

SECTION IV: Vietnam, The Helicopter War

In keeping with the traditions set by past VHPA Directories, the Directory Committee presents a few pages to support the theme of this edition – Vietnam, The Helicopter War. Due to page limits, only a portion of this material is printed in this paper edition. The complete Section IV is on the CD membership directory and the online membership directory located on the password protected web site at <https://directory.vhpa.org>.

Vietnam - The Helicopter War

By Gary Roush

"The advent of the helicopter in the early 20th century had a profound impact on transportation, communication, and myriad other areas of human endeavor. Warfare also experienced an important transformation at the operational and tactical levels as a result of rotary wing technology, and has perhaps had an equally important influence on the development of the helicopter. Helicopters afforded rapid transportation of fighting forces on the battlefield, and have also evolved to embrace a much larger role as an efficient and deadly weapons platform, but also serve vital support roles in medical evacuation, logistical operations, search and rescue operations, and in many other uses. In many ways, the evolution of the military helicopter mirrors the rapid changes of American society while still reflecting Americans' faith in technology and efficiency.

The United States first employed helicopters in warfare during the Second World War. When downed American bombers in Burma could not be reached by the vaunted American glider forces, helicopters were called in and successfully extracted the flight crews. Recognizing the immense potential of the helicopter, military planners focused on developing a rotary wing force to buttress the American arsenal. The Korean War witnessed a much wider usage of helicopters, most famously with the H-13 and its role in the medical evacuation of wounded personnel to field hospitals, but in minor troop insertions and in a limited reconnaissance role, as well.

During the Vietnam War, the United States relied on the helicopter as never before. The helicopter's role in combat expanded enormously in this conflict as thousands of "choppers" rapidly transported personnel throughout the war zone. Heavily armed helicopters offered a fearsome component to ground operations as close air support. Mobility and firepower would be the keys for American operations in Vietnam, and the helicopter provided an abundance of both. But the role of the helicopter in support activities in the Vietnam War must not be overlooked, as thousands of missions were flown to resupply and reinforce troops on the ground, to evacuate American and South Vietnamese wounded, and to offer countless other services in pursuance of the war effort. The UH-1 "Huey" is the ubiquitous symbol of the American war in Vietnam. Indeed, the Vietnam War was the Helicopter War.ⁱ

Mobility has been a critical factor in wars for centuries. Animals like elephants, horses, camels, donkeys and mules provided the first significant increases in mobility providing ground forces with the force multiplier of rapid movement. Mechanization followed with bicycles, carts, and motorized vehicles like trucks, jeeps, and tanks all operating in two dimensions. Aircraft added the third dimension permitting mass movement over great distances in increasingly shorter time periods. In the Vietnam War, the helicopter became the ultimate in ground force mobility.

It is generally believed that the helicopter was specifically developed for use in the Vietnam War; however, that is not the case. The helicopter was introduced to military forces in the 1950s primarily as a means to safely disperse troops in a nuclear war. Large concentrations of troops like were used in wars before the atom bomb were no longer practical. Spreading forces out to more likely survive a nuclear blast created new challenges in transportation and support that only the helicopter could provide. This began the integration of aircraft into ground force structures. Another factor was the need to maneuver in rough terrain. Ground commanders in the Korean War marveled at how easily the famous H-13 medical helicopters flew up and down mountainous terrain. It was easy for them to visualize using helicopters to place troops on high terrain without the physical exertion and time required for troops to climb to those high vantage points needed for flank security.

12% of KIAs Associated with Helicopters

A look at the war's casualties verifies the extensive use of helicopters. The Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association (VHPA) has documented and verified that 6,856 men and two women were killed related to helicopters during the Vietnam War. (continued on page 528)...

(Continued from page 380) VHPA historians researched these KIAs through the National Archives, POW/MIA office and other sources of official documentations. Of this total, 5,309 were helicopter crew members, i.e. pilots, crew chiefs, door gunners, flight engineers, flight medics, para-rescue, observers, etc. This number includes helicopter crew members who were killed on the ground. The rest, 1,547 were passengers. A few in the VHPA databases are Vietnamese, however, it is known that many more Vietnamese were killed in helicopters than VHPA records or DOD records show - probably hundreds more.

Determining exactly how many helicopter crew members served in the Vietnam War is essentially impossible as it is believed that information does not exist anywhere. One of the reasons this information is not available is that many helicopter crew members, especially door gunners, had a non-crew member military occupational specialty (MOS). As example, nearly all Army door gunners had an 11B MOS which was Infantryman. The Army also actively used on-the-job-training for crew chiefs without a change in MOS. It is, however, possible to make an educated guess based on helicopter pilot training records, unit orders and KIA records. The assumption is that helicopter crew members were killed in proportion to those specialties serving in the Vietnam War.

The VHPA has Army flight class records and Vietnam unit records indicating that 46,363 helicopter pilots were trained and likely served in Vietnam. The VHPA has always used the conservative number of 40,000 as some of the 46,363 never went to Vietnam for various reasons, i.e., they belonged to the National Guard units or were sent to Korea, Germany or other locations. These numbers are updated weekly as more insight and information about where pilots served after training is gained. The KIA ratio of pilots to other crew members is about 37.7% pilots and 62.3% other crew members so using this relationship approximately 66,100 non-pilot helicopter crew members served in the Vietnam War. This indicates that over 106,100 helicopter crew members served in the Vietnam War.

From August 4, 1964 to January 27, 1973 a total of 8,744,000 served from all Armed Forces in the Vietnam War. Total deployed to Southeast Asia was 3,403,000 which includes 514,300 serving offshore. See: <http://www.va.gov/oaa/pocketcard/vietnam.asp> Total Vietnam War KIAs were 58,286, so here are some helicopter related statistics:

- 1.7% of total served in Southeast Asia were KIA. (58,286/4,403,000)
- 3% of those who served in the Vietnam War were helicopter crew members. (106,100/3,403,000)
- 12% of total KIAs were related to helicopters (6,856/58,286)
- 9 % of total KIAs were helicopter crew members (5,309/58,286)

Conclusion: since 12% of total casualties were associated with helicopters, it is clear that the Vietnam War was in fact the helicopter war.ⁱⁱ

Airmobility and Army Aviation

On 11 December 1961 the United States aircraft carrier USNS *Card* docked in downtown Saigon with 32 U. S. Army H-21 helicopters and 400 men. The 57th Transportation Company (Light Helicopter) from Fort Lewis, Wash., and the 8th Transportation Company (Light Helicopter) from Fort Bragg, N. C., had arrived in Southeast Asia. This event had a two-fold significance: it was the first major symbol of United States combat power in Vietnam; and, it was the beginning of a new era of airmobility in the United States Army.

Just twelve days later these helicopters were committed into the first airmobile combat action in Vietnam, Operation CHOPPER. NOTE: Full text online at <https://directory.vhpa.org>

ⁱThe Vietnam Archives at Texas Tech University <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/exhibits/helicopter/>

ⁱⁱ Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association (VHPA) databases, by Gary B Roush.