

HISTORY OF THE
118TH AVIATION COMPANY (AIR LBL BN) APO 27, SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

25 June 1963 - 31 December 1963

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1455th AVIATION BATTALION
UNITED STATES ARMY, SOUTH PACIFIC, MILITARY
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FOREWORD

Born in combat, the 118th Aviation Company (Air Mbl Lt) began its existence on 25 June 1963, at Bien Hoa Air Base, Vietnam.

Created by General Order Number 236, Headquarters, United States Army, Pacific, the 118th was a new, streamlined, flexible organization designed under the ROAD* concept of organization.

The mission of this new unit was to assist the Republic of Vietnam in defeating the communist inspired Viet Cong by providing the capability to move troops and equipment throughout the battle area. The unit also was responsible for providing aircraft for reconnaissance and liaison.

In the beginning, the 118th Aviation Company was just an organization; a number indicating a particular amount of men and equipment. As the months wore on, the 118th became more than a number. It represented a spirit. No job was too difficult for the 118th. As experience among personnel increased, the impossible became the ordinary. What was once considered to be dangerous became just another job.

The 118th was people working together. It had aviators with thousands of hours and it had aviators fresh from flight school. It had mechanics and crew chiefs that had worked with the first types of Army aircraft. It also had men who had little or no experience with aircraft maintenance.

Most important to the 118th was the fact that it had a spirit of getting the job done.

This History of the 118th Aviation Company is dedicated to those men who changed a number to a fighting spirit.

* Reorganization Army Division

PREFACE

The purpose of this unit history is to outline the events and happenings of the 118th Aviation Company (Air Bbl Lt) during the year 1963. It is intended to give an accurate picture of the company and its personnel and equipment, as well as the conditions under which the unit has operated.

Only the more memorable events have been covered here. The everyday happenings can be seen in any unit in the United States Army. These everyday jobs were accomplished with enthusiasm and determination. It was this spirit which enabled the unit to meet the conditions and situations pictured in this unit history.

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Illustrations not available for reproduction by CMH.

PART I GENERAL

General Order 236, Headquarters, United States Army, Pacific created the 118th Aviation Company (Air Mbl Lt), on 25 June 1963. It was to be one of the two helicopter companies of the 145th Aviation Battalion.

When this newborn unit first opened its eyes it found itself at Bien Hoa Airfield in the Republic of Vietnam. The 118th was a war baby

Organized and equipped from the recently deactivated 33rd Transportation Company (light Helicopter), the 118th found itself outfitted with CH-21C helicopters. The unit had inherited some of the most ancient helicopters still in service.

Among the personnel of this newly activated unit were some of the old-timers of the 33rd Transportation Company, however the majority of the personnel were new to Vietnam.

Through the patience and guidance of the men who had brought the 33rd to Vietnam a year before the unit began to gain valuable experience. When the last of the old-timers left it, the 118th was ready and willing to do the job.

The unit flew the CH-21's in resupply, liaison, inspection and combat assault missions until the 15th of September when they received the new turbine powered UH-1B.

The unit continued to fly operational missions while personnel were being trained in the new aircraft. All during this period of transition, the 118th continued getting the job done without a break in stride.

After the transition period from CH-21's to the new UH-1B's the unit proceeded to fly missions not heretofore possible due to the characteristics and maintenance requirements of the CH-21's.

In the first six months of its existence the 118th accumulated almost 7000 hours in the air. Flying 13,000 sorties, the Unit carried over 4500 troops, unlimited cargo and participated in 30 major operations.

The 118th earned over 700 air medals and aircraft of the unit were hit 51 times by Viet Cong fire. Three of the Units men were killed in action, 12 wounded.

In a single week the armed helicopters of the 118th scored 117 confirmed kills against the Viet Cong. This new unit was becoming a fighting team of the first order.

PART II ACTIVITIES

During the first six months of its existence, the 118th Aviation Company participated in 12 major combat assaults and four large scale Eagle Flights, as well as flying everyday missions such as resupply, liaison, and reconnaissance.

The 118th was activated on 25 June 1963. The unit was in direct support of III Corps (ARVN). Major Joseph E. Henderson commanded the unit until 15 July when Major David B. Hayes assumed command.

During its first few months of existence, the 118th sent elements north into the mountainous terrain around Ban Me Thout and Nha Trang to support the 23rd Division (ARVN). Early in August, the units were recalled to their home station at Bien Hoa.

Meanwhile, at the home base of the 118th, missions continued as normal. Daily missions included outpost inspections, resupply and numerous other activities, including an occasional combat assault.

Late in August, the 118th suffered its first casualties. On the morning of 30 August 1963, a flight of CH-21's from the unit were enroute to Tay Ninh, about one hour northwest of Bien Hoa.

In a flight of five, the lead aircraft was shot down in a jumbled wreck, killing the pilot, Capt James Wenzel, and the co-pilot, 1/Lt Tim Lang. The gunner was seriously injured. The crew chief received superficial wounds, but was capable of walking.

When the lead ship went down, every ship in the formation followed to help the survivors. Landing in a hail of enemy fire, the helicopters immediately returned fire as crew chiefs ran to the downed aircraft to pull the crew out.

This day valor was the rule rather than the exception. Landing in the first aircraft were Sgt. Peter W. Milbauer and FFC Robert A. Graupman. They ran through concentrated small arms fire and pulled the pilot from the wreckage carrying him back to the nearest awaiting helicopter. Returning to the wreckage, they then pulled the co-pilot out and placed him in the same helicopter. They returned once more to the wreckage to destroy anything that might be of value to the Viet Cong.

As one aircraft slowed to a stop an inexperienced young private leaped to the ground and ran through ankle deep water to pull the injured gunner from the stricken helicopter. Firing his rifle as he went, Pvt Brayton Witherell pulled the injured gunner onto his back and carried him back to waiting helicopter, again firing as he splashed through the rice paddies. After depositing the gunner, Witherell started back for the wreckage. He stopped momentarily to fire at a group of Viet Cong advancing upon his aircraft and was hit by a bullet in the leg. Falling to the ground, he continued to fire forcing the enemy to keep their heads down. He maintained his fire until he was carried back to the aircraft by his pilot and gunner.

This day was a hot one for the gunners as well. When Sgt. Donald W. Curry had expended all but one box of his machine-gun ammunition he was shot through the left leg. Continuing to fire, he calmly told the pilot of his shortage of ammunition, mentioning casually that he'd been hit in the leg.

When the machine-gun ran dry, Curry pulled his pistol and continued to fire as the helicopter lifted from the rice paddy. He shot one of the swarming Viet Cong from the landing gear of the helicopter. After emptying his

pistol, he borrowed a sub-machinegun from the co-pilot and fired it until it was empty. Then he borrowed the pilot's carbine and kept firing. Not once did he seem to be excited.

The total time the aircraft were on the ground was 7 minutes. Estimates of enemy strength put at least one battalion in the area. At least 60 were involved in the fire-fight. Total personnel involved on our side; 21, ten of whom were pilots and could not fire back. Two of the remaining eleven were ineffective as they were in the crashed helicopter and either seriously injured or in a state of shock. That left nine men to hold off those 60 Viet Cong. They did it, inflicting an estimated 50% casualties on the enemy. The actual fire-fight resulted in two wounded on our side, for a total of 6, including the crew of the stricken aircraft.

After completing the rescue, the flight continued to Tay Ninh to participate in a combat assault. There, the unit encountered more fire which wounded one crew chief and shot one more aircraft down. The downed crew was rescued by another OH-21. All but one of the unit's 15 helicopters involved with the mission were hit by enemy fire.

30th day of August 1963 was quite a day for the 118th. Seven Purple Hearts were earned that day, two of them posthumously.

The 118th got a little rest for about two weeks after that, flying only routine missions with their few remaining aircraft. Then the one event occurred which probably did the most to bring the unit's morale to a peak.

On 13 September 1963, the 118th Avn Co (Air Mob Lt) received its first OH-1B. In the next three days a total of 25 of the sleek, new turbine-powered aircraft were received.

The transition from CH-21's to the new UH-1B's was a happy occasion, and somewhat strenuous.

Problems in housing all the new personnel were becoming serious. The unit still had a great portion of the 33rd Trans. personnel residing with it. These people, when added to the newly arrived personnel, created a shortage of living space. The problem was gradually solved as the personnel of the 33rd rotated back to COMUS.

Even a greater problem than space was the training of new personnel. The unit was divided in half. One half continued as operational while the other half was trained in the new helicopter.

Instructional crews were sent by the Department of the Army to give transition training to the units receiving the new helicopters. Throughout the transition period the company remained operational.

The last CH-21 mission was a combat assault mission conducted at Phan Thiet, located on the seacoast east of Bien Hoa. The mission went off with a minimum of problems and upon returning to Bien Hoa, the old CH-21's were turned in.

The first UH-1B mission was flown that same day. A night medical evacuation mission to Tay Ninh was called. The mission was accomplished without incident.

Flying both the last CH-21 mission and the first UH-1B mission, was 1/Lt Chadwick C. Payne. He was the only pilot to participate in both.

From the 15th of September to the 15th of October, the company's Third Platoon trained with their new armed helicopters. Carrying four machine-guns and 16 rockets on each of their eight aircraft, the Third Platoon's job would be to escort the transport helicopters of the First and Second Airlift Platoons.

The 15th of October saw the armed platoon become operational after a brief training test in a range area north of Bien Hoa. While on the test, the platoon was fired upon. A more realistic test could not have been asked for. The platoon leveled the target area satisfactorily and passed the test. Upon becoming operational, the platoon became known as the "Bandits".

During the month of November, elements of the 118th were sent to Phan Thiet, once more on temporary duty. A fire team consisting of two armed helicopters of the "Bandits" located and destroyed an enemy troop concentration. Up to 40 dead Viet Cong were counted.

Meanwhile, back at Bien Hoa, the remainder of the "Bandits" were busy. During one week of November, a single fire team of the Bandits accounted for 117 Viet Cong dead, plus an undetermined number wounded.

Combat Assaults were commonplace now. Every week the unit flew at least one, with an Eagle Flight every Sunday.

Eagle Flights became a specialty of the 118th. An Eagle Flight is a type of airmobile combat patrol. An aircraft flies around an area of suspected enemy activity until a probable target is observed, then the troops are called in and landed under the protection of the armed helicopters. The troops hit hard and fast, then the helicopters return, the troops climb back on and it starts all over again. One Eagle Flight resulted in the capture of 21 suspected Viet Cong.

During the month of December an aerial assault was conducted on the hamlet of Bo Tuc, north of Tay Ninh. During this assault six Bandit aircraft were hit by ground fire. The aircraft of the Company Commander, Major David B. Hayes, was shot through a hydraulic line, forcing it to land. Upon retrieving the aircraft, Major Hayes was again shot down and slightly wounded in the arm.

Every "Bandit" aircraft was hit that day, and three personnel, including the Major, were slightly wounded.

On one of the first missions flown in support of the 7th Division (ARVN), located in the dangerous Mekong Delta region, 2Lt Lynn Rothenbuhler was shot through the head and killed by a sniper as he was escorting an unarmed transport helicopter from the town of Mo Cay. The incident occurred on the 28th of December 1963, Lt Rothenbuhler was the third man killed during the first six months of unit operations. Twelve more were wounded.

Operating in the hottest area in Vietnam, the 118th took 51 hits during the period 25 June 1963 to 31 December 1963. This area, controlled by III Corps (ARVN), reported nearly three times as many hits on aircraft as the next reporting unit.

In spite of increased Viet Cong activity in their area of responsibility, the 118th Avn Co flew 6893.25 hours and 13,000 sorties during the first six months of existence in 1963. They carried 4500 troops and participated in 30 major operations.

Displaying the utmost in professionalism, the 118th was regarded as the unit to do the job by those whom they supported. Is there a higher recommendation?

"COMBAT ASSAULT"

The typical combat assault mission flown by the 118th required many hours of planning and coordination. When this had been completed, the crews were briefed. Then the mission depended largely upon those crews. The following is a brief sketch of the combat assault type mission as seen by an aviator.

"The grey dawn was streaked with red as the sun rose behind the formation of helicopters. Twenty minutes before, the sky had been a collection of colored lights, blinking off and on intermittently. Now the flight was on the way toward the landing zone."

"I was vaguely aware of the Vietnamese troops packed into the cargo compartment behind me. My focal point of interest right now was the next aircraft in the formation. Was my formation too tight?

"My thoughts drifted out to the flanks and rear of the formation where the armed escort helicopters were positioned. It must be nice to fly around without having the worry about maintaining a tight formation, like those armed ones. Then I thought of the job ahead of them, protecting us while we are in the landing zone. If there's much Viet Cong fire, they'll be the ones getting it.

"My thoughts were interrupted by a voice on the radio, 'Romeo Papa now', at release point. Now the flight would split into two elements, one for each of the tiny landing zones ahead.

"The sun was bright as landing zones came into view. There was the one we are supposed to land in. Damn, it was small. A patch of woods ran next to it and on the other side of the woods was the other landing zone. The Viet Cong were supposed to be in the woods.

"The intelligence briefing said the Viet Cong were strong here. Good, that usually means we'll meet pretty light resistance. It's those landing zones that aren't supposed to have anything near them that I sweat.

"The lead helicopter of our eight ship formation suddenly started a decent. We were on final then.

"As the aircraft in front of me touched down in the moist high grass, the troops behind me were moving about in anticipation of unloading.

"A bullet snapped by just as I touched down, and caused me to jerk the aircraft a little. Finally the troops unloaded. I said "6 up" and heard the chatter of machine-guns on our flanks. The escorts had run into something.

"I grew apprehensive as I sat in the landing zone waiting for the last shipload of troops to unload. After what seemed like hours, the word came, 'Pull Pitch'. The formation lifted from the landing zone as one single aircraft and struggled to climb out of range of the Viet Cong weapons. I noticed my clock. The flight had been in the landing zone 6 seconds and yet it seemed like hours.

"Then we were back in the air and on the way home. The mission was complete and we'd taken no hits. The escorts now pulled alongside after covering our take off.

"Finally, the home field came into sight. It was only 8 o'clock in the morning, yet I was already soaked with perspiration.

"Upon landing, the crews attended a quick debriefing then prepared to go out on a few everyday missions.

PART III REFLECTIONS

In six short months, the 118th Avn Co (Air Mbl Lt) grew from a designating number to a symbol of determination, skill, and sacrifice. Its personnel changed from a collection of different people in uniforms, to a hard working, close-knit team.

The 118th took men fresh from the Aviation School and showed them what they were capable of doing. It trained them. It watched some of them die.

There were old-timers in the 118th too. Experienced personnel soon found themselves sharing treasured little secrets of long years at working on helicopters.

The men lived and worked together. Some of them died together. The 118th was no longer a number. It was work, sweat, a job well done, and close friends gone. The 118th was an indomitable spirit.

HEADQUARTERS
UNITED STATES ARMY, PACIFIC
APO 958 San Francisco, Calif.

ORDERS
—235

14 June 1963

Section

SECTION OF UNITS I
SECTION OF UNITS II
SECTION OF UNITS III

SECTION I

INACTIVATION OF UNITS

1. TC 020. Following Units INACTIVATED.

TRANSPORTATION COMPANY (LT HELICOPTER)
TRANSPORTATION COMPANY (LT HELICOPTER)
TRANSPORTATION COMPANY (LT HELICOPTER)
TRANSPORTATION COMPANY (LT HELICOPTER)
TRANSPORTATION COMPANY (LT HELICOPTER)

Referred to: Control of Headquarters, Department of the Army.

Effective date: 25 June 1963.

Effect: Will be in accordance with existing directives.

Personnel: Will be transferred in accordance with existing directives.

Assets/records: Will be disposed of in accordance with AR 230-215.

Final report: Will be submitted in accordance with AR 230-215.

Priority: Immediate, 14 June 1963.

Other instructions: Unit funds will be disposed of in accordance with AR 230-16. Orders, supplies, and impediments will be disposed of in accordance with pertinent directives.

SECTION II

INACTIVATION OF UNITS

1. TC 001. Following Units ACTIVE and INACTIVATED as indicated
Enclosure 1.

AVIATION COMPANY (AIR MOB LT) 20010 TH AF 1-772 (Active)
AVIATION COMPANY (AIR MOB LT) 20010 TH AF 1-772 (Active)
AVIATION COMPANY (AIR MOB LT) 20010 TH AF 1-772 (Active)
AVIATION COMPANY (AIR MOB LT) 20010 TH AF 1-772 (Active)
AVIATION COMPANY (AIR MOB LT) 20010 TH AF 1-772 (Active)

MONTHLY FLYING TIME

1 July 63 - 31 December 63

HELICOPTERS

<u>MONTH</u>	<u>TIME (TOTAL)</u>	<u>AVG/AIRCRAFT</u>	<u>% AVAIL</u>	<u>TYPE AIRCRAFT</u>
Jul	436:55	23	63	CH-21
Aug	546:55	30	60	CH-21
Sep	922:10	37	47*	CH-21, UH-1B
Oct	1261:55	50	87	UH-1B
Nov	1485:45	60	94	UH-1B
Dec	1618:50	64	91	UH-1B
Total 6272:30				

FIXED WING

<u>MONTH</u>	<u>TIME (TOTAL)</u>	<u>AVG/AIRCRAFT</u>	<u>% AVAIL</u>	<u>TYPE AIRCRAFT</u>
Jul	28:05	29	61	TC-3D
Aug	115:50	38	50	"
Sep	99:15	33	61	"
Oct	78:10	26	77	"
Nov	107:00	36	72	"
Dec	132:45	44	95	"
Total 620:45				

* Transition period to UH-1B

TOTAL 6593:15 hrs