

HISTORY OF THE
118TH AVIATION COMPANY (AIR MED LT)

145TH AVIATION BATTALION
JUNE 1963 - DECEMBER 1964

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I. June 63 - December 63

The 118th Aviation Company (Air Mob Lt) was activated on 25 June 1963 by General Order 236, Headquarters, United States Army, Pacific. It was to be one of two helicopter companies assigned to the 145th Aviation Battalion. The company was formed under TOC 1-772 and included 61 officers, 220 men, 3 TH-1D Bird Dogs and 21 of the OH-21 Shawnee helicopters, in addition the 93rd Medical Detachment and the 573rd Transportation Detachment were assigned to support the 118th Avn Co.

The 118th was organized and equipped at Bien Hoa Airfield, Vietnam, following the deactivation of the 33rd Transportation Company (Light Helicopter). Major Joseph A Henderson commanded the unit until 15 July when Major David B Hayes assumed command.

The mission assigned to the 118th Avn Co (Air Mob Lt) was to expedite combat operations while providing direct tactical and administrative air mobility support to combat units.

The 118th adapted quickly and guided by the experienced aviators of the 33rd the company attained a high degree of combat proficiency in its first month. The company participated in combat assaults and large scale eagle flights as well as performing daily missions of resupply, command liaison, medical evacuation,

and reconnaissance. Elements were sent north to the mountains of Ban Me Thout and Nha Trang to support the Vietnamese 23rd Division. They gained the valuable experience in mountain operations.

On the morning of 30 August 1963, the company was part of a combat assault operation at Tay Ninh, T210520, one hour northwest of Saigon. Enroute to Tay Ninh, the lead helicopter of a flight of five was shot down killing the pilot, Captain James Menzel, and the co-pilot 1/Lt Tim Lang. The gunner and crew chief were injured. The remaining ships landed in a hail of fire to aid the survivors.

While some returned fire others ran to the wrecked ship and extracted the crew. They were subjected to intense small arms fire, and one of the rescuers was wounded. The gunners in the aircraft continued to fire at the Viet Cong, and when one of the gunners was down to one box of ammunition, he was shot through the leg. He continued to fire until he expended the ammunition, then he drew his pistol and shot one of the Viet Cong from the landing gear. After he emptied his pistol he used the personal weapons of the pilot and co-pilot and continued to fire. Later reports confirmed that there were over sixty Viet Cong involved in the fire fight against 21 Americans. After the rescue was completed the flight continued on to Tay Ninh to participate in the combat assault. During the operation two men were killed, 5 wounded in action, one helicopter destroyed, and 13 CH-21s were hit by ground fire.

On 13 Sep 1963, the company received the first UH-1B and in three days all twenty five were delivered. The company divided into three groups, one transition training into the UH-1, and the other

group continued operational missions.

The last CH-21 mission was a combat assault mission staged out of Phan Thiet, AMG32100, on the coast east of Bien Hoa on the 9th day of October. It was a success and the CH-21s were processed for turn in after returning to Bien Hoa.

With the transition of UH-1B helicopters, the company changed to 25 total helicopters, in three flight platoons of eight UH-1s each, and one UH-1 assigned to company Headquarters. First and second platoons were "Slick" or airlift platoons, and the third platoon was the gun platoon with 4 M-60 machine guns and 12 rockets on each helicopter.

The company adapted the UH-1 to operations and the third platoon "Bandits" became active in combat, killing over 150 Viet Cong in November. The pace of operations brought at least one combat assault each week, and an eagle flight each Sunday. The 11th became eagle flight specialists.

The eagle flight is a type of air mobile combat patrol. One aircraft, the command and control aircraft, would search an area of Viet Cong activity and select a probable target. The troop ships, escorted by the Bandits, would land the troops by the objective and depart. The troops would attack hard and fast and then call for the troop ships to return and pick up the prisoners and troops. The process would be repeated throughout an area and prisoners delivered to the Headquarters for processing.

During December the company continued combat assaults and eagle flights along with other operational missions. On one assault at Bo Tuc, north of Tay Ninh, six Bandit aircraft were hit and three crew

members wounded. Later in the month the company was supporting the 7th Division (Vietnamese) in the Mekong Delta. On the 28th of December, 2/Lt Lynn Rothenbuhler of the Bandits was shot through the head and killed as he was escorting a helicopter out of No Way.

In its first six months of existence the 118th Avn Co flew 6,893.2 hours, 13,000 sorties, carried 4,500 troops, participated in 30 major operations, had 51 aircraft hit, twelve men wounded, and three killed.

II. January 64 to December 64

The 118th started 1964 with a good reputation and a lot of pride in the unit. Combat assaults and airmobile flights continued to be normal operations. During the week of 9 February in action as part of a combat assault a fire team from the Bandits destroyed a fortified machine gun emplacement. The 118th had three aircraft hit and one aviator wounded during the operation.

On 10 March the 118th conducted an assault to recover the remains of an Air Force Colonel from a crashed AD-6. The landing zone was near Dau Tieng, XT430565. Elements of the 5th Airborne Battalion were staged at Tan Son Nhut, Saigon. Twelve troop ships and 6 armed escorts conducted the lift. The lift force had to wait 40 minutes for the Air Force to conduct the pre-strike and landed at 0630. The troops were extracted later the same morning and returned to Saigon. The mission was a success.

Additional combat assaults were conducted at Ban Thiet and 11 March and 16 March. The only loss occurred when a C-47 from the Vietnamese Air Force taxied into the tail boom of a UH-1.

The normal operational missions continued between combat assaults and the 118th was given the additional mission of training aviators of the 120th Aviation Company in UH-1B helicopters. 120th Aviators were assigned to the 118th for a two week period to accomplish the basic transition and to fly an operational missions and assaults.

The spirit and pride continued to grow, and on 17 March the 118th compound was named Camp Thunderbird after the ensignia of the company.

During the first three months of 1964 the 118th Avn Co flew 5114 hours, 14,015 sorties, carried 10,563 troops, had 13 aircraft hit, and 4 wounded in action, and conducted 9 combat assaults and one eagle flight.

The number of missions increased during April, but the number of assaults decreased. The company flew 1501.3 hours, 4112 sorties, carried 4605 troops, had 46 hits, two wounded in action, and conducted two assaults. Both assaults were unusual.

On 12 April the 118th Avn Co was given the mission of airlifting 432 troops of the IV Corps into blocking positions in ^{conjunction} ~~conduction~~ with an airborne assault. The unit took 11 troop ships and 6 armed escorts. The 118th combined with 9 CH-21s of the 120th, 2 CH-21s from the 121st, 2 VNAF CH-34s and 1 UH-1B from the 57th Medical Detachment. The ships landed at Can Tho at 0600. The first lift was off at 1015 for the LZ north of Canau, WR315515. The force received scattered ^{fire} ~~fire~~ enroute but discharged the troops in the LZ without incident. The second lift was into an LZ 500m south of the first LZ. And the force met increased fire, but no hits were taken by the 118th. The flight went to

Canau, refueled and took off for a new LZ at WR185527. The aircraft received fire, but took no hits. The next lift took off for a new LZ at 1500 hours. It was an LZ 400 yds from the previous LZ. Heavy fire was received on short final. Several aircraft were hit and as the flight departed the area two VNAF A1H's attacked the Woodline south of the LZ. The flight refueled and took off at 1650 hrs for an LZ 400 Meters south east of the previous LZ. Again heavy fire was received and aircraft hit. After departing the LZ the flight went to WR255519 to evacuate 40 casualties to Can Tho. After landing at Can Tho the two aircraft that were damaged were left. The flight departed for WS850480 to evacuate 15 casualties to Siagon. At the area the fire was too heavy to land until it had been suppressed. After the flight landed the Viet Cong attacked with causing the flight to depart. Heavy fire was received as the flight departed and aircraft were hit. The flight discharged the casualties at Siagon and returned to Bien Hoa at 2030 hours. A total of 10 of the 118th helicopters were hit.

On the 26th of April 1964, the 118th was assigned a mission to move north to Second Corps area for a five day operation in the mountains near Gia Long, PS0656680. The company took 10 troop carriers and 5 armed helicopters to work with the 117th and 119th Avn Cos, the 11 Marine Helicopter Squadron and 29 AD-63 from the Vietnamese Air force. The force conducted assaults into three difficult landing zones. Each was a small opening in a valley surrounded by high, tree covered, mountains that were infested with Viet Cong troops and 30 cal and 50 cal automatic weapons positions. The 118th conducted twelve lifts and received fire on every lift. Two troop carriers were hit, and

the troops on board another were killed. The Bandits efforts at suppressing the fire resulted in the destruction of one 50 cal machine gun position. The other Aviation units lost a total of seven helicopters on the operation, but the 113th even though operating in unfamiliar and mountainous terrain did not suffer any losses. The 113th flew 331.5 hours with 375 sorties, lifting 585 troops on the operation.

On 13 May Major David B Hayes departed and Major L Vincent McNeese assumed command.

During May the 113th flew 1584.3 hours, with 3,940 sorties, carrying 2690 troops, 14 tons of cargo, had 8 aircraft hit, 4 men wounded in action. The company conducted one combat assault near Blao (Bao Loc) that was a complete success with no hits or injuries.

In June the total missions and flying time increased and the company flew 2,043 hours, 4,207 sorties, carrying 4,011 troops with 5 aircraft hit. The company had two men wounded and participated in four combat assaults. One operation was well north of Qui Nhon on the 16th, one was at Tay Ninh and two were near Duc Hoa.

The aviators were wounded near Soui Da XT330570 when a ship from the 113th was carrying the Special Forces Commander, Lt Col Call, in search of the graves of Special Forces Captain Ledbetter and others who had been ambushed and massacred by the Viet Cong. As the helicopter touched down next to what looked to be a fresh grave, the Viet Cong opened fire at them from thirty meters away. The pilot, co-pilot, and gunner hit the ground and would not get back into the helicopter. The helicopter sustained several

received a round in the arm and the pilot flew out of the area and called the nearby Bandit fire team to cover the troops on the ground until the friendly ground forces could relieve them. The friendly troops arrived in five minutes and secured the area. The Bandits recovered the crew and passengers and took them back to Soui Da. The battle continued throughout the afternoon and the Viet Cong encountered considerable losses.

During June and July the officers strength had dropped to a critical level, and the 118th continued to fly more hours with fewer pilots available. In June and July the company had 40 officers. M-1 Patton flew 137.2 hours for the 118th combat support hours in July. In July the 118th flew 2032 hours with 1,155 sorties, carrying 5,920 troops. There were two wounded in action, 10 aircraft hit, and four unit size operations.

The combat assaults were at Duc Hoa, X0595965, Phuoc Vinh, X0900400 Rach Gia, X0110090, and Tu Duc, X1905000. The Rach Gia operation included over 80 M-1s from five aviation companies. The 118th recognized for its outstanding professionalism.

On 25 July the 118th took part in a reaction force plan. The troop ships staged from Tu Duc at 2000 hrs and left for Co Da Ha, X1390260. Before the flight passed Thu Da Mot the weather had dropped to an eight hundred foot ceiling and rain. The flight entered the clouds and the combination of night and instrument conditions caused an extremely dangerous situation. Fortunately, no incidents or injuries were sustained and the flight reformed and went to Bien Hoa until the weather improved. Later, the troops were taken back to Co Da Ha, Tay Ninh, Soui Da, and then back to Thu Duc.

In August the company gained in strength but remained short with only 53 officers and 167 enlisted men. The company flew 1712 hours, with only 53 officers, with 4,453 sorties, carrying 4,007 troops. There were four aircraft hit and two company size operations. Three men were wounded and one man was killed.

After the Tonkin Bay incident, the 118th gained an additional mission of providing a light fire team and one troop ship as part of the tactical security of Bien Hoa Air Field. The crews would remain on five minute alert all night.

On 12 August the 118th led the 103 helicopter assault that staged from Tan Son Nhut and landed northwest of Ben Cat. The weather caused delays, but the operation finished with shouting success and the 118th sustained no hits or injuries. On 14 Aug, during an approach to the top of Tay Ninh mountain, helicopter 62-2051 crashed and killed Sp4 James E. Caughey, who was the crew chief.

Many new aviators and men joined the company in September and they were trained and operational in a very short time. In September the 118th flew 1,652 hours, with 4,391 sorties, carrying 3,339 troops. The aviator with the highest flight time flew 124 combat support hours. There were 3 aircraft hit, 2 men wounded in action and one killed in action. There were two combat assaults and one special operation.

The platoon Sergeant of the First platoon (Scorpions) was killed while serving as a crew chief on an approach into Don Thuan, of Tay Ninh province. Later a coordinated attack that included the 118th destroyed many Viet Cong in the area.

On 23 September the 145th Avn Bn was called upon to send a force to the Nha Trang Special Forces Headquarters, to take part in a special operation. Captain Islin, First Platoon Commander, was selected as mission commander for the battalion.

Eight troop ships from the 118th were selected to compose the Battalion Force.

The situation was that rebellious Montagnards who were in camps with American Advisors were holding the American advisors hostage so the Vietnamese Air Force would not bomb the camps. The mission of the 118th, as part of the Battalion Force (145th Bn) was to go to Bon Mi Ca, on order to extract personnel held as hostage. The situation was critical because the Montagnards at Bon Mi Ca, numbered 350 and were well trained and well equipped. Also the Montagnards at Bon Mi Ca had killed 17 Vietnamese troops during the rebellion and they refused to surrender the Americans for fear of reprisal. Luckily, after conferences and bargaining, the rebellious tribes quelled and no fighting was encountered. The 118th flew more missions than any other unit, and it was continually praised on the precision formation flying and professional operations. The entire operation was a success.

In October the 118th underwent more changes. The 73rd Avn Det was added to the 118th Avn Co. The company commander, two platoon commanders, and operations officer were all changed in October. The new 198th Sig Det was also added to the 118th and was mission ready on 22 October.

The company flew 1,984 helicopter hours, 908 fixed wing hrs, with 4,451 sorties, 5,705 troops carried, 349,900 passenger miles flown. The highest flight hours for an aviator were 111.9, 8 aircraft were hit, two were lost, 5 men were wounded, and four men were killed in action.

The platoon commander of the third platoon, Captain Gary Higgins, his co-pilot W-1 Havemann, crew chief Sp4 LaFleche, and gunner, Pfc Baine were shot down and killed immediately in action near Duc Hoa while supporting a Vietnamese operation on 7 Oct 64. The crew were engaging the Viet Cong when there was a flash at the lower rear of the helicopter. It pitched on fire and dove into the ground with an extremely high impact. Air strikes were called in and many Viet Cong were killed.

On 22 Oct Major L Vincent McNeese departed and Major Harvey S Stewart assumed command.

UH-1B 62-2041 one of the first platoon (Scorpions) had set the record of flying over 1,000 hours in less than one year, and it was expected to be the first UH-1 to fly 1200 hours on the original engine. Unfortunately, when it was only a few hours away from the record the tail rotor blade fell off in flight and the 90 degree gear box tore out. The aircraft was a total loss.

In November the company flew 3,5554 hours, 35,190 passengers miles and 5,982 sorties. Eight aircraft were hit, one helicopter was shot down and one TO-10 was lost in action. The high aviator flight time was 116.6 combat support hours. The company participated in many operations. There were 4 men killed in action and

Shortly after minnigh on 1 November the Viet Cong staged a mortar attack on Bien Hoa Air Base. Four men were killed and 62 were wounded in the enlisted compound. The Viet Cong fired an estimated 30 rounds of 81mm mortar at the 118th area. Five billets were destroyed and an additional thirteen buildings were damaged. The men reacted with courage and determination. Rebuilding was started immediately and the members of the 118th worked under great strain and in unison to restore facilities.

During the attack on Bien Hoa a Vietnamese Al-1 tried to take off on runway 15 but crashed about 100 meters off of the end of the runway. 1/Lt John Dailey and C.O. [redacted] were in a TH-1B and picked up the pilot. The crashed plane exploded minutes later. For their gallantry 1/Lt John Dailey and C.O. [redacted] were awarded the Vietnamese Flying Cross with Star. They were the first Army aviators to win this award.

On 6 November 1/Lt D Dawson was lost in action in a TO-1B. An extensive search failed to find any trace of the aircraft.

Numerous dignitaries visited the 118th during the month including Ambassador Taylor, General Westmoreland, Major General Oden, and Lt General Ben Harrell.

On 12 November the 118th led the 117th helicopter operation called "Brushfire" that was directed by General Kahn. The operation lasted for four days and included numerous assaults. The company had 3 aircraft hit but none shot down.

During December the 118th flew 4,292 hours (2,605 helicopters) with 1,067,705 passenger miles, and 1,937 sorties. 1 helicopter and 2 fixed wing hit. Two pilots were killed.

The company participated in thirteen major operations and numerous single flights. On 23 December the company led an assault near Tan Uyen in the morning. That evening a flight was assigned the task of extracting some of the troops. The Viet Cong pressed the extraction and several aircraft were hit. The extraction lasted into darkness and the aviators returned to Bien Hoa with 7½ hours of flying, under fire most of the time.

On 24 December the 118th practiced CBR training, wearing gas masks during a practice assault. At the same time, a fire team of the Pandits was on airfield security for the Bob Hope show that was presented at the Bien Hoa airfield.

On 25 December the 118th was part of a special Battalion operation in an assault south of Tay Ninh. No aircraft were hit and no injuries were sustained.

On 26 December the 118th led the first of a series of combat assaults in the Binh Gia area. The assault staged out of Phu My and lifted troops of the 36th Rangers. No aircraft losses were taken. On 27 Dec the 118th led two lifts to the south of the town of Binh Gia.

One helicopter was shot during the morning operation and was forced to land. Another helicopter was hit during the afternoon assault and was forced to land at Binh Da plantation. The Viet Cong in the plantation

Vietnamese Air Force. All aircraft and crews were recovered without loss or injury. One 118th crew evacuated the crew from a 68th Avn Co helicopter that was shot down in flames by BinhBa. On 30 Dec. the 118th led 3 more lifts into the Ginh Gia area to land the 4th Marine Battalion. The Binh Gia operation was the largest of the war to this date. The Viet Cong encountered were over one regiment of hard core professional soldiers with modern equipment and 50 cal machine guns.

The 118th sponsored the arrival of the A/501st Avn Co. On 13 December many experienced pilots from the 118th were transferred to the 501st to help them become operational in the shortest possible time.

During December stress was placed on night training and the company completed the night training program. The instrument program continued with added stress.

The Thunderbird compound was renamed the James E Bailey Compound in honor of the first platoon sergeant who was killed in action in September 1964. The Day Room was dedicated to E-4 Dubar who was killed in the mortar attack on one November.

During 1964 the 118th "Thunderbirds" took great pride in their organization, and the 118th Avn Co continued to be the most outstanding aviation company in Vietnam, setting new records almost every month. The company flew a total of 23,909.9 hours, 50,345 sorties, carrying 53,978 troops. The company had 55 aircraft hit and suffered 82 wounded and 10 killed in action during the year.