

Aero Scout...

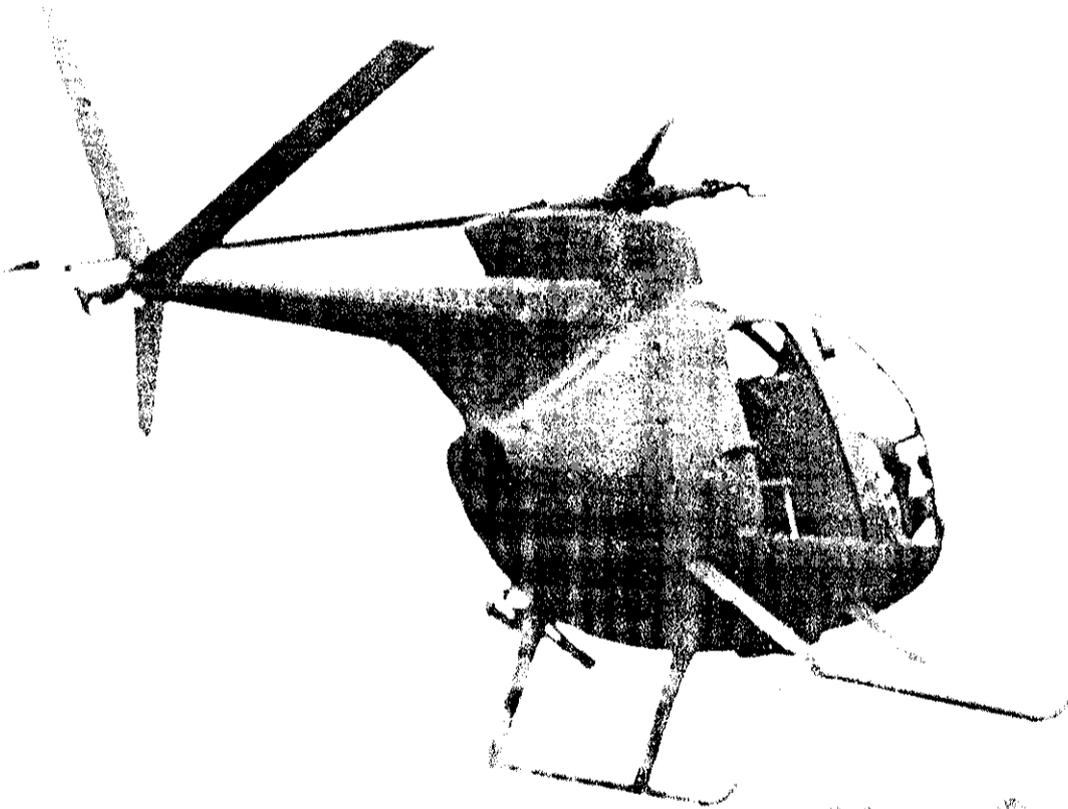
... what's it all about?

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THE BIRTH of the aero scout was inevitable. In the early 1960's United States commanders in the Republic of Vietnam were faced with an enemy whose hit and run tactics made him extremely difficult to locate. The mountainous terrain and

thick jungle provided vast sanctuaries where the Viet Cong could hide and mobilize. The allied foot soldier could spend days participating in giant search and clear operations only to catch but a brief glimpse of the VC disappearing into the jungle.

U. S. commanders had superior firepower but lacked the necessary mobility and information-gathering capabilities to effectively engage the enemy. However, the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) introduced its "aero concept" in Vietnam in Septem-



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ber 1965 and furnished the air-mobility and much of the battlefield intelligence that had been lacking.

A typical cav mission includes an OH-6A observation helicopter and AH-1G HueyCobra gunships. The scout pilot pokes around at low level for signs of the VC. Trouble might come in the form of automatic weapons fire from a battalion or a staccato burst from a single AK-47. When contact is made, the scout marks the target with colored smoke and quickly pulls out of range while the Cobras move in to attack. If the area looks promising, the aero rifle platoon of the air cavalry troop is inserted to investigate while the scouts screen escape routes and the Cobras supply fire support. If conditions warrant further support, several battalions could join the battle within minutes.

These hold tactics proved to be a master stroke in counterinsurgency warfare. Commanders quickly learned that the air cavalry squadron could find and fix the enemy and that airmobile infantry—supported by artillery and air strikes—could swiftly deal a decisive blow.

Today, air cavalry squadrons are employed in each corps tactical zone and are in the vanguard of many successful strike operations. The nucleus of the organization is the aero scout pilot and observer with the OH-6 Cayuse, nicknamed the "Loach." This highly maneuverable aircraft is armed with the M-27E1 minigun system which is capable of firing 2,000 to 4,000 rounds per minute. The observer

carries the CAR-15 rifle and rides next to the pilot. They fly in either mixed fire teams (one Loach and one Cobra) or in pure scout teams (two scout ships flying low level).

Most scout crews augment their firepower by carrying an imaginative assortment of smoke grenades to mark targets for the Cobras, flush elusive VC out of the underbrush and discourage him from hiding in foxholes and bunkers.

To perform his mission, a scout pilot must fly low, varying his altitude, air speed and direction of flight. Initially, when going into a suspected VC stronghold, air speed must be kept up and flying in a straight path is avoided.

If the Loach does not draw fire on the initial passes, the pilot gradually decreases air speed to take a closer look. The observer keeps his CAR-15 at the ready and the pilot has the minigun in the firing mode. Both crewmen are looking for signs of recent activity, bunkers, packs, equipment, sampans, etc. If there's a platoon or larger size VC unit in the area, it usually doesn't take long to notice it.

If a scout team achieves surprise over a VC squad size element, swift and accurate fire will usually destroy the enemy. If there are any prisoners to be taken, the rifle platoon will land and pick them up while the scouts and Cobras cover. This technique in VC base areas often supplies timely information for the S-2.

Platoon size and larger elements are targets for the gunships. When a heavy volume of fire is received by the scouts, the observer immediately drops smoke and returns fire with the CAR-15 while the pilot takes evasive action and announces on the radio that he's receiving fire.

Within seconds the Cobras are rolling in for the attack. Scout aircraft will orbit beyond small arms range and adjust the fire.

Once the firing passes are complete, a damage assessment can be made by the scouts, or the situation may warrant the insertion of the aero rifles to develop the situation. If the enemy tries to avoid contact, reconnaissance by fire can be used.

The life of the aero scout is dangerous and demanding. It calls for courage, confidence and imagination.

Superior training is the key to success for the scout pilot. After the initial OH-6A checkout, trainees fly the observer seat with experienced scout pilots and learn the required techniques during combat missions. After 50 hours of combat time, he receives a checkride with the scout platoon leader to determine if he's ready to handle combat missions. Flying scout style requires low-level flying techniques that encompass maneuvers at and below tree-top level. Quick stops, fast starts, hovering, flying backward, sideways, constant pedal turns and quick and accurate firing passes must be mastered.

The observer handles navigation and radio traffic. His primary duty, however, is to look for the enemy. As an expert marksman with the CAR-15 rifle he adds extra firepower and protection.

Army aviation and Armor have combined to give modern warfare a new and unique weapon in Vietnam: the air cavalry squadron. Although the aero scouts are but a small part of the air cav, the role they play in its success is great. Based on their high achievements, it is clear that the aero scouts are here to stay.

Left: An OH-6 Cayuse and an AH-1G HueyCobra (above) on a mission 50 miles northeast of An Khe. Our thanks for the photo to SP5 Alex Hybel, 7th Squadron, 17th Aviation, 17th Combat Aviation Group.