



“Flying Dragons” Light Charlie’s Fire

52nd Combat Aviation Battalion

Mountainous areas have always been a refuge for outlaws and guerrilla bands. The Central Highlands of South Vietnam provide a splendid stronghold for the desperate men who are menacing that nation's government. Mountain peaks which stretch 7,000 feet into the clouds, triple canopy jungle, natural caves, and over all, as rugged a terrain as anyone would find on this globe, abound in the Central Highlands.

If the conditions are excellent for secreting the movements and hiding places of small groups of men, they are terrible for men who fly in search of these desperados.

Such is the task of the 52nd Combat Aviation Battalion headquartered at Camp Holloway, near Pleiku.

“The adverse conditions that we fly in include jutting mountain peaks, deeply gorged valleys, ground fog, morning fog, evening fog, and 200 foot tall trees. There is a lack of horizontal LZ’s, as well as a lack of emergency landing areas. During the respective seasons there are sudden monsoon storms, marginal flying conditions, or vision defying dust bowls. These are more difficult to contend with for the helicopter pilot than the Viet Cong or the NVA,” says LTC

Patrick O’Grady, Commanding Officer of the 52nd.

The “Flying Dragon” is one of the largest assault helicopter battalions in the Republic of Vietnam.

The 189th Assault Helicopter Company, commanded by MAJ John P. Ratliff, the 170th Assault Helicopter Company, commanded by MAJ Douglas H. Snell, the 361st Aerial Weapons Company, commanded by MAJ John L. Deryck, and the 179th Assault Support Helicopter Company, commanded by MAJ John E. Pirkle are all located at Camp Holloway. The 57th Assault Helicopter Company is based at



Plans for the day's operations are discussed by CIDG camp commander and "Ghost Rider" pilot. (Courtesy Jimmy Hattie)

Kontum and commanded by MAJ John D. Charles. The 119th Assault Helicopter Company has recently made the move from Pleiku to An Khe under the command of MAJ John P. Fernald.

The 52nd's mission is to provide airlift support throughout the Central Highlands with priority given to the 4th Infantry Division. Their policy is "to get the job done."

The "Flying Dragons" are spread from Kontum to the north, to Ban Me Thuot in the south (some of their assault helicopter companies have a portion of their

gunships based at Ban Me Thuot). On any given day a ship from any of the 52nd's companies might find itself flying anywhere in II Corps. As the need arises, the different companies are assigned their missions.

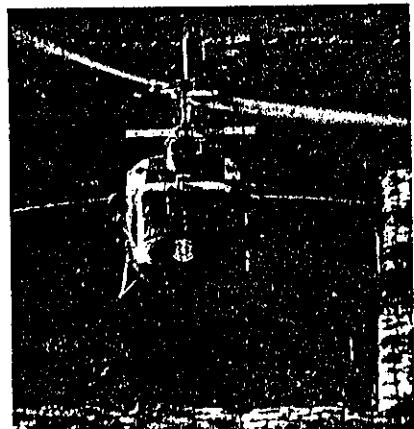
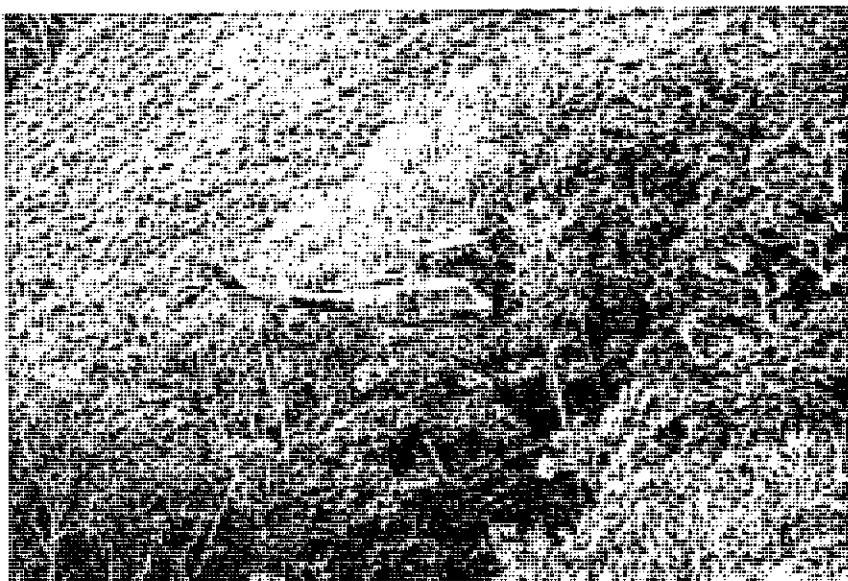
Recently two Bird Dog airplanes providing reconnaissance for the "Famous" 4th Infantry went down somewhere in the northwestern section of II Corps. The main portion of the search went to the 189th "Ghost Riders," but the 361st "Pink Panthers" supplied some Cobras for cover and the 119th "Alligators" provided a few ships for search craft.

If the operation calls for it, it is not unusual to see ships from several different "Flying Dragon" companies "marry up" and work together on a mission.

The 52nd pulls every kind of a mission from combat assaults, to resupplying fire bases, to inserting long range patrol (LRP) teams, "snoopy" flights, "scorpion" flights, medevac, providing cover for convoys; the list is never ending and ever varied.

Inserting LRP teams in II Corps is a challenge to any helicopter pilot's skill and courage. There are very few good landing zones in the up and down terrain of the Central Highlands. Most

Flying into a rough LZ a 119th "Alligator" slick prepares to extract a LRP team.

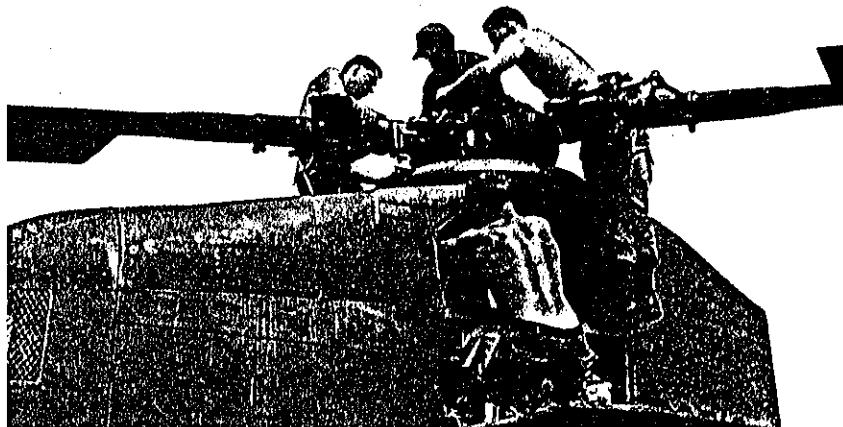


A "Ghost Rider" slick is eased into its revetment wrapping up another day.

often "hover holes" must be cut into the thick jungle-like forests to enable the ships to get close enough to the ground for the LRP team to jump out. Pathfinders or another LRP team might walk in with axes and cut a hole in the trees big enough to accommodate a chopper. Sometimes the Air Force is called in to drop their 10,000 pound "Daisy Cutter" bombs to blast a hover hole. Either way, there is inevitably a mere few feet of clearance for the slick's rotor blades as the pilot gingerly lowers it toward the ground. Often, due to the stumps left from the cutting or explosion, a log platform must be constructed on which the helicopter can land so that its underside is not punctured. This provides, at best, a rocky resting place for the chopper's skids.

Contending with all these obstacles should create ulcers enough, but when Charlie arrives and begins to throw lead, it can make an old man out of a young pilot in a very few minutes. And yet this type of flying is only to be expected of the men who fly the Gladiator, Ghost Rider, Bikini or Alligator slicks of the 52nd.

The "Flying Dragon" gunships work very closely with the different units of the "Famous" 4th. The Avengers, Pink Panthers, Crocodiles, Buccaneers, and the Cougars all are masters of close aerial support for the infantry.



A team of "Shrimp Boat" mechanics removes the rotor blades from their CH-47 Chinook.

"They would rather have us out there supporting them than the artillery," says CW2 Dennis L. Santos, a 119th Crocodile pilot. "We not only have voice to voice contact with them, but frequently eye to eye contact as well. Even in the jungle when we can't see exactly where they are, all they have to do is set off a smoke grenade and inform us as to the distance and direction the enemy is positioned in relation to the smoke."

Close aerial support is the word with the 52nd. They believe that right down near the enemy is the best place not only to do a job on Charlie but, in most instances, a safer position from which to fight. Even the 361st Pink Panthers, the only entirely Cobra outfit in II Corps, believe in the low level style of attack. Their craft supposedly is designed for firing from 1000 feet or higher.

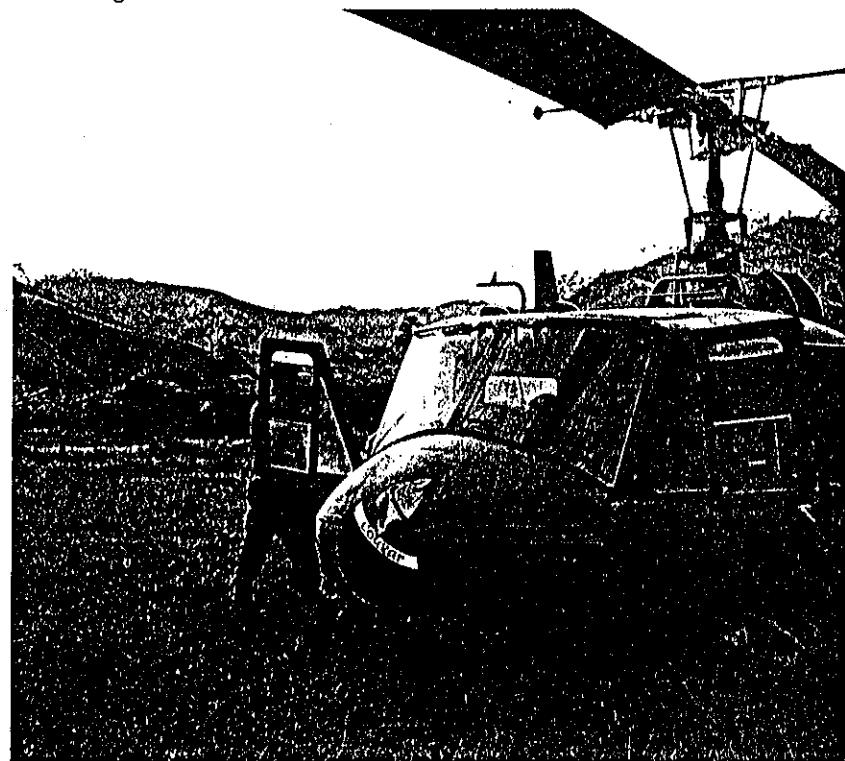
"If you are low level and coming right at the enemy, they don't have much of a chance to get fire on you. During the siege of Ben Het only ten of the Panther aircraft received hits and we were using low level exclusively," said CPT Teddy Hampton, a 361st pilot.

The theory must have some validity, for in one day during the Ben Het siege, four Panther Cobras were given credit for 175 enemy killed.

The 52nd is also given the task

of resupply to any unit in II Corps that cannot be supplied by ground transportation or that is in need of the materiel at short notice. The slicks of the battalion do a portion of the supply missions to the outlying fire bases, but the brunt of the resupply work falls to the 179th "Shrimp Boats."

A "Cougar" gunship awaits orders on the day's mission at a remote fire base in the Central Highlands.



Like most Chinook companies in Vietnam the 179th will, and does, haul anything in their ships. "If you can rig it into a 7,000 pound load, we'll carry it either inside the ship or slung under it," noted one of the Shrimp Boat pilots.

Unlike most Chinook companies in Vietnam, the 179th often supplies locations over a mile high. This attitude restricts their load capacity to 7000 pounds. They have an answer for this restriction, however. Gradually they are replacing their present ships with new "Full C" model Chinooks which have new, improved and larger engines. At the altitudes the Shrimp Boats operate, the new craft is able to carry loads up to 10,000 pounds.

The 52nd Combat Aviation Battalion is a big organization that covers an enormous amount of the most formidable territory in Vietnam. If there is a job to do they are the ones who will get it done.