

DEWEY CANYON II/LAM SON 719



A page from the past was rewritten in older script as the breaking of the winter monsoon saw the Screaming Eagles participating in Operation Dewey Canyon to reopen the battle-shrouded former marine airstrip at Khe Sanh in the northwest section of Military Region 1.

The operation began on January 30 and included a combat assault (CA) into the Khe Sanh area by the 3rd Battalion (Airmobile), 187th Infantry, making the "Rakkasans" among the first Allied units in that area of western Quang Tri province since before the monsoon rains of 1970.

The mission of the "Rakkasans" was to secure all the vital bridges in the vicinity of Firebase Shepherd, four miles southeast of Khe Sanh on Highway 9. Within an hour after the CA, all objectives, including the securing of Firebase Shepherd and the surrounding hilltops and ridges, were accomplished.

Under the watchful eye of 3/187th troopers, engineers from the 326th Engineer Battalion (Airmobile) readied 12 miles of Highway 9 winding back to Khe Sanh for convoy traffic by minesweeping the road, making necessary repairs and constructing bridges.

For nearly two and one half years the airstrip had been a desolate tract of dust and aluminum plank dotted with numerous shell craters. These remnants of Khe Sanh's famous siege greeted the Screaming Eagle engineers who had been assigned the task of building another airstrip, capable of handling C-130 aircraft, adjacent to the existing aluminum mat field and minesweeping the area to render it safe for the arrival of men and supplies yet to come.

Though the giant repair job presented several major problems, the men of the 326th worked through the night using artillery illumination and torches made of 55-gallon drums cut in half and filled with fuel to get the job done in six days, with the first Air Force C-130 transport landing on the new strip on February 4.

The minesweep mission was hampered by the vast array of scrap metal and destroyed equipment which remained from the siege in 1968. Many times the engineers had to cut elephant grass by hand or by bulldozer before being able to cover the area with minesweeping equipment. However, the job was once again swiftly and thoroughly completed by the engineer battalion.

Now Khe Sanh was ready as a staging area for Operation Lam Son 719 - the subsequent Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) thrust into the southern panhandle of Laos to cut the communist supply and infiltration network along the



Throughout the early days of Dewey Canyon II, "Skycranes" airlifted tons of equipment and supplies to Khe Sanh.

Ho Chi Minh Trail and destroy enemy caches in Laos.

Involving nearly 30,000 troops, the Allied operation was highlighted by the teamwork of South Vietnamese and American units operating with close coordination but with each force under its own command structure.

The 101st and the aviation units under its operational control were now given the mission of providing all helicopter air support for the RVNAF drive. In order to accomplish this monumental task, fuel was needed to run the equipment and aircraft and ammunition was needed by all units.

At Khe Sanh, Screaming Eagle Pathfinders and riggers from the 101st Aviation Group and Division Support Command (DISCOM) were among the first to touchdown amid the twisted sections of shrapnel-shredded runway. They immediately set up to direct incoming helicopters into the shell-pocked perimeter. Acting as air controllers, the Pathfinders guided in an average of 175 sorties per day during the first four days of the operation. The riggers directed delivery of blivots of fuel and water, Conex containers, vehicles, ammunition and other resupply items brought in by helicopter to support the

men of the 101st, and the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized); 18th Engineer Brigade, 45th Engineer Group; and elements of the 23rd Infantry Division, operating at Khe Sanh.

Meanwhile, the men of DISCOM's 426th Supply and Service Battalion (Airmobile) were setting up and manning reararm and refuel points to feed the hungry gas tanks and weapons systems of the Aviation Group's UH-1 Huey, CH-47 Chinook and CH-54 Skycrane helicopters; the Cobra gunships and light observation helicopters (LOH) of the 2nd Squadron (Airmobile), 17th Cavalry and the aerial rocket artillery (ARA) Cobras of the 4th Battalion (Airmobile), 77th ARA.

The men and supplies were now in position and Operation Lam Son 719 commenced on February 8.

With the 3/187th Infantry and elements of other non-divisional units providing security patrols in the areas surrounding Khe Sanh and west to the Laotian border, pilots from the Cav and ARA flew armed aerial reconnaissance and screening missions in support of the 101st Aviation Group's helicopters carrying ARVN troops, equipment and supplies into Laos.

In the ensuing days of early February, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA)

began to feel the pressure of the ARVN ground forces in Laos. Destroying caches and inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy, the ARVNs thrust deeper into Laos with the aid of US air support. A major portion of this support continued to be from the division's Aviation Group, with Huey slicks carrying fresh ARVN fighting units into enemy territory, and with Chinooks and Skycranes hauling artillery pieces, bulldozers and various supplies to the South Vietnamese forces on dozens of missions daily.

In retaliation, the NVA committed more troops to the battle, and the 4/77th ARA and 2/17th Cav continued to pound suspected enemy locations and cache sites.

With heavy contact taking place in Laos, more ARVN troops were needed there. To free these forces, additional 101st soldiers were committed to assume responsibility for some of the ARVN areas of operation in northern Military Region 1. As a result, the 2nd Battalion (Airmobile), 327th Infantry and the 2nd Battalion (Airmobile), 502nd Infantry, moved to begin operations in areas northeast and southwest of Khe Sanh, and the "Geronimo" troopers of the 1st Battalion (Airmobile), 501st Infantry, commenced operations from Strongpoint Alpha-2 in the northeast area of Military



Aerial rocket artillery helicopters provided much of the close air support for ARVN troops operating in Laos.

Region 1.

It was a short stay at Alpha-2 for the 1/501st as the battalion was replaced by elements of the 23rd Infantry Division and the "Geronimo" troopers moved to conduct operations east of Khe Sanh.

With the initial task of airlifting and supplying US forces into the Khe Sanh area completed, the following days saw combined US airmobility devoted to the

airlifting of additional South Vietnamese troops and equipment to strategic locations inside Laos.

These same days saw valor become almost commonplace among the gunship, ARA, Huey and medical evacuation pilots and crews of the division. Braving some of the war's most intense enemy fire, airmen often dared where others less courageous would not have dared.



Working day and night, under illumination, engineers carved out a new airstrip at Khe Sanh in record time and made the area safe of old mines.



With the bustling activity of the newly reopened Khe Sanh combat base in the background, ARVN soldiers move out on a patrol of the surrounding area.

During the first week in March the 101st's AO increased by a considerable size as the division assumed operational control (OPCON) of all American units operating in northern MR1. In addition, all of the Army utility and cargo helicopters flying in support of the RVNAF drive were placed under the operational control of the division's 101st Aviation Group.

The 3rd Brigade of the Screaming Eagles with its OPCON infantry battalions and supporting elements, including an armored task force, conducted offensive operations in roughly one-third of Quang Tri Province and denied the enemy access to the lowlands. The brigade also provided security for Highway 9 and Allied logistics bases in its AO.

The 11th Brigade, 23rd Infantry Division (Americal), conducted operations along the DMZ, from the coast to the 3rd Brigade's AO. The brigade also provided security for Allied logistics facilities in the Dong Ha area which were



vital to Operation Lam Son 719.

The 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized), with its organic combat units and one Screaming Eagle battalion, operated in western Quang Tri Province. The brigade's mission was to destroy NVA forces in the area, to provide security for Lang Vei, Khe Sanh and US artillery firebases along the Laotian border and to keep Highway 9 open to the border.

From the beginning of the operation until the RVNAF forces had withdrawn from Laos, the 101st Aviation Group's helicopters and those of the group's OPCON units transported over 20,000 tons of supplies and equipment, airlifted more than 22,000 RVNAF troops and flew more than 102,000 sorties.

History will record the 101st's part in the operation and battles as another Screaming Eagle "Rendezvous With Destiny."



'Happiness is a cold LZ'—Airmobile Combat Assault

The principal purpose of helicopter-borne airmobility was to place combat rifle units and supporting troops on or within close assault distance of their tactical objectives. Furthermore, airmobile assault made it possible to deliver fresh riflemen at the decisive point in the battle zone unwearied by long ground approach marches, while maintaining tactical cohesion irrespective of time, distance and terrain factors.

Airmobile operations in Vietnam were conceived in a reverse sequence known as 'backward planning'. Firstly, the 'ground tactical

BELOW: Huey slicks of the 29th Assault Helicopter Battalion, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) land at a LZ to embark troops. (US Army/1st Cavalry Division)



plan' was prepared including artillery and aerial fires evacuation, and the extraction elements at the completion of the plan. The 'Landing Zone' (LZ) was devised to place the troops at the location, integrated with the movement plan' was prepared the 'Landing Zone' (LZ). A troops and equipment on the designated 'Pickup Zone' that all the elements of the at the PZ on time and in t

The majority of airmobile operations were planned at the battalion level with a company commander (the ground commander) and the elements of the airmobile battalion (controlling the aviation elements) and the fire support co-ordinators. They devised the detailed plan, contributions and requirements for the commander's mission. During the operation, the command and control elements were integrated in the tactical plan wherever the two commanders were. Time and security considerations were carried out to determine the time and state of the landing zone.

The first important p



...the Vietnam war were
nown by Air America Hueys from the roofs of apartment buildings
during the last desperate hours before the fall of Saigon in April 1975.

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BELOW: Emblazoned with the shark's mouth markings that adorned many Huey Cobras, an AH-1G of D Troop, 3rd Squadron, 4th Cavalry returns from a mission in support of the 25th Infantry Division during the Cambodian incursion of 1970. The shark's mouth encompasses the XM-28 A1 Armament Subsystem while the wing stores are XM-159 and XM-158E1 rocket pods. (US Army)

forty-five days of the operation, units of the 101st Aviation Group flew 204,065 sorties in 78,968 flying hours, during which sixty-eight per cent of the helicopters committed suffered combat damage and fourteen per cent were lost. Regrettable as these losses were, the doctrine of airmobility had been proven in a theatre of mid-intensity warfare, and the helicopter had accomplished everything that was demanded of it.

During 1971 the 1st Aviation Brigade decreased from 18,000 men to approximately 6,000. Throughout the year the brigade continued to provide air cavalry, gunship and lift support to ARVN forces in all four military regions. On 30 March 1972 the NVA unleashed a conventional invasion against the RVN, spearheaded by Soviet T-54 and Chinese T-59 tanks. Throughout the course of the campaign the 1st Aviation Brigade flew virtually twenty-four hours a day in support of ARVN forces, not the least of their tasks being armed helicopter gunship sorties to stem the armoured onslaught. In one instance near Quang Tri, the pilot of an OH-6A Loach flew his helicopter through a fusillade of small arms fire at a speed of ten knots just above an enemy tank while a crew member dropped a white phosphorous grenade into the open hatch, incapacitating the vehicle. However, more efficient methods of attacking AFVs were at hand: helicopters armed with anti-tank guided missiles were now deployed with devastating effect against enemy armour for the first time in warfare (see Chapter 4—US Army Helicopter Gunships in Vietnam).





ABOVE: Before and after—SP4 Gary Wetzel refuels his UH-1D of the 173rd Assault Helicopter Company prior to the mission on 8 January 1968 for which he was awarded the Medal of Honor. After the action near Can Giuoc, in which the 'Robin Hood' slick was repeatedly hit by enemy RPG and machine gun fire, the Huey was recovered; note the impact points of the RPGs to the left front. All fourteen Hueys participating in this combat assault were damaged and three were shot down. (Gary G. Wetzel)

aid to an injured pilot or co-pilot, as well as expediting the removal of either from the control area. Armoured seats were fitted to the Hueys of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) before shipping to Vietnam.

From the outset, aircrews wore M-1952 body armour which was designed to provide protection against shell fragments but not against small arms fire. It was, however, relatively comfortable, and afforded good protection against fragmentation wounds from shattered plexiglass after penetration by projectiles. For this reason aircrews sometimes lined the chin bubbles and the cargo compartment floor with several body armour vests to protect themselves from spall fragmentation; but this expedient obstructed the pilots' downward vision, and the 'flak carpet' rarely lasted very long. To protect the frontal torso area of the pilots, aircrews were originally issued with a Doron chest protector until one made of HFC was introduced with the MOD-IV kit. This was extremely uncomfortable and interfered with the flight controls, so it was rarely worn until three inches were cut off the bottom to create what became the T65-1 Aircrew Torso Armor. This, in turn, was superseded by a ceramic plate which was standardized as Body Armor, Small Arms Protective, Aircrewman, for crew chiefs and helicopter gunners who required both back and front protection; pilots and co-pilots, who sat in armoured seats, wore frontal ceramic plates only. Known as 'chickenplates', the aircrew body armour was designed to defeat a .30 calibre/7.62mm AP round at 100 yards but often proved even more effective and, on occasions, withstood hits from .50 calibre projectiles¹. Despite these measures, it was impossible to protect the Huey against the concentrated fire of machine guns and rocket propelled grenades in a 'hot LZ'—as this account by William Dismukes of the 173rd Assault Helicopter Company, the 'Robin Hoods', vividly reveals of an action on 8 January 1968:

'Our mission was to insert a blocking force in a large LZ on the east bank of the Can Giuoc River five miles south of Can Giuoc. The Viet Cong was trying to break contact with the 9th Division troops to the prepared positions in the treelines east of the river. The blocking force was inserted in the north-west corner of the large LZ along the river and were immediately caught in a crossfire from bunkers in the trees along the north and west sides. The majority of the infantrymen were wounded or pinned down in the open rice paddy as soon as they left the ships.

'We were flying in the number four position of the first element. I had control of the ship with the aircraft commander following through to take the ship if necessary. Looking out the right side I could see the LZ under the aircraft ahead. It looked like about thirty or forty acres of wet rice paddy bounded on all sides by heavy stands of palm and banana trees. An air strike had been placed across the river by mistake and our gunships had time for only one pass on the treelines before we started our approach. The lead ship took us in close to the west treeline. At fifty feet from touchdown we were met by heavy automatic weapons fire but continued on in. Just before touchdown a rocket propelled grenade was fired from a bunker to our

¹For a fuller account of aircrew body armour in Vietnam, see the author's *Flak Jackets—20th Century Military Body Armour* (Osprey Publishing Ltd, 1984).



ABOVE: 'Hotel' Hueys of the 174th Assault Helicopter Company disembark soldiers of the 1st Battalion, 6th Regiment of the ARVN 2nd Infantry Division on LZ 'Kala' prior to an attack on the old Special Forces camp at Kham Duc on 26 July 1970. (US Army/Infantry)

'A long stream of tracers arced up at White Two, the helicopter on the right point of the diamond. "We're taking a lot of fire", the aircraft commander of White Two said in a calm, matter-of-fact voice.

"Green and red flights, go to a staggered trail formation. We've got room in the LZ to do it. It will give you better coverage", Wagonwheel Six said.

"Blue Fox, this is Black Knight Six. Do you want your reserve platoon brought in?", asked the battalion commander, orbiting in the command-and-control helicopter. Normally the C and C helicopter would orbit high over the LZ. But because of the low clouds, it had to remain low-level, well off to one side of the battle.

"If we can get that heavy gun knocked out, I think we'll be okay", Blue Fox replied.

"Blue Fox, this is Hog One; we're starting our run now", the ARA flight leader said. "We've got enough fuel for about two runs apiece", he added.

"Okay, concentrate on the north-east side", said Blue Fox.

'White Flight made a left 180-degree turn and I could see the next flight of helicopters lifting from the landing zone. Streams of tracers continued to pour from the dense foliage on the east side.

'The first ARA ship was just pulling up after its rocket attack on the heavy machine gun. As the helicopter broke to the right, I saw a flash of fire from the right rocket pod. Smoke trailed from the pod and the



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ABOVE: AH-1G Cobras of HML-367 are refuelled at the POL point at Khe Sanh during 'Lam Son 719' in February 1971. This operation saw the first use in action of the AH-1J Sea Cobra when four were attached to HML-367 on 17 February 1971. The Sea Cobras, especially configured for the USMC with heavier firepower and twin-engined reliability, soon proved themselves in combat. (US Army)

From Tet to Keystone

While the Battle of Khe Sanh raged, the enemy unleashed the Tet Offensive in I Corps on 30 January. Following rocket attacks against Marine airbases to cripple air support, the VC/NVA attacked urban areas in strength. Hue, the ancient imperial capital of Vietnam, became the scene of one of the bitterest battles of the war as Marine and ARVN units engaged in a gruelling month-long house-to-house fight until the enemy was expelled from the historic city. Throughout the battle the weather was atrocious and the use of tactical air support severely limited, although helicopters flew many medical evacuation and resupply missions. The enemy suffered a serious military defeat on the battlefield; but the political effect of the Tet Offensive had profound repercussions in the United States, that were eventually to lead to the withdrawal of American forces from South-East Asia.

Following Tet, III MAF adopted more mobile tactics, but the intensity of ground combat slackened as the enemy retired to the border regions to recuperate. However, Marine air operations reached a new peak, reflecting this shift in tactics, with the helicopter units flying 639,194 sorties during 1968—almost double the 388,000 of the previous year. The prime example of these new-found tactics was Operation 'Dewey Canyon', when, at the height of the monsoon season, the 3rd and 9th Marines were airlifted by helicopters into the fearsome A Shau Valley. From 22 January to 19 March 1969, the Marines sought out and destroyed numerous enemy camps along the Laotian border. Despite the weather, Marine helicopters continually carried essential supplies to the various bases in the operational area and returned with the wounded. Often flying on instruments because of the low clouds and drizzle, the helicopters flew 14,893 sorties carrying 21,841 troops and 3,515 tons of cargo in 5,050 flight hours.

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