SECTION IV: The Flying Banana: A Vietnam Unsung Hero

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 Flying Banana: A Vietnam Unsung Hero. 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 .

The Flying Banana: A Vietnam Unsung Hero

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When John F. Kennedy was elected president in 1960, he was faced with a multitude of problems concerning Vietnam. MAAG (Military Assistance Advisory Group) which would later become MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam) was asking for both American combat troops and large increases in aviation. While the President was reluctant to commit combat troops, he did authorize teams of Special Forces to be strategically located throughout South Vietnam. Still, it was not until mid-1961 that he approved any increases in aviation. These increases came in the form of one Marine helicopter squadron flying the Sikorsky H-34 helicopter, and five Army transportation companies that flew the Piasecki H-21 helicopter. Since Army helicopters are named after Indian tribes, the H-21 was officially known as Shawnee, but due to its fuselage shape, it was more commonly referred to as "The Flying Banana."

The first two H-21 companies, the 57th and the 8th arrived in Vietnam late in December 1961; the 33rd, 93rd and 81st arrived over the next nine months and by October all five companies were fully operational. American strength including advisers, aviation units, Special Forces, and all MACV personnel was now 11,000. A nine thousand increase in two years, and this was just the beginning because American forces would exceed 535 thousand by 1968.

The TO&E, (table of organization and equipment) of a transportation helicopter company consisted of approximately 155 men. The Commanding Officer (major), Executive Officer (captain), First Sergeant, and two clerks made up company headquarters. There were two flight platoons, an aircraft maintenance platoon, and a service platoon all commanded by captains. Each company had 18 helicopters. If all five companies were at full strength there would be 90 H-21s in country, but seldom were companies at full strength; especially in flight crews. Occasionally when a troop lift required maximum availability, there were not enough pilots to fly all aircraft.

High technology helicopters with turbine engines, governor controls, and simplified flight systems were on the horizon, but by today's standards both the H-34 and H-21 were considered difficult to fly, hard to maintain, and definitely low technology. Both were powered by the Wright R-1820 radial engine, the same engine used on B-17 bombers during World War II. In all likelihood, the R-1820 was selected because so many were available, but using them on helicopters required significantly more power which created additional engine stress. As a result, few engines lasted more than 400 hours.

The H-21 was manufactured by Piasecki Helicopter Company to be an arctic rescue helicopter and flew its first flight in 1952. Only 707 were built over a seven year period, as compared to over 16,500 Huey helicopters which are still in limited production. Maximum takeoff weight was 15,200 pounds while its empty weight was 9000 pounds. After adding 1800 pounds of fuel, the useful load was basically 4000 pounds. Because the H-21 was considered difficult to fly, some pilots referred to it as the "beast," and this sometimes initiated a love/hate relationship. Those who flew it well, loved it! Those who had difficulties with the characteristics of tandem rotor, hated it. Overall, the ratio was greatly in favor of love.

Unit missions were mixed and somewhat depended on where companies were located. For example, the 81st operating in the Central Highlands did more mountain flying than the Delta units. Troop lifts, support for Special Forces, and supply missions comprised the bulk of flight time. The 81st, averaged at least one troop lift per week, but because there were significantly more ARVN (Army of Vietnam) forces to support in the Delta, the Delta units averaged two or three. All five companies were flying close to or exceeding a thousand hours per month. Considering the less than perfect conditions

for performing maintenance, flying at this rate month after month was a remarkable accomplishment. Many pilots had been flying the Banana for years, and the majority of crew chiefs were seasoned H-21 veterans from the very start. It was this combination of experience, hard work, and unit pride that made an old technology helicopter exceed expectations!

In early Vietnam, a troop lift was called just that, a troop lift. Later, when thousands of high tech helicopters arrived to replace the Flying Banana, a troop lift would be called "a combat assault." A "pick-up" or "drop-off" was now known as "insertion" or "extraction," and flying with your gear in or near the trees was "NOE" (nap-of-the-earth). Fancy names for pretty much doing the same thing. What didn't change were the tactics developed by H-21 companies for transporting troops into the landing zone (LZ). The major differences were the types of troops transported. With the H-21, it was mainly ARVN soldiers and usually ten or more aircraft were involved. Later in 1965, it would be American soldiers, and the number of high tech helicopters might exceed sixty or more.

Several factors were considered in determining the number of troops carried per aircraft. Weather and temperature were always factors, but under good conditions, the H-21 on initial lifts might carry twelve or even up to fourteen ARVN soldiers. On subsequent lifts, more could be added as fuel weight was reduced. Another factor was the number of aircraft available versus the number of troops to transport. For example, if there was a battalion to lift, and less than ten aircraft available, the number of troops per aircraft would be maximized. Flight crews always preferred to start with twelve or less because having more troops kept aircraft in the landing zone too long. Too long was hazardous, and too long was more than fifteen seconds! In a hot LZ, Vietnamese troops were sometimes slow getting off the aircraft, and occasionally it was necessary to throw one or two out the door.

Troop lifts usually started from an airstrip either paved or dirt; mostly dirt since there were so few paved airstrips. The H-21s normally arrived at the pick-up point two hours in advance to refuel and receive the mission briefing. Assigned to each company was a single engine, two seat observation airplane (L-19 Bird Dog) that played a vital role in all troop lifts. Before any troop lift, the bird dog would fly a high recon of the LZ in order to provide crews with important details about its size and shape. During the mission itself, the bird dog would fly high above the flight providing distance and direction; important to the flight because flying in close formation at tree top level is no time for map reading!

A well conducted troop lift was a silent troop lift! The flight leader does the talking and only then when necessary. The importance of a good flight leader cannot be over emphasized because he not only sets the tone for the flight, he must be skilled enough to fly a constant airspeed that prevents the unwanted accordion effect. Just like an interstate highway, when one car slows, cars in back will slow, and occasionally some cars even stop. Here however, if the lead helicopter makes sudden or erratic airspeed changes, it ripples through the flight and some trail aircraft might change airspeed as much as fifteen or twenty knots. The reverse then happens, and the same trail aircraft might exceed 90 knots to maintain their position. When aircraft are separated by slightly more than a rotor disk, flight leaders need to be damn near perfect! In actuality, not all good pilots make good flight leaders.

During the before mission briefing, all pilots would synchronize their watches in order to start engines and perform takeoff checks simultaneously. After all checks were completed, pilots would turn on their landing lights. The flight leader when seeing all landing lights illuminated, would announce "flights up," and began his count down of "5,4,3,2,1," before lifting. During the dry season when dirt airstrips were extremely dusty, two aircraft would lift together instead of the whole flight lifting at once. Utilizing this type of departure, the lead aircraft would climb on course to the designated altitude while holding 60 knots. When advised by the trail aircraft, "the flight is formed," lead would then increase to 80 knots the best formation speed. To discourage small arms fire while en route, the flight normally flew about 2500 feet AGL (above ground level), before descending to fly the last fifteen or twenty kilometers at tree top level. Flying at tree top level muffled sound and helped achieve surprise.

It was SOP (standard operating procedure) to airstrike the landing zone prior to the flight's arrival, and it was the bird dog's responsibility to stop the air-strike approximately three minutes before landing. The aircraft used for airstrikes were North American T-28's flown by Vietnamese pilots, and for the most part, both did a very good job! At MACV, there was the feeling that air-striking the LZ lost the element of surprise giving the VC time to escape. Possibly this had some validity since many initial troop lifts were somewhat anti-climatic. However, never anti-climatic was crossing the tree line for landing when both the crew chief and door gunner opened fire with their machine-guns. Pilots knew this was going to happen, but that sudden burst of noise always caused butts to squeeze tight in the seat!

The few times aircraft were hit always seemed to happen when departing the LZ. These hits were generally in the rear section of the aircraft leading crews to believe that the troops just landed were doing the shooting. It was well accepted VC sympathizers were embedded in the ARVN Army, so these hits didn't come as a total surprise. In any respect, and regardless of what MACV thought about airstrikes, from the flight crew's perspective, it was an essential part of any troop lift!

Not readily apparent at the time, but in December 1962 and again in early January 1963, there were indications the VC were beginning to change their tactics. Instead of leaving the area, they now stayed to fight. The first indicator occurred on 22 December when the 81st and 8th conducted a two company maximum effort troop lift. Each company was to provide 15 aircraft for transporting three ARVN battalions into the mountainous areas north of Tuy Hoa. At the mission briefing held three days prior, MACV announced the decision to not airstrike the landing zones. The designated flight leader stood and voiced his objection, but was told to sit down as the decision was final!

On mission day 22 December, the first lift consisting of 29 aircraft (one had mechanical problems) departed Tuy Hoa just like earlier troop lifts except this time there would be no airstrikes. As the flight crossed the tree line and began its flair for landing, the VC opened fire. Numerous aircraft immediately received multiple hits, ARVN soldiers were being killed before getting off the LZ, and fifteen seconds on the ground seemed like an eternity! Defense was limited because only the outer edge aircraft could return fire without hitting other helicopters. Luckily, all aircraft departed the LZ, but before reaching Tuy Hoa, one aircraft with multiple oil tank hits, lost all oil pressure and made an emergency landing.

Before conducting the second and third lifts, it was necessary to shut down and evaluate the situation. 22 aircraft were hit, one pilot was mortally wounded; two additional crew members injured. 12 aircraft were determined too badly damaged to fly another lift, or even return home without repair. To complete the mission, the second and third lifts were conducted using 17 aircraft carrying as many additional soldiers as possible. Thankfully, these landings were uneventful!

The question is, (which will never be answered) if the landing zone had had an airstrike per SOP, would the VC have stayed or left? It's an assumption, but since the VC were shooting before all aircraft even landed, it appeared they knew about this mission in advance.

Within days, MACV issued a directive that no troop lifts would be conducted without prior airstrikes. A little late, but at least a lesson learned! Even with an airstrike and the added support of a helicopter gunship, on 2 January 1963 at an area known as Ap Bac, the VC stayed to fight. This time five helicopters including the gunship were either shot down or disabled in the landing zone. Some ARVN soldiers were killed, but most hid behind rice paddy dikes doing nothing. Armored personnel carriers (APCs) with 50 caliber machine guns were close by and available, but the ARVN commander refused to commit these APC's even to save his own countrymen. Just as bad, air support was not readily available because of poor communication and a lack of coordination. The VC, experiencing little or no resistance maintained their position for over six hours; then simply disappeared. If nothing else, Ap Bac disclosed some serious leadership weaknesses on the part of senior ARVN Officers. It was suspected these weaknesses might exist, but now they were definitely confirmed. Later, Ap Bac was to become a major factor in the decision to commit American combat troops.

After Ap Bac, there seemed to be fewer troop lifts and the majority of flying was now geared towards support and supply. In the Central Highlands for example, the 81st had four Special Forces teams to support, and because the teams were located so deep in the boondocks, helicopters were basically their sole link to civilization. Working closely with the teams, it was only natural to develop a strong friendship, but taking an occasional case of beer didn't hurt. Seeing first hand how Special Forces worked, it was easy for flight crews to appreciate the way they turned primitive Montagnards (French for mountain people) into disciplined fighting units while also improving their quality of life through health care, sanitation, and modern agricultural techniques. Montagnards, might be considered primitive, but they were loyal, fearless, and eager to fight VC.

In 1962, a program known as the Strategic Hamlet Program (SHP) was implemented for the purpose of consolidating individual Montagnard tribes into centrally controlled compounds. The objective was to deny Vietcong access to manpower, food sources, and places to live or hide. From the start, the SHP experienced significant problems mainly because it was poorly conceived and badly managed. For example, it forced tribes to live together that were not compatible, took away their precious independence, and worse of all, the compounds were controlled and guarded by Vietnamese whom the Montagnards totally despised.

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(continued from page 378) The program was doomed to fail, but it did keep aircraft busy hauling pigs, chickens, tons and tons of rice, and hundreds of crocks of a fermented fish sauce called **nuoc mam.** Flying pigs and chickens presented an unpleasant odor, but when transporting the fragile nuoc mam crocks, it was inevitable some would be broken. A broken crock created a smell throughout the aircraft that could bring tears to your eyes, and occasionally crew members even resorted to wearing gas masks. Whereas nuoc mam smelled badly, it was an important staple in the Montagnard diet.

To meet the demand of keeping these compounds supplied, there could be two, three, or more aircraft working four to five days a week. The flying hours supporting this program placed heavy tolls on aircraft availability especially when troop lifts called for maximum availability. Still, it was rewarding to see how the Flying Banana played a significant role in what little success this program achieved. Even better, it gave all flight crews an opportunity to see first hand how Montagnards lived their primitive lives.

Beginning in late 1963, the Bell HU1-B helicopters (nicknamed Huey) began to replace the Flying Bananas; the timing was good as the H-21s were badly showing their age. Cracks were appearing due to metal fatigue, parts were hard to get, and cannibalization was the norm instead of the exception. Even worse, two aircraft had literally fallen out of the sky with disastrous results; not knowing what caused these failures, presented some serious morale factors.

However, the excitement of new aircraft soon turned to disappointment. The HU1-B was a smaller helicopter and instead of twelve or fourteen troops like the Banana, it struggled to carry six or seven. A 3000 pound sling load easily lifted by the H-21, was impossible for the HU1-B. Sadly, it would be two years before the "H" model Huey arrived with an engine strong enough to somewhat duplicate the H-21, but only somewhat. Flight crews were soon saying, "give us back the Banana."

As the Huey replaced the Flying Bananas, the "old girls" were flown to Saigon for transport back to the States. Sometime in late 1964 or early 1965, they left Saigon by ship, but when and where they arrived in the US is a mystery. What happened to them if and when they arrived, is also a mystery. It would break the hearts of many old crew members if they discovered these unique helicopters were lying on the bottom of the Pacific Ocean. Hopefully this is not the case, but anyone reading this article who might actually know, just keep it to yourself as we prefer to not know!

Before leaving Saigon there were no parades, no brass bands, no fancy speeches honoring the Flying Banana for its service. Service, that was exceptional considering they were old when they arrived, difficult to maintain, hard to fly, and operated in an environment for which they were ill suited. Still, they proudly led the way until thousands of high tech helicopters arrived to change air mobility as it was known, forever!

The Flying Banana; definitely a Vietnam Unsung Hero!

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