

SECTION VII - The Helicopter History of Events Outside of Vietnam

Introduction

It is a custom for the VHPA Directory to present a small helicopter related history and for the cover photos to relate to the theme of that history. These histories are not written as definitive works, rather their primary purposes are:

- to be educational and informative to the membership,
- to present a quality selection of the available historical material with a bias toward helicopter related activities,
- to present at least some material on several units, and
- to provide a format for individual VHPAers and VHCMAers (and other interested parties) to provide their personal comments.

Other sources are simply used to help organize the personal comments and to round out the story. All VHPA histories are "living" meaning that additions and corrections are always welcome. All VHPA histories are periodically reprinted.

For the purposes of this VHPA history, the area 'outside of Vietnam' is defined as any area in Southeast Asia that was not administered by the Republic of South Vietnam. This area covered Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, North Vietnam and the international waters of Southeast Asia. The scope of this history includes the helicopter units stationed in this area as well as the battles fought and significant events that occurred in this area from a helicopter perspective. The term 'helicopter unit' includes any organization (e.g. civilian, military, governmental) that used helicopters in Southeast Asia.

A basic map

This map was adapted from Summers' *Historical Atlas of the Vietnam War*, page 77 entitled MACV. The tactical areas along the western border of South Vietnam bares a strong resemblance to Map 19 in Stanton's *Green Berets at War* and primarily relate to MACV-SOG AOs. The names of the AOs (e.g. Daniel Boone, Nickel Steel) are taken from both Summers and Stanton. The U.S. Navy SAR positions are from Carroll's *North S*A*R*. The location of Tang Island, the site of the *Mayaguez Incident*, came from *The Marines in Vietnam*. The location of PDJ and Long Tieng came from Map 2 in Parker's *Covert Ops*. Sadly this map does not include even the most significant "up country" locations in Laos nor does it show Bangkok or U-Tapao in Thailand.

LAM SON 719

LAM SON 719 was, without any doubt, the largest single helicopter related operation to be conducted outside of South Vietnam. While LAM SON 719 is within the scope of the helicopter history presented in this Directory, it will not be mentioned here because the 1994 VHPA Directory was dedicated to just this subject. Anyone desiring a copy of that material should contact VHPA Headquarters or Mike Law.

ATTENTION 101st Airborne Division

This historical presentation is serious lacking in material relating to the 101st's trans-border operations. This is due more to a lack of Directory Committee resources and a lack of material submitted from 101st veterans than anything else. Make no mistake here - the Directory Committee is well aware of the sacrifice, skill and bravery of the 101st helicopter units and soldiers. Nothing in this history

is meant to take anything away from anyone who flew for the 101st or to honor the FOB 2 support group over the FOB 1 group. Please know that everyone who submitted material to the Directory Committee for this history should find at least a part of it here. Sadly, only a few 101st veterans responded to our requests for input.



T.G. 96, 23.

SIGNAL. WHITE. KA.

THANKS

UG 0923.

11 WHITE

UG 1022. UN WHITE

SEND RICE

TG 9913

SIGNAL

M. WHITE

SEND WATER

Please you send one pax
sick AND 5 pax to TG

8042 (SIGNAL NO HAVE NOT)

I shall. Thank you very much

T.G. 91, 21

NOT HAVE SIGNAL

NOT HAVE SOLDIER

UG 1121 YA

WHITE PICKUP

MORTAR 81 M/M.

BRING BACK HERE

Many of our pilots and crewmembers who flew in Laos will remember these hand written messages by the local customer coming through the cockpit window outlining instructions for the next flight. Some are straight to the point — some are quaint — and some are even sad — but they helped us get the job done.

(Submitted by Leon LaShomb)

T.G. 92. 22.

SIGNAL WHITE. I.

CAN YOU NOT COME

YOU DROP.

THANKS

SEND ONE WOMAN SICK

WITH 3. PAX TO VF 1672

SIGNAL WHITE 'N'

COME BACK LAND LE 204

PICKUP ONE MAN WITH 3

PIGE BACK LE 46.

SEND. RICE. GO TG 9726.

SIGNAL. T. WHITE

AND ONE BAG. GO TG 9825.

SIGNAL. N. WHITE

SEND. SOLDIER.

GO TG 9324 SIGNAL.

V. RED

CAPTAIN.

I NEED YOU MOVE ME LUMBER.

To. the my home. T.G. 73.52.

about 1. trip.

OK. meBe 90:

I SEND ONE OFFICER AND ONE PAX
3 TG 8042 (SIGNAL NO HAVE NOT)

Thank you very much.

< YOU COME BACK SITE 154-

The CIA's Secret War in Laos

The Vietnam War Era helicopter history of Southeast Asian must include Laos. As with other geographic locations, the helicopter history takes on added meaning when the military and political events are known. Sadly it is often difficult to find a good, brief military and political history of an area. In most cases the VHPA only works with individual recollections, unit histories and major combat operation reports which do not contain 'the big picture.' Perhaps the best (for VHPA purposes) 'brief military and political history of Laos can be found in the 16+ page Foreword written by William M. Leary of the Univ. of Georgia for James E. Parker's *Covert Ops* by St. Martin's Paperbacks or in hardback *CODENAME MULE* by the Naval Institute Press. Professor Leary seems to have specialized in Laos and Air America - which suits the VHPA's interests nicely. What follows is an edited version of the Foreword.

The largest paramilitary operation ever conducted by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) took place in Laos. The US established an Operations Mission in Vientiane after the French left to help the royal government with its many economic problems. The CIA had only a minor presence with a few officers watching small intelligence network reporting on the various political and military factions jockeying for power. The three main Lao factions were the neutralists, the Communist Pathet Lao (PL), and the pro-American elements.

In the summer of 1959 fighting broke out between the PL and the Royal government in the Plain of Jars (also called Plaine des Jarres or PDJ), a strategic 50-square mile plateau area surrounded by rugged mountain ridges in the Long Tieng valley in the northern part of Laos not far from the border with North Vietnam. The U.S. answered a request for assistance by dispatching Army Special Forces teams (later known as White Star) to train the Royal Lao Army and the CIA increased its logistical support to the army and anti-Communist areas by using the transports of Air America, an airline that it secretly owned. The American Ambassador in Vientiane was responsible for all U.S. activities. The U.S. supported General Phoumi who had his base at Savannakhet in southern Laos. The Russians were airlifting support for the PL in northern Laos. Neither Russian nor America seemed to want a confrontation in Laos so they 'cooled things down' in 1961.

However, in the early 1961 CIA officers began working with Vang Pao, the leader of the Hmong tribesmen in northern Laos. The Hmong were almost a stone-age people that are ethnically and culturally different from the Lao. They had already suffered from the better-armed PL and the North Vietnamese held them in destine. The CIA found them eager to obtain modern arms and training. To provide communications and support to these remote areas, the CIA expanded Air America with a variety of fixed wing aircraft (heavy emphasis on STOLs) and helicopters. To speed up this process, the Kennedy Administration directed the Marine Corps to transfer several UH-34Ds to AA and to work with AA on a 'skills transfer' basis in 1961. By mid-1961 the CIA was supplying arms and ammo to about 9,000 Hmong and transporting rice to ten of thousands of Hmong refugees displaced by the fighting. Most items were airdrops but AA also developed a series of airstrips, many on mountain tops or mountainside by having local villagers cut down trees and level the ground as best they could. In 1961 there were a dozen Victor Sites (airstrips) but the program grew to more than 100 Lima Sites by late 1964 and then to more than 400 in the early 1970s.

Thus we have the basis for the 'Secret War' - officially Russia wouldn't support the Pathet Lao 'too much' and America about the same for the Royal Lao Army. Everyone signed the 23 July 1962 'Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos.' Officially the North Vietnamese were not in Laos and, later, were not flowing Russian equipment down the Ho Chi Minh Trail to South Vietnam. Officially America had a humanitarian aid program for these poor, remote, mountain people called Hmong who just happened to be good fighters, hate North Vietnamese, and live along significant portions of the border with China and North Vietnam and, eventually, the Ho Chi Minh Trail. In general, there was little 'world interest' (also spelled media or political attention) in Laos or northern Thailand. Since no significant pieces of the American military (like an Army division or a huge Air Force presence) was there - everything must be cool. By 1965 the Secret War 'began' - about the same time that America began its air war over North Vietnam, its electronic surveillance

of the NVA, its interdiction effort on the Trail, and its efforts to kill NVA soldiers before they reached South Vietnam. The CIA, and later SOG, also believed that by putting pressure on the NVA in Laos, they were diverting NVA resources away from South Vietnam.

The heavy rain forest jungle and mountainous terrain with its tall, limestone krasts was the battle ground. In the early years, the war took on a seasonal aspect. The dry season lasted from October to May, the monsoon from June to September. About mid-December started the smoke season for the slash and burn farmers. High temperatures, high altitude, sharp mountains, generally rotten visibility, ever increasing quantities of advanced AA weapons, a 'military unfriendly' political situation, a few good guys scattered all over, lots of bad guys wherever the NVA need to be - you've got Laos! Perfect place for another helicopter war!

Air America

In March, 1960, four H-19As arrived in Vientiane to support CIA directed operations. In August and September, 1959, AA had three veteran transport pilots transition to helicopters in Japan and, with a fourth pilot, gained additional experience flying U.S. Air Force H-19s in the mountains north of Clark Air Base in the Philippines. Three of the former USAF H-19s were used for missions while the other was relegated to spare parts.

Due to the limitations of the H-19s, they stayed mainly at lower elevations, carrying CIA case officers to meetings in outlying areas and tossing leaflets out of the aircraft during elections.

The following was taken from an unpublished manuscript of Professor Leary of the Univ. of Georgia:

Dale Williamson was the section leader of Air America's helicopter operations in Laos. He and another former veteran transport pilot, Arthur D. Wilson, did most of the operational flying while, Herbert Liu, performed ferry flights. The fourth helicopter trained transport pilot, Gordon V. Smith, left the program soon after the H-19s arrived in Laos in March, 1960.

In June, 1960, working out of Savannakhet, Williamson had a full fuel load and was preparing to depart on a leaflet drop when his mission suddenly was changed to an emergency medical evacuation. A Lao soldier at a small outpost 40 miles northeast of Seno had cut his leg with a machete and gangrene had set in. Williamson boarded a Lao captain and medic and proceeded to the outpost. After collecting the injured man and his family, who would look after him in the hospital, Williamson circled the field to gain altitude. He had just reached 1,000 feet when the engine quit. As he neared the ground, Williamson's fixed-wing habits took hold and he pulled back on the cyclic. As a result, the aircraft's tail slammed into the ground. Fortunately, there were no injuries, but the helicopter could not be flown.

Williamson walked back to the Lao outpost, about a mile distant, and sent a radio message for assistance. No one could come for him that evening and the next day Wilson flew another H-19 to retrieve him.

Not long after this accident, three recently discharged, experienced USMC helicopter pilots arrived to allow Williamson and his companions to give up their rotary-wing careers. This was the start of what would be a long term relationship between AA and USMC trained helicopter pilots and mechanics and USMC supplied helicopters.

The H-19As proved to be under powered and inadequate for the demands of the assignment. On March 29, 1961, Clarence J. Abadie led a flight of 16 former USMC UH-34Ds from Bangkok to Udorn, where AA established a major rotary wing operating base. Udorn was 350 miles northeast of Bangkok but only 35 miles south of Vientiane.

There is a big difference between supporting three H-19As and 16 UH-34Ds. The official USMC published histories are a little quiet about their relationship with AA in 1961. In a chapter on the Laotian Crisis, 1962 we read: "A 300-man Marine aviation support unit, MABS-16, had actually been positioned at Udorn for over six months during 1961 where they provided maintenance support for helicopters which were assisting General Phoumi's forces in Laos."

The helicopter force soon became involved in supporting Hmong forces engaged in fierce battle with the Pathet Lao at Padong, a mountain top position south of the PDJ. On May 30, the first Air America helicopter pilots died in Laos, when Charles Mateer and Walter Wzbowski crashed in bad weather attempting to land supplies to the besieged Hmong garrison at Padong.

The Special Collections department of University of Texas at Dallas library houses the Air America collection including the famous bronze wall memorial to all (fixed and rotor wing) their known KIAs and MIAs. The collection is organized around individually donated material as well as traditionally cataloged publications. The Air America Club is the name of the association for those who served with Air America at any time. The Club publishes a newsletter *Air America Log* which was also the name of the company newspaper during the Vietnam Era. The Club encourages individuals to donate items to the library. Sadly, most seem to do this either just prior to or not long after they pass away.

The VHPA Directory Editor spent one entire day in this library last December with three goals in mind. First, extract information related to Air America helicopter pilot and crew member KIAs for the VHPA database. Second, begin to understand what historical material there is on Air America's helicopter activities. Third, begin to understand how Air America's helicopter were used. The first goal is about 90% complete with 117 KIA records in the VHPA database. More research needs to be done to obtain event details for many individuals.

The library has the private collection of Capt. Leon V. LaShomb who was one of the prime movers behind the Air America Club and their memorial. The collection consists of several boxes of indexed material several relating to the 1984 Yearbook. His notes, letters, and printed material all show the same 'labor of love' that many VHPA efforts did. Page 246 of this VHPA Directory contains one page from that Yearbook which speaks volumes for the rest of the book, for Leon, and for the Air America Club.

The library also has the private collection of Dave Hickler who was, as best as be determine without expert verification, a senior pilot and a member of Air America's safety and/or accident investigation board for many years. The VHPA obtained copies of several dozen helicopter 'accident' reports. Some are indeed aircraft accidents in the traditional definition. For example, on 18 Sep 1968 the pilot of UH-34D tail number H-56 was cleared to swing the tail while hovering on the ramp at Luang Prabang and the tail rotor struck a fuel truck. However, some read like U.S. Army '1965 accident reports' (when battle damage was not the politically correct term). For example, consider the following from a 22 Feb 1968 report:

Safety Synopsis - Because of the nature of this mishap, this report is best covered by the pilot's statement, a part of which is quoted verbatim: "I was assigned as pilot of UH-34D H-52 and was working in company with Flight Mechanic J.H. Hope in the vicinity of LS-239, Laos. We were engaged in carrying cargo to outposts in the vicinity of LS-239 under the provisions of the 1841 Contract.

At approximately 1410 hours local time, we had just landed at a pad located at coordinates UG115275 for the purpose of off-loading cargo. Almost immediately after landing, the aircraft was struck by a projectile from an apparent heavy caliber weapon. Flames engulfed the entire aircraft and it collapsed to the right. After several wild gyrations, the aircraft came to rest on the right side, supported by the stubs of the main rotor blades, and with the pilot's window approximately two feet above the ground.

I was able to unstrap and exit through the pilot's window, crawl underneath the main rotor system, and make it away from the burning aircraft. Approximately 15-30 minutes elapsed before the fire died down sufficiently for me to make it to a friendly position. Friendly indigenous met me about half way and they had already initiated search for survivors and had found one local wounded and one dead. They also informed me the flight mechanic was dead in the wreckage of H-52, which was still burning vigorously.

When the rescue effort began to materialize and the fire had subsided, I went to the aircraft to confirm the statement concerning the flight mechanic. At this time one of the local party discovered the Flight Mechanic lying about 25 yards down the hill. He appeared to be

critically injured, but was coherent and complaining that his back was causing pain.

I placed a tourniquet on his right wrist which appeared to be blown half away and had a local medic give him what I believed to be morphine. We then carried him to the helicopter pad and within five minutes we were picked up by H-40, H-52 and all equipment on board was completely destroyed."

Comments -The pilot of H-52 landed on a pad which was occupied by friendly forces and was therefore considered secure. However, unfriendly elements infiltrated the area within effective small arms and either mortar or recoilless rifle range. The force of the explosion and damage to the aircraft indicates the aircraft was struck on the left side by a projectile from a recoilless rifle of large caliber.

The good news about Air America accident reports - they contains a lot of information that can help the VHPA understand more about their helicopter operations. In general, they are peers with U.S. military helicopter accident reports. The bad news - very few crew member names are mentioned. The VHPA's databases are well equipped to record details along with names, dates, aircraft tail numbers, locations, etc. Sadly, our Air America records will not be as 'name rich' as our U.S. Army records.

Finally, the library has what appears to be a complete set of *Air America Log*, the generally monthly (one year had only nine issues) official company publication. From an historical perspective, the *Air America Log* seems to be better than the famous 1st Aviation Brigade *HAWK* magazine. The VHPA copied several dozen articles for input into the databases that make up the Historical Reference Directory. What follows are pieces from selected articles:

Dec 1967 *Air America Log*, Vol 1 No 2; AAM Acquires Five Beautiful Bell 205s by Staff/BKK - Our BKK base recently received five spanking new Bell 205 helicopters. Each machine was packed in three large crates which were hauled from Bangkok's dockside to its Don Muang Airport on two huge trucks. The three crates contained respectively the chopper's fuselage, tail boom, and rotor blades. The 205s were uncrated and assembled in the open on the North Ramp of the airport. A maximum effort was put forth by all AAM and Bell personnel concerned and the aircraft were made ready for flight test in very short order. Assembly of the 205s was done under the supervision of Robert (Bob) Davis, Superintendent of Maintenance. The reams of paperwork involved in importing the choppers were efficiently handled by Norbert Wynn, Superintendent, Supply.

Jan 1968; Udon Fire Fighters by R.B. Malicsi, Fire Chief, UDN. In addition to its aircraft operations and maintenance activities in Southeast Asia, Air America also furnishes fire protection services. At AAM's Udon base, the organization charged with this responsibility is the Udon Fire Brigade, as it is known in Company circles. The Brigade is responsible for structural and aircraft crash fire fighting and rescue operations at the Air America complex and adjacent taxiways and runways at the Udon Airport. The Brigade's primary mission is the protection and preservation of lives; secondly, the protection of property and the control and extinguishing of all types of fires. The Brigade is presently protecting over \$1-million worth of property; this figure does not include the worth of the four twin-engine fixed-wing and 25 rotary-wing aircraft based at UDN. AAM's Fire Brigade works closely with the U.S. Air Force Brigade and the Fire Chiefs of both organizations coordinate their activities and cooperate with each other in all matters - especially on mutual air responses. A mutual air training program is in effect on a continuing basis between the two Fire Brigades.

Two photos appear with this article. One clearly shows a fire truck with Air America painted on the side and a USAF HH-43B Huskie crash-rescue, fire-fighting helicopter hovering to the rear.

Feb 1968; LETS SAVE A BUCK a Message From Management. We are rapidly reaching an economic plateau. Our customers' funds have been cut - therefore their requirements of AAM have lessened. So it is good common sense for us to save a buck. The Company, to become increasingly efficient in serving its customers, always seeks to up-grade its equipment - like switching increasingly to jet-powered machines. Would you believe that 32% of our fleet is turbine powered? We've converted 14 piston-powered twin Beeches

to Volpar turbo-props. And we operate 26 turbo-prop Porters. While, in the rotary wing division, we fly eleven turbine-powered 204Bs and five spanking new 205s - big brothers to the 204Bs.

Feb 1968; Vientiane by Frank L. Dunn, BM/VTE. Air America's Laos Base is located at Wattay Airport, Vientiane, Laos, the country's Administrative Capitol; Luang Prabang, the Royal Capitol, is 145 miles to the north. AAM operates in Laos to meet contractual commitments with such organizations as the International Control Commission (C.I.C.) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). To meet these commitments, AAM performs these services in Southeast Asia:

1. Maintains C.I.C. helicopters based at Wattay Airport and provides ground services to the organization's four-engine Boeing Stratoliners transiting Vientiane. AAM also supplies weather information for C.I.C. flights in to and out of Wattay.

2. Provides airlift throughout Laos under contract with USAID. Note: the Air Transport Operations Group (ATOG) is a cargo and traffic handling function which AAM performs under contract with USAID.

Of AAM's Laos airlift operations, 85% are cargo flights, 15% personnel flights. Cargo delivered in Laos is mostly rice and related commodities which are both free air-dropped without parachute or landed on-site. AAM also parachutes commodities which would not withstand the impact of a free fall - such as drums of kerosene. Air-dropping accounts for over 80% of the deliveries; the rest is landed. AAM air-delivers over 8-million pounds of commodities a month.

In addition to its Main Base at Vientiane, AAM operates stations at these far-flung Laotian localities - going from north to south: Ban Houie Sai, Luang Prabang, Sam Thong, Savannakhet and Pakse.

AAM operates flights on a regular schedule between Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Savannakhet, Pakse and Attapue, Laos, and a regular twice-a-week commissary flight to Bangkok, Thailand.

AAM planes also fly throughout Laos non-sked. They operate off of all kinds of strips - ranging from Wattay's 6,000 foot concrete runway to 600 foot dirt strips perched on mountain ridges, carved out of hillsides or smuggled in remote valleys.

A total of 43 planes are based at VTE: Helios, Porters, Volpars, Ten-twos, Caribous, C-47s, C-46s and C-123s. VTE employs over 1,100 personnel who, by passport check, cover the astonishing range of 13 nationalities. The large majority, however, are Lao.

Vol III, No. 3, 1969 written by David H. Hickler, ABM/UDN. The front page carries a photo of Acting Base Manager D.H. "Dave" Hickler, standing on the right wheel strut and reaching up to shake hands with Captain Wayne H. Gentry, AAM/UDN, for piloting AAM Sikorsky UH-34 No. H-15 past the 10,000 hours mark. The photo also shows M.L. Centeno, the Flight Mechanic, sitting on a passenger seat.

Vol III, No. 7, 1969; The front page carries a photo of 24 men in front of an UH-34D. The caption over the photo reads 'Air America's 1,000-hr. Sikorsky UH-34 Pilots' and is dated 7 Sept. The narrative reads: Air America has 24 UH-34 pilots at Udorn who have accumulated over 1,000 hours flying time in that particular helicopter. This is the largest such group in the world to have amassed so much time in the UH-34D (civilian designation is S-58) according to Mr. Archie Loper, Sikorsky Aircraft's field representative in Southeast Asia. To commemorate this milestone, earlier this year Mr. Loper presented 1,000-hour pins (enlarged picture of the pin printed at the bottom of the article) to the historic group of 24 Air America pilots. The pilots also were given individual prints of the pic shown above each of which had been personally autographed by Mr. Igor Sikorsky, the famous founder of Sikorsky Aircraft Division, United Aircraft Corporation.

Air America may have peaked in size during the late 1960s but it was still going strong in 1972. The fleet even included some US Army CH-47Cs loaned to Air America for use in Laos. The company was still flying in Vietnam until the final moments. Currently the VHPA HELICOPTER database holds 58 Air America records (35 loss and 23 non-loss, 47 related to CH-34s and 11 other aircraft). The KIAMA database holds 26 helicopter pilots, 6 helicopter crew members, and 85 fixed wing individual.

The Marines in Thailand

As noted in the Air America section, MABS-16 had a 300-man support unit at Udorn for over six months in 1961 to help establish the helicopter maintenance base. This is the earliest known American military helicopter unit assignment to Southeast Asia.

The Laotian Crisis, 1962 is the name of a chapter in one volume of the official USMC history of The Marines in Vietnam. As the North Vietnamese sponsored Pathet Lao army gained control over the eastern areas of Laos to allow the Ho Chi Minh Trail to be developed, one of the American responses was the establishment of Joint Task Force 116 (JTF 116) in 1961. After the political tensions eased in mid-1961, JTF 116 was deactivated. However, when President Kennedy ordered U.S. forces to deploy to Thailand on 15 May 1962, JTF 116 was reactivated. The muscle of JTF 116, which became the 3d Marine Expeditionary Unit (3d MEU), was a Marine expeditionary brigade composed of a regimental landing team (three reinforced infantry battalions), a jet attack squadron, a helicopter transport squadron, and supporting units to be based at Udorn. The UH-34D equipped HMM-261, which was operating as the Special Landing Force (SLF), landed at Bangkok on 18 May.

Sky = the CIA = the customer

Only recently have we started to find books written by former CIA officers who fought in Laos. One of the best is Parker's *Covert Ops*. Basically his book is a collection of short stories about the life and times of a CIA (codename Sky) officer in the PDJ area of Laos in 1971 - 1973. Earlier in the book he explained that everyone in Sky had either a nickname or radio call sign - his was Mule. The reader will pick up the others in this edited version of the short story called *Hmong New Year*.

The Hmong New Year, like Tet in Vietnam and the Chinese New Year, came in February. In 1973, because of the peace talks or the F-111s or for whatever reason, our forces (the Hmong and the Thai) were not under attack this February, as they had been in years past. Vang Pao (the Hmong commander) wanted the troops in the field to celebrate the New Year in traditional fashion. This had something to do with killing a water buffalo and dressing it for a New Year's Day feast. It was an important part of the tradition for the buffalo to be sacrificed where the Hmong lived; an integral part of the Hmong belief in the trees and the mountains around them. Where the buffalo was killed was significant in bridging the distance between the Hmong people and their environment.

Hog was the first to learn that V.P. wanted live water buffalo delivered to all forward Hmong positions. It was one of those cross-cultural propositions that sounds simple in each language but had different meanings. Sky and Air America had plenty of planes and helicopters, and V.P. was sure there was some way to get the live animals out to the Hmong sites. It was important to him and to the Hmong, but it did not appear important to us. We saw no value in heli-lifting live buffaloes. Nice buffalo steaks in cardboard boxes we could do.

I went with Hog to argue with V.P. on the matter. Maybe, I suggested, we could rotate some of the men from the different sites back to a special area in the valley where they could kill the buffalo, and we'd send the meat out to the sites. V.P. said no, the water buffalo had to be butchered where the men lived and worked. He cocked his head and knitted his brow as if confused about why I didn't understand this. So we went to Greek and said V.P. has these water buffalo to move to the field. "You don't mean live, do you?" asked Greek. "Yea, we sorta do," Hog said. "A water buffalo is bigger than a Volkswagen, weighs a ton. How are we going to get them to LS 15, Ba Na?" Greek asked. "That's what Air Operations is supposed to know how to do. That's your job." "You tell Vang Pao to go stick a water buffalo up his #&@." We don't have any livestock facilities on our aircraft." "Greek," Hog said with a meaningful look. "Oh, s&#%, Hog, how do we move live water buffalo?" Greek asked rhetorically. "I reckon we have to sling them out."

It didn't work on the first try. The buffalo was fitted with a belly harness, and a helicopter came in and began to drop a weighted line for

someone to attach to the harness. The water buffalo heard the helicopter and took off, dragging three or four Hmong behind him.

Tranquilizers were ordered from Udorn. The next buffalo was doped up for his sling ride. This time, the buffalo stood with his head down and allowed the helicopter to pick him up. In time, he was delivered to one of my positions near LS 15. For several days, Air America slung out water buffalo to the forward positions. An Air America helicopter coming in to a position with a doped-up buffalo was a strange sight!

I had long since learned that the Hmong had better eyes than I did, even when I used binoculars. For instance, I might be waiting on a site for a helicopter, and the skies appeared empty. A Hmong looked in the distance, without squinting, and said, "Chopper." I looked up and didn't see a thing. Nhia said, "Yeap, sure is." When I took out my binoculars and scanned the sky, I might see a speck way in the distance. Maybe that was a helicopter, or it could be dirt on the lens. Once, the Hmong spotted a helicopter, but I could just make it out with the binoculars. Then they said it wasn't ours, that it wasn't coming our way. It took me another two or three minutes to see the speck moving laterally.

At one site, a helicopter arrived without its water buffalo. The kicker got on his stomach to guide the helicopter down so that the animal would have a soft landing, but there was no buffalo at the end of the sling. The pilot said, "S&%#," we had him just a moment ago." "Nope," one of the Hmong said, "there wasn't a water buffalo there, at least since Sam Thong." The Hmong had not only seen the helicopter ten miles out but had seen that it wasn't slinging anything. We often wondered if there were any Hmong along the way who saw that water buffalo fall from the chopper. 'Why would Sky send the buffalo that way?' they might have asked. Or, if they didn't see the helicopter and suddenly a water buffalo dropped out of the sky at their feet, they would have said, 'Damned thing was flying.'

Greek's real problem came in getting water buffalo to Bouam Long, LS 32. It was just too far to sling one buffalo at a time. Also, we were deep into the smoky season, and it was a constant struggle getting Air America pilots to fly helicopters through all that haze. Greek ordered up an Air America Chinook. T.J. and Super Mex pitched in and worked on getting the buffalo ready for the flight.

"The plan here," T.J. explained, "is to dope these animals until they drop and then lift 'em onto pallets with a forklift, strap 'em down, and put 'em on the Chinook two by two. We can get eight on."

The water buffalo were led behind Air Ops where the tranquilizing and palleting was done. By the time the Chinook arrived from Udorn, the eight buffalo were on the ramp and lashed down to their pallets in neat rows. They looked like they were ready for mailing. Their legs were hog-tied, like rodeo animals. They were lying on their sides, strapped to the individual pallets with heavy webbing.

T.J. and Super Mex were justly proud of their cargo, but the Air America pilot said he wasn't carrying them to Bouam Long. The Greek exploded. "You worthless, scum-sucking, overpaid bus driver, what do you mean you ain't carrying these pallets up to Bouam Long?" He took some antacid pills. "I don't do animal acts," said the pilot. "How long are they tranquilized for? How long they going to lie there peacefully and sleep?" "Hell, I don't know, we'll ask T.J.," Greek said. "Hey, T.J., how long have you got these cows tranquilized for? Long enough to get to Bouam Long, right?" "Yeap," said T.J. "How do you know, T.J.?" asked the pilot. "Well, I've just been doing this air freight of water buffalo for a week and I know, or I knew before you two started arguing, that there was plenty of time to get to Bouam Long."

"OK," said the pilot, after consultation with his crew. "We will take your cows up to Bouam Long on two conditions. One, I use temporary, emergency chocks at the rear of the rollers (two tracks of rollers inside ran the length of the helicopter). If one of those animals so much as bats his eyes, shows any signs that he's coming off Doc T.J.'s drugs, they're out the back door, all of them. I do not want a half-crazy water buffalo loose inside my helicopter flying over clouds near the PDJ. You can understand that, can't you, Greek?"

"What's number two?" Greek asked. "T.J. goes with us." "Are you crazy?" T.J. exclaimed. "Or you, Greek," the pilot said. "Are you crazy?" the Greek said. So Super Mex went.

Halfway to Bouam Long, one of the water buffalo blinked, but no one saw it. He blinked again, and still no one saw it. Then he must have realized that he was lying down in an unfamiliar place, and he wanted to get up and look around. As he tried to get up, Super Mex and the crew yelled, "Holy s&%#!" They removed the chocks from the rear of the roller tracks. The buffalo, continuing to struggle on the pallet, kicked more violently. The pilot put the nose of the helicopter up in the air and dropped the rear. The buffalo began to go out the back, two at a time. The buffalo who had stirred was just getting on his feet and out of the webbing when he disappeared out the back. The North Vietnamese on the ground probably reported, 'We were bombed by eight buffalo today.'

Royal Lao Air Force

The VHPA's knowledge of Lao helicopter activities is rather limited. On page 133 of Chinnery's *Vietnam The Helicopter War* we see a photo of a Mil-4 taken at Vientiane in January, 1966. Directory Committee member John Konek is the lead in this area.

Thai National Police Aviation Unit

The VHPA's knowledge of Thai helicopter history is rather limited. Directory Committee member John Konek is the lead in this area. The following extract from an *Air America Log* provides a good overview:

March, 1968; Air America Participates in Thai Police Ceremony by M. Forrest, Supervisor, Thai Police Contract. Air America advisors in Bangkok were recently honored by being invited to participate in ceremonies marking the presentation of 22 Fairchild Hiller Model 1100 helicopters to Thailand by the United States. This is another example of the rapport resulting from joint Royal Thai Police and Air America efforts to build an efficient Thai air arm under the sponsorship of the United States Operations Mission (USOM), now referred to as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

The Thai National Police Aviation Unit is not a new project; it has progressed rapidly in the few years since it came under the USAID assistance program. Royal Thai Police aviation traces its beginnings to 1950 when it was first established as part of the Metropolitan Police. This early unit consisted of but one Hiller 360 helicopter with a pilot and mechanic as its entire staff. Realizing the value of helicopters, the Ministry of Interior inaugurated a kingdom-wide Transport and Communications Command in 1953 which included the Royal Police Aviation Unit. A hangar was obtained from the Royal Thai Air Force and ten Hiller 12B helicopters were purchased along with three Cessna aircraft, one 180 and two 310s. During this interval, the unit was known as the Communications Aviation Division and was under the command of then Major Payome Chantaragga. Now a full Colonel, Payome is the Deput Commander in charge of operations.

As the requirements for air support increased, the year 1954 saw Royal Thai Police aviation operating for additional 12Bs and two Douglas C-47s. In 1956 two Cessna 310Fs were obtained and more C-47s joined the growing fleet. The unit then became closely associated with the Border Patrol Police and was placed under their supervision.

The year 1967 brought many changes for the aviation wing among which was its elevation to Division status. The unit, under the command of Colonel Pichit, reports directly to the Headquarters of the Thai National Police Department (TNPD) and provides air support to all Royal Thai Police elements.

Currently AAM's advisory staff number 14. They work closely with Air Asia's Technical Training Division in Tainan, Taiwan, where many Royal Thai Police mechanics undergo training.

Air America also assists in helicopter instructor-pilot training in conjunction with TNPD personnel and Hal Kent of USOM. AAM Captains F.N. Smith and W.J. Fraser regularly train Royal Thai Police and Civil Aviation Technical Center (CATC) pilots in Hiller 2Es recently converted by AAM/BKK to a side-by-side training configuration.

The Thai National Police Division Base at Bangkok's Don Muang Airport is a focal point of activity where an international staff from

the Royal Thai Police, USOM and AAM work diligently, harmoniously and with pride towards a common goal.

There are 11 captioned photos printed with this article. The first shows a Buddhist blessing ceremony for a new FH1100. The second is a view of the new FH1100s, with three Bell 204Bs in the foreground, all in a line. The third shows TNP flight crews and Air America advisors surrounding a new FH1100. The fourth shows a TNP Hiller 12E helicopter making a low-level pass to drop flowers. The fifth shows six men listed as senior officers of the TNP and Air America. The sixth is a large, center shot of the blessing ceremony for the new equipment. The seventh shows the Air America Advisory Team. The eighth shows the TNP and Air America teams with 17 newly assigned Thai helicopter pilots. The ninth shows TNP General Krachang, LTC Chavalit and U.S. Ambassador Leonard Unger talking with a TNP pilot and mechanic. The tenth shows Ambassador Unger boarding a 204B. The eleventh shows a 204B departing Pak Nam Marine Police Station.

Before there was SOG = The CIA Era

SOG's beginning dates back to the 1960 - 1964 period when the CIA funded efforts to position individuals and teams of Vietnamese nationals in North Vietnam for intelligence purposes. They used boats plus Chinese and Vietnamese flown fixed wing to deliver or parachute these teams into North Vietnam after training them at Camp Long Thanh. When this program had run its course in 1964, of the 22 teams dropped only four, plus a singleton ARES, remained active - all the others were captured or died during their insertions.

McNamara was not impressed with the CIA directed results and when President Kennedy was embarrassed by the CIA led Bay of Pigs debacle, the military was directed to take over the larger operations - including those in SEA.

SOG (Studies and Observation Group)

In OPLAN-34A, issued on 15 Dec 1963, the DOD limited targets to 'those that provided max pressure with min risk.' On 24 Jan 1964, SOG was born when MACV organized the covert unit to take over the CIA program. An Army Colonel commanded the unit initially called the Special Operations Group but which quickly became Studies and Observation Group. SOG reported directed to the JCS and only five non-SOG officers in Vietnam were briefed on its operations. Initially the mission statement was unclear because McNamara wanted quick results and the military only had what the CIA had left them to work with. In his April, 1964 visit to Vietnam, McNamara asked senior SF officers "How soon could I launch operation into Laos?" After some discussion, Project LEAPING LENA was approved where U.S. trained indigenous soldiers were sent on military type recon type operations against the Ho Chi Minh Trail. On 24 Jun 1964, the first of eight LEAPING LENA eight-man Vietnamese teams parachuted into Laos. Only four survivors returned. In early 1965, Air America pilot Jim Ryan photographed a new road from North Vietnam. On 8 Mar 1965, while the world watched the first USMC combat troops arrive at Da Nang, SOG was celebrating the authorization to have U.S. Special Forces lead indigenous troops to recon in Laos. SOG also got a new commander, COL Blackburn and established Operation SHINING BRASS to cover this recon effort. However, the U.S. ambassador to Laos, William Sullivan, restricted SOG's operating area to two small boxes. COL Blackburn got around the 'hike in' restriction by getting VNAF helicopter units to support his cross-border recons. Thus the Da Nang based 219th Squadron and its H-34s became a SOG trademark. SOG commanded SHINING BRASS from Saigon with a Command and Control (C&C) element in Da Nang and an Forward Operating Base (FOB) at Kham Duc.

Command and Control North (CCN)

Based at Da Nang, CCN was born in Sep, 1965 as the local control for SHINING BRASS and was just known as the Command and Control Detachment since SOG's headquarters was in Saigon. They established a Forward Operating Base (FOB) at Kham Duc which became FOB 1 when the second FOB was established at Kontum. About April, 1966, FOB 1 was established at Phu Bai where it remained until standing down. FOB 3 was at Khe Sanh in 1967 and FOB 4 at Marble Mountain. In addition to the 219th VNAF Sqdn, USMC helicopters would provide a

significant percentage of CCN's needs. Eventually this shifted to the Army until finally the 101st Airborne Division provided the bulk of CCN's needs. However, most every helicopter unit in I Corps would be involved in SOG missions at one time or another.

Command and Control Center (CCC)

Based at Kontum and co-located with FOB 2. Initially FOB 2 was supported by the 219th VNAF and the USAF 20th Helicopter Squadron (later redesignated the 20th SOS). Gradually the 20th supported CCS almost exclusively when companies from the 52d CAB, and maybe the Pleiku based KINGBEEs, started providing all of FOB 2's needs. To say that there is to this day a special bond between the Special Forces soldiers who served with FOB 2 and between VHPAers and VHCMAers who served with 52d CAB units is a huge understatement! The Gladiators Association (57th AHC) has had at least four major reunions and the 'center of attention' is always one of the Special Forces SOG soldiers.

Command and Control South (CCS)

was formed when permission was granted to conduct cross-border missions into Cambodia. Commanded by a major, CCS was the smallest of the field command and operated inside Vietnam and throughout Cambodia. It contained RTs, Hatchets forces, and four SLAM companies. Operations were started in May, 1967 under Project DANIEL BOONE, later known as SALEM HOUSE. In 1971 the name was changed to THOT NOT and the American side of CCS closed out in May, 1971.

Special Forces B-50 Detachment, which was raised for Project OMEGA, at Ban Me Thuot East (versus the City Stripe where the 155th AHC lived) formed the basis for CCS and use Montagnard, Chams and Nungs soldiers. CCS launched teams from Duc Co in the north, Duc Lap in the center and Bu Prang in the south.

First US-led reconnaissance into Laos

There are several good accounts of SOG's preparations for SHINING BRASS. Saal's *SOG Vol. 3* is especially good as it includes lengthy personal accounts from many of the participants. Training actually began in the Spring of 1965 in Okinawa with about 20 specially selected volunteers. The political preparations finally concluded with White House approval on 15 Oct.

On 18 Oct 65, the first American-led recon team, RT Iowa, to be inserted into Laos as part of SHINING BRASS had trained with four other SOG teams at Kham Duc. The one-zero, team leader, was MSG Petry and the one-one, assistant team leader, SFC Card. There were seven Nungs and one ARVN LT on the team. Their mission was to recon part of Target D-1, about 20 miles NW of Kham Duc where Laotian Highway 165 almost reaches Vietnam. The USAF COVEY FAC was USAF MAJ Pyles with a SOG air liaison officer USMC CPT Sessions. Three KINGBEE CH-34s from the 219th VNAF Squadron were escorted by at least two Huey gunships (thought to be USMC). The weather was marginal, with clouds below the mountain tops and increasing ground fog. At 1800H, the helicopters left Kham Duc and inserted RT Iowa into a slash-and-burn area selected as the LZ. After the insert, CPT Thorne, the solo passenger of the third KINGBEE, sent the other helicopters back to Kham Duc and stayed until the RT radioed they were safe. Cowboy and Mustachio (the American names for the two VNAF pilots who would become SOG legends) in the two CH-34s returned to Kham Duc. They reported the weather was so bad they had to climb to 8,500 feet to get over the clouds. CPT Thorne radioed that they were returning. However, the KINGBEE crashed killing CPT Thorne and the VNAF crew of two pilots and one doorgunner. The COVEY FAC landed at Kham Duc and then left for Da Nang, but they too went down. Thus on its first day, SHINING BRASS generated three US and three VNAF MIAs.

Many VHPAers, including Seppo Hurme, are fascinated by life of CPT Thorne, his dedication as a soldier and his passion for fighting communism. What follows is an abbreviated history of this great man.

Larry Alan Thorne was born Lauri Allan Torni on May 28, 1919. As an adult in Finland, he joined the Finnish army where he attained the rank of Captain. His valor earned him the equivalent of the Congressional Medal of Honor, the Mannerheim Medal. Following

Finland's second defeat to the Russians, Torni was imprisoned by the communists as a war criminal. He escaped prison three times and made his way to the United States where he enlisted in the U.S. Army as a private. He went to Vietnam with Special Forces A-734 to establish the camp at Tinh Bien in April 1964 near the Delta's Seven Mountains area, which bushwhacked so many Viet Cong that it became a serious thorn to the lifeline to Cambodia. In a second Vietnam tour, he was attached to Headquarters Company, MACV and assigned to SOG.

On page 55 of Saal's *SOG Vol. 3* we read: 'When rescue personnel went to the site, they recovered the remains of the three Vietnamese crew, but found no signs of CPT Thorne.' However, this account does not agree with the Joint Task Force - Full Accounting Case 0174-0 report dated 28 Sep 1994 obtained by Seppo Hurme. It reads: 'During the mission, the crew encountered bad weather and indicated they were experiencing low visibility because of dense clouds. The last radio contact with the crew occurred in the vicinity of YC895105, approximately 12Ks west of Kham Duc. Search and rescue efforts were initiated with negative results. On 6 and 7 May 1993, a joint team traveled to Kham Duc to investigate Case 0174. The team interviewed Mr. Ho Van Roi who reported he found a crash site in 1988. The team visited the crash site at YC92210 and found aircraft wreckage and a data plate. The data plate was later correlated to an F-100 aircraft. The team found no remains at the site. Mr. Roi said he has traveled throughout these mountains during his life and this is the only crash site in the area.'

The Wall lists USAF Harley B. Pyles and USMC Winfield W. Sisson as BNR (body not recovered). Plaster's account in *SOG* on page 37 states, correctly, that all three Americans are still in BNR status.

219th Squadron VNAF

The VHPA's knowledge of the history of VNAF helicopter units and their KIAs can be summarized in two word VIRTUALLY ZERO. Only because of these SOG books was the VHPA able to add its first and only VNAF helicopter pilot KIA to the database. Anyone who can help in this area: place contact Mike Law or Gary Roush.

Many VHPAers who flew in support of SOG remember flying with VNAF KINGBEES. They were commonly seen at Kham Duc, Dak To, Bu Prang. Certainly the 57th AHC and 20th SOS accounts mention them frequently. However, when asked which squadron? or where were they based? - none of the Americans know.

Several VHPAers believe the VNAF crews were paid a bonus for each SOG mission they flew. On page 96 of *SOG Vol. 3* while summarizing the air support for SHINING BRASS for 1966 Saal states the daily commitment was six to ten VNAF H-34s supplemented with four to ten US army helicopters. Saal also mentions that the H-34s were from the 83rd Tactical Air Group (VNAF). We know the 219th Squadron VNAF was based at Da Nang and believe it was part of the 83rd TAG.

Hatchet Forces

were SOG recruited and trained company-size raiding units designed to execute lightning heliborne strikes on key enemy facilities, such as truck parks, headquarters and material stockpiles. With tremendous aerial fire support, the raiding company would land, sweep through and destroy a target and be gone before the enemy could react. Initially, all SOG recon indigenous troops were Nungs. The Nungs had emigrated to Vietnam from China's Kwangsi Province and were proud of the fact that they were not Vietnamese. The South Vietnamese government regarded Nungs - as well as Montagnards and Cambodians - as inferior and did not even draft them. There was some GVN resistance to letting the Special Forces train and arm these 'indig' mercenaries, but as a general rule they proved to be furious fighters; especially when lead by SF soldiers that they liked and respected. The lowest-ranking Nung received a monthly pay comparable to an ARVN captain, about \$60 U.S.

Because the helicopter assets needed to insert, supply and extract a Hatchet Force deep in Laos were rather significant, only about one major operation per month per company could be planned. Some of the biggest SOG battles and the largest helicopter loss situations were connected with Hatchet Forces.

Code Name Bright Light and the JPRC

George Veith's book *Code Name Bright Light* is really a wonderful summary of all the significant POW rescue attempts plus all the political and interservice rivalries related to POWs and MIAs. Even though Bright Light was another SOG mission, neither Saal nor Plaster cover the complete subject as Veith does. What follows is two excerpts from Veith. One relates to US Navy helicopters in North Vietnam (also see Plaster page 63) and the other to US Army and VNAF helicopters in Laos (also see Plaster page 66).

12 October 1966 - Lieutenant Dean Woods' crippled A-1 Skyraider had limped within sight of the South China Sea, but the U.S. Navy pilot couldn't squeeze another mile out of her. The tree in which Woods landed was on a heavily jungled ridgeline about halfway between Vinh and Hanoi and almost 30 miles inland, overlooking rice paddies and dikes and villages. He turned on his emergency radio but the failing light told him he would see no rescue this day, so he put some distance between himself and his telltale chute draped in the tree and found a place to hide for the night.

It looked hopeful the next day. Escorted by A-1 Skyraiders and highflying Navy F-4 Phantoms, a Sikorsky SH-3C Sea King helicopter whirled above the ridgeline until, at last, the crew chief could see Woods waving his arms beneath the heavy canopy. While the A-1s strafed approaching enemy patrols, the hovering Sea King lowered an extraction rig from its winch, but the harness kept snagging in the trees. By the time it was clear this would not work, there was not enough station time left to talk Woods to an open area where the helicopter could land, nor enough daylight to fly out to sea, refuel and return. They wished him good luck until the next day. But the next day heavy fog and clouds blanketed the jungle around the Navy pilot, making rescue impossible, although a Navy plane communicated with him. All day, aircraft stood by, but the weather never broke.

Out in the South China Sea, Seventh Fleet Commander Admiral Leroy Johnson decided he could not just stand by with one of his men in such jeopardy. That night, Admiral Johnson cabled General Westmoreland, requesting a small force to land in North Vietnam, search for the young aviator and fight through any enemy that tried to interfere. Westmoreland phoned Chief SOG Colonel Singlaub. While Singlaub made preparations, political approval was sought, reportedly all the way to President Johnson. With that approval, Chief SOG called upon the best man he could imagine to lead the mission, One-Zero Dick Meadows at FOB 2.

It was midnight by the time a Navy C-2 Greyhound transport delivered Meadows and his reinforced RT Iowa to the heaving deck of the USS Intrepid, and it was just as well since the thirteen heavily armed SOG men did not want to arouse unwanted speculation.

This was the first mission under the code name Bright Light, top-secret rescues of Americans from behind enemy line, ever to be attempted in North Vietnam. But once again the weather refused to cooperate, and the SOG men could do little more than pace and hope for a break. It did not come.

Beneath the shielding cloud cover, the North Vietnamese continued searching for Woods, who was now suffering through his third day without food. Enough time had passed that the NVA had trucked in additional 37mm and 57mm antiaircraft guns to engage American rescue helicopters when they came, as the enemy knew they would. Several companies of NVA had arrived to reinforce the local militia.

The next morning the clouds scattered, and just before dawn a pair of Navy Sea King helicopters lifted from the Intrepid's deck with Meadows and RT Iowa aboard. As the North Vietnamese coast took shape, there was an uncomfortable realization that ahead was a modern air-defense system whose radars already were tracking their approach and alerting antiaircraft units and ground forces who'd had four days to prepare for them.

When the helicopters crossed the coast, the sky exploded with antiaircraft shell bursts, but the Navy pilots expertly weaved between the worst of it. Minutes later they could see the heavily forested ridge where that very moment the NVA were converging on the downed flyer. After several false insertions to confuse the enemy, one Sea King

inserted RT Iowa about 800 years from Woods' hiding place. Meadows made a beeline for the ridge.

Woods could hear buzzing planes and helicopters and the booming of anti-aircraft guns, but his greatest concerns were more immediate: Brush was breaking nearby and he could hear shouts of excited soldiers.

Meadows and his men moved fast and had closed to a few hundred yards when they received a sickening radio report: The Navy pilot was captured. Had they traveled 500 miles only to come up 200 yards short? "A cautious soldier would have taken his men to the nearest extraction point and departed enemy territory," COL Singlaub says. "But Meadows was not overly cautious." Coming upon a major trail, Meadows decided to set up an ambush and capture a prisoner. A few moments later an NVA officer and three enlisted men walked up, alert, still searching for Woods, apparently unaware he'd been captured. Perhaps they expected a lone, injured pilot with just a pistol. They were astonished when Meadows stepped from the dense foliage and leveled his AK-47, calling a friendly good morning. As one, they went for their guns, but Meadows shot first, killing all four in one blur. While his men searched the bodies, Meadows radioed for an exfil, and soon they were flying away, although their helicopter was sprayed by gunfire and eventually had to ditch near an American destroyer. From this, their first Bright Light mission, every SOG man made it out. [After the war, Meadows met Woods, who'd spent six years as a POW, and presented him with the Tokarev pistol captured from the NVA officer he'd wished good morning on the trail.]

The VHPA is interested in knowing the USN Sea King crews and unit involved in this mission.

It could be said Bright Light was COL Harry Aderholt's personal creation. Six months earlier, USAF General Hunter Harris, Pacific Air Force commander, had challenged the experienced special operations officer to develop a concept: What to do after a SAR effort came up empty-handed and one or more Americans were still evading, missing or taken prisoner. A recent Air Force study had found that 47 percent of all failed SARs resulted from slow reaction time by helicopters. If a rescue bird could reach a downed airman within fifteen minutes, the chances of rescue were good, but if retrieval took more than thirty minutes, the downed airman's chances fell precipitously.

COL Aderholt decided a single office should handle all post-SAR responsibilities, and it should be in SOG since this was the only joint service agency with assets and authorization to operate secretly throughout Southeast Asia. The Joint Chiefs agreed and, on 16 September 1966, authorized Aderholt to head SOG's OPS-80 section, to track MIAs, locate prison camps, attempt rescues and even offer bribes and ransoms to get Americans released. Because OPS-80 needed to coordinate with many non-SOG entities, it would operate behind its own special cover, the Joint Personnel Recovery Center (JPRC), a supposed staff section in MACV.

Late October 1966 - Despite the JPRC insistence on deferring to the Search and Rescue Control Center, post-SAR was still a difficult concept for some of the Air Force people. Nonetheless JPRC was chafing to accomplish something positive. Aderholt states that "we would watch the reports come in on the various SAR missions. I could see instances where we could have helped and I was always trying to get JSARC to stand down earlier than the required 72 hours so we could go after somebody. We finally got one right in late October 1966, when a SOG O-1 flying near Attapeu in Laos saw an F-105 pilot eject in the Bolovens Plateau area. As it was late in the day and the Air Force did not operate rescue helicopters at night, I asked the 7th Air Force to terminate SAR so we could have a crack at rescuing him."

The backseater in the SOG FAC was the commander of FOB 2, Francis Sova. After witnessing the ejection of the pilot and his good parachute, Sova called Frank Jaks at the Operations bunker at their launch site at Dak To. Jaks remembers, "Sova called me and gave me the coordinates. I looked at the map and I was stunned. They were about 10 kilometers SW of the town of Attapeu, which was well beyond our helicopter range. Even our gunships couldn't go that far. I radioed him back and I said, 'Do you know where this is at? We can't get there and back.' He says, 'Figure something out,' so I sent two helicopters from the VNAF 219th Squadron carrying fuel drums and hand pumps to land on a LZ about fifteen kilometers from the pilot. I covered the LZ with gunships and A-1

Skyraiders. I then had two Hueys fly out to get the pilot. I was in the lead helicopter.

"It was getting dark when we finally got to the pilot, a Major Robert Kline, flying on one of his first missions out of Korat, Thailand. He was hidden in the wood line and when we picked him up he was amazed. He said to me 'I didn't realize Army helicopters were in this area.' I said we aren't, just be happy we're here and forget the whole thing. We flew to the LZ pretty low on gas, hand-pumped the fuel as fast as we could into the Hueys, and then took off for Dak To. We took the hand pumps, but we left the fuel drums behind with a nice surprise underneath. We were extremely lucky the enemy didn't spot us. When we got back, I had to radio Saigon and tell them what had happened. After I gave them the coordinates, they called me back. They didn't believe me. I spent almost an hour on the radio convincing them what I said was true. This was the craziest thing I did in the war, but the key is you have to make fast decisions in situations like that. Saigon wasn't too happy, but you can't beat success. I'm sure if I had failed, though, I would have been swinging from a pole."

Jaks' daring rescue of Major Kline was the sort of high-risk operation the JPRC had been designed to handle. However, according to Aderholt, "The 7th Air Force people gave me hell because we used an Army helicopter to recover the pilot. Interservice rivalries are the worst."

The VHPA is interested in knowing the VNAF and Army crews and unit involved in this mission.

SOG Helicopter Equipment

SOG 1SG Norman Doney took aluminum cable ladders off CH-47 helicopters and adapted them to SOG Hueys. This allowed teams to be landed or extracted wherever a Huey could hover 28 feet above the ground. This forced the NVA to disperse their LZ Watchers over a wider area.

Special Forces SMG Charles McGuire developed the McGuire rig, a simple 100-foot rope with a 6-foot loop at the end and a padded canvas seat. You rode it just like a playground swing seat. A Huey could carry four McGuire rigs, or 'strings' as they were called, two on each side. During an extraction, the pilot had to hold a steady treetop hover while the CE, lying on the aircraft floor, peered down and directed him over the hole. After dropping the ropes, the CE watched the men climb into the seats and then called for the lift out. SGT Charlie Dodge of the 57th AHC explained, "If we got in trouble with the strings, the crew would have to cut them. That would be the only way the aircraft could fly free. It didn't matter if anyone was on the ends of the strings or not. That was understood by everybody."

All the pilot had to do was rise vertically until his string passengers were above the jungle canopy, then fly away. A team could be lifted through any canopy hole wide enough for the CE to see the ground. Riding strings felt a bit like being Peter Pan, a magical climb, better than any elevator, but your weight soon shifted to the crotch, eventually cutting off blood flow to your legs.

McGuire rigs saved lives but several men were injured or killed when dragged through trees or when they fell from strings. Several VHPAers commented that had to train on how to fly a Huey when deploying a McGuire rig. A few even said they'd experienced a training ride in a McGuire rig.

The PONY EXPRESS

The 20th Helicopter Squadron was reactivated at Tan Son Nhut on 8 Oct 1965 with 14 CH-3Cs and started combat operations in December. Requests from the government of Thailand for transport for Thai military and police for counter-terrorist and counterinsurgency operations, resulted in two aircraft and crews relocating to Nakhon Phanom in Feb. 1966 as 'D' Flight. In Mar, the 20th was attached to the 14th Air Commando Wing, later redesignated the 14th Special Operations Wing. In April the Nha Trang based 'C' Flight relocated to Udorn. In May the Da Nang 'B' Flight also relocated to Udorn having supported the USMC in DOUBLE EAGLE earlier in the year. In June, with only 'A' Flight at Tan Son Nhut, the squadron headquarters moved to Nha Trang even though it had no aircraft there.

With the bulk of its assets in Thailand, the 20th began to concentrate on missions into Laos to support Gen Vang Pao's forces plus refugee and civic action missions. The heavy lift capability of the CH-3C provided logistics support for the mountain top radar and communications sites. They inserted 'road watch' and 'road destruction' teams at points along the Ho Chi Minh Trail from the Mu Gia Pass south to the Cambodian border. A total of 388 indigenous troops were flown into and out of Laos in the first five months of operations.

In June, CH-3Cs, flying from SVN, infiltrated a combat team into NVN just north of the DMZ. In all of 1966, the 20th flew a total of 315 infiltration sorties.

As noted in the Green Hornets section, in June, 1967, the 15 UH-1F/Ps from the 606th ACS joined the 20th and moved to Nha Trang. The 20th now had two distinct personalities - the CH-3C flight at Udorn and the Huey flight at Nha Trang.

By July 1968, the 20th was down to ten CH-3Cs but maintenance problems left only five or six mission ready. A flight of four UH-1Fs was added to Udorn and they used the Pony call sign. The Hueys, however, did not have sufficient range to perform most of the cross-border operations.

During a six day period in Jan, 1969, the Ponies evacuated more than 5000 persons in 539 sorties from a village in northern Laos that had been cut off to a safe area 14 miles away. This effort required hauling fuel in drums to the site for refueling the helicopters at the pickup point. The evacuation was hampered by early morning fog and hazardous terrain. The pickup point was in the mountains at the 4700 foot elevation. The unarmed and unescorted CH-3s successfully completed this operation without loss of life or aircraft damage.

On 17 Jan, CH-3C # 62-12582 was lost while supporting a TACAN site in northern Laos. Three crew members (Maj W.W. Martin, CPT R.A. Fleming, and SSG A.J. Davis) and three passengers died in the crash. Two crew chiefs and one passenger survived and were transferred to Clark AFB for hospitalization.

The CH-3 and UH-1 Flights did conduct joint operations. On 26 Mar, 18 helicopter including CH-3s and UH-1s took part in the insertion of a 230-man assault force. The infil was successfully accomplished but the recovery was delayed for operational reasons. As the aircraft began their approach to the PZ, they came under hostile fire. Three Pony CH-3s and one Hornet UH-1 received battle damage. One aircraft suffered 15 bullet holes and lost an engine. UH-1F #63-13158 was lost. Three 20th pilots were wounded in the action and the aircraft returned to Thailand to recover.

The GREEN HORNETS

There are several reference sources for material about the Green Hornets, USAF Hueys in SEA, and the 20th SOS. VHPA Member Tom Garcia has faithfully and patiently helped insure the VHPA has good information about USAF helicopter activities. He has published several articles on the subjects mentioned above. Wayne Mutza's article *Covertly To Cambodia* in Air Enthusiast issue #32 in 1987 is an excellent history. The August 1998 issue of Vietnam magazine carried an article by Dale Robinson on the 20th that repeats much from Mutza and from the Vietnam Era unit histories.

In Aug 66, a cadre of six pilots and several dozen mechanics arrived at Nakhon Phanom to join several USAF UH-1Fs that had been acquired from various SAC missile as the Huey section of the 606th Air Commando Squadron. VHPA member Tom Garcia recalls:

Bob D. Allen, Bob L. Baldwin, John W. Elftman, Dick D. Madigan, and Richard 'Rip' P. Smith were 'the originals' assigned on a 6-month TDY basis. Within a week 29 more TDY pilots and maintenance personnel arrived. I was one of the pilots.

Most of our air operations where in Thailand in support of the Thai Army, Border Patrol Police, and Thai civilian rescue missions. We also flew missions for Air America into Laos, often in civilian clothes. The Green Hornet call sign and patch was developed during this period.

In Jan 67, all the 6 month guys started returning to CONUS. I and another pilot volunteered to stay at NKP. A few days before our TDY was up, we were told that the unit was moving to Nha Trang. I was told that a deal was cut at the bar one night to have the Hornets work with

Special Forces as part of SOG. Because of a bad luck situation, I was unable to stay with the unit and returned to Montana; but not for long.

Not long after I left, I'd guess still in January, the 15 UH-1F/Ps were transferred to the 20th Helicopter Squadron and moved to Nha Trang but retained their Hornet call sign.

In April I received a 'sponsor' letter from Rip Smith as part of my return to SEA and the Hornets. He told me I should get myself in as good physical shape as possible and then he described the combat death of Bob Baldwin. The survivors of Bob's crash had gone through some very strenuous exertions before being rescued and they had moved Bob's body across several hundred meters of rough terrain.

On 31 Mar 1967, the Hornets suffered their first KIA. MAJ Bob Baldwin was the AC of UH-1F #65-07932 which was hovering above the trees and lowering ammo via the rescue hoist to a SOG team in Laos. The Huey was hit by 12.7mm enemy fire and Bob was seriously wounded. Since there were not enough Huey pilots, the CP was a CH-3C pilot for the Udorn Flight. The Huey settled into the trees and crashed after Bob was hit.

The UH-1F was based on the Bell 204B but equipped with the same GE T-58, 1200 SHP, engine used on the CH-3C. The UH-1Fs were called slicks while their UH-1Ps were guns because they carried a GAU-2B/A minigun on a pintle mount in each door plus a LAU-59/A 2.75 inch rocket pod. The miniguns could be locked to a forward fire position and fired by the pilot or could be aimed and fired by the gunners. As more of their F-models were modified with guns, the difference between the F- and P-models became blurred.

Though the Hornets' base was at Cam Ranh, their forward base was at Ban Me Thuot East. On 1 Aug 1968, the 20th was redesignated the 20th SOS.

The following account was taken from Plaster's *SOG* and from Philip Chinnery's *The Helicopter War*.

USAF 1LT James P. Fleming was flying his second day as a UH-1F slick AC for the 20th SOS on 26 Nov 1968. The rest of his crew were: MAJ Paul McClellan, pilot, SSG Fred Cook, gunner, and J.J. Johnson, gunner. That morning as part of a flight of five (two gunships and three slicks) green hornets, he had departed Duc Co and inserted RT Chisel for SOG CCS in Cambodian target Tango-51 as part of Operation DANIEL BOONE. It was CCS's custom to name their recon teams for tools, e.g. RT Saw or RT Hammer.

The One-Zero (team leader) of Chisel was SSG Ancil "Sonny" Franks. The One-One (assistant team leader) was SGT Charles Hughes. CPT Randolph Harrison, the new CO of the CCS Recon Company, was a team member who came along to learn how his men worked. Three Montagnards made up the rest of the recon team.

The green hornets returned to Duc Co for lunch and fuel. Mid afternoon the flight inserted another team further south in Cambodia. In the meantime, Chisel had moved quickly toward a wide river where they were to surveil enemy boat traffic. The NVA hit the team as they were setting up their site and trapped them in a small depression near the river.

Hughes' initial radio calls were not answered. As the NVA threw more troops into the battle, Chisel was surrounded on three sides and pinned against the river. Their next set of radio calls were picked up by their COVEY FAC, USAF MAJ Charles E. Anonsen, flying in a Cessna O-2 Skymaster. He alerted the green hornets, now returning to Duc Co, and they diverted toward Chisel but were low on fuel. The two gunships attacked the NVA and knocked out two 12.7mm heavy machine guns only 200 yards from Chisel. CPT Dave W. Miller's gunship was shot down. They managed to land in a clearing and were immediately rescued by MAJ Dale L. Eppinger, SLICK LEAD, who then departed for Duc Co for fuel. Another slick had to depart for fuel, leaving only Fleming's slick and MAJ Leonard Gonzales's gunship on station with the FAC. The gunship continued to engage the NVA but took hits.

When Fleming told the FAC that he had to get the RT out now or depart for fuel, the FAC directed the Huey around a low hill to mask the approach from enemy fire. At high speed, they came in over the river

and nosed the Huey into the bank where Chisel should have been. The NVA, however, had launched another attack and the six member team was too busy shooting for their lives to make it to the Huey. Chisel radioed, "They've got us! They've got us! Get out, get out!" to the Huey. As Fleming backed the Huey into the river, Chisel blew their last claymores and the Huey crew saw an NVA's body thrown in the air. Gonzales later recalled, "It was a sheer miracle that he wasn't shot down on take-off."

Fleming asked, "What's going on down there?" as he reached altitude and surveyed the situation. "We blew them back," Hughes explained, "but we're out of claymores and can't hold out much longer." Fleming knew it would be over an hour before the refueled GREEN HORNETS returned, figured there was only about an hour of daylight left, and determined that the river was too wide to swim and too open to rush across. He told the other aircraft, "We'll give it one more try." Gonzales said, "I'll make one more pass over 'em, give 'em everything we have, but then I've got to get out of here." Fleming fell in behind the gunship. At first he couldn't find the team, yet he knew he was getting close by the volume of enemy ricochets coming off the river. Then a door gunner saw one Montagnard leap in the river and move toward the Huey with four men close behind.

Even Franks couldn't believe the Huey hadn't been shot down or driven off by all the enemy fire. Despite AK fire and exploding rockets, Fleming held the bird rock-steady in what the Air Force citation later called "a feat of unbelievable flying skill." The crew could see NVA trotting and crouching along the riverbank as the gunners alternated between firing their machine guns and pulling men aboard. At last five recon men were aboard but Harrison was not there. Even though Fleming knew Randy best of all these men, he knew he had to leave or be shot down right there. As he began pulling back from the bank, Harrison suddenly appeared in the bushes as he sprayed fire at the unseen enemy. The lanky captain ran four strides, jumped into the water, stroked twice and snared a rope ladder Cook managed to throw out to him. Dragging the man through the water, Fleming catapulted them above the trees as several hands heaved Harrison aboard. Fleming and McClellan were so focused on what they were doing that it was several seconds before they noticed the shattered windshield.

The fuel gauge read EMPTY as they landed at Duc Co. Randy Harrison grabbed Jim Fleming by the head and shouted, "You sweet motherf#\$%&!!" - the highest form of heart-felt compliment SOG soldiers paid those who supported them. Franks said, "They were great people. Every one of 'em there, there wasn't none of 'em flinching."

In all two Air Medals, eleven Distinguished Flying Crosses, one Silver Star were awarded with Gonzales receiving the Air Force Cross and Fleming the Medal of Honor.

On 3 Jan 69, UH-1F #63-13164 was shot down and lost and SGT R.P. Zenga died while attempting to recover a beleaguered SF team in Cambodia.

On 13 Apr 69, while extracting a RT, the flight was fired on after successfully making the pick up. UH-1F #65-07937 flying escort for the extraction was hit by ground fire. The co-pilot, CPT J.O. Lynch, was killed and the AC seriously wounded. Although on the verge of unconsciousness due to the loss of blood and a wound in the left leg, the pilot managed to land in a nearby clearing. The aircraft came to rest with its tail boom broken and its skids ripped out from under it. The gunner, SGT Isidro Arroyo, was wounded in the back. Arroyo moved the dead and wounded pilots to the rescue slick while the other gunner sterilized the wreck. Unable to board this slick because there was no room, Arroyo waited on the ground for another helicopter to pick him up. The wrecked Huey was destroyed.

On 21 Apr 69, a RT had stumbled into a large force near an enemy base camp. The team had been without fresh water for a day and a half and was exhausted and dehydrated. The Hornet gunships came in and laid down suppressive fire, making repeated passes. UH-1F #63-13152 went in for the extraction, but was shot down on the attempt. In a battle that lasted nearly seven and a half hours, the Hornets fired some 200,000 rounds of minigun ammo and 500 2.75 inch rockets. Army gunships provided additional support while the Hornet gunships rearmed and refueled. Finally, three Army light helicopters was able to extract the team and the crew members of the downed Hornet slick.

In the spring of 1969, forays into Cambodian airspace all but ceased but the Hornets continued to fly gunship support for the VNAF CH-34s. On 1 Aug 69 the Green Hornets and the 20th SOS became one and the same when the CH-3 Ponies were transferred to the 21st SOS. As mentioned in the Pony Express section, since July, 68, the 20th had maintained a flight of four UH-1Fs at Udorn to augment the CH-3 flight. These Thailand-based Hueys also used the Pony call sign. At the same time the CH-3s were transferred to the 21st SOS, the Udorn based UH-1Fs were transferred to Nha Trang.

There were three Huey losses due to engine failures in July and August. The VHPA Helicopter database only has one #66-01217 on 25 Aug. The crews received only minor injuries, although the aircraft were destroyed. The Huey fleet was grounded for approximately 30 days while these incidents were studied.

On 5 Sep, the 20th relocated to Tuy Hoa Air Base from Nha Trang where they had served since 15 June 1966. The living quarters and squadron facilities were cramped at the new location. The enlisted quarters housed 72 men in a facility designed for 54. Latrine and shower facilities were more than a hundred yards from the quarters. Officers were billeted three to a room. Squadron offices were all located in a single room that had been the briefing room for the 308th Tactical Fighter Squadron.

About the time the Hornets started flying again, their role had changed to providing gunship support for VNAF and Army slicks as they continued cross-border operations. Most of their aircraft were armed with miniguns and rockets. They continued to fly a few aircraft in the slick configuration but they were used mostly in emergency and tactical priority situations.

On 25 Sep 70, the 20th moved to Cam Ranh Bay. VHCMA members Terry Curry, Jim Green and Rich Jalloway were gunners on UH-1Ps and UH-1Ns. Terry flew with the 20th from 6/69 to 6/70 and from 2/71 to 2/72; Jim for most of 1970, and Rich for 18 months ending 3/72.

Our name for Ban Me Thuot East (hereafter BMTE) was TPRS which stood for This Place Really Sucks! Editor's Note: While serving there in July, 1968 with the 7/17th Air Cav our side of the compound was called Camp Bleakness. Terry says they lived in tents and no showers during his first tour. During the late summer of 1970, the Seabees put up some normal buildings so during his second tour they had two guys to a room. Rich can only remember the buildings, the shower and eating in the SF run mess hall. At most the 20th had about 20 Hueys, but it got as low as 12 some times. As a general rule, we kept at least 8 operational aircraft at BMTE. The 20th actually sent the personnel to BMTE on TDY status. The EM followed a 45 days at BMTE and 7 days at the base area rotation while the pilots had something like 20 days at BMTE and 30 at the base area.

There were more than just operational crews at BMTE - we had avionics, aircraft, and weapons maintenance staff there as well. If it couldn't be repaired at BMTE, either the component or the aircraft was replaced with another from the base area. The 20th uses several FOLs (Forward Operational Locations) or forward launch sites - the most frequently used were Duc Co, Duc Lap, and Ban Don but they also got to visit Tieu Atar, Bu Prang, and even Kontum. Their tactics heavily favored the door mounted miniguns since they carried only 14 rockets and 10,000 rounds for the miniguns. Providing cover for the troopships and the team was their primary mission. The gunships flew at treetop level in a 'crazy 8' (figure 8), a race track or a dog bone pattern.

The following award citation for 4 Jan 1971 helps describe these tactics:

This UH-1P helicopter gunship crew distinguished themselves by heroism in action while participating in aerial flight near Tieu Atar, RVN. The helicopter gunships had the mission to provide any necessary fire support in conjunction with the helicopter insertion of a LRRP team into known hostile territory. Approximately 45 seconds after the team deplaned, they reported receiving heavy ground fire from a regimental sized hostile force. CPT Schuman led the gunship formation in a descent to treetop level, firing high explosive rockets and miniguns at the enemy positions. At this time, the enemy had advanced to very close proximity to the team. CPT Schuman elected to cease fire until the team's precise location

could be established by the FAC. Four low altitude non-firing passes were flown to draw enemy fire from the team. During these passes intense AA fire was encountered and the team reported enemy rockets impacting in the LZ. With the team's location determined, CPT Schuman resumed his firing passes, suppressing the AA fire. As the troopship attempted a landing, dense smoke from enemy rocket impacts obscured the LZ. Erratic communications coupled with deteriorating visibility made the rescue attempt extremely hazardous. CPT Ostergaard performed in an outstanding manner, effectively dividing his attention between monitoring aircraft performance and spacing, maintaining radio communications with three other aircraft, and directing return fire upon enemy positions. All three aircraft again received heavy enemy fire which drove the troopship from the LZ. CPT Schuman directed the gunships through four more extremely hazardous treetop level firing passes in spite of increasing enemy fire and dense smoke. SGT Green and SGT Ramsey demonstrated exemplary skill and judgment by simultaneously firing upon enemy positions and keeping the aircraft commander informed of the positions of other aircraft, the enemy, and the LZ. SGT Ramsey experienced a minigun jam, which he quickly proceeded to clear while still under fire. During the period in which SGT Ramsey's gun was jammed, SGT Green assumed visual clearing duties for both gunners and increased his field of fire as much as possible to make up for the loss of firepower. While the gunship diverted enemy fire from the team, the troopship was again called into the smoke filled LZ, only to encounter further enemy fire. Despite virtually nonexistent visibility, poor communications, great danger of a mid-air collision, and a determined hostile effort, CPT Schuman elected to remain at treetop level for five additional firing passes, protecting the team and the rescue troopship. In doing so, the gunship formation was forced to overfly enemy positions on each pass, exposing themselves to extremely heavy AA fire. CPT Ostergaard again proved invaluable by pinpointing enemy firing positions for the gunners and assisting CPT Schuman in maintaining critical separation between other aircraft. The enemy fire could have been combated from a high altitude pattern which offered far greater safety for the gunships, however the team would almost certainly have incurred heavy casualties and the troopship damaged or lost. By electing to remain as close as possible to the LZ under adverse conditions and repeatedly drawing enemy fire, CPT Schuman demonstrated great heroism and gallantry above the call of duty, while preventing the possible massacre of the team and the loss of the troopship. His entire crew was called upon to demonstrate the maximum degree of skill and crew coordination and they further exhibited heroism beyond the call of duty in their rescue attempts. After the troopship extracted the team and safely departed the area, CPT Schuman led the gunships in a continuation of the fire suppression pattern until all ordnance was expended.

They received their first UH-1N in late 1970. VHCMA member Phil Rouviere crewed these twin engined Hueys. He also loaned the VHPA microfilm copies of the unit histories. He mentioned that during 1972, the 20th sent a dozen aircraft to Da Nang for two weeks to support SOG. The VHPA needs to learn more about those activities.

On 1 Apr 72, the 20th departed Vietnam. The unit is still on active duty. Currently the VHPA HELICOPTER database holds 40 records (16 loss and 24 non-loss, 29 related to UH-1Fs, 7 to UH-1Ps, and none for UH-1Ns). The KIAMA database holds 9 helicopter pilots and 5 crew members.

Jolly Greens

As mentioned earlier, most every helicopter unit in I Corps got their turn to support SOG. Flying outside of Vietnam was not uncommon for the 37th ARRS. What follows is an edited version of three accounts. The primary was compiled by the Homecoming II Project 15 June 1990 from one or more of the following: raw data from U.S. Government agency sources, correspondence with POW/MIA families, published sources, interviews. The VHPA has obtained electronic copies of most of the Project's reports and stores these in the HELICOPTER or KIAMA databases. The other sources are CAPT Young's CMH citation and Harve Saal's SOG Volume III. The HELICOPTER database shows the HH-3E #66-13279 was lost at grid YC012973 and believed to be CAPT Young's aircraft. The database also shows that HH-3E #66-13282 flown

by CAPT John B. McTasney was heavily damaged on this date and we believe this aircraft was Jolly Green 29.

On November 8, 1967, two Air Force "Jolly Greens" (#26 and #29) from the 37th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron were scrambled from Da Nang Air Base at 1505 hours for an emergency extraction of five surviving members of a SOG RT which had suffered heavy casualties while operating deep in Laos. The recovery effort was to be recorded by the Squadron as one of the largest and most hazardous on record. One account states that previous attempts to retrieve the team had resulted in the loss of two helicopters to hostile ground fire. Additionally, the RT was located on the side of a steep slope which added to the requirements for unusual airmanship from the helicopter trying to get in.

The two Air Force helicopters were advised by FAC to hold while three Army gunships softened the area. An Air Force C130 gunship, meanwhile, provided flare support for the mission. At 1630Z, Jolly Green 29 picked up the three indigenous personnel before being driven off by hostile fire. As the damaged Jolly left to make an emergency landing at Khe Sanh, the aircraft commander recommended to Jolly Green 26 that further rescue attempts be abandoned because it was not possible to suppress the concentrated enemy automatic weapons fire. Twenty minutes later, with full knowledge of the danger involved and the fact that supporting helicopter gunships were low on fuel and ordnance, Jolly Green 26, flown by CAPT Gerald Young, with flight crew consisting of CAPT Ralph Brower, co-pilot; SSGT Eugene Clay, flight engineer; and SGT Larry Maysey, rescue specialist; braved the ground fire to pick up Special Forces SP4 Joseph G. Kusick and MSGT Bruce R. Baxter, both wounded. The account in Saal's SOG states they also picked up six indigenous team members, names unknown. Saal also states that Kusick was a SGT not a SP4. As they maneuvered to depart, the enemy appeared at pointblank range and raked the aircraft with automatic weapons fire. They crashed, inverted, and burst into flames. CAPT Young escaped through a window of the burning aircraft. Disregarding serious burns, CAPT Young aided one of the injured men and attempted to lead the hostile force away from this position. Despite the pain from his injuries, he declined rescue attempts because he had observed the enemy setting up more automatic weapon positions to entrap any rescue helicopters.

By the afternoon of November 9, a Bright Light team was inserted into the area and reached the crash site of the burned HH3. CAPT Young had survived and was rescued 17 hours after his crash. Because of fading light, it was impossible to inspect the wreckage at that time.

On 10 November, the wreckage was searched and 3 charred remains were found. Two of the remains had identification tags which identified them as members of the crew. The third remains had no tags, but were identified as SP4 Kusick, radio operator of the reconnaissance team, as the long antenna from his PRC-25 radio were found on his body.

About 34 meters downhill from the wreckage, another set of remains were found which were readily identified as MSGT Baxter from the facial features. No trace was found of the third crew member. The remains of the two crewmen and Kusick were removed from the aircraft and placed with MSGT Baxter's remains so they could be hoisted as one lift into a hovering helicopter. The identification tags of the crewmembers were placed with the remains. Weather conditions and enemy action would not permit the extraction of the bodies and they are to this day still classified as BNR.

While working with VHPA member Bill Byrd, who served with the 37th ARRS, concerning his CH-53C Jolly Green Giant photo printed for February in the 1995 VHPA Calendar, Bill made a statement that is well worth repeating. He said that the ARRS operated by one primary rule 'Get the man.' Even though their helicopters were heavily armed with mini-guns and such, they never had the mission of killing the enemy or attempting to exploit the tactical situation. They used their guns to protect themselves and those they were attempting to rescue. 'Get the man' did not say 'if it was safe' or 'if the weather was good' or 'if it is convenient' or 'if you have enough fuel.' All ARRS rescue missions usually operated under the control of KING or QUEEN, the airborne rescue controller flying in C-130s. When their controllers directed them in, they were to 'Get the man.'

The 161st AHC

The 14th CAB ORL states that during the period May, 1967 the 161st Aviation Company provided two UH-1B gunships for a classified mission in support of Operation Prairie Fire.

The 52d CAB

About Nov 1967, not long after FOB 2 became fully operational, the 52d CAB at Camp Holloway began rotating FOB 2 support to its AHCs on a two month basis. The following table attempts to show the actual schedule for FOB 2 support. Anyone who desires to provide updates to this table is asked to contact Mike Law.

START	END	UNIT	COMMENTS
67 Feb	67 Apr	20th HS	Initial support
67 ??	67 ??	20th HS	Primary support
67 Nov	68 Jan	119th AHC	60 day tour from 52d CAB
68 Jan	68 Mar	57th AHC	60 day tour from 52d CAB
68 Mar	68 May	? AHC	60 day tour from 52d CAB
68 May	68 Jul	? AHC	60 day tour from 52d CAB
68 Jul	68 Sep	189th AHC	60 day tour from 52d CAB
68 Sep	68 Nov	57th AHC	60 day tour from 52d CAB
68 Sep	72 Aug	361st AWC	Permanent assignment
68 Nov	69 Jan	? AHC	60 day tour from 52d CAB
69 Jan	69 Mar	57th AHC ??	History is not clear
69 Mar	69 May	57th AHC	60 day tour from 52d CAB
69 May	70 Feb	57th AHC	Permanent assignment
70 Feb	70 Dec	170th AHC	Permanent until 170th Stood Down
??	70 Apr	VNAFCH-34s	Squadron from Da Nang or Pleiku?
70 Oct		57th AHC	Some missions
71 Jan		57th AHC	Permanent until 57th Stood Down
72 Aug		361st AWC	Stands Down, AH-1Gs to 57th

The 57th AHC

Though originally re-activated as an airmobile light company, the Army had programmed the 57th to support the SOG mission; therefore it was re-organized soon after re-activation as an AHC with 23 UH-1Hs and 8 UH-1Cs, with 20 Commissioned, 51 Warrant Officers, and 227 Enlisted. The company arrived in Oct 1967 at Pleiku via C-141 and C-130s from Ft. Bragg and proceeded to their new home on Kontum air field. They became operational on 12 Nov and helped with the Battle of Dak To.

The 52d CAB unit history states that on 10 Jan 68, the 57th AHC and Kontum Airfield came under heavy enemy attack at approximately 0200H. The NVA used mortars, B-40 rockets, satchel charges and heavy small arms fires. The contact lasted approximately 7 - 8 minutes, resulting in: six US KIA, 20 WIA, two UH-1Hs destroyed, two UH-1Cs destroyed, two UH-1Hs major damage, seven UH-1H and two UH-1C moderate damage. This sudden and sizable lost of mostly maintenance skills and aircraft had a ripple effect for other units not only within the 52d CAB but also the 17th CAG. For the next few days, units would be asked to transfer and lend maintenance EM, an extremely valuable resource, to the 57th.

The 57th Assault Helicopter Company unit history states that as a result of all the flying and deferred maintenance caused by Tet, the daily requirement for the FOB mission of 11 slicks and 6 guns was cut in half. The operation continued on a limited basis through the third week of Feb when it went back into full swing.

The 57th's first combat aviation casualty occurred on the 19th. A 10 man FOB 2 LRRP was surrounded and called from extraction. Tac Air bombed and strafed the area before the slicks went in for the pick up. The first slick extracted half the team. The second ship, piloted by LT Richard Griffith and WO John Cook, followed and picked up the remaining 5. As they started out of the LZ they came under intense hostile fire. The ship burst into flames and plummeted to the ground. At this time the chase ship, piloted by WO John Herbold, descended into the area and was able to pick up LT Griffith, WO Cook, the crew chief and one member of the LRRP team, SGT Zabitosky.

The remainder of the patrol and the gunner perished in the fire. WO Cook died two days later of the burns he had suffered in the fire. WO Herbold was later awarded the DFC for his heroism.

Editor's Note: The Vietnam Era document spelled WO Cook's name as Cooke. It also indicates that the chase ship was able to extract the CE from the downed ship but the bodies of both the CE, SP4 Dye, and the gunner, SP4 Griffith, along with the LRRP team leader, SSG Glover, were not recovered. The chase ship carried an SF medic named Luke Nance who helped SGT Zabitosky get the two pilots to the chase ship. Luke Nance was extracted on the chase ship.

57th AHC SOG Tactics

VHPA Member Stanley "Steamer" Steenbock, Gladiator 27, provides:

The tactics developed and used in northern II Corps for across the border operations evolved through the loss of men and equipment. In the 1967 through 1972 period, we generally put up five aircraft per day for the FOB mission. Chalk One or Lead and Chalk Three carried the team which had two Americans, the One-Zero and the One-One, plus four Montagnards or Nungs. Chalks Two and Four were the vector and chase ships. A typical day began with the briefing at the SOG CCC compound - teams on the ground, their location and status. We then went to Dak To where we topped off fuel and ammo. As we departed Dak To and headed west, we generally crossed the border at 3,000 to 7,000 feet. Once across, everyone test fired their weapons and the gunships would contact Covey. When I first started flying FOB, Covey flew in an O2 'push pull' Cessna, but later they changed to the OV-10 Bronco. He would talk us into the area and point out what he and his back seat, who was himself a former team leader, had picked out as the LZ. Insertion sites were bamboo or elephant grass patches or a small break in the double or triple canopy jungle. Any open areas that were large enough to land a Huey were either watched or booby trapped. Once the LZ was determined, the guns went to tree top level. This was NOE in its inception. Lead and Chalk Three dropped to about 1500 feet making sure Chalk Two and Four had a good tally on what was to be the insertion site, then Lead would drop down, pick up a gun and follow him toward the LZ. Chalk Two would then begin vectoring Lead to the LZ. Chalk Three would be starting down and picking up an inbound gun as Lead was stopping and getting close enough to the ground for the team to drop off. As Lead was coming out, staying low and picking up a gun, Chalk Three would be on short final to drop the rest of the team and come back out to rejoin the flight at altitude. The flight circled some distance away and waited for the team OK. This typical insertion from Lead following in with the gun to Chalk Three coming back to altitude would be about 45 to 90 seconds. If we got an All Clear, we returned to DakTo and stood by. If the team called an Ah Shit, then we went back and pulled them out. This time the guns would expend about 50 to 75 percent of their ammo in the two patterns it took for Lead and Chalk Three to pick up the team. Speed was essential to keep the numbers of bad guys joining the hunt to a minimum and still have fuel to get back. When we would pull the teams hot, we would receive tremendous amounts of fire; but at 110+ knots at tree top level and with the barrage of fire power put out by the guns, the bad guys generally shot at the helicopter sound or found cover. We took lots of hits but they tended to be in the blades or tail boom. On the really hot extractions, A1E Skyraiders were called in. They would cover two thirds of the area around the team and a heavy gun team would cover the remainder plus the slicks while they were inbound. This resulted a tremendous amount of fire power and if the team hadn't been overrun by the time we got there, we were able to get them out. In the 22 months that I flew these missions, never once did the crews refuse to attempt a pick up if a team was in trouble. Those team members, who are in touch with the air crews, are still grateful to this day for this!

Mike Taylor, a Bikini Lead, and later a Gladiator for a short time, said it best when queried about the tactics used on these missions by a USMC full colonel brought in to help with a mission that was too large for the Bikini assets to handle. Mike replied we stay as high as we can for as long as we can, then we get as low and as fast as we can as quick as we can. The colonel said: "Those tactics sound

suicidal!" Mike replied: "No Sir, the tactics are sound - the mission is suicidal." Mike died of a heart attack 4 Oct 1993.

One of the required training missions was to have all the crews ride the strings, since many times the teams could only be extracted by pulling them out on the 120 foot, one inch ropes. This was to give everyone an idea of what those team members felt like when they were on the ropes. The 57th lost a pilot - he was extracted out on strings after being shot down but fell out of the harness.

One of the more interesting missions was to insert Chu Hois back into Laos and have them rejoin their old units. Then at a certain time and place, they were to be picked up. One such mission happened to be a string LZ. Lead went in, picked up and departed. As Chalk Three came out, he started kidding Lead that he must either have a very weak ship or was losing his touch. When Lead queried why, Chalk Three said: "Well, you only took one out of the LZ 'cause I have three of the four." Lead came back and said "So do I!" Instead of pulling a four man team, we pulled six. Needless to say but there was a welcoming committee at Dak To when we set the teams down. Now, CCC had a standing offer to the teams - any POWs brought back was a three day R&R in Bangkok. We tried to claim the R&R for all the air crews, but were voted down. Seems the four man Earth Team was put on a detail along with the other two and they got taken for a ride. Talk about having a bad day!

On another mission, while trying to get close to the ground along a ridge line to pick up a team, my CE said: "Steamer, if we take fire, don't come straight up - just listen to our directions." I said OK. By then we were hovering in a very confined area. After a few minutes I wondered what was taking so long and why they had me make an unusually large number of very small movements so we could get in and out. On the way back I could hear the guys in back on private, so I switched over and asked what they were laughing about. They said: "You might not believe this, Steamer, but we had your tailboom in a cave at one point back there!" Now I didn't see anything funny about the prospect of being part of the mountain if anything had gone wrong. However, such was the confidence and skill of the crews in the back with their ACs that they could and would put a Huey in some unbelievable places.

There are many more stories of FOB missions, some funny, some tragic; but the crews became as one - each man depending and relying on the others to do their jobs to accomplish the mission and to protect lives. To this day I am convinced that no finer men ever lived than crewed with me.

The 57th would serve FOB 2 on a permanent basis twice as noted in the table on page 257. They can be justifiably proud of their great service.

The 170th AHC

In Feb, 1970 crews from the 170th started flying FOB missions with the 57th. When the 57th moved to An Khe, the 170th relocated from Holloway to Kontum in early March. VHPA Bill Watson recalls:

I joined the Bikinis on 26 Jan and one of my first jobs was OIC for a ground convoy moving stuff to Kontum. I certainly remember flying some of my first missions in country with 170th ACs that had been flying with the Gladiators. I firmly believe that the Gladiators didn't want to give up the FOB mission and certainly didn't want to move to An Khe; but they did anyway.

The 361st was still providing support and until late March or April, the VNAF Kingbees provides some of the FOB transport ships which meant that the 170th only put up four or five slicks daily. When the Kingbees stopped supporting FOB 2, my company had to put up eight slicks every day.

I also remember that the Bikini ACs respected the 57th's FOB tactics and copied them completely when we flew FOB missions.

On 24 March 1970, helicopters from the 170th were sent to extract a SOG RT which was in contact with the enemy about fourteen miles inside Cambodia in Ratanokiri Province. The flight leader, RED LEAD, serving as one of two extraction helicopters was commanded by James E. Lake. Capt. Michael D. O'Donnell was the aircraft commander of one of the two cover aircraft (serial #68-15262, RED THREE). His crew consisted of WO John C. Hoskins, pilot; SP4 Rudy M. Beccera, crew chief; and SP4 Berman Ganoe, gunner.

RT Pennsylvania, included 1LT Jerry L. Pool, team leader and team members SSG John A. Boronsky and SGT Gary A. Harned as well as five indigenous team members. The team had been in contact with the enemy all night and had been running and ambushing, but the hunter team pursuing them was relentless and they were exhausted and couldn't continue to run much longer. When Lake and O'Donnell arrived at the team's location, there was no LZ nearby and they were unable to extract them immediately. The helicopters waited in a high orbit over the area until the team could move to a more suitable extraction point. RED LEAD and RED THREE made a quick trip to Dak To for refueling.

When Lake returned to the site, Pool came over the radio and said that if the team wasn't extracted then, it would be too late. O'Donnell evaluated the situation and decided to pick them up. He landed, was on the ground for about 4 minutes, and then transmitted that he had the entire team of eight on board. The aircraft was beginning its ascent when it was hit by enemy fire, and an explosion in the aircraft was seen. The helicopter continued in flight for about 300 meters, then another explosion occurred, causing the aircraft to crash in the jungle. According to Lake, bodies were blown out the doors and fell into the jungle at 142750N 1071816E (YB484003). [NOTE: According to the U.S. Army account of the incident, no one was observed to have been thrown from the aircraft during either explosion.]

The other helicopter crews were stunned. One of the Cobras, Panther 13, radioed "I don't think a piece bigger than my head hit the ground." The second explosion was followed by a yellow flash and a cloud of black smoke billowing from the jungle. Panther 13 made a second high-speed pass over the site and came under fire, but made it away unscathed.

Lake decided to go down and see if there was a way to get to the crash site. As he neared the ground, he was met with intense ground fire from the entire area. He could not see the crash site since it was under heavy tree cover. There was no place to land, and the ground fire was withering. He elected to return the extract team to Dak To before more aircraft was lost. Lake has carried the burden of guilt with him for all these years, and has never forgiven himself for leaving his good friend O'Donnell and his crew behind.

The Army account concludes stating that O'Donnell's aircraft began to burn immediately upon impact. Aerial search and rescue efforts began immediately; however, no signs of life could be seen around the crash site. Because of the enemy situation, attempts to insert search teams into the area were futile. SAR efforts were discontinued on April 18. Search and rescue teams who surveyed the site reported that they did not hold much hope for survival for the men aboard, but lacking proof that they were dead, the Army declared all 7 missing in action.

Michael O'Donnell was recommended for the Congressional Medal of Honor for his actions on March 24, 1970. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Air Medal, the Bronze Star and the Purple Heart as well as promoted to the rank of Major following his loss incident. O'Donnell was highly regarded by his friends in the "Bikinis." They knew him as a talented singer, guitar player and poet. One of his poems has been widely distributed, but few understand that the author remains missing.

On 30 May 1970, the 170th would lose another pilot, CW2 B.J. Devanney. VHPA member Robert Talmadge, the 1st Lift Platoon leader, provides a lengthy account of the 'life and times in the 170th,' a description of B.J.'s flying skills, and details about his death in *Unknown Warriors: Canadians in Vietnam* by Fred Gaffien. B.J. was Canadian born and retained his Canadian citizenship. What follows is an extract of that account:

B.J. had completed one year in gunships and was most of the way through his six-month extension. He was a well respected slick AC. He had been shot down twice during his time with the 170th. He wasn't scheduled to fly on the 30th because he was due to go home. However, the night before he signed up for one more mission. On the 30th he was Flight Lead on an SOB extraction mission out of Dak To. Talmadge was flying CP in the reserve ship which launched when the call came that 'Lead's down.' The recon team and downed crew were in a bomb crater surrounded by jagged tree stumps in an area

of Laos called 'The Bra.' CW2 Rich Glover was the AC of Talmadge's aircraft. The RT was receiving heavy machine-gun fire and didn't want any more helicopters to come into their area. Disregarding this, Rich made a high overhead approach and hovered near the edge of the crater. As soon as the downed crew and wounded RT members were on board, Rich started backing away from the crater. He inadvertently hit a tree stump with the tail rotor but managed to maintain control of the aircraft. As they headed for Ben Het, Talmadge got out of his seat and when back to help CW2 Mike Taylor, who was flying with B.J., and the other wounded. He yelled to Rich that they needed to get to the Evac Hospital in Pleiku. Rich yelled back that he didn't think the tail rotor would hold up that long but it did. Later inspection revealed almost three inches were missing from the tips of the tail rotor and one blade still had a four-inch piece of wood stuck in it. About 10 minutes after B.J. was taken into the Evac Hospital a nurse returned to say that B.J. didn't make it. A doctor later told them that a remnant from a large-caliber round had come through the side of B.J.'s chicken plate, bounced back into his body and entered his heart.

155th AHC = Stagecoach and Falcons

The 155th was based at the Ban Me Thuot city strip had basically 'saw it all!' They supported CCS, the 23d ARVN Division, MACV, and the 4th Infantry Division.

Their unit history states they were supporting the Special Forces at Kontum as early as Oct 1966. In Jan and Feb 1967, over half the company was at Kontum for the same reason.

Frequently they support Special Forces B-23 based at Ban Me Thuot East for SOG and conventional CIDG operations inside Vietnam.

In Sep 1969 they relocated the company to Hue-Phu Bai to support the Special Forces for over a week.

In the early 1980s, before books about Vietnam were popular, VHPA member Dave Groen and his brother published *Huey*. While it is 'friction' the story describes how CW2 Marlin Johnson and WO1 Darek Richardson were shot down on 20 Apr 1970 by a B-40 while extracting a SOG team in Cambodia. The survival story for the rest of the crew is very thought provoking.

189th AHC = Ghost Riders and Avengers

The 189th AHC was another member of the 52d CAB that from time to time supported FOB 2.

VHPA member Jim Kreutz had his *307 Days To Go!* published in the January 1988 issue of Air Combat magazine. What follows is an edited version of Jim's story:

It was 27 Nov 1967 and it had been a fast 58 days in country. I reminisced on flying Slicks for the 189th "Ghost Riders" in support of Special Forces Project Omega out of Plejerang for a month until that operation closed down then, because of combat losses, getting assigned to the "Avengers" gun platoon just in time to pick up the FOB 2 mission.

The previous day, CPT John J. Holland, the CO of a Hatchet Force, took 80 men on an operation. The target area "Hotel-Nine" had and, later was to get an even worse, reputation for being an ass-puckering environment. The aircrew briefing was sketchy at best, no specifics on the target, only general areas and coverage responsibilities. We were accustomed to supporting small RTs with most of the work and excitement coming from insertions into hot LZs or making emergency extractions of teams in contact. This operation was unusual in its size, the relatively large number of aircraft and the fact the team was scheduled to remain on the ground only long enough to destroy the target then get out, couple of hours max.

Initial insertion was uneventful, we covered the area until the team cleared the LZ then returned to the staging area at Dak To to refuel/rearm and standby for the extraction. Monitoring the tactical frequency revealed they had made contact shortly after clearing the LZ. They weren't calling for an out so it couldn't be determined if the troops hit the target or unexpected bad guys. Nevertheless, replenishing was expedited.

As usual, communications were between the team, the FAC, another radio-relay site and FOB 2 'Head Shed' at Kontum, leaving the recovery force to wait and wonder at old Dak To. Bits and pieces of information

started rumors ranging from "the team was totally wiped out" to "they are kicking ass and going all the way to Hanoi." The anticipated extraction time passed and it was hot, crews got tired of swapping lies, some went to harass Slick crews, others sat in the cabins for shade and a couple wandered into the elephant grass, possibly for the non-command sponsored but time-honored/traditional romantic liaisons. Late in the afternoon information came that the team was pinned down and needed water, ammo, entrenching tools and had wounded to recover. The flight got to the LZ just before dusk and, during the approach, the first aircraft took twelve hits. The Aircraft commander received multiple serious wounds and the pilot took a round in the leg but managed to fly the heavily damaged aircraft back to Dak To. The other aircraft couldn't land because of the intense ground fire so he made passes over the LZ, tossing equipment to the team.

A night extraction was impossible so we returned to FOB 2. After a hot meal came optimism: Hell, with 80 friendlies on the ground, massed targets in a small area—it would be a turkey shoot. However, my last thought before going to sleep was that it would really be nice if the team broke contact during the night. Just prior to sunrise the compound comes to life, the word is that more Slicks are coming from Pleiku so the extraction can be completed in one lift. WO William "Bull" Durham—short, stocky, friendly (with everyone but FNG co-pilots) and still sleepy, allows as though we ought to get a bite to eat and find out if anyone knows what the hell is going on. After breakfast he goes looking for a briefing while I pre-flight.

We had flown this aircraft for the last week, her problems were familiar and the walk around confirmed that nothing had fixed itself: ADF - inop; crazed windshields; fuel pump - chatters; throttle linear actuator - sluggish; fuel pressure gauge - intermittent inop. (probably a bad gauge and a mental note is made that EGT had been creeping up a few degrees and power dropping off - not drastic so it probably just needed an engine flush). Crew Chief SP/4 Orville "Chief" Sheoships and Gunner SP/4 Raymond J. Reigadas wiped down the critical areas but, by any standards, the aircraft is filthy - the engine deck has suspicious fluid marks but no identifiable leaks, tail rotor blades have several new dings probably caused by expended door-gun brass. Up on top a blade grip-seal is seeping - dripping - leaking? Who can tell the difference? Chief just refills the reservoir every day. We don't find any show stoppers, as long as the "Jesus Nut" is on top, skids on the bottom and the engine runs, we are going to be going. There are no spare gunships.

Bull and the other ACs exit the briefing and he waves a small circle indicating time to get ready. Suiting-up starts with the flight jacket, not required by regulation and certainly not for warmth but a personal idiosyncrasy. I have heard and believe that in a crash you can only plan on getting out with what you have on your back; other than a weapon what I want most is the jacket's orange inner-liner as a marker panel for chase/rescue birds. Next, the pistol is repositioned from the hip to the front, at least a psychological barrier against a hit in that vital area. Recheck dog-tags and good-luck tiger tooth. Reluctantly the "chicken plate" (a real pain-in-the-ass), there are believers but I think it has more potential for taking your head off in a crash than stopping a bullet and, finally, the flak-jacket to prevent ricochets off the chicken plate from wiping out your neck and face.

The Slicks from Pleiku arrive and Bull gives the pre-mission briefing. Aircraft ready? Yup. Throw on some more M-60. OK. Spads are on target, guns are going to Dak To and wait for the Slicks to launch. Roger. You got any extra coffee? Ya, it's on the console. OK. Let's crank.

Avenger 6, CPT Lynn Hooper, leads the first fire team and Bull moves into position to lead the second. It is still early, density altitude is down and we are light for a "C" Model but the compound is small with a narrow takeoff path so he goes to the far end, stabilizes power at a one-foot hover, gently nudges cyclic forward then locks the controls to prevent disturbing ground cushion. The aircraft slowly accelerates and bumps through translational lift, nose down for a couple extra knots then a cyclic climb just skimming over the top of the berm surrounding the compound and a dive toward the rice paddy to pick up speed for the climb to en route altitude. Confined area gunship

takeoffs are not for the faint hearted. On the way to Dak To doorguns are test fired and the 40mm flexed, no use firing and giving it the opportunity to jam.

Fuel is topped off in South POL at Dak To and communications established with the FAC. He gives the order to launch, the Slicks have departed Kontum and the A-1Es have only 15 minutes more station time. Bull flies and I have time to think. Responding to an emergency is one thing, you react and do what is necessary to accomplish the mission; not having time for extensive prior planning means you don't have time to worry about the risk. This mission is my first exposure to a different and not particularly pleasant set of conditions. The NVA have .50 caliber machine guns, probably triangulated by now and 23mm, 37mm and 57mm anti-aircraft weapons in this area. They know we are coming and because the team is very close to a major road network they have undoubtedly prepared a reception. A sudden flash of insight: What in the hell am I doing here?

Smoke from the A-1E strike and a C&C Huey with our CO flying, lead us into the area. The FAC reports the team is receiving fire from all quadrants except the east, are extremely low on ammo, have had more wounded and are concerned about being overrun. He acknowledges the Spads are on their last firing pass and clears us into the area as soon as they depart. Gun/rocket systems "Hot," Bull reminds the door gunners not to fire toward the team until their perimeter is identified, then dives down to treetop level. A dry run to checkout the terrain and threat was made at a smoking 120 knots from the south-east (actually we had difficulty locating the LZ), approaching the team a break in the foliage exposes twinkling gun flashes—many twinkling flashes. Bull calls a visual on the LZ, I look but can't spot it. Avenger 6 confirms firing passes will be from the east, his fire team on the south of the LZ and ours on the north. Rolling inbound, Bull fires a pair of rockets and, finally spotting the LZ, I plunk out some 40mm, the team is around a small bomb crater surrounded by 100-120 foot trees with smoke, haze and mist hampering visibility. One more firing pass then a low-slow-cold pass to draw fire in order to locate the enemy and determine if the Slicks can be brought in. The team reports hearing automatic weapons, we don't spot them or take any hits, happiness is not seeing any green basketballs coming up, indicating .50 cal's in the area.

Time was crucial and the situation wasn't going to get any better so C&C vectored the first Slick toward the LZ. We pick up coverage and vectoring about a half mile out. "10 degree right, 1/2 mile, hold what you got—it's at 12 o'clock, 1/4 mile," Bull places a pair of rockets abeam the LZ, the door-gunners and I start putting down covering fire. "Slow down, start your flare, damn-it slow down," he slightly overshoots the LZ, comes to a stop, does a pedal turn and descends into the hover hole. The LZ was shaped like a frying-pan with the handle to the west. To minimize exposure to ground fire the aircraft approached from the east, did the 180 degree pedal turn, descended 120 feet to a low hover, held the hover while the troops loaded, did a vertical 120 foot climb and departed to the east. CPT Holland later reported the area had only 14-inch clearance on the sides and 48-inches fore and aft, it might have been a little larger but was extremely tight and in spite of our fire suppression, enemy fire was constant.

Normally the fire-team leader's responsibility is to concentrate on the target and the wingman is to cover lead. This mission required the guns to maintain continuous suppressive fire for the Slicks, covering each other was incidental. The firing runs were oriented in a basic race track pattern but the actual flight path dictated by maintaining position on the Slicks. On the outbound leg, right after the brake, we had a pest armed with what sounded like an SKS. Every pass in his vicinity was greeted with a loud CRACK—CRACK. We were staying low and varying track so he must have been on high ground or in a tree platform. In spite of all the problems and heavy fire around the LZ, Chief was taking this one-shot Charlie very personal. He hollered, cussed and hung out the door on his monkey strap firing his M-60 under the aircraft and down the tail-boom in a desperate attempt to locate and silence this guy. Good intentions, outstanding effort, yet pass after pass was acknowledged with CRACK—CRACK.

The Slicks' timing was great, as one would exit the LZ the next was on 1/2-mile final. I had isolated concentrations of weapon flashes and aimed some rounds at them but suppressing fire when the Slicks were

vulnerable was more important than zeroing in on a few individuals. The majority of rounds were spread to keep heads down in areas that had likely fields of fire into the LZ. Bull kept us in beautiful firing position, as the fourth aircraft descended I sensed it, felt it, heard it. "Oh shit, we are hit!" A searing burning in the neck, the Master Caution flashes, the hydraulic segment light illuminates. I let go of the sighting system and grab the back of the neck. No blood - just a poorly timed piece of hot brass from the door gun. A glance at Bull, sweat running down his forehead - this is not good. Although designated a UH-1C, this particular aircraft is a hybrid B/540 and only has a single hydraulic system. Total hydraulic failure this far from home is the thing nightmares are made of. Caution panel reset, the hydraulic light flickers. Bull exercises the controls and asks me to feel them. They feel normal. He shrugs and rolls inbound to pick up the next Slick.

As the number of people left on the ground decreases, the potential for a full blown assault to wipe them out increases dramatically - so the situation got particularly tense for the last couple of aircraft. Frequently, in the past, our Slicks had complained about gun coverage being too close. Although the ground next to his skids was saturated and the helicopter virtually obscured by dust from exploding rockets, 40mm and the M-60 rounds from mini and door guns, the AC of the last aircraft kept calmly repeating, "Come on Avengers, get it closer, get it closer!" Departing the LZ his path was marked by a line of smoke grenades identifying locations where previous aircraft had taken ground fire. The Hatchet Force had six more wounded, all of the living and wounded were extracted, the dead couldn't be recovered because of the intense enemy fire in the area.

Flying guns had its perks, you wore black hats, acted macho, talked dirty and a certain amount of deviant behavior was both expected and tolerated. A favorite pastime was proclaiming "Slicks are for kids" and ragging Slick pilots about gunny's constant exposure to fire. The seven crews of the 189th AHC "Ghost Riders" and the one "Alligator" crew from the 119th AHC that flew into the hover hole on Hotel Nine were not subject to being ragged. The skill, determination and courage required to fly through intense fire, descend into a hole barely big enough for the aircraft and load troops while maintaining a stationary hover in the midst of bedlam, explosions, carnage and constant incoming fire probably has to be experienced to be appreciated - but these Slicks were definitely not for kids!

After the last aircraft departed, the FAC spotted an NVA company-sized force 900 meters north of the LZ apparently massing to overrun the team. Avenger 6 made a quick ammo check and determined that although most was expended there were a few rockets, some mini-gun and enough door-gun, .38 and M-79s to make a going away pass. This was vetoed by the C&C who said the Air Force was being called in to work over the area. Turning for home we began to wonder about the hydraulics, the light remained out. Later it was discovered a round had hit the 40mm pod and creased a hydraulic line causing the light to flicker; one of the better things the 40mm did was stop the round that otherwise would have come through the cockpit. The Slicks were just dots on the horizon and our two fire teams were in more of a gaggle than a formation. Bull looked over and growled "OK, you've had enough rest, let's see if you can fly us home and try to maintain your damn altitude."

"Yes sir, I have the controls." Only 306 1/2 days to go!

The Pink Panthers = 361st Escort Company

The 361st Aviation Co (Escort) arrived in Vietnam from Ft. Hood, was assigned to the 269th CAB, was stationed at Cu Chi, but physically was based at DiAn. By 1 April their 12 UH-1Cs had been loaded onto C-133s for air transport to Vietnam. The main body departed on 6 April and arrived 8 April at Bien Hoa. Their TOE allocated 16 officers, 15 warrant officers and 143 EM. On 23 May 1968, the 361st relocated to Camp Holloway and was assigned to the 52d CAB. Their 12 gunships arrived on 24 May. On 8 July 1968 the unit history states that they received their first AH-1G to replace their UH-1Cs. Their compliment of 12 gunships remained the same during this replacement. The company 'originals' all believed their unit was programmed for MACV-SOG support.

VHPA member Gary Higgins wrote a short story with two titles *Secret War and its Secret Heroes* and *"The Bra," Juliet-Nine, Attopeu Province, Laos*. What follows is an edited version of his short story:

The operations and intelligence briefing on 19 December 1968 at FOB 2 went routinely and sketched out the locations of RTs on the ground in the AOs: T-7 "Ban Blade," J-3 "Little June," I-6 "Hip Shot." The mission on this day was the insertion of a nine-man RT into AO H-6, team code name "Little John."

Following receipt of a Good Day (secure on the ground) from the RT to be inserted that day, the Panther fire team was asked to proceed to J-9, and strike a wooden bridge on Route 96. Described as very hard to see from the air, the target was so concealed that even the Covey FAC, in slow flight, had not been able to get a visual on it. The 30-meter long bridge was constructed on a crossing to a high banked tributary feeding the Dak Xou river 300 meters to the west of a curve in the river called "The Bra." This natural twisting and turning of the river in and around large sandbars and connecting tributaries created the appearance, viewed from the air, of a large brassiere. To aviators and RTs alike, The Bra was significant for two reasons. First, it served as a checkpoint for aircrews and recon teams flying over a vast and uncharted Laotian jungle with few landmarks. Second, it served as a warning beacon to all U.S. aircrews operating in the area of one of the most dangerous spots along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. This reputation was justly earned based on enemy contacts, activity, and losses in aircraft, crews and recon teams.

RT's reported the newly discovered bridge camouflaged and well hidden in a tree thicket 200 meters north of the main river crossing, which was an underwater stone and concrete ford. Route 96 was originally part of the main road system of Laos but now served as the North-South high-speed thoroughfare of the Ho Chi Minh Trail network. This particular segment of Route 96 was in the open and very visible for relatively long stretches and therefore heavily bombed. It was always immediately repaired and well maintained for the passage of truck traffic that usually traveled at night and parked in the day. From Route 96 at the Dak Xou River ford, Route 110 splits eastward through The Bra, paralleling the river to South Vietnam's Central Highlands.

The 361st AEC had been flying FOB missions on a daily basis since September 1968 and had on a routine basis been tasked, after completing RT insertions, to recon and hunt for trucks, truck parks, training areas, animal corrals, sampans on the rivers, and any other legitimate targets of opportunity. The request, on this day, concerned me to the extent that the 361st and the 57th AHC had experienced heavy action in mid-November just north of The Bra (see SOG by Plaster pages 208-213). The 361st and the 170th AHC both experienced the loss of an aircraft earlier on 1 December.

The mission on 1 Dec was a B-52 post strike bomb assessment on the Ban Tram 37 logistical command, based near the bridge site on Route 96. While in-bound, descending through the dust from a half-mile of utter devastation caused by hundreds of 500-pound bombs, the NVA AA fire hit the Bikini slick with the RT still on board. The slick made a hard landing less than a kilometer north of the target Bridge and 75 meters west of the main road. As the Panthers covered Bikini 29, the chase/pickup slick going in to help the downed crew and RT, our fire team lead, CPT Harold Goldman and WO Mark Clotfelter took 12.7mm heavy weapons hits and went down. I continued to cover Ken Harper (AC of Bikini 29) till they were airborne with the downed crew and RT and clear of enemy fire. Harold's emergency radio was pulsing in my ears as I stayed low and fast, homing on the beeper. I found them down in the high elephant grass on a sand bar in the middle of The Bra. The second Bikini chase/pickup, for Harold and Mark, was on the spot and everyone got out alive. As a lone Cobra, we covered the pickup, strafed and burned the downed Cobra, and promptly covered the 67 kilometers back to Dak To.

Considered collectively, these events were clear indications to our G-2 folks that something was important to the enemy about the Juliet-Nine AO. It had been our experience that critical information about enemy movement and activity was not always passed on to the aircrews supporting the SOG. Mission brief at Kontum assured us that the NVA logistical headquarters had been destroyed and that the SOG radio relay site, Leghorn, on top of the mountain over looking the valley had not

reported anything unusual in the AO. No RTs were on the ground in this area.

Returning to 19 Dec., as air mission commander and 1st Platoon leader, I had adopted the practice of discussing with the fire team members the options we had in the conduct of an impending mission. WO Mark Clotfelter was my co-pilot/gunner. He came to the company in September, fresh from Cobra school and was already a seasoned veteran on FOB. 1LT Paul Renner was first Section Leader, flying wing as AC with WO Ben Ida as his co-pilot/gunner—the new guy on board. Paul joined the company in November and was fast learning the long-range cross-border operations of FOB. I had deployed from the United States with the 361st and at this point had extensive experience with the 5th Special Forces and their methods and requirements of operating on FOB. On this day we discussed the mission to destroy the bridge on Route 96 for a few minutes in the fire team and mutually agreed to look the bridge over in the course of a low recon once we completed our "Little John" RT insertion into AO H-6. Subject to the tactical situation of the other RTs, our fuel/ordnance status, and on-site area and target information, we would decide whether, and precisely how, we would attack the bridge.

The insertion of "Little John" was uneventful with a quick "Good Day" from the RT. The Covey FAC reported all quiet with the other three RTs and cleared us to engage the secondary target. In addition, Bikini 29 had fuel to serve chase/pick up if needed. We headed up Route 96 moving low and fast over the broken jungle to the Dak Xou River ford. It took two passes, scrubbing off speed, to get a straight "look down" to see the bridge structure well enough to get an accurate fix and call the fire mission. Once both Paul and I had a good visual and no challenges to our presence, Paul called the fire mission: "From the South to the North, parallel to the road-25% HE (High Explosive/17lb rockets)-Left break." Low angle, fast shots under the tree cluster made up the first pass and drew the usual pop and crack of small arms from the trail sentries. The second pass, on the out-bound leg from the target, was greeted by a sudden shift in volume of fire with the small arms sonic cracks rising to a chorus. I could see Paul in-bound covering our break. I suggested a right break and I would turn in behind him to cover so he could disengage from the target.

Within seconds, the cacophony of small arms fire rose to a thunderous level with hundreds of enemy troops suddenly standing up in the grass and tree lines emptying their Kalashnikovs on us. 12.7mm and 37mm Heavy-weapons fire started streaming in as well. Paul broke right. He began to shed parts and descend, at an alarming rate, into the open, grassy field covered with enemy troops, some of which were running to get out of the way. Not a word was exchanged as he flared and set down in the grass along Route 110; enemy troops shooting and running in all directions. With a lightning stroke and cloud of dust, the rotor struck the ground and separated. We followed in a wide sweep, getting real low and fast to avoid the AA guns. Mark was shooting the 40mm in a wide circle around Paul and Ben's point of impact. Keying the mike, I reported to anyone listening on the net, "Bikini 29, Panther 16, I've got one down on The Bra and need help." In only seconds Kent Harper's reassuring voice crackled back, "Roger, on the way."

A series of independent, yet interrelated actions and events were rapidly running simultaneously - and threatening to spin out of control. Paul was struggling desperately to extricate Ben from the aircraft, communicate on his emergency radio, and at the same time deal with their defense with his uncooperative Swedish-K. He could hear the enemy troops shouting orders and tactically moving around their exposed position. From the air, we could see hundreds of enemy appearing from virtually every direction in the flat, open grassland on both sides of the Dak Xou River. Mark and I were shooting back with everything we had while hugging the ground less than 50 feet over pith helmets and flaming AK muzzles. Bikini 29 suddenly appeared on a quick short final, settling into the epicenter of the ground and air fight that was growing in intensity, and becoming thick with dust and HE smoke. Grass fires exploded into flames and heavy smoke was everywhere. Small arms and heavy weapons flashes with tracers were cracking from almost every direction, bouncing and crisscrossing in a confusing array that made it difficult to tell what was enemy and what was friendly fire.

As if a lightning bolt suddenly struck, there was a thunderous crash and shudder that ran the entire length of my Cobra's airframe. Instantly, an enormous effort, with wildly exaggerated motion in the cyclic, was required to keep from hitting the ground at 150 knots, as the SAS dropped off the line. A quick scan of the instruments and a confusing attempt at working unresponsive switches revealed a total electrical failure. There were no radios, intercom, guns, warning lights, gauges – nothing! We managed to stabilize the aircraft, keep it flying, but knew instinctively our airworthiness was likely to play out very quickly. That meant it was imperative that the recovery efforts on the ground be completed damn fast; otherwise, we'd all be on the ground fighting the enemy with our pistols and Swedish Ks!

Although it could only have been a couple of minutes that Bikini 29 had been on the ground, it seemed a lot longer and for a long few seconds I wasn't sure he was coming out at all. They were struggling with Paul to get Ben out of the badly crushed aircraft, requiring the Bikini co-pilot, gunner, and crew chief, all working together, to complete the task. Finally, Bikini 29 was up and running low, nose down, blades forward over the grass. Door gunners shooting. Kent was on his way out and taking hits. We turned east, hiding between the riverbanks, badly swaying and wobbling at high speed. We held off climbing out till safely clear of The Bra and open ground. The loss of radio and intercom is difficult anytime in an aircraft, but in tandem seats it forced us to use hand signals to communicate and assess our battle damage. Without gauges or warning lights, fuel and hydraulics were of immediate and critical concern. If the cyclic and collective were going to freeze in place, we were determined that it was going to be in the "running fast and straight for the border position."

The landing at Dak To was clumsy, as was the shut down by manually pulling the throttle stop solenoid. Climbing down from the cockpit, I passed a jagged 6-inch hole, which appeared to be the result of a 12.7mm passing under my seat and through both center box beams. The main wiring harness was hanging in half and still smoking. Turning, I could see Bikini 29 setting down on the medical pad with the crew carrying someone hanging over a stretcher. Running toward the medical bunker, I could see Paul in step with the crew and hovering over the stretcher. I couldn't see Ben standing anywhere, which gave me a sinking feeling.

Once inside the medical bunker, a whole new and desperate struggle began, and it was clear Ben was in very serious condition. Paul was covered in blood and totally exhausted. The doctors and corpsmen worked frantically and aggressively with long hypodermic needles, tubes, IVs, pounding and pressing Ben desperately trying to find or spark life. It was chaotic yet coordinated, with each of four men working simultaneously on different parts of the patient. Gradually, their motion slowed and quite settled over the medical team as we stood over Ben. Each of us present endured a terrible, private agony as the realization settled in that the time and medical science to save Ben had played out. I didn't want them to stop. I felt helpless and clearly out of my element in this bunker of medical heroes. I'm sure for Paul it was a mountain of frustration to have it come out this way after going through so much to save Ben. Given the nature of Ben's wounds, he was probably gone in Paul's arms coming out of the front seat. I would guess Paul suspected as much, but he fought for even the slightest chance for his co-pilot; no matter how small. Despite the outcome, his efforts were truly heroic. I followed the corpsmen carrying Ben to a small shack setup for formal identification and processing. I was helped through a process that was never part of my training and I was learning why. The forms seemed complicated and impersonal. There were no noble words, just impersonal terms and facts about death. There was no ceremony, just a bluntness very removed from the advertised view on war and fallen warriors. I struggled to collect and list Ben's possessions, signing for everything including his remains.

A crowd had gathered around the badly damaged Cobra as word spread across Dak To that something had happened in a place no one would identify, and no one seemed to know anything about. Ben Ida had come to the 361st only two weeks earlier from an Air Cav Troop that was still operating in the area. As I exited the small shack and left Ben behind, a Cav pilot came running up frantically wanting to know if the rumor was true, that Ben was hurt. I asked what his relationship to Ben was and

tried to introduce myself. But he could see through me and knew that his friend was inside. Without warning, this unnamed friend of Ben's struck out in a rage of frustration over what none of us could change. His blind, frenzied attack was indiscriminate. Fists in the sandbags, side of the shack where Ben lay, and me. I tried to hang on to him but he was uncontrollable in his grief. Others, standing silently and just as surprised as I, came to help him in his struggle for acceptance of Ben's loss. This sealed something inside me.

The real stress of these events began to settle heavily on me while sitting on the floor of the Bikini slick en route home to Holloway. We were all physically, mentally and emotionally exhausted, ending the day in a strange way for gunship pilots; riding in the back of a slick as passengers. On this day, however, it was an honor. We owed these slick pilots and crew our lives and I was glad to be aboard. As Platoon Commander, I don't think I have ever felt worse – returning having lost your men and aircraft. Yet in another way I was going back with something I never really expected. I saw and experienced the kind of desperate struggle that most people only read about in novels and history books, and that movies are made from. On reflection, it stuck me as the kind of situation where men rarely survive the truly important lessons of war: Paul's commitment to Ben, a man he barely knew, a man he risked everything for. Kent Harper and the Bikini Crew, who knew none of us, rode into smoke and fire without hesitation, knowing there was every chance they would not come out alive. The medical team working in impossible conditions, on men with horrific trauma they'd never met, in a bunker in the middle of a place medical school could never imagine. These men and women know a reality of war few people do. I felt the deep devotion of Ben's unnamed friend and, through his anger, shared in his pain and loss that will be an ever-lasting torment for us both. Ben had such friends and I met one this day. It was difficult to accept the fact that Ben's citation will be written with a vague, fictitious location in Vietnam as the place where he fought and died. Ben's friends may never know his true courage and contribution. For that matter, few of those we were doing this for will ever know or hear of any of these men, their deeds or stories. Ours was a clandestine mission in an unpopular war.

Our drop off in front of the 361st Operations hooch at the Snake Pit brought many of the unit's men out to meet us. Leading them was MAJ Robert (Jim) Rodgers, our CO. A man I would follow to Hell. Well, some how we got there (Hell) on our own and it was time to report. Stepping a few feet away from the crowd, I gave a choking explanation of how we had lost Ben and both aircraft. How communications and equipment failed us from battle damage in the fight of our lives over a bridge strike and the chance encounter with a large enemy force. That individuals, aircrews and medical teams did their best and more, even in the face of overwhelming numbers of enemy and intense fire. That even though I felt we killed a lot of enemy and did what we could to save Ben, there was emptiness in my gut and heaviness in my heart. That I felt no victory, only loss and anger. MAJ Rodgers was supportive, understanding and insightful about how many uncontrollable things can and do happen so fast in combat. He spoke low and softly of the consequences in the choices we all make in war and how so much that happens can't be foreseen or even understood sometimes. He pointed out that you can control, manage and are responsible for only so much in battle. That everyone does his part the best he can given the circumstances. I was thankful for his strength, experience, and support, which, much like the terrible loss of Ben, I have never forgotten. MAJ Rodgers' kindness and understanding helped many of us go on in what we had to do.

As is always the way, in the misfortunes of war, Ben was the first of some number of heroes, actually secret heroes, in the 361st who would lose their lives in the months to come. Mark and I would again ride on the floor of a slick in January because of Juliet-Nine, which is another story for another time. There would be more harsh lessons that some would not survive. MAJ Rodgers would again have to ease my anguish with the loss of Mark Clotfelter and Michael Mahowald in July. His words, with their salving effect, I wrote down and keep in my office to this day: "Wrap today's sadness in a small package and lose it among tomorrow's projects."

The 361st supported FOB 2 with approximately 50% of its operational assets from about Sep 1968 while it departed Vietnam in Aug 1972. Some of the Panther AH-1Gs when to the 57th AHC's gun platoon.

The Hillclimbers & 1st CH-47s in Laos

VHPA members Sy Berdux and George Miller provided the following in reply to the VHPA Newsletter articles about cross-board operations.

The mission originated with 7/13th Air Force (a hybrid of the 7th Air Force, Vietnam and the 13th Air Force, Philippines) in September 1966. The mission was classified and originally planned for late October 1966. The tasking order had us recovering a crash damaged CH-3 from a classified site in "The Other Theater" to Udorn AFB, Thailand and to accomplish other missions as directed. At that time even the country's name was classified and you couldn't mention Laos. Basically, the 147th ASHC at Vung Tau would send two CH-47As with a reinforced crew to Udorn, Thailand TDY for about three weeks.

Mission planning commenced and included assigning five pilots and nine enlisted men to the mission. The normal Chinook crew consisted of a pilot, copilot, flight engineer, crew chief/gunner and door gunner. An additional maintenance person replaced the assigned door gunners. A pilot and three additional maintenance personnel, tech inspector, hydraulic repairman and an engine mechanic augmented the two crews. In anticipation of maintenance problems requiring spare parts, the normal fly away kit was utilized and a "Red Ball" arrangement was developed for high priority parts to be shipped to us via USAF aircraft operating daily between Saigon and Udorn. Fortunately that system was not utilized as both aircraft operated throughout the twenty-day period without any maintenance requirements. Both aircraft had just completed a one hundred-hour periodic inspection.

These Hillclimbers made the trip: CPT Sy Berdux, CW4 Roy Mollick, CW2 George Miller, CW2 Cal Moor and another pilot whom we can't recall. Being the 1st Platoon Leader, Sy was also the designated mission leader. All of the crew-members, to include the pilots, were experienced in rigging loads.

After assembling the crews, installing internal auxiliary fuel tanks (that in those days these were rubber bladders with an internal boost pump to increase range), doubling our basic load, and going through the myriad of items on the pre-mission check list, the aircraft departed at 0615 about Dec 5th bound for Udorn. We stopped at Bien Hoa for refueling and filling the bladders. The bladder required a single point refueling capability, which was not available at home station. Next stop - Pleiku.

During the pre-mission briefing we were informed that upon landing at Pleiku, we were to proceed to a compound at the opposite end of the field from the control tower for appropriate briefings and refueling. Before the blades had stopped, security forces surrounded us from the compound. We received our SAR and other briefings, changed into civilian clothes and spray painted all identification and US markings from the aircraft. Next stop - Ubon.

When we got within 30 miles of Ubon, we discovered they were below minimums due to restricted visibility and directed us to divert to Udorn. We were unable to comply as we were short on fuel. We shot an instrument approach, received another briefing and refueled. Next stop - Udorn.

There we were directed to park near the Air America flight line. Our contact, was an Air Force Major, who we later found out was part of the Special Operations crowd. Following post flight everyone was taken to the Officers Club to exchange our MPC to Baht. As the money exchange wouldn't open for awhile, we took over one of the poker rooms and discovered that a bunch of newbie majors were having a promotion party, which we joined. Free beer! After changing our money we headed downtown to a very nice hotel where we were all billeted for the duration of our stay.

The next morning the USAF presented extensive weather, intelligence, search and rescue, and escape and evasion briefings to all of the crewmembers. The aviators were briefed on the use of the codes for the day. The USAF tried to key our KY-28 equipment but was unable to do so. We operated the entire time without secure communications. As the crews were dailying the aircraft, one auxiliary bladder burst sending 500 gallons of JP-4 cascading down the ramp and onto the parking area. This

left us in a dilemma. Without the bladder, our "A" model didn't have enough fuel to return to Vietnam. The down side of this is? The Air Force did a non-standard fix on the tank so all ended well.

We were tasked to recover a crash damaged CH-3 and return it to Udorn, move a D-4 Bulldozer to a construction site and subsequently to another location, provide ammo resupply to a number of 105 howitzer positions in northern Laos on the hilltops surrounding the Plaine des Jarres and other missions as assigned. Following our briefings, Sy and George proceeded 'up country' (as Laos was called) to Landing Site 20A (alternate) the secret city of Long Tieng. After departing Udorn we had to proceed to a point 25 miles east of Vientiane before crossing the border. We were flying over terrain unlike anything we had seen before; a gentle tree covered slope that went on for miles, then a sheer drop of a couple of thousand feet, mountains erupting out of the green jungle, some shaped like pinnacles with sharp jagged edges, others like knife edges and towers of limestone on the banks of the Mekong and other rivers. It was beautiful!

Long Tieng lay in a perfect bowl. It was surrounded by high mountains on three sides with a gently rolling hill on the fourth. Looking down, we saw a C-47 taking off and it looked like a model some 4,000 or 5,000 feet below us. Following a circling descent, we shot an approach and observed a huge green flag being waved from the tower. We were cleared to land! ATC communications were interesting - they had a red and green flag and that was it! The runway was at about 4,000 feet ASL and had a huge stone rock outcrop (or krast) about 100 feet high at the end. For fixed wing aircraft, it was obviously one way in and one way out. The Ravens (USAF FAC's) called it 'the speed brake.'

We were directed to a house in the village and there we were briefed on the rules of engagement and our first mission to recover the damaged CH-3 on the airstrip. We looked at the hulk of the CH-3, which was just a shell, no transmissions, gear boxes, or engines. With all its structural damage we wondered what the Air Force wanted with this pile of junk. We discussed the situation and as we were not allowed up country overnight, proceeded to return to Udorn with a brief stop at a landing strip near Vang Vieng to check on our refueling stop for the lift mission.

The next morning, after getting the CH-3 estimated weights, calculating weight and balance for the lift and coordinating the pre positioning of fuel at Vang Vieng, we proceeded back to Long Tieng accompanied by an AF full colonel to lift the CH-3. The Air Force had placed 4 x 4's on the hull portion of the aircraft to act as spoilers and an F-4 drogue chute on the tail boom. Following all of the preparations, including topping the engines, rigging the aircraft, we found we had 20 lbs. torque to spare during the hover check. We shut down and went back for briefings and were informed that the mission was a go and that Air America had pre-positioned fuel for us at Vang Vieng.

We hooked up, picked up the load and hovered to the runway for departure. As we moved forward, one of the airmen tried to open the drogue chute which, unknown to us, roman candled immediately and became totally ineffective. After translation we established a gentle circling climb towards a gap in the ridge when the crew chief stated that something fell off the load. The flight engineer stated the load was flying (slack in the slings). The CH-3 swung 90 degrees and struck the aft gear of our aircraft. This sent us into an unusual attitude. We saw parts of the attitude indicator that you don't see unless you are disassembling! We basically stopped in mid-air and as the CH-3 started to swing forward the flight engineer, pilot and copilot all hit their pickle switches. We don't know which one worked. The jettisoned load ended up in a very deep ravine. When we volunteered to try to recover the load, the AF colonel, who was on board declined stating that the hulk was going to be shipped to the States and used as a maintenance trainer and not worth the risk. Mission failure.

En route to Udorn we stopped at Vang Vieng to refuel from the pre-positioned stocks that turned out to be 55 gallon drums and a 10 gallon per minute rotary hand pump. The refueling seemed to take hours and wore the arms off all of us.

A couple of days later, the second mission began. We were to move a D-4 bulldozer externally which weighed in the neighborhood of 11,600 lbs. We proceeded to a small airstrip in the vicinity of "The

Rock," LS 85, which was close to the North Vietnam border. The idea was to enlarge the strip so the Jolly Greens coming in from the North could transfer more seriously wounded to fixed wing aircraft thus getting them to the hospitals quicker. We carried the dozer in two loads; one aircraft had the tracks and blade, the other the main frame. An Air America Pilatus Porter who we communicated with over our five channel emergency VHF radio, guided us to the area. The first aircraft in dropped the tracks and ground crew. They then repositioned the blade further away while the ground crew unrolled the tracks. The second aircraft set the main frame onto the tracks. The ground crew reconnected the tracks and the blade within half an hour.

We headed to LS 36, Nha Khang, for fuel and on the approach, over-flew a camp with what looked like PT-76 Tanks parked in it. As we were passing mid-field we heard the crump of mortars and observed the rounds impacting in the center of the runway. The Raven personnel who handled our refueling stated, yes, they were PT-76's and yes, the Pathet Lao always welcomed people with mortar fire.

We provided one aircraft to augment the Air America CH-34's providing artillery re-supply. Each gun position had a 50 to 75 foot cleared area for the CH-34's to make a running landing thus increasing their load capability while landing at 4,000 or 5,000 feet AGL. With our greater carrying capacity, one CH-47 sortie equated to 4 CH-34 sorties. Since we were carrying sling loads, our turn around time was greatly reduced. As opposed to the artillery hauls and ammo re-supply we had experienced in Vietnam, this was really interesting. Each artillery position consisted of one tube with another located a few hundred yards away on another hilltop. There was no radio communication as they didn't speak English and we didn't speak Lao. To our knowledge, these artillerymen had never seen a Chinook nor had they experienced the rotor downwash and turbulence that it creates. We weren't sure whether they were glad to see us or not after the havoc we raised.

Operating in the Plaine des Jarres was interesting and much different than our normal mission area in the III and IV Corps. The crews were subjected to flight conditions and altitudes in the areas frequently exceeding 6,000 feet AGL and all landing areas were much more confined with extremely high barriers than those experienced in the Delta.

The highlight of the trip was twofold. The first, Bob Hope caught up with us at Udorn and we had an opportunity to see his show, which we wouldn't have if we had stayed in Vietnam. Secondly, Cal Moore, the chief scrounger, found 18 brand new 15 cubic foot refrigerators still in their original crates that the Air Force was disposing of. Each aircraft carried nine home as a Christmas present to the troops.

Heading home we RON'd at Ubon and then on Christmas morning, we headed to the "Golf Course" at An Khe thinking we would eat Christmas dinner with the Cav. Unfortunately, they were serving dinner later that day, so we had some "C's" and headed south to the relative civilization of Vung Tau. In George's "C" ration was a "Pound Cake" that he still has. He says that "Some day, when the time is right, he will eat the cake and think of all of those times thirty odd years ago."

Hurricanes in Laos

Periodically, the 478th Heavy Helicopter Company, equipped with CH-54A flying cranes and based at Red Beach near Da Nang, was tasked to support U.S. interests in Laos. VHPA member Ed Strazzini who served with the 478th in 1970 and 1971 provides the following:

Many of our missions supported the USAID activities assisting the Lao civilians driven from their homelands by invading NVA. The U.S. Embassy also gave us missions to assist the Royal Lao forces. To this day, I faithfully tell anyone that officially we were just transporting chicken coops and other things for the natives. I do, however, recall several iron chicken coops that looked a lot like CONEX containers. We also moved a lot of fuel drums and general heavy lift items.

We were on TDY status for about three weeks at a time with one aircraft. Since we were based at Udorn, it was more like R&R. This was a very desirable assignment for both the pilots and EM. There was always a list of volunteers.

Once we recovered a Royal Lao Air Force CH-34 to Vientiane so Buddhist monks could exorcise it. The Lao pilots had determined the aircraft was not flyable because it had been inhabited by evil spirits!

In June 1971, we were asked to help Gen. Vang Pao's troops by lifting a couple of Chinese 122mm howitzers they had just captured from the NVA in a battle on the Plain of Jars. My response was the standard one, "What does it weigh?" Well, nobody present had any idea, but we concluded that it had to be less than a U.S. 155mm, since it was a noticeably smaller piece. I took advantage of an Air America S-58T flight to get a glimpse of the site where the guns were being guarded by the general's troops. We landed briefly just to let off a team of American riggers and then returned to Long Tieng where we quickly readied for the mission. A pair of armed T-28s (each loaded with six 250-pound bombs and two .30-cal. machine guns) escorted us into the PZ. The hook up and flight out were uneventful; the gun weighed somewhere around 8,000 pounds, I seem to recall. We carried the gun to the airfield at Long Tieng where the camo-dressed Gen. Vang Pao personally thanked us. As we had undertaken the flight with minimal fuel, we were delayed while Air America refueled us before going after the second gun. Before we could get cranked up, a messenger reported the mission was suddenly canceled. Shortly afterward we learned why: The NVA had counterattacked and took back their lost howitzer!

Several years ago the Directory Editor was speaking with a VHPAer who flew for the 478th in the 1970s. He said words to the effect, 'I have an unusual story for you - a CH-54B (as in Bravo Model) in Southeast Asia during the war!' While I am no expert in Skycranes, all the crane drivers I know are consistent about one issue - there were only A Models in Vietnam; so I said 'Tell me more.' I wish I could remember this person's name. I believe he lived in Florida, but could be mistaken on this matter.

Anyway, he described being assigned by the 478th to Udorn for a 90 day period as something of a 'permanent temporary' to maintain continuity for their TDY operations. This made sense. Next he said that the Army test board was interested in getting some real heavy lift operational experience for the B Model in Southeast Asia without all the political attention the aircraft might get if it were in Vietnam; so they picked the Thailand TDY deal as the test site. This also made sense - Laos was hot and high plus there was no shortage of heavy lift opportunities and things were in the 'side show' department. So, the Army had an USAF cargo plane flew a disassembled B Model to Da Nang where it was assembled by the 478th guys at Red Beach. After it was checked out, it was flown to Udorn in much the same manner as their normal TDY aircraft rotation. After a month or so in Thailand and everyone had seen and recorded what they wished, the B Model when back to the States the way it had arrived.

Over the years I have repeated this story to several CH-54 and 478th folk. To the man they say words like, 'That might be true.' They are quick to add, 'I would like to know more about that story' and so would I. Soooooooo, if you know anything about an Army CH-54B in Southeast Asia during the war; please contact Mike Law.

HMM-165 with VMO-2, VMO-3, and VMO-6

The following narrative, taken primarily from Saal's *SOG Volume III*, provides some insight as to the magnitude of the helicopter support required for a Hatchet Force operation.

2 June 1967 - At 1600H, an eighty-man Nung Hatchet Force from FOB 1 (Phu Bai), led by SF NCOs (SFC Billy R. Laney, SFC Ronald J. Dexter, and SFC Charles F. Wilklow), with the Nung commander, Ky, was inserted into Oscar-8 (XD793044) to determine if a B-52 Arc Light had been effective in eliminating, what was felt to be, the NVA headquarters directing and controlling the Ho Chi Minh trail. Intelligence reports described the area as a small piece of flat land, approximately four-hundred-sixty meters high, surrounded by cliff-like hills which rose sharply at a distance of three-thousand meters. Reports also indicated the area was being guarded by a regimental size enemy unit.

Prior planning called for the continued bombing of the area by 18 aircraft, after the Arc Light raid. This would be done to lessen any remaining enemy resistance in the area. Only four aircraft, however, were used to fulfill the bombing requirements prior to inserting the SOG Hatchet Force. The operation was called a suicide mission due to the lack of pre-bombing in the areas thought to contain strong

resistance and a lack of air cover for any unplanned emergency extraction.

Eighteen aircraft were tasked with the insertion of the SOG Hatched Force. The insertion aircraft consisted of nine Vietnamese H-34 helicopters from the 219th VNAF flying out of Da Nang and five Marine CH-46 helicopters from HMM-165 out of Khe Sanh Marine Combat Base (KSCB). These transports would be covered by four UH-1E gunships, one each from VMO-2 and VMO-6 and two from VMO-3.

The VNAF H-34s, under fire, performed the first insertions onto the LZ. Two H-34s were hit by small arms fire. It was apparent that the LZ was ringed by enemy automatic weapons. The gunships provided covering fire as the insertion of the Hatched Force continued. MAJ Coffin's VMO-3 gunship was hit by heavy fire and crashed in a densely forested area 2,500 meters from the LZ.

MAJ Romine immediately flew his CH-46 to the location of the crash site. The crew, on the ground, could not move from their location due to the terrain, the enemy situation, and MAJ Coffin had sustained a broken back in the crash and could not be moved. Maneuvering his helicopter, through a narrow opening of the hundred foot tall trees, MAJ Romine was able to get low enough to extract the downed crew. The wreckage of the downed UH-1E was set ablaze by LCPL James King firing machine-guns from the VMO-6 UH-1E piloted by CPT Pless.

3 June 1967 - The gunships returned to Oscar-8 at first light. The Hatched Force reported they were in contact with the enemy and needed assistance. CPT Pless relayed the dismal situation to Covey 56. Covey called for assistance in the form of fighter aircraft. The Hatched Force soon became surrounded and locked in battle, at close range, with the enemy forces. The gunships continued maneuvering against the enemy. CPT Pless' gunship had taken two rounds, was disabled, and had to return to base. At base, as CPT Pless talked with SOG Launch Site personnel about the situation, his crew made the necessary repairs to the gunship. CPT Art Graff of VMO-3 took the place of the injured MAJ Coffin, received a briefing from CPT Pless and followed him into Oscar-8. As the situation heated and the ground fighting grew fiercer, an enemy round hit a rocket pod on CPT Henry's gunship and caused it to burst into flame. The burning rocket pod was finally kicked loose from its mount by LCPLs King and Bowen.

An emergency extraction was called for by the American Hatched Force team leader. Nightfall was approaching and the team leader expressed his doubts about holding off the enemy until Hatched Force reinforcements could be inserted. The Hatched Force had several men wounded and was occupying a bomb crater which had been dug-out by a seven-hundred-fifty pound bomb from the Arc Light bombing raid. Both the weather and the enemy continued closing in around the Hatched Force. At 4 p.m., MAJ Romine maneuvered his CH-46 below the rim of the bomb crater. Eight mercenaries were loaded on board and the aircraft lifted through a wall of small arms fire 200 feet high. Engine # two quit. MAJ Romine maneuvered the helicopter as it crashed into a dense jungle area 150 feet away from the Hatched Forces' location. Fifty-one personnel formed a defensive perimeter.

Next CPT McCracken brought his CH-46 down into the Hatched Force's crater and sixteen Nungs scrambled on board. Three other Nungs grabbed hold on the ramp as it lifted out. While gathering altitude and speed, the three Nungs fell from the helicopter tail-ramp.

Then CPT Hanson maneuvered into the crater. He loaded a group of twelve Nungs, the three American Special Forces and lifted-off through a hail of small arms fire. SFC Laney had been wounded in the back. At 5:05 p.m., the helicopter was shot down and landed in an upright position in trees 50 to 100 feet high. It came to rest about four-and-a-half feet, suspended, off the ground, and two feet from a hut. Other huts and open areas were in the immediate area. The crash happened, evidently, in an enemy base camp. The enemy concentrated heavy fire into the CH-46. An explosion occurred in the aircraft, firing died down on the right side, and SFC Wilklow was able to escape from the area. At about 5:50 p.m., CPT Hanson, asked SFC Dexter to form a defensive perimeter with LCPL Cius and the Nungs. They departed the aircraft, but were forced away from the area by enemy actions and gun fire. SFC Dexter, LCPL Cius and ten Nungs set up a defensive position on a hilltop approximately 200 meters from the crash site. SFC Dexter

and the small group of men spent the night at the hilltop site with the intentions of returning to the crash site at dawn to search for the crew. CPT Byrd, due to the crash of MAJ Romine, became flight leader and aborted further attempts at extraction. With darkness closing he directed all helicopters to return to base.

At 6:50 p.m., helicopters at the launch site were assembled for attempting extraction the next morning. They consisted of eight CH-46s, five UH-1E gunships from VMO-3 and five gunships from VMO-6, and nine SOG Vietnamese H-34 helicopters. It was determined that the extraction of the Hatched Force be accomplished by the H-34s while the CH-46s would perform any necessary search and rescue support. The Hatched Force had been without food or water since insertion.

4 June 1967 - At first light, the Hatched Force reported it was still under siege and needed assistance. From the position occupied by SFC Dexter and his small group of men, extensive enemy movement could be heard at the area of the crash site. The group departed the area and traveled the entire day without encountering enemy forces. No further sign was seen of CPT Hanson, SGT Bodden, or 1LT Gardner. Throughout the day, UH-1E gunships launched, expended their ordnance, returned, re-armed and launched repeated attacks in support of the remaining Hatched Force. They were joined later in the day by fixed wing bombing. At 3 p.m., six CH-46s, nine UH-1E Helicopters, two A1E Sky Raiders, nine VNAF H-34s and two O1E FACs launched to Oscar-8. CPT Art Graff, gunship pilot, replaced the seriously injured MAJ Coffin. LCPL Bateman was replaced on SHARK TWO by a door gunner; LCPL H. Shive.

The first H-34 was directed to unload the food and ammunition it carried and pick-up five wounded Nungs from the crash site of MAJ Romine. The third H-34 entered the crater and was shot down as it attempted to lift-out. Two H-34s rescued the men from the crashed H-34 and another had been shot up so badly it had to return to base without any passengers. As the ninth, and last, H-34 lifted personnel out of the bomb crater, twelve Nungs from the Hatched Force still remained in the crater. At last light, the group with SFC Dexter set up a night defensive position, and they remained in place.

5 June 1967 - After sun-up, nine of the Nungs with SFC Dexter were separated as they passed through a Montagnard hamlet. SFC Dexter, LCPL Cius and one remaining Nung were captured and taken back to the hamlet where they were grouped with the other Nungs who had been captured earlier. Meanwhile, reconnaissance flights were launched to locate any survivors from Oscar-8. One group was seen waving a colored panel, but enemy ground fire halted any closer surveillance of the site.

6 June 1967 - Reconnaissance aircraft flights continued searching for possible survivors in Oscar-8. During the search a colored panel was seen in a bomb crater with one lone body laying next to it. Closer observation showed it was an American. All efforts were concentrated on his recovery. Later SFC Wilklow would reveal one of the most interesting and gut wrenching E&E stories to come from the war. The NVA, seeing that he was virtually unable to move, used him as 'rescue bait' for four days. Initially they tied him to a stake but when he didn't move much, they removed the ties. They hid in the trees to kill any rescuers. They even walked over and urinated on him. He had to drink from the pool of rain and urine to stay alive. Finally, that night he managed to crawl and drag himself nearly two miles and miraculously found a rescue panel in one of his pockets that the NVA had not searched. He put out the panel and passed out. When he woke up, he was looking at SOG SSG Lester Pace who had come down on a McGuire Rig to get him. Eventually 58 American SOG soldiers would be MIAs in Laos and only SFC Wilklow was rescued. The other American to survive was the doorgunner, LCPL Cius, who was captured by the NVA and successfully survived as a POW until 1973. SOG SFC Dexter was captured by the NVA but never reached North Vietnam. A Nung, captured and later released, reported witnessing the executions of the three USMC crewmen and that SFC Laney was last seen in the aircraft with a back wound from the battle and possible a broken leg from the crash.

195th AHC

The 195th AHC, based at the Plantation, in late 1969 and early 1970 had the distinction of officially authorized camouflaged painted Army Hueys because they were constantly going 'over the fence' in the III Corps area. They routinely keeps a pair of guns and three slicks at Bu Dop SF Camp; switching aircraft and crews every two weeks.

The VHPA is interested in learning more about the 195th's missions into Cambodia. If you can provide information, please contact Mike Law.

Phoenix = C/158 AHB and Redskin = D/158 AHB 101st Abn Div

VHPA member Tom Marshall had his *Phoenix Rising - Hueys in I Corps* published in the January/February 1996 issue of Behind The Lines magazine. What follows is an edited version of Tom's story:

In Nov 1970, after flying OH-58s for the 1st Bde 4th Inf Div for three months, Tom was assigned to the Phoenix. His article describes being in a group of 'newbies' attending a CCN briefing at the SOG FOB compound inside the Quang Tri airfield compound. When he asked if the multicolored pins on the maps showing northern I Corps, Laos and southern North Vietnam denoted .51 cal, he was told "No, Mr. Marshall, these are all larger than 12.7-mm." He was told that everything they did was classified so no cameras; but he took several shots, including the LZ in 'North Damn Viet-Nam' that are included in his article.

On his first mission, a hot RT extraction, with the Phoenix in Nov 1970, Redskin Cobras from D/158th AHB provided the gun support. The flight of four Hueys climbed to 4,500 feet and flew just below a base of purple-gray overcast, heading northwest from Quang Tri toward the border area north of the DMZ and east of Laos. They checked in with Covey who was contact with the team and told to look for purple smoke on short final. The story continues in Tom's words.

CPT David Nelson was my AC. We were Chalk One. My three months of flying a little Jet Ranger in the Central Highlands around An Khe was no preparation for what I was about to do. Nelson did all the flying, continually updating the others en route regarding the plan of action and the type of extraction. Near the border area we assumed radio silence except for our classified "digital scrambled" FM radio. Without the same type of radio and our secret code, the enemy could not listen to us on this band. In the cargo bay of our Huey, rode a Special Forces NCO flying "belly man" along with our door gunner and crew chief. We were going to make a "string" or rope extraction. This meant coming to a hover a few feet above the trees and then dropping 120 foot long ropes to the team on the ground. We were able to handle four passengers in this manner. They would clip on to the ropes by means of special metal rings sewn into their LBE (Load Bearing Equipment) harness, then we'd lift them out of the jungle and fly them to safety, dangling below us as we climbed vertically to 5,000 feet.

From that moment onward, we were a small assault helicopter team of four lift aircraft and four gunships, literally riding to the rescue, like cavalry of old. There was an unspoken commitment we were all aware of. There were Americans in trouble on the ground. We were their only way out. It was time to get them and hope we didn't die trying. In the game of war, the lives of those on the ground were the "bet". Our lives were committed to "up the ante" in quest of a win.

A vicious skirmish was underway between the SOG RT hopelessly out-numbered by North Vietnamese, who were equally willing to die in pursuit of "the Americans." We were living an absolute dedication and commitment to duty, honor, and country. We weren't proclaiming these virtues, we were committing them. Deeds of action, not empty words. Life itself, we learned, was the most precious gamble.

Several miles from our PZ the four slicks dispersed into one-minute intervals. The pilots behind us slowed to increase their distance between each Huey. We'd have one minute to find our passengers under attack, hover over them and kick out the strings. When they clipped on, we'd have to climb vertically to safety. Minutes later we turned onto the final approach. Nelson called the team leader on the ground and told him we were two miles out. His only response was, "Hurry!" Nelson asked, "Is it hot?" The team leader's response was, "Yes." We could hear the firefight raging in the second he took to say one word.

We began our descent, leaving behind the purplish gray glare of overcast clouds into the reddish brown haze of smoke and battle. The Redskin

gunships were rolling in on a rotating cycle of fire support. When one finished firing and turned to climb out, another was coming in on his tail picking up the fire. As we descended toward the smoking PZ, clearly in sight, an indescribable sinking feeling tore at my guts. Descending further, the Huey was shuddering as it decelerated. The loud "whopping" sound of our rotor blades heralded our approach to everyone within 25 square clicks. With adrenaline pumping, we focused fully on the mission - locate the team, hover on them, drop the strings, get them out safely. The business at hand, training and respective duties took over. We had to set aside our fears during our approach. Time slowed as our minds raced, pumped with adrenaline. As we came in on short final, still a quarter mile from the PZ, Nelson said, "Get on the controls [with me]...very lightly." Another chill shot down my spine. This was it! The real thing! Just in case he was hit, I was supposed to be ready to take over the controls. As we came to a hover, the crew chief shouted, "About ten yards forward, sir, about five yards to the right." I felt the controls moving furiously, but Nelson had the bird at a perfect hover. Nelson was hovering the Huey just below a mountain ridge line without much in the way of visual aids. His piloting was complicated by gusty mountain winds. I kept my fingertips just touching the controls. The SF sergeant back in the cargo bay looked over the side and said, "We're clear to drop, sir." Reflexively, Nelson said, "Drop 'em." The four 120-foot ropes uncoiled over the edge of the cabin floor. As I looked over the side of my armor plate, I could see we were taking fire. We'd hovered over the chaos of close combat, yellow tracers streaming by beneath us, wisps of white smoke from NVA rocket propelled grenades, and concussion of Redskin 2.75 inch rockets going off all around us. I stole a quick glance back inside the cockpit, watched Nelson performing, and never looked out again. Instead, I focused on the landmarks of the ridgeline in front of us, moving my eyes in the manner I had been trained, one second on the ridge line, one second on engine instruments, one second on flight instruments, then repeating it all over again. At the same time, I subconsciously made myself as small as I could behind my "chicken plate" and the armored sliding door on my right. My entire simple existence totally depended on successful mission performance and my luck at not occupying the same space at the same time as a rapidly moving bullet.

I watched Nelson holding the Huey at a precise hover, totally ignoring the sounds of rockets and grenades exploding all around us. He was mentally and physically focused on maintaining that hover. He had shut down his mind to all outside distractions. Suddenly, the crew chief called, "They're all hooked up, sir." Then Nelson calmly announced, "Okay, coming up." "Clear up," shouted the crew chief, followed by the same response from the gunner. Nelson then called over the radio, "Chalk One, coming out."

Chalk Two, on short final called back, "Is it hot?" "Affirmative", responded Nelson. With four passengers dangling from strings beneath our helicopter we went straight up 500 feet, moving forward slowly once the men on the ends of the ropes cleared the trees. We climbed steadily up to the bottom of the clouds near 4,500 feet and continued southeast away from the danger. Our time at a hover over the hole in the jungle had been less than thirty seconds. It had seemed like an hour. The same action was repeated by the second Phoenix Huey. Our two ships completed the extraction in less than two minutes. The other two Phoenix birds, orbiting in the distance, were there as back up or recovery birds in case we went down during the extraction.

Clear of the area with the team safely out of danger, we turned southward towards South Vietnam, still unwilling to relax. We were still over North Vietnam. A few minutes out from the PZ, Nelson said, "You got it, keep it steady, very steady." As I took the controls, he shook his gloved hands, and began clenching and unclenching his fists, trying to relieve the tension and stress that were cramping his hands. He'd executed the extraction perfectly, but not without paying a price.

About fifteen clicks northwest of Quang Tri, just north of Camp Carroll, there was a large river valley. When we reached it we descended toward a large sand bar out in the current and hovered down with the men still on the ropes. They were too numb to move, the straps on the

McGuire rigs had cut off the blood circulation to their legs. And there was the additional discomfort of having just been carried for thirty minutes at 4,500 feet, dangling at the bottom of 120 foot rope, in 40 degree temperatures at 70 miles per hour. None of them could move. Our crewmen had to physically carry them into our cargo bay. Back in the air, we flew the rest of the way to FOB pad at Quang Tri. We dropped off our passengers, then headed south once again to our base at Camp Evans.

When we were finally on the ground in the relative safety of our revetment area at Camp Evans, Nelson looked at me and said, "You shut it down, I've got paperwork to do." He exited the helicopter and made his way to the TOC to write up his after-action report. On instinct I began the procedure to initiate the engine cool down and shutdown check list. It was obvious that everyone had been under an incredible amount of tension. But this was I Corps, the end of the line. We had just completed an unbelievably risky mission in North-Damn Viet-Nam, and up here it was just routine!

I was quietly impressed with the performance of Captain Nelson. He'd served his first tour as a warrant officer, then had taken a direct commission and returned to Nam for a second tour. My first impression of him when I had arrived at the Phoenix a few days earlier didn't fit the impression I had now. He had worn spit-shined Corcoran boots, polished to a mirror finish. I'd seen him "hopscoching" from one dry rock to the next just to avoid getting his boots dirty in the monsoon mud. I remember thinking to myself, "This guy would be better suited for the Navy!" I'd seen a lot of them in my home town of Pensacola, always immaculate, everything polished. We Army pilots, however, were a different breed. Silently, I assimilated this experience. I was in awe of the performances of Nelson, the crew chief, the gunner and the Special Forces sergeant flying bellyman. The second Phoenix crew had done the same thing. I felt inadequate to serve with these types of men. During the extraction, waves of adrenaline had created in me an alertness, an aliveness, a high, so to speak, that transcended anything I had ever experienced in competitive sports. It had been interspersed with what I can only explain as "time expansion," when a second seemed like a minute, and a minute seemed like an hour. The wonderful exhilaration and the incredible sense of accomplishment that I felt after the mission was shared by everyone who was part of it. Yet it took a while to calm down, to get myself back under control. What an amazing experience! We had been exceedingly lucky. Not one aircraft had taken hits. Every member of the SOG recon team had been safely extracted while under heavy enemy ground assault. For the Phoenix, this good luck would hold...for a while.

CPT David Nelson was lost over Laos four months after this action.

4/77th ARA, 101st Airborne Division

The 4/77th ARA supported SOG missions at least in the last half of 1969 and through 1970. When VHPA member George Louzek reported to Bravo Battery in Aug 1969, MAJ Fred J. Stubbs was the CO. Stubbs called George into his office and told him that they were often assigned a great, classified mission but that they could only be assigned to crews who volunteered to fly them. Without much more information than that, the Major asked if George would volunteer, then waited for the answer. When he told the Major he didn't know what to say, the Major said: "Just say Yes." George said "Yes" and joined all the other Toro pilots who flew these missions. At this time, Alpha Battery was a Phu Bai, Bravo and HHB at Camp Eagle, and Charlie at Camp Evans.

CCN missions were assigned just like any other ARA mission through Division Artillery. Each ARA battery had three sections of four aircraft. While they were on operational status, they were assigned one of three ready conditions. On Two Minute Alert, the crews stayed near their aircraft which were ready to launch. They even slept next to the birds. On Five Minute Alert, the crews could stay in their own hooches but had to be ready when the Two Minute team launched. Anyone on Fifteen Minute Alert also pulled CCN missions when they came up. Each battery would receive CCN missions on a two week rotation, so basically every one had about the same opportunity to fly this mission as he did any other type of ARA mission. Because it was just another mission, the ARA units did not certify their crews for CCN operations as some of the slick

units did. A junior man would start out in the front seat, could then become the back seat AC, and then become the section leader.

A typical CCN configuration was one USAF Covey FAC in an O-2 or OV-10, two AH-1Gs, six transports, and two rescue transports. There was usually a pair of A-1 Sands. Sometimes the Marines were tasked to provide two UH-1E gunships but not for every mission. The UH-1Es had a problem keeping up with the AH-1Gs and UH-1Hs when the Army provided the transports. About half of the missions were flown with VNAF CH-34s transports and the rest with UH-1Hs from 101st assets. George can never remember flying a mission with Marine CH-46s as transports. Sometimes they flew with USAF H-3s without markings that came from bases in Thailand.

The VNAF crews were good at what they did. They were paid extra for each mission, something like \$100. Sometimes on the way home they would hunt wild deer with their door guns. They would load the deer into the helicopter and sell the meat in town. "KINGBEE go home now" was VNAF for "this mission is over and I'm out a' here!"

Basically the 101st attempted to fly CCN missions as if they were in-country LRRP missions, so if something went wrong they could say, "OK, we got lost." This rationale might have made the officers in the higher headquarters feel better; but those who flew the mission knew the NVA would just shoot you no matter what you said, so the rationale was meaningless to them!

BIG MOTHER

Helicopter Combat Support Squadron SEVEN (HC-7) was established and headquartered at NAS Atsugi, Japan on 1 Sep 1967 with the mission to service the Seventh Fleet.

In time they deployed about 23 detachments with helicopters covering an area from California, to Japan, to the Philippines but mostly with the Seventh Fleet that maintained a constant presence off North Vietnam.

Their major flight tasks were shipboard search and rescue (SAR), fleet helicopter logistics, VIP personnel transfer, and helicopter vertical replenishment (VIRTREP). The squadron used the callsign BIG MOTHER.

In 1968 HC-7 had 85 pilots.

Each detachment had specific equipment and was dedicated to a specific mission. Some of the detachments were:

Det 101 had one Kaman UH2A/B Sea Sprite and was deployed with the COMSEVENTHFLT Flagship at all times. Even though it was a VIP transport unit, they recorded a number of emergency rescues. BLACKBEARD was their callsign.

Det 102 had two Boeing UH-46A/Ds Sea Knights and was deployed on the big supply ships (e.g. USS Mars) until the ship was replaced on station. The personnel rotated 40 days with the fleet and 20 days in Japan. They flew with the BIG MOTHER callsign.

Det 103 was permanently shorebased at NAS Cubi Point, RP and provided maintenance for the SAR detachments. Personnel rotation was 180 days at Cubi and/or one of the SAR detachments. In Sep, 1968 it was renamed Det Cubi and established as a PCS organization. Dets 104, 105, 106, 107, 108, and 109 all flew Kaman UH-2Bs on rotating Combat SAR (CSAR) from mostly frigates (DLCs) positioned at the North SAR and South SAR areas in the Tonkin Gulf. CLEMENTINE was their callsign. Generally a det would rotate on duty for 15 to 30 days and then be training for a 30 to 45 day period.

Dets 110 and 111 were permanently present with the fleet and may have been collocated most of the time aboard the various aircraft carriers (CVAs and CVSSs).

Det 110 flew four Sikorsky SH-3A Sea Kings on Yankee Station SAR continuously from 19 Feb 1968 until 25 Sep 1973 for 2,217 consecutive days at sea. They used the BIG MOTHER callsign.

Det 111 flew two Sikorsky SH-3A Sea Kings in a logistics configuration and were designated PROTECTORS. This det joined the fleet on 23 Jan 1968 but after 5 March was collocated with Det 110.

Det 112 also flew UH-46s on VIRTREP missions but the history suggests it was only used when the fleet size got larger than Det 102 could handle.

Det 113 flew RH-3As in a mine countermeasure role.

Det 115 flew the venerable UH-34s in an oceanographic research role.

Det 116 flew SH-3Gs on CSAR.

Det 117 flew UH-2Bs on CSAR.

The other dets provided local support for specific Navy Task Forces and were usually on an aircraft carrier.

After forming on 1 Sep 1967, they assumed custody of the former HC-1 dets on 1 Oct 1967 and recorded their first rescue on 3 Oct 1967.

Any reader of the Pacific Stars and Stripes will notice that hardly a week goes by without some account of a SAR rescue; so even though these units were on stand-by, they flew!

On 19 Jun 1968, LT Clyde Lassen and crew made a daring rescue of two Navy pilots at night inside North Vietnam and earned the Medal of Honor. At least three other pilots were awarded the Navy Cross.

In 1970 HC-7 started disestablishing dets.

In 1971 they started phasing out the H-2 aircraft and this was finished in early 1972.

HC-7 received a PUC in July, 1971.

The NVA offensive in March and April, 1972 saw a lot of business for BIG MOTHER.

Gerry Carroll's book NORTH S*A*R documents the life and times of a SAR crew in late 1972 and is a very good read.

On 14 Jan 1973, HC-7 recorded its last combat rescue and 25 Sep 1973 Det 110 left Yankee Station.

On 17 Jun 1975, the last aircraft and men were transferred to HC-1.

On 30 Jun 1975, the history states "HC-7 is disestablished. BIG MOTHER is dead." This seems to be a cruel statement even for a history document.

As best the VHPA HELICOPTer and KIA databases can currently tell us, HC-7 (and its predecessors) had 8 pilots and 13 crewmember KIAs. They also experienced the loss of 2 UH-46s, 12 SH-3s, and 12 UH-2s.

Project 404

VHPA member John Quesenberry provided the following information that appeared in a 1995 VHPA Newsletter:

Project 404 was the name for the classified aviation support of American interests in Laos. It had an Air Force component that consisted of the famous Raven FACs and an Army component that consisted of a small aviation detachment with three UH-1H helicopters and one U-10 helicopter. I'd guess Project 404 started about 1967.

We lived at Udorn and flew in Laos. We received all our missions from the embassy. We flew missions that were very similar to those flown by Air America or Continental Air Service - moved people and supplies where ever they wanted but generally support the Special Forces boys deep in Laos. We also did some reconnaissance - for example, try to find out if the good guys or the bad guys were on a certain hill top without getting shot down.

The previous detachment CO was MAJ Nicholis (who had Greek ancestors) and I know a MAJ Bob Moberg commanded it at one time. Not long after I took over the unit, Bob, who had retired from the Army and was living in Thailand, purchased the U-10 and flew it all around the area. Others who served in the unit besides those already mentioned are: CW3 Archie Ahl '73-'74, CW2 Jim McCollum '73-'74, CW2 William Duncan '73-'74, CW4 Chuck Honecutt 'forever-'73, and CW3 Tom Moore '72-'73. We usually had two or four EM. I can only remember one, a SFC Will Lock.

We had red passports and embassy ID cards. This gave us official US government business status but meant we were not accredited. If we went down and were captured - we were to say that we were on a training flight and should be returned to the US embassy. If this didn't work - well, tough luck GI. Naturally everyone in Southeast Asia knew we were there but it was not known in the US or Europe.

Air America provided maintenance support. If we needed anything, we got it very quickly. Our Hueys were painted green and had U.S. Army on the tail boom. Naturally we had no door guns. Because we routinely refueled from 55-gal drums and fuel bladders, the right aft cargo compartment had a DC-3 fuel pump and a small hose. Other than that we flew standard H models.

We carried individual weapons. The embassy people got excited about this and we told them: "Hay, there are places in Laos where if you go down the NVA are the least of our worries - tigers and snakes ARE THE WORRY!" We wore nomex when we flew but civilian clothes whenever we are on the ground.

When I left in May, 1974 Project 404 consisted of a single UH-1H and one pilot CW2 Phil Lee who had basically been there forever.

The Cambodian Incursion

The official dates for this effort are 29 April to 30 June, 1970 because that is when the US ground combat units and US advisors were involved. The activities west of III Corps, and to a lesser extent those west of II Corps, grabbed all the attention because that is where the Americans were. *The Helicopter History of IV Corps* presented in the 1997 VHPA Directory included material on the Delta Devils (235th Aerial Weapons Company) and the Uptight Cougars (214th Combat Aviation Battalion) which supported the ARVN effort west of IV Corps. While that material is within the scope of this helicopter history, it will not be repeated here to provide space for other units. Anyone desiring a copy of that material should contact VHPA Headquarters or Mike Law. What follows is some material on the American side of the Cambodian Incursion.

A/7/1st Cav

VHCMA Member Charlie Palek, who flew as a Scout Observer with A/7/1st Cav from June, 1969 to June, 1970, recalls:

In early May we got ready to invade Cambodia. When we first got the word that this was going to happen, everybody was pretty excited about it because it was more like pay back than anything because we'd been chasing these guys across the borders and not able to go after them.

Typically our Scouts usually flew with two men in the lead ship and two men in the wing ship and two Cobras overhead. That was typically how we worked. Just before we went into Cambodia, we changed things a little bit. They added another Cobra as overhead cover, so we had three whenever our team was on the ground. We also put a third man in the LOH on the right side behind the pilot in the cargo compartment with an M-60 also, to cover that side of the helicopter.

We took about three days, I guess, before we flew into Cambodia to get things ready. I volunteered to fly the back seat in the lead LOH and I rigged up a little jump seat back there. A chicken plate went underneath the seat. I wore a chicken plate on the front and back of my chest. A strap was attached to a harness on my back and the other end was attached to a bolt in the helicopter, so I wouldn't fall out. I had enough strap attached to me that I could actually get out and stand on the helicopter skids and shoot under the ship if I had to. Since the cargo compartment was empty except for me, I had plenty of room for ammo and grenades and everything else we took along. So we were pretty much ready to go.

We taped a block of C4 to a frag grenade and called them super frags. We took a whole bunch of those along for busting bunkers and anything else that it might be useful for like blowing up buildings and supply warehouses. We had heard we were going to be hitting a base camp and figured we were going to need lots of those. Just about every grenade in the inventory we carried with us - super frags, tear gas, normal frag, Willie Petes, concussion, incendiary and smokes. The observer in the left seat had a whole bunch hanging between him and the pilot and on a wire hanging in front of the bubble. Didn't seem to occur to us that we had several hundred pounds of high explosive sitting in between the pilot and the gunner and in the back seat, but that was back in the days when we were young and dumb and didn't really consider that.

I was about two days away from going on an R&R in Hong Kong when we got the word about Cambodia. Our CO came to me and asked me if I would be willing to give up my R&R and stay because they needed Oscars. It didn't take me long to say Yes. I'd been with this unit for almost a year and there was no way I was going to let them get away with something this big and not take part in it. So I gave up my Hong Kong R&R and never did get it back, because

about three weeks after the invasion, I went home and was discharged. Our Blue Platoon, our Infantry guys, were shipped over too. I can not remember where we staged out of. All I can remember was that it was a small airport. But our Infantry guys were sent out there the day that we went over the border and spent the next couple days humping rockets back and forth between the ammo dump and the Cobras that were coming in to be rearmed. I am still in contact with one of them. He lives in Syracuse and he says they worked harder than they had ever worked in his life in those two days because there was a steady stream of Cobras coming back needing more rockets. They were expending them pretty quickly.

The morning of the invasion, our team was up first. We were going into the Parrot's Beak area. ARVNs were supposed to be in support but I never saw many of those guys on the ground that day. We were flying around about 4,000 feet right next to the border. Flying lazy circles. We finally got the word to go in and Jimmy Hendrix was playing on AFVN at that exact moment. I thought that it was pretty appropriate when we got the word to go, we rolled over and dove for the ground. Jimmy was playing his solo and I thought, 'Boy, this is really going to be appropriate music for this!' Because this is really going to be funky and I couldn't have been more right!

We crossed the border. Flew across a pretty large treeline and there was a huge base camp in front of us. The Rules of Engagement were that we couldn't fire at anybody unless we got shot at first. So, we posted our wing man up a little bit above us and went down and started hovering around, pretty much begging someone to shoot at us. As we looked in, there were storage buildings, barracks, all kinds of things going on. The paths back and forth from the buildings were very well compacted, so you know that this place had been there awhile.

We didn't see any people though. We were actually hovering around looking in the windows of some of these buildings and stuff, just champing at the bit to start tossing grenades in them. We did see one guy about ten minutes into our checking things out. He walked out of a barracks with his AK over his shoulder and actually waved at us. I guess he thought we were lost or something. I don't know, but he didn't have a care in the world. I guess he was heading for the latrine. We hovered around for another ten minutes or so and then some idiot stuck a rifle out of a window and took a shot at our wing man. After that it was every man for himself because we started tarring things up big time!

We were tossing grenades into the buildings and killing people as they were running out of the barracks. We had so many targets some times that we didn't know what to concentrate on. We were so excited about all this activity that we didn't want to leave. Typically when we had targets like that, if we figured we couldn't handle it, we would toss out a smoke and grab some altitude to let the Cobras work it over. But we weren't receiving that much fire, so we were staying on the ground and the Cobras were yelling at us to get the hell out of there so they could go in and do their job. It was pretty chaotic!

When we went in, we had 2,000 rounds of minigun ammo. My guy in the front seat, Denny Workman, had about 1,000 round of M-60 ammo at his feet, his M-60 machine gun in his lap. I believe he carried a 12 gauge shotgun for a backup and he had a Smith and Wesson 38 on his hip. I had probably about 2,000 rounds for my M-60. It was in a box spilled out on the floor. I draped it back and forth, back and forth across my left leg, then right into the gun. I carried an AK-47 that day as backup with around three clips of ammo and a Smith and Wesson on my hip too.

When we started the attack, we popped some smoke in some of the building areas, got out of there and let the Cobras go to work. Then we'd go back down to check it out. It was probably the most intense hour and a half I've ever spent in my life. But I can't say that we were receiving that much fire. There were a lot of people out there with brand new AKs, brand new Russian SKs, but they weren't using them. I thought that was pretty weird because I expected that when we started attacking these people that they would really get aggressive. But it was like they were confused about what was going on. They never expected something like this and when it happened, they didn't know what to do.

So we spent an hour and a half in the air on our first mission. That day we pulled three flights. Most of the time we had more targets than we knew what to do with. We flew over a tree line and found about eight guys standing right out in the open in the rice paddy. All eight of them dropped to the ground, got themselves in a little fetal position and just let their weapons lay at their side. That is how they stayed when we hovered up on them. I could see them peeking at us with one eye open. I could never really explain that kind of behavior unless it was something they had been trained to do. Because I'd seen people do this before, it always kind of baffled me why they would do that instead of at least try to shoot at us; but I kind of figured it was something that they were told to do if they heard a helicopter overhead. Drop to the ground, roll up into a tight little ball and don't move. But unfortunately that doesn't work if you've already been spotted and they were definitely nailed to the wall. We killed those eight guys laying there like fish in a barrel and I begged my pilot to put me out so I could get some of those rifles and AKs. They were brand spanking new. They had the nice Russian bayonet on them and everything. But our pilots were really, really afraid of letting one of their Oscars out on the ground for some reason or other. I never did figure out why. One thing they were afraid of was that he would step on a booby trap or get shot by one of the guys that was on the ground, then they'd have to deal with that. So I was doing some pretty heavy begging to get him to put me out there and he absolutely would not do it. So I said that he had an Oscar on the other side of the helicopter who could cover me, just turn the thing around and let me hop out. I'll only be on the ground for a minute. But he didn't have anything to do with that. So we left the weapons laying there. I blew up a bunch of them with the M-60. Shot them up.

We flew over to what looked like a levee about ten feet high. It was about a hundred yards long and there were bushes growing in the middle of it. I thought I saw just a flash of white in one of the bushes, so I had the pilot fly parallel to it and I worked the whole treeline over with my M-60. Three bodies rolled out of it. We swung around and did the same thing back the other way and the other Oscar did the same thing. Two more bodies fell at out it. This little bushline was just loaded with people. Never received a round of fire in return. But we went back and forth on that bushline about three times and I think that we killed nine or ten people out of that thing. They just kept rolling out. All brand new weapons again. They were well fed. Most of them had uniforms. It was like they just didn't know how to handle all these helicopters flying around.

We flew our first mission that day. We came back and let the second team take over. We had expended every bullet we had in the helicopter and every grenade was thrown. I even emptied my Smith and Wesson out on some people that were running around down there. So we went through about 3,500 rounds of M-60 ammo and 2,000 rounds of minigun ammo. We probably had at least 60 grenades with us and we threw them all in an hour and a half.

We got back to the staging area and I put another 2,000 rounds of ammo in the back seat with me in addition to the 1,500 I started with. My other Oscar in the same ship put another 1,000 rounds in. We loaded up the minigun again with 2,000 rounds and put in as many grenades as we could. We did have somebody there from our Troop who had made some more super frags for us. That was his job that day. Just sit there and put those things together for us. So we loaded up with a bunch of those things and went back out even heavier loaded than we were the first time.

On the second trip and the third trip, we expended every bullet we had. It was just pretty amazing. Each of them lasting about a hour because we were expending our ordnance so fast we couldn't keep up. When the day ended I had 29 kills. The back seat in the other team's LOH had 35. I think between the two front seat Oscars, there were another 40 there. So we probably shot and killed at least a hundred men in that one day, just the two LOH teams. I don't know how many the gunships got. Like I said they were blowing up buildings and there were probably people in there too. But it was an exhausting day. I mean we were going flat out all the time. No rest. I don't even remember eating anything that whole day until we were

on our way back. But I have to admit that it was one of the most intense days of my life.

The pilot that flew the lead ship that day was a CW2, I believe, Randy Willis. Everybody called him 'Chatty Randy' because he talked a lot. The other Oscar was Dennis Workman. I think this was his second tour. He had been there a long time. He was my room mate and probably one of the best guys, you know, to ever have on your side when things started getting tight because he was very cool.

We went back into that same area the next day. People had pretty much thinned out and scattered by then. It wasn't as easy to find them. We could still find a few. The bodies that we had killed, the eight guys that were just lying in the paddy, had been covered with green plastic. They were already starting to swell and the plastic started to stretch over their bodies. They looked like green cocoons laying there. They didn't remove them. They just covered them up.

We ended the day without any casualties. No body was wounded. We had a couple of bullet holes in a couple of the LOHs and Cobras but we never saw any 51 caliber positions. We never saw any 20mm anti-aircraft. The only thing we witnessed was people carrying small arms and that was all.

A couple days after the first mission into Cambodia, we flew into a little town called Takeo and landed. We didn't actually go into the city, we just landed outside the town. While we were flying over I noticed that the ARVN were taking baths and washing themselves in the river. There was a nice, big Cambodian flag hanging in a bush. It had just been freshly washed and was drying. I figured that I needed that more than they did. So the second we touched down, I unstrapped and ran and stole it from the ARVNs. On my way over there, I noticed that this was about the time that Lon Nol was wiping out a third of his country's population, so there were bodies floating in the river everywhere. It was just amazing. Skeletons. Freshly killed. It just didn't seem to make any difference. You could find any kind of body in any kind of decomposition along the river banks and floating in the water. These ARVNs were washing themselves in this same stuff. But I got the flag. I've still got it. It is hanging in my room.

We landed at Takeo, rearmed and continued to fly around checking for people. By that time they said they had been pretty well dispersed and finding them wasn't as easy as it was the first day. We still worked at it for several days after the first day and brought back a kill or two every once in a while.

1/9th Cav, 1st Cavalry Division

The Directory Committee thanks VHPA members Walker Jones and Bert Chole for their efforts to collect and record the history of the Air Cavalry Squadron. What follows is an edited version of a well-researched article written by Bert:

Official cross border operations by the Squadron into Cambodia occurred in May and June 1970 and again in February-May 1971. These were two very distinct and different operations. The May-June 70 incursion was as a part of the 1st Cavalry Division operations under the command and control of the division. The second operation occurred after most of the Division had deployed back to the United States.

The planning for the first operation took into consideration the lessons learned by the division since its arrival in Vietnam. The Air Cavalry squadron remained under division control and was not fragmented. All troops of the Squadron (HHT, A, B, C, D) and our normal attachments of Co. H 75th Rangers and the 62nd Combat Tracker Team all participated in the Cambodian operation. In addition to conducting operations into Cambodia the division retained responsibility for their assigned AOs in Vietnam. The division organized for the Cambodia incursion by forming Task Force Shoemaker under the command of Brigadier General Shoemaker. The Task Force consisted of the 3rd ARVN Abn Bde, the 3rd Bde 1st Cav Div, the 11th ACR and their subordinate elements. Five batteries of artillery, one assault helicopter company, an engineer company and one MI detachment completed the Task Force.

D-Day, 1 May 1970 began at 0410 with the first of six serials of B52's conducting arc light missions in the AOs. At 0600 the artillery preparation began and at 0630 a 15,000 pound bomb with a daisy cutter fuse was dropped, creating LZ East. Fifteen minutes later another 15,000 pound bomb was dropped creating LZ Center. Shortly after first light

FACs started tactical air strikes against preplanned targets. At 0700, artillery fires were shifted to support the movement of the 3rd Bde and the 11th ACR as they began movement towards the border. When the fires were shifted, B Troop 1-9 flew across the border into Cambodia becoming the first element of the 1st Cavalry Division to enter Cambodia.

The 1-9 (-) consisting of Alpha and Bravo Troop began recon operations in their assigned sectors. At 0740 hours 5 NVA soldiers in a 2 1/2 ton truck were observed by a pink team from Bravo Troop and engaged by the scout and accompanying gun ship resulting in 5 NVA and one truck KBH and the first recorded enemy casualties in the operation. At 0815 the first combat assault into Cambodia was completed by the 1/3 ARVN Abn into LZ East.

Elements of the 1-9 conducted LZ reconnaissance throughout the TAOR. Final selection of LZs was completed at 0930 and the three ARVN Airborne Battalions assumed alert posture at Quan Loi. The first elements of the 3rd Bde crossed into Cambodia at 0945 and the 11th ACR crossed into Cambodia at 1000. This was followed by a 42-ship air assault into Objective B by the 5th ARVN Abn Bn. Contact was immediately made with a force of approximately 200 NVA. Fighting throughout the day resulted in 27 NVA KIA and one 1 ARVN soldier KIA. The 9th ARVN Abn Bn and the 3rd ARVN Abn Bn completed the ARVN air assaults into Objective A. The final air assault on day one was conducted by two companies of 2-7 Cav into LZ X-Ray.

At the conclusion of day one this entry appears in the division after action report, "1-9 Cav had a field day catching small groups of NVA trying to evade, resulting in a record total of 157 NVA killed by helicopter."

The natural trepidation one feels, on moving into a new AO, was present throughout this first day. As the day wore on it was soon apparent that the only thing that had changed was the area on the map where the Squadron was operating. The Squadron SOPs were followed and warfare as the Squadron conducted it, was in full swing. "Pink Teams" consisting of one AH-1G and one OH-6A were scouring the countryside finding, fixing and destroying, within their capability, as many enemy as possible. The "Blues" (Aero-rifle platoon) were inserted to fix the enemy until a larger force could be committed into the area. They were also used to conduct ground reconnaissance, search bunker complexes and possible cache sites.

The Squadron scout pilots discovered one major supply area and one major cache area. SSG Ron Renouf of the 1st Cavalry quarterly publication "The First Team" describes these finds in the summer 1970 issue as follows, "... Hunter Killers of Bravo Troop, 1st of the 9th, found a major installation soon to be nicknamed 'The City.' ... Warrant Officer James Cyrus, a LOH pilot with Bravo troop, discovered the complex during a routine mission."

"We found the building complex almost by accident, 12 kilometers west and 25 north of the Cambodian border. We were looking for something in the area, but didn't see anything at first. Then I spotted one hooch, well camouflaged. Unless you were at treetop level, it was almost invisible. I just followed the bamboo walks from hooch to hooch, and saw the street signs, bridges with walkways and ropes and what looked like a motor pool and a lumber yard." Cyrus said. The 1st Battalion 5th Cavalry was inserted the next day to remove the equipment from the supply area.

The Cav's other initial Cambodian assault, north of Phuoc Long and Binh Long Provinces, also had spectacular results with the discovery of the "Rock Island East" cache. Scout pilot Charles L. Frazier of Charlie Troop, 1st of the 9th, was on a routine recon 10 miles northeast of Bu Dop near the 2nd Brigade's FSB Myron.

"We saw the road running out of a small village. Following the road, which had been heavily used and recently by trucks, we could see pallets stacked off the side of the road," recalled Frazier. "But the overhead jungle canopy was too thick to see very far inside. Next day two of the pallets we'd seen previously were gone and we found truck tracks leading to the spot. We followed them and saw three two and one half-ton trucks loaded with troops in complete NVA field uniforms. They heard us and tried to dismount the trucks and hide. We engaged them and killed 23 of them and destroyed their trucks." D/2-12th Cavalry conducted an air assault to exploit this find and was followed

the next day by Charlie Company and recon platoons of Echo Company. All elements of TF Shoemaker were returned to Division control at 1431 hours, 5 May.

The following descriptions of the results achieved by each Troop and Company assigned to the Squadron is taken from Annex K of the Division After Action Report.

"A Troop during this period was credited with 230 enemy killed by helicopter, 13 enemy KIA in actions against the "Blues", 152 individual weapons destroyed, 3 crew served weapons captured, 52,100 rounds of ammunition captured or destroyed, 266 tons of rice captured or destroyed and 9" of documents captured."

"B Troop during this period played a most successful role in the allied drive into enemy sanctuaries in Cambodia. They netted 437 enemy killed by helicopter, 307 individual weapons captured or destroyed, 18 packs captured, 5 bridges and 10 trucks destroyed and 3,000 lbs. of rice captured or destroyed. The discovery and first exploitation of an enormous enemy cache site on 4 May, 1970 highlighted the efficiency of B Troop's reconnaissance, later named "The City".

"C Troop, although coming into the Cambodian conflict after its sister units, was not to be outdone. They accounted for 284 enemy killed by helicopter, 2 individual weapons captured, 100 boxes of fuses destroyed, 37 - 22" diameter wheels destroyed and 4,400 lbs. of rice captured or destroyed. C Troop was also responsible for leading ground forces into the cache site later named "Rock Island East". A scout helicopter from the troop discovered the cache while on a visual reconnaissance mission."

"D Troop during this period, the troop escorted 13 convoys to Duc Phong and Song Be, [made] 27 combat assaults to Loc Ninh and Song Be as a quick reaction force, were inserted into Cambodia three times to reinforce the squadron's Aero-Rifle platoons, picked up 95 detainees and killed 2 NVA, captured 2 AK-47's and one 122MM rocket booster."

"H Co. 75th Rangers, during this reporting period, conducted 50 missions into Cambodia. These resulted in 38 enemy sightings, 15 contacts, 9 enemy KIA, 16 enemy contributed kills by helicopter, and numerous intelligence reports brought back."

"62nd Combat Trackers performed 19 missions during this period consisting of tracking to regain contact with the enemy, reconnaissance, and to track missing or lost friendly personnel. CCTT 5's performance of tracking down 4 Ranger MIA's after a heavy contact with the enemy resulted in finding two of the MIA's."

The 1/9th accounted for 985 of the enemy KIA's out of a 1st Cavalry Division total of 2,339 enemy KIA's, or 42% of the division total KIA's. This was consistent with this squadron's remarkable achievements during the entire time they were in combat in Vietnam.

It was fitting that this incursion into Cambodia ended as it began, "At 1728, the last aircraft of B/1-9 returned to mark the end of all 1st Cav forces in Cambodia, 25 minutes ahead of the 1800 deadline set by higher headquarters."

Returning from Cambodia, the Squadron resumed their normal operations in Vietnam's III Corps area. The impact of our operations in Cambodia lasted for several months as the level of activity in the III Corps area was dramatically reduced. By September the US troop withdrawals from Vietnam were in full swing. The 1st Cavalry Division was picking up more and more area and by the end of August 1970 was responsible for approximately 4536 square miles, from the South China Sea to the Cambodian border. Between the end of this first incursion into Cambodia and the beginning of the second incursion into Cambodia the Squadron had many unique challenges and opportunities to excel. We formed the Ninth Provisional Air Cavalry Brigade, started to stand down and prepare to return to the United States, and then were told to stand back up.

The start of the story of the second incursion into Cambodia begins on 25 Dec 1970 at 0830 when the Squadron was directed to position a troop at Tay Ninh to support ARVN forces. The combat elements of C/1-9 arrived at Tay Ninh at 1040 hours and by 1400 had established contact with the enemy. For planning purposes C Troop was to remain at Tay Ninh for three days; however, they were there until 19 May 1971.

The learning experience C Troop acquired while working with the 18th ARVN Division was applied to all other troops of the squadron when the 1st Cavalry Division, minus the 3rd Bde, stood down and the 1-9 received the mission of supporting ARVN forces in MR III.

In the two months prior to the Cambodian operation the Squadron, while still part of the 9th Air Cav Bde, trained ARVN rifle platoons to perform detailed ground reconnaissance normally accomplished by the Aero-Rifle (Blue) platoon of the Air Cavalry Troop. Use of these ARVN platoons (Browns) greatly reduced the language problem between the forces accomplishing ground reconnaissance and the reinforcing troops that followed. In Cambodia, U.S. ground forces were not allowed on the ground; however, the Brown teams were immediately available to secure downed aircraft or to rescue shot down crews. General Minh, CG, MR-III, decided to expand the Brown team concept to 13 teams. The Air Cavalry Troops trained the teams in rappelling from helicopters, helicopter familiarization, rigging downed helicopters for extraction, and ground reconnaissance as well as refresher training in booby traps and marksmanship.

We had been working very close with the ARVN troops throughout the months of December and January and the early part of February. As the stand down of U.S. forces progressed there was increased activity by the NVA along the border of Cambodia and Vietnam. In response to that increased activity another incursion into Cambodia was planned, only this time the incursion would be under the control of the ARVN forces with General Minh, CG, MR-III in charge.

The Task Organization at the beginning of the operation was similar to the organization of the 9th Air Cavalry Brigade. The 1-9 Cavalry Headquarters was the controlling and operational headquarters for all air cavalry units involved in the operation. The TF organization on 22 February 1971 was as follows: A/1-9, B/1-9, C/1-9, A/3-17, and A/2-20 (Blue Max) in direct support. Echo Troop 1-9 Cav was going to revert to its original designation of D-227 AHB on 24 February and as such did not participate in this campaign.

On 21 February 1971 the squadron was told that the following day would find us, once again, going into Cambodia in support of the ARVN forces. This time no American forces would be allowed on the ground. If we had an aircraft shot down; the ARVN Brown platoons would secure the aircraft, and evacuate the crew and aircraft. This also mandated that we change our method of operating. Normally the squadron had pink teams operating independently without a C&C aircraft. This incursion into Cambodia would require a C&C aircraft on station whenever a troop was operating in the TAOR. On board the C&C would be the senior troop officer and an ARVN LNO. The LNO would obtain clearance to fire and to insert the Browns, from the ARVN Commander in whose AO we were operating. This worked very well but our major problem with the ARVN forces during this operation was their inexperience with the "pile on" concept of Airmobile operations and their reluctance to provide a Ready Reaction Force (RRF) whenever the Browns made contact on the ground. It took time to work our way through this problem and with some units, we never did get it solved. In those cases when the ARVN unit commander would not provide a RRF when the Browns had contact, we would extract the Browns and attempt to destroy the enemy with organic weapons, air strikes and artillery.

On 22 February, the first day of the operation, A/1-9 supported TF 9 in the Snuol area, B/1-9 supported TF 333, C/1-9 was supporting the 18th ARVN Division, and A/3-17 was supporting the 3rd ARVN Armored Cavalry Brigade. During the day we inserted the Browns twice and extracted them twice, five aircraft were fired at with two of them hit and one AH-1G from A/3-17 shot down and later extracted. Bravo Troop received ground to air fire and engaged the area. A/2-20 arrived on station in support of this contact and also engaged the enemy. At the end of this engagement B/1-9 had killed 25 NVA and A/2-20 had killed 19 NVA. The start of this second incursion into Cambodia proved the NVA was back in strength.

On 24 February we had the ACT of the 11th ACR attached to the squadron and began working the area near the Chup Rubber plantation. On 25 February an ARVN convoy was ambushed in the B/1-9 AO. Bravo troop responded and engaged the enemy. The fire was intense as they made repeated gun runs upon the enemy. It was

soon apparent the ambushing NVA were in at least company strength. Four sections of ARA from A/2-20 were used throughout this engagement accounting for 27 NVA KIA. At the end of the day Bravo Troop had accounted for 130 NVA KIA.

The following day Bravo Troop returned to the general area of the previous day's contact and regained contact with the enemy further to the south. One Cobra took heavy ground to air fire and one LOH took fire from three 51 caliber positions, one 30 caliber machine gun and extremely heavy small arms fire. The LOH burst into flames and crashed. This turned into a daylong battle with B/1-9, C/1-9, A/3-17, 11th ACT and A/2-20 all involved in the battle. ARVN forces attempting to reach the downed aircraft got within 200 meters of the aircraft but were driven off. The crew's bodies were never recovered. 234 NVA were KIA as a result of this action. This day turned out to be the day with the highest body count during the entire operation.

On 10 March at 1411 hours a LOH from A/1-9 received heavy 51 Caliber fire crashed and exploded on a riverbank. The Browns were inserted at 1630 hours and recovered one body (the crew chief) and found two additional flight helmets. The ARVN Lieutenant in charge of the Browns was convinced that the pilot and observer were either killed or captured. I was the Squadron XO at this time and conducted the MIA investigation. As I interviewed the two Cobra pilots, both told me there was no way anyone could survive that crash. On 13 March at 1340 hours the Alpha Troop Operations NCO was shocked to receive a call from General Minh informing him that Warrant Officer Houser (the LOH pilot, shot down on the 10th) was at his headquarters and would Alpha Troop care to pick him up?

I reopened the investigation and interviewed WO Houser upon his return from the hospital. As he recalled what happened this incredible story came from his lips. "I knew we were going to crash. I don't remember the crash, but the force of the crash ripped my seat from the aircraft and I went through the windscreen. I came to under water and I was still strapped to the seat. I fought to get out of the seat while thinking I was going to drown. I swam to the surface and towards the nearest shore. Fortunately I swam to the south side of the river since the north side was full of NVA. As I pulled myself up on the bank I moved further into the jungle and away from the fight. When I was several hundred yards from them and the adrenaline had stopped pumping, I took stock of what I had. I had my survival knife, a wrist compass and my 38 Caliber pistol. 'That is not much,' I recalled thinking. But I knew roughly where I was at when I was shot down and I knew highway 13 was to the southeast. I checked my compass and started in that direction. As night descended I was deep into the jungle. I had moved down some heavily used trails and past some sites that had indications of recent use. I found a small stream and got something to drink. As I was getting a drink I heard voices of an approaching force of some sort. I moved away from the stream and back into the heavy undergrowth. A three-man NVA unit passed by the spot I was hiding, as the adrenaline surged through me. I lay motionless as they passed and decided I had better get some sleep. In the morning I continued moving towards the southeast. It was hard going and very hot. I continued moving all day but this time I stayed off the trails. As the second night descended upon the jungle, I wondered if I was ever going to find highway 13. I felt very much alone and isolated. In the morning I started moving south-east again and within a few hours found myself at the edge of Highway 13. I checked both ways before I moved onto the road. I was elated at first and then realized I was very vulnerable in the middle of the road, and moved to the edge of the road as I continued moving to the south. Within an hour a man on a bicycle appeared as he rounded a bend in the road. I jumped into the underbrush and as the man was opposite me I stepped into the road in front of him, aiming my pistol at him. I told him, 'I know you don't understand what I am saying but I need your bicycle,' as I motioned with my pistol for him to get off the bike. I got on the bike and started peddling as fast as I could. I was sailing down the highway when suddenly a jeep came over a slight rise directly in front of me. 'God', I thought, 'Am I going to get captured when I am so close to safety?' The Jeep slid to a stop and two soldiers jumped out. They had their weapons at the ready position and motioned for me to get in the jeep. I couldn't tell if they were ARVN or NVA. I was scared. They didn't take my pistol and I started to relax thinking, 'They must be ARVN'S'. We rolled into a compound and in a

few minutes General Minh introduced himself and wanted to know if I was the pilot that had been shot down three days ago. I replied yes and he said, 'I know some people who will be very happy to hear you are alive.'

On the 26th of March 1971 the stand down ceremony for the 1st Cavalry Division (- the 3rd Bde) was held at Bien Hoa as the Division cased their colors and returned to the United States. On 27 March, B/1-9 completed their last day in Cambodia and was attached to the 3rd Brigade. On 28 March, B/3-17 was placed OPCON to the 1-9 Cavalry and started working in the Snuol area while A/1-9 was given responsibility to conduct operations in the Chup rubber plantation.

During this entire period we hoped the Squadron would stand down and return to Fort Hood as soon as this operation was completed. We moved the Alpha Troop rear area from Song Be to Phuoc Vinh in mid March and on 27 March started moving the rear areas of HHT, A, C, and D Troops to our new Squadron area located at Di An, while the combat elements of the Squadron laagered at Tay Ninh. H Co. 75th Rangers and the platoon from the 62nd. Combat Trackers were detached from the Squadron. We closed on Di An on 4 April as the last elements of the 1st Cavalry Division left Phuoc Vinh. On 1 April, F/3-4 Air Cavalry was placed OPCON to the Squadron. On 8 April 1971 the 1-9 Air Cavalry Squadron was assigned to the 1st Aviation Brigade. Combat operations continued in full swing as the Squadron administrative, maintenance and supply activities conducted these various moves. The months of April and May saw daily contact throughout the Cambodian TAOR. Nineteen days after being assigned to the 1st Aviation Brigade the Squadron was notified it was to start stand down operations on 20 May 1971.

On 19 May 1971 the Squadron and all attached and OPCON troops engaged the enemy for the last time resulting in 14 enemy KIA. The totals for this second incursion into Cambodia were 1307 enemy were killed by the Air Cavalry Troops, 330 killed by A/2-20 ARA, 80 enemy killed by air strikes and 16 killed by Artillery. The last entry in the S2/S3 daily journal for 19 May 1971 was this entry. 'Operations halted at 1912 HRS.'

In addition to the enemy killed this operation destroyed; 108 tons of rice, 1,429 structures, 22 trucks, 342 bicycles, 54 motorcycles, 130 sampans, and 94 weapons destroyed and another 27 weapons captured.

This operation resulted in 25 American KIAs, 1 MIA and 33 WIAs; 95 aircraft were hit by ground fire with 38 of these shot down, 22 were recovered and 16 were destroyed.

Helicopter Operations in Cambodia

The VHPA's knowledge of Cambodian helicopter activities is rather limited. Directory Committee member John Konek is the lead in this area and has information that the Cambodian military had a few Hueys in the last years of their war.

Marine Helicopters at Nam Phong, Thailand

Work on this airfield terminated in 1967 prior to commencement of flight operations. It consisted of a 10,000 foot concrete runway with a parallel taxiway and limited aircraft parking areas that was 'carved out of the jungle.' As part of the reduction of U.S. Forces in RVN in early 1972, this airfield was prepared to be the base for MAG-15 from Da Nang. The first F-4s arrived on 16 June. Eventually the base housed one A-6 and two F-4 Squadron plus a KC-130 and CH-46 detachment of four aircraft each. The designation of the Sea Knight det is not known.

Helicopter Hunter Killer Operations off North Vietnam

The renewed air war over North Vietnam following the NVA Easter Offensive of 1972 forced the North Vietnamese to increase the use of waterborne logistical craft to move supplies and equipment along the coast of NVN. These ships were especially active at night and in bad weather. A detachment of AH-1Js from HMA-369 based at Futema was ordered initially to Denver (LPD-9), then to Cleveland (LPD-7), and finally to Dubuque (LPD-8) for a hunter killer operation. Suspected craft and transshipment points were attacked by the helicopters which also provided an observation role. They also worked with TACAIR when more lucrative targets were found. The hunter killer

operations were terminated on 18 Jan 1973 as part of the cease fire. The AH-1J det on Dubuque returned to Okinawa.

Operation EAGLE PULL

On Apr 13, 1973, the Commander in Chief, Pacific assigned the CG of the 7th Air Force the responsibility for the planning and conduct of the noncombatant emergency evacuation of Cambodia, operation EAGLE PULL. Several options were considered but the planners correctly decided that if fixed-wing aircraft could not use the only major airfield, Pochentong, at Phnom Penh; then long range CH-53 helicopters would have to be used. At this time the USAF had the 56th SOW and the 3d ARRG as its primary assets. This included the 21st SOS equipped with CH-53s and the 40th ARRS with HH-53s. USAF C-130s would serve as the airborne control. So long as there was sufficient reaction time, the Marine 31st MAU/ARG would provide the security force.

The KC started their dry season offensives in early Jan 1974 and 31 Dec 1974. The American planners continually watched the war in Cambodia and made adjustments to the operation plans.

On Jan 8, 1975, as part of the preparation for EAGLE PULL, the CH-53s of HMM-462 were flown to Subic Bay from Futema to replace the CH-46s of HMM-164 on board USS Tripoli as the helicopter component of the 31st MAU/ARG 'A'. On Jan 28, the 31st MAU/ARG 'A' departed Subic Bay with HMM-462 on board USS Okinawa for launch points in the Gulf of Thailand off Cambodia. When the 24 hour response time was relaxed in late February, the ARG returned to Subic. On Feb 28, the response time was reduced to 24 hours and they returned to their positions off Cambodia. For the next 43 days this force remained in their launch points.

On Mar 26, HMM-463 sailed from Pearl Harbor on the attack carrier USS Hancock to be the helicopter component for the 31st MAU/ARG 'B'. It was also designed as a relief/rotation force for ARG 'A' that had been stationed off Cambodia since Feb 28. HMM-463 would arrive just in time to be a major help in making EAGLE PULL a quick success.

On Apr 3, the command element for EAGLE PULL from the 31st MAU flew into Pochentong airfield and the next day the fixed-wing evacuation of personnel began using USAF C-130s. The fixed-wing missions continued until Apr 10 and 750 were evacuated prior to the helicopter extractions. Hampered daily by 80 to 90 incoming 107mm rockets and artillery fire, on the 10th the airfield was so heavily interdicted by fire that the fixed-wing evacuation was halted.

On Apr 9, HMM-463 on the USS Hancock sailed from Subic Bay for the waters off Vung Tau as part of the 33d MAU/ARG 'B'. On the 10th, HMM-463 joined 31st MAU/ARG 'A' from the 33d MAU/ARG 'B'. They sailed from off Vung Tau and joined the rest of the EAGLE PULL components late in the evening of Apr 11.

With the KC in control of the east bank of the river, the decision was made not to use the two designated LZs closest to the embassy. LZ Hotel, a soccer field about 900 meters southwest of the Embassy, was selected as the single evacuation site. It was masked from the river by a row of apartment buildings which meant that the KC could only use indirect fire weapons. The decision was also made on the 10th to wait one more day so that the second USMC CH-53 squadron could join the operation. This modified the plan so that the USAF helios would be utilized as back up, SAR, and in the extraction of the security force.

On the afternoon of the 11th, the MAU received the execution order for EAGLE PULL with L-Hour at 0900 the next morning.

At 0700 twelve HMM-462 CH-53s launched from the Okinawa. At ten-minute intervals the aircraft came down to load a 360 man security force from the 2/4th Marines and their last drink of fuel. Two USAF C-130s provide C&C. The lead aircraft touched down in Hotel at 0854. HMM-463 launched the first of four three-plane waves 25 minutes after the last HMM-462 aircraft were inbound. After learning that the last evacuees were on 462 helicopters, 463 went in to get the security force. At 1050 the first 107mm rockets started landing near the LZ. At 1057 the last of the security force was gone. At 1058 mortar fire was received and at 1115 two USAF CH-53s extracted the last of the command element. The entire operation that had taken two years in planning, took two hours and 23 minutes to execute.

Operation END SWEEP

Marine helicopters were in the mine clearing operations in NVN harbors and elsewhere. MAG-36 assets including CH-53s, CH-46s, and UH-1Es on board at least USS DUBUQUE (LPD-8) plus CH-53Ds from MAG-24 were committed to assist the Navy in the mine clearing task.

Operation FREQUENT WIND

Sadly, the Directory Committee did not have enough time to prepare a proper helicopter history of FREQUENT WIND. On the American side of the story, the US Marines and Air Force plus Air America did most of the job. CH-53s from HMM-462 and HMM-463 did the bulk of the transport work. CH-46s from HMM-165 and AH-1Gs from HML-367 also provided support. The only helicopter crewmember KIAs were two pilots from HMM-165, CPT Nystul and 1LT Shea. The text in the official USMC history seems to go out of its way to compliment the Air America crews both before and during the operation. The Air Force history states that eight HH-53s and three HC-130s from the 40th and 56th ARS Squadrons, respectively, participated. Two of the HH-53s airlifted 362 evacuees from Saigon to the USS Midway. Both aircraft returned enemy ground fire. The HC-130s provided command and control communications and aerial refueling. The 3d ARS Group coordinated the rescue operations. No ARS personnel were injured.

The Mayaguez Incident

On 12 May 1975, the U.S.-flag merchant ship Mayaguez, a fully-loaded containership, was illegally seized on the high seas in the Gulf of Siam while sailing for Thailand by a gunboats from a faction of the new revolutionary Government of Cambodia. American military forces heard the Mayday call. The Mayaguez anchored overnight off Poulo Wai Island, about 60 miles off mainland Cambodia. At 2128, 90 minutes after first learning of the incident, the first P-3 aircraft arrived from Utapao. The aircraft, equipped for night radar and visual surveillance, was from USN Patrol Squadron Four (VP-4).

After systematically reviewing all vessels within 60 miles of the island, shortly after sunrise on the 13th a P-3 made a high-speed pass and positively identified the Mayaguez with two gunboats tied up alongside. The P-3 received AA fire and took one hit. Shortly after this, the Mayaguez sailed to Koh Tang, a small island about halfway to the mainland and anchored about one mile from the island. About 1500 the first USAF tactical aircraft arrived to protect the P-3s from hostile interceptors. Late that afternoon, the P-3s watched as the crew members from the Mayaguez were taken in a trawler to Koh Tang. Any aircraft within range was fired on by Cambodian AA.

Also on the 13th, while moving a USAF security team to Utapao, 21st SOS CH-53C, #68-10933, crashed. Some accounts say there were 23 KIAs related to this ship but The Wall only lists 22 including CPT Kays, the AC, 1LT Froehlich, the pilot, TSG Glenn, the FE, and TSG McMullen, another FE.

Meanwhile in the Philippines, by 2200 elements of the 1/4th Marines were going through final inspections and at 2330 departed for Cubi Point airstrip. About the same time elements of the 2/9th Marines were doing the same thing at Okinawa.

Shortly after dawn on the 14th, a trawler with the Mayaguez crew and gunboat escorts sailed for Kompong Som, a mainland port. In spite of an impressive fire-power demonstration by USAF F-11s and a AC-130 which sank three boats and fired within ten yards of the trawler, the trawler made it to Kompong Som. Near midday the US forces received orders to prevent any gunboats from approaching either Koh Tang or the Mayaguez, so the tactical aircraft continued to attack and kill Cambodian gunboats. It was during this period that the SS Hirado, a Swedish ship, was fired upon by a Cambodian gunboat about 50 miles SW of Koh Tang but nothing more developed from this incident.

At 0505 on the 14th, USAF C-141s landed the 1/4th Marines at Utapao. The leadership was briefed and then began their wait as the launch time was moved from 0910 several times during the day. Since nautical twilight would be at 1915, they had to launch by 1415. During this period they rehearsed scenarios for helo landings at two points on the Mayaguez. At 2200 the plan to helo assault the Mayaguez was

on the Mayaguez. At 2200 the plan to helo assault the Mayaguez was abandoned. Instead three 53s would take a smaller force to the USS Holt.

At 0615 on the 14th, USAF C-141s and C-5As began lifting Battalion Landing Team (BLT) 2/9 from Kadena to Utapao. By late afternoon, the BLT was encamped at Utapao. Several BLT officers took off in a borrowed U.S. Army twin-engine aircraft for a reconnaissance flight over Koh Tang. By 2130 their assault plan was completed. It called for G/2/9 to make the initial assault from eight USAF 53s. The helicopters would return in about four and one-half hours with the second wave from E/2/9.

The USAF had two long range helicopter units still in SEA. The 40th ARRS had HH-53s that could carry 20 to 27 Marines on the 270 mile flight from Utapao to the Mayaguez. These Jolly Green Giants were constructed for SAR operations, were equipped with three 7.62mm miniguns, had 4,000 pounds of armor plate, and an aerial refueling capability. The 21st SOS flew CH-53Cs equipped with external fuel tanks for extended range.

During the night of the 14th, the USAF continued its battle with gunboats around Koh Tang and the first surface units of the U.S. Seventh Fleet entered the Gulf of Siam. This force included the destroyer escort USS Harold E. Holt, the guided-missile destroyer USS Henry B. Wilson, and the attack carrier USS Coral Sea. All were coming from different points and arrived separately.

Late on the 14th, the Holt was told that a detachment of Marines, some Military Sealift Command (MSC) civilian personnel to crew the Mayaguez, some Navy personnel and an USAF EOD team for booby traps were to be flown out to them and that they would serve as the boarding party. They were also to prevent the Mayaguez from reaching the mainland if she got underway.

Shortly after dawn on the 15th, a coordinated attack to secure Koh Tang and the Mayaguez commenced. Concurrently, air strikes from the USS Coral Sea began on the mainland harbor facilities and airbase that could be used to oppose the American operations.

At 0400 on the 15th, three USAF HH-53s launched from Utapao and at 0600 offloaded 59 Marines, six MSC plus the EOD team on the Holt. The Holt's helo pad was too small for the 53 which could only set down one set of wheels. The debarkation was through a doorway and took several minutes. With the boarding party in place, the Holt immediately started for the Mayaguez which was 15 miles away. The plan included having Air Force A-7s air-drop tear gas just before the Holt came along side the Mayaguez. Wearing gas masks, the Marines embarked on the Mayaguez and the sailors passed mooring lines to the Marines. The well-organized search was completed in an hour and the deserted Mayaguez was secured. Since the Mayaguez's engines were completely cold, the Holt assisted with the MSC crew prepared and towed the Mayaguez. The two ships were about 3,000 yards off Koh Tang, well within range of heavy weapons.

Also at 0400 on the 15th, the initial assault wave of eight 53s launched from Utapao. At 0607 the assault commenced with simultaneous insertions at two LZs. The eastern LZ was on the cove side where the Cambodian compound was located. The western LZ was a narrow spit of beach about 500 feet behind the compound on the other side of the island. The Marines hoped to surround the compound. There were no pre-assault air strikes for fear of injuring any of the crew thought to be on the island.

Six 53s were assigned to the eastern LZ. The accounts suggest there would be three waves of two ships. The sequence of events described next may not be correct. 1LT John Shramm's helicopter tore apart and crashed into the surf after the rotor system was hit by hostile fire. All aboard made a dash for nearby rocks and trees on the beach. As MAJ Howard Corson and 2LT Richard Van de Geer's helicopter approached the island, it was caught in a cross fire and hit by a rocket. The severely damaged helicopter crashed into the sea just off the coast of the island and exploded. To avoid enemy fire, survivors were forced to swim out to sea for rescue. At this point, the remaining waves were told to use the western LZ.

The Wilson arrived off Koh Tang at 0700 from a different direction than where the Holt was. They slowed to 5 knots, watched the air strikes going in and could see the plumes of oily black smoke rising from the two

downed 53s in the cove. As they moved to within 1,000 yards of the island, lookouts shouted there were people in the water. Soon they located three groups of men still within AW fire range from the island. Twelve from MAJ Corson's helicopter were rescued; thirteen, including the pilot, 2LT Van de Geer, were missing.

Sporadic fire was taken by the first two 53s in the western LZ. Another inserted part of its load after repeated aborted approaches and two more could not even get in because of the rapidly increasing intensity of SA and mortar fire into the zone. SSGT Elwood E. Rumbaugh's aircraft was shot down near the coastline. Rumbaugh is the only missing man from this aircraft. The helicopter carrying the command and fire support group made it into an alternate LZ. One last attempt to insert a troop transport was not successful.

At this point, all the forces going ashore for the next five-and-a-half hours were on the ground. Three helicopters had been lost. Two had been shot up so badly that they would make emergency landings far from Utapao with their troops still aboard. Three more returned to Thailand or assumed SAR duties after discharging all or part of their troops.

About two hours after the assault began, a P-3 picked up a small target exiting Kompong Som harbor. Visual identification determined the Mayaguez crew was on this Thai fishing boat waving white flags. The Wilson retrieved the crew from the Thai boat and joined the Holt towing the Mayaguez. Within a few hours the Mayaguez was underway with her own crew under her own power. First the Wilson and then Holt returned to Koh Tang to help with the extraction. They needed more helicopter landing platforms and more fire support. It would be late in the evening before helicopters retrieved the boarding party from the Mayaguez.

Details concerning the second assault wave are sketchy but it did go in. The Marines were able to consolidate their positions. Save for one KIA, not enough water or ammo, and rather steady sniper fire, the ground force was OK.

The Marines, Navy, or Air Force had no grid maps of this area. The airborne tactical air control center, the force on the ground, and the Wilson's guns had to work out how to bring supporting fires to the targets. The Cambodians were aggressive and even fired on the Wilson from the island and from a former USN Swift boat! The Wilson armed its gig and put it nearer the island for fire support and immediate rescue missions. A C-130 dropped a 15,000 lb. 'daisy-cutter.' With the Wilson's five-inch guns providing cover, the helicopter operations resumed.

At last light, the extraction began. The ground commander described the events as follows:

As he (the first 53) settled into the shallow water at the edge of the beach he was greeted by an almost unbelievable hail of SA and AW fire from the ridge to our south and east. Tracers streamed into the perimeter and bounced around like flaming popcorn. The pilot set his aircraft down and took his share of the fire without flinching. As he lifted off, the next aircraft, whose reception by the Khmer Rouge was just as warm, moved into the zone. The troops on the perimeter zeroed in on the source of fire. The minigunmen on the helos poured streams of fire over the heads of the Marines and into the ridgeline. Enemy pressure remained strong right up until the last helicopter pulled out. At approximately 2030, the last helo recovered to the Coral Sea.

The ground force had been delivered to all three ships. Sadly there were three USMC MIAs from a machine-gun position on the perimeter. The entire Marine phase of the operation lasted some 56 hours, but the last 14 were the longest!

This Mayaguez incident narrative was written mostly from USMC and USN sources. What the VHPA desperately needs is better USAF information. The brief ARS material we have suggests the 40th ARRS was the primary player in the show, that they sustained two WIA's but no KIAs and that their aircraft had battle damage but no losses were mentioned. Other sources indicate that the two USAF KIAs were from the 21st SOS. Please contact the VHPA Records Committee if you can provide any more information.