

PART I: Prelude to Air Assault



IT IS INDEED important to understand what happened before, during and after the most significant airmobile battle fought in the Vietnam War—LAMSON 719. This 1971 battle is a milestone in the evolution of Army Aviation air assault tactics because:

- LAMSON 719 is the *only* historical example of contemporary Army Aviation operating in a mid-intensity conflict.
- During LAMSON 719 more helicopters received combat damage and were shot down than during any other comparable time in the Vietnam War.
- The combat assault on Tchepone in Laos involved more helicopters in a single lift than any previous combat air assault in Army Aviation history.
- Two of the blackest days in Army Aviation history occurred during the 45-day operation.
- LAMSON 719 is the best contemporary example of AH-1 Cobra gunships contesting enemy armor in combat.

Lessons learned from LAMSON 719 contribute to the current and developing evolution of Army Aviation tactical doctrine more than experience in any other operation has in the past 20 years. This article, next month's Part II: "The Battle," and August's Part III: "Reflections and Values," clearly show that Army Aviation has evolved into a most important member of the combat and, of course, the maneuver arms of the United States Army.

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Part III concludes with reflections and values of lessons learned not only from LAMSON 719, but also from Army Aviation's involvement in Vietnam from the beginning.

Based on invited lectures that I've given to aviation officer advanced course classes at the Aviation Center, Ft. Rucker, AL, and to others elsewhere, it is obvious to me that many people in Army Aviation today know little about Vietnam. We're already well into the next generation of people who were too young to have cogent memories of the Vietnam days. Also, there are only a few capsular references (see Part III in August) that I would recommend for obtaining additional background on Vietnam. For those reasons, I begin by giving more detail than may seem necessary to provide a contextual background around LAMSON 719. But, the successes, and more importantly, the failures of the operation are better understood in context with a complete LAMSON 719 background. This article describes aspects of the Vietnam War that are critical in understanding it but, too often, are deemphasized or overlooked in most references about the war. For those who already know something about the war in Vietnam, the article can widen the perspective gotten from other sources and references.

The 3-part series reveals that Army Aviation is a unique organization that packs great firepower and provides extensive mobility on the air-land battlefield. It depicts Army Aviation as a young and dynamic combat force building a precious heritage as it flies above, and among, the best!

Vietnam-era aviators confirm that most of the current air-land battle doctrine we read about is a historical summary and refinement of techniques employed and tested in the Republic of Vietnam. Army

Aviation has *not* reinvented the wheel in the past 10 years. The experiences in our history offer more insights than you might think.

Part I of this article is a summary of the pertinent history of the Vietnam War through the end of 1970. It describes typical types of missions and combat operations conducted by Army Aviation.

Next month Part II will describe the LAMSON 719 operations order, the operation itself, the battle statistics, the afteraction reports and the lessons learned. Finally,

A Troubled History

Vietnam as a country does not have an impressive history of independence. It was briefly occupied by the Japanese during World War II, but for more than 50 years it was colonized by the French.

The French were defeated by the Communist Viet Minh at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Because of sharply different political philosophies, Vietnam was divided by a Geneva Accord into a non-Communist state in the south, and a Communist-controlled state in the north. The Communists, or Viet Minh,

represented only a small percentage of the people, but they had the only force able to effectively fight the French. For about a year after the French defeat, the population was able to move freely across the partition line. More than one million anti-Communists streamed south while only a few thousand Vietnamese moved to the north.

The Geneva Accords were supposed to be temporary with a reunification to occur after elections scheduled for 1956; however, hostilities between the Communists, Nationalists and Buddhists prevented any election from ever occurring. The partition line soon became a closed demilitarized zone. After this, a Communist revolution (directed by North Vietnam) was started in South Vietnam by trained combat veterans of the Viet Minh army that had fought the French. These soldiers, and those enlisted from South Vietnam to fight with them, were known as the Viet Cong.

By 1959 the Viet Cong in South Vietnam were being directly assisted by units of the regular North Vietnamese Army. The U.S. Government, as part of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization alliance, in conjunction with other countries including Australia and the Republic of Korea, sent an increased number of advisors under Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) control to train and assist the South Vietnamese. MACV actually came into being in 1962 as a reorganization of an earlier military assistance and advisory group.

In 1960 there were fewer than 1,000 military advisors in Vietnam. President John F. Kennedy had been "burned" by the defeat at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba in 1961 and didn't want to see another country fall to Communism. He authorized and increased military presence which grew to 3,000 troops in 1961. President Kennedy was assassinated in November 1963, but the mandate was set and continued by

President Lyndon B. Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, to increase the American presence as necessary to prevent a Communist takeover. In 1964, the U.S. Congress adopted the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, authorizing the President to take whatever measures he considered necessary to repel attacks on American forces and to prevent further aggression in Vietnam.

By 1964, there were about 23,000 American troops in South Vietnam. In 1965, the emphasis on the war shifted. MACV became more combat operational and the first American combat division was sent to South Vietnam in the summer of 1965. The 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) deployed and engaged the enemy with the first extensive and sustained use of helicopters (principally the UH-1 Huey) in combat. Helicopters were employed earlier in Vietnam* and, in fact, were used during the Korean War on a lesser scale for movement of troops, resupply and aeromedical evacuation. The development of Army Aviation as we know it today began with the deployment of the 1st Cav. Clearly, the airmobile and air assault concepts of the 1st Cavalry Division in Vietnam demonstrated for the first time in combat the enormous flexibility and utility of helicopters on the battlefield. On countless occasions, from the battle at Ia Drang Valley in 1965 to the standdowns in 1972, Army Aviation proved to be of paramount importance in waging war in the defense of South Vietnam.

Through the 1960s, as the United States increased its involvement and support to South Vietnam, Russia increased its military support to North Vietnam, continually and several times at higher comparable monetary levels than the support provided by the United States. American strength reached its peak in 1968 at a level of about 550,000 troops. From 1969 on (through President Richard M. Nixon's ad-

ministration) troop strength dramatically declined until in April 1972 there were fewer than 70,000 American troops in Vietnam. Operational control in MACV returned to a more advisory rather than direct combat role.

An Effort At "Vietnamization"

During the years of American presence in Vietnam, MACV was responsible for a program called "Vietnamization" (term coined in 1969). It sought to train the Vietnamese people about government, agriculture, industrialization, education and soldiering. The early plan included organizing an army and local reaction forces so that they would be able themselves to conduct the war against the Communists. To do so, an effort was made to train South Vietnamese soldiers in the maintenance and operation of military equipment to include weapons, artillery, tanks and helicopters. Many Vietnamese also were trained in the United States.

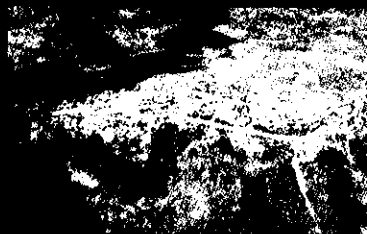
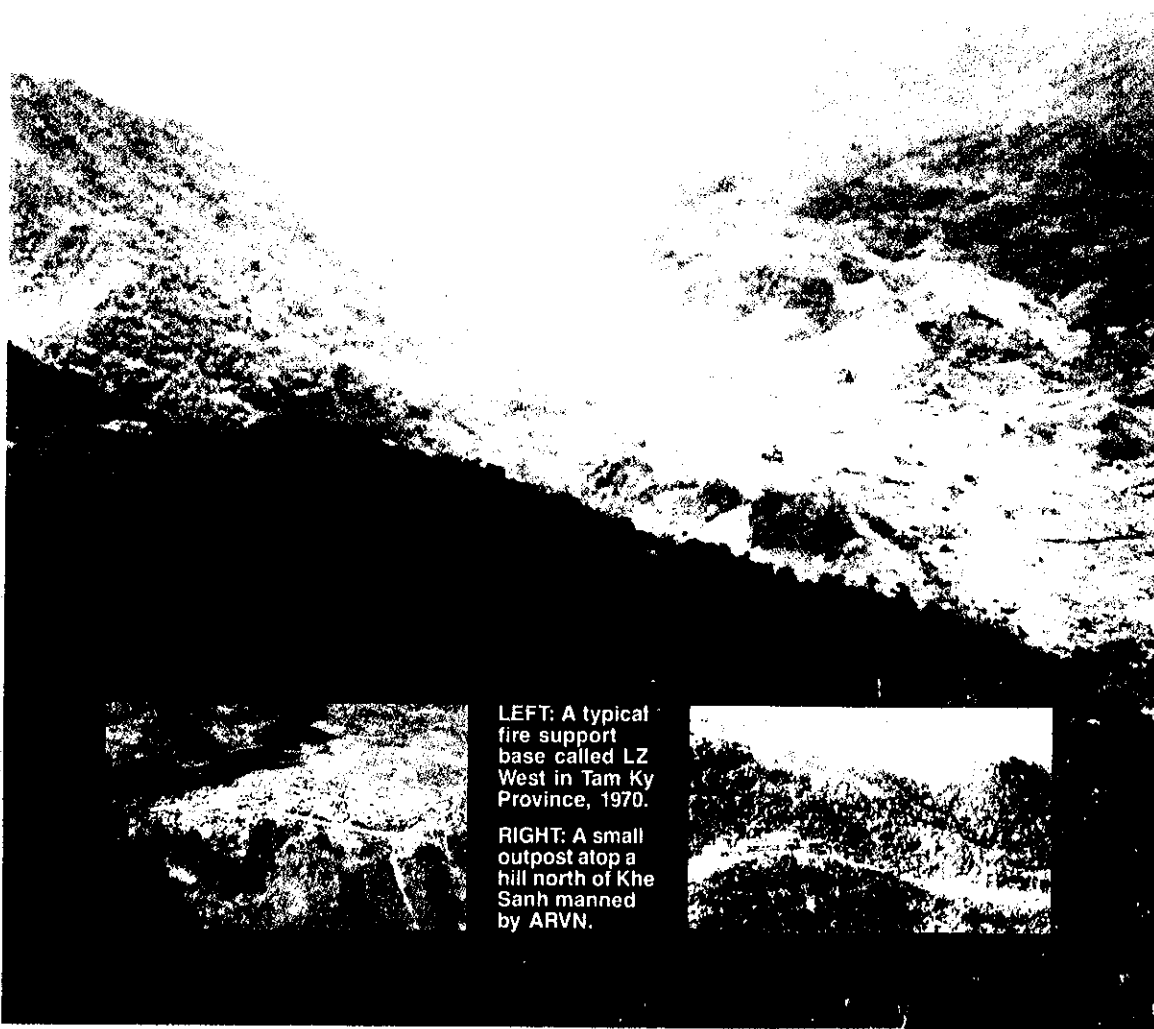
Unfortunately, most Vietnamese were not well educated, their technical understanding was primitive, and there was a serious language barrier, all of which made interactions, training and operations difficult and frustrating for many Americans. Progress was slow and when the U.S. Army and Marine Corps entered the war with direct combat missions, Vietnamization was further curtailed under the notion that the Communists would either back off or be quickly defeated by the large show of American force: Thus, a well-trained Vietnamese force would not be necessary. This was a fatal decision that resulted in several years being lost in developing greater auton-

* There were individual Army Aviation units in South Vietnam as early as 1961. The U.S. Army's 173d Airborne Brigade also deployed to South Vietnam in 1965. By the end of 1965 U.S. troop strength reached 181,000; in 1966, 385,000; and in 1967, 486,000.



INSET LEFT: To create LZs for helicopter assaults in the jungles and mountains, 5,000-pound bombs called "daisy cutters" were dropped, stripping the trees. However, the triple canopy jungle of hardwood trees was sometimes so dense that engineers would have to be rappelled into the LZ.

The A Shau Valley, renowned as the area of heaviest enemy concentration and logistics centers in the northern portion of South Vietnam.



LEFT: A typical fire support base called LZ West in Tam Ky Province, 1970.

RIGHT: A small outpost atop a hill north of Khe Sanh manned by ARVN.



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omy for the people and experience for the Vietnamese Army.

In late 1967 and in 1968, the U.S. Embassy helped MACV rejuvenate the Vietnamization effort. In 1969, MACV was also bolstered in advisory troop strength severalfold to further accelerate the formalized Vietnamization program. Many more Vietnamese were then brought to the United States to learn how to fly helicopters, drive tanks and maintain equipment. Finally, it was obvious that the days of a U.S. presence in Vietnam were numbered. The Vietnamese were going to have to learn to fight the war on their own. LAMSON 719 became the first serious test of the Vietnamization of ground combat operations because American ground troops or advisors would not be allowed to set foot into Laos where the operation was to take place.

Throughout the war in Vietnam the Communists rarely showed concern for their number of combat losses. Human wave attacks were not uncommon and generally accounted for some of the few minor battlefield victories the Communists enjoyed up through 1972. However, it is not lofty or exaggerated to say that from 1961 to 1972, except for LAMSON 719 (which was more like a draw), the American and South Vietnamese decisively won every *major* battle of the war to include the most well-known battle, the Tet Offensive of 1968.

The Tet Offensive and LAMSON 719 stand out as two different types of battles that were very distinguishable from the way the war was otherwise conducted. The Tet Offensive involved more than 100,000 North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong troops. It was launched on 30 and 31 January 1968, as an all-out surprise assault, primarily against well-defended military compounds in more than 115 different urban areas throughout the country. The battle was called the "Tet Offensive," named after the lunar New Year in Viet-



UH-1 lands at a small pad at Mai Loc in 101st Airborne Division area of operation. A fire support base can be seen on the distant ridge (upper right corner).

nam which is the Vietnamese peoples' most celebrated and important holiday.

Before the offensive, the Viet Cong had announced a 7-day truce over the holiday to further catch U.S. and South Vietnam troops off guard. The belief by the Communists at the time was that occupation of the major urban areas would generate a popular uprising among the people, mass defections from the South Vietnamese Army and the rapid collapse of the government. However, in just a few days, except for small sections in Saigon and Hue, the offensive was totally crushed. Communist losses ranged from 35,000 to 50,000 killed with 3,000 South Vietnamese killed, 1,500 Americans killed and more than 10,000 civilians killed in crossfires or murdered by occupying Communist forces.

After Tet, the Viet Cong were totally eliminated as an effective

fighting force. Tet was a decisive victory for South Vietnam in several respects. It destroyed any credibility for the Communists with the South Vietnamese people and it greatly bolstered the South Vietnamese government and Army. But, the most far-reaching outcome of the Tet Offensive was a political one in the United States. As the battles unfolded, too many American journalists consistently distorted the events and highlighted the horrors of war. Everything the Communists did was embellished by those members of the media, while the South Vietnamese and American military were treated with derision and cynicism, as though they reported only fabrications.

The media's reflections of the war, coupled with the U.S. Government's failure to effectively communicate the purpose and objectives of the war, spread disillusion.



Strong religious beliefs can be seen in the lives of most Vietnamese, such as Kim Anh Thu.

The Culture of Vietnam

Captain Jim E. Fulbrook

A lot should be said about the culture of the Vietnamese people if we are to fully understand the war and the significance of LAMSON 719. The Vietnamese are influenced mostly by Confucianism and ancestor worship. They are community and family oriented, not nationalistic.

Most are superstitious, religious and decidedly nonviolent. They are anti-Communist because they fear a loss of freedom that would prohibit ancestor worship, religious freedom and community traditions like the "Council of Elders" which dominated the rural majority as the principal

form of government. It's unfortunate that those fears have been borne out since the Communist takeover in 1975. These are the precise areas in which the Communists have placed their greatest efforts: reeducating and reunifying (nationalizing) the people. This cultural background makes it easy to understand why millions of Vietnamese since 1975 have risked their lives to leave their country by boat or whatever means possible.

The cultural and ethnic backgrounds of the Vietnamese people seriously impacted military operations in Vietnam. Even the indigenous armies were divided along ethnic lines to a significant degree.

The principal religions in Vietnam include Confucianism, Buddhism, Cao Dai (belief that all religions are "seeds of wisdom planted by God"), and "Cack" (Catholic or Christian). There are two main types of Buddhists: those subscribing to ancestor worship and those believing in reincarnation (sometimes called Mandarin Buddhists).

The Buddhists who believe in reincarnation make good combat soldiers

because they believe that if they are killed their level of reincarnation would be high, based on how great their valor was on the battlefield. Buddhists, Confucianists and others who followed ancestor worship generally are poor soldiers. They are nonviolent in attitude, fearful of leaving their village areas where deceased ancestors would protect them and fearful to die if it were not in the family order.

These cultural differences are found throughout Vietnam, but there is a significant difference between the people north and those south of Da Nang where a major mountain range aids in dividing the country. Above Da Nang the average Vietnamese were about 2 inches taller than those in the south. The "northerners" appear more Chinese-like and Mandarin Buddhism is more prominent.

The cultural differences gave a significant advantage to the Communists. Both North and South Vietnam built their armies from volunteers and conscriptions, but the Communists in the north primarily conscripted Mandarin Buddhists (reincarnation believers)

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sionment nationwide. That the Communists could launch such an offensive, even though it was decisively crushed, was a shock to the American public. Thus, the Tet Offensive of 1968 marked the beginning of disengagement by the United States from a war in which we were unbeatable on the battle-

field, but which we could never win—at least probably not without a direct invasion of North Vietnam.

Levels of Conflict

It's important to define and describe the three levels of conflict found in combat:

- A **high-intensity conflict** is a war between two or more nations and their allies in which the combatants employ the most modern technology and resources of their military organizations to include nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. Decisive engagements between large numbers of troops oc-

for combat duty. The South Vietnamese conscripted without discriminating, but to a significant degree assigned troops to specific units based on cultural or religious backgrounds.

In the south, the Republic of Vietnam divided its Army into three general categories: Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) forces, regional forces and popular forces. Organized and trained along U.S. military lines, ARVN forces included marine, ranger, airborne, infantry, artillery and armor units generally capable of being deployed wherever necessary for combat. While ARVN units were frequently commanded by officers appointed from a non-Buddhist aristocracy,



A store in Tin Phuoc, in the Tam Ky province.

the bulk of the ARVN forces were composed of Mandarin Buddhist soldiers.

From 1968 to the defeat of South Vietnam in 1975, ARVN forces fared well in combat. Unfortunately the same could not be said too often for the popular and regional forces which made up the largest part of South Vietnam's combat troops. Popular and regional forces were territorial in the worst sense of the word. Many of these units were organized and trained more like paramilitary reaction forces, or police. These units rarely left their immediate villages and provincial regions, and they varied considerably in unit organization, leadership, level of training, equipment and resolve to conduct search and destroy operations around their local areas of operation. As you may have guessed, the majority of these units were dominated by the Confucianists and believers in ancestor worship.

American soldiers were critical of South Vietnamese soldiers, considering many of them to be corrupt, lazy, cowardly and without the resolve to fight the war. Many Americans believed that one Communist soldier



A "Papa Sanh" selling meat to a store owner.

was worth about three South Vietnamese soldiers. Unfortunately, this was true at times, especially in the early 1960s. But few Americans knew enough about the Vietnamese culture to understand the reasons why. To survive, the South Vietnamese would have had to make dramatic adaptations to their culture—hardening it against a relentless, countercultural aggressor and accomplishing this task in an inordinately short period of time. The South Vietnamese were not able to make the necessary adaptations before United States' support dwindled away in 1975, and the country was overcome

by a conventional invasion of the North Vietnamese Army.

It's unfortunate that many Americans who served as soldiers in Vietnam knew little about the culture of the people and almost out of necessity seemed to dehumanize the Vietnamese to make killing the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese regulars easier. That's human nature and not unusual, but a lack of understanding hid any purpose for most soldiers to be there. I served in Vietnam from May 1970 to June 1971 and I came to see a purpose in my mission there: to protect the lifestyle and culture of the people.

cur with some frequency over a broad geographic or even global expanse. The direct combatants in a high-intensity conflict have generally committed the majority of their national resources and gross national product toward the war effort. World Wars I and II are examples of high-intensity conflicts.

• A mid-intensity conflict is a war between two or more nations and their allies in which the combatants employ their most modern military technology and military resources short of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. These conflicts are for limited objectives under definitive policy limitations

on the extent of destructive power that can be employed, or the extent of a geographic area that might be involved. Decisive engagements between large numbers of troops will occur at least occasionally at this level. Only a part of a nation's assets would be directed to the war and the period would not be as pro-

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tracted as in a high-intensity conflict. Examples of mid-intensity conflict include the Korean War and the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli Mideast Wars.

- A low-intensity conflict is a limited politico-military struggle to achieve political, social, economic or psychological objectives. It can be quite protracted and range from economic and political pressure all the way through terrorism and insurgency. Low-intensity conflicts are generally confined to a geographic area and constrained on the use of weaponry, tactics and levels of violence. Low-intensity conflicts include Beirut, Grenada, Nicaragua, Afghanistan and Vietnam during the United States involvement. Of course, the list is depressingly long with each conflict having its own unique features.

Although three levels of conflict have been conveniently defined, it should be realized that these conflict categories actually occur along a loosely defined continuum. Generally, most wars or conflicts do not remain at one level, but tend to escalate or deescalate over time. Each battle or period within a war can be defined in its level of intensity as well. Countless examples could be given of the escalations and deescalations of conflict in any war. However, where the Vietnam War is concerned, during the United States involvement, LAMSON 719 stands out as the only clear example of a mid-intensity conflict or battle.

LAMSON 719 lasted 45 days and large numbers of troops (more than 50,000 total) became decisively engaged. The significance of LAMSON 719 has been greatly overlooked in contemporary U.S. military history, and in Army Aviation in particular. From the introduction of the UH-1 and from the 1965 deployment of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) to Vietnam to the present, LAMSON 719 also is the best contemporary example of Army Aviation in a "deep attack" and as a combat and maneuver arm



ABOVE: A small squad area along Route 9 in the valley just east of Khe Sanh. Photo was taken in the beginning of LAMSON 719.



RIGHT: Captured enemy 50 caliber (12.7 mm) machinegun.

on a combined arms operation in combat. Both of these will be defined and discussed next month in Part II, "The Battle."

Some people feel that the Tet Offensive of 1968 was a mid-intensity battle because it was a significant escalation of the war and a large number of troops were decisively engaged. Granted, from an infantry standpoint, the battles to retake Hue and the Cholon district in Saigon during Tet may be examples of a mid-intensity level but not where Army Aviation is concerned.

While Army Aviation was involved in Tet, it was not employed to the degree that it was in LAMSON 719. Most of the Tet battles were fought by South Vietnamese, U.S. Marine Corps and U.S. Army ground combat units. Remember, Tet took place in more than 115 ur-

ban areas and was fought more like a multitude of house-to-house skirmishes and small unit actions. Most of the enemy attacks were defeated within 2 days; only the Hue and Saigon battle areas were active for more than 1 week (about 26 days in Hue). Actually, the Tet Offensive is best suited as an example of a military operation in urbanized terrain conflict, but such an article will have to wait until another time.

Low-Intensity Conflict in Vietnam

The general and most common type of engagements in Vietnam were termed "small unit actions" which mainly involved company-size units or battalion-size operations. Throughout the war the Communists primarily operated in

small units within South Vietnam. This was especially true after the Tet Offensive of 1968 when the Viet Cong were greatly depleted. These units or cells were frequently composed of only six troops with perhaps only three of them carrying weapons. The primary missions of these cells involved harassment and temporary interdiction, usually without becoming decisively engaged. In fact, the Communists were so firm about this tactic in some regions that, as captured documents reveal, a ranking person could be shot if a superior officer encountered a unit in size greater than six that was not on a specific operation. Larger units would be formed as necessary for an operation, but after the operation the unit would disperse into small unit cells once again.

Against the South Vietnamese, common tactics of the Communist forces included murder, kidnapping, confiscation of supplies, impressment and other acts of terrorism. The most frequent targets were the "elders" in a village because they represented the local governing body and, by culture, received the highest respect and fear for loss of their lives. It was not uncommon for the Communists to kidnap a ranking ancestor then impress the younger of the family members, sometimes even into suicide missions as "sappers" under the threat of the kidnapped ancestor being "cock-a-dowed" (phonetic pronunciation). "Cock-a-dow" is Vietnamese for being decapitated which, according to the Vietnamese culture, would separate that ancestor's soul to wander aimlessly in the afterlife without ascending in the family order.

Sapper operations involved either soldiers or impressed civilians sneaking through tunnels or under barbed wire at night to enter a military compound with satchel charges and grenades. Once inside, the sappers would plant or throw the charges to blow up as many



Aircraft shut down on fire support base in mountains.

people and as much equipment as possible before being killed or blowing themselves up. The main operations the Communists conducted against Americans included hit-and-run skirmishes or ambushes, sapper attacks and the setting of booby traps.

In the early phase of American involvement in Vietnam, too often when a village was occupied by the Communists or thought to be sympathetic to them, the U.S. troops would literally blast the enemy from a village or burn it to the ground. This usually caused more casualties and damage to the civilians than anything else. However, after the Tet Offensive, and the My Lai massacre in 1968, a greater effort was made toward the pacification of the people.

As another part of the Vietnamization program, civilians living in the most rural and mountainous areas were encouraged to resettle in designated pacification areas, usually in the most defensible geographic location in a regional province. From that location the people were guaranteed protection

against the Communists, a place to live, land for farming, health care, education, etc. Everyone was still to retain ownership of their ancestral property in the unpacified areas and would be able to return when the war was over. Anyone choosing to remain in the unpacified areas was given no guarantee of security or other benefits.

To a significant degree, the pacification program run by MACV was successful. Even many of the Montagnards or "Mountainards," as they were sometimes called, came to cooperate with the pacification program. Montagnards are a primitive, pigmy-like, aboriginal population of ethnic tribesmen who inhabited areas of the central and northern mountain ranges in South Vietnam. They were excellent, vicious fighters against the Communists who routinely impressed the Montagnard women, children and elderly tribesmen whenever they could capture them.

To provide greater security to the people, many of the pacification areas were made off limits to U.S. military combat personnel. In addi-

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tion, these areas and all other established populated areas became designated as control fire zones (CFZs). All military, to include aviation and artillery personnel, were restricted from firing into a CFZ without MACV or provincial civilian approval. If a helicopter was flying in a CFZ and received enemy fire, the gunner had to have a positive identification of the enemy, without any endangerment to the civilian population, in order to return fire.

On helicopter combat assaults the local province chief or a MACV officer would be required to ride in the command and control aircraft to make the decision about whether or not the gunships and troop carrying helicopters could "go hot" if enemy fire were received. Hence, as U.S. involvement continued into 1970, military operations became more and more restricted. While CFZs were occasionally frustrating, they were probably the best way to conduct operations in populated areas. Of course, there were plenty of *free fire zones* that *had no restrictions* on return of fire.

Between 1965 and 1970 about 11 percent of all deaths and 18 percent of all wounds for U.S. combat troops were caused by booby traps and mines. For the Communists to avoid decisive engagements and just peck away at the U.S. troops became increasingly frustrating, and a serious no-win situation. Clearly, the only way to defeat the enemy would be to take the battle farther westward, away from the population centers and into the Communist strongholds in the mountains and plains along the Cambodian and Laotian borders. There, the enemy could also be found in greater numbers.

Fire Support Bases and Airmobility

Conventional military operations in Vietnam were simply not possible for several reasons. Aside from the Communist tactics of

ambush and terrorism, and the absence of "front lines," the topography and climate profoundly influenced the timing and types of operations that could be conducted. The climate is primarily tropical and quite wet especially during the summer monsoon season when military activity on both sides was significantly reduced.

The southern part of South Vietnam is called the Mekong Delta, which is flat, swampy and covered with rice paddies. Delta areas were generally no-go terrain for military vehicles and tough going for soldiers on foot. "Riverine operations" by shallow-draft gunboats were common in the Delta. The capital city, Saigon, is located north of the Delta in an area known as the Piedmont, which consists of rolling hills and plains. Armor operations were most frequent in this area and along the coastal plain.

The coastal plain is a narrow strip of beaches, river valleys, marshlands and rice paddies along the length of South Vietnam. The coastal plain is the area of highest population and commerce, and was the location of most major U.S. bases and logistics centers.

The great majority of the remaining northern half of South Vietnam is composed of "triple canopy" jungle and mountains, some higher than 5,000 feet. Triple canopy jungle comprises three dense layers of foliage reaching as high as 15 feet, 75 feet and 150 feet from each layer of bushes and trees. The only effective type of operations that could be conducted in this terrain was airmobile assaults by helicopters with small units of infantry and artillery.

Operations to interdict into enemy-held strongholds which were usually in the mountains, employed the fire support base (FSB) concept. The typical combat operation involved the establishment of a self-contained, self-defended artillery base, usually on top of a hill or mountain, from which infantry

"search and destroy" operations could be supported. The FSB concept reflected a universal truth in contemporary infantry combat: Never conduct operations beyond the range of artillery support. FSBs provided rapid, reliable, continuously available fire support, which was especially important when weather conditions precluded air support. By their locations, most FSBs provided additional advantages for communications relay, observation and control of high ground.

A typical fire support base would consist of a battery of 105 mm or 155 mm howitzers, an infantry company, four 81 mm mortars from an infantry battalion, and communications, administrative, medical and special operations personnel (K-9 teams, psychological operations teams, sniper teams with night scopes, etc.). FSBs were usually placed within range of the supporting fire of another FSB. Each FSB generally supported three or more infantry companies in conducting operations around the base.

The development of the fire support base concept was an innovation that went hand-in-hand with the increased flexibility and mobility made available by the use of the Vietnam workhorse—the helicopter. Many FSBs had no access for resupply and were wholly reliant on helicopters for support. There were generally few roads, and when there were roads they were usually not secure. Remember, this was a war without front lines against an enemy that favored ambushes and terrorism. Clearly, the helicopter made possible the FSB concept. Airmobility and air assault tactics in Vietnam enabled the U.S. Army for the first time to move large forces to specific locations rapidly and on short notice. FSBs allowed the Army to progressively strike deeper into enemy-held terrain without the loss of superior firepower.



Fire support base with a battalion of artillery on it.

Army Aviation Missions and Units

Much could be written about the missions and units of Army Aviation in Vietnam, but only a short review limited to rotary wing operations is necessary here. After 1965, the major types of Army helicopters employed in Vietnam included: The AH-1 Cobra gunship, the OH-6 Cayuse and OH-58 Kiowa scout and division artillery helicopters, and UH-1C, D and H series helicopters.

Unit sizes and types varied considerably among divisions and the four corps areas in South Vietnam. They consisted of platoons, detachments, teams, companies, batteries, squadrons, battalions and groups. At the height of U.S. involvement there were more than 5,000 Army aircraft in Vietnam and it is estimated that more than 13,000 Army aircraft cycled through Vietnam between 1961 and 1972. A few of the more typical

types of aviation units and their missions were:

- **Aeromedical Evacuation (Dustoff) Units.** At the peak of U.S. troop strength in Vietnam there were 116 UH-1 helicopter ambulances in service. Between 1965 and 1969 alone some 373,000 military and civilian casualties were evacuated by Dustoff helicopters. While many casualties were conveniently evacuated by other aircraft in the vicinity, the lion's share was han-

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dled by Dustoff units on a 24-hour basis in all weather conditions.

- **Cargo Helicopter Units.** An aviation battalion in support of a division consisted of two cargo helicopter companies of CH-47 Chinooks. Their missions included troop and cargo transport. Cargo helicopters played an integral role in the establishment and resupply of fire support bases primarily by delivering artillery pieces, ammunition, food and fuel.

- **Assault Helicopter Companies (AHCs).** Clearly, the workhorses of the Vietnam War were the UH-1 Hueys of assault helicopter companies. AHC missions included resupply ("ash and trash"), combat assaults, psychological operations, special forces and long range reconnaissance patrol insertions, electronic surveillance, etc. The typical AHC consisted of 24 to 27 UH-1s in three platoons—two lift platoons of UH-1H "slicks" aircraft and one gun platoon of UH-1Cs.

- **Air Cavalry (Cav) Units.** Combat divisions in Vietnam were usually supported by air cav squadrons. Each squadron consisted of three air cav troops and one ground cav troop. An air cav troop contained 27 helicopters, 9 to 10 AH-1G Cobras or UH-1C gunships, 10 to 11 OH-6 or OH-58 scouts and 7 UH-1s. The typical mission of a cav unit involved coordinating with a combat brigade for reconnaissance missions and bomb damage assessment in specified grid squares. In Laos during LAMSON 719, a recon team often consisted of one low AH-1 gunship and three high AH-1 gunships on search and destroy missions.

- **Aerial Rocket Artillery (ARA) Units.** These units were designated as batteries and had a total of 12 AH-1G "heavy hog" aircraft. Each had rocket pods capable of carrying up to 76 rockets. ARA units worked directly for a division artillery and received fire missions the same way as did ground artillery. The aircraft were usually used to provide close

air support to ground units and to assist assault helicopter companies on combat assaults. During LAMSON 719 most ARA teams consisted of three aircraft with the additional mission of seeking targets of opportunity.

Low level flying in Vietnam was strictly prohibited and viewed as unsafe by most units up to the standdowns in 1972. Aircraft were supposed to fly at 1,500 feet above ground level in Vietnam and at 3,000 feet above ground level in Laos and Cambodia. Tight circling approaches and climbouts were typical for getting into and out of landing zones (LZs).

Combat assaults also conformed to the altitude restrictions and usually were conducted in tight formations of UH-1s, sometimes with as many as 10 aircraft in one lift. Most combat assaults, however, were divided into multilifts with about six aircraft per lift. Generally, the more aircraft involved, the more normal were approaches and departures of flights, although terrain and LZ factors largely determined the assault tactics.

Each combat assault had at least one team of UH-1C gunships that would make a racetrack pattern on one side of the flight around the

LZ, at an altitude of 500 to 1,000 feet, to provide gun cover if needed. Occasionally, a smoke ship would be used to provide additional cover.

Combat assault tactics mentioned above were effective in Vietnam when a unit was usually only sporadically engaged, primarily with just small arms fire. However, during LAMSON 719, as we shall see, such tactics were disastrous. Before the end of LAMSON 719, most aviators routinely flew low level. Combat assaults were conducted by single ship landings with 30-second separations, and gunships made runs from higher altitudes. The LAMSON 719 battle probably did more than any other operation in the history of the Vietnam War to revert Army Aviation doctrine to the development of nap-of-the-earth flight tactics, and to move away from close formation combat assaults.

The Ho Chi Minh Trail

Through the 1960s resupply and reinforcement of Communist troops in South Vietnam were accomplished via two primary routes. The most efficient route to resupply the southern half of South Vietnam was by cargo ship to the port of



One of countless trails in Laotian panhandle known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Bomb craters are visible everywhere.



A typical combat assault. Insertion involved several aircraft in tight formation landing in a large LZ. Most LZs in mountainous areas required hovering instead of landing, and were sometimes booby-trapped.

Approach to a small ground unit on a typical "ash and trash" resupply sortie.



Sihanoukville (Kompong Som) in Cambodia. Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the Cambodian ruler, allowed the North Vietnamese to use the port, and to construct base areas and logistical facilities in Cambodia near the South Vietnam border. This was stopped in March 1970 when Prince Sihanouk was overthrown by an anti-Communist government that ordered North Vietnam out of the country and sought U.S. support.

In May and June 1970, U.S. and South Vietnamese forces launched

a major offensive into the Communist sanctuaries in Cambodia. The offensive was a major success. Huge amounts of enemy supplies, equipment and bases were destroyed along with a serious loss of Communist troop strength. Coupled with the major loss of troops during the Tet Offensive, the North Vietnamese were severely reduced as a combat effective force in the southern IV Corps region of South Vietnam for years to come.

The second and most important route for the movement of supplies

and reinforcements from North Vietnam to the south was the Ho Chi Minh Trail, named after the North Vietnamese leader. By 1970, it had been developed into an extensive, well-organized network of hundreds of miles of roads and trails running south in a wide corridor along the border between Laos and Vietnam into Cambodia. With the loss of the port at Sihanoukville, all supplies and reinforcements had to be moved down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Not only was this a long, arduous trip, but for some time the trail network also was continually bombed by the Air Force, Navy and Marines. Despite these problems, the North Vietnamese had to dramatically increase activity on the Ho Chi Minh Trail to try to reconstitute their forces in the south.

The Americans and South Vietnamese had turned the war around and wanted to continue the offensive. So, in late 1970 an invasion of Laos, into the heart of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, was considered. An operations plan called LAMSON 719 was drawn up. The principal objectives of LAMSON 719 were to interdict and disrupt the flow of enemy troops and supplies along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos that were coming into South Vietnam.

Operation LAMSON 719 would be the first major test of the Vietnamization effort. It would buy more time and safety for the continued withdrawal of U.S. troops by further damaging North Vietnam's ability to launch any offensives. And, it hopefully would cripple North Vietnam's strategy for combat operations and enhance peace negotiations, which were already underway.



Next month: LAMSON 719, Part II: "The Battle."