

## **SECTION III – THE PIONEERS: EARLY HELICOPTER AVIATION IN VIETNAM (1961-1964)**

### **U S Army Aviation in Vietnam 1961-1964 : A turbulent transition**

**By Bernie Quedens**

Students of US military involvement in Vietnam are keenly aware of the Washington mandated personnel policy which resulted in rotating, thereby replacing, the total US Force in Vietnam once every year. It was the policy responsible for constantly feeding the system new and inexperienced troops and green but eager commanders. In fact, it is said that US Forces in Vietnam had to re-learn combat lessons annually. And story after story has been written of the impact such a rotation policy had on casualties, outcome of combat engagements and many other events.

But for the millions of words that have been written about the Vietnam War, a related issue, and its possible effect on success/failure of early aviation operations in Vietnam, has received little coverage over the years: Employment and subsequent conversion of Helicopter Transportation into combat Helicopter lift units.

The policy of rotating personnel after only 12 months on station in Vietnam also had a direct and negative effect on the combat effectiveness of Army Aviation units introduced to that theater in late 1961 and early 1962. However, those units were confronted with an additional problem upon arrival in country-- How to employ and operate a Transportation Helicopter Company in a combat environment..? In other words, how do you convert a transportation helicopter unit into a combat helicopter lift unit almost overnight? Making that feat even more difficult were non-availability of current doctrine, lack of unit training in combat helicopter operations and tables of equipment (TO&E's) that were designed for aviation transport companies but not for helicopter units with a mission to carry combat troops to the enemy.

In those early days, Transportation helicopter companies were designed primarily as 80 mph transport means to carry troops and supplies from point A to point B within a military theater of operation. Therefore, when those TO&E's were authored, few entertained the thought of lifting soldiers into a combat situation using this type vehicle. Underlying doctrine envisioned helicopter companies to supplement, or in some instances provide an alternate transportation method for, trucks. Consequently, the basic philosophy and mission profile that drove the establishment of truck transport units was also applied in the design of helicopter transport companies. Basically, the organization, while obviously more complex - requiring increased maintenance capabilities and a much higher skill level 'driver'- was thought of in terms of a flying truck company. Accordingly, since armored personnel carriers were the standard piece of equipment that carried troops into battle over the ground and not truck companies, it follows that aerial truck companies were no more suitable for that mission than their ground counterpart unless some innovative thinking was applied. Modifications in doctrine, training and equipment would be necessary to effectively employ the helicopter with any assurance of success on the battle field.

Existing doctrine for employment of the helicopter as troop carriers into a combat zone was extremely limited in 1961. Hence, development of doctrine was an event that took place as a result of experience gained by those early deployed H-21 helicopter companies and the first Huey equipped lift companies, arriving in Vietnam in 1963. In fact, it evolved as a joint effort of, and to a large degree was due to the experience gained by, those four H-21 units within the first one and a half years after deployment to that

region. In order to minimize combat losses in both personnel and equipment, the units made excellent and routine use of their own 'lessons learned'. How-to approach into and select touch-down points in 'hot' LZ's and how-to avoid ground-fire while enroute are examples of direct and immediate applications. First-hand experience dictated use of new and innovative operating procedures in order to survive this newly conceived method of delivering combat troops to the battle field. Many of the 'lessons learned' in those early days became the base-line of a newly evolving airmobility concept that was being examined by the 11th Airmobile Division (Test) at Fort Benning, Ga. during the 1963-1965 time frame. Direct infusion of personnel into the Division who had served in Vietnam in an aviation capacity was, in part, responsible for timely knowledge transfer.

Needless to say, constant review and updating of combat flying procedures became an almost daily event by helicopter transport companies operating in Vietnam in mid 1963. Two other factors deserve further consideration when analyzing the transition process of those early units from transport to assault helicopter status: Training and Equipment.

Training is one of the key components of unit readiness and combat effectiveness. And experience tells us, the higher the degree of combat readiness, the lower combat losses in personnel and equipment. To achieve desired training readiness levels, three prerequisites must be met, 1. meshing of man and machine, enabling individuals to perform at or close to the equipment's designed capability level, 2. conduct of collective training to insure the team can function as an efficient entity and 3. a high degree of excellence exercised by the commanders and staff during planning and execution of the mission.

Required individual and collective flight-crew training skills vary little whether transporting personnel in a logistical or combat role. However, helicopter crews, when flying combat missions, must have received additional training in such areas as suppression of enemy fire, minimizing ground time and rapid deceleration into and quick egress out of LZ's, etc. The major difference of helicopter employment in those two roles is in execution of and the degree of command and control exercised over the mission. In both instances, it is essential to know recent enemy activity, location, condition and size of landing zone, among other factors. However, units employed in a combat assault role must also be provided with detailed information on the enemy situation, approach / departure routes, altitudes, friendly fire support, combat emergency procedures such as forced landings and other tactical requirements. Planning of such missions is, generally, much more detailed and complex and execution tightly controlled, when compared to a mission requiring transport of troops or supplies from one safe area to another. Moreover, the success of the mission depends, in large part, on the degree of professionalism, background and training of the commander and staff charged with execution of the operation.

When the first four H-21 Transportation helicopter companies were deployed to Vietnam in late 1961 and early 1962, the 8th, 57th, 81st and 93rd together with the 45th Transportation Helicopter Battalion as the parent headquarters, they were manned by Transportation Corps Branch officers and enlisted men. In fact, TC was the proponent for those organizations. The vast majority of their officers and Warrant Officer aviators had a transportation corps background to include basic and advanced branch courses. Additionally, a number of the field-grade officers had attended the Command and General Staff College Course at Fort Leavenworth, KS. It was with these 'givens' that the Army expected the Transportation Corps to execute a major combat support mission. And, generally speaking, they did a great job considering the limitations in doctrine, training and equipment mentioned earlier. A great part of the success achieved must be attributed to the commanders of the companies. Several had been exposed to combat in Korea or earned their combat arms orientation while detailed to combat ground units as company grade officers for two years, long before they became transportation helicopter commanders. Others recognized the situation for what it was and realized that a new mind-set and detailed planning for combat assault missions were absolutely essential, if these transportation companies were to succeed in accomplishing the assigned mission without a great

number of losses in men and equipment.

Officers like Darwin Beuchamp, Richard Kissling, Pat Delavan, Dick Bastion and others recognized that they had to fill the gap left by a void of valid doctrine as well as shortcomings of equipment and training. The early Battalion commanders of the 45th Bn, because of circumstances such as geography, size of operation and lines of communications, left the conduct of missions pretty much to their company commanders. They generally limited the Bn's role to logistical and administrative support and that of screening/ forwarding agent of all helicopter support requested by higher headquarters. The operational functions were almost exclusively handled at Company level. This included such tasks as coordination and planning of helicopter troop lifts and all artillery/close-air fire support activities with Vietnam Army /Air Force units as well as with US Air Force advisory elements. Additionally, it required coordination of helicopter gunship support with the US Utility Tactical Transport (UTT) armed helicopter company, briefing of participating unit representatives and directing the execution of the operation. The latter called for exercising control over all elements while the helicopter lift force was enroute to, landing in and departing from the landing zone. The Army Vietnam troop commander, together with his US advisor, picked the landing zones during the planning portion of the operation, validated or up-dated those locations just prior to lift-off from the pick-up zone and then relied on the helicopter units to deliver the troops to the designated areas.

Helicopter companies operated in this environment in Vietnam throughout 1962, continuing to improve tactics and procedures and generally accomplishing the mission with few casualties or equipment losses. Then in January 1963 came AP Bac, a battle that for the first time pitted Viet Cong regulars against ARVN units carried to the enemy by US Helicopters. The results were disastrous. It was also the day that forever changed the mode of US helicopter employment under combat conditions. A number of US helicopters were shot down in the landing zone and numerous US and a larger number of ARVN casualties were sustained as a result of enemy ground fire. Something had gone wrong. Questions were asked and issues raised to avoid repetition of these mistakes in future helicopter combat employments. As a result, planning was more tightly coordinated with the lifted ground elements, improved liaison was established between ARVN and US helicopter units and command and control procedures/responsibilities were reviewed. The 45th Aviation Bn, then parent headquarters of all transport helicopter companies in Vietnam, got more directly involved in mission planning. However, with units dispersed over a distance of 400 miles, from Soc Trang in the Delta to Nha Trang along the coast of the Central-Highlands, left the command little choice but to continue delegating primary control of helicopter combat operations to company level with staff support provided by battalion headquarters.

By pooling the resources of two or more helicopter companies and assisted by the type of fire support mentioned earlier, major operations were conducted throughout the Delta and within a 100 -150 mile radius north, east and west of Saigon throughout 1963 and into 1964. Most were executed very successfully, many under enemy ground-fire while enroute or upon landing in the LZ. Generally, few losses were sustained by helicopter companies. And again, much of the successes must be attributed to individual helicopter unit commanders and their small ad hoc staffs. Frequently, officers assigned to flight platoons were detailed to work in such needed, but not- authorized, positions of operations, intelligence and liaison officers. Generally, the commanders would be in one of the lead helicopters and a staff member would control the entire operation, to include all fire support elements, from an O-1 Birdog, light fixed wing aircraft, flying at an altitude from which he could oversee and direct all facets of the airmobile assault. Direct radio communications between all fire support elements and controller, as well as the helicopter commander and controller, lent flexibility to the scheme. It permitted instant introduction of changes to a given situation such as timing of events, enemy fires, flight patterns, touch-down points and arrival times in landing zones. This experienced team was able to bring to bear all lessons learned, even in a very fluid situation, thereby avoiding many of the mistakes made in the past.

An operation that comes to mind was one launched in Kien Hoa province on January 17, 1964. On this day the US Army in Vietnam had assembled one of the largest helicopter forces ever to undertake an airmobile operation by lifting major elements of the 9th ARVN Division into a Vietcong stronghold. Excellent communications and control among all airborne elements resulted in a near textbook - not yet written at this time- version heliborne combat assault. Arrangements included time sequenced fire-support by ARVN Artillery, USAF/VNAF B-26 and T-28 close air support as well as the escort of the UTT armed helicopter company. All fire support activities were executed as scheduled and the fires shifted just as the troop carrying helicopters were on short- final approach. At that time, heavy ground-fire was encountered by both the controller marking the LZ for the troop carriers and armed helicopter escort elements continuing to reconnoiter the fringes of the LZ by fire. The commander of the helicopter unit, Major Pat Delavan, upon receiving recommendation from the controller to go for an alternate touch-down point, was able to avert disaster, deliver the troops to the battle field and depart the landing zone without a single helicopter loss. By updating himself of the most current enemy situation, while one mile out on final approach, he was able to land his formation out of effective enemy small arms range and successfully accomplish the mission. Although numerous hits were sustained by his lift helicopters resulting in a number of light casualties, application of the Ap Bac lesson had paid off. In all fairness, mention must be made of armed helicopter losses sustained by the escorting UTT gunships that day. One aircraft was hit by an anti tank-weapon while firing suppressive fire into concealed and covered enemy positions along a tree line. The helicopter was literally blown out of the sky with all four crew members killed in action. Another gunship was hit and lost the tail rotor, successfully autorotating into the Mekong River. Two members of that crew could not be rescued but drowned as a result of that incident.

By this time aviation battalion headquarters had become very active in the support of aviation missions, routinely carrying and establishing a forward command-post to the departure air-strip or pick-up zone (PZ) and assuming all coordination and liaison functions between US aviation and ARVN ground units. The Bn forward tactical element normally consisted of a first-aid station and ground-to-air communications as a minimum. Moreover, the Avn Bn commander would be in the air in a specially equipped Command and Control Huey helicopter monitoring activities and communications exercised by his subordinate units, commanders and air-controllers.

In 1963 it became more apparent to the planners and decision makers in the Pentagon that an official, more permanent solution had to be developed toward converting transport helicopter units into combat helicopter lift units. Hence, during that year, the four H-21 helicopter transport unit were officially redesignated the 118th, 119th 120th and 121st lift helicopter (light) companies. Even the 45th helicopter Transport Bn was renamed and now became the 145th Helicopter Bn. Some additional equipment was authorized. For instance, door mounted, jerry rigged, WW II vintage light machine guns were replaced with new M-60 MGs in both cargo door openings of the helicopters. Additionally, notable personnel changes took place. For the first time the Army recognized the need for additional personnel to man the guns and provided infantry men from the 25th Inf Division to relieve the helicopter units of those tasks . Finally, aviation unit cooks, bakers, clerks and mechanics got a break after having gallantly performed that task on an 'additional-duty' basis.

As early as 1962, it became apparent that most officer aviators arriving in Vietnam as replacements were from the combat arms branches, while the number of warrant officer replacements remained nearly unchanged, the same thing was true at Bn level. Positions, formerly occupied by transportation corps officers, were now being filled with officer aviators from any of the branches authorized pilots. A concept, born of experience on the ground in Vietnam, had now been officially adopted by the Army: Organization and integration of helicopter lift units into the Army force-structure with an assigned combat support mission- a concept, beyond the scope of any originally envisioned mission for the former helicopter transport

companies, had now become a reality.

The final step of converting H-21 transportation helicopter units into tactical lift companies came with the introduction of the Huey helicopter into these units. The last H-21 helicopters were replaced with Hueys in May of 1964. It was the end of an era for transportation helicopter units in Vietnam. A new organization, outfitted with new equipment, guided by newly developed doctrine and manned by aviation personnel, representing all combat arms and some combat support and combat service support branches, was now the proprietor of helicopter lift companies. But the transition was not quite complete. Newly assigned battalion and company commanders first had to become familiar with their new combat command environment. All were eager, some were receptive to acquire new skills and expand their knowledge based on lessons learned by their predecessors. Others felt that an orientation combined with previous experience was sufficient to make them instant experts on combat helicopter operations.

Moreover, back in the States the US Army had initiated a program of organizing new helicopter lift companies around the turbine-powered Huey helicopter which had just recently become available in greater numbers within the Army inventory. Based on experience gained in Vietnam, these units were assigned a helicopter gunship platoon in addition to the normal contingent of lift helicopters. These units were commanded by combat arms officers. The first units so organized started to arrive in Vietnam in 1963. To accommodate this rapid expansion of the aviation role, two additional helicopter battalion headquarters were formed and dispatched to Vietnam. One to be assigned to Pleiku in the central highlands and the other was located in Can Tho to take control of aviation assets in the Delta. Introduction of these two battalions and the realignment of aviation units reduced the 145th Bn's span of control as well as provided for a major reduction of responsibility in geographic coverage for that Bn. With the advent of redesignating those units as combat support units, to differentiate from the combat service support status of their predecessor, combat branch aviation commanders started vying for these sought after command positions.

The first such individual to command the 145th Aviation Battalion was LTC Kenneth Mertel. He had been in the aviation business for a number of years and was well known in the aviation community, in part because of his many contributions of articles to *The ARMY AVIATION DIGEST* and other trade magazines. He had already spent nearly a year on the staff of Brigadier (Cider-Joe's) Vietnam Support Command, therefore was intimately familiar with the capabilities of all aviation units in country to include its key personnel.

Ken Mertel was largely responsible for the more direct involvement of his headquarters in operational combat lifts by his subordinate unit. But he also permitted the company commanders 'to run the show' while monitoring the assaults personally from a command and control helicopter, frequently flying in close proximity of the troop carrying helicopter formation. From time to time, he would be in radio contact with the commander or the mission controller during the execution phase of the mission, but he was never known to question the troop lift commander's judgment or interfere while the mission was in progress.

Subsequent 145th Bn commanders were not always ready to permit their subordinate commanders that degree of latitude. And while it is the commander's prerogative to execute his assigned missions the best way he sees fit, situations arose when direct intervention by a commander at the next higher level could have resulted in disaster. History is full of accounts where poor decision-making, combined with lousy judgment calls by commanders or staff members, led to tragic outcomes.

Case in point was a major airmobile operation out of TAN AN in the Mekong Delta in early 1964 when the 120th helicopter company lifted elements of the 9th ARVN Division into a hot LZ in Tan An province. While on final approach, the lift commander, Major Pat Delavan requested and received from his air controller last minute verification of the LZ touch-down point. The touch-down point location had been chosen, practicing standing operating procedure i.e. out of effective enemy small arms range, 300-500 yards

from the nearest tree-lines and in an area that provides the troops some minimal cover upon hitting the LZ, whenever possible. While these final instructions were transmitted, LTC Grandelli, the recently arrived Bn Co, questioned the location of the touch-down point and also insisted that it be relocated closer to the treeline. Pat Delevan countermanded the order by conveniently not hearing his request and landed the troops as planned. While ground-fire was received, no casualties were sustained by the helicopter unit on that day. It took a lot of guts on the part of the helicopter lift mission commander to do what had to be done in order to accomplish the mission with minimum risk to personnel. However, the real question is how frequently have inexperienced commanders been responsible for unnecessary loss of life, limbs and equipment?

That question will probably beg answers from now until the final chapter on Vietnam has been written and the last individual, directly affected by the Vietnam War, has passed on. For all the technology available today, there isn't a box, gadget or micro-chip that can provide answers to a WHAT IF situation. Although, it is interesting to speculate on how many obscene, stupid and dumb decisions could have been avoided, if that war would have been fought without constantly rotating experienced personnel back to the States and by not providing newly arrived commanders the opportunity to re-learn or screw up that which already had been learned the hard way on previous occasions.

Did the April 12, 1964 operation suffer from an infusion of command ineptness, since the new 145th Bn commander had been in country less than two weeks? We will probably never know, unless someone on the scene who was responsible for or had insight into the planning and control exercised that day can and will shed some light on that question.

### **Early Aviation Unit-339th Transportation By Gary E. Earls, Phoenix 30/36 and Roadrunner 5**

My father-in-law, Major Robert Allwine, was the Commander of the 339th Transportation Company when it left Fort Riley, Kansas to go to Viet Nam. I did this interview with him several years ago when Ralph Young was researching early aviation units. Here is the story on how they deployed and arrived in RVN.

On the afternoon of December 31, 1961, the Fort Riley MP's tracked down then CPT. Robert Allwine, the commander of the 339th Transportation Company (Aircraft Maintenance) and delivered him to the quarters of the Commanding General of Fort Riley, Kansas. CPT Allwine had been working with his horses at the post stable. He wasn't allowed to go to his quarters and clean up so he walked into the General's quarters with his work clothes and boots on. The General informed CPT. Allwine that his unit would be sent to Okinawa, as originally planned, or to the Republic of the Philippines, or to the Republic of South Viet Nam. CPT. Allwine replied, " Where, Sir"? The 339th had to be enroute to its new destination within two weeks.

CPT. Allwine summoned his company officers to his quarters to make plans while his wife kept the two youngest children occupied. The oldest daughter, Becky, was instructed to make sandwiches and to keep the coffee coming since planning for this move was going to take some time.. The 339th had twice its normal number of assigned personnel so the officers could select who was going with them to RVN. The 18th Transportation Company (Otter) commanded by a Captain Felix would be going to Viet Nam at the same time as the 339th.

The 339th was shipped to port with the destination listed as "unknown" and were to travel under secret orders. CPT Allwine and an operations sergeant flew ahead of the company to make arrival arrangements. Before they landed at Clark, AFB, the co-pilot came back to CPT Allwine and stated, "Stay on the aircraft and they will tell you where you are going". CPT Allwine and the sergeant were issued passports at Clark,

AFB. The higher command couldn't decide whether to leave a maintenance platoon at Clark and the rest of the company go on to RVN or have a platoon size element go to Viet Nam while the rest of the company stayed at Clark. CPT. Allwine told them to make up their minds since they hadn't planned to separate anything from the rest of the company. Finally the decision was made to send the entire unit to Viet Nam.

The rest of the company were issued passports while enroute to Viet Nam. On February 7, 1962 when the ship docked at Cam Ranh Bay, a General Officer had both units assemble on the deck so he could welcome them to Viet Nam. The news media were living in a hotel that overlooked where the ship had docked. A few days later the New York Times carried a story about the arrival of the two units. So much for operational security.

The 339th off loaded its equipment from the USS Core, an aircraft carrier to LST's for the trip to Nha Trang since CPT. Allwine was told that the roads were unsafe to travel from Cam Ranh Bay to Nha Trang. Nha Trang was selected as their "new home" by higher headquarters. The arrival of the 339th increased the number of Americans in Viet Nam to over one thousand.

The 339th had an U-1 Otter and a CH-21 as organic aircraft. They were to provide aviation maintenance support for all four Corps of Viet Nam. The CH-21 was modified with a .30 caliber machine gun on the nose gear and .50 caliber machine guns in the doors. One time they had to recover a U-1 Otter that had made an emergency landing in a field. A local ARVN unit was to provide security until they recovered the aircraft. At 4:30 in the afternoon the ARVN lieutenant informed Major Allwine that it was time for his unit to leave even though the recovery work wasn't finished. Major Allwine took some of his maintenance personnel to form a defensive perimeter while the rest of the recovery team worked on the aircraft.

Major Allwine, promoted while in RVN was shot at once while flying the Otter when they were going into an airfield. Another time he was flying the CH-21 when they were hit in the gas tank by arrows shot from crossbows.

One of the difficulties they encountered were obtaining aircraft repair parts. Once they patched holes in an aircraft using beer cans as patch material.

For recreation, the company used a boat that was loaned to them by the local advisor's headquarters and the beach near Nha Trang. Because there wasn't a local Army ration breakdown, the mess sergeant was authorized to purchase vegetables, meat, and fish from the local economy. The company began living in tents and later moved to villas in Nha Trang.