

# HELICOPTER OPERATIONS AT KHE SANH

*An interview with the 1968 Alfred A. Cunningham Aviator of the Year, LtCol David L. Althoff. The interview was conducted by Mr. Barry Nelson, editor, Boeing Helicopter News.*

During the 1968 winter-spring monsoon in Vietnam's northern provinces, 30,000 enemy troops laid siege to the Marine bastion at Khe Sanh. For most of that period only helicopters could land at the embattled camp or its surrounding hilltop outposts, to bring supplies and troop reinforcements or to lift out casualties. All but a handful of the choppers were Boeing CH-46 Sea Knights.

An important figure in this epic airlift was LtCol David L. Althoff, 1968 Marine Aviator of the Year. Last month during a visit to the Vertol Division, Boeing Helicopters, he described the ordeal known to Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 262 as OPERATION SUPERGAGGLE.

*Q: LtCol Althoff, just what is a "supergaggle?"*

A: We always referred to a formation flight of helicopters as a gaggle, like a "gaggle of geese." Well, when you get as many aircraft in the sky as we had on our Khe Sanh resupply runs, it's a supergaggle.

*Q: Could you set the scene for us a little? Why were the Khe Sanh outposts so important?*

A: Khe Sanh Combat Base sits down in a "U" shaped bowl, surrounded by two-to-three thousand foot hills. The hills offer an outlook on all the valleys, roads and trails leading from Laos into that part of Vietnam. Our people up there had artillery and air support on call, and when they saw anything moving they could bring fire on it. Actually, the only reason we had a base at Khe Sanh was to keep those outposts going.

*Q: How did Operation Supergaggle begin?*

A: The action at Khe Sanh started on January 20, and we lost our first plane out there on that day. From then on it just turned into pure hell. At first, C-123s and C-130s were bringing all supplies for both the base and the hills into the strip at Khe Sanh, and we'd be there to pick up

the stuff that was for the hills and take it to them by helicopter. Then the fixed-wings started taking unacceptable losses and stopped landing. They'd just make parachute and low skid drops and so forth; but we'd still go into Khe Sanh to pick up supplies for the hills. Then toward the end of February it was even getting too tough for helicopters to work out of Khe Sanh. We had to start staging supplies at Dong Ha, out on the coast. They didn't take much "incoming" there, and we could refuel. But Dong Ha was 20 miles from Khe Sanh; considering fuel requirements, that meant that to do from there the same job we had been doing from Khe Sanh, we'd have to use more helicopters.

Which meant we'd have to have more air support than before. After that we went out with 12 CH-46's, four Huey guns, two Huey slicks for command and control, and four flights of fixed-wing support to prep the area before we went in.

*Q: What squadrons were involved?*

A: Khe Sanh started out as an 11MM-262 commitment. But by the time we stopped staging supplies at the Khe Sanh airstrip, we'd lost more

## HELICOPTER OPERATIONS

than half of our aircraft to enemy fire. So in order to come up with a full stable we were reinforced by HMM 364.

*Q: What sort of planning and coordination was required?*

A: Each night we'd pick the hill we were going into the next morning, and brief the fixed-wing people. We planned all the takeoff times so that when the fixed-wings arrived from Chu Lai, the Huey slicks would be there to control them. Meanwhile, we'd have launched the 12 CH-46s from Quang Tri, gone into Dong Ha, picked up our external loads and be heading for the objective.

We'd arrive over Khe Sanh within two minutes of the time the fixed-wings had finished their prep of the hillside, and they'd save enough ordnance to make a last pass or two as we were going in. We usually did this three times a day—about nine o'clock in the morning, one in the afternoon and five in the evening.

*Q: You said these were external loads. Didn't you also carry internal loads sometimes, so that you had to land in order to pick up and deliver?*

A: Yes, we had to take troop reinforcements into the hills, and we had to pick up medevacs, and then water cans had to be carried inside. So after our supergaggle—after we'd made a first pass into the hills and dropped off our sling loads—the two squadrons would usually split up again. One would make a second trip into the hills, and the other into Khe Sanh itself, to pick up medevacs and any other necessary passengers.

So we did continue to work out of Khe Sanh, on that limited basis.

*Q: What was it like on the ground at the Sanh?*

A: Khe Sanh was being shelled continually—anywhere from one to 1300 rounds a day of incoming artillery, rockets, mortars and automatic weapons, .50 caliber, everything you can name. There were snipers within 25 meters all the way around the fence, and anyone who moved above ground would get shot at.

Every inch of the runway was zeroed in, and if an airplane tried to land they just walked artillery rounds right up the center line. While our helicopters were on the ground, we'd have eight to ten rounds going off around us.

*Q: They were shelling the outposts, too, weren't they?*

A: Yes, especially when there was a helicopter there. In fact, when they saw us approaching a hill they'd have a round there by the time we touched down.

So we'd make a pass at the hill like we were going to land, and then do a quick 180-degree

*LtCol Althoff was awarded three Silver Stars, three DFCs and 50 Air Medals for his service in Vietnam. He was ExO of HMM 262 (Provisional MAG-39, 1stMAW). He is currently attending the University of Arizona under the College Degree Program.*



turn. About the time we were at the 90-degree position the stuff would be landing that they'd lobbed in and we'd go ahead and land. It would take them awhile to reload and get the rounds on the way and by that time we'd be out of there.

*Q: Who actually bore the brunt of the assault—the base camp or the outposts?*

A: The base camp was hit hardest by shelling and sniping, because we were concentrated there. But it was the outposts that were hit by waves of assaulting troops, because they were small and lightly defended. It was man against man up there.

*Q: How were we able to hold these positions? Weren't they terrifically outnumbered?*

A: Well, yes they were, and we lost a lot of folks up there. But we kept them supplied and reinforced and they held out. Our people had the area very well booby-trapped, and they'd get interlocking fire set up and the enemy would keep coming and we'd keep firing. Sometimes in the morning we'd see three or four hundred bodies out along the wire.

*Q: We know that the outposts at Khe Sanh were very often covered by clouds. How could you resupply them under those conditions?*

A: I know those hills like the back of my hand. I would come up to the base of the clouds under visual conditions and establish a hover, and then hover slowly up into the cloud keeping the spine of the ridge in sight.

Sometimes I'd have to stop and just wait there hovering to see if I could make another foot or two. This stuff mists in and out, getting thicker and thinner. I'd ease along until I got close to where the troops were waiting. Then they'd tell me on the radio if it sounded like I was getting closer and sort of guide me in.

*Q: Operation Supergaggle involved a great deal of instrument flying, didn't it?*

A: Yes. Normally during that time of the year the weather would be socked in at Dong Ha, and then clear, or at least broken, at Khe Sanh. So we had to climb out IFR (under "instrument flight rules") with our sling loads.

We'd line up at Dong Ha, pick up our loads

one at a time and take off into the soup. We'd break out at six or seven thousand feet, regroup and fly on up to Khe Sanh.

*Q: Did you encounter any particular problems with this IFR climbout?*

A: It worked perfectly, even with the external loads. We had a standard load of 3000 pounds and a standard climb speed of 80 knots. There were no high winds or turbulence, and the aircraft was smooth as could be.

Two different times, people had engine failures on the climbout; but there was no real problem. One of them dropped his load and made a single-engine landing back at Dong Ha. The other was in a CH-46 D-model, and he was able to keep right on going to Khe Sanh where he made a low pass at about 20 knots, dropped his load and landed.

*Q: How about when Khe Sanh and Dong Ha were both IFR—would you still go?*

A: Not on routine resupply missions. But for emergency resupply or medevacs, we made many IFR landings at Khe Sanh, day and night.

*Q: Assuming Khe Sanh had good instrument approach facilities, one might think it would be easier to land under IFR conditions than it would when the enemy could see you coming. Was that the case?*

A: No. They had the glide slope zeroed in with .50 caliber machine-guns and they knew exactly where to shoot to hit you on it. They'd just listen for you and start laying fire down the glide slope. If you were on it you were drilled.

Another thing, if you went in IFR, you were all by yourself. No close air or gunships could support you IFR.

*Q: And yet you did get in there IFR—and at night, too, How?*

A: You had to stay above the glide slope. I remember four different nights I got in there with

the weather below GCA minimums. People would come up to Quang Tri, where my squadron was based, and drop off supplies that were needed urgently at Khe Sanh—radio equipment and other stuff they had to have to operate—and we'd just have to go.

So I'd get to where Khe Sanh had me on radar and I'd ask the controller there to bring me down paralleling the glide slope, about 700 feet above it. The North Vietnamese would hear me coming and open fire, but it would mostly go below me.

I'd have the controller tell me when I was over the threshold of the runway. He'd lose me on radar at that point, so then it was up to me. I'd slow down to about 20 knots and start a very slow descent to the runway. I watched my radar altimeter, and when I got to 100 feet if I wasn't visual then I'd just take it around. This worked very well. The CH-46 is a real stable instrument ship and she handles very nicely under these conditions.

*Q: I don't suppose the runway was lighted for these night approaches.*

A: No. Not a light on that field. But just as I'd pass the threshold of the runway, I'd ask them to pop a flare. It would light about the time I was descending through 100 feet. Then, too, I'd use my landing light—just long enough to get established. Of course, breaking out at 100 feet, it didn't take long to get down and land; so they didn't have the light to shoot at for very long.

*Q: What was the squadron's aircraft availability rate during the period?*

A: I don't know the exact percentage, but it was high—right around 80 per cent, I'd say.

*Q: How did the aircraft perform?*

A: I got a great deal of indication. I've brought them back with as many as 25 holes in the tail pylon alone—with one boost system shot out, when the aft vertical shaft had six or seven good-sized chunks out of it, with no fuel gauges and stuff like this. It continued to fly.

*Q: How many times were you shot down?*

A: Well, there were four times that I had to land right on the spot. But there were several birds I was able to limp home in. It's hard to say how many I actually lost.

*Q: Colonel, how does a man keep up his good humor under these conditions? What keeps him going out there?*

A: With us, it was a matter of squadron pride. We got into this Khe Sanh mess early, and it was really tough. We got the squadron together at that time and we said, "Look, it's going to be tough, but we're going to go out and do the job and we're going to do it every day. We'll do a good job, and where it's possible to enjoy it, we will!" We got that idea to start with, and we carried it on through.

USMC



**Troops arrive by helicopter at embattled Khe Sanh.**

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## ARTICLES

Marine Aviation Anniversary Message	<i>MajGen K. B. McCutcheon</i>	23
Flying the Harrier .....	<i>Col Thomas H. Miller</i>	24
State of the Corps .....	<i>Gen Leonard F. Chapman, Jr.</i>	28
Marine Air Observer .....	<i>Maj Jesse G. Mulkey</i>	35
Employing the Recon Patrol .....	<i>MajGen R. G. Davis and Lt J. L. Jones, Jr.</i>	40
Air Support of Amphibious Operations .....	<i>LtCol D. E. Gillum Maj R. D. Foster</i>	50

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## SPECIAL FEATURE

Helicopter Operations in Khe Sanh .....	<i>LtCol David Althoff</i>	47
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## FEATURES

News	2	Scrapbook	56
Letters	9	Issues	58
Books	12	Orders	64
Professional Library	16	Index to Advertisers	70
MCA News	18	MCA Insurance	73

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