. On 6 June Major Robert F. Cornell took over command from the Executive Officer, Captain James E. Cambell. Major Cornell commanded until 15 July when he was wounded and evacuated to the United States. Captain Cambell re-assumed command until 9 October when Major Richard D. Kisling was appointed to the position.

Starting in late 1962, and for a three month period, the 8th received a complete replacement of personnel. This replacement was orderly and staggered in such a manner that the new personnel were properly indoctrinated into their new positions and situations. As the "old heads " were being returned to CONUS to impart their knowledge to the growing masses of Army Aviators, they were replaced by an equally fine group of experienced rotary wing Aviators who has vast amounts of CH-21 Flying hours. It was this group which Major Kisling commanded.

Even though there was a complete change over of personnel, helicopter support of the Vietnamese Army continued in the form of assault, resupply and medical evacuation. These missions were flown in the vicinity of Tuy Hoa, Van Canh, An Khe and Quang Ngai. In addition to flying its own mission, the 8th sent aircraft to support the 81st Aviation Company at Pleiku and Ban Me Thuot. As of 1 January 1963, the 8th had flown 6,350 hours of combat support time. This time accounted for a total of 23, 155 troops lifted and 587, 331 pounds of cargo airlifted. This record of accomplishment was the direct result of the excellent support received from the 140th Maintenance Detachment under the command of Captain Robert Bray. Excellent support was also tendered by the

256th Signal Detachment commanded by Captain Thrasher and the 139th Medical Detachment commanded by Captain William "Doc" McCormack. The only incidents to mar the record of achievements during the first period of operations were the combat deaths of Chief Warrant Officer Joseph A. Goldberg, Sp5 Harold G. Guthrie, Sgt James E. Lane. Major Cornell, 1Lt Ashe A. Williams and Sp4 Bruce G. Nelles were wounded during this period also. All the men were awarded the Purple Heart.

The New Year brought additional support to the 8th Transportation Company. On 2 February 1963, a platoon of armed UH-1's were sent from the Utility Tactical Transport Company in Saigon. Needless to say, the flying personnel of the 8th felt more secure on assault missions as the UTT's lived up to their advance billing.

Thus given fine support and fortified by a close knit team of aviators, maintenance personnel, clerks, cooks, motor vehicle personnel, ammo experts and many others, the 8th Transportation Company (referred to as the "Tailless Wanderers") continued to accomplish their mission in an outstanding manner.

The company has paid for its successes through aircraft losses and personnel injuries. On 9 March, a CH-21C, piloted by CWO O'Donnell and CWO Thompson, crashed on take off from an advance airstrip at Mam Buc on a search and rescue mission for a downed P-400 pilot. There were no injuries but the crew spent a long night in the jungle. A few days later on an assault mission north of An Khe, a ship piloted by Cpt McCartt and CWO Bouza crashed on take off from a hostile landing zone. The crew was rescued under VC fire by a medical Huey and flown to an aid station. Cpt McCartt suffered a fractured skull and was evacuated to the States. CWO Bouza suffered severe bruises and minor cuts about the face but was back flying in three weeks. The two enlisted crewmen suffered

minor injuries. The aircraft was determined not to be worth recovering and was destroyed in the landing zone by Air Force tactical aircraft.

On 20 March, an H-21 loaded with ammo and supplies rolled down a hillside. The ship burst into flames and exploded but the crew managed to escape with minor burns and cuts.

While conducting a resupply mission in the vicinity of Quang Nghi, CWO Dixon and CWO Lanier lost control and crashed into a steep ravine. The entire crew and the three passengers were rescued by a second CH-21C and flown to Quang Nghi for treatment. CWO Dixon and the gunner, PFC Reedy were evacuated from Vietnam and CWO Lanier was back in the air a month later.

Despite these setbacks the 8th continued to support the Vietnamese Army in an outstanding and courageous manner. On 2 April 1963, General Stilwell presented Air Medals and Purple Hearts to 26 members of the 8th for their actions against the Viet Cong.

Heroism seemed to come naturally to the men of the 8th. On 6 April, during the course of a combat assault mission it became obvious that the Viet Cong were entrenched and waiting. Major Kisling flew lead ship on the assault and had to change ships twice as the heavy ground fire severely damaged his first two ships. Major Kisling, Captain Stockton, CWO Bouza, CWO Patton and Sp4 Eldon Jones were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for the action.

On 22 April, Major William S. Aiton succeeded Major Kisling as commander of the 8th Transportation Company. Shortly thereafter on 4 May the 8th became involved in the largest airborne assault yet flown in Vietnam. Nine lifts were flown on the first day and three lifts the second and third days. During the three day period, 1750 troops and 8500 pounds of supplies and equipment had been airlifted. The landing zone had been reconed and determined to be smooth. Upon

landing , the 8th discovered the LZ to be covered with large rocks making landing extremely difficult. The landing zone was nicknamed "Pebble Beach". The ARVN II Corps commander later presented the 8th with a rock from the LZ and a plaque commemorating the mission and the fine support rendered by the 8th Transportation Company.

While the 8th was performing admirably in Viet Nam, Back in the States events were taking place which would drastically change the old 8th Transportation Company. On 14 June 1963, General Order #326 USARPAC was issued and on 25 June 1963, the 8th Transportation Company (Light Helicopter) was inactivated.

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117TH ASSAULT HELICOPTER COMPANY
25 June 1963 to 31 March 1968

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117TH AVIATION COMPANY

PART II

CHAPTER I

25 June 1963 - 31 December 1963

The old 8th Transportation Company inactivated by USARPAC General Order #326 was reborn into the 117th Aviation Company (Airmobile Light) by the same General Order and was assigned to the U.S. Army Support Group Vietnam. All of the men and equipment formerly belonging to the 8th became the nucleus of the new 117th under the command of Major Aiton. The 117th then took over the billeting area at Qui Nhon, former home of the "Old 8th".

As activated, the 117th operated under a TO&E strength of fifteen officers, forty warrant officers and one hundred and seventeen enlisted men. In addition a platoon of twenty gunners from the 25th Infantry Division, US Army, was attached to the 117th for a 90 day period. After each 90 day period a new set of gunners was assigned.

The 117th kept its old friends the 140th Maintenance Det., 130th Medical Det., and the 256th Signal Det. and added the 1st Section, 57th Medical Det. (Helicopter Ambulance) and the 6th Weather Det., 130th Sqdn, USAF, to its roster of supporting units.

The basic mission of the 117th remained to provide air movement of combat troops, supplies and equipment within the combat zone. The first six months of operation were characterized by reorganizing and building the unit. The 117th flew eleven combat assault missions during this period. However, great improvements were made in their camp during this time.

The billeting area was named Camp Goldberg in memory of CWO Joseph A. Goldberg who was killed in action by the Viet Cong on 15 July 1962. Camp Goldberg was located at Qui Nhon airfield and included a large parking ramp,

two hangers and a maintenance building. The two hangers were named Lane Hanger and Gutherie Hanger in memory of Sgt James E. Lane and Sp5 Harold G. Gutherie the gunner and crewchief killed in the same action as CWO Goldberg. Camp Goldberg had six permanent buildings: the arms and mail room, and four latrines.

The latrines proved to be one of the greatest morale boosting factors, since they provided an abundance of hot and potable water. Semi-permanent buildings housed the orderly room, supply and operations, and personnel billets. A kitchen was located between the officer's and enlisted dining rooms. Camp Goldberg also boasted of a field exchange, a barber shop, and enlisted club, an officer's club and an outdoor movie theater. With all these comforts the men of the 117th eagerly launched into their daily missions. The missions during this period were primarily resupply support missions and a four week rotation of crews between Qui Nhon, Bam Me Thuot and Quang Ngai. This rotation was incorporated to conduct the missions in the northern II Corps Tactical Zone.

Accidents and injuries were few through this initial period. On 27 October 1963, Captain David Thurlow received a leg wound from Viet Cong ground fire. On 13 November and CH-21 crashed injuring the crew slightly.

About this time the last of the old CH-21's were being replaced by UH-1B helicopters. On 28 November the last CH-21 left Qui Nhon. The 25 UH-1B's were organized into two lift platoons of eight ships and one gun platoon of nine ships.

The year nearly ended tragedy free, but on 14 December, while enroute for a medical evacuation of wounded ARVN soldiers, one ship crashed into the South China Sea. 1Lt John M. Busch, the co-pilot, who swam ashore was the only survivor. Captain James H. Allred, PFC Jean-Claude Esnault and PFC Terrence Lovengrith perished. Thus ended the year 1963 for the men of the 117th.

CHAPTER II

1 January 1964 - 31 December 1964

The 117th Aviation Company began 1964 still under the leadership of Major Aiton. Several changes were begun in the unit. The 22nd Quartermaster Detachment was added to the list of support units. Its responsibility was to support the 117th and the Qui Nhon area by supplying POL for aircraft and vehicles. The 57th Med. Det. (Hel. Amb.) was dropped and an internal medivac aircraft was incorporated on a twenty-four hour stand-by basis. This Search and Rescue Team was a volunteer group of men from the 117th and attached units. A six-man SAR team accompanied the 117th on all assault missions. The team also organized and operated a water ditching procedures class and conducted escape and evasion classes for pilots and crews.

The 117th had the experience on 1964 of flying and operating over all types of terrain. The crews temporarily stationed at Bam Me Thuot experienced jungle and mountains. The men at Quang Ngai flew lowland terrain. The men at Qui Nhon, Phan Thiet and Nha Trang experience the coastal plain and coastal mountain type of flying.

On 14 February 1964, Major Virgil P. McGuire assumed command from Major Aiton. During his leadership the 117th utilized a smoke ship to screen and assault on 29 February, near Van Li. The success of this novel tactic lead to its improvement and incorporation.

On 22 March, the 117th was honored by being selected to carry the Ambassador to South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge.

When July came around, the VIP roster had been increased by Ambassador Taylor and ARVN Brigadier General Khanh.

General Order #183 USARPAC changed the TO&E to fourteen officers, forty-one warrant officers and one hundred and thirteen enlisted men.

During the period from 24 September to 29 September the 117th joined the 118th, 119th and the UTT in Bam Me Thuot, on alert due to an expected Montagnard uprising. The uprising did not materialize and after five days of "C" Rations and sleeping in helicopters the 117th returned to Qui Nhon.

On 10 October, Major Clement A. Wyllie assumed command. His problems were quickly compounded by Typhoon "Iris" on 4 November. He 70 mph winds raged for over four hours. Damage was confined to the semi-permanent buildings of Camp Goldberg. One victim of the typhoon was the movie screen. Luckily only one aircraft received minor damage. "Iris" was followed on 9 November by her 40 mph sister Typhoon "Jean". This storm contributed a great deal of water damage. This rainy season was the worst in some time for the Qui Nhon area. Over 100 inches of rain, 40.5 inches above normal, fell in the Qui Nhon vicinity. During this period the 117th flew over 400 flood relief missions. Approximately 80 tons of supplies were airlifted to ARVN units isolated by the flood waters. Because of the increase in hostile activities and the low ceilings, armed escorts were required on all missions.

The lone tragic occurrence of 1964, for the 117th, was the death of CWO Robert E. Thurston, killed in action on a support mission near Nha Trang. CWO Thurston was honored at a ceremony at Camp Goldberg by the Chaplain, Captain Warren H. Withrow and the new Commanding Officer, Major James E. Rogers.

During 1964, there were six awards ceremonies where over 200 awards and decorations for valor and service were presented.

CHAPTER III

1 January 1965 - 31 December 1965

The 117th began 1965 under the command of Major Rogers. All of the attached units remained with the company through most of the year at Qui Nhon. The city of Qui Nhon was just a base camp for the 117th as they ranged far and wide throughout the II Corps area. The year proved to be an exciting one for the men and with the exception of two incidents, the year was a very favorable one.

A series of operations in early January resulted in the recovery of four MAAG enlisted men captured by the Viet Cong. It was an inauspicious beginning for what was to follow. On 10 February, the unit's enlisted billets, a hotel in Qui Nhon, was mined by Viet Cong infiltrators. The hotel collapsed killing twenty two US enlisted men and wounding twenty three others. Eight Vietnamese nationals were killed and twelve injured by the blast. Two of the four man suicide squad were killed by guards. Rescue and clean up operations were begun immediately but the last body was not recovered until 17 February. This action by the Viet Cong was instrumental in precipitating the first retaliatory missions against North Vietnam.

On 15 February, a 117th crew spotted a camouflaged ship in Vung Ro Bay. After a Navy patrol verified the ship as unfriendly, it was sunk by the Air Force. In a subsequent search of the area by the 117th, an estimated 100 tons of supplies were found in caves near the area of Vung Ro Bay. Most of the equipment was of Chicom manufacture and this incident was instrumental in proving the role of the Communist Bloc in support of the Viet Cong. For their action in discovering the ship the 117th crew was awarded the following medals:

1Lt. Bowman - Aircraft Commander: DFC, Vietnamese Gallantry Cross with Palm

WO1 Adkins - Pilot: DFC, Vietnamese Gallantry Cross with Star

Sp4 Rardbarger - Crewchief: Air Medal, Vietnamese Gallantry Cross with Star

Cpt Pena - Medic: Air Medal, Vietnamese Gallantry Cross with Star

During March one 117th aircraft was downed by Viet Cong ground fire and the crew was forced to dodge enemy patrols until they linked up with an American advisor group. They were rescued the following morning.

The outstanding support of the 140th Maint. Det. was evidenced on 2 June when one of the 117th's aircraft experienced an engine failure and autorotated to a sandbar. The engine was changed on the spot and the aircraft returned within three hours.

From 11 June to 19 June, the 117th participated in airmobile assaults at Dong Xoai in III Corps Tactical Zone. Dong Xoai was under constant threat of extinction by the Viet Cong. The 117th along with other units of the 52nd Aviation Battalion performed innumerable resupply missions and assault landings in support of the besieged defenders. For their part in the action the 117th Aviation Company was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation.

On 8 July, the 117th supported road clearing operations along Highway 19. The operation ended on 20 July by opening the highway from Qui Nhon to Pleiku, which had been closed since early March 1965.

From Qui Nhon the unit made a temporary move to Pleiku where from 10 August to 25 August it supported operations in the Duc Co and Kontum areas. These two areas were to become very familiar in the coming years. During this period, the 117th acquired a new commanding officer in the person of Major Roman J. Stobbs who assumed command on 18 August. As was almost a tradition, the new commander led the 117th in another operation which was to be a highlight in the unit's history. From 28 August to 20 September the 117th flew combat assault and support

for the 101st Airborne Division in the An Khe area. The operation was a search and clear of the An Khe - Ben Khe area prior to the arrival of the 1st Cavalry (Airmobile). The 117th was involved in daily assaults into hostile areas, followed by resupply, relocations and troop extractions. The high point of this period was Operation Gibraltar and the relief of Plei Me. Operation Gibraltar was a battalion sized operation which began on 18 September. The 117th was the primary unit and was assisted by "A" Company of the 502nd, 101st Airborne and five CH-34 helicopters of Marine Squadron 161.

The assault, led by the 117th encountered no difficulty on the first lift but ran into heavy enemy crossfire in the second phase of the lift. Seven of the 117th aircraft were severely damaged by enemy fire and the lead ship, piloted by Major Stobbs was shot down after leaving the landing zone. The number three ship, piloted by WO Billy S. Carpenter, followed the lead ship and effected the rescue. "A" Company of the 502nd, had four ships seriously damaged and all of the Marine CH-34's were seriously damaged. A third lift was made with five ships. All of the 117th aircraft were severely damaged and one ship was abandoned in the landing zone. Major Stobb made the rescue of that downed crew. The troops in the area were relieved later in the day by an assault from the 1st Cavalry.

During 21 October to 28 October, the 117th was occupied in the relief of the besieged outpost at Plei Me. Despite the heavy enemy fire, the 117th in conjunction with other aircraft of the 52nd Battalion conducted emergency evacuations of wounded and resupply in the teeth of enemy fire. For its actions during Operation Gibraltar and at Plei Me the 117th was awarded a Valorous Unit Award by the Department of the Army.

On the 8th of October, Major Harbine A. Constance assumed command of the 117th Aviation Company. The next change occurred on 5 November when the TO&E changed the unit strength to fourteen officers , forty one warrant officers and one hundred and forty enlisted men. This change also eliminated the platoon of gunners from the 25th Infantry Division and all door gunners came unit personnel.

From 10 November to 20 December, the 117th supported the Korean Marines in advance preparations for Operation Christmas in the Tuy Hoa area. Operation Christmas commenced on 22 December and cleared Highway 1 north of Tuy Hoa until 31 December 1965.

Thus ended the busiest year yet for the 117th. But it was just a preview of what was still to come.

CHAPTER IV

1 January 1966 - 31 December 1966

On 25 September 1965, the advance party of the 117th moved into Dong Ba Thin as the Advance Party for the 10th Aviation Battalion. The 10th Battalion arrived on 15 December and found the 117th combat ready. The 117th began the year with Operation Jefferson. The 117th was the sole aviation support for the 2nd Republic of Korea Marine Brigade and the 47th ARVN Regiment throughout Operation Jefferson, from 1 January to 16 January 1966, near Tuy Hoa. This support consisted of massive combat assaults, resupply missions and numerous medical evacuations. These missions were conducted primarily during daylight hours, but several missions were conducted at night. The cooperation between the 117th and the allied units and the Esprite de Corps of every one engaged in the operation was truly outstanding. This close harmony between the 117th and the supported units was to become readily apparent in all future operations.

Operation Jefferson was immediately followed by Operation Van Buren. This operation, 19 January to 21 February 1966, began with the 117th and sister units of the 10th Aviation Battalion supporting the 2nd ROK Marine Brigade and the 47th ARVN Regiment. The most noteworthy actions involved two simultaneous company lifts into extremely confined landing zones. Enemy resistance was encountered and immediately engaged by the armed helicopters who effectively neutralized the resistance and the combat assault was successfully completed. Throughout the night, increased enemy activity required the 117th to provide lift helicopters for emergency medical evacuations and armed ships for suppressive fire support. The dedication to duty in the face of known dangers and intensive hostile fire inspired the ROK Marines to display their appreciation to the pilots and crews by presenting them with Certificates of Heroism from the Republic of

Korea. It was during the latter phase of the operation, when the 117th was in direct support of the 1st Brigade, 101st, and enemy activity was relatively light, that the 117th learned to appreciate and respect the aggressiveness and professionalism of the infantryman of the 101st. There emerged from this operation a unique and close knit fighting force of aviation and infantry.

Operation Harrison was next on the list for the unit. This operation required the accomplishment of a combat first by the men of the 117th. During the operation which lasted from 26 February to 24 March, they airlifted in one assault, an entire infantry battalion of the 101st. This was accomplished in two lifts during a chemical attack utilizing non-toxic tear gasses on a hostile area. This phenomenal feat required all crew members to perform their duties while wearing the newly developed M24 aviator protective mask throughout the mission. These tactics were completely successful despite the considerably reduced visibility within the landing zone as a result of the smoke, gas vapors and exploding ordinance. Enemy contact steadily increased throughout the day, requiring commitment of all available aircraft of the 10th Battalion. The veteran 117th was called upon to lead every combat assault, airlifting combat infantrymen to critical points throughout the battle area in order to effectively press the attack against a determined enemy. In addition to these assaults, crew of the 117th completed three emergency ammunition resupply missions into areas never before penetrated by allied forces. The results of this action have been compiled and documented by the 10th Aviation Battalion at the request of the Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and have been included in the curriculum of the school. For its actions during Operation Jefferson, Van Buren and Harrison the 117th was awarded its second Valorous Unit Award. At the end of

February, Major Harry J. Zellmer succeeded Major Constance as Commanding Officer. As his first act, Major Zellmer led the 117th in Operation Filmore. This operation lasted from 25 March to 9 April. The 117th in alliance with the 101st and the 47th ARVN Regiment succeeded in protecting the rice harvest throughout the Tuy Hoa Valley, marking the first time in ten years that rice was not imported into this area to support the local population. In addition to assuring an ample food supply for our allies and denying the enemy his source of supply, these units blunted the attack of a North Vietnamese Army Regiment and routed them so as to cause complete dispersion of all their units. In order to exploit this dispersion the 2nd Battalion, 502nd Infantry, with the support of the 117th developed special reconnoitering teams to pursue the fleeing NVA. These tactics proved successful and continued until the close of the operation.

The 117th experienced many enemy probes and hand grenade attacks throughout Operation Austin II near Phan Thiet, from 11 April to 26 April. The 117th was required to provide both airlift and armed helicopters on continuous alert to support the emergency medical evacuations and combat assaults. On the night of 21 April, the entire 10th Battalion compound area and parking ramp became the target of enemy mortar fire. Fortunately no ground attack followed and due to the excellent protective measures no casualties were sustained and the only result was minor damage to the parked aircraft. On April 27th, the enemy was reported to have withdrawn inland toward the west. In order to block this movement into the central highlands, all units were redeployed to new base camps located near the Cambodian border.

The 117th provided support for the 2nd Battalion, 502nd Infantry in its efforts to halt the Viet Cong infiltration along the "Ho Chi Minh" Trail in the rugged central highlands near the Cambodian border. The 117th also provided support for the 2nd Battalion, 502nd Infantry in its efforts to halt the Viet Cong infiltration along the "Ho Chi Minh" Trail in the rugged central highlands near the Cambodian border.

central highlands near Gia Nghia, approximately eight miles east of Nhon Co from 28 April to 17 March during the conduct of Operation Austin VI. Some of the more important lessons learned during this period were the techniques required for flying at high density altitudes, maximum gross weights and under severe weather conditions in the early morning and late afternoons caused by the rapidly approaching monsoon season for the area. In order to best accomplish its mission, the 117th placed volunteer crews and helicopters in the forward infantry units.

These crews, actually living with the infantry, were available to the supported units much earlier each day since they did not have to wait for the intervening weather to clear. In addition, the armed helicopter support was available for immediate call. Midway through Austin VI, the tactical emphasis shifted to the area of Bu Gia Map. From this small landing strip, Infantry, Artillery, Army Aviation and Air Force activities increased to a high peak. Close fire support by the "Sidewinders", our gun team, was commonplace, requiring the addition of an ammunition and POL resupply point to be located at the crowded airstrip. The rough jungle terrain between the Cambodian border and the forward command post was literally impossible to land in. Time after time 101st Airborne recon teams attempted to blast areas in order to provide sufficient clearings for the helicopters, but the task was fruitless. Therefore, the assault helicopter pilots of the 117th were forced to hover more than 60 feet above the treetops in order to accomplish the wide variety of missions, including resupply of ammunition, food and high explosives and the inevitable extraction of critically wounded personnel. Operation Austin VI was the most aggressive action for the 2nd Battalion since its arrival in Vietnam. The data on enemy casualties is as follows:

Killed in Action (body count) 95,

Killed in Action (estimated)	85,
Wounded in Action (estimated)	17,
Captured	15.

An extract of the After Action Report of the 2d/502d Infantry for Austin VI reveals the following quotes:

" The assignment of the 117th Aviation Company command and control aircraft in direct support of the Infantry was invaluable to the success of the operation. A command and control helicopter was used for liason, communication with subordinate units to terrain objectives, and the location of potential landing zones. This flexibility facilitated routine unit supply and airdrops and expedited emergency airdrops of chainsaws, demolitions, food and ammunition. Stationing the helicopters forward at Bu Gia Map provided much greater utilization."

The professionalism and combat proficiency of the 117th was again displayed when in only four hours, the entire company moved, on order, from Gia Nghia to Pleiku for an immediate 48 hour participation in Operation Paul Revere IV, 31 March to 1 June. Reinforcements were required to assist the 1st Air Cavalry Division in an aggressive attack on Viet Cong forces surrounded in an isolated area. In less than 24 hours the 117th had compiled 152 hours of combat flying, airlifting 654 American troops and over 10½ tons of supplies. All missions were successfully completed without incident.

At the same time that the 117th was involved in Paul Revere IV, the 10th Aviation Battalion issued orders for the 117th to be combat operational at Dak To no later than 2 June for participation in one of the most intricately planned campaigns to date, Operation Hawthorne, 2 June to 20 June. Without hesitation an advance party was airlifted to Dak To to establish the forward command post and a temporary cantonment area for the operation. This advance party, under command of the Executive Officer, Major Schieder, accomplished its mission in a truly outstanding manner and due to its efforts, the 117th was prepared to

commence the support of the operation on the day of their arrival. Operation Hawthorne was one of the most significant and decisive battles fought in Vietnam. American and ARVN forces succeeded in completely stopping the planned attack by the 24th North Vietnamese Army Regiment against the villages of Dak To and Tan Cahn. This operation succeeded not only in stopping the attack, but also routed the NVA regiment which resulted in its complete disorganization. The infantry pressed the attack against the enemy by deploying company sized elements into strategically located positions in order to effectively block the exits into Cambodia and the dense jungle to the north. These tactics required maximum aviation effort in order to rapidly move large infantry and artillery elements throughout the battlefield. In addition, numerous special reconnaissance teams required immediate airlift into the area separating the larger allied units. Many of these areas were known enemy resupply and withdrawal routes and several times during the operation members of the 117th were called upon to effect an emergency extraction of one of these recon teams under intense enemy fire to prevent its complete annihilation. The success of this operation would not have been possible without the determined, highly professional aviation support rendered, of which the 117th played a major and decisive role. Feats of individual, crew and team heroism were common throughout the operation. Members of the 117th continued to support, assist, and even save their infantry comrades at great personal risk and sacrifice. As example, Warrant Officer Richard J. Fedorowicz on two occasions while at night hovered above the trees, and while completely exposed to the intense enemy ground fire successfully extracted the recon teams from the grip of the enemy forces. For his actions Warrant Officer Fedorowicz was twice awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. Three complete crews of the

"Sidewinders" also earned the everlasting gratitude and respect of our allies, when, on the evening of 3 June they were called upon to aid a company of ARVN troops who had been ambushed, pinned down by enemy fire, and eventually surrounded by an enemy regiment. During the resulting engagement, even though two of the pilots, CWO Harold R. Heber and WO1 Raymond G. Fritz, became seriously wounded and all aircraft became targets for the intense enemy ground fire, these dedicated soldiers remained on station and attacked the enemy time after time with effective and devastating suppressive fire. The American Advisor later reported that as a result of this action, his forces met no further resistance and were able to continue and accomplish their mission. As a result of the action, CWO Heber was recommended for the Silver Star, Cpt Richard D. Akre, 1Lt Homer R. Jordan and Warrant Officers Harold O. Crooks, Edwin R. Constant and Raymond Fritz were recommended for the Distinguished Flying Cross and all other crew members were recommended for the Air Medal for Valor. In order to pay tribute to the extraordinary achievements performed in the conduct of Operation Hawthorne, sixty-five percent of the enlisted men were recommended for the USARV Certificate of Achievement. All told, Operation Hawthorne was one of the most successful operations conducted in Vietnam during 1966. This success was the result of a truly professional team effort, in which the 117th played a major part.

Toward the end of Hawthorne, the 22nd Quartermaster Detachment was dropped as a supporting unit and POL responsibility was given to the Service Platoon. It was the Service Platoon which constructed the "mini-port" refueling facility at Dong Ba Thin. This achievement enabled the aircraft to refuel while running, saving a great deal of time.

The 117th continued to provide support for the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne

Division in the same general area around Dak To from 24 June to 14 July during the conduct of Operation Beauregard. This operation was conducted to exploit the success of Hawthorne and the 117th continued to provide professional aviation support required by the infantry units to enable them to accomplish their objective.

During the period, the 10th Aviation Battalion was redesignated as the 10th Combat Aviation Battalion and all of the Aviation Companies became Assault Helicopter Companies.

The 117th returned to the coastal area of Tuy Hoa to provide support for Operation John Paul Jones from 21 July to 25 August. Once again in support of the 1st/101st Airborne Division as well as their old friends and allies from the 2nd ROK Marine Brigade, 22nd ARVN Division and elements of the 5th Special Forces Group. Once again the 117th was included in several night lifts by company and battalion sized task forces. During this operation, the gunships of the 117th had 10 confirmed Viet Cong kills and approximately 45 structures damaged or destroyed.

Without a break and fortunately without moving from its location at Tuy Hoa, the 117th provided support for Operation Seward from 26 August to 15 October. Again the unit worked with the 101st Division, and the newly arrived 1st Battalion, 22nd Infantry, 4th Infantry Division, as well as providing 10 lift helicopters to aid the 14th Combat Aviation Battalion in support of the 1st Air Cavalry Division from 12 September to 18 September. The highlight of Operation Seward was a 10th CAB lift in which an entire infantry battalion was extracted, lifted to a staging area and then lifted in a Combat Assault. This lift commenced in the afternoon and terminated with the final extraction and assault being conducted with the use of artificial illumination after dark. It was during the final

extraction of the recon element of the 2d/502d that one of the airlift helicopters, piloted by Cpt Leslie J. Halper, was taken under fire and disabled in the pickup zone. Additional troops were immediately returned to the area, and due to this rapid reaction, no losses were sustained and the aircraft was recovered.

The 117th was alerted on 15 October to move from Tuy Hoa to Pleiku to reinforce the 52nd Combat Aviation Battalion in support of the 4th Infantry Division, which were engaged in Operation Paul Revere IV. By 17 October the entire unit was operational in Pleiku and commenced operations immediately. The 117th conducted numerous assaults as well as other support missions. During this period, Major Kenneth L. Ketzler succeeded to command of the unit. The 117th was faced with the problem on conducting assaults into dense jungle terrain held by very determined enemy forces in areas where no suitable landing zones existed. By taking lighter loads to allow the helicopters to hover out of ground effect, the 117th overcame the problem and conducted assaults into areas where it appeared to be impossible. Trees, stumps, bamboo and high elephant grass kept the helicopters from landing, but as they hovered over the area, the infantrymen would jump from the ships, secure the area and cut out a suitable landing area for the subsequent lifts. It was during this type of work that the 117th lost two ships to the enemy fire. On 29 October, 1Lt John Manchester was resupplying a rifle company which had been in contact for several hours. As 1Lt Manchester approached the drop zone, his aircraft was hit and began to burn in flight. Only through exceptional flying skill was he able to fly the burning aircraft to a nearby river. He then ditched the aircraft in the water and all crewmembers were escaped unharmed. The second loss resulted in the only combat casualties for the unit for the year. One of our armed ships piloted by Cpt John J. Livingston and

Warrant Officer Terrence M. Rooney, was called upon to provide cover for another armed ship making a run on a known enemy position. Without hesitation, Cpt Livingston dove his aircraft at the enemy target where one other helicopter had already been shot down. As he broke away from his gun run, he became the target of numerous enemy automatic weapons in the area. The helicopter burst into flames and in a final effort he crashed his virtually uncontrollable ship into the enemy position. It was not until the enemy had been routed out that the bodies of Cpt Livingston, WO1 Rooney, Sp5 Maynard J. Humes and Sp4 Loren S. Reeves were able to be recovered. For the unquestionable heroism and self sacrifice above and beyond the call of duty, Cpt Livingston was awarded the Silver Star posthumously and the three other crewmen were posthumously awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

After Operation Paul Revere, the 117th was changed in two ways. The first was the change in strength to fifteen officers, fifty one warrant officers and one hundred and seventy three enlisted men. On the 10th of November the TO&E was modified giving the two lift platoons eleven UH-1D models each to replace the eight "Bravo" models in each platoon. The gun platoon traded its old "Bravo" models for the new and faster "Charlie" model. The guns were also authorized the new "mini-gun" weapons system.

The next operation for the 117th was Operation Attleboro in Tay Ninh Province which developed into one of the major combat operations in 1966. As more and more American infantrymen were committed to the operation, the need for more helicopter support became apparent and the 52nd Combat Aviation Battalion was called upon to provide some of this support. At this time the 117th was attached to the 52nd and recieved the mission of reinforcing the 170th Assault

Helicopter Company for operation in support of the 1st Brigade, 25th Infantry Division in the area just north of Tay Ninh. During the period from 10 November to 17 November, one airlift platoon and part of the gun platoon participated in massive combat assaults, resupply missions, medical evacuations and command and control missions for the infantry units. Although the flat terrain, with huge landing zones free of obstacles, gave the pilots and crews a relative break from the rigorous flying around Pleiku, the Viet Cong did not. He posed a constant threat to all aircraft flying anywhere in the area and it was only by extremely good fortune that the 117th aircraft were able to return to Pleiku without loss or incident. During their stay at Tay Ninh, the combat veterans of the 117th were again subjected to mortar attacks but suffered no injuries or damage.

On 7 December the 117th again packed its bags and moved to Kontum where it joined the headquarters of the 10th CAB and its sister unit the 129th Assault Helicopter Company in support of the 1st Brigade, 101st Division in Operation Pickett. Operation Pickett got underway early in the morning of 9 December when all of the tactical units of the brigade were moved in a series of assaults into positions approximately 30 miles west of Kontum, near the Cambodian border.

After these initial assaults, the 117th continued to fly the various support and reconnaissance missions for the brigade. Just prior to the Christmas Truce period, the 117th and the 129th extracted all of the tactical elements from their field positions and returned them to Kontum where they were able to celebrate Christmas. As a fitting end to a highly successful year, the 117th, 129th and four CH-47A Chinooks completed what was believed to be the largest non-illuminated night combat assault held in Vietnam. On the night of 27 December, more than 1000 men and over 6,000 pounds of cargo were lifted into a deep valley approximately 15 miles northeast of Kontum. Despite the extremely hazardous mountain

terrain and unimproved landing zones, coupled with strong winds and severe turbulence, the entire lift was completed without incident or accident by the veteran aviators. Thusly 1966 came to a close with the men of the 117th Assault Helicopter Company spending another New Year's Eve in the field.

CHAPTER V

1 January 1967 - 31 December 1967

The month of January found the 117th in the field engaged in Operation Pickett at Kontum where they had been since 8 December 1966 and were to remain until 19 January 1967.

Between 19 January and 1 February, the 2nd and gun platoons went back to Dong Ba Thin and assumed an "Ash and Trash" and training mission while the 1st platoon went to Phan Rang and remained there until 15 February supporting 2d/327th of the 101st. The 2nd and the gun platoons moved out for Bao Loc on the 1st of February to start Operation Gatling I. During Gatling I, the 117th flew a variety of combat missions which included troop lifts, extractions, resupply and medical evacuations. The missions terminated on 4 February 1967.

On 5 February the 117th closed on Phan Thiet where it began Operation Gatling II. Gatling II ran from 5 February to 15 February during which the 117th compiled 1378 sorties, 578 tasks, lifted 3636 troops and carried 68 tons of cargo.

On the 20th of February, the 117th moved back to Tay Ninh to engage in Operation Junction City, which was to be the most action packed engagement for the 117th in some time. Joining with the 71st, 129th and 116th Assault Helicopter Companies on 22 February, the 117th had a mission to move the 1st Brigade of the 41st Infantry into three Landing Zones. Out of the ten 117th ships, five were hit by ground fire, two of which went down in the vicinity of the LZ. On the 24th the 117th flew into action again, dropping ARVN Rangers north of Tay Ninh and getting three ships hit with one going down in the vicinity of the LZ. 1Lt. Bazzell Wolfe was the unlucky pilot as it was his ship which was shot down on both days. He suffered no serious injuries.

With Junction City finished, the 117th moved on to Operation Ivy Task on 26 February 1967. It was an uneventful and routine operation which lasted a short while. At the same time the 117th was engaged in Operation Farragut until 23 March. Operation Farragut took the unit from Phan Rang the Phan Thiet and then to Song Mau.

Operation Summerall found the 117th in Khanh Duong from 28 March and lasted until 29 April. This operation was difficult in that on several occasions our aircraft made resupply to troops in positions that forced the pilots to fly very slowly over the LZ and throw the supplies from the ship.

In April the 117th returned from the field to take over the coastal support mission in the II Corps area from Dong Ba Thin.

July found the 117th again on a hunt after three months of "Ash & Trash". During this period Major Travis L. Walker assumed command of the unit on 2 August until 30 September when he was succeeded by Major David G. Jayne.

Only one period of time was outstanding during the above interval and that had to do with our gunships the "Sidewinders". On 6 September at approximately 1600 hrs. the guns were alerted to send one light fire team to certain coordinates and contact Mocking Grips Alpha. Arriving on station, they were given the situation and turned over to the controlling agency. The fire team expended twice on the location with a confirmed 40 kills and 30 wounded. Again on 7 September at 0600 hrs the performance was repeated. The control had reported a VC machine gun position. After the guns expended the control ship reported that the target was neutralized. Then at approximately 1700 hrs, the control ship found a suspected VC position. Upon engaging the target the guns received intense automatic weapons fire. The after action report credited the "Sidewinders" with

seven NVA kills and 14 NVA wounded for the action.

The 117th received a warning order on 6 November stating that it would participate in an operation in the Phan Rang area on or about the 11th of the month. Typhoon Freddie created some problems in that some of the aircraft were spread around the II Corps area and could not return in time for the initial phases of the operation. Attachments were received on the night of the 10th in the form of two CH-47's, five UH-1D's and three UH-1C's. Briefing of all crews took place at 2100 hrs the evening of the 10th and the crews prepared for a 0600 hrs take off on the following day. At 0600 hrs on 11 November all aircraft departed Dong Ba Thin for Phan Rang. The pick up was at 0635 and the first lift began. The first LZ was "cold" and after it was secured the CH-47's began bringing in their loads of ammunition and artillery pieces. Bravo company of the 3rd Battalion of the 320th, 101st Division was airlifted into LZ Tampa in a series of three assaults. The LZ was prepared with both air strikes and artillery, but fire was received while on short final into the LZ. After completion of Tampa, a series of three lifts were also flown into LZ New York. Fire was received northwest of the LZ by the gunships while performing a recon of the area. An air strike was directed into the area and Charlie Company was completed without further incident. Following New York, the CP group was landed in LZ Boston. LZ Boston presented a real challenge to the aviators in that the only clear area in which to land was a small space located in a hollow and the only entry was down wind. The LZ was completed without incident. Alpha Company of the 3rd Battalion was then lifted into LZ Atlanta. Artillery was used to prep the area for twenty minutes. The gunships then reconned and began to prep the area. Low clouds on top of the mountain forced the lift into low level entry. Approximately two-thirds of the LZ was in flames and four of the ships were forced to go around.

Burned out tree stumps covered the area which was not on fire and only three ships could be landed at one time. By the time the third and last lift was completed smoke and clouds obscured the the entire area. Ships were required to make individual exits from the LZ flying low level through the various valleys and passes until they were able to reform on the other side of the mountain about 400 feet below LZ Atlanta. LZ Providence was the next to receive troops. A final insertion into LZ Providence was completed at 1455 hrs and the 117th returned to Dong Ba Thin.

On 28 November, the 117th began Operation Klamath Falls. The men packed their bags and moved back into the field. Klamath Falls was conducted with the 117th at the explicit request of the Commanding General of the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division who was in charge of the entire operation.

The first move was back to Phan Rang. The lift and gun platoons moved out but the administrative and support units remained at Dong Ba Thin. The unit supported the 101st in a clearing operation along Highway 1 until 4 December when the entire company and support units moved to Phan Thiet. The lift units accomplished the move in three hours and the remainder of the company followed in convoy the next day. The 117th continued to support the 101st in opening Highway 1 from Phan Thiet to Xuan Loc. While at Phan Thiet, the 1st Lift Platoon was engaged in a twilight insertion of troops near the city of Dalat. During the operation, the lift ran into heavy resistance. One of the gunships, piloted by Warrant Officer Dal E. Garber was shot down in the midst of a heavily bunkered Viet Cong command post. Sgt John R. Batiste, the door gunner, saw approximately 30 enemy troops advancing toward his hip. He immediately took up his M-60 machine gun from its mount and standing in full view of the enemy held them off

single handedly until a rescue ship could get into the area. Sgt Batiste managed to kill 15 enemy soldiers before he was rescued. The rescue ship, piloted by 1Lt. Francis W. LaRoue, braved the enemy fire to pluck the seemingly doomed crew from the enemy trap. For their actions, Sgt Batiste was recommended for the Distinguished Service Cross and 1Lt. La Roue was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

The 117th remained at Phan Thiet until the 18th of December when they followed the 101st deep into the mountains and set up camp at Bao Loc. Here the 117th supported the 101st in several assaults, relocations and numerous resupply operations. These missions were especially difficult due to the high terrain (average elevation was above 3,000 feet MSL) and weather during the monsoon season. Bao Loc proved to be a unique experience for some of the men. Warrant Officer Robert Browne and his fellow 1st platoon members celebrated his First Wedding Anniversary with champagne saved for the occasion. The festivities took place in the sandbagged bunker adjacent to the tent during a mortar attack on the area.

Christmas dawned cold and damp for the men of the 117th, but their spirits were undaunted. It was a 117th aircraft, piloted by Warrant Officers Robert A. Skiba and Richard M. King, which carried Sierra Charlie Six (that's Santa Claus to you civilians!) on his yearly visit to the men of the 101st in the field.

So 1967 ended for the 117th where it began - in the field. During the year the 117th had flown over every square mile of the II Corps area in support of many operations but their biggest surprises were yet to come.

CHAPTER VI

1 January 1968 - 31 March 1968

At about 0100 hours on 31 December 1967, the 117th was released from the 10th Combat Aviation Battalion and reassigned to the 145th Combat Aviation Battalion at Bien Hoa. By 2000 hrs on the 31st the unit had relocated at Bien Hoa about 100 miles south of Bao Loc. "Tent City" was again set up and on 2 June 1968, the 117th began familiarization flights in general support of the units in III Corps Tactical Zone. This was a new experience for the aviators. The flying was complicated by flight following, traffic patterns and zones and artillery advisories. The men had to shuck their rough and tumble habit acquired in the mountains and adjust to the rigid rules necessary in the high density traffic around Siagon and Bien Hoa. On 14 January, the officers moved into a villa in the town of Bien Hoa. Civilization at Last!! The unit continued in this fairly easy life of support missions with an occasional combat assault until 31 January. On the night of 31 January, the Viet Cong launched their notorious Tet Offensive. The unit was rocketed on two occasions during the offensive. The following days and nights were filled with emergency resupplies and assaults. The "Sidewinders" had their hands full flying emergency gunship support mission day and night. The 117th was constantly active in the defense of Bien Hoa and Siagon as well as the resupply of the smaller isolated outposts. This offensive caused a great loss to the men of the 117th. On 25 January, Warrant Officer John J. Roden, 1Lt Robert H. King, Sp4 Jack Cotterell and Sgt Jack Sutphen were killed when their aircraft was blown out of the sky by a VC 50 caliber machine gun brought in to reinforce the Viet Cong offensive. Three days later, a gunship had an engine failure at low altitude over the city of Bien Hoa. The pilot tried desperately to avoid crashing in the middle of the city. He was just able to get his fully

armed ship into a field when it crashed and exploded. The pilot, Warrant Officer Timothy McKiernan, died in that explosion. For his heroic self-sacrifice he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, posthumously.

On 5 February, the unit was transferred to form the nucleus of the newly formed 308th Combat Aviation Battalion. The 117th began to fly as a designated assault unit. The "Ash & Trash" general support days were over. They began to exclusively support the 199th Light Infantry Brigade and the 9th Infantry Division in their operations in the Delta.

On 15 February Major Jay O. Weight succeeded Major Jayne. The unit again began combat operations in earnest. Despite the age of their ships the 117th took their vintage 1963 and 1964 Delta model into the fight. It was an assault every day. Places like My Tho, Dong Tam, Tan An, Vinh Long and Can Tho appeared on the mission board with increasing regularity.

On 26 February, 15 ships took off for Can Tho. The first lift of 9th Division troops drew light fire. The second lift flew into a trap. The lead ship, piloted by Captain Ben H. Blizzard, received intense fire and Cpt Blizzard had his foot shattered by an armor piercing round. Every ship was taking hits. Lead ship had taken over 30 hits and due to the excellent flying ability of the co-pilot, Warrant Officer Michael D. O'Leary, was flown back to Can Tho. Warrant Officer Barry Nordlof had his controls completely shot away and crashed. Miraculously no one on board was seriously injured although the aircraft was demolished. In the space of 15 minutes, only three of the 117th's ships were flyable. One of the three, an old 1963 model #989 piloted by Warrant Officer Robert A. Skiba and Warrant Officer Dal W. Renshaw was flying with over twelve hits. Nonetheless, the command and control officer, Major Johnny K. Gower,

organized another lift and the three 117th aircraft led the way in three successive lifts to relieve the embattled 9th Division troops.

Thus began a chain of events which was to nearly deplete the 117th of flyable aircraft.

March came and brought more assaults in the My Tho-Dong Tam-Vinh Long area. The 117th carried the troops into the areas and resupplied them with food and ammunition. Often these resupplies had to be picked up from the decks of US Navy ships in the Mekong River.. The aircraft and crews worked long hours for into the night on these missions. The toll on the aircraft and crews was heavy. The missions continued; night pickups from the blacked out ships, formation extractions guided only by a single flashlight. The months of February and March were two of the most difficult months in the 117th's experience.

Finally due to the age of the aircraft and the great amount of flying hours plus the extensive battle damage and the shortage of repair parts, the valiant 117th could no longer meet its daily commitment of 10 slicks and 4 guns. In the final days of March the unit was only able to put up a maximum of seven patched up slicks and one die hard gunship. The unit was ordered to a 30 day stand down for the first time in its history. On 31 March 1968, the 117th ceased operations and began to rebuild. The 117th had been in continuous combat operations since the Tet Offensive began and had not ceased even when on 21 March it accomplished another full company move to Long Binh, 10 miles east of Bien Hoa and was re-assigned to the 214th Combat Aviation Battalion. The 117th began a well deserved rest after nearly seven years of glorious and valiant service in the Republic of Vietnam.

EPILOGUE

The circle had been completed. On 11 December 1961, the old 8th Transportation Company landed at the docks of Siagon. Six years, two months and ten days of traveling from I Corps through II Corps and III corps, terminated with the 117th Assault Helicopter Company locating at Long Binh Military Complex a scant ten miles from where the odyssey began.

The past years were illuminated by countless operations of all types which the 117th conducted with great valor and determination. The unit had lost aircraft and men but kept on fighting. The heroism of its members accounted for many individual awards for valor and three Unit Citations for Valor. In addition to the Presidential Unit Citation and the two Valorous Unit Awards, the 117th was awarded two Meritorious Unit Commendations for its activities in 1965, 1966 and 1967. During the last two years, the 117th and its attached units operated at reduced strength in aircraft and personnel. Finally it was granted a reprieve to rebuild and reorganize.

On 5 April 1968, Major Johnny K. Gower took command of the 117th. Under his energetic leadership the unit began to take shape. The old worn out Delta model slicks were replaced by 1966 and 1967 D models. Personnel were brought into the unit to bring it up to strength. The 117th acquired new gunships. The operations section was revitalized and updated through the energy of Captain Arthur D. Goetz, the operations officer. The company area became more and more livable during this period. An Officer's Club began to take shape from a spare building. The Enlisted Club became a going concern. Every where was improvement. There is much more to be accomplished as of this writing but on 1 May 1968, the new 117th Assault Helicopter was ready to start operating again.

in the same tradition of valor and determination of its ancestor.

The circle has been completed and starts anew - the future holds nothing but promise.

APPENDIX

PART III

APPENDIX 1

CHRONOLOGY

22 Nov 61	8th Transportation Company alerted
21 Nov 61	8th Transportation Company left States
11 Dec 61	8th Transportation arrives in Vietnam
23 Dec 61	First Combat Mission
10 Jan 62	8th moves to Qui Nhon
6 Jun 62	Maj Corneil succeeds Maj Hardesty
26 Jul 62	Maj Tedesco succeeds Maj Corneil
9 Oct 62	Maj Kisling succeeds Maj Tedesco
22 Apr 63	Maj Aiton succeeds Maj Kisling
25 Jun 63	8th Trans. Co. inactivated - 117th Avn. Co. Activated
28 Nov 63	Last CH-21 left Qui Nhon
14 Feb 64	Maj McGuire succeeds Maj Aiton
10 Oct 64	Maj Wyllie succeeds Maj McGuire
23 Dec 64	Maj Rogers succeeds Maj Wyllie
10 Feb 65	EM hotel in Qui Nhon bombed
11 Jun 65	Dong Xoai operation begins - Presidential Unit Citation
18 Aug 65	Maj Stobbs succeeds Maj Rogers
28 Aug 65	Operation Gibraltar begins
25 Sep 65	117th moves to Dong Ba Thin
8 Oct 65	Maj Constance succeeds Maj Stobbs
21 Oct 65	Relief of Plei Me - Valorous Unit Award
10 Nov 65	Operation Christmas
1 Jan 66	Operation Jefferson

19 Jan 66	Operation Van Buren
26 Feb 66	Operation Harrison - Valorous Unit Award
28 Feb 66	Maj Zellmer succeeds Maj Constance
25 Mar 66	Operation Filmore
26 Apr 66	Operation Austin II
28 Apr 66	Operation Austin IV
31 May 66	Operation Paul Revere II
2 Jun 66	Operation Hawthorne
24 Jun 66	Operation Beauregard
1 Jul 66	117th Avn Co redesignated 117th Aslt Hel Co
21 Jul 66	Operation John Paul Jones
26 Aug 66	Operation Seward
15 Oct 66	Operation Paul Revere IV
26 Oct 66	Maj Ketzler succeeds Maj Zellmer
10 Nov 66	117th authorized UH-1D aircraft Operation Attleboro
7 Dec 66	Operation Pickett
19 Jan 67	Ash & Trash
1 Feb 67	Operation Gatling I
5 Feb 67	Operation Gatling II
20 Feb 67	Operation Junction City
26 Feb 67	Operation Ivy Task Operation Farragut
26 Mar 67	Operation Summerall
1 Apr 67	Ash & Trash
2 Aug 67	Maj Walker succeeds Maj Ketzler

30 Sep 67	Maj Jayne succeeds Maj Walker
11 Nov 67	Back with the 101st
28 Nov 67	Operation Klamath Falls
4 Dec 67	Move to Phan Thiet
15 Dec 67	Move to Bao Loc
31 Dec 67	Transferred to 145th CAB Moved to Bien Hoa
31 Jan 68	Tet Offensive
5 Feb 68	Transferred to 308th CAB
15 Feb 68	Major Weight succeeds Major Jayne
26 Feb 68	Shot up at Can Tho
21 Mar 68	Transferred to 214th CAB Moved to Long Binh
31 Mar 68	Ceased operations
5 Apr 68	Maj Gower succeeds Maj Weight

APPENDIX 2

This section of the Unit History is drawn up in memoriam to the men of the 8th Transportation Company, the 117th Aviation Company and the 117th Assault Helicopter Company who gave their lives in their country's cause. These men set the example of complete devotion to duty and will never be forgotten in the hearts and minds of those who worked and fought at their side.

HONOR ROLL 8th Transportation Company

CWO Joseph A. Goldberg	(KIA)	15 July 1962
Sp5 Harold L. Gutherie	(KIA)	15 July 1962
Sgt James E. Lane	(KIA)	15 July 1962
Cpt James H. Allred		14 December 1963
PFC Jean-Claude Esnault		14 December 1963
PFC Terrence Lovengrith		14 December 1963

HONOR ROLL 117th Aviation Company

WO1 Robert E. Thurston	(KIA)	18 December 1964
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HONOR ROLL 117th Assault Helicopter Company

Cpt John J. Livingston	(KIA)	11 November 1966
WO1 Terrence M. Rooney	(KIA)	11 November 1966
Sp5 Maynard J. Humes	(KIA)	11 November 1966
Sp4 Loren S. Reeves	(KIA)	11 November 1966
WO1 John J. Foden	(KIA)	25 January 1968
1Lt Robert H. King	(KIA)	25 January 1968
Sgt Jack Sutphen	(KIA)	25 January 1968
Sp4 Jack Cotterell	(KIA)	25 January 1968
WO1 Timothy M. McKiernan	(KIA)	28 January 1968
Sp5 Robert B. Hedge		26 February 1968
Sp4 Gerald McCaffery		26 February 1968
PFC John C. Smith		28 May 1968

APPENDIX 3

UNIT HONORS

PRESIDENTIAL UNIT CITATION

Dong Xoai

10 - 13 June 1965

VALOROUS UNIT AWARD

Operation Gibraltar

Plei Me

18 Sep - 28 Oct 1965

VALOROUS UNIT AWARD

Tuy Hoa Valley

1 Jan - 24 Mar 1966

MERITORIOUS UNIT COMMENDATION

Vietnam

1 Dec 65 - 1 Sep 66

MERITORIOUS UNIT COMMENDATION

Vietnam

5 Sep 66 - 31 Mar 67

THE NIGHT OF THE FIFTH OF JUNE

The diamond formation headed northeast from Nui Ba Den mountain flying at the base of the clouds with that unhurried, Sunday afternoon air so characteristic of helicopter formations. Looking over my shoulder from my number two position, I could see the smiling face of "Little Annie Fannie" on the nose cone of the number four ship, rising and falling gently in the late afternoon air. Right then I was proud to be a member of the unit she stood for; the First Platoon of the 117th Assault Helicopter Company, the "WARLORDS." Now, as we moved in for the final extraction from the Landing Zone, I marveled at the keen alertness of all my senses, surrounded by a cool, relaxed confidence that grows from being part of a well-oiled team of competent and dedicated professionals. All four aircraft commanders were masters of the fine art of airmanship under combat conditions. All four pilots had flown many hours under the command of these AC's. Every crewmember in this formation knew his particular role in the mission. Every man was calm; every man was alert.

We had already made two extractions from this dark, unholy cavern in the jungle. Both times we had received intensive fire on the approach and on climbout. Somehow these recon teams seemed to have aggravated every Viet Cong within a ten mile radius. In this region was the home of more enemy units than the teams had ever suspected. The faint blue puffs of smoke at the edge of the landing zone had been unmistakable - and not more than 50 meters away! My crewchief had seen the muzzle flashes. I felt certain we must have taken hits. But all four ships reported all instruments normal and the birds handled perfectly. I could only attribute the enemy's poor marksmanship to the fact that he used no tracers, thus minimizing his chances of being detected.

Under such intense automatic weapons fire, the normal procedure would have been to silence the positions with artillery and tactical air strikes. But this was Charlie's country. Triple canopy jungle lay for miles around in every direction. If an attempt was made to pinpoint his position, he was nowhere - the jungle: empty and peaceful. If a chopper flew over at less than 1,000 feet, he was everywhere - the jungle was vicious and deadly. Yet we had to get the rest of that recon team out of there before nightfall. There was at least one battalion of VC and North Vietnamese regulars in the immediate vicinity of the LZ. Against such odds the little team had small chance of holding out through the night.

"Flight, go trail; Lead starting descent." The voice was calm and clear. Old 562 yawed slightly to the left in reaction to the smooth reduction of power as my AC eased the pitch to almost bottom. The crewchief cleared us to the left and we slipped in directly behind Lead as we began the three thousand-foot descent to the treetops. That descent would take about 90 seconds. We would stay on the treetops for the last three or four miles to the LZ. In this terrain, flying was done on the deck or above 2,000 feet, and the time spent in getting from one level to the other was kept to an absolute minimum.

We leveled off with our skids in the treetops, flying a comfortable distance on Lead. The thick vegetation was a green blur as it whipped beneath. I was reassured by the thought that if anything could see us through the dense jungle growth, we'd be there and gone in a flash. Lead flew at 100 knots making gentle turns to avoid the areas where the growth became sparse enough to make the ground visible. Then he rolled smoothly into a 30-degree bank, dipping the blades close to the trees. We banked right and stayed with him. "Lead starting deceleration."

The LZ was not in sight, but we were on short final. I made a quick check of the instruments, threw a reassuring glance and a thumbs up to the crewchief and gunner. They never saw me; their eyes were glued to the jungle beneath. I prepared myself to take over control should it become necessary. "Lead going through four-zero knots." Without warning Lead disappeared into the trees out of sight. My AC instinctively eased back on the stick. Then it was on us - a gaping chasm in a predatory jungle. I half expected to see a saber-toothed tiger leap up at us. As we crossed the treeline and sank into that hole, what leaped up at us was far more deadly than any pre-historic beast. The sharp, superfast staccato of the Chinese AK-47 rifle was an all too familiar sound.

"Lead, this is Three, we're taking fire - taking fire! I think we're hit." As our skids touched the ground Lead picked up and started out.

"Lead's coming out. Can you make it out Three?"

"This is Three, I'm touching down at this time. Everything seems to be okay."

"Lead, this is Sidewinder Eight; break right when you hit the treeline." The Sidewinder gun team had covered us on the first two extractions. Their heavy suppressive fire was the only deterrent sufficiently effective to make the extractions possible. Now the two gunships, low on fuel, flew at minimum torque to stretch their time-on-station.

The troops were motivated. The loading was very expeditious.

"Two's coming out." We eased off the ground and began the agonizingly slow climb to the brink of that ghostly cavern. "Tat-tat-tat" Close! Too close! But almost immediately, two M-60 machineguns barked a defiant answer as the crewchief and gunner silenced the closest enemy position with a steady stream of death. The troops we had picked up helped us to get the point across with their fast-talking M-16s. The steady rhythm of automatic weapons fire coming from my ship was music to my ears. "Two's out, breaking right, taking fire from the left and right in the LZ."

"Two, this is Lead; you alright?" Before we could answer, "Lead, this is Three, I'm losing fuel fast. It's all over the floor."

"This is Lead; can you make it out, Three?"

"We're not staying in this hole! Three's coming out."

"This is Sidewinder Eight, we've got you Three. Come on out - take it easy."

"Three's out. Lead, I just got my fuel warning light."

"Roger, Three. Set her down. Pick a spot and set her down."

"Three, this is Two. There's a pretty good area at your two o'clock about 300 meters."

"Roger, I've got it. I'm taking her in. Cover me, Sidewinders."

"We're with you, we'll have you out in a minute." There had only been three loads in the LZ. The number four aircraft was brought along as a cover ship. Now, this idea paid off in full, and the rescue and salvage operation which followed was an example of discipline and professionalism.

"This is Four. I'm going in to get him."

The aircraft commander of the lead ship was our operations officer. He was also our command and control. It was his brilliant evasive action and tactics which enabled us to insert the small recon teams into the heart of the enemy-infested territory. This same leadership enabled us to extract them at a moments notice - often from the very jaws of a VC trap. Now, though, he maintained the call sign of Lead, he resumed his role of Command and Control, and the cool, easy tone of his voice instilled confidence where it might have ebbed for an instant.

"This is Lead. Roger, Four, just get the crew and head for home base. I'll get the radios. Three, don't forget your log book."

"This is Three. I'm on the ground. No injuries to personnel, no further damage to the aircraft. Going of the air at this time."

On the ground, the troops on board the downed ship quickly spread out into a defensive perimeter. They were 500 meters from the LZ. Charlie was close. A helicopter and crew was a rich prize. He would be getting closer.

Back at base camp, Sidewinder Seven had been monitoring the radios. Both his ships had been shot up and were in need of maintenance attention. As soon as it became evident that a ship was going down, he scrambled his team and was on his way to the scene.

"Two, this is Lead. What's your position?"

"Two is orbiting at one-five hundred."

"As soon as Four gets the crew, take your troops in as a security force."

"We're on our way."

"Four's coming out with the crew."

"This is Lead. Roger Four. Head for home base and have them get a reaction force ready to go."

"Four. Roger."

We took our troops in, and as we climbed out, Lead went in after the radios. We picked up an orbit at 2,500 feet and called our base, Warlord Control, at Long Binh, filling them in on the situation so they could work through their own channels. The radio traffic increased tremendously as everyone seemed to be calling at the same time. Seeing how this could give rise to serious complications, we climbed another thousand feet and acted as radio relay. I checked the instruments. Fuel was down to 380 pounds. We would be well into our 20-minute reserve before we got back to home base. We didn't have much time on station. I tried to think of what moves should be next. We had three slicks available to put in a reaction force to secure the ship through the night. It would take quite a force. Charlie would go to any lengths to destroy a helicopter which was a winged bird right in his own back yard. If we could only get a Chinook here before night closed in - and Charlie with it. We could pluck that bird right from his jaws. But that possibility seemed too remote. Already the shadows reached way out to the east, shrouding the lower portions of the landscape in the gloom that was so precious to the enemy. It would be a rough night for the security force. But Lead had not been as pessimistic as I. Little did I know that he had already had Pipesmoke recovery team contacted on a separate radio channel, and right at this moment a Chinook and recovery crew were being sent to the location of the downed bird. It would be a race against time.

I began to get worried about Lead. He'd been down there almost four minutes now. I turned to my AC, "What the hell's taking him so long?" His answer was laconic, "He's getting the radios." I looked at the fuel gauge. This was going to be close. We orbited another minute. "Lead, you alright?"

"Roger, Lead's coming out. Cover me Sidewinders."

"We're with you, Lead."

The VC wasted no time in getting there. As Lead crossed the tree line they opened fire from directly below him and to his front. "Lead taking fire, breaking right, Sidewinders, breaking right."

SWISH - WHUMP!! The Sidewinder's rockets blasted the VC position seconds after they had taken Lead under fire. These were followed immediately by the deadly sing-song chorus of twin miniguns.

"You alright, Lead?"

"Lead. Roger. I think I took a couple of hits, but the bird feels OK. I'll have to check her out on the ground." As he climbed out we fell in behind him and headed for home base.

By this time Four had dropped the downed crew off and had refueled at Tay Ninh. "Lead, this is Four. What are your instructions. Over."

"Looking good, Four. Stay in the air for radio relay and head out to the downed bird. Coordinate with Pipesmoke and guide him in if he gets there be-

fore I do. I may have taken a couple of rounds getting those radios out of there. I'll have to shut this thing down and check her out." As Lead touched down at the base camp, the gaping crowd that gathered around his chopper, staring in disbelief, confirmed his suspicions. 14 hits, and one of them through the engine combustion chamber! A quick glance at the puctured skin of the aircraft was sufficient to dictate their next course of action. Out of the cockpit before the blades had even stopped, they grabbed their gear and hopped into the cockpit of 208, one of our Warlord courier ships from Long Binh. They cranked her up and were off again, leaving a crowd of ground troops and Vietnamese civilians to marvel at their bullet-riddled ship.

We refueled and shut down at the base camp to await the decision to take out the reaction force or to extract the security force now guarding the ship. A close inspection of the ship revealed only one bullet hole in the main rotor blade. We had been very lucky so far.

An excited GI burst out of the operations tent, running like a bat out of hell and frantically rotating his hand around his head, the signal to crank her up. "The Chinook's only a few minutes out from the downed ship. Head on out for the extraction." We whisked old 562 into the air as if the world were on fire, anxious to be doing anything but sitting on the ground at a time like this.

It was twilight now, and in the twenty minutes we would take to get out there it would be full night. I wondered if the Chinook was being harassed by the VC. As we passed Nui Ba Den, we heard over the radio that the Huey was about to be lifted out. I could just see Charlie treating the big hook to a sizzling banquet of lead as it hovered over the Huey, tempting and vulnerable in the grey gloom of half night. But the next transmission was not the spine-chilling MAYDAY we expected. The Chinook was calling clear as he headed for the early stars with his precious cargo secured. The crew of 562 let out yells of joy like kids at a football game. We had snatched this valuable prey from the hungry jaws of the VC without a minute to spare. Again it was professionalism and courage that won the day. The salvage crew had worked smoothly and quickly. The Huey was rigged, hooked and lifted out with no damage to equipment and no injuries to personnel. The blanket of suppressive fire laid down by the Sidewinders deprived the enemy of any opportunity to fire at the salvage aircraft or crew. The ship was saved. Now came the touchy part of extracting the troops in contact at night.

When we arrived at the location, Four had already climbed out with his shipload of the security force. The night was a confusing maze of flashing beacons and red and green lights as the Sidewinders kept up their deadly suppressive orbit. We established altitude separation to avoid a mid-air collision and Lead started in for his load.

"Lead, this is Four. Go in to the South and watch out for those little trees in there. It's hairy." The grass in the LZ was tall and even with a landing light it was impossible to pin-point the exact location of the ground troops. When Lead was on short final, one of the ground troops began to give him a modified GCA using a P4C 25 FM radio. With some hasty course correction and a crazy flare at the bottom, Lead made it in safely. I hoped we could do the same. To roll it up trying to get into that impossible spot at night on the very last lift would just ruin a perfect day. It was Lead's ingenuity and courage that provided an answer.

"Two, this is Lead. We'll sit here with our landing light on to guide you in. When you get on short final, we'll get out of here and you can shoot to our spot." I knew right then that he was one leader I would follow anywhere without a moments hesitation. We started in.

"Looking good, Two, keep coming." We began to decelerate.

"Okay, Two, slow her up." 40 knots. 20 knots.

"Okay, Lead, we can take it from here."

"Roger. Lead's coming out." As he lifted out we hit our searchlight. We were a little hot, but thanks to Lead, we landed right on the spot. The troops were on board before the pitch was on the bottom.

"How many do you have, Two?"

A quick check; "Two's got seven." All we would need was to leave a man in that LZ!

"Two's coming out." We eased the ship up into the blackness, and as soon as we were sure that we had cleared the trees, "Two's out."

"Roger, Two. Smelling like a rose. Lets go home and get some hot chow and a shower."

"This is Two. Roger that!"

As we climbed away from that unhealthy jungle, I thought it was a beautiful night to be flying; to be talking; to be smiling; just to be.

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