

Infantry Battalion Support

“Ash and Trash”

(Not Really)

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When I joined the 4th Infantry Division in 1967, they were in the Central Highlands on a large base camp just south of Pleiku near the Crater Mountains. This was also just east of the Kateka Tea Plantation which was on the west end of the Ia Drang valley famous for the Battle of the Ia Drang Valley from the 1st Cav. Division in '65 (Check the map on page 4).

We had (actually, I had) named the Infantry Battalion support missions as “Ash and Trash”. Now why would I call them “Ash and Trash” missions? I grew up in Columbus, Indiana in an older home that had a coal fired furnace. My Dad often told me take out the ash and the trash. So, that meant go down in the basement and get the ashes out of the furnace, haul them up and, while you were on your way, get the trash and take it to the alley. So that’s how I came to name these missions “Ash and Trash”. We were hauling in good stuff, taking out bad stuff. This name was not meant to be disrespect of the Infantry, just a GI name for a daily mission. Besides, as a wearer of the CIB (Combat Infantryman’s Badge) and as an Infantryman myself, I know and appreciate all they did in Vietnam.

Part of the Infantry Support Missions was to support the Infantry Battalion Fire Bases. In a fire base there were generally a battalion headquarters (or forward operating headquarters), a rifle company, an artillery battery that was in direct support of the battalion, some 4.2 inch or 81mm mortars, a medical aid station, and the battalion forward supply point. When you would go into the fire bases to do your support missions sometimes the battery would be firing in support of the forward troops. Let me tell you, if you’re sitting in the fire base and that battery is firing, the noise is horrific!!! If you can imagine 105mm or a 155mm artillery firing just over your chopper while you’re sitting on the ground and trying to get a little break, the break never happens!

The missions we flew for the battalions were command and control (called C&C), re-supply, fire support and med-evac. Let’s look at each mission in more detail...

Command and control missions: Air assaults were the main reason we would run C&C missions. Generally the battalion commander would not be in the air assault as it went in so you would be on the side or above the air-assault with the battalion commander, field artillery observer (FO), and VIP’s, etc. He would observe and use some command and control during the assaults. Also, you might have visiting commanders who wanted to go out and see what was going on.

C&C missions also involved VIP’s, such as Bob Hope or somebody like that who might be in the area; or a brigade commander or a division commander. C&C missions delivered “Donut Dollies”. A “Donut Dolly” was a Red Cross employee who would sometimes come out to the Battalion Fire Bases. They never, ever went down to the rifle

company positions. They would bring sundry packs for the troops. Sundry packs had cookies, candy, cigarettes and personal items like shaving cream, aftershave, etc. in them. Sundry packs were a nice item to receive when the “Donut Dollies” passed them out to the troops. Helicopter crews got them too!

Infantry Battalion Re-supply: When we did re-supply missions they were always heavy loads because you wanted to get as much out as you could in one load. We would take out everything, ammo, C rations, water, first aid kits, etc., etc. Sometimes we would sling load these items if we could. Sling load was a good way to get supplies out to the infantry troops in the field.

Often, when you went from the fire base out forward to the rifle companies, you would encounter tight landing zones. Once I was asked to go to a rifle company who said they had a really fine LZ for me to use. As I finished my final approach, I saw that they had cleared this LZ under a large group of trees (look at the photos on page 5). While I could fly in to the landing zone, I couldn't turn around to fly back out. I couldn't do a hovering turn to take off and get out of there. So, on this particular landing zone I had to back out tail rotor first and do a max-back-up take off. It was a really interesting maneuver. You would say to your crew chief and door gunner, “Clear me on the way out”. They would say back to you “a little left, a little right, hold it right there, oh, no, a limb, a little left”. You would try to clear your tail rotor all the way out. As soon as you were back out you would do a pedal turn, pull full power and get out of there.

We also had an unfortunate job when on these missions. Had the rifle company been in enemy contact they might also ask you to carry out body bags to the division morgue which was a refrigerated trailer that was back at the base camp. That was a really sad end to a mission.

Sometimes you would find a rifle company that had no landing zone. That was a difficult mission because you would hover, if you could hover, near them and they would say, “Go ahead and drop the goodies”. You would drop the ammo, food, and water and hope they would survive the fall. On some occasions, a rifle company would be near an elephant grass area that you could hover over 8 to 10 feet above the ground to dump the load for a soft landing. That was a better way to get supplies when they didn't have a landing zone.

Fire Support Missions: An important part of our mission was to take the forward observer from the battery out to direct artillery fire. This was always a good mission. Generally, when you did this you would have some operations people from the battalion or the battalion commander onboard. We would be directing artillery fire in support of Infantry troops on the ground. Quite often when you flew back to the fire base you had to sometimes fly under where the artillery was firing in order to land. Most fire bases had only one place to land. It was an exciting time to trust that the artillery would not drop their angle of fire any at all as you flew under it to land.

Medical Evacuation Missions: This was a most essential mission. Med Evac missions almost always came when the troops were in contact with the enemy and, therefore, it would be a hot LZ. As you would expect, regular Huey pilots and crews had no medical equipment on board and we often had no medics. If we could, on a Med Evac mission, we would try to get a unit medic at the battalion fire base to come along. If not, then we went ahead and flew the mission anyway. Often when you would run Med Evac missions you would pick up troops that were bleeding. Also, they had been in the woods for a long time so the smell of blood and the injured person would be horrific. The blood would be all over the floor of the Huey. On one mission, there was so much blood on the floor that it ran toward the front of the chopper as I nosed it over to accelerate and gain air speed. The blood ran across the floor of the Huey and down into the chin bubble. My co-pilot and I were getting sick from that bloody smell. We were just lucky to make it back to the fire base to get the guy some treatment at the fire base medics. They almost always had a good medical station at the fire bases. We were quick to grab some 5 gallon cans of water and clean the chopper out. That was an awful story, I know, but it was part of being a Huey pilot in the 4th Infantry Division in the Central Highlands supporting our good Infantry troops in the field.

Most of the Infantry support missions were greatly appreciated. You can't imagine how good it feels to have a wounded Infantryman praising you for getting him out of the fire fight or to be delivering a Thanksgiving meal to the troops way out in the Ia Drang valley. Taking them turkey, gravy, dressing and fresh fruit was such a treat. It was just very satisfying. Infantry support missions were wonderful things to do and the Huey was an essential vehicle for fighting the NVA in the Central Highlands of Vietnam.

The Area of Operation (AO) for the “Infantry Battalion Support Missions” story is shown in the red oval below.



