

A HISTORY OF THE
101st AVIATION BATTALION (ASSAULT HELICOPTER) (AIRMOBILE)
FOR THE YEAR 1970.

as prepared by

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As the year 1969 was drawing to a close several changes were taking place which would greatly affect the operations of the 101st Aviation Battalion (Assault Helicopter) (Airmobile) during the coming year.

On 1 December, 1969 Alpha Company, 101st Avn Bn was redesignated as F Troop, 2/17th Cavalry and came under the operational control of the 2/17th Cav. For the next four weeks Alpha Company went through a strenuous training program which sought to educate their pilots and aircraft commanders in cavalry tactics and provide them with a suitable background for the missions they would receive as a cavalry troop. Additionally they were to be given Light Observation Helicopters and "Charley" model gunships. On the 26th of December F Troop became operational as an air cavalry troop and by the 1st of January, 1970 were performing such missions as visual reconnaissance with infantry platoons of D Troop, 2/17th Cav, supporting ranger operations, downed aircraft recovery, and the non-divisional mission of supporting the 3rd Force Reconnaissance Company, USMC.

Operation Randolph Glen, which had begun on 6 December, 1969, was off to a slow start due to the extremely adverse weather conditions present during the latter months of the Southwest Monsoons. The weather severely limited both the number and effectiveness of missions flown primarily because of reduced visibility. The weather situation impaired many visual reconnaissance missions so that the reconnaissance of some areas was at best incomplete. The reduced visibility, however, enhanced the enemy's capability to perform ground recons of friendly positions and installations.

January 1st found Bravo Company in direct support of the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division. Charley Company was in direct support of the 2nd Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, and Delta Company was in general support of the Division. Due to the weather only 6770 sorties were flown by all three companies during the month of January. This proved to be a blessing in disguise, however, because the battalion at this time was experiencing a critical personnel shortage and could not afford a heavy operational load. Additionally the rapid turnover of key officer personnel created difficulties because many replacements had to be trained while experienced aviators were transferred out of the battalion by higher headquarters.

In mid-January F Troop experienced its first disaster. Flying on a classified mission with members of the 3rd Force Reconnaissance Company the lead ship into a planned Landing Zone suddenly lost power. It was never determined if this was due to engine failure or an enemy RPG round. The disabled ship auto-rotated onto the LZ but fell short in such a manner that it wound up teetering on the edge of a cliff. One of the marines jumped out of the ship and pulled the injured co-pilot out of the aircraft. Shortly thereafter the ship fell backwards, burst into flames, and then rolled five hundred feet down the side of the mountain. While gunships covered the downed aircraft and the other slicks dropped off their passengers into the Landing Zone, the emergency siren at the Hideout hut shattered the mid-morning calm and a half dozen crews raced to their ships to attempt a recovery of the downed aircraft and its occupants. Despite

the rescue attempts of all concerned, however, the incident left three crew members and three marines dead. The ship was destroyed where it had come to rest and the mission itself had to be aborted. We pay tribute here to that unknown marine whose courage and quick thinking saved the life of 1st Lieutenant John Carlson.

The weather cleared up in February as the monsoons were drawing to a close, and as a result 15,000 sorties were flown in February in support of the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile). Support during this period was also provided for Special Forces Command and Control North missions, ARVN forces in I Corps, and to the 1st Brigade, 5th Mechanized Division. In mid-February the battalion received notice that Charley and Delta companies would be required to move from the old Mag 36 area to North Phu Bai. This was to be part of a larger move which would eventually put battalion headquarters in the Marble Mountain area of DaNang. Rumor had it that Charley and Delta companies would then be reassigned to another battalion and would, of course, remain in Phu Bai to support Northern I Corps. Preparations were made which included a number of "reconnaissance" trips to North Phu Bai. Their future working (and living) areas had once belonged to a Marine contingent that had become part of the de-escalation of the war and had gone home. When the marines left they took with them almost everything in sight. Thus the move would also require a complete overhaul of the new areas. Buildings had to be reinforced and, in some areas, rebuilt.

Separate "construction" platoons were established in each company whose sole function was to rebuild and repair. On 4 March Charley Company began their move. The move itself was extremely difficult because the heavy transportation equipment needed was not available in sufficient quantity. Additionally, missions could not be cancelled because of the move and so each company was required to fulfill its operational obligations despite the move and the confusion and work it entailed. It is easy to envision the problems that this would (and did) present to those individuals working in operations and aircraft maintenance. It is a credit to the maintenance personnel in both companies that during and after the move they were able to maintain 88% availability of aircraft. Delta Company began their move on 7 March and completed it on 8 March. Charley Company completed their move on 9 March.

While move preparations were being made the battalion also received notice that F Troop would be redesignated as Alpha Company on 12 March and would once again be OPCON to the battalion. This meant another series of classes for the F Troop aviators and maintenance personnel and another redistribution of aircraft. The Charley model gunships and the LOH's were traded for "H" model slicks and the training began. From 12 March till 31 March Alpha Company operated in a limited general support role while they trained their pilots in airmobile operations. A number of aircraft commanders had to be transferred from Bravo and Charley companies to Alpha Company to make up for their deficient of aircraft commanders, and many of the Commachero pilots flew with the other companies to receive on-the-job training. On the 1st of April the company was put in direct support

of 1st Brigade. Bravo Company, which had been operating in direct support of 1st Brigade, began operating in general support of the Division on 1 April 1970. During April night flare missions became a daily requirement due to increased enemy activity in the Division area of operations.

On the night of 6 April Fire Support Base Arsenal came under heavy mortar fire and underwent a severe ground attack. The battalion was called upon to run an emergency night insertion into the firebase to prevent the enemy from overrunning it. Ten aircraft were launched prematurely due to a lack of coordination between the air mission commander and the ground commander. It was discovered, after the aircraft were orbiting Camp Eagle, that the company commander of the infantry company had not yet been briefed on the situation or plan of action. This resulted in severe congestion of the Camp Eagle traffic pattern and increased the possibility of a mid-air collision. As soon as the ground commander had been briefed and the ground elements were ready the ships made their pickup and carried elements of the 1st Brigade into the Fire Support Base to reinforce the 1/502 Infantry. The Hawks escorted the slicks to the firebase and layed down protective fire while the ships touched down and dropped off their loads. The following day many enemy KIA's were discovered outside the wire and some of these were almost certainly due to the Hawks.

The battalion was visited by the Annual General Inspection Team on 7 and 8 April and passed with flying colors. Preceding this inspection (and following it) all of the companies received the Command Maintenance Management Inspection as well. In addition to passing all of its inspections the period of March-May was a hallmark for the battalion as it set a record for reenlistments. During the three month period the battalion had 14 first term RA or AUS reenlistments, and in doing this the battalion set the record for reenlistments for an aviation unit.

On the 9th of April two Kingsmen, WO1 John Drow and WO1 Robert Kovolak, while returning from an insertion of a reconnaissance team southwest of the A Shau valley, spotted a downed marine pilot waving a white cloth. While proceeding to the recovery zone WO1 Drow and WO1 Kovolak came under heavy automatic weapons fire. Nevertheless they managed to pickup the downed pilot and for their efforts received DFC's and thanks from one very happy marine pilot.

On 5 May 1970 an incident occurred which proved to be the greatest disaster of the year for the 101st Aviation Battalion. The Commancheros, who were flying in direct support of 1st Brigade, were tasked to provide a flare ship for a practice red alert on one of the firebases. As the ship was circling the firebase, and the flare man was dropping flares, one of the flares ignited inside the ship. The flare man tried unsuccessfully to kick the flare out and several more flares caught fire. The situation degenerated rapidly and soon the ship itself was on fire. When the aircraft commander attempted to autorotate a mid-air collision occurred when the Huey fell on top of an ARA gunship that was also covering the practice red alert. Both ships plunged to the ground and were destroyed. As a result of this incident seven Army aviators lost their lives. Five were Commancheros.

On 12 May 1970, five Commandero aircraft were used to insert Combat Engineers into the jungle around hill 882 near FSB Shock, to cut out a desperately needed landing zone. The unit on the ground had made heavy contact with the enemy and the ships had to brave heavy small arms fire to drop their loads. During the attempt one ship took 23 hits, several of them in the fuel cells, and the co-pilot, Captain Richard Griffin, received a critical head injury. With the ship losing fuel rapidly the aircraft commander rose almost uncontrollably out of the LZ and left the area. Knowing that the fuel supply was deteriorating rapidly the AC flew to an old fire base and autorotated into it. Another Commandero ship, flown by CW2 B.C. Walsh acted as a medivac ship and took Griffin and the crew chief, SP4 Paul Sesrow who had been shot in the leg, to the hospital. The following day the pilot discovered that he also had been shot in the leg.

May 14th marked the departure of LTC Thomas R. Meadows as a change-of-command ceremony held that morning gave reins to LTC William N. Peckoy. With a change in commanders came a change in missions as the Commanderos became the direct support for the 2nd Bde., and the Kingmen became direct support for the 1st. The Widows assumed a general support role for the division and the Hawks were, as always, providing gunships in general support of the division. The rest of the month of May proved to be fairly active for the battalion. At this time the 2/502 Infantry Battalion was in contact almost on a daily basis around hills 802 and 714. An operation was scheduled to replace the 2/502 with the 2/327 Infantry but was cancelled in order to execute an emergency extraction mission of FSB Veehel. The battalion carried the battl. to the enemy west of the Song Bo river toward the end of May by combat assaulting the 2/502 Infantry, 1/501 Inf, 1/327 Inf, 1/506 Inf, and 54th ARVN Regiments into enemy strongholds on a daily basis.

The month of May ended with some astounding statistics. During the month the battalion flew a total of 6693 hours and had carried 23,159 troops on various missions. The Hawks set their high mark of the year with 1093.5 hours flown by Cobra gunships.

The month of July was to become the most memorable month of the year. Headquarters company had been required by Camp Eagle Base Defense to send out ambushes several times a week since March. On the 9th of July an eight man ambush left the perimeter 1300 hours and moved to a position about 600 meters outside Camp Eagle and near the village of Gia Lo, RVN. At 2245 hours a squad of Viet Cong Guerillas walked out the village on the trail being ambushed. The patrol leader initiated the ambush by detonating his claymore mines and a 45 minute fire fight followed.

The patrol called for the reaction force which arrived at a point when the ambush patrol was almost out of ammunition and had lost radio contact with Sector Defense. A sweep was made under illumination and two dead VC were found as well as 2 AK 47's, one RPG launcher, and a rucksack full of food, clothing and other supplies. It was the most successful ambush of the year for Base Defense and gave the battalion the first enemy casualties due to ground combat actions.

Missions changed again on 13 July as A Company became general support to the division and C Company became the direct support company for the 2nd Bde. The real action on the General Support was, of course, the CCN missions. These missions often involved flying into classified areas to drop in Special Forces Teams. Quite often the team would make contact upon landing in the LZ or shortly there after, and emergency extraction would be necessary in order to save the team. The fact that the enemy used a large number of anti-aircraft weapons in these areas made CCN that much more dangerous. During the period that the Commanderos were flying CCN, they had two visitors killed, two wounded, four ships damaged and one ship totally destroyed. All of this was done by hostile fire in the remote mountains and jungle 6000 miles from home.

On the 20th of July the Commanderos had one of these CCN missions. After picking up the Special Forces CCN Troops the ship headed west. The destination was a classified area and the mission was to drop off CCN troops and then return home. The lead ship landed and dropped off its load and as it was leaving the LZ the ship took heavy fire. While attempting to gain altitude the engine was hit by automatic weapons fire and the ship caught on fire. With the loss of engine power the aircraft commander attempted to autorotate but had no where to go. The ship landed on some trees and crashed. Everyone on the ship had to evacuate it--the ship now engulfed in flames-- but the co pilot did not move. Either dead or unconscious he was pulled out of the ship by the aircraft commander. A following ship, piloted by WO1 Marc Goodell, hovered over the survivors and threw out ladders and raigiro rigs. Despite the intense incoming fire, the rescue ship remained where it was while everyone below strapped themselves to the rescue ladders. The co-pilot was strapped into a raigiro which had caught fire and finally snapped.. As a result the co-pilot fell to the ground and was killed. The ship itself was totally destroyed and the mission aborted, but all other personnel were rescued. As a result of his courageous rescue attempt the aircraft commander of the rescue ship received the silver star.

Three days later an action was to take place which would result in the Battalion being submitted for the Presidential Unit Citation. In the weeks following the action winners of the battalion received 55 Distinguished Flying Crosses and 24 air medals with V device for valor. The action was the extraction of American troops and supplies from Fire Support Base Ripcord. The enemy had been putting heavy pressure on the fire base since the beginning of June. By the middle of July the firebase was surrounded and taking small arms and automatic fire; 360 degree artillery and mortar fire hit the firebase daily. It became obvious that the losses being sustained by US forces on Ripcord was unacceptable. An operation was planned; therefore to extract all forces on the fire base. The target date was 23 July 1970. On the morning of the 23rd the ships from all three lift companies and two light fire teams from D Company lifted off their various pads and left for Ripcord. Upon reaching the firebase the encountered heavy small arms fire. Ships going into the firebase encountered .51 calibre machine gun positions from 3 sides and mortar fire from several different directions.

As soon as the extraction began the enemy started dropping mortar rounds on the fire base with mortars dropping into the LZ and automatic fire coming from three directions the battalion began its approach into the LZ. Frequently, gunships had to position themselves between lift aircraft and enemy positions in order to deliver neutralizing fire which reduced the hazards encountered by the lift aircraft arriving and departing the firebase.

A story was told by an infantryman after the extraction was completed about a Huey that was on final approach. When the ship was about 25 meters off the ground a mortar round exploded at the point where the ship was about to land. The explosion rocked the aircraft and shrapnel tore apart the plexiglass on the front of the helicopter but the pilot calmly got the ship under control and touched down on top of the crater while the infantrymen climbed on board. The ship had a diamond painted on its side and this story typified the heroic actions performed by aviators of this battalion during the extraction of the firebase. When the mission was completed not one ship had been lost and the battalion had none of the victors killed or wounded. On 30 July, the battalion had one C&C, 44 slicks, and two light fire teams involved in a CA into the eastern edge of the Ashau Valley. The employment of smoke and CS aircraft, and a heavy concentration of TAG air, artillery, and gunships assured the success of the CA.

In August operations continued as usual except that it was time to begin thinking of the approaching monsoons. In preparations, the companies began to cement the sandbag emplacements around the bunkers, construct wooden shutters, and, in general, waterproof buildings in preparations for the heavy rains.

On September 6th, operation Texas started and operation Jefferson Glen began. The operation which stood out most during the early phase of Jefferson Glen was the extraction of firebases Veghol, Whip, and Tennessee. Along with these, one battalion of Americans and one battalion of ARVN's were extracted. The two battalions had been placed near the south end of the Ashau Valley and the fire bases had been occupied to support them. The biggest problem encountered during this time was the deteriorating weather. The insertion went as planned but the extraction had to be called off because of low ceilings and rain. A C-130 dropped resupplies in an attempt to tilt the troops over until the battalion could extract them. The Monsoons were well on their way and the division was starting to fall back into its winter fighting position thus making the active area of operations much smaller. During October the rain continued and several typhoons hit the South China Sea. At one particular time a typhoon got so close to the coast that as a precautionary measure, the Kingsman flew every flyable aircraft to Quang Tri to wait out the storm. Missions changed on the 10th of October as A Company became D.S. to 2nd Bde and C Company became GS to the Division.

The months of November and December proved to be quiet months in relation to previous activities. All companies continued their primary missions with unwavering determination in spite of inclement weather.

It is our specific wish to express gratitude for our fellow man who served side by side with one another and died. Their valor; their gallantry; their implacable fortitude to continue in spite of seemingly insurmountable odds sets a precedence that leaves us humble in appreciation.