

MACV Army "A" Photo Team Films the Cayuse Helo

The Cayuse story came to MACV Army "A" Photo Team early in the team's inception. Still living at the 221st Signal Company (Pictorial) at Long Binh. As team NCOIC I contacted the aviation unit, to learn they were located just North of Long Binh Post on the Saigon/Bien Hoa Highway. I was told instead of turning left to Bien Hoa keep straight ahead a mile or two. The film coverage of this new helicopter in country was set up to take place the next morning.

In the middle of the night, beds shook, whole buildings vibrated and windows rattled with loud explosions closer to Long Binh Post, than I remember any previous B-52 Raid. Bien Hoa Air Base must have really been bounced out of bed. The bombs seemed to be right outside the base perimeter fence.

The next morning the photo team found the helo unit just North of the Bien Hoa Airbase flight path. Man, it seemed like the perfect location to have a Mid-Air collision. F-100's loaded with bombs taking off and helicopters lifting off in the same air space. It just seemed like an accident waiting to happen. Greeting the flight crew, our casual conversation with the pilots centered on the close in B-52 Raid, during the night. Then the crew started explaining the helicopter. It was a four place craft, designed as a Light Observation Helo or "LOH." Having a pilot, co-pilot, crew chief/gunner and room for one observer.

Circling around to the rear, the pilot and crew chief opened the cowling to expose the engine. I remember asking, if the Cayuse was a Bell Helicopter? They told me it was a Hughes Aircraft product. The pilots emphasized the engine. I hope my ears worked correctly as they spoke. What I heard was astronomical and hard to believe. They said the engine weighed only 36 pounds, but delivered over 200 horsepower. The exact figure of 212,213 or 214 horsepower has long been lost to memory.

Even by today's standards, auto engines are deemed efficient if there horsepower output closely resembling $\frac{1}{2}$ horsepower per pound of engine weight. Aircraft engines are lucky to get near one horsepower per pound of weight. But 35 years ago Hughes Aircraft built an engine delivering over $5\frac{1}{2}$ horsepower per pound of weight. That is still a mind boggling statistic by any count.

MACV Army "A" Photo Team Films LOH (Cayuse)

For some obscured reason, lost to time, the LOH crew decided the co-pilot would be the observer, with I as cameraman would sit up front in the co-pilot's seat. I was delightfully surprised by this change. The Vietnam build-up began, while I was in Korea. An urgent call went out to all army commands for helicopter pilot training candidates. I volunteered for the program and recieved an hour orientation flight in a H-13. The H-13 was a Korean War helo and seen in the T.V. Series MASH.

Sliding into the co-pilot's seat, this new helo had many advancements incorporated, however the fundmentals remained consistent. The collective sat on the left, that controls the throttle and the angle to which the rotor blade contact the air. The control stick and rudder peddles were standard equipment. Many instrument panel gauges and dials were known to me. (See Army Photo flys A-37 at this website.) With the revolutionary new powerplant some gauges were new to my eyes. As everyone got their safety belts on, the crew chief grabbed the fire extinguisher, a requirement for starting the LOH and all army helos.

Lifting off, the Cayuse headed Northwest, instinctively I knew we were heading toward last night's B-52 Raid. We weren't in the air no 10 minutes, when a voice came over the radio saying, " If you don't want a 500 pounder on your rotor blades, get out of here." We had flown into an area where a FAC (Forward Air Controller) had a hot bombing mission in session. I nor anyone on the LOH had seen the L-19 or F-100's in the area, but we exited the area in a hurry.

I never looked at the altimeter, but I judge we were flying about 100 feet over the highest trees and obstacles. Some time later, we came across a large open area in the jungle. The open area was a good 100 yards across by two miles long. Out in the open I saw a VC in black pajamas walking across the open area. The pilot flew on. About a $\frac{1}{2}$ mile after flying over the VC, I asked the pilot if he didn't see the VC back there. He asked what VC? I told him the one out in the open field.

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As the LOH turned around and headed back, I just knew that VC had escaped. I had no idea which side he ran to for cover. The crew circled around and around. The crew questioned me, if I was sure I saw one? What was he wearing? etc. The search continued. I figured the VC had plenty of time to duck into a bunker or tunnel. After over five minutes of useless searching the crew all but thought I was nuts and ready to give up looking, when the gunner opened fire. He had spotted "Charlie" in a gully half hidden by a log. The LOH circled once or twice more with the gunner firing the machine gun on each pass.

With one dead VC to our credit, it was a bad deal for me sitting in the co-pilot's seat. The armor plating around the seat prohibited me from turning around to film the crew chief/gunner shooting. The only thing I could do, was lift the camera over my head and point the len in the general direction of the door gunner and push the run button. Hoping to even get the action and not cut the gunners head off by not framing the action.

Later in the flight, the LOH came across three C-123's spraying Agent Orange over the jungle. The newspapers were filled with articles about Agent Orange, but this was the only time I witnessed its application in real life.

With the fuel gauge indicating low, it was time to return to base. I don't recall seeing fresh crators from the previous night's B-52 raid, but there were bomb crators all over the region we flew.

Later Hughes Aircraft created a civilian version of the LOH (Cayuse). When I returned to the states, I saw several flying around for some years.

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