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SECTION III – THE PIONEERS: EARLY HELICOPTER AVIATION IN VIETNAM (1961-1964)

In keeping with the traditions set by past VHPA Directories, the Directory Committee presents a few pages to support the theme of this edition – The Pioneers: Early Helicopter Aviation in Vietnam (1961-1964). Due to page limit considerations, only a small portion of this history material is printed in this issue. For more, go to the war stories section of our web site at <http://www.vhp.org>

U S Army Aviation in Vietnam 1961-1964 : A turbulent transition

By Bernie Quedens

Students of US military involvement in Vietnam are keenly aware of the Washington mandated personnel policy which resulted in rotating, thereby replacing, the total US Force in Vietnam once every year. It was the policy responsible for constantly feeding the system new and inexperienced troops and green but eager commanders. In fact, it is said that US Forces in Vietnam had to re-learn combat lessons annually. And story after story has been written of the impact such a rotation policy had on casualties, outcome of combat engagements and many other events.

The policy of rotating personnel after only 12 months on station in Vietnam also had a direct and negative effect on the combat effectiveness of Army Aviation units introduced to that theater in late 1961 and early 1962. However, those units were confronted with an additional problem upon arrival in country-- How to employ and operate a Transportation Helicopter Company in a combat

environment..? In other words, how do you convert a transportation helicopter unit into a combat helicopter lift unit almost overnight? Making that feat even more difficult were non-availability of current doctrine, lack of unit training in combat helicopter operations and tables of equipment (TO&Es) that were designed for aviation transport companies but not for helicopter units with a mission to carry combat troops to the enemy.

In those early days, Transportation helicopter companies were designed primarily as 80 mph transport means to carry troops and supplies from point A to point B within a military theater of operation. Therefore, when those TO&Es were authored, few entertained the thought of lifting soldiers into a combat situation using this type vehicle. Underlying doctrine envisioned helicopter companies to supplement, or in some instances provide an alternate transportation method for, trucks. Consequently, the basic philosophy and mission profile that drove the establishment of truck transport units was also applied in the design of helicopter transport companies. Basically, the organization, while obviously more complex - requiring increased maintenance capabilities and a much higher skill level 'driver'- was thought of in terms of a flying truck company. Accordingly, since armored personnel carriers were the standard piece of equipment that carried troops into battle over the ground and not truck companies, it follows that aerial truck companies were no more suitable for that mission than their ground counterpart unless some innovative thinking was applied. Modifications in doctrine, training and equipment would

be necessary to effectively employ the helicopter with any assurance of success on the battle field.

Existing doctrine for employment of the helicopter as troop carriers into a combat zone was extremely limited in 1961. Hence, development of doctrine was an event that took place as a result of experience gained by those early deployed H-21 helicopter companies and the first Huey equipped lift companies, arriving in Vietnam in 1963. In fact, it evolved as a joint effort of, and to a large degree was due to the experience gained by, those four H-21 units within the first one and a half years after deployment to that region. In order to minimize combat losses in both personnel and equipment, the units made excellent and routine use of their own 'lessons learned'. How-to approach into and select touch-down points in 'hot' LZ's and how-to avoid ground-fire while enroute are examples of direct and immediate applications. First-hand experience dictated use of new and innovative operating procedures in order to survive this newly conceived method of delivering combat troops to the battle field. Many of the 'lessons learned' in those early days became the base-line of a newly evolving airmobility concept that was being examined by the 11th Airmobile Division (Test) at Fort Benning, Ga. during the 1963-1965 time frame. Direct infusion of personnel into the Division who had served in Vietnam in an aviation capacity was, in part, responsible for timely knowledge transfer.

Needless to say, constant review and updating of combat flying procedures became an almost daily event by helicopter transport companies operating in Vietnam in mid 1963. Two other factors deserve further consideration when analyzing the transition process of those early units from transport to assault helicopter status: Training and Equipment.

Training is one of the key components of unit readiness and combat effectiveness. And experience tells us, the higher the degree of combat readiness, the lower combat losses in personnel and equipment. To achieve desired training readiness levels, three prerequisites must be met, 1. meshing of man and machine, enabling individuals to perform at or close to the equipment's designed capability level, 2. conduct of collective training to insure the team can function as an efficient entity and 3. a high degree of excellence exercised by the commanders and staff during planning and execution of the mission.

Required individual and collective flight-crew training skills vary little whether transporting personnel in a logistical or combat role. However, helicopter crews, when flying combat missions, must have received additional training in such areas as suppression of enemy fire, minimizing ground time and rapid deceleration into and quick egress out of LZ's, etc. The major difference of helicopter employment in those two roles is in execution of and the degree of command and control exercised over the mission. In both instances, it is essential to know recent enemy activity, location, condition and size of landing zone, among other factors. However, units employed in a combat assault role must also be provided with detailed information on the enemy situation, approach / departure routes, altitudes, friendly fire support, combat emergency procedures such as forced landings and other tactical requirements. Planning of such missions is, generally, much more detailed and complex and execution tightly controlled, when compared to a mission requiring transport of troops or supplies from one safe area to another. Moreover, the success of the mission depends, in large part, on the degree of professionalism, background and training of the commander and staff charged with execution of the operation.

When the first four H-21 Transportation helicopter companies were deployed to Vietnam in late 1961 and early 1962, the 8th, 57th, 81st and 93rd together with the 45th Transportation Helicopter Battalion as the parent headquarters, they were manned by Transportation Corps Branch officers and enlisted men. In fact, TC was the proponent for those organizations. The vast majority of their officers and Warrant Officer aviators had a transportation corps background to include basic and advanced branch courses. Additionally, a number of the field-grade officers had attended the Command and General Staff College Course at Fort Leavenworth, KS. It was with these 'givens' that the Army expected the Transportation Corps to execute a major combat support mission. And, generally speaking, they did a great job considering the limitations in doctrine, training and equipment mentioned earlier. A great part of the success achieved must be attributed to the commanders of the companies. Several had been exposed to combat in Korea or earned their combat arms orientation while detailed to combat ground units as company grade officers for two years, long before they became transportation helicopter commanders. Others recognized the situation for what it was and realized that a new mind-set and detailed planning for combat assault missions were absolutely essential, if these transportation companies were to succeed in accomplishing the assigned mission without a great number of losses in men and equipment.

Officers like Darwin Beuchamp, Richard Kissling, Pat Delavan, Dick Bastion and others recognized that they had to fill the gap left by a void of valid doctrine as well as shortcomings of equipment and training. The early Battalion commanders of the 45th Bn, because of circumstances such as geography, size of operation and lines of communications, left the conduct of missions pretty much to their company commanders. They generally limited the Bn's role to logistical and administrative support and that of screening/forwarding agent of all helicopter support requested by higher headquarters. The operational functions were almost exclusively handled at Company level. This included such tasks as coordination and planning of helicopter troop lifts and all artillery/close-air fire support activities with Vietnam Army /Air Force units as well as with US Air Force advisory elements. Additionally, it required coordination of helicopter gunship support with the US Utility Tactical Transport (UTT) armed helicopter company, briefing of participating unit representatives and directing the execution of the operation. The latter called for exercising control over all elements while the helicopter lift force was enroute to, landing in and departing from the landing zone. The Army Vietnam troop commander, together with his US advisor, picked the landing zones during the planning portion of the operation, validated or up-dated those locations just prior to lift-off from the pick-up zone and then relied on the helicopter units to deliver the troops to the designated areas.

Helicopter companies operated in this environment in Vietnam throughout 1962, continuing to improve tactics and procedures and generally accomplishing the mission with few casualties or equipment losses. Then in January 1963 came AP Bac, a battle that for the first time pitted Viet Cong regulars against ARVN units carried to the enemy by US Helicopters. The results were disastrous. It was also the day that forever changed the mode of US helicopter employment under combat conditions. A number of US helicopters were shot down in the landing zone and numerous US and a larger number of ARVN casualties were

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REG William B, B	RO Wilson, D	REG Woidyla, B	DAT Woozley, T	PRO Wutkiewicz, S	PRO Yoshioka, B
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DAT Williams, F	DAT Wilson, H	PRO Wolter, M	DAT Workman, D	DAT Wydner, C	PRO Young, K
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PRO Williams, L	DAT Wilson, T	DAT Wood, R	PRO Wray, R	PRO Yannessa, J	PRO Zabinski, D
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PRO Williams, T	PRO Wise, B	PRO Woodroot, G	PRO Wright, H	PRO Yeager, R	REG Zamora, H
KIA Williams, T	REG Wise, W	PRO Woodruff, L	DAT Wright, J	PRO Yeend, R	KIA Zamorski, G
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DAT Wills, R	PRO Wnek, R	PRO Wooley, N	PRO Wuethrich, J	PRO York, D	REG Zelinsky, R

History continued from page 386....sustained as a result of enemy ground fire. Something had gone wrong. Questions were asked and issues raised to avoid repetition of these mistakes in future helicopter combat employments. As a result, Planning was more tightly coordinated with the lifted ground elements, improved liaison was established between ARVN and US helicopter units and command and control procedures/responsibilities were reviewed. The 45th Aviation Bn, then parent headquarters of all transport helicopter companies in Vietnam, got more directly involved in mission planning. However, with units dispersed over a distance of 400 miles, from Soc Trang in the Delta to Nha Trang along the coast of the Central-Highlands, left the command little choice but to continue delegating primary control of helicopter combat operations to company level with staff support provided by battalion headquarters.

By pooling the resources of two or more helicopter companies and assisted by the type of fire support mentioned earlier, major operations were conducted throughout the Delta and within a 100 -150 mile radius north, east and west of Saigon throughout 1963 and into 1964. Most were executed very successfully, many under enemy ground-fire while enroute or upon landing in the LZ. Generally, few losses were sustained by helicopter companies. And again, much of the successes must be attributed to individual helicopter unit commanders and their small ad hoc staffs. Frequently, officers assigned to flight platoons were detailed to work in such needed, but not-authorized, positions of operations, intelligence and liaison officers. Generally, the commanders would be in one of the lead helicopters and a staff member would control the entire operation, to include all fire support elements, from an O-1 Birddog, light fixed wing aircraft, flying at an altitude from which he could oversee and direct all facets of the airmobile assault. Direct radio communications between all fire support elements and controller, as well as the helicopter commander and controller, lent flexibility to the scheme. It permitted instant introduction of changes to a given situation such as timing of events, enemy fires, flight patterns, touch-down points and arrival times in landing zones. This experienced team was able to bring to bear all lessons learned, even in a very fluid situation, thereby avoiding many of the mistakes made in the past.

An operation that comes to mind was one launched in Kien Hoa province on January 17, 1964. On this day the US Army in Vietnam had assembled one of the largest helicopter forces ever to undertake an airmobile operation by lifting major elements of the 9th ARVN Division into a Vietcong stronghold. Excellent communications and control among all airborne elements resulted in a near textbook - not yet written at this time- version heliborne combat assault. Arrangements

included time sequenced fire-support by ARVN Artillery, USAF/VNAF B-26 and T-28 close air support as well as the escort of the UTT armed helicopter company. All fire support activities were executed as scheduled and the fires shifted just as the troop carrying helicopters were on short- final approach. At that time, heavy ground-fire was encountered by both the controller marking the LZ for the troop carriers and armed helicopter escort elements continuing to reconnoiter the fringes of the LZ by fire. The commander of the helicopter unit, Major Pat Delavan, upon receiving recommendation from the controller to go for an alternate touch-down point, was able to avert disaster, deliver the troops to the battle field and depart the landing zone without a single helicopter loss. By updating himself of the most current enemy situation, while one mile out on final approach, he was able to land his formation out of effective enemy small arms range and successfully accomplish the mission. Although numerous hits were sustained by his lift helicopters resulting in a number of light casualties, application of the Ap Bac lesson had paid off. In all fairness, mention must be made of armed helicopter losses sustained by the escorting UTT gunships that day. One aircraft was hit by an anti tank-weapon while firing suppressive fire into concealed and covered enemy positions along a tree line. The helicopter was literally blown out of the sky with all four crew members killed in action. Another gunship was hit and lost the tail rotor, successfully autorotating into the Mekong River. Two members of that crew could not be rescued but drowned as a result of that incident.

By this time aviation battalion headquarters had become very active in the support of aviation missions, routinely carrying and establishing a forward command-post to the departure air-strip or pick-up zone (PZ) and assuming all coordination and liaison functions between US aviation and ARVN ground units. The Bn forward tactical element normally consisted of a first-aid station and ground-to-air communications as a minimum. Moreover, the Avn Bn commander would be in the air in a specially equipped Command and Control Huey helicopter monitoring activities and communications exercised by his subordinate units, commanders and air-controllers.

In 1963 it became more apparent to the planners and decision makers in the Pentagon that an official, more permanent solution had to be developed toward converting transport helicopter units into combat helicopter lift units. Hence, during that year, the four H-21 helicopter transport unit were officially redesignated the 118th, 119th 120th and 121st lift helicopter (light) companies. Even the 45th helicopter Transport Bn was renamed and now became the 145th Helicopter Bn. Some additional equipment was authorized. For instance, door mounted, jerry rigged, WW II vintage light machine guns were replaced with new M-60 MGs in both cargo door openings. More at <http://www.vhpa.org>