

196th Assault Support Helicopter Company – “Flippers” Unit History

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Administrative Officer and Unit Historian

March-September 1969

Operational Pilot- March 1969- June 1970

268th Combat Aviation Battalion Assistant Operations Officer June – September 1970

Organization and movement to Vietnam:

The 196th was originally constituted on 23 September 1942 as the 2037th Quartermaster Truck Company at Walla Walla, Washington. Its Vietnam service began when the unit was re-designated the 196th Assault Support Helicopter Company (ASH) on 4 May 1966 and activated at Fort Sill, OK on 3 July 1966. The first commander of the 196th ASHC was Major James E. Martin who established the company's motto of “We Haul It All” and the call sign of “Flipper.” At that time there was a popular TV show with a dolphin named “Flipper” as the hero.

Following an infusion of personnel, equipment and training, the advance party departed Fort Sill via U.S. Air Force C-130 aircraft on 20 January 1967 and arrived in Nha Trang, RVN on 21 January 1967. This party consisted of four commissioned officers, two warrant officers and thirty enlisted men who would later find themselves very busy during their first five weeks in country.

Back at Alameda, CA, the rest of the company, equipment and aircraft and the accompanying 610th Transportation Detachment (the assigned aviation maintenance detachment), who had been with the helicopters since departing Fort Sill, OK, pulled away from Alameda, CA on 22 Feb 1967 and sailed for the Republic of Vietnam on the USS Croatan.

In the meantime, the advance party had moved to Lane Army Heliport, An Son, RVN, approximately 12 miles northwest of the port city of Qhi Nhon. Upon arrival the unit was given an area on the north side of the compound as its company area. The advance party, with little, if any assistance, cleared foliage, laid cement foundations and erected buildings for the mess hall, supply room and four billets before the main body arrived.

The officer hootches were built on the top of a hill on the west side of their assigned area at the base of several tall hills. The Supply Room, enlisted barracks and Mess Hall were built in the middle and the flight line was built on the east side of the 196th compound.

All Equipment, with the exception of aircraft, was moved to Lane Army Heliport by the unit and by 10 March 1967 the 196th Assault Support Helicopter Company and 610th Transportation Detachment (which later in 1969 was deactivated and

personnel transferred into the 196th as the Maintenance Platoon) had completed the basic set up of the unit in anticipation of receiving the rest of the company.

The USS Croatan finally dropped anchor in Vung Tau Harbor, Vietnam on 15 March 1967. The CH-47A helicopters were “de-bagged”, assembled, flown off the carrier and delivered directly to Lane Army Heliport. The last Chinook arrived at Lane AHP on 23 March 1967.

On 31 March 1967 a unit formation was held and the 17th Combat Aviation Group (CAG) Commander declared the 196th/610th operational. No aviation unit had ever deployed to RVN, built their area and become operational in such a short amount of time. The First combat missions were subsequently flown in April 1967.

Initially the 196th ASHC was assigned to the 10th Combat Aviation Battalion based in Dong Ba Thin. Subsequently, in January 1969 the 196th ASHC was assigned to the 268th Combat Aviation Battalion “Black Lightning” based at Phu Hiep AAF which was assigned to the 17th Combat Aviation Group (Nha Trang) and the 1st Aviation Brigade “Golden Hawks” to which it remained for the remainder of its Vietnam service.

Other units assigned to the 268th CAB included the 61st Assault Helicopter Company (AHC), 129th AHC, 134th AHC, and the 238th Aerial Weapons Company (AWC) all flying UH-1’s and/or AH-1’s, 180th ASHC (a sister Chinook Company) and the 355th Heavy Lift Helicopter Company flying the CH-54 Skycrane.

With individual tours of duty established at 12 months, it was imperative that 196th personnel had to be “traded” to other existing in-country units in order to bring in experienced aircrews and balance the rotation of aircrews out of Vietnam at the end of their 12 months of service. This meant many original aircrews that came to Vietnam with the 196th would have to be transferred to other units. This began immediately and actually became part of an ongoing process throughout the war as units were transferred in and out of Vietnam.

Unit Insignia:

The 196th insignia consisted of an oval-shaped patch five inches wide and 3.75 inches high. It had a 0.5 inch royal blue border with “196th A.S.H.C embroidered on top and “WE HAUL IT ALL” on the bottom. The center of the patch had a “whimsical/cartoonish” drawing of a Chinook carrying a world globe in a cargo net.

The 268th Combat Aviation Battalion insignia was a silver metal and enamel device consisting of silver metal winged triskelion, one branch up and charged with a vertical black lightning bolt, on a silver background (the black lightning bolt edged silver where it crosses the background) the wings resting on a continuous silver

metal scroll with the inscription in black letters "STATIM NOS AGIMUS." The word "NOS," at the top, between the wings and the words "STATIM AGIMUS," in base. SYMBOLISM: The silver triskelion simulates the rotor blades of a helicopter and with the wings refers to the mission of the unit. The color black, symbolic of constancy and wisdom, and silver, symbolic of speed and urgency, refers to the "Do it Now" spirit of the unit, the literal translation of the motto "Statim Nos Agimus" being "We do it immediately!"

Area of Operations:

Until the 196th ASHC was transferred to Chu Lai to support the Americal Division in I Corps in July 1970, the primary area of operations (AO) was II Corps. This was also commonly known as the Central Highlands.

II Corps

This was the largest geographical operational area in South Vietnam. On the coast of the South China Sea the southern most boundary was just south of Phan Thiet. The northern most point was approximately 260 nautical miles north to a point between LZ English (Bong Son) and Quang Nai. The northernmost boundary then extended northwest approximately 100 nautical miles to the Laotian border just north of Dak Pek. From this point II Corps followed the South Vietnam border between Laos and Cambodia approximately 190 nautical miles, straight-line to a point on the Cambodian border just west of Bu Krak, South Vietnam. From this point the operational boundary extended back to the South China Sea near Phan Thiet approximately 120 nautical miles. Mathematically this calculates to an AO of approximately 24,000 square miles. The 196th Flippers was one of four CH-47 Chinook companies that were tasked to fly throughout this AO on a daily basis providing support to the many units assigned to this area.

Some of the major and memorable cities and bases in II Corps included Phan Thiet, Phan Rang, Cam Ranh Bay, Nha Trang, Ninh Hoa, Tuy Hoa (AFB), Qui Nhon, Lane Army Helipoint, Phu Cat (AFB), LZ Uplift, Bong Son, LZ English along the South China Sea.

Bases and cities in the center of this area (which were few and far between) included Dalat, Cheo Reo, and An Khe.

Some particularly interesting areas that the Flippers of the 196th experienced frequently were the An Khe Pass and the Mang Yang Pass, both on Highway 19, the only resupply route by ground for these two major bases, as well as the Ia Drang Valley and the Bong Son Valley.

The An Khe Pass was the scene of many ambushes of supply convoys traveling from Qui Nhon to An Khe or Pleiku. In less than 10 miles the highway climbed from the

valley floor of 150 feet MSL to more than 1,600 with many hairpin curves, forcing convoys to travel very slowly....perfect for attacks from the steep, jungle-covered mountainsides.

The Mang Yang Pass which was the site of the massacre of the French Mobile Force 100 in the early 1950's Indochina War that saw approximately 5,000 French soldiers surrounded, killed and buried in one meter square graves with lye poured on the graves on the south side of Highway 19, creating a checkerboard appearance from the sky.

The Ia Drang Valley was approximately 30 miles southwest of Pleiku and at the base of the Chu Pong Massive on the Cambodian border. This valley was the site of one of the first major battles of the Vietnam War in October and November 1965 and made famous by the book written by LT. General (then LTC) Hal Moore and Joseph Galloway, and movie starring Mel Gibson, "We Were Soldiers Once...and Young. During this early battle 234 young Americans would lose their lives and this area would be a constant source of enemy attacks on Pleiku and many surrounding bases throughout the war.

The Bong Son Valley, just ten miles west of the coast of the South China Sea also served as the site of another major battle in 1966 and also included then Col Hal Moore as a brigade commander when he lead an attack by the 1st Cavalry against the 22nd Regiment of the NVA and successfully defeated them during a long battle that extended from the Bong Son Valley into the Kim Son Valley to the west and ended in a area known as the "Crows Foot" at the south end of the Kim Son Valley.

Cities and bases along or near the Cambodian/Lation borders included Bu Krak, Duc Lap, Ban Me Thuot, Plei Me, Oasis, Plei Djereng and New Plei Djereng, Pleiku, Camp Holloway, Hensel AAF, Kontum, Polei Kleng, Dak To, Dak Seang and Dak Pek.

Throughout the war United States Army Vietnam (USARV) periodically transferred the locations of infantry divisions within the country. During its time in II Corps the 196th supported such units as the 173rd Airborne Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, 101st Airborne Division, 5th Special Forces, Republic of Korea Army Tiger, Whitehorse and Capitol Divisions and the various Army of Vietnam (ARVN) units in the area.

The vast majority of missions flown by the 196th were single ship resupply missions, aka "ash and trash." The missions involved flying supplies (food, water, mail, and ammunition to infantry and artillery units in the field, observation posts and artillery bases throughout the AO. As single ship missions, we would sometimes never see another aircraft in the area and spend hour upon hour flying over uninhabited jungle and mountains. This required excellent navigational skills as there were seldom any navigational radio beacons to assist. Each flight crew was issued a large map case with maps covering all of Vietnam in the event they had to be diverted from the assigned mission to another completely different sector of II Corps or beyond.

The Flippers regularly were also tasked to take part in combat assaults providing massive troop insertions (33 infantry troops per aircraft) immediately behind initial Huey troop insertions (8-10 infantry troops per aircraft). These missions were most often flown in partnership with one of the many UH-1 Huey companies in the area (129th AHC Bulldogs / Cobras, 134th Demons / Devils, 61st AHC Lucky Stars / Starblazers, or 155th AHC Falcons / Stagecoach)

At times the Flippers were also tasked with special missions supporting the U. S. Air Force and CIA. One such mission required the aircraft to have all U.S. Army markings removed and the crew to remove all identification. Their mission turned out to be the installation of special monitoring equipment on a mountaintop in Laos that later provided support of bombing missions and other missions in North Vietnam.

Special missions included spraying "Agent Orange" along Highway 19 and the perimeters of military bases in the AO, dropping loads of CS gas canisters along the various resupply routes of the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong, and dropping loads of "Phu Gas" (a potent mixture of napalm and aviation gasoline) on NVA/VC strongholds, mountain caves and heavily booby-trapped supply bases.

Other frequent missions included aircraft recovery of Huey and Cobra helicopters that had been shot down or were forced down due to engine failures or other maintenance problems.

The most rewarding missions were the Search and Rescue (SAR) of downed aircrews when they were successful. Unfortunately these were frequently not successful.

The most devastating loss to the 196th ASHC during the entire Vietnam War occurred on 16 July 1969 when a maintenance test flight ended in the catastrophic loss of Flipper "Balls One" (aircraft #001). The entire crew of seven was lost when the CH-47 suddenly began climbing as it was nearing its landing. The aircraft climbed, nose first, went inverted and crashed nose first into the ground killing all seven crew and maintenance personnel.

At first many thought the aircraft had been shot down, but the official accident investigation determined the aircraft had experienced a system failure within its hydraulic flight control system. The crew lost that day included 2Lt Jack Leon Price (after completing his first tour as a Warrant Officer, Jack attended OCS with the intention of pursuing a full career in the U.S. Army as a Commissioned Officer), CW2 Kenneth Max Willis, Specialist 4 Elwin Singleton, Specialist 4 Arthur Allison, Specialist 4 Darrell Hurt, Specialist 4 Ronald Hoff, and Specialist 4 Johnny Kidd.

During April 1970 the Flippers were heavily involved in a large movement of forces in preparation for the invasion (incursion) of U.S. forces in Cambodia. The actual

incursion occurred beginning on 5 May 1970 and carried on for several days of combat operations. The 196th was deeply involved in the operation, providing at least six CH-47's daily for either direct combat missions or carrying back captured weapons, ammunition and supplies from the LZ's about 20 miles inside the Cambodian border west of Pleiku.

I Corps

In June 1970 the 196th ASHC was transferred to Chu Lai in I Corps to provide primary support to the Americal Division and other units throughout I Corps. They remained there until February 1971 when they were redeployed to the United States after serving a very honorable four years of combat.

Flipper Values:

Throughout their time in Vietnam, the Flippers maintained an excellent reputation of mission accomplishment and taking care of the men on the ground. They believed strongly in doing whatever it took to get their missions completed successfully.

At times Flippers ignored standing rules that CH-47's were not to be the initial aircraft inserting troops on combat assaults or taking the last elements of troops out of LZ's. If there were lives on the line, Flippers could be counted upon to do what it took to provide the best support possible for the ground troops and go above and beyond their duty get the job done. This was very much appreciated by those units on the ground.

After serving with the 196th, the writer was transferred to the HQ of the 268th CAB to serve as Assistant Operations Officer. While serving in this position, my responsibility was to coordinate and assign missions for all the aviation units of the 268th. Frequently when in contact with the ground unit being supported, it was not unusual to receive the request to assign the mission to the Flippers. When asked why, the response was "We know they will get the job done!"

And the Flippers did!

Reassignment Stateside:

In February 1971, the 196th ASHC redeployed to the United States and was assigned a new home base at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. On 4 June 1987 the 218th Medium Helicopter Battalion was provisionally activated under the "Army of Excellence." Following this, on 1 September 1987, the 196th ASHC became one of two CH-47 units assigned to this new battalion. Later in 1988, when the Army converted aviation units to the regimental designation system, the unit was re-designated as Alpha Company, 2nd Battalion, 159th Aviation Regiment.

The now re-designated Flippers deployed in support of “Operation Just Cause” (Panama) from 7 November 1989 through 11 January 1990 and again for “Operation Desert Shield / Desert Storm” (Southwest Asia) from 17 September 1990 through 11 April 1991. When Hurricane Andrew struck southern Florida in September 1992, the Flippers were the first to arrive in Miami and begin rapid transport of essential supplies.

For accomplishing over 300 flight hours and transporting several hundred thousand pounds of relief supplies to needy Florida residents, members of Charlie Company received the Humanitarian Service Medal.

When the 2nd Battalion, 159th Aviation Regiment was deactivated in September 1996, the unit became Alpha Company, 159th Aviation Regiment. Shortly thereafter the unit was re-designated Charlie Company, 159th Aviation Regiment, directly subordinate to the 18th Aviation Brigade, 18th Airborne Corps (Airborne).

When Hurricane Mitch devastated several countries in Central America, the Flippers deployed to Honduras from 8 November 1998 through 8 February 1999. For exceptional service to the people of Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, members of Charlie Company received the Joint Service Achievement Medal and the Humanitarian Service Medal.

The Flippers participated in multiple major peacetime training exercises, requiring self-deployment by air, and providing medium helicopter combat service support to the ground commander. The primary mission of the Flippers was to provide worldwide medium airlift capability in support of the 18th Airborne Corps, and was based out of Simmons Army Airfield, Fort Bragg, North Carolina. This mission took the Flippers to the Middle East in support of operations for the invasion and occupation of Iraq in as late as 2005.

The most recent update is that the Flippers are still flying and serving actively as B Company, 3-82nd Aviation Regiment at Fort Bragg, NC.

Officers serving with the 196th ASHC during Vietnam:

Commanding Officers in Vietnam (incomplete list):

Major James E. Martin – 1966-67

Major Vandernoort – 1968-69

Major Ralph Stone – 1969

Major Harold D. Zumbro – 1960-1970

Major John Barton – 1970

Pilots (incomplete list): Source – VHPA current and potential members and personal archives of Darrell Jagers

Kenneth R. Anderson-60-70
Jimmie D. Arnold – 68-69
Timothy J. Arnold – 60-70
George J. Barton - 67-68
John F. Baylin -69
Lacie M. Belk -69-70
James P. “Jim” Bell -69-70
Nelson E. Bell -67
James E. Bennett -69-70
Eric F. Benton -69
Richard D. Biggs -67
Kenneth W. Bording -68-69
Jimmie C. Bornheim -67
Hugh W. Brigham -67-68
Richard E. Brown -67
Theodore M. Brown -70-71
Terry L. Butler -70
Peter B. Caffall -70-71
James R. Callen -67
Jack J. Carey -69-70
George W. Causey -67-68
Allen B. Causseaux -67-68
Angelo S. Cetrano -67
Eugene E. “Gene” Chalecki-68-69
Vernon D. Childers -69-70
Floyd M. Clifton -67
Peter R. Coggins -68-69
Clayton “Les” Coker -68-69
James E. “Jim” Coleman-69-70
William F. Conroy -67
Larry W. Craft -67
William L. Davis III -69-70
William M. Dempsey -67-68
Arthur Dimsdle -67
William D. “Bill” Dubuisson, Jr.-69-70
Richard L. Duley -70
Roger Lee Dunford -68-69
David H. Edwards -67
Javier F. “Joe” Espejo -69
William Gordon Everhart -68
Ronald J. Exley -69-70
Charles S. Ferber -67

Monty D. Febuary -69-70
Charles S. Ferber -67
Kingdon L. Ferris -68-69
Ronald B. Frye -67
Richard "Dick" Gerard-68-69
James C. Gibbs, Jr. -68-69
Jon D. Gibson -68-69
James D. Geyer -68-69
Lawrence "Larry" Heikennan-68-69
Allan W. Hammerbeck-67
Richard D Hammons -67-68
Valentine Hampton -67
Roy A. Heibel -68-69
David E. Helton -68-69
Peter R. Hendon -69-70
Howell W. Henson -69
Todd Herrick -70
David Hertle -69
Jimmie C. Herzfeld -67-68
Kenneth W. Hill -68-69
Samuel D. "Sam" Holleman -69-70
Joseph Holmes, Jr. -69-69
Bobby L. Holtzclaw -67-68
Steven P. Houston -69-70
Roger D. Huffaker -67
John R. Irwin -70
Darrell L. "Jag" Jagers-69-70
Martin A. Jetton -67
Charles D. Jochetz -70
John M. Kiel -70
William L. "Skip" King -69-70
Charles A. Knause -67-68
Robert L. Kormelink -68-69
Robert M. "Bob" Larsen-72-74
Michael D. Lazares -69-70
Billy W. Lindsey -67
Donald Livingston -67-68
Frederick P. Loehmer-69-70
David J. Ludovissie -68-69
Michael J. "Mac" Macaluso-68-69
Charles H. "Chuck" Mathews-67
Leroy W. McCall -67
Alan C. Miller 69-70
Mervin W. "Jake" Miller-67-68
George A. Moore -67-68
Obie D. Mullins, Sr -69

Robert M. Neal -67
Alan J. Orbesen -68-69
William C. "Bill" O'Halloran-69-70
John S. Olsen -68-69
Marc H. Pasewalk -70
William E. "Bill" Pittman-67-68
James G. Pratt -69
Jack Leon Price -69 (KIA)
Rodney M. Priebe -69-70
Wilbert O. "Will" Radford-67-68, 69
Roger C. Randals -68-69
Joseph L. "Joe" Riley-68
John L. Rioux -68-69
Joseph P. "Pat" Robertson-69-70
Marion J. Rogers -67
A Ross Russell -67-68
Joseph R. Schmidt -67
Robert E. Shirley -67, 68-69
Harold M. "Huck" Smith-69-70
Bobby W. Springer -68-69
Williard S. "Bill" Squire, Jr.-69-70
Edward W. Stanhope-68-69
Norman L. Stanley -67
Clyde R. Stoycoff -68-69
James R. Taplin -67, 69
Robert D. "Bob" Thompson-70
William C. "Bill" Thompson-68-69
James B. Travis, Jr -68-69
Roger J. Treves -68-69
Delvin R. Trost -69-70
John S. Tulloch -67-68
Nathan G. Vidrine -67-68
John J. Wachter -69-70
Jimmy L. "Jim" Walters-69-70
Patrick J. Welsh -69-70
Kenneth Max Willis -69 (KIA)
Donald T. Wilson -71-72