

THE HISTORY
OF THE
57th AVIATION COMPANY
"THE GLADIATORS"



HERALDRY

The "Gladiator" crest represents the symbolic dedication to duty and skill that the famed gladiators of ancient Rome exhibited. The contrast exhibited in the "Gladiator" crest is represented by the sword which is wielded by the gladiator of ancient Rome, and the winged bird he brandishes upon his shield. The gladiator of old was the backbone of the greatest army ever seen in ancient history. The "Gladiator" of today tries to emulate his predecessor. The weapon at his disposal are the wings of United States Army Aviation. The ideals and high standards are as applicable to the "Gladiators" of today as they were those of yesteryear. The true spirit of the gladiator has not flickered, but is carried on by the warriors of today.

PREFACE

As in the research, study and writing of any history, the subject of the work can never be complete. Someone or something can always add to the story to enhance it and give it more focus. This is especially true for the history of the Gladiators.

Although we know the 57th existed from 1961 to 1987, our focus for the 1993 Reunion was for the Vietnam years of 1966-1973. To our knowledge, no one man was there for those six years to tell the whole story. Our research took us to the National Archives in Washington, D.C. to get material on the history. Much information was found there, but a lot was not.

We found that fairly extensive summaries were written for the years '66, '68, '69 and '70. For the other years the information was quite slim. In recent conversations with other members of the 57th, we have pieced together some general information on the "missing years". Consequently, we have left out quite a bit of information that is known to be fair to the men who served in years where information was little. For example, '69 and '70 included the "Honor Roll"...a list of the men who were KIA. It would not be acceptable and a dishonor to include those names without including our fallen brothers who's names we do not know.

Hopefully, we may now be able to change that. This Reunion is giving us the chance to renew old friendships and share memories. By doing this we can learn more about the Gladiators and our history. In this way, we can add to the following. The narratives for '67-'70 will be available for all to see here in Orlando. If one or a few of us would like to take on the task of expanding on this history, it would be most welcome. Then perhaps if we ever get together again in the future we will have a more complete story to share.

Bob Thibeault
Pat Cahill

March 1993

STATEMENT OF SERVICE

57th AVIATION COMPANY

Constituted 5 June 1961 in the Regular Army as the 57th Aviation Company

Activated 1 July 1961 at Fort Sill, Oklahoma

Inactivated 1 January 1967 in Vietnam

Activated 8 February 1967 at Fort Bragg, North Carolina

Inactivated 13 March 1973 in Vietnam

Activated 18 February 1986 in Germany

Inactivated 16 July 1987 in Germany

CAMPAIGN PARTICIPATION CREDIT

Vietnam

Counteroffensive
Counteroffensive, Phase II
Counteroffensive, Phase III
Tet Counteroffensive
Counteroffensive, Phase IV
Counteroffensive, Phase V
Counteroffensive, Phase VI
Tet 69/Counteroffensive
Summer-Fall 1969
Winter-Spring 1970
Sanctuary Counteroffensive
Counteroffensive, Phase VII
Consolidation I
Consolidation II
Cease-Fire

DECORATIONS

Valorous Unit Award, Streamer embroidered VIETNAM 1969-1970

Meritorious Unit Commendation, Streamer embroidered VIETNAM 1956-1966

Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Palm, Streamer embroidered VIETNAM 1967-1968

Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Palm, Streamer embroidered VIETNAM 1970

Republic of Vietnam Civil Action Honor Medal, First Class, Streamer embroidered VIETNAM 1970

The History
of the
57th Aviation company
U.S. Army
Republic of Vietnam

The 57th Aviation Company served two tours in Vietnam. One from Dec 31, 1965 to Jan 1, 1967... and the second from Oct 24, 1967 to Mar 13, 1973.

1966

In 1966, the 57th Aviation Co., an air mobile fixed wing company flying Caribou's went to war in Vietnam. Upon arrival shortly after the 1st of the year, the 57th and its maintenance support unit, the 138th Transportation Detachment were assigned to the 14th Aviation Battalion at Nha Trang. The first few days were difficult as few airplanes were flyable and living conditions that first month were primitive. The company achieved an operational status on 16 Jan and began flying an average of 1500/55 hours a month/day.

The assigned mission of the 57th was to provide airlift of supplies and personnel as directed by the Army. To accomplish this, ten CU-26 aircraft were made available daily. During the year, the 57th flew missions from Ca Mau in the southernmost Delta to Dung Hoa on the DMZ, hauling ammo, food, supplies and troops.

In the fall, the 57th took part in a unique assimilation program, Operation "Red Leaf". This was the transfer of the CU-26 Caribous aircraft from the Army to the Air Force. As Air Force personnel filled the ranks in Aug through Dec, the remaining members of the 57th trained those men to take over the mission. When the Air Force took control 1 Jan 67, the 57th Aviation Co. returned to the United States. For them, the war was over. The 57th Aviation Co. was inactivated... but not for long.

1967

On 8 Feb 67, the 57th Aviation Company was re-activated at Fort Bragg, North Carolina under TOE-1-77G by Grand Order 52, Headquarters, Third U.S. Army. Due to the nature and development of the role of the helicopter in the conflict in Vietnam, the 57th re-organized as an Assault Helicopter Company utilizing UH-1H troop carrying aircraft and UH-1C attack helicopters. The company consisted of a Company Headquarters, two airlift platoons, one armed platoon and a service platoon. Units attached to the 57th AHC were the 615th Transportation Detachment, the 822nd Signal Detachment and the 154th Medical

Detachment. Upon its deployment to Vietnam, the 57th and its attachment were authorized 20 commissioned Officers, 51 Warrant Officers and 227 enlisted men who operated and maintained 23 UH-1H helicopters and 8 UH-1C helicopters. The 57th became part of the 52nd Combat Aviation Battalion, 17th Combat Aviation Group, 1st Aviation Brigade, Vietnam.

On 27 Oct, an advance party of men from the 57th AHC landed via C-141 in Pleiku and proceeded to their base at the Army air field located at Kontum in the northern section of the Central Highlands near the tri-border of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam.

During the last months of the year, not many missions were flown as the remainder of the company arrived and the compound was under construction.

On 10 Nov, pilots flew to Qui Nhon to pickup the aircraft. The only significant missions before the end of the year was during the Battle of Dak To in late November and early December, where American units from the 173rd and 82nd Infantry received heavy losses from the enemy.

1968

The new year brought the 57th its first bitter taste of war. In the early morning hours of 10 Jan, a NVA sapper platoon slipped into the Gladiator compound and executed a well planned attack. All total, the NVA destroyed 7 ships and damaged several others; 3 workshops were burned to the ground and many vehicles were destroyed. More seriously, 6 gladiators were KIA in defense of the compound. NVA losses totaled 19. As a result of this attack, an all out effort was made to improve the perimeter. The 57th also petitioned the 17th Group to make 10 Jan the annual Organization Day to honor the men killed. The unit also named the compound Camp Pfiester in honor of the Pfiester twins, members of the 615th transportation Co., one who was KIA and the other WIA.

Missions flown during January in II Corps supported the 24th Special Tactical Zone, MACV, Special Forces Camps, ARVN II Corps and the 4th Division in the Dak To area. At the end of the month, the Gladiators began preparations for assuming the FOB II missions from the 119th AHC. The 57th was to have the FOB missions for the normal tour of 60 days as all the companies in the 52nd Battalion participated in the mission. FOB consisted of supporting Special Forces reconnaissance teams which operated along Vietnams tri-border with Laos and Cambodia. The teams gathered intelligence as to the movement of NVA troops and equipment infiltrating the country along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

On the night of 29 Jan, small arms fire erupted all over Kontum City, with several Gladiator ships being fired upon as they returned from that days FOB missions. This was wrongly attributed to the ARVN's celebrating the arrival of TET. As the night progressed, the compound and Kontum City were under siege.

The TET Offensive had begun. For the next 6 days, Cougar gunships stayed in the air almost continuously breaking ground attacks and attacking mortar and sniper positions. They were also supported by the Gladiator slicks to provide flare support. The city was finally cleared of NVA on 4 Feb. Miraculously, no members of the unit were killed, although 26 were wounded. The body count of NVA reached 785 dead. Because of TET, the FOB missions were cut back, but reached full swing again near the end of February. The 57th saw its first combat aviation casualty on 19 Feb as a lift ship was shot down in an emergency extraction of a FOB team. Although the pilots, CE and most of the team were rescued by the chase ship, the gunner and other team members were KIA.

March saw the Gladiators completing the FOB mission. The next several months the 57th supported the 173rd Airborne Division around Kontum, assisted the 4th Division in establishing Fire Bases along the Cambodian border, in addition to its normal II Corps support missions.

In June, the unit supported the 101st Airborne Division at Dak Pec and the 4th Division at Dak To.

July and August saw the Gladiators working with the 134th AHC in operations in and around An Khe, and participated in the Battle of Fire Base 19 near Dak To.

Near the end of September, the 57th began the FOB II mission again, relieving the Ghost Riders and the Avengers of the 189th AHC.

At mid October, the Cougars were assisted in gun support for the FOB missions from the "Pink Panthers" of the 361st Armed Helicopter Escort Company, utilizing lethal Cobra gunships.

The end of November again marked the completion of the demanding FOB mission for the 57th.

Decembers missions included support of the 4th Division at DAK To, the Special Forces 24th Tactical Zone, MACV and numerous other units.

1969

As the new year began, it became clear at Battalion that since the 57th had accomplished such a remarkable record of successful FOB missions with a minimal loss of aircraft and personnel that it was requested and approved that the 57th remain on the mission for an extended period of time and become their primary mission to support the 5th Special Forces Group, Command and Control Central (CCC). At the same time the unit would fulfill its responsibilities to other units in the area.

On 16 Feb, while trying to insert a FOB Mission, the lead insert slick was shot down, crashed and burned upon impact. The crew and 4 Team members aboard were KIA.

April was extremely tough on the Gladiators as three aircraft were lost, however, only one fatality was incurred.

On 11 May, Mothers Day, the unit compound came under a sapper and ground attack. Thanks to the Cougar gunships, the ground attack was repelled. Although 13 enemy soldiers were KIA, they inflicted 6 million dollars worth of damage by destroying or damaging 10 aircraft and completely destroying the large maintenance hanger and all of its equipment. Luckily, only 3 people were wounded in the attack.

The siege of Ben Het also began in May, with re-supply and medical evacuation missions for the 57th, while still flying FOB.

In June, the 57th was given word that it would move to Camp Holloway in Pleiku and turn over the FOB mission to the 189th AHC. However, the CO of the 57th at the time, Maj. James T. Kearns, with the support of the entire company, requested that the 57th remain on FOB indefinitely. The request was granted and the unit stayed in Kontum.

As summer arrived, so did the monsoons, affecting the number of missions. During this time, one ship crashed and all the crew KIA while returning from a FOB mission while IFR. Engine failure claimed another ship. And another crew member was KIA and another wounded on another FOB mission.

In September, the weather began to break and FOB missions were put into high gear. On 27 Sep, while extracting a FOB team on strings, the aircraft lost power and fell straight down into the trees and exploded. Although the gunner was KIA, the remainder of the crew received only minor wounds. Of the FOB team, 3 survived and all were extracted by the chase ship.

On 12 Nov, while standing by at the FOB alternate launch site at Dak Pek, the crews from 1st flight came under mortar attack. One crew member was KIA and 8 others wounded. One aircraft was completely destroyed and the other 3 were severely damaged.

The month of December was a busy one for the 57th with many operations against hostile forces, but also the loss of several crew members. On 6 Dec, a slick was shot down by small arms fire with all aboard KIA. On 22 Dec, a Cougar gunship was hit by hostile fire, lost its tailrotor and crashed. The gunner was KIA, and as the remaining 3 crew members were being extracted by strings, one fell out of his extraction harness and was KIA.

The coming of the new year had the 57th ready to continue the dangerous mission in the Republic of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

1970

The motto of the 57th AHC was "Combat Proven, Try Us." In 1970, that motto was shown true time and time again.

The month of January truly showed the dangers facing the Gladiators in performing the FOB II mission, especially for WO1 Weber. Weber had his ship shot up badly on 3 different FOB missions, once being shot down. In these incidents 2 team members were KIA by intense enemy ground fire, another was seriously wounded and Weber himself was slightly wounded.

In February, the 57th began training the 170th AHC to take over the FOB mission. The 57th began preparations for its move to An Khe to support the 4th Infantry Division.

The move to An Khe was completed on 13 Mar and combat assault missions in support of the 4th Division began.

On 6 Apr the 57th compound came under a sapper attack that resulted in four aircraft being completely destroyed and another seriously damaged. The rest of April saw the 57th in support of the siege of Dak Seang. Twelve aircraft received damage, 6 crew members were wounded but no lives were lost.

At the beginning of May, the 57th participated in the massive air-lift into Cambodia that was ordered directly from President Nixon. Four aircraft were damaged, one shot down and one crew member was wounded from the intense enemy fire.

By early June, all U.S. troops were withdrawn from Cambodia and An Khe once again became the primary area of operations.

From the middle of June until the end of September, the 57th continued to act in support of the 4th Division. During this time, several aircraft received damage from ground fire, but no casualties occurred.

In October, the 4th Division began to "Stand Down" and the 57th began preparations for its move to Pleiku. The move was completed on 18 Nov. and the 57th began its support of ARVN units in the Pleiku area.

On 22 Nov the 57th flew in support of the siege of Plei Mei. Six aircraft were damaged by intense enemy fire, a pilot was KIA and another crew member was wounded.

As the new year approached, the 57th began once again to take over the FOB II mission, once again proving the superior air combat capability of the 57th AHC.

1971

As the new year began, it would begin a turning point of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and consequently, and increased level of responsibility in carrying our missions for the 57th AHC.

As the 57th took over once again the FOB II mission, it was decided by command at Battalion and at 5th Special Forces Group that the Gladiators would have FOB "TFN". This was done as the unit performed this unique mission with great success and minimal loss of aircraft and personnel. It was also decided that the 361st, the Pink Panthers, also based at Pleiku, would handle gun protection for the Gladiators on FOB for the duration as well.

In January, the process of "Vietnamization" was in full gear. As more and more U.S. units were "Standing Down", the responsibilities of fighting the ground war was slowly being turned over to the ARVN's. Although now the 57th's primary mission was FOB, their other duties would be to support the ARVN's take-over of Fire Bases, ground operations and eventually the air war.

FOB was rotated in the Gladiators every other day from 1st (White) to 2nd (Yellow) platoon. When not flying FOB that day, the Gladiator platoon flew other missions in their expanded AO of the Pleiku/Kontum/Dak To area, which increasingly meant flying missions in support of ARVN units.

In Jan-Feb, intelligence obtained from the FOB missions indicated massive amounts of NVA and equipment were moving across the tri-border area into Vietnam. In response, Command began to set up approximately 8 ARVN fire bases from Dak To to the border to attempt to combat the flow.

As March began, it became evident that the ARVN effort would fail to the massive NVA assault. One by one, the fire bases were over-run and destroyed by the NVA. This climaxed on 31 Mar as Fire Base 6, located just west of Dak To, was the last to fall. In support of Fire Base 6, two slicks from the Cav "Chickenman" unit were shot down atop the compound. Units from the Gladiators and the Pink Panthers were sent to search for the crews who were E & E from the base along with ARVN troops. Forced to fly low and slow to search the area, and facing heavy thunderstorms and extremely intense enemy ground fire, the Gladiator slicks were able to locate and extract the downed crews to safety.

All through April, the AO in and around Fire Base 6 and the surrounding area were repeatedly subjected to intense "Arc-light" B-52 bombing on the NVA assault force. Intelligence recon by FOB II and other missions indicated many enemy KIA and an apparent withdrawal back across the border.

For the remainder of the year, the 57th continued FOB and its other assigned missions. As the year drew to a close, it once again became evident from the FOB recon's that the NVA advance

across the border may have been hurt and slowed... but not stopped.

This would become more evident with the approach of the new year, as the 57th would face a tremendous test in the face of a massive enemy offensive as one of the last U.S. combat units to fight in the Vietnam War.

1972

FOB missions during the early winter months again indicated massive numbers of NVA troops, supplies and for the first time, tanks, moving towards Kontum from the tri-border. Now it seemed that almost any team insertion resulted in a pre-mature extraction, and almost always it was "hot".

The "Spring Offensive" in the Central Highlands began in March as two NVA divisions led by T-64 tanks attacked from the north with their objective, Kontum.

The ARVN bases between the tri-border and Kontum were either over-run or surrounded within the first few days. Both the Gladiators and the Cougars flew extensive support missions north of Kontum including emergency medi-vacs, re-supply and gun support. It seemed that the Cougars had at least one ship in the air at all times. Over QL-14, the road from Dak To to Kontum, 4-57th ships were shot down within two weeks.

During the first week of April, both Tan Can and Dak To fell to the NVA. Just prior to being over-run, a Gladiator was on a mission to Tan Can to pick up some advisors. The ship was shot down, and amazingly, 35 days later, two of the crew members walked into Kontum. They had been E & E and surrounded by the NVA for over a month.

The main attack on Kontum began 14 Apr as ARVN paratroopers and South Korean "ROK'S" fought desperately to keep Kontum from falling and to keep the road open from Pleiku for re-supply. At the height of the fighting, the order came down that any area with the exception of Kontum City was a "free fire zone". Both Gladiator and Cougar crews flew non-stop missions while receiving intense enemy fire in the all out effort to save the City. At one point, Gladiator crews flew special B model Hueys sent by Brigade that were equipped with TOW missiles to use against the NVA tanks. There were no FOB missions...the men of the CCC compound had all the action they wanted just outside their own compound, as it was house to house combat in Kontum.

At the end of April massive B-52 strikes around Kontum began to have their effect on the NVA, and the siege of the city ended in early May. But the NVA's foothold in the Central Highlands had been established and would not be lost.

That summer, a portion of a Cav unit that was standing down formed a 3rd slick platoon with the Gladiators, making the 57th the largest AHC of its type in Vietnam.

In August, the 361st stood down as the Panthers went home, and the Cougars once again took over gun duty for all Gladiator missions, including FOB. However, FOB missions had slowed considerably as they knew where the NVA were...surrounding Kontum.

Throughout 1972 the Paris Peace Talks started and stalled several times over many disagreements on military and political questions. But in the fall, progress was being made and U.S. involvement in the War was ending swiftly. As more and more U.S. units "Stood Down" the Gladiators and Cougars stayed busy supporting those units going home.

In September, Leghorn, the FOB II radio relay base located atop a pinnacle in Laos was evacuated, and the Cougars were given the job of blowing it up so the NVA wouldn't have it.

In October, CCC ceased operations as the unit stood down and finally went home after carrying out the most secretive and dangerous missions of the Vietnam War.

As the year ended, the NVA were very close to seizing Kontum as the ARVN's were the last hope of survival of South Vietnam. But the 57th was still there flying support and guns in the final days of the U.S. involvement in the war. The 57th would be there to just about the very end.

1973

On 8 Jan, the Paris Peace talks resumed, and a positive attitude was taken by all parties. Nixon ordered a halt to the bombing in the north, and on 23 Jan, an accord was reached. The next day, both sides claimed victory in Southeast Asia.

In Jan 73, the 57th was very busy, especially the Cougars, flying support of the inept ARVN's. As word of a cease fire came, action reduced considerably on both sides.

The Paris Peace Agreement was signed on 27 Jan, and the cease fire went into effect the next day.

February and March were chaotic and un-organized as the 57th began turning their mission to the South Vietnamese. At the same time, the ships were being sent to the coast for evacuation as the 57th began to "Stand Down". In the chaos, the records of the 57th AHC were lost, and have not been found to this day.

In March, the 57th AHC stood down and left the Republic of Vietnam. For the men of the Gladiators and the Cougars, the war was finally over.