

July 17, 1969

Army aircraft processing detachments bring them in and send them home



Final touches prepare the rotor of a newly assembled chopper.

SAIGON—A squad of infantrymen charge from a Huey while two Cobras provide security from above.

An artillery observer pilots his Bird Dog in a tight circle as he checks the results of an artillery bombardment of enemy bunkers.

A Chinook breaks the morning stillness of a lonely fire support base as it brings in supplies.

No matter where you are in Vietnam, you're never far from Army aircraft; there are several thousand planes and helicopters ever ready to provide some form of support to ground troops in the field.

There is no doubt that the Army's aircraft have made a big contribution to the war. But the rigors of combat require that there be a ready source of replacements for battle damaged or just plain worn out aircraft.

And there is: a constant turnover of aircraft as new and overhauled aircraft are brought into the Republic of Vietnam to replace others that have been damaged or have reached the number of flying hours that will bring the craft back to the United States for extensive overhauls.

And handling this important job are men of the 520th Aircraft Processing Detachment and other units of the 34th General Support Group (Aircraft Maintenance and Supply). Located at Saigon's Hotel 3 heliport, the 520th is responsible for the initial in-country processing and, later, the retrograding of a large proportion of the Army's aircraft in the Republic of Vietnam.

"This is the only detachment in Vietnam where we do nothing but assemble and disassemble aircraft," says CWO D.W. Guthrie, officer-in-charge of the detachment.

The 520th takes charge of the aircraft upon their arrival at Tan Son Nhut Air Base from the United States, off-loading the craft from Air Force transport planes.

The craft are then brought to the detachment's assembly. The assembly time varies with the aircraft, according to Guthrie. Although they are shipped in sections, "it is a total aircraft when it arrives," he said. It takes the detachment's technical specialists—mostly civilians under contract to the Army—from 19.6 man hours (for the OH-6 Cayuse) to 250 man hours (for the CH-47 Chinook) to assemble the aircraft they receive.

In addition to the Cayuse and Chinook, aircraft processed through the detachment include the AH-1 Cobra, the OH-1 Bird Dog, the U-1 Otter and the U-6 Beaver.

Besides the assembly of the aircraft, the detachment's personnel also give the craft a thorough inspection, including a test flight to make sure that all parts are working properly. As soon as the aircraft has proven itself airworthy, it is issued to a field unit needing it.

As helicopters and fixed wing planes are being introduced through the processing detachments at Saigon, Vung Tau, Qui Nhon and Da Nang, there is a corresponding flow of aircraft out of the country.

Retrograding covers crash damaged aircraft and those that have reached "high time," the maximum number of flying hours that is considered safe for the craft's continued use. High time for a UH-1 Huey, for instance, is about 2,200 hours. Maj. Gen. Robert G. Williams, deputy assistance chief of staff for force development,

Department of the Army, cited the case of the first Cayuse of the war to complete 1,000 hours of combat flying. The helicopter had, he said, "been shot down five times and recovered, received fire on 57 occasions and survived 150 strikes. It was finally retrograded to the States for overhaul and is probably at this time back in Vietnam flying again."

When an aircraft to be retrograded is brought to the 520th, one of the first steps taken is to give it a thorough steam cleaning in compliance with U.S. health laws. The craft is then disassembled and packaged for shipment back to repair shops in the States.

After this, the detachment sees to it that the aircraft are loaded on board an Air Force transport plane at Tan Son Nhut. From there they will be taken to Sharpe Army Depot, New Cumberland Army Depot or the Army Aero-Depot Maintenance Center (ARADMAC) at Corpus Christi, Texas.

And then the process starts all over again.

Although a high degree of skill is required to process the aircraft, particularly the more complex ones such as the Chinook (it has some 54 bolts, each a different size, in the aft pylon alone), the aircraft move through the 520th with relative ease.

The work goes on in round-the-clock shifts to ensure that the units in the field will not lack for air support of all kinds.

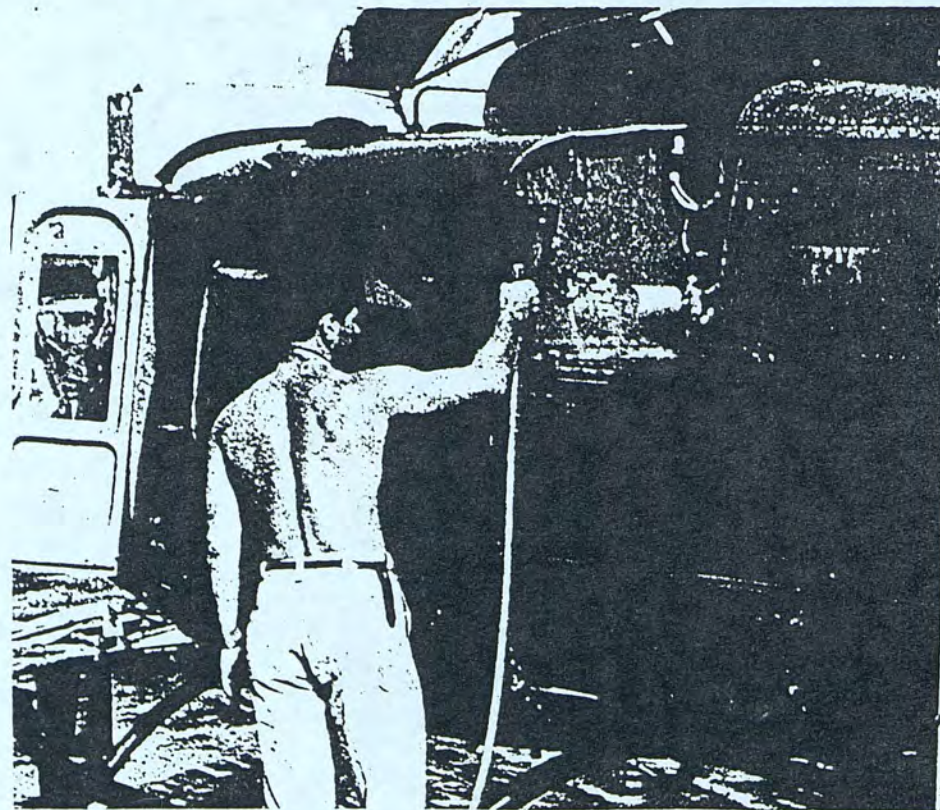
"We move roughly 500 aircraft a month, in terms of the number of times you handle each one," Guthrie said.

On an individual basis, the detachment processes an average of 170 helicopters and fixed wing planes each month.

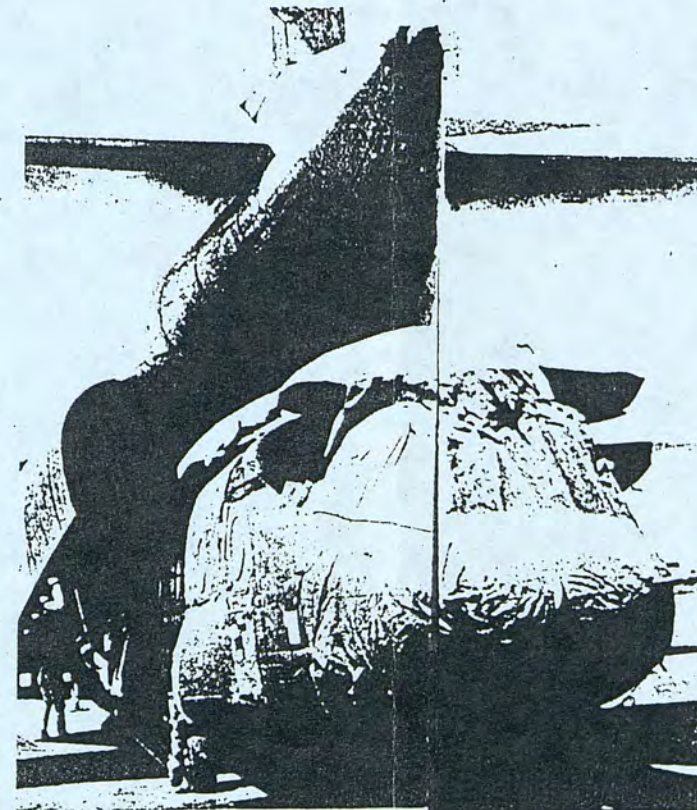
The result of such work is that many aircraft are able to serve more than one tour in the Republic of Vietnam, although it is difficult to tell the first-tour airship from the veteran when they arrive for assembly.



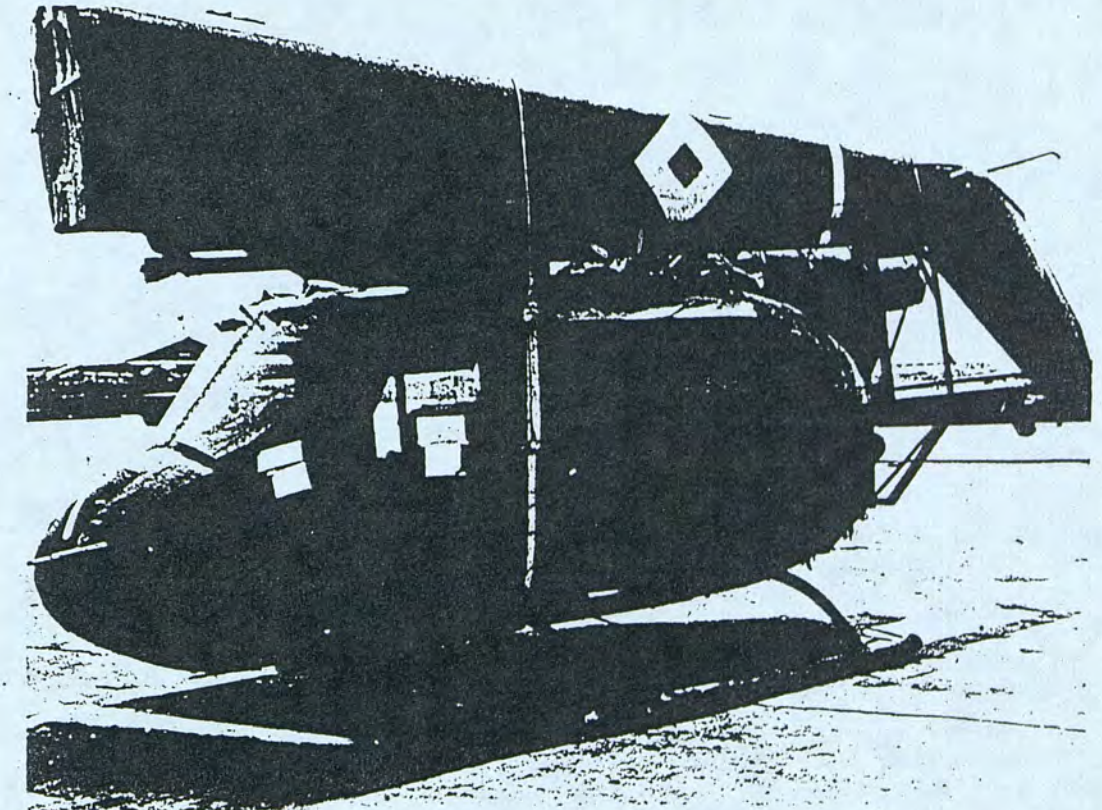
New landing skids are emplaced for easy shipment.



A homeward-bound Huey gets a thorough cleaning



This Chinook is DEROSing.



He sits ready for shipment to the U.S. for overhaul.