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DELTA SUPPORT SPANNED BY U. S. ARMY AVIATION

BY SP5 JIM SCHULTZ

SOC TRANG, RVN--Teamwork as defined in the dictionary is "work done by a number of associates each doing a part, but all subordinating personal prominence to the efficiency of the whole." The U. S. Army's 82nd Medical Detachment (Helicopter Ambulance), more commonly known as "dust-off" stationed in Soc Trang 130 miles southwest of Saigon, is part of the Mekong Delta Army Aviation team which covers more than 12,000 sq. miles of Vietnam's IV Corps area.

To tell the story of "dustoff" would by itself be an interesting story of skill and courage, but to widen the scope and give the 'big picture' of the U. S. Army Delta operation in South Vietnam is the mission of this story.

The seven medical evacuation helicopters of the 82nd support all Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) soldiers in the Delta which includes the 21st, 9th and 7th Divisions. "Dustoff" also supports all U. S. advisory groups, Special Forces camps and four assault helicopter companies, the 121st and 336th stationed at Soc Trang and the 175th and 116th at Vinh Long, 50 miles north of here. The 221st Aviation Company (Birdogs) single engined reconnaissance planes provide radio relay and reconnaissance of the area to all pilots stationed at Soc Trang.

One "dustoff" chopper remains at Dong Tam for an alternating three day period in support of the U. S. Army's 2nd Brigade, 9th Infantry (Old Reliables) Division, 70 miles northeast of here.

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The 82nd Medical Detachment evacuates wounded personnel according to a set priority. Most of the evacuation missions, however, are made during ARVN operations and airmobile assaults throughout the region.

"Our degree of success can be attributed to our skilled pilots and the cooperation and teamwork of the assault helicopter companies we support," remarked U. S. Army Maj. Lloyd G. Gardner (wife, Norma, 1975 High St., Salem, Ore.), commanding officer of the only helicopter ambulance detachment in the Delta.

Since the "dustoff" pilots fly an average of more than 500 hours a month, one third of that at night, the coordination among the units at the Soc Trang Army Airfield and the 82nd must be perfect. The man who is responsible for ~~supplying all the beans, bullets and black oil for the~~ airfield is U. S. Army Lt. Col. Robert St. Aubin (wife, Margaret, 3321 N. East 133rd St., Portland, Ore.), (the airfield commander). It's a big job, but the colonel remarked, "When we need supplies here, all I have to do is ask

for them. The 1st Logistics Command provides them." *THE AIRFIELD AND UNIT LOGISTICS*

"The pulse of our operation here is the maintenance," stressed Major Gardner. "Our crew chiefs work closely with those in the helicopter assault companies. This, plus the direct support of the 611th Transportation Company which provides 3rd echelon and back-up maintenance for everyone here, gives our ships a high availability rate," he added.

Mr. James C. Follett (wife, Nancy, 1411 Kiowa Dr., Arlington, Tex.), the field service representative for the Bell Helicopter Company which makes the UH-1D "huey" helicopter, gives professional technical assistance to all units stationed there. "Through his knowledge we are able to keep our aircraft flying," commented one of the pilots. Mr. Follett goes where the problems are, in the field or in the hanger. It doesn't matter to him. It's his job.

Crew chiefs and mechanics give the ships daily pre-flight inspections and intermediate inspections every 25 flying hours, plus the periodic equipment (PE) check every 100 hours.

When a chopper goes in for a PE every 20 days or so, the engine is completely disassembled and rebuilt. This inspection grounds the aircraft for three or four days, but the time is of great value when you consider that a loose part or faulty gear box could cost the lives of two pilots, a crew chief and an aidman.

Everything is done step by step according to the "book" to insure that not one item or part is overlooked.

This is a typical example of the keen awareness and knowledge of all the crew chiefs at the Soc Trang Army Airfield. U. S. Army PFC Alvin L. Largent (wife, Sara, 178 Elm St., Andover, Ohio), a crew chief with the 82nd, spotted a problem with one of the assault helicopters at the airfield. Noticing a severe vertical vibration in the tail section, Private Largent notified the pilots of the definitely dangerous situation. A test was made and the tail rotor flew off. The problem could have been serious, but because of Private Largent's alertness, the ship and crew were saved from possible destruction. Private Largent has been recommended for an award for this action.

The Delta, for the most part, is just one big Viet Cong encampment spotted with small isolated friendly compounds and towns. The only feasible way to evacuate the wounded is by helicopter, so the teamwork among the Army aviators must be superior. Lt. Vo Trung Hieu, an intelligence officer with the 21st ARVN Division, commented on the U. S. Army Aviation team in the Delta: "They're the greatest I've seen. While on field operations I've seen them fly in and out of impossible situations."

Occasionally, the wounded soldiers outnumber the capacity of the "dustoff" chopper that accompanies every field operation. In such cases cargo and personnel ships nicknamed "slicks" with dust off medics <sup>ABsaco</sup> ~~abroad~~ are used to evacuate the wounded. The "slicks" from the 121st, 336th, 175th or 116th then drop to the landing zone (LZ) no matter how intense the fire and pick-up the casualties. Again teamwork pays off in saved lives.

When the IV Corps Combat Operations Center (COC) at Can Tho, 75 miles northwest of here, relays troop operations to the 82nd by the "hot line," the true picture of cooperation begins.

The dramatic events of a ground assault depend on a lot of skilled pilots, crews and ground units. When the "slick" helicopters loaded with ARVN soldiers enter the LZ, they are supported by the gunships which soften the area with rockets and machine gun fire. The "dustoff" ship circles over the LZ waiting the call for a med-evac.

Routine missions can be hair-raising experiences. Flying at different altitudes, the gunships, "slicks," "birdogs," maintenance, command and medical evacuation helicopters put on a demonstration of skill and steel-hard nerves that can't be forgotten. Low level approaches into the LZ under enemy fire at speeds around 110 knots have the participants on the edge of their seats. Sharp turns and sudden but skilled moves lessen the chances of receiving enemy hits. The firing of rockets and the laying of smoke screens add to the tension--and increase the mission's chance of success. Constant communication is kept between the ground forces and the command chopper which directs the gunships to their targets hidden in the dense jungle. Suddenly the call is made to "dustoff," and from 3,000 feet the helicopter ambulance plummets like a rock to the LZ as two gunships provide suppressive fire around the unarmed ship.

Once the pick-up is made--usually in less than a minute--the patients are evacuated to the nearest hospital. When surgery is required for the ARVN casualty he is taken to Can Tho or to the ARVN hospital in Saigon. There are dispensaries at Soc Trang and Vinh Long which provide medical assistance for the more serious cases. Doctors at My Tho and Dong Tam also help if necessary.

If a U. S. patient is in extreme difficulty "dustoff" takes him to Can Tho or Soc Trang where a doctor can stabilize his condition--make him ready to evacuate--before he is taken to a hospital such as the 93rd Evacuation Hospital at Long Binh.

The aidman aboard the evacuation helicopter is trained to do just about anything that a doctor could do in the limited space of the helicopter. There are exceptions such as tracheotomies or heart massages. In cases that require such a specialized skill, a doctor goes out with the mission.

The U. S. advisors on the ground, part of the team, brief the pilots from the ground on the various injuries before the pick-up is made. This makes the aidman and pilot aware of the urgency of the med-evac before they see the patient.

The aircraft commander, normally a Medical Service Corps pilot, is knowledgeable of the medical evacuation system and of the treatment necessary for different types of injuries. He knows where and how fast he must get the patient to the hospital.

A "dustoff" pilot remarked that many of the medical evacuation missions are "routine." The others are classified "hazardous." He preferred to call it "trepidatious." One such mission occurred on the 26th of March, Easter Sunday.

In the early morning hours of that tragic day, a "dustoff" ship was gunned down by the VC while taking off from an LZ after rescuing three crew members of a "slick" ship from the 121st Aviation Company that was shot down while landing troops. The "dustoff" aircraft was under intense enemy automatic and small arms fire during the approach to the downed craft.

While attempting to take off the pilot was hit in the leg and the med-evac ship crashed and burst into flames. In a daring but futile attempt to rescue the "dustoff" ship, the commanding officer of the 13th Aviation Battalion was mortally wounded on his approach to the LZ. His aircraft also crashed and burned.

All air crews were pinned down by the heavy enemy fire for more than three hours until friendly forces could reduce the enemy fire enough to allow a daring rescue by a second "dustoff" ship.

During the three hours of intense enemy fire, an aidman aboard the first "dustoff" ship, SP4 William W. Hook (Tacoma, Wash), called in artillery, airstrikes and additional gunships after the U. S. advisor was killed. It was largely through his efforts that the crew members of the three downed aircraft were able to survive the long hours of intense fire. Specialist Hook has been put in for a valorous award.

Such events are not common, but when the need arises, the teamwork pays-off.