

UNIT HISTORY
118th Assault helicopter Company
1967

VHPA 58

FOREWORD

The 118th Assault Helicopter Company was activated on 25 June 1963 by General Orders 236, Headquarters, United States Army, Pacific. It was one of two helicopter companies assigned to the 145th Aviation Battalion - the "First in Vietnam". Since its activation, the 118th "Thunderbirds" have been in continuous combat for three years.

The company, born in combat, was organized and equipped at Bien Hoa Air Base following the deactivation of the 33rd Transportation Company (Light Helicopter) which arrived in Vietnam in the fall of 1962. The mission of the company was to expedite combat operations while providing direct tactical and administrative air mobility to combat units engaged in the allied counter-insurgency efforts in the Republic of Vietnam.

The 118th adapted quickly, and, guided by the experienced aviators of the former 33rd Transportation Company, attained a high degree of combat proficiency. The company participated in combat assaults and large scale "Eagle Flights" from the day it was created. In addition, daily missions of resupply, command liaison, medical evacuation and reconnaissance were expertly accomplished.

In the following pages, significant actions and events during 1967 are named. They illustrate the 118th Assault Helicopter Company in its contributions to the allied forces' counter-insurgency efforts in Vietnam. Moreover, it is a report of Army Aviation accomplishments in counter-insurgency warfare.

**DAILY ACCOUNTS OF SIGNIFICANT
ACTION**

On 8 January 1967, the 118th Assault Helicopter Company, while participating in a combat assault three kilometers east of Chu Chi, Hau Nghia Province, Republic of Vietnam. The assault was made by nine UH-1D armed troop transport helicopters and two UH-1C gunships. The mission was the airlifting of the 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry, 25th Infantry Division, into a landing zone in the vicinity of coordinates XT 740200. The assault was a part of operation Cedar Falls.

At 1430 hrs., as the flight approached the landing zone for the first time, the helicopters came under intense enemy automatic weapons fire. The transport helicopters maintained strict formation integrity while the gunships dove on enemy targets to draw the fire from the troops.

During the second airlift into the landing zone the flight was attacked with automatic weapons fire and a barrage of mortar rounds. Tearin through the formation as the nine transport helicopters touched the ground, the mortars seriously damaged eight aircraft and wounded six aircraft crewmembers. Miraculously, the eight aircraft and the two gunships escaped damage.

The lead aircraft received a total of five hits, one from a piece of shrapnel which wounded the door gunner. The number two aircraft had both its aircraft commander and pilot wounded when two .30 caliber rounds and three pieces of fragmented shrapnel slammed into it. Four pieces of shrapnel struck the third helicopter. The fourth aircraft received four hits and the fifth helicopter in the formation received multiple strikes in the main rotor blade and left windshield. The number six aircraft was struck by two pieces of shrapnel, one of them wounding the crew-chief. After a mortar round exploded less than two feet from it, the seventh aircraft received twenty-two shrapnel hits, several of the fragments wounding the door gunner. In the trail aircraft the aircraft commander was wounded when eight .30 caliber rounds slammed into it.

..11 through the attack, despite the wounds suffered by the crews and the severe damage inflicted on the aircraft, the helicopters maintained strict formation integrity and all crewmembers made certain the airlifted troops were successfully unloaded before leaving the landing zone. The gunships inflicted severe damage on the enemy positions and seriously hampered the Viet Cong fire power in the area. Not one aircraft was lost to the enemy mortars and ground fire.

On the morning of 6 March, the 118th airlifted one company of the 6th Bn-1st ATF to secure an LZ south east of Bear Cat and spent the remainder of the morning conducting a 20 sortie resupply of the same LZ. The morning operations were uneventful with only moderate ground fog hampering landings in the first LZ. That afternoon, 2 companies of the 3/47, along with 1 recon plt. were airlifted into 4 separate LZ's. Full suppression and smoke screens, provided by the 145th Bn smoke ship, were employed in the LZ's which were prep'd by air strikes prior to entry. No ground fire was reported during the operation and later that afternoon, the recon plt. was airlifted into a fire support base. At the close of the days operation, the Thunderbirds had completed a total of 86 hours of flying time utilizing 15 aircraft to airlift, resupply, and provide air cover for 430 troops in 223 sorties.

On the 11th of March, the Thunderbirds joined forces with the 335th Helicopter Co. in support of the 2/39 Bn, 9th Inf Division. Numerous combat assaults and extractions filled the days operation. Three lifts were scheduled for the morning and on the first lift, 3 Thunderbirds aircrafts received hits from the sporadic ground fire received on approach to the LZ. One pilot sustained a minor leg wound. Of the 3 aircraft that sustained bullet damage, two were flown to Saigon and the 3rd remained to complete the days operation. Later the same afternoon, the 335th departed the operational area leaving the Thunderbirds to finish resupply missions before returning to the Bird Cage to end the days operations.

On 12 March, the 118th Thunderbirds were assigned the mission of supporting elements of the 199th Lgt Inf Bde in a series of multiple combat assaults. Action at morning was confined to 3 lifts into widely spaced LZ's south of Saigon, which were thoroughly prepared by artillery fire. Upon entering the LZ, the Thunderbirds employed full suppression to ensure adequate protective fires into and out of each LZ, no reports of ground fire were reported. The same afternoon saw the Thunderbirds involved in 4 extractions which were accomplished without incident. Upon their return to the Bird Cage, the 12 Thunderbirds aircraft logged 111 flying hours, having lifted 520 troops, and completed 400 sorties.

On 30 March, the officers and men of the 118th put the finishing touches on a month long building and remodeling project at the office a villa in Hocur-Smith Compound on Cong Le Street, Bien Hoa. Numerous projects were assigned to the 3 flight platoons of the 118th and with a lot of imagination and even more hard work the end result assumed a "face lifting" on the old French Villa like no one had ever imagined possible. The 3rd Flt Flt "Bandits" set about remodeling their "hide-out" at the villa by completely redoing the interior of the bar area. This was accomplished by installing indirect lighting, bamboo wall panelling, and a thatched roof over the bar area. The 2nd Plt. "BlueJays" tackled an ambitious task of expanding the dining room floor space by laying new concrete floors, adding stained wood panelling to the walls, and completely repainting the entire dining room area. The 1st Flt "Scorpions" set about beautifying the court yard area and improving living quarters. Their outstanding job of cementing the court yard, adding additional sand bags, and pot plants significantly beautified the drab old face of the 118th Villa. Other additions were an auxiliary bar in the 1st Flt. Ratio opened evenings for company members. In all, the end result met with abundant praise by all those within the battalion. A fine tribute to the department C.C. Major Boggs, who was responsible for the inception of this self-improvement program.

On 31 March, change of command ceremonies were conducted at the Birdcage in front of operations. Prior to the commencement of the ceremony, thunderclouds threatened the activities, but once begun, all eyes were directed front to the staff and words from the 12th Circuit Commander, Col. Campbell, the cut going Major Boggs and the incoming commander.

On the 18 April the Thunderbirds were once again assigned the mission of supporting the 9th Inf Div. Staging out of Tan An, the 118th joined forces with the 69th Avn Co in a Bn operation involving combat assaults and relocation of elements of the 9th along the river and canal complex northwest of Tan An. Twice operations were temporarily suspended as the approaching rainy season made its presence known with brief, but heavy down pours. Through the day, Thunderbirds were alternately in and out of heavy rain showers as they dodged rain clouds and heavy overcast conditions. At the end of the days operation, the Thunderbirds returned to Bien Hoa leaving several birds to finish the isolated resupply and extraction missions.

On 21 April, the Thunderbirds departed the Birdcage at 0430 hours in route to an area west of My Tho. The darkness of the early morning was broken by the periodic splash of lightning from the thunderstorm southeast of the 118th's flight path. Arriving at Dong Tam, the Thunderbirds immediately began their mission for the 9th Inf Div. as daylight broke the darkness of the early morning. Four lifts were planned to an area 2000 meters west of Dong Tam airstrip. With a troop loading of 7, the Thunderbirds performed the 4 combat assaults without incident receiving no reported ground fire. Returning to Dong Tam, the Birds refueled and shutdown awaiting any further developments with a reaction force. It was during this time that the Thunderbirds received an honored visitor, the 1st Aviation Brigade commander, General George P. Seneff, who landed for a short briefing on the mornings operation. Several hours later the 118th extracted elements of the 9th from a nearby field site and after topping off, took off for another

operation in the Rung Sat area. The afternoons mission involved the extraction of a company size force from a single PZ hacked out of the dense underbrush in the delta area. Each ship broke off from the orbiting formation with 1 minutes separation and plucked their waiting passengers from the PZ. A shuttle was formed to Vung Tau. Upon the Thunderbirds return to the A.O., sniper fire was reported by the Bandits who were caping the area. The birds continued the extraction without further incidences and returned to Bien Hoa completing another days successful operation.

On 22 April saw the 118th in support of the 173 L.I.B. in a massive Bn relocation and extraction. Staging from the New Bird cage, the Thunderbirds flew 4 lifts to an area north of the Song Dong Nai River, near Bien Hoa. The fifth lift involved a sling load extraction from the field site, all ten slicks were rigged with external slings which were maneuvered back to the new bird cage. Departing the PZ individually, the Thunderbirds returned to Bien Hoa and after releasing their respective loads, shut down to refuel.

After several more airlifts and extractions, the Thunderbirds experienced a tragedy that struck deep in the hearts of all members of the 118th. Returning from the LZ, a Redtail slick running low on fuel experienced an engine failure near Long Binh. The Aircraft crashed and burned, killing the aircraft commander gunner, and 6 troops who were returning to base camp. 1LT Paul Stimpson and SF4 Adams will long be remembered and will join the ranks of fallen Thunderbirds who have given their lives during this time of conflict, was with heavy hearts the Thunderbirds continued the mission until the 1400 release time. Later the same afternoon, three ships were sent on resupply and ash and trash, closing a sad day in the history of the Thunderbirds.

On 25 April 1967, the 118th departed the Birdcage at 0500 in route to Dong Tam for a combat assault with elements of the 9th Inf Div. Upon arrival, the overcast and ground fog began to dissipate with the coming of daylight. The troops were lifted to an area approximately 2000 meters east of Dong Tam camp, because of the numerous casualties incurred by the abundant anti-personnel mines placed around the camps outer perimeter by the enemy. Upon completion of the 3rd lift, the Thunderbirds were released to join other elements of the 9th Div. At Tan An. After refueling at Tan An, troops were airlifted to an area north of the river and the Thunderbirds returned to a position near Tan Tru for a company relocation and extraction mission. Three lifts accomplished the mission after sporadic ground fire which was reported by several of the ships in the rear of the formation. Negative suppression was ordered because of the abundance of friendlies in the area. The Thunderbirds returned to Tan An and after refueling set out for Bear Cat to finish the days operations with the 9th. Staging from the Long Thanh airstrip south of Bear Cat, the 118th flew combat assaults into the river area southwest of Bear Cat. Numerous Thunderstorms and rainclouds had formed by this time and the Thunderbirds encountered brief showers while inroute. Several of the LZ's were very wet and required hovering to allow the troops to get out. In the second LZ, full suppression was ordered and on final approach and departure from the LZ ships reported ground fire from the tree lines to the left of the flight path. Upon completion of the fifth lift, the Thunderbirds departed the area for the Bird cage after completing a full days operation lifting 610 troops.

On 27 April, the Thunderbirds departed the Birdcage for an operation north of Vung Tau (Baria) with elements of the Australian forces at Nuci Da. After landing at the newly completed air strip near Aussie base camp, the Thunderbirds received their final briefing and along with another sister company from the 145th Avn Bn, departed Nuci Da with Aussie strip in a ten ship flight. Upon reaching the LZ some 4000 meters west of the base camp, the 118th was cleared to fully suppress the left flank of the LZ. The additional other airlift company

was assigned the right side of the LZ, and both companies landed in staggered rail abreast of one another. No ground fire was reported and after the following one other lift into the same area, the Thunderbirds were released to Bien Hoa with one flight of Redtails directed to Tay Ninh for a single airlift sortie.

On the 29th of April the 118th was once again involved in a company operation supporting the 199th Light Inf Bde in operations in and around Binh Chanh and various areas south of Saigon. Staging out of B.C. and later Nha Be, the Thunderbirds.... Isolated ground fire was reported in the two LZ's near the Binh Chanh area but no suppression was ordered due to the presence of friendlies and adequate protection by the Thunderbirds organic protection, the Bandits. That afternoon, the 118th airlifted U.S. and ARVN forces from several isolated PZ's south of Saigon to LZ's along the major river network south of Nha Be. Full suppression was ordered in two of the LZ's with no ground fire reported. Later after a several hour wait, the Thunderbirds returned to extract the airlifted forces back to their original PZ's, and were released.

On 30 April, the 118th was involved in a support of the 173 L.I.B. airlifting troops into the area north of Bien Hoa near Xom Cat. Later that afternoon they were dispatched to Ben Cat for several lifts in the immediate area. The entire day's operation was without incident and the Thunderbirds returned to the BC after a light day of flying.

On 29 April the Thunderbirds staged out of Tu Duc for operations south east of Saigon. Three lifts were assigned into LZ's that were surrounded by dense mangroves. Some difficulty was encountered in the first LZ because of its small size. Upon departing the LZ and breaking north, one of the Redtails received several hits in the control tubes and windshield. Upon return to Tu Duc, a delay was called to the operation until a replacement aircraft could be flown in. No suppression was allowed due to the presence of friendly forces in the area. The remaining flights into the LZ's were without incident after the landing sites were softened up by the Bandits.

On 5 May the 118th began its day with a pitch being at 0655 from Birdcage with destination being a PZ in the Can Gio area. Ten slicks and four guns assaulted 3 LZ's which were in close proximity of each other. These assaults were carried out without incident and the company was back in Bien Hoa for refueling before 0900 hours. The Thunderbirds departed B.H. for PZ southeast of Thu Duc where 6 lifts were extracted, two going to Long Binh Redcatcher Pad and the remainder relocated in the Thu Duc area. The extractions were first Americans, then ARVN's and then Americans. Again negative fire was reported. Back to BH and shutdown for lunch and refueling.

On 8 May pitch-pull from the Cage was at 0630 with Lt. Jackson and WO-1 Wieland leading the birds. The first takeoff was called back to the cage before the flight reached Saigon because the PZ at Ben Phuoc was still having scattered fog upon arrival. Troops were taken to the LZ northwest of Tan An and the PZ was at Tan An strip (PZ Richey). These troops were also taken to LZ A and the flight returned to Tan An and the first five ships refueled while the second flight of 5 Redbirds carried sorties of equipment to LZ A. After all birds had returned and refueled, the flight shutdown and awaited the call to proceed to Rach Kien where the 3rd PZ was located. These troops were lifted to LZ B, which is 3 clicks northwest of LZ A. This lift was followed by a lift from a 4th PZ at Ben Luc. All lifts were successfully executed and without a single shot fired in anger.

Upon the completion of this phase, the flocks set down at Tan An and inched on scrumptuous C-rations. The afternoon's activities commenced with some off-wall Eagle Flights, which are planned, but with no detail. These were carried on in the area west of the morning's lifts. These consisted of about 5 mixed relocation lifts with some troops being lifted into an area and half being removed again. All these measures were designed to confuse and baffle "Charlie", but they also seemed to confuse the Ground Commanders and the flight leaders, but the operation was carried to a golden conclusion by the Bien Hoa Thunderbirds, those magnificent men in their flying machines. The already full day was rounded out with approximately 20 sorties of resupply to LZ's A and B, being conducted by the 2 flights of five, Redbirds and Bluebirds. The Birds returned as 2 flights of five and were back in their cages before six. As a point of interest all of the formations were V's of 5 except the Bluebirds had a flight of V's of five plus 1 as Cpt Moore took up the number 6 slot.

On 11 May, Thunderbird lead (Hostler & Michel) pulled from the cage at 0745 with a flight of ten. First PZ was 10 miles southeast of Xuan Loc on a road where we were boarded by elements of the 173rd Airborne Brigade. There was a second PZ a few miles south down the road, a 3rd at Blackhorse, and a 4th at Xuan Loc. Six lifts came from PZ's 1 & 2, five from Blackhorse and one from Xuan Loc. The lifts into LZ 1 were made by three companies (335th Cowboys, 118th Thunderbirds, and 68th Top Tigers, in this order), the companies trailed one another by 2-5 minutes interval. The lifts into LZ 2 was Bn Echelon rights with companies in staggered trail. It was tight for the 118th in the middle and turbulence was very bad. Top Tiger and Cowboy ships near trail pressed in very close to the Thunderbirds several times. Some re-supply sorties were carried externally and internally from Blackhorse to LZ 1.

On 12 May 1967, ten Thunderbirds with Lt Kimzey leading pulled pitch at 0610 hours proceeding to the PZ at the Hiep Hoa Sugar Mill strip. ARVN's were loaded eight per on the ten ships. Three lifts were made to LZ's about seven clicks northwest of the Sugar Mill and a click west of the Vam Co Dong River. The LZ's were within a few hundred yards of each other. Sniper fire was received by the number three ship as we crossed the main river, but no hits. No resistance was encountered by the force as we entered and departed the LZ with full suppression. The lifts were completed and the Thunderbirds proceeded to Duc Hoa where they refueled and stood by for 3 hours. Thunderbirds were released at noon and home in time for lunch.

On 13 May 1967, the Redbirds and Bluebirds operated as separate elements and worked for the 9th Infantry Division out of Tan An, takeoff was at shortly after 0700 hours, with Captain Moore and Major Jay leading respectively the Redbirds and the Bluebirds. The Eagle Flights were conducted to the north and northwest of Tan An, and were interspersed with re-supply. The seven or eight lifts and extractions which each platoon made were of the 9th troops and some ARVN's also. The extractions were made amid late afternoon showers and rain storms. The operation was climaxed as the Bandits lit afire some of the LZ's with smoke. Few rockets were expended and some work for the flex guns, was about the size of it for the gunnies. The time figured to six and a half hours with some standby time accounting for the ground down time.

On 16 May 1967, Nha Be, 199th Lt Inf Bde, the Thunderbirds left the Birdcage at 0650 hours after a slight weather delay with Captain Moore and WO Lonnie Schmidt leading the flight. The pickup point was south and a little west of Nha Be. There were two lifts from each of the three PZ's that went to three separate LZ's. The T-Birds were accompanied into the LZ's by the Bandits with full suppression being the order of the day. The six lifts were executed quickly and efficiently and the T-Birds were back at Bien Hoa by 0930 hours. After lunch the flight returned to Nha Be for the extraction of the six lifts and finished the afternoon's work in short order for a 1500 hours release time.

On 19 May 1967, Dong Tam, the operation was scheduled to kick off at the Birdcage at 0630 hours but was delayed until 0700 hours because of cloudy conditions. Bluebirds lead the 10 ship formation with Major James Jay at the helm. The first order of the day was to make 2 sorties of extraction of night kits. (These are night operation equipment packets that the Infantry uses.) Then the flight proceeded to Vinh Long to refuel and receive the briefing for the morning's operation. Take-off for the operation was at 1000 hours and the PZ was north across the My Tho River about 10 miles from Vinh Long. The first take-off from the PZ, Bluebird 2 with AC J. Mickey, Pilot Conway, CE Waymire, and G Collins los⁺ RPM after attempting to clear a barrier and landed in a canal at coordinates XS 0748. The rescue operation lasted about an hour and the med evac's were taken to Dong Tam. That portion of the operation was cancelled and the remainder of the day was spent in the repositioning of troops from field positions to Fire Support Bases. The flight was back in the Cage at 1730.

On 12 August the Thunderbirds were assigned the mission of combat assaulting elements of the 25th Inf Div into an area southwest of Chu Chi. The first PZ was near Bao Tri and after lifting, the flight was divided so that a simultaneous touchdown could be obtained into 2 LZ's, separated by a small canal which emptied into the large river west of Chu Chi. A slight delay put the 2nd flight (Bluetails) on short final as the Redbirds pulled from their LZ. "Taking fire from the left..." was reported by number 2 ship of the Red flight as they cleared the trees surrounding the LZ. Shortly after, the docmed aircraft dropped out of the sky after a muffled explosion in the engine compartment. Landing in the main river to the west of the LZ, the Redtail #7 sank almost immediately, with the crew scurrying to exit the fast sinking aircraft. "Trail", a Bluebird, after a hasty off-loading of its troops, sped to the crash site and hovered over the water to insure that all four crewmen were afloat. It then hovered over the trees and sat down in the LZ, but not before the gunner, an off duty Spartan Control tower operator who flies with the 118th, leaped from the hovering Bluebird to save the bobbing and stunned aircraft commander. As the downed crew was pulled from the water and directed to the waiting ship, the "Bandit" gunships gave both crews close fire cover, suppressing the tree line to the south of the LZ where fire had been received. The remainder of the Thunderbirds continued the mission with great relief knowing that the crew were safe and enroute to Chu Chi for medical attention. Throughout the day, the Thunderbirds continued to combat assault, relocate, and extract troops who swept thru the river area. The performance of the T-Birds after the loss of one of its birds typifies the dedication to the mission and reaffirms the 118th's motto, "It shall be done!"

On 24 August 1967, the Thunderbirds began a busy day, departing the Birdcage at 0630 hours for a Battalion operation on the west side of the river south of Phu Cong. As the lead element of the CA, the 118th departed PZ Tucker flying low level due to the reduced ceiling and approached the LZ with only right door gunners suppressing. Isolated ground fire was reported by the Bandits and the 68th Tigers followed the 118th into the LZ. The next lift was accomplished without incident and the 118th was released to return to Bien Hoa before departing for Dau Tieng for a brief extraction mission. Upon arrival at Dau Tieng, the company awaited the last extractions made by Chinooks before proceeding to the PZ located near a canal and abandoned hamlet southeast of the famed Michaline Plantation of Operation Attalborough. After two orbits over the plantation complex north of the PZ to allow the Bandits and an air strike to work over the southwest forest area ground fire, the Thunderbirds landed in the PZ. Shortly after touchdown, a "Turkey-Shot" took place (the detonation of Claymore mines which "ruffled the feathers" of several of the Thunderbirds) before the troops trudged thru the swampy brush covered PZ to the awaiting aircraft. Upon returning to Dau Tieng, the T-Birds refueled and waited 30 minutes before the second extraction was cancelled sending the T-Birds on their way back to the Birdcage. The afternoon mission involved splitting the Blue and Red flights for separate combat assaults from Long Binh and Tan Tru respectively. Several lifts were accomplished by both flights without incident before the birds were turned loose to resupply at Bear Cat and Tan Tru. Later that afternoon the Redtails were dispatched to the PZ 5 miles south of Bear Cat on Hwy 15 to join the Hornets in a Battalion CA to an area southeast of Bear Cat. The Bluetails joined the Redtails after completing their resupply missions. Three lifts were made from the PZ with no ground fire reported in the LZ. The Thunderbirds returned to the Birdcage and home as darkness fell over Bien Hoa and the close of another day of assigned missions. Well done Birds!

On 13 August 1967, the Thunderbirds completed the final phase of their long anticipated move to the new Birdcage. Various other elements of the 118th had preceded the physical movement of the aircraft to the revetments in the helipad area. The operations officer and the complete maintenance facility had to complete the move the day prior to the actual event of moving the Birds. Ceremoniously, the Blue and Redbirds called Spartan Control for a final clearance "...for south departure from the old birdcage". The drizzling rain dampened the occasion even more as the Birds lifted for the last time from the Old Birdcage which had been the home of the Thunderbirds for the last three years prior to moving from Tan Son Nhut in the latter part of 1964. The Thunderbirds will be sharing the new heliport complex with the newly arrived 190th Avn Co. As for the old Birdcage, it will undergo a face lifting to serve a company of "Hoicks", CH-47 Chinooks who will remain there until their transfer to Chu Chi. Thus another page in the history of the Thunderbirds closed, opening a new page at the New Birdcage.

On the evening of the 17th of August 1967, an informal awards ceremony was conducted in the Thunderbird lounge. Only recently approved awards were presented to four departing Thunderbirds. The following awards were presented for actions and service during their tour of duty in Vietnam to LT Reed Kitzey went the Distinguished Flying Cross and Bronze Star, and Purple Heart. Lt Tom Payne received the Bronze Star and MO Metal Winner received the Silver Star. The ceremonies were concluded and a "Free Bar" was ordered by the departing, awarded Thunderbirds.

TRIBUTE FROM THE ARMY TIMES

On the following pages is a narrative copied from the Army Times. It describes a typical operation, a typical day, with the 118th Assault Helicopter Company.

A silence fell over the mission crews as the company commander entered. He walked directly to the front of the room and turned facing them. His face was hard as he spoke. "Mission commences at 0530 hours. The 118th Avn Co will conduct a heliborne assault as part of the 145th Avn Bn." He punctuated the statement with a finger on the large map to his rear. He then continued with, "The area is in Viet Cong territory. There are plenty of automatic weapons in the area, so listen closely to this briefing: Operations Officer." The major stepped aside and sat down as the operations officer, surrounded by maps, diagrams and charts, continued the briefing, concluding with instructions for escape and evasion.

The major again spoke as he rose from his chair. "This one can be a tough one if we don't think. Remember to call any fire you receive and mark it with smoke grenades. That's all."

The crews gathered in little knots for a few last-minute coordinating instructions, then went into the dark outside to board the awaiting transportation. The ride to the flight line was a bumpy one. Faces were lit occasionally by someone taking a deep drag on a cigarette. The truck halted by each helicopter and the crews jumped out. Low voices were heard up and down the darkened flight line and an occasional flashlight indicated a preflight inspection in progress. Crews donned flak vest, armor chest plates and made last minute checks of personal weapons, then took their places aboard the aircraft as the appointed time for starting approached.

Capt Gerald Cubine and Capt Johnny Phillips started the lead helicopters. Quiet was broken by the whine of a turbine engine winding up. It was joined almost immediately by several others. The whine soon built up to a crescendo beat of turning rotor blades and formation lights flickered on up and down the line. Grim faces appeared in the red glare of instrument lights. The uniform roar of engines and rotor blades was interrupted by the crackling of radios as communications checks were completed. "Thunderbird Lead, Alpha Two, Delta One, Delta Two, UHF check complete."

Two aircraft moved out in turn, lights making an enriched glow on the rotor blades as they hovered to the ramp and sat down in a column of Vs. Seconds later, the escort helicopters came along-side with rockets and machineguns hanging from them as if added to the fuselage as an afterthought. Commanded by Capt John C. Bahnson, the gunship platoon known as the Bandits is the most honored armed helicopter platoon in Vietnam. A voice breaks into individual thoughts, "Pull Pitch, 30 seconds." Gloved hands make last-minute adjustments and then 18 helicopters rise as one and climb into the early morning sky. The sun, not yet in sight, creates a red glow in the east.

With every passing moment the sky grows lighter as the sun climbs steadily over the dark rim of the horizon. Pilots concentrate on the myriad of dials and gauges in front of them. Except for the aircraft in the formation, their whole world is in the cockpit. Their only link with the outside is their headsets.

Crew chiefs and gunners also live in a different world. Theirs is a world of jungle passing beneath and probable hiding places for Viet Cong antiaircraft positions. Their eyes fixed on the jungle below, they search for telltale flashes and puffs of smoke.

The landing zone appears in the half light of the climbing sun. Lines of awaiting troops materialize as the helicopters near the tiny dirt airstrip. Upon landing the now unnecessary navigation lights go out and rotor blades slow to a standstill. Fuel trucks move down the lines of helicopters, filling half empty tanks and crews step away to light cigarettes. As the POL truck pulls away from the last helicopter, the crews board their aircraft.

Engines again whine, as tough little Vietnamese troops crowd aboard the aircraft, laden with weapons, ammunition and packs filled with rice. Black bottom little pots used for cooking hang from their packs as they jam themselves into cargo compartments. The helicopters appear to have arms and legs protruding from all openings as this mass of humanity within each helicopter searches in vain for comfortable positions. Again the radio crackles and aircraft lift off the runway. This time the next stop will be the Viet Cong infested jungle. There will be no friendly faces waiting there.

As the flight cruises over the jungle, the aircraft constantly adjust their positions in the formation. Mild turbulence marks the sky with small clouds and bouncing of the closely packed helicopters increases the tension of the crews. Earphones begin to feel like they are crushing ears and chin straps chafe throats. Although it is early morning, the day promises to be long and hot.

A column of smoke appears on the horizon. Tiny black specks move around white pillars, as Super Saber F-100 tactical fighters bomb and strafe the landing zone. The company commander was now talking to the Air Force fight leader on the radio. "Jungle Jim, this is Thunderbird Six. The troop carriers are at check point three. We're 10 minutes out." A "Roger" is received and the radios are again silent as the formation of helicopters approaches the landing zone.

Minutes later the landing zone comes into view. It is exactly as it appeared in the aerial photos taken by the OV-10 Mohawks the day before. Each detail appears the same. The voice on the radio breaks the silence as the CO calls the Air Force. The helicopters are only a few seconds out now. The Air Force lifts its tactical cover as the Bandits speed ahead of the formation into the landing zone. They form two chains, one on each side of the landing zone as the troop-laden transports approach their touchdown points.

The radio comes to life, "Bandit three one receiving automatic weapons fire 100 meters southwest of smoke." A column of white smoke drifts up through the trees from the smoke grenade thrown by the Bandit's alert gunners. The Bandit immediately behind the marking aircraft puts heavy machinegun fire into the area, then the air seems to roar as he fires rockets. The ground fire becomes intense as the troop carriers touch down.

The troops pour out, separating and firing toward the enemy position as they move. Crew chiefs and gunners fire from the now empty doors of the slick ships as the flight lifts off from the landing zone. The Bandits break off firing passes and pull in alongside the slick ships, firing into the jungle beneath as the flight climbs to altitude. The sounds of the fight taper off as the aircraft gain altitude. At this altitude, relatively few of the Viet Cong can hit them.

The flight moves back to the pickup point for its second load. Each crew begins preparing for the next lift as soon as the helicopters touch down. Quick checks for bullet holes, computation of fuel requirements, distribution of individual ammunition and a quick crew check by the pilot insure the readiness for the next lift.

As fuel trucks move down the line of helicopters, crews load machineguns, rockets and rifles. Preparations complete, the crews walk to their aircraft, put on flak vest, armor chest plates, untie rotor blades and stand by ready to start.

The crews had been instructed exactly where each aircraft will be in the loading zone, the formation, and in the landing zone. Each crewmember knows his job and repetition has made it habitually perfect. Upon landing, aircraft had been inspected for bullet holes and other damage. So far no hits.

The blades on the lead aircraft begin to turn. Soon the others are turning and the radio again come to life. The command comes, "Pull Pitch, 30 seconds."

The Bandits wait until the troop carriers are in the air, then take off and join the flight below and to the outside of the formation. The gunners of the Bandits sit poised in the doors, smoke grenades for marking enemy fire are in their hands and M-60 machineguns in their laps ready. The pilots can tell when a gunner speaks because the air from the open cargo door rushes around the gunner's microphone. The rushing noise comes through to the pilot now as gunner suddenly reports enemy fire. Quickly he pulls the pin of his smoke grenade and throws. Then his M-60 chatters and tracers find the target. The Bandit behind the ship that marked the fire engages the target as the formation passes over. Never does a Bandit break from the formation. Suppressive fire is put on the area as each ship passes over.

The landing zone appears and the troop carriers start their approach through the turbulent air created by the preceding aircraft. The lead Bandits move ahead into the landing zone. This time they will not fire unless fired upon. The first load of troops is still on the edge of the landing zone fighting hard.

As the armed helicopters pass the end of the landing zone they turn 180 degrees away reconnoitering parallel to the direction of landing, but in the opposite direction. When they reach the approach end, they will turn again to fly alongside the slick ships preparing to lift off from the landing zone.

Bahnsen is the second Bandit in the daisy chain on left turns. A crack is heard then several more are heard. The pop of a smoke grenade fuse is heard and again the M-60 chatters. The gunner reports fire in the tallest patch of trees west of the smoke, about 50 meters. The pilot relays the report and the next ship in the daisy chain puts fire on the target. Machine guns search out the area. No movement is seen. Fire is only heard and not seen. The area is engaged and the invisible enemy in the jungle below is neutralized. Whether he was alone or one of several, whether he ran or was killed or wounded, will probably never be known unless the ground troops find him and report it.

By this time the last slick is off and the Bandits disengage and join up. This is the last lift; they are through for the day. The flight home is a long one. Everyone is tired. The mission involved the tension of being subjected to enemy fire and of flying as aircraft heavily loaded, in a high density altitude into tight jungle clearings, oiling with rotor wash is overwhelming. Soon the home field comes into sight. The formation suddenly tightens up and looks neat, without a word. After landing, filling out necessary reports, checking aircraft for damage and other incidentals, including the debriefing, it was a good morning.

The big payoff is knowing that the mission has been accomplished and knowing that the 118th Avn Co of the 145th Avn Bn has satisfied its customers.

LETTERS OF APPRECIATION

During the year of 1967, the 118th Assault Helicopter Company received many letters from commanders and individuals who were much impressed by the outstanding support they received from the "Thunderbirds". Some of the most illustrative excerpts are included in the following pages.

AVGC (25 Sep 67)

SUBJECT: Letter of Commendation

HQ, 12TH COMBAT AVIATION GROUP, APO 96266, 4 October 1967

THRU: Commanding Officer, 145th Combat Aviation Battalion, APO 96227

TO: Commanding Officer, 118th Assault Helicopter Company, APO 96227

1. It gives me great pleasure to note and forward the high praise of Lieutenant Colonel Schrader in recognition of the outstanding support rendered by your unit to the 4/12th Infantry on 22 September 1967.

2. The professional skill displayed and the outstanding support established with the supported unit are goals for which we in Army Aviation must strive daily.

3. Please extend to all who participated my personal appreciation and congratulations for this praiseworthy achievement.

NICHOLAS G. PSAKI
Colonel, Infantry
Commanding

AVGC-C (25 Sep 67)

SUBJECT: Letter of Commendation

DA, HEADQUARTERS, 115TH COMBAT AVIATION BATTALION, APO 96227, 6 Oct 67

TO: Commanding Officer, 118th Assault Helicopter Company, APO 96227

1. The constant professionalism displayed by all of the men of the 118th Assault Helicopter Company has shown up in the many successful engagements against the common enemy while in support of American Forces.

2. Please extend my personal praise and appreciation along with the comments of Colonel Psaki and Lieutenant Colonel Schroeder to the men of your command for their fine judgement and aerial skill on this operation.

JOHN A. TODD
LTC, Infantry
Commanding

DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
HEADQUARTERS 4TH BATTALION 12TH INFANTRY
199TH INFANTRY BRIGADE (SEP)(LIGHT)
APO San Francisco 96227

AVBH-DOT

25 September 1967

SUBJECT: Letter of Commendation

THRU: Commanding Officer
145th Aviation Battalion
APO 96227

TO: Commanding Officer
118th Airmobile Company
APO 96227

1. The purpose of this letter is to express my appreciation for the outstanding manner in which your pilots and crew members and especially the command and control pilots, Major Guidroz and Major Bilbrey performed their duties in support of the "Warriors" and "Rangers" during an operation in the Hoc Mon area on 22 September 1967.
2. The fine spirit of cooperation and flying skill displayed by your pilots contributed to the successful accomplishment of the mission. Particularly noteworthy was the professional manner in which your personnel worked with the troops on the ground. Enemy contact was present going into the landing zone and contact was heavy lifting out of the pickup zone. On both occasions your pilots and crewmen operated in a cool professional manner in supporting our operation. Major Guidroz and Major Bilbrey commanded the flight in a well organized manner and made timely decisions when they had to be made.
3. Thanks again for a job well done. I wish you and your company all the success in future operations and look forward to the time when we might have the opportunity to call on the "Thunderbirds" again, against the common enemy.

WILLIAM S. SCHROEDER
LTC, INF
Commanding

AWARDS AND DECORATIONS

During the year of 1967 the following individuals were decorated for their meritorious and heroic acts while serving with the 118th Assault Helicopter Company.

Warrant Officer Noel Winnor
Aircraft Commander Silver Star

Major Robert Ulzheimer
Aircraft Commander Silver Star

SP4 Michael Pappa
Gunner Silver Star

Major James Jay
Aircraft Commander Silver Star

1LT Charles Jackson
Aircraft Commander Silver Star

SP4 Bobby Cuttino
Gunner Silver Star

Warrant Officer Lonnie Schmidt
Aircraft Commander Silver Star

Warrant Officer Daniel Heart
Aircraft Commander Silver Star

Warrant Officer Michael Burke
Pilot Distinguished Flying Cross

SP4 Ray A. Schold
Crew Chief Distinguished Flying Cross

SGT Francisco Delacruz
Gunner Distinguished Flying Cross

Major Robert A Langworthy
Aircraft Commander Distinguished Flying Cross

Warrant Officer Noel Winner
Aircraft Commander Distinguished Flying Cross

Major Robert Ulzheimer
Aircraft Commander Distinguished Flying Cross

Major Charles Utzman
Aircraft Commander Distinguished Flying Cross

1LT Paul Stimpson
Aircraft Commander Distinguished Flying Cross

Warrant Officer Sidney Schmidt
Aircraft Commander Distinguished Flying Cross

Captain Edgar Saffle
Aircraft Commander Distinguished Flying Cross

Warrant Officer George Rhoades
Aircraft Commander Distinguished Flying Cross

Captain Bobby Moore
Aircraft Commander Distinguished Flying Cross

Major Robert Michel
Aircraft Commander Distinguished Flying Cross

Warrant Officer Rickey Mattern
Aircraft Commander Distinguished Flying Cross

SP5 Ken Jokercst
Crew Chief Distinguished Flying Cross

SP4 William Jacobs
Crew Chief Distinguished Flying Cross

SP4 Ray Schold
Crew Chief Distinguished Flying Cross

Warrant Officer Carl Garret
Aircraft Commander Distinguished Flying Cross

Captain James Williams
Aircraft Commander Bronze Star

Captain Jeffery Thomason
Aircraft Commander Bronze Star

1LT Paul Stimpson
Aircraft Commander Bronze Star

PFC Morris Bridwell
Gunner Bronze Star with V device

SP4 James Adams
Gunner Army Commendation Medal=Killed in Action

Corporal Roosevelt Amison
Gunner Army Commendation Medal=Killed in Action

SP4 Raymond Ernst
Gunner Army Commendation Medal

SP4 James Harden
Gunner Air Medal=Killed in Action

SP4 Woodrow Mueller
Gunner Army Commendation Medal=Killed in Action

Major Donald P. Wray
Detachment Commander Legion of Merit

Major William L. Bradner
Commanding Officer Legion of Merit

MAINTENANCE RECORD
November 1966 August 1967

Number of aircraft receiving crash or incident damage - 27

Number of aircraft requiring maintenance recovery - 10

Number returned to service after repair by maintenance - 10

Number of aircraft receiving combat damage - 51

Number requiring recovery - 14

Number returned to service after repair by maintenance - 48

The historical account of the "Thunderbirds" set forth in these past pages relates the continued and increasing contribution of the 118th Assault Helicopter Company to the overall mission of the 145th Combat Aviation Battalion. Constant praise was the common factor which marked the activities of the "Thunderbirds" in 1967. Numerous letters of appreciation from grateful ground commanders cite the courage and dedication of the men of the 118th.

Throughout 1967, the "Thunderbirds" demonstrate many times a high quality of professional training and enthusiasm toward the completion of their mission. As evidenced by the wide variety of difficult requirements and missions assigned, the 118th have covered every aspect of logistical and combat support. In all instances, the success of the mission was a result of the "Thunderbirds" giving untiringly of their efforts toward the ultimate goal. The price was high for those departed Thunderbirds who unselfishly gave their lives in the performance of their duty. Though the missions were often demanding, the 118th was always prepared with "Can Do" spirit engrained in each and every member of the Company.