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361st

THE PINK PANTHERS

The striking power of the 361st Aviation Company's Cobra gunships keeps Charlie on the defense in II Corps.

Pink is a color not generally associated with military units unless the unit happens to be the "Pink Panthers" of the 361st Aviation Company (Escort) in Camp Holloway, Pleiku.

Perhaps it is even more unique that this "pinkness" should be a part of a hard-fighting Cobra

The AH-1G Cobra is an evil weapon the 361st uses well.



gunship company. Though MAJ John L. Deryck, commander of the 361st, bears no resemblance to David Niven of "Pink Panther" movie fame and was not with the company when it adopted the name and the color, he has a plausible explanation.

"In both the movie and cartoon versions, the Pink Panther is a very daring individual or animal and displays a great deal of cunning, stealth and resourcefulness. "Since these are desirable traits in a Cobra pilot," said MAJ Deryck, "this was probably the association that was made in selecting the unit's name and color."

Aside from the distinctive name and color, the company is unique in another way. It is the smallest aviation unit in the 52nd Combat Aviation Battalion, yet it has one of the battalion's most difficult and hazardous missions. The 361st provides gunship support for the II Corps area in the rugged Central Highlands.

Pink Panther duties include escorting combat assaults, providing

aerial fire support for ground elements, and escorting supply missions and visual reconnaissance. The company works closely with the 5th Special Forces Group and has recently seen heavy action in the area around Dak Seang, 15 miles northwest of Dak To. During this fighting which started in April, the Panthers often displayed their superlative technique and skill.

The company is also responsible for the defense of a sector of the perimeter at Camp Holloway as well as providing airfield defense. In addition to the men manning the bunkers at night, their Cobra gunships are kept ready to respond in the event of a night ground assault. Panther gunships are on stand-by and primary alert 24 hours a day and maintain a capability of being scrambled in less than two minutes.

Attached to the Panthers for combat support are the 665th Transportation Detachment and the 621st Signal Detachment, both commanded by CPT Douglas B. Brown. The Signal Detachment



emergency procedures and use of the transponder.

As in every aviation company, operations is a small but vital section. Several enlisted men, under the direction of CPT Brian R. Sweet, staff the section each hour of the day to coordinate missions, schedule pilots, maintain flight records, submit reports and maintain the communications center. The company is committed for 75 per cent of their aircraft every morning according to CPT Sweet.

"The combined efforts of these sections have made possible a 10 per cent increase in the unit's daily aircraft availability," he continued. Another indication that the efforts have been fruitful is that the unit has won the battalion's "Best Aircraft Maintenance Award" for the last six months.

The 361st is a relative newcomer to Vietnam, having arrived in April, 1968; but they have built an excellent reputation in those brief two years, to include a Presidential citation. The unit, first based in Di An with B and C-model Huey gunships, made the move to Camp Holloway in May of 1968. A month later they switched over to the more lethal Huey Cobras.

Although the 361st has adopted the nickname "Pink Panthers," derived from the movie and cartoon character, their association to one trait of this animal is non-existent. At least the Viet Cong have yet to discover anything funny about the operations of the 361st.

handles all the avionics maintenance and the Transportation Detachment is responsible for all scheduled and unscheduled maintenance on the Cobras. "We have direct support capabilities enabling us to repair most battle damage," said CPT Brown.

The 665th includes hydraulic, engine, electrical, sheet metal and prop and rotor shops, plus technical supply. Its enlisted men and officers work around the clock to keep the "Snakes" flying.

Despite the long hours and heavy combat, "safety always takes

first priority," said MAJ Deryck. The unit operates on an incentive type safety award program, he explained, and high-time pilots without accidents are recognized through letters of commendation.

According to the major, emphasis is on prevention of accidents through constant training. Panther pilots put in five hours of instrument time per month under the watchful eye of an instrument instructor pilot, exceeding brigade requirements. In addition, they constantly practice enroute flight procedures, approach procedures,

Panther Cobras recently distinguished themselves in action at Dak Pek and Dak Seang.

