

SECTION IV: Aviation Platoon HHC 1st Brigade 101st Airborne Division

In keeping with the traditions set by past VHPA Directories, the Directory Committee presents a few pages to support the theme of this edition – a mini-history of the Aviation Platoon Headquarters Company 1st Brigade 101st Airborne Division. Due to page limits, only a portion of this material is printed in this paper edition. The complete Section III is on the CD edition and the membership directory password protected web site at <http://directory.vhpa.org>.

Beyond Lam Son 719, the VHPA does not have much history about the Aviation assets of the 101st Airborne Division. You might think it strange that we would pick a really small platoon sized unit to feature in the history section when they were only a small piece of 101st history. The reason for doing this is that in the course of Peter Rzeminski putting together the history of the platoon, he did a really good job describing below how they fit into the division and how they made a difference in the fight. To do that he had to tell the history of the division and the 1st Brigade. This history is a really good example of the difference one person can make by compiling a piece of our history. This history is simply another good example of the material that makes up part of the VHPA's legacy. As with all pieces of the VHPA's legacy, they are worthy of collection, preservation, and addition to The Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University.

The following pages are an extract from the full history that Pete has put together. The goal in selecting these pages is to present the reader with samples of the history to display the "richness" of the material in the full history.

Aviation Platoon Headquarters Company 1st Brigade 101st Airborne Division September 1965 to January 1972

by Peter "Pete" J. Rzeminski

Editors Comments: The Aviation Platoon, HHC, 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division was formed in June/July 1968, initially with one UH-1D Iroquois and several OH-23 Raven Helicopters (imagine scouting the A Shau Valley in OH-23's). Major Stuart Miller was the 1st Brigade Aviation Officer and the Aviation Platoon Leader, HHC (we Warrant Officers were amused that we had a captain as our company commander and a major as our platoon leader – CW2 Pete Rzeminski). The four original pilots assigned to the Aviation Platoon were: WO Arthur Negrette, WO Richard Neil, WO Thibadeau, and WO Pete "ski" Rzeminski. They supplied Command and Control (C&C) helicopters for the 1st Brigade commander, flew courier and resupply missions and had a scout section among other missions.

The Officers and Enlisted crews who served in the Aviation Platoon, HHC, 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division in Vietnam, from June 1968-January 1972, flew in support of a number of Operations including Apache Snow (Hamburger Hill), and Lamar Plain ("... one of the last extensive operations conducted by the 101st Airborne Division against the North Vietnamese Army"). Many in the platoon didn't even know the names of the Operations they supported until years after returning to the United States.

I am my family's genealogist, so I have a love for and experience in researching a family's history. I am attempting to research the history of a particular "family," the officers and enlisted crews of the Aviation Platoon, HHC, 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division.

In the early '60s, the Army predicted a large involvement in Southeast Asia and began building up the 101st Airborne Division in addition to several other units.

In the spring of 1965, the 101st Airborne Division at Fort Campbell, Ky., was alerted to send a brigade of infantry plus support troops to Vietnam. In July of 1965, the 101st was ordered into combat. The men were flown from Fort Campbell on the evening of July 6, 1965, and arrived at San Francisco, where they took buses to Oakland Army Terminal. Here they were greeted by an Army band, Red Cross "Donut Dollies," and a gray ship.

The USNS General Leroy Eltinge: 510 feet long, every inch painted gray. It seemed too short to have such high smokestacks. "Gee," remarked a trooper from Arizona, "I wonder what battle General Eltinge lost to have it named after him?" A voice from the crowded deck informed him, "He was Custer's S-2."

Four thousand (4,000) paratroopers of the 1st Brigade (Separate) of the 101st Airborne Division, also known as the "Bastogne Brigade," landed in-country at Cam Ranh Bay, South Vietnam on 29 July 1965. It was the third unit to be shipped to the new war zone and was comprised of the 1st and 2nd Battalions, 327th Infantry and the 2nd Battalion, 502nd Infantry. They made a demonstration jump immediately after arriving, observed by Gen. William Westmoreland and outgoing Ambassador (formerly General) Maxwell Taylor. Taylor and Westmoreland were both former commanders of the division, which was known as the "Screaming Eagles." The 101st Airborne Division has a long and storied history, including combat jumps during the invasion of Normandy on June 6, 1944, and the subsequent Market-Garden airborne operation in the Netherlands. Later, the division distinguished itself by its defense of Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge.

The 1st Brigade fought as a separate brigade until 1967, when the remainder of the division arrived in Vietnam. The combat elements of the division consisted of 10 battalions of airmobile infantry, six battalions of artillery, an aerial rocket artillery unit armed with rocket-firing helicopters, and an air reconnaissance unit. Another unique feature of the division was its aviation group, which consisted of three aviation battalions of assault helicopters and gunships.

The majority of the 101st Airborne Division's tactical operations were in the Central Highlands and in the A Shau Valley farther north. Among its major operations were 1) the brutal fight for Ap Bia Mountain, known as the "Hamburger Hill" battle; 2) the smaller in scale than the action in the A Shau Valley, but just as fierce and, for those who fell there, just as deadly "the big fight with the little helicopters;" and 3) the battle of Firebase Ripcord.

The last Army division to leave Vietnam, the remaining elements of the 101st Airborne Division returned to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, where today it is the Army's only airmobile division. During the war, the 101st Airborne Division fought 45 operations, and troopers from the 101st won 17 Medals of Honor for bravery in combat. The division suffered almost 20,000 soldiers killed or wounded in action in Vietnam, over twice as many as the 9,328 casualties it suffered in World War II.

During September 1965, the *USNS General Leroy Eltinge* returned to Cam Ranh Bay. Six (6) pilots arrived aboard the ship, with six (6) OH-13 helicopters (including Captain Ron Miller, 1LT Edgar Schneider, 1LT Leonard F Keys, CW2 Bob Steele, CW2 Bill Marchman, and WO Ken Wymer). They were attached to the Headquarters, 1st Brigade (Separate), 101st Airborne Division for administrative purposes.

After a brief period where the Soldiers acclimated themselves and received all their equipment, the 1st Brigade (Separate) went into action.

The Brigade was ordered into the Song Con Valley, about 20 miles northeast of the town of An Khe. During one mission, the 2nd Bn, 502nd Infantry encountered heavy enemy fire at their landing zone. Three company commanders were killed and the contact was so close, air support and artillery could not be called in until they pulled back. That night, 100 sorties and 11,000 rounds of artillery hit the enemy. The next morning, the 2nd Bn 502nd Infantry was pulled out. They later discovered that they had landed in the middle of a heavily entrenched enemy base.

For the rest of 1965, the 1st Brigade (Separate) continued to mount patrols and interdicted the enemy supplies lines. At the beginning of 1966, the enemy greatly reduced his operations. In May, the enemy began massing in the Pleiku and Kontum provinces. The 1st Brigade was moved from An Khe to Dak To, a Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) base camp in the northern area of South Vietnam. Here a South Vietnamese force was surrounded by the 24th North Vietnamese Regiment. The 1st Brigade (Separate) was ordered in to reinforce the South Vietnamese position.

After evacuating the South Vietnamese forces, the 2nd Bn, 502nd Infantry established their lines inside the abandoned camp and sent C Company forward in an exposed defensive position. On the night of June 6, the 24th NVA Regiment attacked C Company in a brutal assault. In a desperate attempt to stop the enemy advance, the commander of C Company called in air strikes on top of his own position, killing NVA and Americans alike. It was a

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