

THE 162nd AVIATION COMPANY [ASSAULT HELICOPTER]

by Stan Gause

1965-1972



Introduction

The 162nd Aviation Company (AML), later the 162nd Assault Helicopter Company, was one of the earlier aviation companies to arrive in Vietnam after the ground troop build up began in 1965. The company subsequently built a sterling record as an assault helicopter unit.

This history is dedicated to the men of the 162nd who gave their lives in the service of their country. But for the hand of fate, anyone of us could have easily been in their place. We still wonder after all these years why some were chosen and others not. Only God knows the answer. As those who survived, we owe a tremendous debt to those who did not come back. Everything we do, every breath we take, and every memory we have, we owe in some part to those who are not here. It is up to us to conduct our lives so as to make their sacrifice worthwhile, honor their memory and make sure they are not forgotten.

Also not to be forgotten are the men who made everything possible—the maintenance crews. Much has been said about the pilots who flew the aircraft but not much about the people who kept them in the air. Theirs was often an unappreciated task. However, they did a magnificent job. The performance of the crew chiefs and maintenance people was summed up by one general this way:

“The super performance did not stop with the pilots. The maintainers achieved the miraculous...crew chiefs flew all day and worked on their birds all night. The scene round any company maintenance detachment when the birds staggered home in the evenings was a sight to behold. The [maintenance crews](#) rolled out, turned on the lights, worked with flashlights, worked by feel, worked any way, in the rain, in high winds and dust storms, all night long if necessary to patch their aircraft, pull the required inspections, correct deficiencies and get them back on the line by next morning. Night test fights, prohibited in peacetime, were the rule rather than the exception.”

Finally, it is important to realize that an assault helicopter unit was a team in which everyone had a vital role to play. Everyone was important, right down to the cooks and mail clerk—maybe especially the cooks and mail clerk!

The Beginning

The 162nd Aviation Company (Air Mobile Light) was constituted on 31 August 1965 in the regular army and activated on 1 September 1965 at Ft. Benning, Georgia. The unit formed up, received its men after a rather difficult time rounding up a full complement of pilots and maintenance personnel and began training in early December with the 10th Aviation Group using their aircraft (B model Hueys) and equipment. Small groups of men were sent to Ft. Rucker and Ft. Bragg for additional specialized training.

Most pilots received only 20 or so hours of training with the unit prior to shipping out to Vietnam. However, virtually all of them had significant prior experience with an average of 2100 hours each. Many were dual rated and had over 3,000 hours of flight time so they didn't need a great deal of training. After completion of training in B models each pilot had a one hour D (or C) model transition and they were ready to go.

Many of the enlisted men and even some of the officers were new to the army. Cpt Ronald Crown, the flight surgeon, had only recently been drafted and on one of his first days at Ft. Benning he "borrowed" a jeep parked near the 162nd area to go to the PX. However, the jeep belonged to another unit and was reported stolen. The MP's quickly located the jeep, apprehended "Doc" Crown and brought him back to the 162nd compound for disciplinary action. Of course, "Doc" Crown, being just drafted, knew nothing of military life and assumed all army vehicles were communal property to be used by anyone in the army. By his reasoning, since he was in the army, he was entitled to use an army jeep.

Organization

The 162nd had an initial authorized strength of 170 men (including 41 warrant officers and 14 officers). Equipment consisted of 39 vehicles and 25 aircraft—later increased to 31, including eight gunships. The company also had three attached direct support units. These were the 407th Transportation Detachment for direct support maintenance with an authorized strength of 2 officers and 70 men, the 450th Signal Detachment for avionics support with an authorized strength of one officer and 8 men, and the 758th Medical Detachment with a flight surgeon and 7 other medical personnel. Roughly, 80% of the entire complement of enlisted men were regular army and 20% were draftees.

At this point, the war in Vietnam was rapidly heating up and the need for pilots far exceeded the supply. A decision had recently been made to dramatically increase the number of pilots trained but it required approximately a year to produce new pilots and the pipeline was nowhere near full. Consequently, the 162nd, and other units formed in late 1965 and 1966, had a difficult time obtaining pilots. Anyone with a set of wings, Major and below, was press-ganged into cockpit duty. Initially at Ft. Benning the original aviator staffing was 26 Majors, mostly fixed wing aviators who had gone through the rotary wing transition course, 13 Captains, 2 Lieutenants (Ed Brock and Tom Turner) and not a single Warrant Officer. Some of the pilots were not even checked out in a Huey.

However, the shortage of pilots was only part of the problem. Skilled mechanics, crew chiefs, avionics and armament specialists were also in critical demand. Twenty-six Private E-2 crew chiefs (all draftees) were bussed to the 162nd straight out of maintenance school at Ft. Rucker on October 29, 1965. There were only 3 maintenance personnel with any experience—two of them were civilian maintenance technical reps and one was a gunship CE (crew chief).

The aviator staffing shortly after arrival in Vietnam consisted of 28 Majors, 18 Captains, 3 Lieutenants and 4 Warrant Officers. There were Majors all over the place—some weren't even Aircraft Commanders. There were probably enough Majors in the 162nd to fill all the Major slots in the entire First Aviation Brigade at that time! The pilots used to joke that "the last one out of the shower had to be the leader" and "every major gets an airplane". Of course, they all understood the shortage of pilots and proceeded to have a good time flying while they still had the opportunity.

At Ft. Benning the company had chosen the call sign “Dragon” but upon arriving in Vietnam it was learned that some administrative outfit in Saigon was using that call sign. The men of the 162nd then chose the call sign “Vulture” for the two slick platoons and maintenance and “Copperheads” for the gun platoon. The first company patch was square with a flying vulture holding a helicopter. This was simplified in December 1967 when the round Vulture and Copperhead patches were adopted. Later, in 1970, the maintenance platoon came to be known as the “Hangar Rats” and had their own patch. Not to be outdone, the lift platoons also had their own patch—“Executioners” for the 1st and “Easy Riders” for the 2nd platoon. The motto for the company, emblazoned on the later Vulture patch was “STS” for “Set the Standard”, or perhaps as some folks thought more appropriate “Slicker Than S----.”

During its tour in Vietnam, the 162nd had a total of 15 commanding officers as shown below:

<u>Commanding Officer</u>	<u>Dates of Command</u>
Major Joseph E. Pfluger	Sept 65-Jun 66
Major Albert H. (Rip) Roughen	Jun 66-Dec 66
LTC Gerald W. Kirklighter	Dec 66-Apr 67
Major Neal C. Petree, Jr.	Apr 67-Aug 67
Major Stokely L. Wilson	Aug 67-Jan 68
Major James E. Thompson	Jan 68-May 68
Major Ronald K. Andreson	May 68-Nov 68
Major Robert K. Wright	Nov 68-May 69
Major George W. Venti	May 69-Oct 69
Major Kenneth D. Loveless	Oct 69-May 70
Major Thomas E. Beauchamp	May 70-Sept 70
Major Walter B. Moore	Sept 70-Mar 71
Major Hudson Schnell	Mar 71-Aug 71
Major Ronald A. Brooks	Aug 71-Jan 72
Major Ronald L. Grooms	Jan 72-Apr 72

The Mission

Upon arrival in country on February 3rd, 1966, the 162nd was sent to Phouc Vinh, just north of Saigon, and assigned to the 11th Combat Aviation Battalion (CAB) at Phu Loi which supported the First Infantry Division in the III Corps area. On 1 November 1968, the company was relocated to Dong Tam in the upper Delta region and assigned to the 214th CAB which was the direct support aviation battalion for the 9th Infantry Division. Upon the withdrawal of the 9th Division from Vietnam in August 1969, the 162nd was assigned to the 13th CAB in the Mekong Delta and relocated to Can Tho.

The period at Can Tho saw a shift in type of missions flown from the previous emphasis on Combat Assaults and related support to more ash & trash type missions with fewer CAs and a variety of sometimes unusual tasks. After the pullout of the 9th Division (parts of the division did not leave until early 1970) there were no US infantry units left in the Delta, and the Vultures primarily supported ARVN units. This included the 5th, 9th and 21st ARVN Infantry Divisions as well as other Vietnamese units throughout the IV Corps area until the company stood down in April 1972. The 162nd had the distinction of being the last assault helicopter unit in the Delta.

During its six years of service in Vietnam, the 162nd supported a wide variety of US, Vietnamese and free world forces throughout the III and IV Corps area. Although the company was in direct support of two US divisions for much of the time, it was frequently called on to support many other units. Units supported included:

First Infantry Division (The Big Red One)
4th Infantry Division
9th Infantry Division
3rd Brigade, 101st Airborne Division
25th Infantry Division
173rd Airborne Brigade
196th Light Infantry Brigade
199th Light Infantry Brigade
11th Armored Cavalry Regiment
5th Special Forces—"A Teams" and Mike (Mobile Strike) Force units
Navy SEALs
1st Australian Task Force
5th, 7th, 9th and 21st ARVN Divisions
Thai Expeditionary Force
US Embassy in Cambodia
CIA (Operation Phoenix)
Local Province authorities
Delta Regional Assistance Command
Various artillery, engineer and other II Field Force units

1966

Major Joseph (Gentleman Joe) Pfluger, a former marine and long-time helicopter pilot who had flown H-19's in the Korean War, was the first commanding officer. He joined the unit in September 1965 and took the company through deployment and the first few months in Vietnam. He relinquished command to Major Albert (Rip) Roughen in June who held the position until December when Major (later LTC) Gerald (the Red Baron) Kirklighter assumed command. Major Kirklighter was a big man with noticeably red hair even when cut very short.

Major Pfluger was one of 10 Majors in the company up for promotion to LTC. He later found himself in a rather awkward position when the other 9 Majors made the LTC list and he did not. Despite this, he was a good leader and excellent company commander.

After the Christmas holidays in '65 passed, the company completed last minute preparations for departure from Fort Benning. Late one night in early January, the company departed Benning by bus to the Muscogee County Airport in Columbus, GA to load on to Lockheed Electra aircraft for the flight to Alameda Naval Air Station, CA. Although the aircraft were in standard airline configuration, all of the company personnel were in full combat gear with steel pots and weapons. After takeoff and climb to cruise altitude, more than a few on board commented on the really shallow rate of climb after takeoff and the extensive time spent looking out the windows at the ground below at a very low altitude. The suspicion was that the flight crew might have underestimated the takeoff weight of the plane due to the weight of the full combat gear worn by all on board except them. Despite this slight problem, the flight went well and the company off-loaded from the Electras at "oh dark early" the next morning at Alameda.

Major Pfluger flew to Vietnam with a small advance party while Major Ed Brown, the XO, took the main body of men over on the USMTS Pope.

In typical "hurry up and wait" manner, the company proceeded to dockside at Oakland and boarded the USMTS John Pope for what was expected to be a departure shortly thereafter and deployment to Vietnam by ship. Then two days were spent on board while other units and personnel were boarding, and the company personnel stood at the rail looking across the harbor at the San Francisco skyline - so close and yet unreachable! In addition, the

anticipation of a quick departure on the voyage was related to the fact well known by all on board that their Vietnam tour of duty began when the ship departed - not when it arrived in RVN. (The 25 aircraft had been picked up at the factory, flown to Oakland and loaded onto the carrier Iwo Jima along with an advance party in December).

Some were a bit disappointed with the sendoff from the Oakland pier. Rather than cheering crowds, marching bands and speeches as in the old war movies, the pier was deserted except for a small, lonely-looking Army band. However, the view of the Golden Gate Bridge on the way out of the harbor was a spectacular sight, one still imprinted in the memory of the men who were on the troopship that day.

The trip to Vietnam via Hawaii took 22 days with one stop in Hawaii to disembark troops for the 25th Infantry Division stationed there at the time. It was incredibly boring and there was literally nothing to do but eat, sleep, read and play cards. "Doc" Crown, the flight surgeon, managed to get himself into more trouble on the ship. During the stopover in Hawaii almost everyone went into Honolulu for eight hours of shore leave with instructions to be back at the ship by midnight. Everyone, that is, but "Doc" Crown. He had brought his pump action shotgun along and went back to the fantail and began shooting sea gulls. The ship's Captain asked "Doc" Crown to stop shooting birds while the ship was docked. Another incident occurred later while enroute to Vietnam. "Doc" Crown, Cpt Ronald Miller and several others decided to have a little target practice off the fantail one day. They started by shooting tin cans thrown up in the air but then began picking off the albatrosses that flew nearby. The ships' officers had a fit over this and chewed the group out—something about bringing bad luck if you kill an albatross. (Remember "*The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner*" from high school and why the sailor was cursed?)

Many remember the unscheduled stop near Guam to transfer a man with appendicitis to a small tug boat and the show the troops put on a few days before arrival. The USMTS Pope stopped at Cam Ranh Bay to unload some of the smaller units that had embarked with the company and then on to Vung Tau, arriving on 6 February 1966, where the company offloaded onto LSM's for the trip to the beach. The unit was then flown into Phouc Vinh on three C-130's, a hot, dusty and desolate spot that had been a former French, then ARVN, compound that was now the HQ of the First Brigade, First Infantry Division. Phouc Vinh had been a Japanese airfield called Bung Bung in World War II and then a French airfield in the early 1950's.

The arrival of the main party of the company at [Phouc Vinh](#) was interesting to say the least. When loaded on the C-130s at Vung Tau, all on board were sure it would be a flight of some time before arriving at their destination. However, in approximately 15 to 20 minutes of flying time, the C-130 descended and made an assault landing. When looking out the small windows of the plane, all that could be seen was a cloud of red (laterite) dust swirled up by the reversed props. It gave the impression of landing on Mars instead of Phouc Vinh. After recovering from the effects of the landing, the company [personnel](#) picked up their combat gear and personal gear and disembarked down the rear ramp of the C-130 at their new base camp. As the troops deplaned, they noticed one of the company advance party officers waiting on the ramp for them. When all had deplaned, he formed them up in a column of twos, sort of, and led them over the ramp where the company UH-1's would soon be sitting.

As they proceeded the short distance to the gate of a compound, all of the newly arrived men had experienced the climate of Vietnam for the first time after waiting for an hour or so at the Vung Tau airfield and now in the mid-day heat at Phouc Vinh, and were really feeling the heat and humidity. The cumulative effect of lugging their combat and personal gear off the ship, on and off the planes, and covering the length of the ramp had not only worn them out physically but had put them in a mental frame of mind that was not a happy one. When they arrived at the crudely constructed front gate of their new home, they saw the CO, Major Pfluger, 357 Magnum on his hip, sitting on a jeep with a 1/4 ton trailer behind it. They were glad to see him—until he started laughing

at them—more than a few started feeling otherwise about him and a few choice derogatory words were muttered under their breath. Having no other choice, they walked up to him. As they approached, he continued laughing and then, pointing to the trailer, said “The first one’s on me!” When they got close enough to the trailer, they saw that it was filled with iced down beer. With that first, ice cold beer still going down, they all experienced a great attitude adjustment and gained a greater appreciation for their CO. Some were heard to say that that first beer in Vietnam was the best they ever had.

The aircraft had not yet arrived but the air crews were farmed out to the 116th and 128th AHC’s (the Hornets and Tomahawks) at Phu Loi for a couple of weeks of in-country training. The rest of the company was kept busy constructing facilities and sandbagging hooches. There were a few old French buildings but most facilities had to be built from scratch. Initially most people, including the pilots, spent some of their time filling sand bags and pulling guard duty on the perimeter. Someone built a sand bag loading contraption out of a 55 gallon barrel which made filling the bags a little easier but it was still tough work. Everything got off to a good start but some folks weren’t too happy when a Chinook dropped a conex full of footlockers being sling-loaded in. Major Darwin Schuett brought some jet wing tanks ups from Saigon for use as holding tanks for the showers. It was a bit tricky flying since he couldn’t go faster than 45 knots without causing severe bouncing (due to the aerodynamics of the wing tanks protruding from each side of the cargo area).

The senior pilots, CO, XO and company staff lived in “Majors’ Manor”, a refurbished original French building, and some of the junior ones made their home in “Vultures Gulch”, a converted pig barn that resembled an old west building with a covered wooden walk in front of a dusty/muddy street. Most others lived in GP Medium tents.

The aircraft soon arrived in Vung Tau via aircraft carrier and the crews were ferried over to pick them up. This first complement of aircraft consisted of 17 brand new UH-1D models and 8 UH-1C models. (It is interesting to note that the 162nd had the distinction of being both the first and the last assault helicopter unit in Vietnam to use C model gunships.) On the way back to Phouc Vinh, the entire company was diverted to the Snake Pit (home of the 71st AHC Rattlers), picked up troops and carried out a Combat Assault (CA) at An Loc. What a way to go operational!

The Copperheads had brand new C models with quad 60’s and one 40mm “Chunker”. The C models were the envy of the company’s sister units which still had B model gunships and no chunkers. However, there was a shortage of M-60’s and on the first few CA’s the slick CE’s and gunners used M-14’s fired on automatic. After a few weeks, more M-60’s were available but they were primarily used free-hand, attached to a bungee cord, since the X-23 gun mounts didn’t arrive for a couple more months.

Initially, both the aircraft commander (AC) and crew chief (CE) were assigned to specific aircraft while the pilot (peter pilot, or PP) and door gunner usually rotated from ship to ship. However, in later years only the CE was assigned to a ship although the AC and gunner often tended to fly with the same CE. A peter pilot normally flew with every AC in the company on a rotating basis. A PP flew almost every day for 4-5 months before he was ready for AC. When he was put up for AC, all AC’s in the company voted on whether to grant him that honor.

The Vultures were assigned as direct support for the 1st Brigade of the First Infantry Division. The First Brigade units operating out of Phouc Vinh were the 1st Battalion of the 26th Infantry, 1st of the 28th , and 1st of the 1st. The 162nd worked very closely with these units both at Phouc Vinh and in the field. In addition to the First Infantry Division the Vultures worked with almost any unit operating in III Corps. They worked not only in III Corps but also throughout the area known as War Zone D and the northern Delta.

The grizzled veteran of the group was Major Robert DesJardins who had previously served a tour at Pleiku in the very early stages of the war. He was the resident advisor on how to survive in Vietnam and his pointers probably saved many a pilot and crew.

When the 162nd arrived at Phouc Vinh, it provided the 1st Brigade with a significant air mobility capability -- in more ways than one! At that time, Phouc Vinh was an enclave in Viet Cong held territory to the extent that it was accessible by outside friendly forces only once a month. The rest of the month, it was encircled by VC forces. This was alleviated on a once-a-month basis by a road clearing operation, conducted by the 1st Brigade and supporting forces to open and keep open the road from Phu Loi to allow large (100+) truck convoys to resupply the brigade's isolated location. Included in the mission essential items brought in was a supply of a variety of liquid refreshments for the troops—beer included (on a space available basis of course). Unfortunately, the supply of beer did not always sustain the troops until the next month's delivery by ground. Prior to the arrival of the 162nd and their aircraft, it got more than a little dry towards the end of the month. However, once the Vultures were in place and flying daily combat support (ash and trash) missions to and from down South (Phu Loi, Saigon, etc.), the term airmobile took on a whole new meaning. Seldom, if ever, did an aircraft return from down South without a partial, or even full, load of mission essential liquid refreshments, Budweiser being one of primary importance! The ability of the Vultures to bring in significant quantities all during the month not only boosted troop morale, but also made them very popular - and made "horse trading" for things needed by the company a lot easier.

The first shelling by VC 75 mm pack howitzers in early 1966 was an event not to be forgotten by those who were there. This first attack took place shortly after the arrival of all of the aircraft. Surprisingly, it was predicted by a Special Forces grunt who passed through while catching a ride to go back up North. He told Operations personnel they could expect Charlie to hit within ten days - the attack occurred on the night of the ninth day. The CO's jeep took a direct hit from a 75 mm round and another hit the porch of his hooch but failed to explode. A round also made a direct hit on a conex of washing machines shipped over with the equipment, completely destroying them. Another round severely wounded a very nice paper mache Vulture hanging in front of Vulture's Gulch. Fortunately, it was patched up like new.

The attack set back an early attempt at mosquito control in Majors Manor, a never ending task. A few days before, two residents (Majors Atsushi "Archie" Miyamoto and Sam Patellos) made a significant contribution to this effort by scrounging some screening material that was very hard to come by. First priority was given to the mess hall that had walls that went from the ground up about four feet and a roof supported by poles - otherwise an open air hooch. After being able to screen in the mess hall, they took advantage of having enough left over to put screening in the door and the rear window openings (no window or door, just openings) of their room. When the attack occurred, one of the other occupants of the room forgot about the screening in the excitement of the moment, and made a flying exit out through the rear window opening taking the precious screening with him. Despite the seriousness of the attack, the Vultures were fortunate in that they did not lose any personnel. Charlies' accuracy was such that he bracketed the aircraft ramp by hitting the POL dump at one end and the company compound at the other end - no aircraft were lost or damaged. As a result of the first attack, the filling of sandbags took on number one priority for all of the company. The next day saw the building of many bunkers with what was reported to be thousands of sandbags.

Sometime around mid April, Lt Ed Brock had the dubious distinction of earning the first of many Purple Hearts awarded to the men of 162nd. He was firing the quad-60's on a Copperhead gunship and was hit in the face by shell fragments. Luckily, it was relatively minor and he was back flying within a week or so.

Many of the Majors who came over on the ship with the unit were reassigned during the May-June '66 time frame. These departures were caused primarily by two significant events. The first was the publication of the LTC promotion list in June. At that time, there were 10 Majors in the company that were in the zone for

selection. When the list was published, nine of the 10 made the list for promotion. Shortly after this occurrence, all of those selected were reassigned to other duties, mostly to staffs at USARV, MACV, and other higher HQs. Their replacements in the company were largely company grade officers and WO's arriving from stateside. The second event contributing to the change in the company rank structure was the infusion of members of the 1st Cavalry Division from up North. This was done to avoid a rotation problem when the Cav's first year in country ended since they all came over at the same time in '65. By this action, the Cav personnel sent to units like the 162nd would rotate out before the rest of that unit. Later in the year, the company received another large influx of Majors as assigned pilots were transferred or DEROS'd.

The first combat casualty also occurred in April. Major Darwin Schuett and WO J. D. Tucker were lead ship on a 4 ship CA on April 9th to insert a recon (LRRP) team from the First Infantry in the Courtney Rubber Plantation area south of Xuan Loc. On takeoff from Xuan Loc, Major Schuett's ship (64-13857) had an engine failure, crashed and burned just outside the airfield perimeter. The two pilots received only slight injuries but the CE (SP5 Paul D. Stevens) and gunner (PFC Ronnie R. Lovett), as well as several troops on board, had very serious burns from which some later died. PFC Lovett died from his injuries two days later. God rest his soul.

Everyone seems to have heard the story about a couple of 162nd crew chiefs (apparently flight school dropouts) going to Saigon, stealing a B model and bringing it back to Phouc Vinh. They gave it a new log book and tail number, painted a red dog on the nose and presented it to the 407th Maintenance Co. Who the CE's were remains a mystery—but they should have continued on in flight school!

The Vultures were supporting a battalion of the First Infantry Division on a CA around midyear when a bizarre event occurred. After inserting the troops and resupplying them the slicks were ordered to land in the LZ by the ground commander and were stationed around the battalion's perimeter to use the aircraft's M-60's for perimeter defense. They stayed there all night and part of the next day until higher level commanders found out about it. Luckily they were not attacked during the night. The battalion commander on the ground got into big trouble over that one!

Some folks may remember the DECCA navigation system installed on some of the first aircraft of the 162nd. DECCA worked by triangulating off three ground transmitters. Using DECCA, the pilot could pinpoint his position down to within a few meters in very rough terrain and even at night. However, the DECCA map came in a long strip and the width represented only a few thousand yards. If a ship was flying along the map's vertical axis there was no problem but if it turned to the horizontal axis the aircraft quickly ran off the map and it took some time to load and register the adjoining map into the DECCA system. Despite its limitations, DECCA was used frequently for Long Range Recon Patrol (LRRP) insertions, particularly those involving multiple fake LZ's to confuse the enemy. It was also very handy in helping LRRP teams pinpoint their exact position on the ground.

Major "Rip" Roughen, a "lead magnet" in the air and a hard drinking Irishman at the O Club, was the CO during the last half of 1966. Major Michael Royse, the Operations Officer, recalls flying with him one day to pick up some POWs and being hit by a 50 caliber round in the fuel tank. The round ripped a hole in the bladder and JP-4 was pouring out when they landed. That's when they learned the fuel cell was self-sealing only on the bottom, not the sides. Of course it wasn't very funny to him but the Vultures joked about it for days when Major Roughen later broke an ankle falling off a bar stool at the O Club.

The Vultures supported the First and 25th Infantry Divisions as well as the 173rd Airborne Brigade in Operation Attleboro in the fall of 1966, leading many of the large initial lifts. By this time, the [Vultures](#) had established their reputation as one of the most proficient units conducting combat assaults. Four regiments of NVA regulars had planned to wipe out a Special Forces camp and Mobile Strike Force at Sui Da but were foiled by the

aggressive tactics and rapid airmobile deployment of the US units involved. Over 1,100 enemy were killed in a 4-week period.

Being designated to lead large lifts to kick off Operation Attleboro was just one example. In an earlier similar size operation, Major Ray Holleran led a flight of 90 slicks with supporting gunships and Chinooks. In this operation the Vultures supported the 1st Division in establishing and operating from a forward CP on the Michelin Plantation at the Dau Tieng airfield for the duration of the operation.

Another interesting event occurred in Sept '66. A Copperhead fire team under Lt Ed Brock was supporting the 5th ARVN Division near Phu Loi and managed to single-handedly capture 2 VC. They had spotted 3 VC who were shooting at them from a tree line next to some rice paddies. The VC then ran along some dikes and disappeared in into a rice paddy. Lt Brock landed both ships of his fire team on a nearby dike and he along with both CE's (SP5 Carl Feuchter and SP4 Gene Boselle) and both gunners (SP4 Ronald Willis and Sgt. Robert Schaber) jumped out and formed a line to search the rice paddy for the three VC who were hiding under the muddy, chest-deep water. They soon located 2 of the VC by actually stepping on them. Lt Brock waved his 45 in one VC's face hoping to scare him into revealing the location of the 3rd VC. However, he lost his balance in the muck and fell backwards. He thought he was "done for" at that point but, surprisingly, the VC did not even move. They tied them up and put one VC onto each gunship then took off and unloaded their rockets on the suspected location of the 3rd VC they could not locate. They turned the 2 VC captives over to the 5th ARVN Division and the division commander later presented the entire fire team with the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry.

On October 4th the Vultures, covered by one Copperhead gunship, on a mission near Ben Luc flew into the hottest LZ they had been in to date. The lead ship, [64-13854](#) under AC Major Atsushi "Archie" Miyamoto with Major Carl Busdiecker, CE SP4 William DuBois and Gunner SP4 Boynton Goldston, landed in the LZ when suddenly a number of VC came out of rice paddies firing BAR's, Carbines and machine guns. The ship took heavy fire—one round hitting Major Miyamoto square in the abdomen. Luckily he was wearing his chicken plate (chest protector) and it stopped the 30 caliber round.

Another round came up through the bottom of the ship as they landed, entering the bottom of SP4 "Goldfoot" Goldston's foot but did not exit the top. While the lead ship was being shot up, another Vulture ship was also in trouble. AC Lt Roy Dowdy, Pilot WO Robert Edgertan, CE SP4 Charles Buckner, and Gunner SP4 Lester Stevens, in ship [64-13862](#) were hit many times and forced down in the LZ. After dropping its troops off the ship behind them picked up the downed crew.

The slicks cleared the LZ with a tally of 5 VC confirmed kills while the Copperheads stayed to provide fire support for the infantry. AC Captain John McQuestion, WO Arthur Cline, CE SP4 Gene Boselle and Gunner Corporal Rivera-Aviles reported 10 VC confirmed kills and 5 VC wounded. WO Cline made a direct hit on 2 VC with a rocket.

Many people remember the adventures of Major Miyamoto who became known as "Kamikaze 6". No one remembers how many times he was wounded but it was quite a few. On the above occasion where he was hit in the chicken plate by a round that splattered shrapnel into his throat, chin and upper legs he was medivac'd to the MASH at Bien Hoa. However, the wounds were not as serious as they appeared and he returned to duty after a week or so. As Major Schuett recalled "I can still see him with that big grin sitting up in his bed at Bien Hoa". Major Miyamoto's chicken plate, with the large depression where the slug impacted, was ceremoniously hung in the Operation's Hooch as a reminder for everyone to wear their chest protector. His luck also held one day when he returned from a mission and the transmission locked up on his ship just as they shut down.

On another occasion, the Vultures and Copperheads were standing by on an airstrip waiting to begin a large CA with the 1st Infantry Division when the strip was shelled by the VC. Major Miyamoto was hit by shrapnel in the back just under his flak vest. He was medivac'd by Major Joe Estores and left blood all over the inside of his ship. He was scheduled to go on R & R the next day and was to meet his wife in Japan. Instead, he was evacuated to Japan for an operation and got a long R & R there with his wife. Major Miyamoto later returned to the company. He finally managed to make it out of Vietnam alive, but it was a pretty close thing!

In late 1966, an incident occurred that illustrates how some guys were incredibly sound sleepers. During a mortar and rocket attack, WO Jim Christiansen was startled awake but not sure if the noise was incoming fire. A few seconds later the mess hall just across from his hooch was blown up by a rocket, quickly confirming his suspicions. He ran toward the bunker outside his back door but hesitated to go in because of his fear of spiders! Just then a large fireball (from a rocket) erupted nearby and he decided to take his chances with the spiders. Once inside it dawned on him that his roommate, WO Bob Truckenmiller, was missing. He ran back to his hooch to find his roommate still fast asleep and the mess hall next door burning furiously. WO Truckenmiller kept 3 large "Big Ben" alarm clocks in a pie tin next to his bed to keep him from oversleeping but, of course, they were no help in this case. He said he thought it was just a thunderstorm—until it started "raining" shrapnel on his tin roof.

Many remember Cpt Chuck DeShields for his uncanny ability to draw enemy fire. He seemed to be invariably shot at on every CA. Cpt DeShields was a big man, well over 6 feet and 240 lbs. or so, who had turned down a Pro Football draft to stay in the Army. He always seemed to be a little lower, or slower, than the rest of the pack and thus probably attracted fire like a wounded duck. The other pilots joked that "if he wasn't so damn big, he wouldn't be over gross and could climb faster".

Cpt DeShields was easily recognizable approaching his aircraft on the flight line by his gear. In addition to flight equipment, he wore both a flak vest and a chicken plate over it and carried both a .45 pistol and an M-16 that he had scrounged from some Infantryman. Not too many others in the company were strong enough to carry all that.

Cpt DeShields often led CA's as Air Mission Commander and is noted for one particular occasion when he was leading a group of roughly 30 slicks from 3 different companies on a series of lifts for the First Infantry. They landed at Tay Ninh airstrip in the evening and remained on standby. Just after dark, as the crews were settling in to sleep by their aircraft, mortars began hitting the airfield. Cpt DeShields quickly rounded up the crews and got the aircraft airborne. The flight proceeded to another airfield, landed and again settled down for the night, still on standby. They were hit again with mortars and in the confusion a truck racing down the flightline ran over a pilot who was sleeping by his ship (the pilot was from another unit in the flight and was picked up by medics—the Vultures never learned whether he survived or not). Cpt DeShields frantically rounded up the flight crews and the took off again, this time for Lai Khe. On landing at Lai Khe they flight was still on standby and remained near their aircraft. A short time later explosions rocked the airfield, making it the third time that night the flight was subjected to a mortar attack. The next day finally dawned and the Vultures returned to Phuc Vinh after a long and sleepless night.

On November 15, 1966 [WO James W. Bruhn](#), copilot in [64-13855](#), was killed by small arm fire while on an ARVN CA near Tay Ninh. As WO Christiansen recalls, he was flying lead ship with Cpt DeShields and WO Bruhn was copilot with WO Chuck Tanner on their left in a 5 ship staggered trail formation. As the ships flared to land, a machine gun opened up on them from a bunker to their left front, close to WO Bruhn's ship. One of the rounds went behind Bruhn's chicken plate, killing him instantly. No one else was hit but the ship was too damaged to fly and the crew scrambled out and took cover with the ARVNs.

Another ship in the flight picked up the three survivors. On learning that WO Bruhn was dead, Cpt DeShields began crying and beating on the instrument panel, blaming himself for Bruhn's death.

On the 2nd lift into the LZ, WO Christiansen recalls they landed in the same spot (in a flooded rice paddy) and the ship was rocking in an unsteady manner. The gunner then came on the intercom saying "Mr. Christiansen, you're on a slope!" Christiansen responded "No S---, the ship is rocking all over the place". The gunner then said "No, you're on a real slope." At that point WO Christiansen looked out his window and noticed 2 ARVN troops squirming under the weight of the skids, right where there were previously dropped off.

One of the well-known landmarks in the area was [Nui Ba Den](#) (Black Virgin Mountain) just north of Tay Ninh. It was a perfect cone shape, rising 2500 to 3000 feet. There was a Special Forces A Team with a company of Cambodian mercenaries on the summit who operated a radio relay station but the rest of the mountain was controlled by the VC. The A Team was more or less adopted by the Vultures and anyone in the area always checked in with them to see if they needed supplies or people hauled up or down the mountain (the only way on or off was by air). Landings at the top were no problem since they were steep pinnacle approaches. However, during takeoffs the ships dove down the side of the mountain hugging the treetops and almost always took fire. Luckily, the VC had lousy aim and this came to be something of a game.

One of the missions in direct support of the 1st Brigade, 1st Infantry Division was the employment of a Copperhead light fire team to a battalion forward CP during a battalion size operation. The SOP for this mission was to locate in close proximity to the battalion CP and be ready to scramble if the battalion came under mortar attack—the purpose being to get airborne, spot muzzle flashes from the mortars, and fire rockets, machine gun, or 40mm rounds into the location of the mortars. A different starting procedure was used to expedite getting airborne ASAP. When shutting down at the CP, all switches were left on except for the master power switch so that when it was time to scramble the pilot flipped on one switch to start up the aircraft and all systems at once. The Copperheads handled this mission very well. That fact, and the location of the company north of the other units in the 11th CAB, resulted in a call from the Battalion Operations Center (BOC) one night to scramble gunships and go up to Loc Ninh to support the friendlies there who were under attack by the VC.

As the Copperhead Platoon Leader (Major Ray Holleran) recalls, a couple of fire teams got airborne in a hurry and headed North. Navigation was difficult over the territory between Phouc Vinh and Loc Ninh and the only things visible on the ground were what appeared to be widely scattered campfires. After flying a general heading and computing some rough time and distance, and having some luck, the teams arrived at Loc Ninh. The attack had ceased shortly before their arrival, but they were ordered to land and RON at that location. Although this put the teams in a situation where they could come under fire if a second attack occurred, the crews agreed that it was a better alternative than trying to get back to home base over the territory just flown over. The teams stayed on station at Loc Ninh on standby for several days in the same role they played in support of the battalion CPs but did not get engaged. One event that added interest to their time at Loc Ninh was a chance to see General Westmoreland up close. Because of the attack, he flew up to check out the situation and his chopper was parked near those of the fire teams.

A popular event during the Phouc Vinh era was the fairly frequent burning of the latrines, more popularly known as "S---Houses". The latrines were originally built as 3 to 6 "holers" over a trench 6 feet or so deep. Every week a couple of gallons of diesel was supposed to be dumped into the trench and set on fire. If only a couple of gallons of diesel was added, the flames would not get high enough to ignite the latrine itself. However, the problem was that the people on the burning detail tended to add far too much diesel, causing the flames to engulf the latrine house itself. When the latrines caught fire everyone seemed to enjoy running around yelling "Fire, the S---House is on fire". Many then ran not to get water buckets or hoses but to get their

cameras. This was probably the most photographed event in Vietnam. Every S---House that caught fire always burned completely to the ground.

An interesting incident happened around the end of the year. WO Christiansen was flying ash and trash missions north of Tay Ninh and was sent to a PZ to pick up some equipment. On landing an officer came over and asked them to take the equipment to a certain set of coordinates. Included in the load was a 55-gallon drum of CS gas crystals, and a gasoline powered CS pump. Seems they had found some tunnels and had pumped CS gas into them. Now they wanted to send the equipment back to their base camp.

WO Christiansen protested that an open 55-gallon drum of CS, with a poncho liner held on by a bungee cord as a lid was not the most desirable cargo in a helicopter with no rear doors. However, the officer assured him that the "lid" was tight and he accepted the cargo.

That decision soon proved to be a mistake. Suddenly, the "secure" lid of the 55-gallon drum was flapping in the breeze, and there were CS crystals filling the air. In no time, both pilots and the crew were virtually blinded. As the pilots struggled to open their eyes and maintain control of the ship, the crew chief and gunner struggled to push the 55 gallon drum out. They finally got the drum out the door (at around 2000 feet) and flew in a big orbit watching it head for the jungle below while trying to regain ability to control the aircraft. Sometimes you wonder how many stupid occurrences like this ended up with tragic results in Vietnam, perhaps with "unknown" reasons listed for the loss of an aircraft and crew.

An Officers' Club was built in the Vulture compound at Phuoc Vinh around mid year in an interesting series of steps. The obvious first step was to acquire building materials - but the way the Vultures did it was unique. As a lot of units did in the early days of '66, a Liaison Officer was kept on duty in Saigon with primary area of interest being the docks of Saigon. Prerequisite qualification for this assignment was the ability to scrounge at a high level of efficiency. All incoming ships and their cargo were his targets. Among his major accomplishments was the continuing acquisition of pallets of the beer for Phuoc Vinh referred to earlier. But he surpassed all previous accomplishments when he got the word that materials to build a Vulture O' Club were needed. Shortly thereafter, materials started arriving by air primarily and some by ground. As the piles of material kept accumulating, some wondered why the CO was waiting to give the word to start building. After a period of time, the word was put out that the club construction would now start. It was then that the company learned that the materials on hand were, in fact, a complete corrugated metal building that had been scrounged by our man in Saigon. The second step was to construct the club - no easy task because it was a good size building. Although some outside help was used, the large majority of the work was done by the officers and men of the company. Because the construction could not detract from operational responsibilities, the labor was done when they could find some time—and by a special group of in-house laborers known as "short timers."

To qualify for the "short timers" group, a guy had to have less than 30 days left before his DEROS which meant he was eased out of being fully committed every day to operational flights, especially combat assaults. So, after a lot of hard work done primarily by the short timers, the O' Club came into being and plans were made for the long awaited grand opening. As it turned out, it was all that was expected of it - but with an unexpected twist. As mentioned previously, some 1st Cav pilots joined the Vultures in June '66. By coincidence, they all hit the less than 30 day mark about the time the club was under construction. Consequently, their operational commitments decreased and their time working on the club increased. They did a great job that was appreciated by all until the day of the opening. It was on the morning of the big day when the first radio calls started coming in to the company Ops about the club building, and particularly the roof and painting thereon. These calls came from inbound aircraft from the 1st Division HQs at Phu Loi and other locations as they approached to land to the West, which meant the crews and passengers had a great view of the Vulture compound. What they were seeing was a painting large enough to cover most of the roof, and presenting a very good rendition of the yellow and black 1st Calvary Division shoulder patch - the famous "horse blanket!" It was later learned that our hard

working group of infused pilots from that division had put in some overtime and had gone up on the roof late on the night before and done the deed. Needless to say, one of the first, if not the first, phone call came from the compound right next door - HQs, 1st Brigade, 1st Infantry Division. They were a little less than thrilled about the horse blanket patch painted on a building in the center of their base camp. The appropriate action was taken to paint over the patch, but the guilty parties were never shot at dawn - they just DEROS'd ASAP! After that, the O' Club was a great place and a big morale booster.

As most people will recall there was a road that crossed the runway at Phouc Vinh to access the First Infantry area on the other side. There was a stop sign at the runway and vehicles were supposed to make sure there was no aircraft nearby when crossing the runway. However, one day a ¾ ton truck with 5-6 infantry troopers crossed the runway just as a Vulture slick was taking off. The right skid went through the vehicle's windshield and ripped the windshield frame off the truck. The slick veered sharply to the right, narrowly avoiding crashing into the ground and made a force landing right in the middle of the maintenance area.

Initially the 162nd company area had poor lighting and a shortage of electricity due to a lack of generators. However, this problem was solved later in the year. One day a Chinook at Phouc Vinh was in maintenance being painted. Before the tail numbers were painted on the ship it was mysteriously "borrowed" for a trip to Saigon where two 75 KV generators were appropriated from the air force and brought back to the roost. WO Nick Riviezzo, one of the slick pilots, had an uncle who was sergeant major of a signal battalion south of Saigon that needed some aerial photos. A Vulture slick soon went down to help out and brought back a group from the signal unit who spent a week wiring the Vulture compound. From then on it was lit up like New York City.

Other memorable incidents during 1966 include:

- W
When the troopship stopped in Hawaii on the trip to Vietnam, the men were allowed to go into town for a few hours. Five men, all from other units on board, decided they didn't want to go to Vietnam and did not report back to the ship in time for sailing.
- M
Major Schuett used his ship's DECCA navigation system to give some Air Force C-130's a makeshift GCA when they were attempting to resupply the First Infantry at the Minh Than air strip and ran into a thick haze and IFR conditions.
- S
P4 Dennis Hickman, a Copperhead gunner, recalls his fire team escorting a convoy of mechanized 155 mm howitzers and them taking fire from a small patch of trees near the road. The gunships set up for a gun run but the 155 crews turned around and lowered their tubes to fire point blank at the patch of trees. When they fired, trees and limbs were blasted up higher in the air than the gunships and almost knocked them out of the sky. They decided the artillery could take care of themselves.
- A
A quick thinking Vietnamese POL driver put out a fire caused by static electricity on an aircraft at a refueling point. He stuck his fire extinguisher into the fuel port and the CE of a nearby ship, SP4 Bill Rettenmund, extinguished a fire underneath the aircraft. After it was over SP4 Rettenmund was so shook up he walked away and lit a smoke and was promptly chewed out for smoking on the flight line by an officer running toward the scene. The Vietnamese driver was awarded a well-deserved Bronze Star.

- A

• memorable company personality for a while was ‘ Agnes’ who was TDY (sort of) from her home station in the jungle. Agnes was a medium sized baboon who was bought by one of the Vultures from a Vietnamese. She was a frequent visitor to the porch of Majors Manor which was the location of what could be loosely called Happy Hour for those who were available to partake of a cool one while rehashing the day’s operations. On the porch was a scrounged old fashioned soft drink cooler that was used to hold the beer - hopefully with some ice. Over time, Agnes’ owner started bringing her to the porch for the get together. While there, she perched on the cooler and was often given some beer—wrong thing to do but it provided some great entertainment. She put on quite an act when she had a few swigs.
- T

• here was also another monkey, a 3-legged one named Henry. He roamed the compound mooching chow, c-rations and anything he could find. Henry was also a horny little devil. He noticed there was an abundance of cats around (some of them "baby leopards"). Henry would lay in ambush from any suitable concealment. When a cat came by he would pounce and rape the cat (with great vigor). The cat would scream, spit, hiss and claw to no avail. Henry was not choosey (male or female cat) but he WAS thorough. When he finally let the cat go you wouldn't see that one around for a long time. A short time later he would ambush another cat, then another, then another....etc. etc.....
- T

• he first pilot wounded in the face received both a Purple Heart and a reprimand for not having his helmet shield down during a CA.
- A

• tent caught fire one day and the airfield fire crew pulled their fire truck up behind it and then pulled their hoses around to the front. While they were in front fighting the fire, the fire truck caught fire and was destroyed.

1967

The year began with Major Kirklichter, “the Red Baron”, still in command. On April 10th, he relinquished command to Major Neal Petree who was in turn replaced by Major Stokely Wilson on August 2nd who served the remainder of the year. Many men considered Major Kirklichter to be the best CO they ever had. He demanded that all AC’s be able to lead the flight and routinely rotated them into flight lead. Since Major Kirklichter was the senior company commander in the battalion the Vultures were normally tapped to lead large CA’s. However, he wasn’t all business and no play. Major Kirklichter had his own bar stool at the O Club with a UH-1 shoulder harness and seat belt.

The top heavy pilots roster had still not improved much by early 1967 and in some respects was worse. At one point there were 39 majors in the company, including 9 on the LTC list. The ”ordinary” majors were pretty much relegated to “carrying the helmets” of the ones on the LTC list, so to speak.

Runway lighting was installed at Phouc Vinh early in the year. The lights were left on until all reported traffic had landed each night and was available on call at other times. This made night landings much safer and, of course, made it much easier to find Phouc Vinh at night.

The first few months of 1967 was a busy one for the Vultures. In addition to two major operations (Cedar Falls and Junction City I and II) there were many smaller scale combat assaults as well as direct support mission to numerous III Corps units.

During the 1966-67 period the Vultures were in very heavy demand and it was common for pilots to log 200 hours or more per month. In fact, WO Christiansen reports that his highest monthly total was 260 hours and his longest day was 17 hours--That's a lot of flying! This kind of flying put an incredible strain on the crews and the First Aviation Brigade later initiated a policy of no more than 140 hours in any 30 day period (although it was often ignored).

A major self-help program was initiated in January to upgrade the company area. Four new tropical troop barracks were built and a large patio added to the Officers Club. Two quonset buildings were also erected to temporarily use as troop barracks. Artillery shell containers were filled with dirt and laid down in parallel to serve as raised sidewalks which came in handy during the rainy season. Water heaters were also installed in the officers' shower and the shower was enclosed.

In early January, a Copperhead fire team supporting the first battalion, 26th Infantry north of Lai Khe made 15 confirmed kills as it attacked VC near an LZ it was covering. Two days later, a Copperhead fire team led by Cpt John Barry, and accompanied by Major Kirklighter, made 10 more confirmed kills while supporting ARVN units outside of Tan An. The Copperheads also netted five confirmed kills while supporting a Special Forces unit northwest of Xuan Loc.

Also in early January the Vultures participated in Operation Cedar Falls. Ten slicks and a light fire team were committed to a 50-ship lift to seal Ben Suc on the first day of the operation. One lift was made carrying elements of the First Infantry and ten ships touched down in each of five landing zones simultaneously, resulting in a very successful sealing operation. Later the same day, the Vultures took part in lifting elements of the 173rd Airborne Brigade from north of Phu Loi to the Cedar Falls operational area.

On the second day of Operation Cedar Falls the 162nd participated in a 60-ship lift of the First Infantry. Again, five separate lifts were made with ten aircraft landing at once in each landing zones. After this insertion the Vultures returned to Phouc Vinh but remained on stand-by. They were scrambled at 1600 hours for an emergency resupply of elements of the 25th Infantry Division. The LZ for the resupply could accommodate only 1-2 ships at a time and was marked with yellow smoke. However, the VC also threw yellow smoke in a clearing nearby. After confirming the yellow smoke marker by radio one Vulture ship shot an approach to the VC position but the crew realized the error before touching down and escaped with only a few bullet holes in the ship.

On the third day of Cedar Falls the Vultures were landing troops in an LZ and just prior to touch down command-detonated mines were exploded in front of the lead ship. The flight executed a go-around through the dust and smoke in perfect formation. Several ships, including one gunship, were damaged by the explosions but there were no serious injuries.

A senseless accident occurred on February 1st. A man from the 407th, SP4 Willard A. Philson, stepped on a land mine while crossing over the perimeter wire to the adjoining ARVN compound and was killed. Men from the 162nd and 407th routinely visited the ARVN compound to buy beer and other "necessities" of life. No one knew the area between the two compounds was mined until this incident. There was some speculation that the mines

were old Japanese mines left over from WWII. Mine-clearing teams were brought in shortly thereafter and the area was cleared.

On February 3, 1967 Major Paul R. Karas, the Operations Officer, and Major William Phillips, the XO, were killed while on a CA southwest of Saigon in the area know as the "Testicles". They were lead ship ([66-00908](#)) on a joint US/ARVN lift involving the 199th Light infantry Brigade. The US and ARVN troops were to land in different LZ's. Enroute to the first LZ the US commander switched the LZ's and the US troops were landed in the ARVN LZ, right in the middle of a huge rice paddy with no trees for at least a mile on each side. The ARVNs, on the other hand, were to land in the apex of a V-shaped area with a river and trees on each side.

On short final of a 10-ship staggered trail formation, the ARVN commander changed plans and shouted for Major Karas to land short. He quickly informed the flight of the change and the ships landed along a dike line with the lead ship in roughly the spot where the trail ship would have been. As the troops unloaded, a massive explosion lifted the lead ship up about 10 feet and rolled it over on its left side where it beat itself to death, ending bottom up at a 45 degree angle. The pilot, Major Phillips, was killed instantly and Major Karas was mortally wounded while the 12th Group flight surgeon going along as gunner (Major Robert Lesser) incurred severe shrapnel wounds in his chest and legs. The CE was also wounded seriously. The rest of the flight was taking heavy fire and pulled pitch. It was several hours before a rescue ship could land. Major Karas was still alive and strapped into his seat upside down but his wounds were severe. He died on the medivac ship.

It was later learned that there were mines all along the dike leading to the apex. Since the ARVN commander told Major Karas to land short, it appears that he may well have known about the planned ambush of US troops.

A few days later on February 7th, a Copperhead gunship ([64-14153](#)) lost power and crashed into a river on take off from a refueling pad while supporting a CA in the Nha Be area. The heavily loaded ship sank quickly in 40 feet of water. SP4 Willard A. Godfrey, the crewchief, and SP4 Isiah A. Dobbins, the gunner, were drowned despite efforts by the co-pilot to save them but the pilots (Cpt J. L. Hill and Lt William Robertson) escaped without major injuries.

Also in February, the 162nd along with the rest of the 11th CAB and two other aviation battalions supported the 173rd Airborne and First Division in Operation Junction City, the largest operation of the war to date. The Vultures led several of the initial lifts with 60 or more slicks involved. This action saw the 173rd make the only combat jump of the war. Also taking part in the operation were the 25th Division, 11th Armored Cavalry, 196th Light Infantry Brigade and the 4th and 9th ARVN Divisions. The target was the enemy bases north of Tay Ninh City (which the French called War Zone C). Over 9,500 troops were lifted in the initial assault. The operation continued until mid-May and enemy dead numbered over 2,700. Large quantities of ammunition, medical supplies and rice were also captured. The first few days of CA's were followed by many days of resupply and ash & trash missions by the 162nd and other supporting units.

In the Jan-Feb period the Vultures took part in several CA's in the Tay Ninh area. On one occasion WO Nick Riviezzo, a Copperhead fire team leader, was shot down in an LZ. His CE (SP4 Rick Franzese) and gunner (SP4 Freeman Bradley) immediately took up positions and began returning the enemy fire. SP4 Franzese noticed a rifle firing from a bunker and ran over, grabbed the barrel and tossed a smoke grenade into bunker. While SP4 Franzese was hanging onto the rifle the VC ran out the back of the bunker and was cut down by WO Riviezzo with the Thompson submachine gun he often carried.

Early in the year a Copperhead fire team was on a search and destroy mission in the delta when they received a call to go to the aid of a US ground unit under heavy fire. They contacted the unit and were told that artillery fire was incoming on the target. They coordinated with the ground unit to set up a gun run so as to avoid the artillery. On the initial run, SP4 Dennis Hickman, was firing his M-60 on a target when a Marine jet from out of

nowhere suddenly flew past at a lower altitude and right through his machine fire. The jet was so close the Copperhead crew could see the pilot. He had an ear to ear smile on his face and was smoking a big cigar. They could tell by his look that he knew exactly what he was doing.

A rather unusual event occurred in early '67. The flight surgeon, Cpt Frank Anzalone, had the habit of going along as a crewmember on many of the combat lifts. On one occasion he flew as "copilot" with Cpt Rod Rodowick, the maintenance officer, when the 1st Infantry was chasing VC across the Cambodian border. Cpt Rodowick, in Vulture 777 the maintenance ship, always trailed along on major lifts so as to have maintenance support quickly available. He usually had no copilot so he often invited the flight surgeon to ride along.

On this particular occasion, a Vulture ship with troops on board had crashed, with no serious injuries, just inside Cambodia. Cpt Rodowick happened to be nearby and answered the call for assistance. He immediately picked up the downed crew and passengers and set the crashed ship on fire as he left. The 11th CAB commander arrived on the scene as the rescue was taking place and when they arrived back at Phouc Vinh, he told Cpt Rodowick he did a great job and that he was putting him in for a DFC. Cpt Rodowick told the battalion commander that he had just received a DFC only two weeks before and suggested he give it to his copilot instead. The battalion commander agreed and two weeks later a DFC was presented to Cpt Frank Anzalone. He may well have been the only flight surgeon in Vietnam to be awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross!

In the above incident on the Cambodian border, the Copperhead fire team covering the troop lift and crew extraction, led by WO Nick Riviezzo, were buzzed several times by strange-looking jets they quickly realized were MIGs. WO Riviezzo had visions of becoming the first army helicopter pilot to down a MIG and repeatedly attempted to get permission to fire, all to no avail. Finally, a Navy fighter over on the coast picked up his radio transmission and offered to come over and take care of the MIG. However, WO Riviezzo insisted that he get the first shot. In the end, no one was allowed to fire and the Vultures pulled back from the border.

In another incident early in the year Lt Michael Shannon was AC of a slick that had a tail rotor servo failure near Phu Loi with a load of troops on board. Lt Shannon told SP5 Darrell Moore, the gunner, to tell the troops to link their arms together and brace themselves as they attempted to land at Phu Loi. One big trooper sitting by the door asked SP5 Moore why they should link their arms and he replied "Because we're getting ready to crash!" The trooper's eyes then became as large as saucers and he bolted out the door as soon as the ship touched down on the runway—even before it had slid to a stop.

In April, four new troop barracks in the Vulture area were completed and occupied. Three permanent showers and one latrine was also completed as well as 5 new reinforced bunkers. The VC provided the initiative on the bunkers by mortaring the area four times in three days. Many compound buildings and improvements were completed over the previous six months under the expert guidance of SSG James Graham and SP4 Ronald S. Clough. SP4 Clough, company carpenter, supervised the crew of local carpenters who did much of the construction.

A nice outdoor theatre was also built about this time. Movies were shown every night. Shortly after it opened the movie was late one night and a mortar round landed right in the middle of the theatre area. Luckily no one was there at the time.

The Vultures had a busy month of combat assaults in March with CA's being conducted on 23 days. On March 23rd, the 162nd participated in a night combat assault south of Saigon. The flight took off from Phouc Vinh at 0150 hours and had a PZ time of 0230 hours. Troops were inserted into the first LZ at 0300 hours. Thirty sorties were flown into two LZ's without incident. It was a hair-raising experience for most of the crews but luckily there were no mishaps.

On April 8th the Vultures supported the 1st Brigade, 25th Infantry Division in the vicinity of Duc Hoa on Operation Makalapa. On the 26th of April, they supported the 173rd Airborne by deploying 2 battalions in the jungle north of Bien Hoa.

The Vultures received six pilots from the 187th AHC (Crusaders) for training during April and four pilots and four enlisted men from the 188th AHC (Black Widows) a couple of weeks later. A number of Vietnamese pilots were also trained and two of them joined the Vultures for an extended period of training.

On April 26th, the 2nd platoon and a Copperhead fire team were given the task of supporting Project SIGMA on Operation Blackjack, an assignment which lasted approximately four weeks. The slick crews received training in extracting personnel using a 125-foot rope dangling beneath the aircraft. Ships assigned to this mission were on alert from 0530 to 1930 hours each day. The mission was highly secret and involved a specially trained Special Forces unit (ANYONE HAVE ANY DETAILS OF THIS?)

Just after dawn on May 2nd Vulture 992 crashed during an approach to an LZ. SP4 Robert Bowling, the gunner, incurred a minor back injury. The crew and troops were extracted from the area and a security force inserted until the aircraft could be evacuated by Chinook. The efficiency of the aircraft evacuation process was demonstrated in this incident. From the time the ship went down to the final evacuation by a CH-47 from Phu Loi, the total elapsed time was 1 hour and 20 minutes. Close fire support was provided by the Copperheads and the Crossbows out of Lai Khe.

On May 3rd a tactical emergency was declared by the Special Forces troops supported by the 2nd platoon. Seventeen UH-1D ships and 3 light fire teams were mobilized to extract the unit and close air support was also provided by the Air Force. The evacuation was made without incident.

The new CO of the 758th Medical Det., Cpt William B. Sanders, had his mettle tested during the month when over 30 Vultures developed food poisoning. However, the new "doc" quickly traced the poisoning to a batch of improperly refrigerated bread pudding and administered the proper antidote.

In mid-May, a small group of nine Special Forces troops were cut off and surrounded by a large force of VC. While only 20 meters from a clearing where they could be picked up, enemy fire was so intense they could not move. They radioed that they could not survive if not picked up immediately. Because of this extreme emergency, Major Stephen P. Stout, 2nd platoon leader, immediately led three slicks into the PZ, covered by a Copperhead fire team. During the one minute they were in the PZ, all three ships received numerous hits and two members of the command party on Major Stout's ship were seriously wounded. Due to the intensity of fire the troops could not make it to the aircraft and the ships were forced to take off without them. Major Stout then headed to Phouc Vinh to get medical attention for the wounded men on board.

The other two ships under WO Kenneth Bristow and WO David Capouya went back to the PZ. WO Bristow made a low pass over the area to locate the ground troops and received more hits from enemy fire. His ship lost lateral cyclic control and a Special Forces crew member on board was seriously wounded. WO Bristow made a successful forced landing two clicks from the PZ. WO Capouya landed close by and picked up the wounded man while Major Stout, who had returned from Phouc Vinh, picked up the rest of the crew. The two ships then returned to Phouc Vinh where it was determined that WO Capouya's ship was no longer flyable. Two additional slicks, under Major Ronald White, 1st platoon leader, and WO James Christiansen then joined Major Stout in his rescue attempt. Arriving at the PZ WO Christiansen was told to circle the downed ship (WO Bristow's) so the Copperhead fire team could be released to cover the extraction. Major Stout and his copilot (WO Craig Cameron) made a low pass through the PZ and received moderate fire but spotted the US troops at the edge of a tree line. They circled around for an approach and began receiving heavy small arms fire, taking a number of hits. At this point both the gunner, SP4 Mark Epting, and crew chief, SP4 Charles Chase, had

expended all of their ammunition. At touchdown the ship took a round through the tail rotor drive shaft and 90 degree gearbox. The US troops climbed aboard but Major Stout almost immediately had to do a hovering autorotation as the tail rotor failed completely. Everyone scrambled out of the ship and took cover.

At this point Major Little and WO Ronald Freer approached and landed their aircraft beside the downed ship. Their ship began taking hits but the US troops and downed crew scrambled on board. Major Stout was sitting in the door of the ship firing at the enemy when he was hit in the head by a round but not seriously injured. When all were on board Major Little and WO Freer executed a takeoff with 1250 lbs. of fuel and 17 people, mostly Americans, on board the single ship. That's good size Americans, not skinny Vietnamese—proof of the exceptional capabilities of the UH-1! On top of that, the engine also had a round go completely through the compressor section just prior to the takeoff.

After delivering his passengers to Phouc Vinh where Major Stout received medical attention, Major Little led flights carrying a Special Forces Mike Force unit into the two LZs to secure the downed ships.

Major Stout and Major Little were awarded a Silver Star for their actions during this incident. There were also 4 DFC's, 6 Air Medals with V and 12 Army Commendation Medals with V awarded to other personnel involved in the incident.

The nights of May 12-14 saw plenty of activity in the 162nd area as the unit experienced four mortar attacks in the three nights. During a 30-minute period beginning at 0207 hours, May 12th, 57 mortar rounds landed within the company area. Several personnel were wounded as they ran to their bunkers and several 2nd platoon enlisted men were seriously injured when a round came through the roof of their barracks.

Five rounds landed in the immediate vicinity of "Majors' Manor" which housed all of the senior officers in the company. One round landed directly in front of the building, sending shrapnel through doors, windows and walls. Another came through the roof and one hit a few feet from the room occupied by the CO and XO. Roughly 15-20 rounds landed in the maintenance area causing severe damage to 10 aircraft. The CO's new helicopter, with less than 100 hours on it, took a direct hit and was completely destroyed. Both maintenance tents were also destroyed and shrapnel riddled many drums, containers and tires. The 450th Signal Det. had all 4 of its vans severely damaged, one of which took a direct hit and was completely destroyed.

The Copperheads scrambled a fire team but saw little action since Air Force jets and flare ships were quickly on station to provide counter fire. Throughout the attack there were numerous incidents of courageous efforts by many individuals to help their wounded comrades. The commanding general of the First Aviation Brigade later presented 4 Bronze Stars, 13 Army Commendation Medals with V and 29 Purple Hearts to men of the 162nd.

After these attacks on May 12th-14th, all flyable aircraft were evacuated to Phu Loi and Lai Khe each night for a week. However, even with this extreme inconvenience to the crews and maintenance personnel, all assigned missions were completed and every man contributed that little bit extra.

During June, the Vultures flew CA's on 16 separate days throughout the III Corps area. During one of the CA's a round hit a rocket warhead on a Copperhead gunship (64-14154) flown by Lt William Robertson. The round caused the warhead to explode, thereby causing 3 more warheads to explode, riddling the aircraft with shrapnel and causing loss of hydraulics. Lt Robertson and CW2 Peter Salamone, who were not injured, managed to land the crippled gunship on a nearby road. The gunner, SP4 Robert Alverado, was severely wounded in the explosion. The CE, SP5 Robert Goulas, was not harmed by the exploding rockets but got a little nervous on the way down and jumped from the aircraft before it landed, injuring his back.

Only 36 days before this explosion Lt. Robertson and Cpt Thomas Quisenberry had been flying this same C

model when 2 rockets exploded just after leaving the tube. The ship received severe damage from shrapnel and the concussion shattered nearly all of the plexiglass. The crew chief, SP4 Donald Combs, was severely wounded in this incident.

After leading a three company lift inserting two battalions of the First Infantry Division on June 5th, the Vultures began resupplying the troops. Lt Joe Grier ([65-12775](#)) was approaching an LZ to land in the north end while artillery was landing in the south end. Suddenly the artillery shifted to his end and shells began impacting all around him on short final, hitting his ship with shrapnel. Lt Grier and the pilot (VNAF Lt Nguyen Van Mao) lost all hydraulics but managed to land the ship without further damage.

The same day WO Donald Foster experienced mechanical problems in Vulture 146 ([66-01146](#)) northeast of Saigon. The ship became almost uncontrollable but WO Foster managed to land in a rice paddy. After shutting down, one side of the ship began to sink into the mud causing the still turning rotor blade to dip very low. For some reason the crew chief walked into the turning blade and was struck in the head. Luckily he was wearing his flight helmet and was knocked senseless but not seriously injured. Unfortunately, during recovery, a Chinook dropped the ship from roughly 500 feet--a brand new aircraft with only 377 hours on it!

A freak accident occurred at Phouc Vinh on June 14th. A Rebel fire team from the First Infantry Division Aviation Battalion landed for refueling and rearming. A crew chief on one of the ships was shot in the head by a minigun that was accidentally discharged (by static electricity) during rearming. Despite rapid attention by "Doc" Sanders, the CE died within a few minutes.

The Vultures did a full day's work on July 3rd supporting the Second Brigade of the 25th Infantry Division on Eagle Flights in the Duc Hoa area west of Saigon. During one insertion in late afternoon a 10 ship flight landed square in the middle of a VC stronghold. Eight ships were hit with a total of 19 rounds. WO Fretts was hit in the right arm, WO Christiansen in the face and Major Stout in the right leg with shrapnel. The lifts continued until 2100 hours that night, a long and exhausting day.

In early July, the Vulture compound was hit with a mortar attack. No one was seriously injured but a couple of brand new D models that had just arrived were riddled with shrapnel. One mortar round scored a direct hit on Majors' Manor but failed to explode. The round came through the roof and landed square on the chest of a Major called "chief" (DOES ANYONE REMEMBER HIS NAME??) who was lying in his bunk. Although the round did not explode it did leave a bad bruise and broke several of the Major's ribs. Lt Paul Fellencer recalls "It was the only time I ever heard someone being profusely and audibly thankful for a bruised chest and broken ribs." Curiously, two VNAF pilots assigned to the Vultures for training mysteriously disappeared just before the mortar attack. There was a strong suspicion that the attack was directed from the bell tower of the church/school just outside the main gate.

While on the way home from a lift on July 16th Lt William Robertson, Copperhead fire team leader, spotted a group of bushes floating down the river. As the fire team made a low pass, the bushes headed for the riverbank. Lt Robertson then began circling the camouflaged VC sampan while his gunner, SP4 Charles Smith, put 1500 rounds of machine gun fire into the boat. One VC was killed trying to escape from the boat which was then sunk by 40mm "Chunker" fire.

The 24th of July was a day that will be long remembered by WO David Capouya and WO Laurence Altobell. They were flying a gunship escorting slicks from a staging area for a lift with the 25th Infantry Division and had an engine failure at 3,500 feet on top of a solid cloud layer. They autorotated through the clouds and by sheer luck broke out over a clearing in the trees, the only one for miles around, and landed with no injuries. They were picked up in minutes by WO Donald Foster in the Vulture "Scavenger" maintenance ship.

Later that same day Major Wilson, the CO, was flying a C&C ship and spotted three VC in the open west of Nha Be. He could not contact the gunships who had gone to Nha Be to refuel so he made a low level pass and SP4 Huckabey, the gunner, managed to bag all three of them.

At 0035 hours on July 27th the Phouc Vinh complex was hit with mortar and rocket fire. Of the roughly 137 rounds fired in the 37 minute attack, 16 120 mm rockets landed within the Vulture roost. Three men were seriously wounded at the beginning of the attack when several rounds hit the mess hall. Another (SP5 Danney I. Holley) received injuries that later required amputation of both legs below the knee as he ran from one bunker to another one so as to be with his platoon. Fourteen others received less serious wounds. Dr. Sanders and his medical staff had an aid station operating in their bunker and probably saved the lives of four seriously wounded men. However, another man, PFC Lawrence A. Dietz, died in the hospital later that day. God rest his soul! A 104 foot long barracks also took a direct hit and two rounds missed a bunker with 20 men in it by 2 feet.

Throughout the attack there were many courageous acts as men helped their wounded comrades. Two DFC's, one Bronze Star with V, six Air Medals with V, seven Army Commendation Medals with V and two Army Commendation Medals were awarded to men of the 162nd for actions during this incident.

On August 4th, the 162nd supported the 9th Infantry Division with Eagle Flights south of Saigon near Rach Kien. Three ships were hit coming into one LZ and a Copperhead gunship (WO James Ramsey) was hit in the fuel cell, spraying fuel on the windshield and interfering with the pilots' vision. However, he was able to fly to a safe area for later extraction by Chinook. Major General George Seniff, the First Aviation Brigade Commander, happened to be flying nearby in his C model gunship and took the place of the damaged gunship. That must have scared the men in the remaining Copperhead gunship far more any VC did! The general ended up taking a round in his tail boom.

An unfortunate and needless accident occurred on August 8th when SP4 Charles A. Jones, gunner on [64-13862](#), walked into the tail rotor while getting ready for a 25 ship CA with the First Division. He was killed instantly. God rest his soul.

Another accident around this time almost had fatal results as the Copperheads were doing a hot refueling in the rearming revetments at Phouc Vinh. The fuel truck was positioned outside the revetment and the hose draped over the revetment. As you might guess, there was a "fuel pressure surge" and the nozzle popped out of the fuel receptacle, spraying the running C Model with fuel. The resulting fire destroyed the helicopter, the fuel truck, and the revetment. The rockets and ammo "cooked off" and provided quite a fireworks display. Fortunately, nobody was hurt. A few days later, the Battalion CO came to Phouc Vinh for an Officer's Call. His opening remark was "I understand that the Vultures had a cookout and I wasn't invited." The lecture went downhill from there.

During the later part of the year, an enlisted shower and latrine was completed and much of the maintenance area and flight line were peneprimed to cut down on dust in the approaching dry season. In late October, high winds toppled the Vulture Theatre but reconstruction began immediately. Since the mess hall seemed to be a favorite target for mortars and rockets a bunker was added for the mess hall personnel.

The 162nd spent much of October and November supporting Special Forces troops not only in III Corps but also II Corps. In October, three slicks and two gunships flew up to Kontum and took a Special Forces recon team into Laos just west of Dak To. They later picked the team up, brought it back to Kontum and then returned to Phouc Vinh (this was a couple of weeks before the 173rd Airborne Brigade's big battle for Hill 875 near Dak To).

On November 4th while supporting Special Forces units, the Vultures and Copperheads were called to extract the troops. The PZ was very tight and could take only one ship at a time. All four ships on the pickup incurred strike damage from rotor blades hitting the tress but all troops were extracted safely. The aircraft landed at a field location and Vulture maintenance came out and changed all 4 sets of rotor blades, returning the ships to service by the following afternoon.

On November 7th, the Vultures made their first extraction with a McGuire Rig (a long rope with loops for footholds and handholds). It went off without incident but using one of these rigs takes practice by both the extractor (crew) and extractees. Another extraction took place at around 2300 hours in mid November. Although a bit tricky, there were no problems other than a Copperhead pilot incurring a slight flesh wound from shrapnel. The Vultures also used rope ladders for some extractions and a LRRP radioman from the 75th Infantry fell off the ladder and was killed during one such extraction.

In late November the 162nd supported the Special Forces for several weeks in an unusual operation near Ham Tan, 20-30 miles north of Vung Tau. A flight of 5 slicks and 2 gunships ferried 150 Cambodian mercenaries and 10 Special Forces advisors to a field location to begin operating in the local area. The Vultures and Copperheads took along tents and other gear and lived in the field themselves for a couple of weeks alongside the Cambodian troops. WO Don Welch recalls this as his first exposure to Cambodian mercenaries.

Unlike ARVN troops who sometimes had to be physically thrown off a ship landing in an LZ, the Cambodians were very eager to fight and Vulture crews found it difficult to keep too many from getting on ships in the PZ. They did not like Vietnamese at all and must have been paid some sort of bonus for killing VC. Every time a Vulture ship cranked up to go out to a field location, the crews had to practically fight the Cambodians off—they all wanted to go kill VC.

The Special Forces often did some rather unusual things and supporting them was never dull. During the operation near Ham Tan they killed an NVA Major and wired his body to a mine that would explode if he was moved. They propped him up in a chair with an RC Cola in one hand and a transistor radio playing music in the other. However, nothing happened and the Special Forces folks came back by a few days later and buried him.

In the last couple of months of the year the Vultures trained pilots from the 135th AHC (Emu's) and from helicopter units accompanying the newly arrived 101st Airborne Division. As a change of pace the 162nd also twice conducted CA's for the 9th Division's Mobile Riverine Force in the Vinh Long- Dong Tam area. This gave pilots the chance to make a few "carrier" landings to support ships anchored in the Delta rivers.

Throughout 1967 the 162nd also frequently supported the 25th Division on Eagle Flights. This involved lifting a company or more of troops into a suspected VC area. The slicks then stood by at a near by airfield. If contact was made, more troops were lifted in. If not, they were extracted and inserted somewhere else. On one Eagle Flight in July, WO Paul Fretts was pilot on an afternoon insertion of troops into a pineapple field west of Duc Hoa. As his ship landed a VC jumped up in front of him and fired an AK-47 point blank through the windshield. One round ricocheted off the inside of his armor seat and hit WO Fretts in the back. The AC, WO Dave Pidgeon, took off so quickly that 2 grunts could not get off and were reported as missing by their unit until they showed up at their base a few days later. WO Fretts was medivac'd to Hotel 3 in Saigon and later recovered back in the US.

On December 19th the Vultures were engaged in training exercises for newly arrived troops of the 101st Airborne at Phouc Vinh. One ship ([65-09987](#)) took off from the airfield with 6 troops on board for a practice CA. However, as they turned downwind the engine failed at 200 feet. The AC, WO John F. Holz, attempted to extend his glide past a stand of rubber trees but the ship came down hard, bounced upside down and blew up,

killing all 10 people on board. In addition to WO Holz, the lost crewmembers were WO Larry A. Harke (pilot), SP4 Robert D. Kline (crewchief), and SP4 Anthony V. Campaniello (gunner).

Other memorable incidents that occurred during 1967 include:

- t Robertson, WO Tom Shirley, SP4 Larry Rippie and SP Robert Goulas were on a recon near Phouc Vinh early in the year and spotted what later proved to be a mobile rocket launcher. They could not find it when they came back around but reported it to Intelligence when they returned to the roost. They identified it as a rocket launcher from a photo book of NVA weapons but the intelligence people dismissed it by saying the VC didn't have rockets that far south. In a few days, the Phouc Vinh compound was hit with its first rocket attack. L
- major hit his head running into a bunker during a mortar attack and was awarded a Purple Heart. A
- O John McCamish was AC on a lift with the 25th Infantry near Cu Chi and was in a staggered trail right formation of 10 slicks that had landed in a huge, maybe 50-acre LZ that was clear-cut except for a few trees on their right. WO McCamish somehow got hemmed in by the other ships and hit a tree on take-off, causing the ship to crash and burn. No one was hurt but WO McCamish got a tongue lashing from the CO and took a lot of ribbing from other pilots for hitting "the only tree in a huge LZ." It wasn't exactly one of his career high points! W
- uring a party one night the CO dispatched several trucks to downtown Phouc Vinh to bring back some female companionship for the company. The VD rate went sky high and the men in the 758th Medical Detachment had their work cut out for them. D
- ilot staffing in the gun platoon went from almost all Majors at the beginning of the year to all WO's at one point in the fall. The CO "traded" one experienced gun-qualified WO to another unit for 2 gun-qualified Lt's. P
- O Nick Riviezzo, Copperhead fire team leader, received a "battlefield" promotion to 2nd Lt and was transferred to another unit. During a going away party organized by his crew, SP4 Rick Franzese and SP4 Freeman Bradley, his CE and gunner told the CO, Major Kirklighter, that with WO Riviezzo leaving, they were not going to fly anymore. The "Red Baron" was a bit taken aback by their statement but quickly recovered, then smiled and told them to report to the maintenance detachment in the morning. W
- ome recall the legendary "Doc" Weatherford, a gunner who had already served several tours in Vietnam (and thus had to be a little different), who armed mortar rounds and carried them under his seat to throw out on final approach as his own form of LZ prep. S

- O Ronald Freer and WO William Vance had an engine failure over dense jungle with no place to land but managed to autorote beautifully into a lone bomb crater with little damage.
- any pilots will remember the Buddha statue that WO Bill Dubuisson picked up in Saigon and put on the bar at the Officers club. He rubbed its belly “for good luck” over the protests of the bar girls who said it would bring bad, not good luck. The next day his ship sustained numerous hits and he quickly became a believer. Thereafter, he and others at the O Club refused to touch the Buddha.

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The 162nd began the new year with a change of commanders. Major James Thompson assumed command from Major Stokely Wilson on January 1st. **Major Ronald Andreson**, CO of the 407th TC Det. succeeded Major Thompson on May 24th, followed by Major Robert Wright in November. (It is interesting to note that both Majors Thompson and **Andreson** went on to **distinguished** army careers and became General Officers).

Major Thompson, in particular, was considered a good leader who was highly thought of by the men of the company. The following anecdote related by Major Paul Wenzel, Operations Officer, is an excellent illustration of his leadership:

“One thing Major Thompson did for which he was awarded the Soldier's Medal and something which he did because "it was his job" probably has gone unnoticed. Thompson and I normally integrated ourselves into the flight when we performed as part of a battalion lift, not as flight lead but as pater pilot in one of the lift ships other than lead. I believe we were the second and third out of eight flights of five and were positioning ourselves in water filled rice paddies for troop pick up when one of the ships in the second flight of five lost his tail rotor when he flared too steep and stuck it in the water. The ship immediately turned on its side and caught fire. Ammo from the crew chief and/or door gunner was cooking off and one could see the tracers as they cooked off as well. Anyway, Jim Thompson recognized that one of the crewmembers was trapped inside and without regard for his personal safety, he exited his helicopter, ran over to the burning ship and rescued either the crewchief or the gunner, I don't remember which. He did this in full view of our crewmembers and of course in view of all the overhead commanders at 1500 feet or above. I remember our guys talking about this for weeks and how they respected Thompson for his demonstrated leadership on and off the battlefield.”

Major Thompson went on to command the Army's only Air Assault Division, the Army War College and the First US Army. Major Andreson, who succeeded Major Thompson, later became program manager for both the Blackhawk and Comanche helicopters and played a key role in their development and introduction.

In early 1968 a number of improvements were made to make life a little more comfortable for the Vultures at Phouc Vinh, including:

- new maintenance hangar was built by the 34th Engineers (and promptly mortared). A
- air conditioning was installed in the Officers club, EM club and dispensary. A
- new "Vulture Theater" was built with a new stage, screen, projection room and covered seating area. A
- new addition was made to the mess hall. The mess hall was also completely enclosed to help eliminate dust. A
- hover area for maintenance was leveled off and penprimed along with all of the slick line. Also, lights were installed on the slick line. A

Conditions were improving at Phouc Vinh and life was not that bad for the Vultures during this period. They occasionally got a couple of days off and went to Saigon to relax. The officers even had their own private villa in Vung Tau, for which they chipped in each pay day. The company also had two NCO's stationed in Saigon with a jeep and a two and a half ton truck to expedite the supply chain and buy stock for the Officers, NCO and EM Clubs.

The first half of January was mostly occupied with training flights for the newly arrived 101st Airborne Division, preparing them to become operational and indoctrinating them in the techniques of airmobile operations.

On 17 January the Vultures conducted combat assaults for the 3rd Bde, 101st Airborne Division. As the day wore on, the troops made contact with an undetermined number of VC and additional reinforcements were inserted by the Vultures enabling the 101st to route the enemy.

On the 18th of January the 162nd was on Ready Reaction Force duty for III Corps and called to the aid of the 173rd AHC (Robinhoods). While supporting the 25th ARVN Division, the 173rd had landed in the midst of a strong VC force and lost several ships. The Vultures and the Copperheads completed the insertion in spite of intensive ground action.

On 29 January the Vultures, landing one ship at a time in a small pick up zone, extracted over 60 tons of captured VC rice from a field location between Phouc Vinh and Lai Khe. There were a few anxious moments while extracting the 600 bags of freshly packed rice when US armored personnel carriers just north of the pick up zone made contact with the VC. However, the mission was successfully completed and the Vultures did not take any fire in the short skirmish that took place.

The 30th of January marked a new era in the fighting in Vietnam—Tet 68. The VC/NVA undertook a major offensive in most of the key cities and districts throughout the country. Saigon, Binh Hoa, Long Binh, Phu Loi, Lai Khe and many other key places in III Corps were hit with rockets, mortars, and ground attacks. The VC/NVA expected to be welcomed by a popular uprising but instead met with massive resistance. Enemy troops were cut down in the thousands by infantry, artillery and air crews from assault helicopter units such as the 162nd.

On the eve of Tet Major Thompson had sent all flyable aircraft to Vung Tau in an effort to preserve valuable assets that might be in jeopardy in an isolated place like Phouc Vinh. On the way to Phu Loi the next day the

Vultures heard a call “on guard” for “any gunships in the vicinity of Plantation Tower (Long Binh), request assistance to repel VC climbing the control tower”. One of the Vulture pilots yelled “hell, let’s take the slicks in and let the door gunners work’em over”. This was the beginning of a hectic period with incredibly long days of flying.

On the same day, January 31st, the Vultures teamed up with sister companies, the 128th and 173rd AHC’s and two Chinook units, the 205th and 213th ASHC’s, and together moved over 3,400 troops and 370 tons of cargo in the short span of ten hours while supporting the First Infantry Division. Two battalion size insertions, two extractions, and a further one and a half battalion insertion in company size lifts were made in the late afternoon. Over five and a half battalions of infantry and supporting equipment were moved by the 11th CAB from Di An to Quan Loi with the Vultures moving over 1000 troops. This was the largest movement to date of troops by UH-1 units of a combat aviation battalion in a single day operation and positioned the First Infantry to block a major attack on the outskirts of Saigon.

Several times during the day the Vultures came under intense enemy mortar and rocket fire at Lai Khe and surrounding areas. However, due to the efforts of flight leads Lt Harlan Scheibe and Lt James Shannon, the coordination by Vulture 3 (Major Wenzel) and Vulture 6 (Major Thompson) all lifts throughout the day went exceptionally well. Majors Thompson and Wenzel put over 22 hours of flight time on the C&C ship on this first day of Tet as they repositioned the First Infantry. On following days the CO and Opns Officer even resorted to putting other pilots names in the log book to keep from being grounded for excess flight hours. There were few experienced officers in the unit and the Vultures sorely needed their experience and leadership.

The Vultures began the month of February with a bang. In the late hours of the first day of February incoming 82 mm mortars were reported in the south quadrant of the compound. These few rounds were an indication of things to come. February, or Mortar Month as it came to be known, was to be a busy month for the 162nd.

In the early morning hours of February 3rd the Copperheads were called to the aid of a PF (Popular Forces) compound south of Phouc Vinh which was attacked by a company size force of VC. The Copperheads stopped the attack and were credited with 25 VC KIA during the night action. Because of the swift strikes such as this, Col. Lawrence Mowrey, Commander of the 3rd Bde, 101st Airborne at Phouc Vinh presented the Copperheads with a letter of commendation.

On 5 February the Copperheads were once again called on to thwart the enemy in their attempt to overrun a Vietnamese compound near Phouc Hoa. After being scrambled the Copperheads established contact with the ground unit and proceeded with their gun runs. When it was over, one of the compound advisors gave the Copperheads credit for 8 dead and 7 wounded VC.

On the next day, the 162nd was on RRF (Ready Reaction Force) and at 1215 hours went to the aid of the 173rd AHC who lost two ships to enemy ground fire just west of Binh Chan. The Vultures airlifted elements of the 199th Light Infantry Brigade into positions around the downed aircraft and completed the lift without taking a round.

On 8 February Major Thompson and members of the gun platoon were honored guests of the Vietnamese district chief at Phouc Vinh. The district chief arranged an appreciation ceremony for the part the 162nd had played in repelling repeated VC attacks on Vietnamese outposts over the previous week. The district chief presented the members of the 162nd with floral wreaths, which were symbolically, one of the highest awards that a person could receive from the government of Vietnam. The VC must have resented the awards because shortly before midnight on the same day they presented the 162nd with a few incoming mortars and rockets.

On 10 February the Vultures were moving elements of the 9th Infantry Division from field locations to Dong Tam when they came under heavy enemy fire. Two aircraft took hits. CWO David Pridgeon was the aircraft commander of one of the ships and Lt Frank Loturco was pilot. CWO Pridgeon was on his last combat assault in Vietnam and Lt Loturco was flying his first one.

After the Vultures were released and enroute back to Phouc Vinh accompanied by a Copperheads heavy fire team, they intercepted a call by Paris Control at Binh Hoa, on guard, for any gunships in the area to contact Paris Control. The Copperheads responded and were requested to go to an area five miles northeast of Binh Hoa, to cover a downed helicopter until it's crew could be picked up. After the crew was rescued, the Copperheads were released and returned to Phouc Vinh.

Tet 68 was an exciting time, to say the least, and the Vultures participated in several unusual operations. On one occasion, the 162nd carried out a CA and landed troops on the US embassy lawn in Saigon. After lifting off a slick was shot up and crashed in an old French cemetery, skewering itself on a tombstone. Luckily, no one was hurt. On another occasion the Vultures landed troops in the infield of a race track in Saigon.

On 13 February the Vultures participated in an administrative lift for the 101st Airborne Division when the lead ship was sprayed with by an AK 47. After taking one round through the windshield, the crewchief of the lead ship, SP4 Howard Wetzel, cut the enemy down with a burst from his M-60—his first VC kill.

Also on the 13th WO Ronnie Adair had a rather unusual day. WO Adair was on short final to the normally secure pad at Phouc Hoa when his pilot overshot the approach and 3 Claymore mines were detonated under the ship. Both pilots grabbed the collective and “pumped” up enough RPM to take off. They limped back to Phouc Vinh leaking fuel and blood from the gunner’s leg. The aircraft was later found to have more than twenty holes from shrapnel and bullets in the main rotor, tail rotor, gear box and bottom and side of the fuselage and was rapidly losing fuel. The only person injured was SP4 Tebay, the gunner, who was hit in the leg by a piece of shrapnel but didn’t realize it until they began tracing the source of blood on the floor.

On 21 February one of the Vulture lift aircraft received heavy automatic weapons fire from a VC road block north of Phu Loi and was going to make a gun run until he was discouraged by RPG rounds and called the coordinates in to be hit by airstrikes.

On 24 February Lt Harlan Scheibe and WO Thomas Phelps had an experience they will not forget. Their ship (66-16189) had an engine failure and lost directional control southeast of Phouc Vinh and the aircraft crashed and partially burned. No one was injured but it was a bad experience for everyone aboard. The aircraft was written off but later rebuilt and returned to service.

During the month of February, the 162nd compound was hit by mortars and rockets on at least 15 occasions but little damage was done and no one was seriously wounded.

The Vultures started the month of March 1968 by welcoming ten new pilots to the roost for two weeks of in-country training and orientation. The ten aviators from the 7th Squadron, 1st Cav (Blackhawks) were newly arrived in country. As was tradition at the Vultures, each new pilot was required to put ten dollars on the bar the first night in the company, so needless to say the month of March was started out right. At 10 cents for beer and 25 cents for whiskey, ten dollars went a long way in those days.

The first two weeks of the month were spent mostly on missions with the First Infantry Division. However the pattern was changed somewhat with trips to Ham Tam and Xuan Loc while supporting the ARVN units.

Around 8 pm on the evening of March 5th, the Phouc Vinh compound came under mortar and rocket attack. The gun platoon responded by scrambling a fire team to locate and attack the enemy positions. Through a series of miscommunications the fire team was directed to an area where one of the gunships ([64-14155](#)) was hit by friendly artillery fire and exploded, killing all 4 crewmembers. The lost crewmembers were CWO Vernon R. Tweedy, SP4 Brian T. Murray, SP4 George D. Novakovic, and WO Vernon L. Leuning, a pilot from the 7/1 Cav who was training with the Vultures. It was a sad day for the 162nd and a senseless loss of 4 good men.

On March 12th at approximately 2130 hours the VC again hit the Phouc Vinh compound with mortars and rockets. Although there were over 200 incoming rounds counted there was only minor damage in the Vulture area.

A few days later the 162nd joined with sister units of the 11th CAB to lift troops of the First Infantry Division from Quan Loi to Loc Ninh and LZ's around Loc Ninh. The Vultures were chosen to lead the 30 ship operation and as always came through with flying colors.

A busy day was in store for the Vultures on March 22ⁿ when they supported infantry units south of Phouc Vinh. Immediately after receiving reports that the ground troops were in heavy contact with enemy units the Copperheads came to their aid and drove the VC back while the slicks resupplied the units during a lull in the fighting. The VC directed their fire on the gunships and succeeded in downing one aircraft. However, one of the slicks, flown by WO Donald "Hog" Welch, quickly rescued the downed crew while five other aircraft put in a security force to secure the slick until it could be lifted out by a Chinook.

As the Chinook was lifting the downed gunship out of the area, a med-evac aircraft in the same area received heavy fire and went down. The Vultures and Copperheads responded immediately to the emergency by extracting the ground troops from where the gunship had been downed and inserting them in to secure the crippled med-evac ship. At one point as the lift ships were departing the area, enemy troops were seen converging on the site.

On March 25th the Vultures started the day supporting the 1st Infantry on an operation north of Lai Khe. With the aid of a sister unit the Vultures lifted ground troops into LZ's with hopes of finding and destroying any VC in the area. This Battalion size lift resulted in the destruction of two large, newly fortified bunker complexes. The Vultures then moved to Di An to air lift more infantry units north of Thu Duc. With a break of only thirty minutes, the 162nd ships were on their way again supporting infantry units near Binh Hoa.

The 26th of the month was begun with incoming rounds in the 162nd area at approximately 0100 hours. After a rather restless night the 162nd was again participating in a battalion size operation north of Lai Khe. The lift was held up briefly while a security force was inserted around a downed aircraft in the area.

At approximately 2245 hours on the same night the Phouc Vinh compound was mortared again. Two mortar rounds hit the beautiful, recently completed maintenance hanger (built by C Company, 34th Engineers), and three persons were slightly injured from the shrapnel.

On 28 March the Vultures worked with the Black Baron and his aviation elements in an operation north of Chon Li Tan which involved LZ's within 150 meters of the Cambodian border. Major Thompson, the CO, later said "you learn to appreciate the professionalism in the 162nd after seeing another unit go nearly 5 miles off course while looking for the LZ." The Vultures as always were right on target, hitting the RP's and LZ's with accuracy and getting the usual compliment from the ground and air missions commanders for doing an outstanding job.

The month of March 1968 was a record-breaking month. The Vultures flew 3119 total hours, more than the company had ever flown in a single month. A total of 32 PE's were also pulled during the month, another record.

One day in early 1968, WO Ron Gresham was on a 25-ship CA with the First Division and as the ships were unloading in a wet rice paddy he spotted a VC who stood up maybe 50-75 yards away and fired an RPG at his aircraft. It landed roughly 20 feet short, exploded and sprayed hot mud all over the crew. Needless to say, they got out of there fast.

On April 9th, WO James Wright was on a routine mission for II Field Forces when he heard a distress call from an aircraft near Vung Tau. He responded to the call and took part in a search of choppy waters just off the coast. About 30 minutes later a Dust-Off spotted some aircraft parts in the water. A little later WO Wright and his crewchief (SP4 Michael Grant) spotted the downed crew of 6 people on a Vietnamese fishing boat. As the boat neared shore, the 6 men jumped into the water, ran to shore and were picked up by the Dust-Off.

On April 30th the 162nd and a sister unit (the 173rd) were engaged in a large operation supporting the First Infantry Division. As they extracted troops from a hot LZ northwest of Lai Khe, they encountered heavy automatic weapons fire on final into the pick up zone for the last lift of 5 ships. Immediately, two Copperhead light fire teams opened up on the area. The Vultures continued their approach and RPG rounds began impacting in the pick up zone. At that point the slicks broke off and were put into orbit nearby while artillery and air strikes worked over the area around the troops. Then with seven fire teams from the 162nd and 173rd laying down heavy covering fire the slicks pulled out the remaining troops. There were no friendly casualties and enemy losses could not be determined.

In addition to supporting the major US infantry units the Vultures were frequently held on standby as part of the III Corp Ready Reaction Force. They also performed many single ship missions all over III Corps, supplying ARVN compounds, providing reconnaissance for ground commanders and Command and Control ships for operations in progress. These single ship missions were generally referred to as "ash and trash" missions.

In mid April the 162nd broke another record by airlifting two complete battalions of the 101st Airborne (1,700 troops) into positions near Binh Hoa in a period of 6 hours.

On May 2nd, while on Ready Reaction status for II Field Forces, the company was scrambled to an area west of Loc Ninh. A company of CIDG troops was picked at their base camp near Thu Duc and flown to Thu Duc to stand by for further deployment. While airborne, the flight was briefed on the urgency of the mission, an insertion of a search party in an attempt to locate 6 missing CIDG troops and their two US Special Forces advisors. A long range patrol had stumbled into a heavily fortified NVA bunker complex, and an attempted extraction under fire (by the 240th AHC) had resulted in two ships being shot down and eight people missing. Most of the patrol was finally extracted but a larger force was being inserted to search for the missing men. The Vultures arrived in late afternoon and began the insertion, one ship at a time into the area where a ship from the 240th AHC had been downed and destroyed by enemy fire. Air and artillery strikes had temporarily driven the enemy back.

The first 5 ships inserted their troops without drawing fire and shortly thereafter the search team located the missing men. All had been killed in the vicinity of the downed aircraft. An extraction was then initiated, again one ship at a time due to the small size of the LZ. The first two ships loaded with the KIAs and gear made it out without incident but the next ones began taking fire which grew more intense with each extraction. The last two ships, chalks 6 and 7, drew heavy fire on take-off and reported seeing a company-size NVA unit rapidly closing in on the LZ. The Vultures arrived back at the roost at Phouc Vinh at 11 pm with no casualties.

Unfortunately, a former Vulture pilot, WO Larry McKibben, was killed in the above incident. WO McKibben had arrived with a group of new pilots in June 67 and was later transferred to the 240th AHC (Greyhounds) to spread out DEROS dates. He landed his ship in the LZ on the initial pick up attempt and was mortally wounded. His ship crashed in the LZ and the small group of US and CIDG troops desperately held off attempts to overrun their position. For his actions during this engagement, Special Forces SSG Roy Benavidez was later awarded the Medal of Honor.

On May 5th SP6 Ronald R. Blanchette, a Technical Inspector, received a \$10,000 lump sum bonus to re-enlist. SP6 Blanchette had joined the 162nd at Ft. Benning as a PFC, came over on the ship in February 66 and held the distinction of being the last remaining original Vulture.

On May 8th, the Vultures made over 600 sorties inserting and extracting troops in hostile areas around Saigon and the Thu Duc area. A total of 12,295 troops were lifted.

While on Ready Reaction standby on May 8th, the 162nd was scrambled to insert reinforcements into an ARVN compound at Bin Dop. The compound was under heavy attack but the first flight of five ships managed to land the troops and depart without damage. However, the second flight of five ships led by Lt Harlan Schiebe was met with a heavy barrage of mortars and rockets in the landing area while on short final. Lt Schiebe broke off and came around for another attempt and the same thing happened. He set up for a third attempt and began his approach to the same area but as the mortars and rockets began impacting in the LZ he veered off to the left at the last minute and landed the troops in an adjacent field. The troops dismounted and took cover and the aircraft departed before the VC could shift their fire.

On the morning of May 13th, the 162nd supported the First Infantry Division in the Phu Loi-Lai Khe area on some rather routine and uneventful CAs. However, in the afternoon they were called on to extract a unit of the First Infantry that declared a Tactical Emergency after 7 hours of heavy contact south of Song Be. Despite marginal weather conditions, the Vultures completed the task without incident and the 11th CAB commander was quoted as saying "The Vultures have once again performed in an outstanding manner in a difficult situation."

On May 19th the company supported units of the First Division in the Lai Khe area. During the second lift the lead gunship, flown by Cpt Michael Shannon, came under heavy automatic weapons fire and Cpt Shannon took a round through his leg. He was later evac'd to Quan Loi and then back to the US. His copilot, WO Butch Garner, was also hit by a spent bullet fragment in the jaw. The round penetrated his cheek but not his jawbone. WO Garner reached into his mouth and pulled out the bullet which he carried for months as his lucky charm.

The 162nd again supported units of the First Division on the 24th of May. The first lift of the morning was a 15 sortie insertion from Thu Duc to an LZ two clicks north of VC Island. The Vultures then completed a 20 sortie extraction from a night defensive position near Phouc Hoa to Normandy I. The Vultures next began single ship resupply missions until late in the day when they reformed to undertake more extractions.

On May 27th WO James Wright was making an aerial recon of a river near Bai Trai when he spotted a small number of VC and 2 sampans in a restricted area. The CE and gunner (SP4 Grant and SP4 Wooden) sank one of the sampans and killed one of the VC.

While supporting II Field Forces in late June, the Copperheads were called to cover an emergency extraction of an Australian unit near Nui Dat. The Australians had several people wounded while in contact with the VC and the Copperheads got one VC KIA. Later they were called on to cover a dummy extraction of a 12 man ambush team which had been spotted by the enemy.

One day in mid '68 WO Bill Greenhalgh and Lt Jack Donahue took a new gunner out to the old French Fort near Phouc Vinh for some gunnery practice. After a few passes in which the gunner managed to avoid hitting the skids or blades, WO Greenhalgh spotted a bird in a barren tree standing out by itself. He brought the ship to a hover and shouted for the gunner to get the bird. The gunner expended his ammo, splintering the tree, but missing the bird. Amazingly, the bird did not move. According to Lt Donahue, WO Greenhalgh then turned the aircraft over to him, pulled out his .38 pistol, took one shot out the side window and down went the bird. Lt Donahue said of the incident, "I am here to testify that he made one hell of a pistol shot. Should have come over to the Copperheads with me!"

It seems that WO Greenhalgh made quite an impression on some pilots. As WO Jack Lewis relates:

"I remember flying a mission in early July near An Loc. I was flying as Peter Pilot with Bill Greenhalgh. He taught me a lot about flying the Huey and saved my butt many times when I would screw up an approach during formation. Unfortunately for Bill my formation flying abilities were not the best during my first few months. I'm sure I gave him several good scares, if not a permanent heart condition. Fortunately for me, he was an excellent aviator and a very patient man.

During the mission we made a drop off at An Loc and were returning to Phouc Vinh. As we were crossing over a rubber plantation the VC opened up on us. It was the first time I can remember being shot at. Two of the ships in our flight went down and our aircraft was hit. The engine oil pressure went to zero. Bill Greenhalgh was at the controls and decided to continue on to Phouc Vinh. I remember to this day him looking at me (I'm sure he could tell I was scared) and calmly telling me 'Don't worry. Never sell this aircraft short, the book says it can fly at least 30 minutes after losing oil and we're not that far from home'. We made it home without any problems, and I began to learn respect for the Huey and its capabilities. And I'll always remember Bill Greenhalgh!"

On July 18th aircraft 66-16188 (AC WO Sidney Austin and WO James Cox) were chalk 2 in a 5 ship trail formation extracting a First Infantry unit west of Lai Khe. They were to land along a road but since an infantryman had set off a mine on the road, the aircraft were told to land in a field beside the road. The tail rotor of WO Austin's ship hit a tree stump, the ship spun to the right, hit the ground and rolled over. The aircraft was destroyed but the crew escaped with only minor injuries.

One day around midyear SP4 Phil Bishop, normally flying as a gunner, recalls going to Saigon and hitching a ride back to Phouc Vinh along with SP5 John Ohmer (returning from TDY at Lai Khe) on a Vulture ship (V-176). The engine failed as they entered the traffic pattern and the pilots managed a scary, but successful, autorotation and landed in a rice paddy just outside the perimeter. There was no major damage to the ship but it was a hair-raising incident no one involved has forgotten.

There was another unusual incident at the Phouc Vinh airfield about this time. SP4 David Blomquist was a gunner on WO Greenhalgh's ship and was getting ready for an Ash & Trash mission. Local Vietnamese workers had been working on the runway that morning and one had somehow managed to get over to the ship and booby-trap the door gun ammunition with white phosphorus (WP) grenades. As SP4 Blomquist was preparing his machine gun, the WP grenades exploded, giving him severe burns. He was medivac'd to Can Tho and then back to the US.

On September 13th, the 162nd with help from the 173rd AHC (Robin Hoods), led a battalion lift for the First Infantry near Loc Ninh. Lt Dennis Morris was flight lead and had 20 slicks to make 5 sorties each into the LZ's.

It was raining, the weather was poor and the ceiling was down to around 700 feet. Despite these conditions the First Infantry Division Commander, MG Ware, was on the scene in his C & C ship. With such a low ceiling his aircraft was dangerously exposed and was shot down with all on board killed.

On several occasions at Phouc Vinh nearby B-52 strikes (high altitude artillery) would be so devastating that men would wake-up feeling the vibrations caused by the strikes and the bunks would “walk” themselves across the floor. Men woke-up in a place other than where they went to sleep. What was even more startling was that the Vultures often inserted troops into the same area just after B-52 strikes and would still take a great deal of enemy fire.

Many people at Phouc Vinh in mid-late ‘68 remember "Lizard Six." As WO Dave Bonifield relates, “When I arrived, on the front of our barn (hooch) hung a sign, ‘Home Of Lizard Six.’ When I asked who was Lizard Six I thought they were trying to see if the new guy would fall for the bull story. However, I soon found it to be true. Lizard Six was about 18 inches long and lived in the rafters of our barn. We often heard him scurry around up there. If you banged on the walls you could make him mad. He would make huffing sounds as he inflated and puffed up his lower neck. Then he would release the air with a “heew” sound. The net result sounded like “f—k, f—k, f—k, heeeew”. Thus the lizard was known as the F--k You Lizard. Later, I went to the Air Force jungle survival school at Clark AFB. What do you know, there was one of these lizards in a little zoo display. Next to it's proper name was ‘FY Lizard.’ Everyone else wondered what that meant, but I knew.”

(I NEED MORE INFO ON WHAT HAPPENED IN LATE 68??)

In November 1968, the First Cav Division moved south to Phouc Vinh and the priority of Delta operations was raised. The 9th Infantry Division, previously given limited resources, was assigned 3 additional assault helicopter units and 3 Air Cav troops. The 214th CAB with the 162nd, 191st and 240th AHC's was put under the operational control of the 9th Infantry. The headquarters of the 9th and also that of the Mobile Riverine Force (the 2nd Brigade of the 9th) was located at Dong Tam and the 162nd moved into that sprawling square mile base to support the Division's operations in the Delta.

The Vultures supported almost any 9th Infantry unit at times but was specifically assigned as direct support for the 2nd Brigade, consisting of the 3rd battalion of the 47th Infantry, 4th of the 47th and 3rd of the 60th.

Getting all the vehicles and equipment from Phouc Vinh to Dong Tam proved to be a bit of a chore since the 162nd, like most all aviation units, devoted every resource to aircraft maintenance and virtually ignored vehicle maintenance. As a result few vehicles were in condition to make the trip. After much effort and considerable assistance from battalion HQ the Vultures put together a convoy to Dong Tam, escorted by armored vehicles (Some vehicles had no brakes and had to run into the vehicle in front of them to stop).

The Delta region in IV Corps stretched from the Cambodian border to the tip of the Ca Mau peninsular. It was a heavily silted level plain with no elevation above 9 feet except in the far western area. The entire area was subject to frequent flooding. Extensive embankments were built over the centuries to channel water into the rice fields. Mud flats and mangrove swamps encircled the delta region along its coast. Road networks were limited but hard surfaced major roads did exist. Most of the canals carried heavy traffic throughout the year.

To patrol and fight in the inundated marshlands and rice paddies and along numerous canals and waterways crossing the Delta, the Army modernized the concept of riverine warfare employed during the Civil War by

Union forces on the Mississippi River and by the French during the Indochina War. The Mobile Riverine Force used a joint Army-Navy task force controlled by a ground commander. In contrast to amphibious operations where control reverts to the ground commander only after the force is ashore, riverine warfare was an extension of land combat, with infantry units traveling by water rather than by trucks or tracked vehicles. Aided by a Navy river support squadron and river assault squadron, infantrymen were housed on barracks ships and supported by gunships or fire support boats called monitors. Howitzers and mortars, often mounted on barges, provided artillery support.

The broad, flat stretches of the Delta provided an ideal environment for unrestricted use of army aviation. Unfortunately, the VC's line of sight was also unrestricted. They could see you coming from miles away and had plenty of time to take careful aim.

In the October-November period the 162nd was chosen to experiment with helmet sights for the XM-21 Minigun system. Sperry Rand sent a technician over to work with the Copperheads on the test of what was called the Viper Sight, or "the Look of Death". SP5 John Ohmer (armorers) and WO Dennis O'Brien helped install and test the system which electrically/mechanically linked the pilots' helmets to both miniguns and the M-5 grenade launcher. Wherever the pilot looked, the miniguns would be automatically aimed. It worked well under ideal conditions but the dust, heat and humidity played havoc with the small servos attached to the helmet. The system wasn't quite ready for field conditions. This was the forerunner of the helmet-mounted sight used in the current day Apache gunship.

When the 162nd first relocated to Dong Tam, or the "the dust bowl" as it was sometimes called, there was a garbage dump on the other side of the flight line across from the maintenance hanger. The dump was covered covered with kids scouring the garbage and unfortunately a duce and half truck unknowingly backed over one of the kids one day. MP's were then posted at the dump and whenever there was a "delivery" the MP's would pop CS (tear gas) grenades to keep the kids at bay. That worked fine until a Chinook came in over the dump at the wrong time. The rotorwash sent the gas into the 162nd hanger area and EVERYBODY was sent scrambling for a gas mask. The first time it was an honest mistake, but word quickly got around and this became a popular activity. A gas mask soon became an every minute-of-the-day personal item.

On December 7th, the Vultures repositioned from Dong Tam to Ben Tre before daylight in preparation for CA. Just after daylight a B-52 strike went in southeast of Ben Tre and the crews could see and hear the strike as they cranked. The strike was in and around their LZ. The 9th Infantry had intelligence indicating a VC battalion HQ in the area. The idea was to make a 10 ship insertion and then bring in more troops if the situation warranted. Lt Dennis Montgomery ([67-17559](#) with CE SP5 Tom Juneau) was flight lead in a 10 ship formation and WO David Bonifield was flying trail.

The LZ had concrete hay stacks around it and although it was pretty well blow to pieces, all hell broke loose. The flight was to make a 180 turn on the ground and WO Bonifield was to be lead coming out. On short final, they began taking heavy fire and Lt Montgomery's master caution light flashed on. At roughly a quarter mile from touch down, the ship began shattering and shaking and the gunner came on the intercom and said he'd been hit (luckily the round had passed through his ribs just to the side of his chicken plate and he wasn't seriously wounded). The round that hit the gunner had continued through the firewall and punctured a hydraulics line. Since Lt Montgomery was already set up for landing he continued on and managed to plunk the ship down in a wet rice paddy. Not knowing the extent of the damage he elected to shut down in the LZ.

There was a bit of confusion as the other ships waited for Lt. Montgomery. Finally, they turned in the LZ and WO Bonifield led the flight out, leaving the former lead ship on the ground. Lt Montgomery gave first aid to his gunner and they all took cover in the LZ with the infantry. Meanwhile the rest of the flight had formed up and were circling a few miles away. At that point WO Gilbreath, disobeying orders from the C&C ship, broke

formation and set up an approach into the hot LZ to pick up Lt Montgomery and his crew. On final approach he was covered on one side by two Cobras and on the other by 4 Copperhead gunships, all blazing away at the tree lines. As Lt Montgomery recalled “You should have seen the massive display of firepower, particularly from my position. It was beautiful!” After they left the LZ, the downed ship was hit head on in the nose by an RPG, incurring massive damage.

Amazingly, there were no fatalities. After things settled down, a CH-47 was brought in to get the ship out. Action was still pretty intense to the north of the LZ so the Chinook crew was told to land north and depart south. Somehow they became confused and departed north, right over all the bad guys. However, they held on to the Huey, probably because they were too scared to remember how to punch it off. They ended up touching the Huey down at Ben Tre and then making a running landing themselves, shutting down engines as they rolled. One of the fuel cells was blown open and the inside of the Chinook and the crew were soaked—a memorable day for them too.

Some of the men didn’t let the tropical weather interfere with a traditional Christmas celebration. They even built a good-size snowman out of sand and shaving crème that appeared very authentic.

During the year aircraft availability rates for the 162nd exceeded 80% every month, sometimes reaching 85%, thanks to the incredible efforts of the Vulture maintenance team. This exceptional availability was in part accomplished by an agreement with the Infantry units supported. Up to this point, a ground battalion commander had little restriction on how much he could use his aviation assets on any given day. It was agreed that under normal conditions (excluding the declaration of a tactical emergency which needed the Division Commander’s approval) battalion commanders were restricted to 100 “blade” hours per day, which equated to one Periodic Inspection per day. The Hangar Rats lived very nicely with this understanding. They did a great job, and this played an especially important part in the Vulture and Copperhead activities in the hectic early months of the year.

The Army supply system during this period (and probably every other period as well) was extremely cumbersome. When you needed something, you took something (a case of steaks or chicken, etc.) to the Vulture liaison man in Saigon, told him what you needed (plywood, air conditioner, or the like) and he would work a deal. More often than not you would have what you wanted in a matter of days rather than months if you depended on the supply system.

Aircraft parts supply was also sometimes a problem but the Vultures were fortunate to have WO Ron Gresham, a great tech supply officer. As WO Dave Bonifield relates,

“We had a very high aircraft mission ready rate. With all due credit to the maintenance guys, Ron had a lot to do with that. We would fly to Phu Loi. At the supply depot, Ron would sometimes send me and the CE in the front door with the requisition slips while he went in the back door to get the things he knew we did not have the priority to get. We would fly back to Phouc Vinh with every corner of the Huey packed and rotor blades and tail booms sticking out the doors. The net result was a tech supply that probably had enough parts to build a Huey and a high ready rate.”

Memorable incidents that occurred during 1968 include:

- WO Donald Welch, Assistant Opns Officer, hopped into the passenger seat of a jeep that was taking him out to the flight line as a rush replacement pilot. However, someone had removed the seat pins and as the jeep made a sharp left

turn, the seat and WO Welch both tumbled out of the jeep—Some guys had a weird sense of humor!

- Major Thompson was so incensed with the living conditions of the maintenance people at Phouc Vinh when he took over the company (they were living on a berm infested with rats) that he immediately had their quarters bulldozed. This left almost 100 men with no shelter at all but the engineers he called in quickly set up tents while they built permanent quarters.
- WO Jim Cox was returning from R&R as a passenger on a slick that had an engine failure and landed in a mine field outside of Phouc Vinh. Everyone was afraid to move and waited for a ship to hover overhead and pick them up.
- A man shot himself in the foot while lying in his bunk and “leading” a rat with his pistol. One of the leisure activities at Phouc Vinh was to shoot rats. Men would often lie on their bunks with a gun in their hand so as to be able to squeeze off a shot without moving and frightening the rat.
- After new urinals were dug, Major Thompson banned indiscriminate urinating in the company area under penalty of the violator constructing new urinals. Two WO’s promptly ran afoul of the ban and were put to work.
- Late one night the shower ran out of water and a WO back from club was all lathered up but with no way to rinse. Being resourceful he ran over to 1st Sgt Pine’s hooch and jumped into the fire barrel by his door to rinse off.
- Many remember the “monkey raids” at Phouc Vinh. Monkeys from the local jungle would invade the 162nd area when the flight crews were all out flying. The monkeys would come in looking for food and devoured any unsecured care package. They scared the hooch maids so much they would abandon ship when the monkeys showed up.
- One of the peter pilots, while jumping out of the back of a Huey at Diong Tam with his 38 strapped to his hip, cradled it in his hand for the jump. There was a round in the cylinder and the impact of his jump caused the weapon to discharge, putting a nice hole in his palm. Ouch!
- At Phouc Vinh, Lt. Dennis Montgomery was walking to his aircraft one morning and noticed a crew chief (maybe on Dil Fout’s ship) loading stones the size of grapefruits into the gunners well. When asked what he was doing adding more dead weight to an already underpowered D model, he responded “but sir, you should see what these things do to a hooch!”
- On a CA near Song Be (in Montanard country) in July or August 68, one of the Vulture slicks noticed an abnormally high fuel consumption and returned to Song Be. Inspecting the ship they found a cross bow arrow had penetrated the fuel cell and caused a leak. This was the only Vulture ship to be “shot down” bt a cross bow!

- Cpt Mike Shannon was AC of a Copperhead gunship on a mission near Xuzn Loi and took a round through both legs while his copilot was hit in the face with shrapnel. Cpt Shannon couldn't use his feet to control the pedals and his copilot was blinded by blood in his eyes. They managed to land the ship by the copilot controlling the pedals and Cpt Shannon the other controls.
- Some folks got a kick out of setting off CS (tear gas) grenades near the intake of Major Venti's air conditioner after he went to bed. This happened on several occasions and obviously enraged Major Venti, fueling even more such events.

1969

Major Robert Wright began the year as CO and relinquished command to Major George Venti in May. He was followed by Major Kenneth Loveless who assumed command in October.

In the 1968-69 period the imbalance of commissioned officers finally came more in line with authorized levels for the first time. However, instead of too many majors and captains there was now a shortage. Most of the platoon leaders in late 68 and early 69 were Lt's rather than captains and there was at most one other commissioned officer in each platoon. Of course, as always the real backbone of army aviation was the warrant officer aviator and the shortage of commissioned officers had negligible impact.

Some of the facilities at Dong Tam left a little to be desired. The revetments were ready, but the barracks, buildings and creature comfort areas were not. The barracks were framed and were slowly being built by a civilian construction company. Officers and enlisted alike scrounged plywood, nails, fans, and whatever else to make it "home". WO Glenn LaPlante had some construction experience and undertook the task of constructing an officer's club (bunker). It was roughly a 20 X 40 foot structure with 3-foot earth filled walls and a 4-5 foot earth roof. The key was the 14" by 14" by 40 foot timber that LaPlante was able to "procure" for the main beam. It was engineered as a bunker but was finished inside as an officer's club complete with bar (made from bowling alley lane material). The enlisted men had to make do with a GP Medium tent for a club. It had a few picnic tables and garbage cans filled with ice and beer. Rank had its privileges! For some time, the enlisted men also had to shower in a 40 knot wind underneath a conex filled with water, using globe valves for showerheads and wood pallets for a floor.

The maintenance facilities at Dong Tam were good. The Vultures had a large open front hangar with the shops on the lower level and offices on the second floor. Very nice but unfortunately a strong wind blew the entire roof off one day. There was also a wood frame mess hall with all the comforts of home. The supply room and motor pool were the only facilities housed in tents. However, the dust at Dong Tam was terrible. It got into everything. When it rained there would be 6-10 inches of water in the company area. Then the sun would come out, quickly dry the ground and it was dust all over again.

For some people at least, things were different in the Delta—and a lot hotter. According to WO Dave Bonifield,

“Flying out of Phouc Vinh, I had received fire a few times but never taken a hit (I agree, not all were so lucky). In the Delta, receiving fire was an every day occurrence and hits were incurred almost every day. By the time I left, I think we counted that my ship, that I had picked up new (Old 520), had taken nearly two hundred hits in less than six months.”

Many of the Vultures felt the 9th Infantry was more efficient than the 1st Infantry. Their tactics were certainly different. Many 1st ID operations involved large multiple battalion –size insertions with 60 or more aircraft. However, most CA's by the 9th were much smaller and more ad hoc. Specifically, the 1st ID would plan each search and destroy mission in excruciating detail. Which battalions (companies) would be inserted where, which artillery batteries would support, when fire would commence and cease, PZ, RP and LZ times. Nothing was left to chance or ad hoc coordination. All of this information was disseminated to supporting units (aviation and artillery) the night before for planning and execution. Vulture operations, in turn, would prepare maps with flight paths, times, formations, coordinates, etc. and brief and distribute before the mission. Some felt the VC had the technology to intercept this information and ready themselves for many of these missions—whether to combat them or to avoid them. Often times insertions were made into a cold LZ based on hot intelligence. In spite of this, the 1st ID would stay the course and wander around the jungle with no one else there.

The 9th ID, on the other hand, would not make complex plans and their operations tended to be more spur of the moment and in response to the latest developments. They based their operations for the day on new, fresh intelligence. The 9th flew CA's virtually every day (as opposed to the 4-5 days per week in the 1st ID) and the Vultures often had to ration “blade time”. For CA's, the Vultures were normally tasked to put up 10 slicks, one Smoke ship, one C&C and 4 gunships.

Based on the battalion commander's intelligence, he would send his Air Cav teams out early in the morning to develop what he thought might be hot spots. If the Cav developed something, he would have the Vultures insert troops. If not, he would move to another location. The VC in this area were smart. They quickly realized it was much more efficient to shoot helicopters (not necessarily the Cav) and evade the infantry. As a result, the Vultures received fire routinely and the downing of one helicopter meant that 6 or 8 infantrymen would be out of action. Rather than being extensively preplanned as in the 1st ID, insertion planning by the 9th ID was accomplished on the fly as it was happening. The battalion commander would select the LZ, C&C would coordinate PZ formation, RP time, LZ coordinates and formation, suppression, artillery, brief the guns and slicks, and do the mission; all generally within 15-20 minutes. It was quick and very effective.

If the infantry on the ground did not made any significant findings after being on the ground for a couple of hours, they were pulled out and taken to a new location. All of this generally in 10 ship (company size or smaller) elements. The 1st ID, on the other hand, often did battalion and even brigade-sized insertions. Very big and cumbersome!

While the 9th ID's tactics were effective, there was also a downside. Relatively small troop units (often just one or two platoons) were sent out in the field, sometimes with little or no artillery prep in the LZ's, to essentially locate the enemy by drawing their fire. Once VC or NVA troops were located in this manner, the US troops were frequently pinned down and had to hold off the enemy until reinforcements could be brought in. For the infantry on the ground this was obviously not conducive to a long life. Some felt they were being used as “cannon fodder” and morale suffered.

On New Years Day, the Copperheads supported the 191st (Boomerangs) on a CA and were returning to the roost when aircraft [64-14160](#) (AC WO David Harmon, WO “T.O.” Jones, CE SP4 Daniel Wright and Gunner SP4 R. J. Gardner) had a tail rotor failure. WO Harmon picked out a rice paddy for landing but touched down in a right crab and the ship rolled over and beat itself to death.

In early 1969 the 407th TC Detachment and 450th Signal Detachment were absorbed into the 162nd and the name was officially changed to the 162nd Assault Helicopter Company. The 758th Medical Detachment was absorbed by the local compound medical staff.

During Tet 1969, the VC hit Dong Tam at all hours of the day and night with mortars, rockets and sometimes 75 mm artillery rounds. Dong Tam had been built by dredging silt from the My Tho River a couple of years earlier and the soil was very fine and soft. Mortars and rockets left craters 3-4 feet deep.

A sad event occurred on February 4, 1969. SP4 Benjamin H. Binegar was “flushing” water through the engine of a ship that had just returned from a mission. The cowling was open and he was kneeling on the engine deck spraying water into the engine and suddenly stood up into the moving main rotor blade. His skull was crushed and he died that evening. SP4 Binegar was a crew chief who had been in country for almost 18 months. He was due to go home in a couple of weeks and had been taken off flight status (against his wishes) so he could have a relatively safe job during his remaining time. He was helping out on the flight line when this incredibly senseless accident occurred. God rest his soul.

On February 28th the Vultures were supporting the Second Brigade, 9th Infantry on a CA near Ben Tre. While on the ground at Ben Tre after refueling, the gunner on 66-16151 (AC WO. H. W. Schmid, WO Marion Jaroz, CE SP4 Whitney Kloman and gunner SP4 E. L. Andras) heard a slight knocking coming from the transmissions area. The CE took off the side panel and the noise stopped so they took off to rejoin their flight. About five minutes later WO Schmid felt a knocking in the cyclic control and turned to go back to Ben Tre. A minute or so later the cyclic was ripped out of his hand, going in a jerky, circular motion. He grabbed the cyclic but could not control it, even with hydraulics off, and the ship began a right spiraling descent with increasing bank (some even think it went inverted). The aircraft hit the ground nose low and pinned SP4 Kloman under the wreckage. The ship was destroyed and all four crewmen were injured but not seriously. Luckily the ship did not catch fire, and a nearby Chinook was called over to lift it off the CE. SP4 Kloman had a crushed skull, was later given last rites and was not expected to live but he pulled through back in the US. (It was later learned that the uniball had popped out of one of the push-pull tubes, causing a complete loss of cyclic control).

Many of the missions with the 9th Infantry Division involved small single ship Eagle flights—almost like LRRP insertions. The Vultures and Copperheads were kept busy inserting squad-size units who searched an area and if no VC contact was made they were quickly extracted and reinserted elsewhere. When contact was made, the Vultures would bring in company or battalion size units, often on standby at Binh Tre, to surround and attack the enemy positions. There were also many small company-size CA’s using six slicks and two gunships on multiple sorties.

Sometimes supporting the Mobile Riverine Force involved unusual activities. Two of its battalions were housed on LST’s moored in the My Cong River and another battalion housed in the ‘Tiger’s Lair’ south of the River. In the words of Cpt Dennis Montgomery, “Lifting troops off of the LST’s was always an encounter. First, we had to learn to talk Navy, e.g. ‘you have a green deck, land port.’ No one was ever sure what that meant. Also, the LST’s tended to align with the wind; this caused us to have to constantly land and take off in a crosswind. Got a little exciting sometimes.”

The 2nd Brigade, and the 162nd, operated primarily in Kien Hoa province, a relatively small area southeast of Dong Tam. However, this was the historic heartland of VC activity and almost all CA’s were hot. One pilot recalls going into 17 different LZ’s in a single day and being shot at in all of them.

Due to the nature of the 9th’s operations the Vultures carried out multiple CA’s every day, day in and day out, with few breaks. The pilots built up an incredible amount of flight time and the routine became rather numbing after a while. Lt Mike “Rock” Pacifico reported logging 1,568 hours of flight time during his tour with the Vultures.

One day in early 1969, WO Chuck Carrillo, who had recently arrived in country, was flying on a CA with his platoon leader Lt Mike Pacifico. On a hot extraction near Ben Tre WO Carrillo was on the controls as they cleared the trees around the pick up zone. Just as he turned the controls over to Lt Pacifico, a round came through the floor, travelled the length of the collective, knocked off the little light post on the collective head, hit the instrument panel, ricocheted up through the glare hood, hit the upper window frame near the OAT gauge and then dropped into his lap. He sat there stunned with his mouth and eyes wide open and then looked over to see Lt Pacifico grinning at him. Lt Pacifico said "It's going to be a long year, Chuck". He was right!

On March 2nd, the VC hit Dong Tam again with a particularly heavy mortar and rocket attack and bracketed the operations/orderly room. SP4 Mike Rush, on duty as CQ runner that night, recalls seeing a rocket explode roughly 50 feet outside his window. Luckily there were no serious casualties among the Vultures. However, a sister unit (the 191st) took a direct hit on their operations building, killing the CO, XO and four others. The 191st CO, Major John Petrie, was a former Vulture who had previously been CO of the 407th TC Detachment, the 162nd's maintenance support unit.

In late March, during one of the frequent nightly mortar and rocket attacks, the VC made a lucky hit on the main Dong Tam ammo dump down near the river. There was a spectacular fire works display for almost 2 hours. Two Navy Seawolf helicopters were taking off near by at the time and were blown out of the air, killing everyone on board. The next morning there was unexploded ordinance all over the south side of the compound.

Many people remember Than, a bar maid at the Vultures' Dong Tam O' Club. She was sophisticated, beautiful and got a lot of practice saying "No". She was also much more fun to watch than the Lawrence Welk Show on AFVN-TV.

Another incident, or rather series of incidents, occurred early in the year that should be noted. 1Lt Jim (Stork) Niemi managed to crash 4 ships within a period of a couple of months, destroying almost \$1 million worth of aircraft. In the first incident, he was on a CA and was to land in a water-filled rice paddy. He planned to do the infantry a favor and hovered over to a dike so the troops wouldn't have to jump into the water. However, the instability from the troops unloading caused the ship to hit the dike, roll over and beat itself to death. Luckily, there were no serious injuries but a grunt was pinned under the ship. Another ship in the flight was able to lift it up enough using seat belts as a sling for the grunt to be pulled out from under the ship.

A few days later Lt Niemi was departing a PZ with a load of troops and took a round through the engine. He autorotated and settled into trees after stopping his forward airspeed, again with no serious injuries. Later, Lt Niemi was on a CA and came into a rice paddy PZ too hot. He flared, his tail rotor dipped into the water and the aircraft crashed into the PZ.

On another occasion, while landing in a PZ, Lt Niemi's rotor wash set off a mine under his tail boom, severing the tail boom and causing the ship to pitch forward with the main rotor slicing through the troops he was to pick up. Two or three troops were killed instantly.

Early in the year, Cpt Patrick MaDill (AC), WO "T. O." Jones (pilot), SP4 Bonds (CE) and SP4 Donald Gembe (CE) were flying gun cover on an CA east of Dong Tam near Ben Tre. They had discovered and partially sank with door guns a motorized sampan in the initial assault. Cpt MaDill, on his first day as AC, wanted to destroy the sampan's motor and came in low to mark the position with smoke. As was his habit, Cpt MaDill was flying flat out at 120 knots and everyone on board was intently searching for the sampan. They were all looking out the side of the ship and not paying much attention to what was in front of them. All of a sudden they hit some trees, shattering the chin bubbles and shearing a rocket pod completely off the ship. It was a miracle they didn't crash—they were probably saved from flipping over by their high speed. Cpt MaDill's AC orders were pulled for a couple of months because of this incident.

Also one day in early in '69 aircraft 67-19520 (AC WO Dave Bonifield, WO Lou Dinnan, CE SP4 Van Travis and SP4 Dorn) was inbound on the first lift of a hot CA near Ben Tre when the ship began to yaw. As WO Dave Bonifield recalls,

“The copilot was flying and things were a bit nervous. We started some slight yawing and the copilot told me he thought something was wrong. In between all the distraction I just told him it was his feet and calm down. He said no there is a problem and the yawing got worse. I took the controls just as the engine quit. I thought we had been shot down and called that we were going down. We made a perfect autorotation into a rice paddy full of water. Smokey immediately came in and started putting a circle of smoke around us. Our six infantry troops hit the ground and immediately engaged in a small fire fight. The rest of the flight circled back to drop the rest of the troops in our LZ and one slick stopped to pick up our crew. The CE, gunner and I grabbed radios and ran to the slick only to find that the copilot was not with us. I ran back to the ship. The copilot door was still closed. I opened it and the copilot was still sitting there frozen, with eyes as big as saucers. When I opened the door he jumped out, unhurt, and we both ran to the other slick. There was a lot of shooting, but when 520 was hooked back in it had no hits. The engine failure was due to a bleed line being left finger tight after an engine wash the night before. It had been a rushed preflight and I missed it. SP4 Van Travis sat down on the ramp and cried. The 1st Sgt was pretty upset, but I told him I didn't think he needed to say a word.”

A rather embarrassing incident occurred in early 69 when a Vulture slick was working with Navy SEALs. WO Dennis Klein was pilot and Cpt _____ was AC. They picked up the SEALs and received a briefing on a Navy barge anchored just offshore near Ca Mau. Two Seawolf gunships provided gun cover and also served as C&C, guiding the Vulture slick (a D model), who was at treetop level for the insertion. The gunships told the Vulture ship they were coming up on the LZ, to slow down and begun flaring. Without seeing the LZ, the AC began flaring and ended up still over the treetops with no forward airspeed and no lift! The ship settled into the trees and crashed. The aircraft was destroyed but luckily no one on board was seriously injured.

Many people fondly recall “Doc” Barefoot. He was the last CO of the 758th Med Detachment and moved the unit to Dong Tam where it was folded into the 214th Battalion medical facility. He joined the army late in life, having been drafted at age 44 and forced to close down his medical practice. Once when the CO, Major Venti, did not permit crew members pulling guard duty the next day off, Doc Barefoot grounded them all for the day.

On another occasion, after a “morale building” banquet for all of the officers, nearly every pilot was struck down with a severe case of diarrhea. Only the officers were effected which may have been a form of retribution since the enlisted guys should have been invited also. Most likely, some swamp water found its way into the feast, and every latrine around had someone heaving from both ends. It lasted for days and very few pilots could fly their missions. Doc Barefoot did a great job in ministering to the group and finally pulled everyone through.

Unfortunately, hygiene was sometimes not that great and conditions were somewhat primitive. When the Company first moved to Dong Tam, the new mess hall did not have adequate dish washing facilities so some nice monogrammed plates and dishes used at Phouc Vinh remained in storage. The mess hall used paper plates and plastic silverware instead. When Major Venti took command he found the dishes one day and, over the objections of the mess sergeant, put them into use. Shortly thereafter, half the company came down with another severe case of diarrhea, and they went back to paper and plastic. In the early days at Dong Tam toilet paper became very scarce and something of a luxury item due to the frequent bouts of diarrhea and dysentery.

The mess hall at Dong Tam was often neglected and did not have a senior NCO as mess sergeant much of the time. Food was often cold and there was no food available for the crews who worked at night. Men were often forced to scrounge around for cold C rations. At one point, frustration boiled over. Many people recall SSG Raymond Fitch, gun platoon sergeant, who threw his plate of cold food against the wall behind the serving line one day. Shortly afterwards a senior NCO was brought in as mess sergeant and food improved dramatically. The Vultures managed to obtain steaks from the Navy on a few occasions and even had had a few BBQ's.

On a mission in the Ben Tre area in mid-1969 WO Lou Dinnan was supporting the 9th Infantry and was to drop something off on a Navy Tango boat which had a small helipad on its rear. This was his first experience with small river boats and no one told him to keep the skids light. Instead, when he landed on the boat he put the collective down and the weight of the aircraft pushed the gunwales of the boat below the waterline. As the boat began sinking WO Dinnan quickly took off and went on his way as if nothing had happened.

There was another interesting event around midyear that many will remember. There was an island in the river a couple of hundred yards south of Dong Tam that was the site of a Buddhist Monastery. Often the 162nd aircraft landing at Dong Tam would fly directly over a Temple (where the so-called Coconut Monk resided) and a large platform where orange-robed monks often gathered. The Copperheads had been joking for some time about scattering the monks by dropping a CS grenade on them. One day, WO "T. O." Jones, a Copperhead AC, decide to do just that. As they returned from a mission, WO Jones instructed his CE and gunner (SP4 Donald Gembe and PFC Bounds), to get ready with a CS grenade. As they flew low over a large crowd of monks, they dropped the grenades square in the middle of the group. They all got a kick out of seeing the monks scatter like rabbits, some of them even jumping in the river. Unfortunately, it just so happened that a US two star general and group of war correspondents were visiting the monks at the time. No one got the tail number but they did see the snake on the nose and figured out it was a Copperhead ship. Major Venti, the CO, was hauled before the general and ripped up one side and down the other for over an hour. He came back to the roost mad as a hornet but none of the Copperhead crews flying that day would admit to being the guilty party.

On June 23rd, the Vultures were on a 10 ship lift in 2 flights of five south of Ben Tre. They dropped off the troops and returned to Ben Tre to await a call for pick up. WO Dennis Bankson, who had been in country five months, was taking his AC checkride on the lift and was tail-end charlie of the second flight. The infantry encountered no enemy and returned to the LZ for pick up around noon. No one realized it but the VC had followed the infantry back to the LZ, surrounded it and prepared an ambush for the helicopters they knew would come to pick up the troops. As the second and last flight came into the LZ they began taking heavy fire from all sides of the football field-size LZ.

WO Bankson loaded up his troops but as the last ship in the flight he had to wait until the other ships took off to make sure they had not left anyone in the LZ. Just as he dumped the nose over and applied power to take off, a mortar round landed very close to the ship and shrapnel hit WO Bankson in the head and neck area, wounding him severely. The ship pitched backwards, with the tail hitting the ground and probably severing the tail boom, then pitched forward and began to spin. The AC slammed the ship to the ground and most of the crew and infantry on board took cover behind a nearby dike (at least one of the troops was hit in the head and killed by the rotor blade). However, WO Bankson could not release his harness and was trapped in the ship which was taking heavy fire from a tree line 30-40 yards away. Realizing the pilot could not get out of his seat, the crew chief (although wounded himself) ran back to the ship, pulled the pilot seat release handles, tilted the seat back, slid WO Bankson out of the harness and helped him take cover behind the dike. They were picked up by a slick after 15-20 minutes and WO Bankson was medi-vac'd to a hospital at Long Binh and later back to the US. The crew chief, a Hangar Rat filling in for the normal CE that day, was hit with shrapnel in the thigh and was also medi-vac'd back to the US. The rest of the crew escaped with no injuries.

Martha Rae, the comedienne, was on a USO tour of Vietnam in the summer of '69 and the 162nd was given the task of taking her to a number of Special Forces camps in the Delta. On one stop there was a bit more excitement than expected. As SP4 Charles Armbruster (the gunner of her ship) relates:

“One afternoon as usual she would take a few cases of soda and beer to a fire base. As we approached to land at the firebase we would use a call sign that let them know who was aboard. One afternoon we landed in an LZ in the middle of a rice paddy. She got out and started talking to 3 or 4 Americans and the Major with her was holding a case of beer for the troops. All of a sudden shots rang out from a sniper, the beer started spraying all over the place and everyone ducked for cover. We quickly got the Major and Martha Rae on board and took off. On the way out I spotted the location of the sniper and sprayed it with a few rounds but couldn't hit anything with that damn slick-mounted M-60.”

In July 1969, the 9th Infantry Division stood down and the 162nd along with a sister unit, the 191st AHC, were reassigned to the 13th CAB and relocated to Can Tho. There were no large US ground units remaining in the Delta and US aviation assets were decentralized and organized around the ARVN units they supported. The 13th CAB became Task Force Guardian and primarily supported the 21st ARVN Division whose operational area extended south and southeast of Can Tho down to the coast. ARVN units in the Delta tended to do fewer CA's than US units and on a smaller scale, or at least smaller than the 1st Infantry. The smaller number of CA's allowed for a greater variety of other types of missions. The majority of assaults were battalion size operations. ARVN units also depended very heavily on gunship support for their far-flung outposts and to a lesser extent on artillery.

(I NEED MORE INFO ON 1969 and the 9th Infantry period??)

The move from Dong Tam to Can Tho was very interesting. Rather than “everybody in the trucks and follow me”, most of the men and equipment were loaded onto Navy LST's. They cruised down the My Tho River and up the Bassac River, taking three days to reach Can Tho. It was a memorable trip, seeing the river and the people who lived on it, face to face, rather than flying over them. The Vultures also got to see how the other half (the Navy) lived. The crew of the ship had good food, showers, nice beds and other facilities—and very few bad guys shooting at them.

The facilities at Can Tho were a few steps down from those at Dong Tam. Instead of wood, 2-story barracks, the unit lived in GP Medium tents for over a year while permanent facilities were built. Living in a tent was not ideal, especially in the Delta. Dirt, dust and mud (in the rainy season) were everywhere as were the mosquitoes and bugs. The mosquito nets quickly became clogged with dust and the fine dust was constantly in and on everything. In fact, some folks felt they lived like gypsies and wondered who the Vultures had ticked off to deserve such conditions.

There had been enough space at Can Tho airfield to accommodate one AHC in permanent facilities. Supposedly, the CO's of the 162nd and 191st met at the Officers Club just before the move and flipped a coin to see who would get the wooden buildings—the Vultures lost! However, as consolation the 162nd got the H models and the 191st took all the D models, a prize much appreciated when coming out of tight LZ's. (Because of the low elevations all of the few remaining D models in Vietnam were sent to the Delta).

The mess hall at Can Tho was not too bad, at least initially. Many of the night crews remember the split pea soup that always seemed to be the standard fare late at night. Even today, former SP5 Mike Rush says “whenever I see or smell split pea soup I always recall the late nights at Can Tho.” He and others also recall the

bread the Vulture mess hall began purchasing from a Can Tho bakery shortly after the move. They soon noticed a variety of bugs and weevils baked into the white bread and complained about it. The bakery resolved the problem by switching to whole wheat, making it much more difficult to detect the baked-in bugs.

At Can Tho, the 162nd and 191st usually alternated between CA's and ash & trash missions on a weekly basis. The Vultures and Copperheads would do CA's one week while the Boomerangs and Bounty Hunters would do them the next. On the off week, the Vultures would do ash & trash while the Copperheads went hunting—recons, hunter killer or Delta Six missions. The Delta Six missions, run by the 164th Combat Aviation Group, required the Copperheads to operate similar to an Air Cav unit and use their C models as both loach and gunship. These were fun missions that everyone enjoyed—although a bit scary on occasion.

On November 4th a Copperhead fire team was covering a CA near Vi Thanh and landed at the strip there to refuel and rearm. On take off the wing ship, 66-15215 (AC WO Barrie Springer, Lt A. N. Rufca and CE SP4 F. J. Bell) used the entire runway and barely managed to get a few feet off the ground. Approximately 200 meters past the end of the runway the ship settled into a rice paddy traveling about 50 yards with its skid in the water. It then hit a dike, shearing the rocket pods off and rolling on its side. The crew escaped injury but the ship was destroyed.

One day in November just after Major Loveless assumed command, WO Fred Auger recalls being called into the CO's office and handed a piece of paper, pen and envelope. He hadn't written home in two months and his family had contacted the Red Cross to see if he was still alive. Major Loveless not only chewed him out but also made everyone in the company write home that same day. With the mind-numbing day in and day out routine some people just lost track of time.

Everyone had their own way of dealing with the long monotony, occasional terror and everyday pressure of life in the 162nd. Many developed some rather unique "quirks" which, given the situation, didn't seem that unusual at the time. For example, Lt. George Barney, Asst Operations Officer, and his replacement WO Dennis O'Brien, acquired the nicknames of Earth Pig and Earth Pig 2, respectively, for their habit of snorting like a pig when keying the microphone to request a landing at Can Tho airfield. The air traffic controllers quickly picked up on the joke and routinely cleared Earth Pig to land upon hearing the familiar snort.

Other memorable incidents that occurred during 1969 include:

- Several men can never forget a haunting scene when their slick picked up a 9th Infantry trooper who had both legs blown off. He was conscious and talking to the CE. He said "I'm going to die"—and then he died.
- Lt Dennis Montgomery and Lt Lee Paynes were extracting troops south of the My Tho River and Lt Paynes was hit in the foot by a tracer as they came out of the PZ. The tracer entered the bottom of his foot but did not exit the top. The round remained in his foot as it burned out, causing intense pain. Lt Paynes was evac'd to Japan and then back to the US.
- While supporting the Mobile Riverine Force, Vulture ships often had to land on little assault boats that could not support the weight of a Huey and the boat crews routinely neglected to lower their antennas, which caused some confrontations between the respective crew chiefs; the boat's and aircraft's.

- During a gun run on a village, SP4 Don Gembe, gunship CE, stood out on the rocket pod and grabbed a VC flag from a pole attached to a hooch they were working over (luckily, no booby traps!).
- Lt Dennis Morris, 2nd platoon leader, recalls standing by for a CA at the Ben Tre airstrip one day with the rest of the Vultures. As they waited, a C-123 on a defoliation mission caught fire and made an emergency landing at the strip. The 123 called in when 5 minutes out but the Vultures could not clear the runway in time so it landed parallel to the runway. The 123 touched down streaming flames, ran through a minefield into a flooded rice paddy and partially sank in the muck. A very memorable incident!
- Virtually everyone hated the single ham and lima beans meal packed in each case of 12-meal C rations. However, there was one WO who enjoyed this particular meal, at least for a while. One day after polishing off a ham and lima beans lunch his ship took off and shortly afterwards he “barfed” out the side window. Unfortunately, the CE (SP4 Tom Barnes) was blasted with the slightly used ham and lima beans.
- A pilot was wounded 4 times by the same bullet. A round came through the chin bubble, went through his foot, through his calf and then thigh and finally hit him in the shoulder.
- Many remember the occasion when, at an Officer’s Call shortly after assuming command, Major Venti proposed changing the name of the company from “Vulture”, a dirty bird, to something more befitting an army aviation unit. Needless to say, he was hooted down and it was all down hill from there.
- Some may recall the time when WO Tom Broadbent’s brother, an Air Force jet jock from up north, came down and flew as door gunner with his brother. Most fun he ever had!
- According to recent visitors, Dong Tam still has a “snake pit”. It’s the home of a tourist trap snake farm.

1970

Major Kenneth Loveless was the commander at the beginning of the year. He relinquished command to Major Thomas Beauchamps in May who subsequently turned command over to Major Walter Moore in September. (Major Moore subsequently went on to become a Major General and command the Fifth Army.)

By early 1970, the few remaining US ground troops were pulling out of the Delta and the war was rapidly becoming an all Vietnamese affair, at least in the Delta. However, the three Vietnamese divisions, various Ranger battalions and regional (RF) troops in the area were extensively supported by US Army Aviation units. At its peak in early 1970, there were a total of 6 assault helicopter companies, 1 aerial weapons company (all gunships), 2 assault support helicopter companies (Chinooks), 1 air cavalry squadron, 2 separate air cavalry troops, 2 recon airplane companies (Bird Dogs) and 1 surveillance airplane company (Mohawks) supporting Vietnamese troops in the Delta. These were as follows:

<u>Home Airfield</u>	<u>Unit</u>
Vinh Long	114 th AHC (Knights)
	175 th AHC (Outlaws)
	147 th ASHC (Hill Climbers)
	199 th RAC (Swamp Foxes)
	7/1 Air Cav Squadron (Black Hawks)
	C/3/17 Air Cav Troop (Light Horse)
Can Tho	162 nd AHC (Vultures)
	191 st AHC (Boomerangs)
	235 th AWC (Delta Devils)
	271 st ASHC (Innkeepers)
	244 th SAC (Delta Hawks)
Soc Trang	121 st AHC (the famous Soc Trang Tigers)
	336 th AHC (Warriors)
	221 st RAC (Shotguns)
	C/16 th Air Cav Troop (Dark Horse)

This amounted to roughly 4000 men and some 500 aircraft.

Although there were only three US Army airfields in the Delta to cover a vast region, the 164th Aviation Group (the Delta Group), which had responsibility for all army aviation in the Delta, had previously established (unmanned) POL refueling points at 15 regional capitals and major towns. These were strategically located throughout the region so that no aircraft would ever be more than 20 minutes or so from a refueling point. This provided aviation units with a great deal of flexibility and allowed them to provide excellent support to ARVN units anywhere in the Delta. At times during the 70-71 period there were two additional assault units assigned to the 164th Group and supporting Delta operations from the Dong Tam airfield. These were the 135th AHC (Emu's) and 335th AHC (Cowboys).

At this point US aviation units were very active throughout the area and pretty much "owned" the Delta. They provided very effective support to the ARVN ground troops. In fact, it was a rare occasion when aircrews from the Delta Group did not account for more enemy casualties in the weekly casualty reports than the ARVN troops they supported.

Although all major US army infantry and other combat units were out of the Delta by mid-1970 there were still quite a few US troops in the area in addition to the aviation units. These took the form of a variety of US engineer, signal, transportation, Special Forces and MACV advisory units.

On January 5th a Copperhead fire team was providing gun cover for a slick spraying Agent Orange along a canal near an ARVN compound west of Vinh Long. The slick began receiving fire and the Copperheads started a gun run. Cpt Frank H. Brinson, the gun platoon leader, was almost immediately hit in the throat by a round that severed a main artery. The pilot, WO Allen Neher, took over and headed for the hospital at Vinh Long using every ounce of torque he could pull while the CE and gunner tried to give Cpt Brinson first aid. He by-passed the helipad, flew underneath some power lines and right up to the back door of the Emergency Room.

Unfortunately, they could not stop the bleeding and Cpt Brinson died before they made it to the hospital. WO Neher had flown the C model so hard that he overheated the engine and it had to be changed.

Much of January was spent staging out of Vi Thanh, conducting ARVIN CA's south of Can Tho.

WO Edward B. Melody, in country only 2 months, was killed on February 23rd as pilot of a slick accompanying a Copperhead fire team on a Last Light Recon south of Can Tho near Phung Hiep. The AC, Cpt Matt Fleming, was flying in a right orbit at 1500 feet and WO Melody was looking out the window at the ground. Suddenly a machine gun opened up from somewhere below and a round hit WO Melody in the right eye, killing him instantly. It was the only round to hit the ship.

Early in the year there was an interesting incident when a Copperhead fire team was covering Vulture slicks on a CA. WO Jim Willard was PIC of one gunship, and Cpt Walt Stewart was fire-team leader with WO Al Olbeter on the Chunker in the other. After they had escorted the slicks into a fairly large LZ s, as was typical in the Delta, they broke off to provide area security to the ground troops (21st ARVN Division). As luck would have it, they spotted a VC up in a tree (about ½ mile from the ground troops) taking in the scene. Of course, this was a door-gunner's dream! As WO Willard's gunner was working over the VC (his aircraft was about the height of the tree, slow, and about 20 feet away), Cpt Stewart suddenly saw an M-16 come up out of the grass directly under Willard's ship and open up on full automatic into the bottom of the aircraft.

Cpt Stewart shouted into the radio for Willard to get out of there – that he was taking fire. Of course, he knew that already because the lower pilots door hinge was shot away, with metal fragments cutting into his leg (he continued with the mission). The gunships immediately rolled in with 40mm and door guns. A 40mm round must have impacted under the VC that shot at WO Willard's ship since the explosion threw him several feet into the air. It was almost as if the scene was in slow motion. For a moment, Cpt Stewart thought the VC was coming through the windshield. Later when the troops made a sweep through the area, they found eight dead VC, all within a close radius of the tree. One of the US advisors saved an SKS rifle for the Copperheads, and it was later presented to Major Loveless when he left the company.

One night in early 1970, SP5 David Holt had a rather close call. In his words:

“It was around midnight and I was taking a shower. I had just about finished when our firefly ship hovered over the shower. The shower didn't have a roof, just beams and barrels. They sit there with that bright light on. I thought 'you perverts' and then gave them some hand signals. They just sat there so I got out my mirror and began to shave—no sense wasting light! They then cut loose with the M-60 right at me, or so it seemed. I left there running. When I slammed the door back, I looked in the direction of the berm and saw a small figure in black pajamas running from just outside the shower toward the berm. He never tripped or got caught in the wire, he just kept running with the M-60 right behind him. They said later that they got him just as he entered the tree line. If it wasn't for that firefly ship I don't know if I'd be here right now.”

In the February-March time period a rather bizarre event occurred at Can Tho one day. Two Cav C model gunships flew into Can Tho to show off their new night vision cameras. Both ships parked along the active runway and left their rockets hot. A short time later a Mohawk was on a GCA to the field and the radar bouncing off the Mohawk was enough juice to send a couple of 2.75 inch rockets straight down the runway. One rocket didn't arm right away and passed through several Chinooks and burned the 3rd one. The other rocket went straight down the runway and into the ammo dump across from the airfield tower. It was a perfect shot!

The dump exploded in a tremendous blast that shook the entire airfield, killing several guards on duty, and blowing the windows out of the tower. There was nothing but small pieces left of the guards.

Another bizarre explosion occurred several months later, again involving a Cav unit. A slick from C/16th Cav had just landed at Can Tho after inserting some ARVNs into an LZ. The aircraft was parked just off the road that divided the active runway from the 162nd's tent city. A maintenance person was looking at a problem inside the slick when a grenade that had been put into the fuel tank exploded. As WO Dennis O'Brien recalls,

“I was visiting in a tent near the road when one of the armored seats from the slick flew into the air and the sliding armor panel from the seat hit the tent I was in. The rest of the seat just missed us. Remember that the undercover VC among the ARVNs would wrap a grenade with scotch tape and pull the pin as they exited the aircraft. They could pop the fuel hatch and drop the grenade into the fuel tank to explode when the JP-4 dissolved the tape.”

A Copperhead gunship was refueling at the POL area when a spark apparently launched one of its rockets (with a white phosphorus warhead).

In late 69-early 70, the Copperheads spent a great deal of time operating out of Moc Hoa near the Cambodian border, including [many night missions](#) over the Plain of Reeds. Cpt Stewart recalls that night flights over the Plain were particularly tricky for them since they had such limited IFR experience. On dark nights there was absolutely no horizon and it was very easy to confuse occasional lights with stars—a great place to get vertigo! Luckily it was flat and if you were higher than 100 feet you wouldn't hit anything. All in all, it was a very lonely place and anyone there was usually the enemy.

Moc Hoa and the area around the Seven Mountains (Sisters) was Copperhead turf prior to the Cambodian Invasion in April 1970. During the invasion they worked around the Parrot's Beak and the Svay Reng area inside Cambodia. They ran routine missions out of Moc Hoa patrolling the border on the southern edge of Parrot's Beak (the beak is that "beak" looking projection of Cambodia located between IV and III Corps, with the point of the beak looking toward Saigon).

A typical mission was for one or two gunships and a C&C/flare ship, to stage out of Moc Hoa, and at various times during the night to link up with an OV-1 and Delta Control to recon the northern portion of the Plain of Reeds. The Copperheads also provided on-call support to the Special Forces outposts along the border—the B Team was based in Moc Hoa. The OV-1 would often pick up something on its radar, relay the coordinates to Delta Control, and they would vector the Copperheads over the site. (It was here that the Copperheads learned an OV-1 was great at finding herds of water buffalo.) In any case, it was a dangerous area and dangerous mission. The American and Vietnamese troops who manned the string of outposts along the border had a lonely and dangerous job. As the time approached to go over the border, the Copperheads began to work around the clock - patrol the border from a line north of Moc Hoa west to Chau Doc and then back again. Once in a while as far south as the Seven Mountains area.

On one occasion the Copperheads were sent out from Moc Hoa in the early morning to look for a battalion of NVA that had come off the mountains. They found them, or at least they found each other! The NVA had at least one heavy machine gun and made the mistake of opening fire too soon. As Cpt Stewart recalls they expended their rockets (WO McGlamery was wing) and gave some instructions to an AH-1 team that followed them in. Unfortunately, the NVA gunners got the range on the Cobras and killed the front seat pilot in one of the aircraft.

On another occasion when operating out of Moc Hoa, Cpt Stewart recalls that engineers were replacing PSP matting with the new square mats. A large, unsecured section of matting was picked up by the rotor wash of the aircraft as he was trying to get off the ground (remember, fully loaded C models would not hover!). The tips of the skids slid under the mat section just as they reached translational lift, the cross tubes gave way and the entire skid assembly was pushed up against the bottom of the aircraft – the first, and only, retractable gear UH-1C. They flew the aircraft back to Can Tho, dropped two fully loaded XM200 rocket pods in the river, and landed on some mattresses that maintenance had set up. Somewhere in the Mekong, off Can Tho, are two surprise packages, compliments of the Copperheads and the engineers at Moc Hoa.

In early 1970, WO Geoffrey McConnell and WO Bob Good were on a defoliation mission (or Autumn Mist as they were called) west of Can Tho. They were to spray trees along a canal and had a gunship escort since the VC/NVA typically shot at any low level ships rigged for spraying. Shortly after commencing their run there was a loud explosion underneath the ship and it ballooned up from the concussion of the blast. At first they thought the Copperhead escort had fired a rocket too close but then realized that was not the case. The VC had apparently wired mines into the treetops as a defense against defoliation runs by helicopters and had detonated one as the Autumn Mist ship flew over. The ship limped back to Can Tho and maintenance counted over 60 holes from shrapnel and bullets. WO Good said he felt like one of those damaged B-17's limping back to its base in England during World War II.

On April 25th, a Copperhead fire team was working an area southwest of Can Tho. WO Gerard F. O'Connor and WO Dennis W. Stoner in [66-15214](#) were on a gun run when the aircraft inexplicably crashed pulling out of a dive after firing rockets. WO O'Connor died in the crash and the rest of the crew were severely injured. Both pilots' armored seats were ejected from the aircraft in the crash. WO Stoner ended up with his legs jammed into the mud of a rice paddy (one leg was severely broken in several places) with the pilot's seat on top of him and pinning him to the ground. The main body of the aircraft was several feet away and caught fire almost immediately. The CE (SP4 B. Potteroff) had fuel splashed onto him in the crash and was badly burned from the waist up. The gunner (SP4 R. Volles) was not badly injured initially but incurred serious burns on his hands as he tried to extinguish the flames on the CE's body. Fortunately, the C & C ship landed within a few minutes, freed WO Stoner and took the group to the Binh Thuy Hospital.

The company later received a letter from WO O'Connor's parents asking about a tape recorder that he used to exchange messages with his parents. It was packed up with his gear and shipped home but lost somewhere along the line. His parents desperately wanted it because they thought it might contain one last taped message from their son. It was heart-breaking a tragedy!

When the Copperheads were finally allowed to cross the Cambodian border in April they were a bit disappointed. Most of their time was spent destroying watercraft and supplies. It was almost as if the NVA knew they were coming. Cpt Stewart recalls finding a beautiful cabin-type boat, maybe 30' long, and probably used by VIPs. In his words, "I shot one rocket at it and missed. By the time I came around for another try, my wing (WO Steve Behm) had reduced it to splinters on the water. We shot-up hundreds of small watercraft and destroyed untold amounts of supplies. There were numerous secondary explosions from door guns – a target rich environment - but the enemy had obviously pulled out fast."

Cpt Bill Tuttle had the distinction of being the one of the first US troops in Cambodia—at least officially. He was flying a 2 ship Nighthawk mission out of Moc Hoa supporting the ARVN 11th Armored Cavalry when that unit jumped the gun and crossed the border on the evening of April 30th. It immediately ran into the 17th NVA Division and had a real fight on its hands. Cpt Tuttle did a night medivac in monsoon conditions and under heavy enemy fire in an attempt to save a US advisor who had life threatening wounds. Cpt Tuttle's brand new Peter Pilot on his first in-country mission, turned the landing light on as they landed and attracted a hail of enemy fire. This act inadvertently allowed a second ship to land and rescue the badly wounded advisor.

Luckily, they all made it out without any casualties although Cpt Tuttle did have a few choice words with his copilot.

After US forces left Cambodia (the ARVNs stayed for a while), the Vultures and Copperheads shifted focus to the east - toward the area around My Tho, and got back to small unit actions. Part of this action included an occasional search for POW camps (that might hold two OV-1 crewmen captured in the area when their aircraft went down in late 1969). These missions would usually follow some intelligence report and involved 3-4 slicks, an ARVN platoon, a C&C ship and a Copperhead fire team. They managed to find two camps, one that had been recently vacated and one where the prisoners (roughly ten ARVNs and civilians) had been executed just prior to the search team's arrival. This was somewhere northeast of Can Tho, the other was close to an abandoned airfield, probably Japanese, near the coast – east of Ben Tre. However, at the occupied camp, the Copperhead gunners did kill some of the guards and the ground troops got a few more of them. There were no US troops among the dead POWs. It was learned much later that one of the OV-1 crewmen died in an escape attempt and one lived to be released.

After Major Beauchamp assumed command in May, he learned that the barracks and other facilities being built for the 162nd were to be given to a Chinook outfit (the 271st ASHC) instead. This not only meant the Vultures would have to live in tents 4-5 months longer than anticipated but also the company buildings would have to be constructed by the men of the 162nd with little outside help. For months every available man was diverted to construction work.

When the 162nd first moved to [Can Tho](#) they had dragged a number of two and a half ton trucks and other vehicles down from Dong Tam and put them in the motor pool to be cannibalized for parts. Like other AHC's the priority was on aircraft maintenance and no one paid much attention to the seldom used ground vehicles. However, the army did! Someone in DOD came up with the idea that combat units should have maintenance inspections. The Vultures had a CMMI (Command Maintenance Management Inspection) in the midst of the construction of the company buildings. The aircraft maintenance and weapons systems passed but the motor pool failed.

The CMMI failure almost cost Major Beauchamp his head. That mysterious black CH-47 that roamed around Vietnam in the dead of night plucking unit commanders who run afoul of headquarters almost came after the CO. However, he was saved when the battalion commander intervened on his behalf. After much hard, but rather useless, work and sleight of hand by the motor pool NCO, the Vultures passed a re-inspection of the motor pool. Priorities were sometimes a little strange!

An interesting task that the Vultures and Copperheads greatly enjoyed in 1970 was the Phoenix missions—a CIA sponsored operation aimed at capturing or eliminating high level VC cadre. The Phoenix missions were based on superb intelligence, and that was how the size of the force package was determined. At times it was a CA but mostly it was a single slick with one or two gunships. The Phoenix “snatches” were generally focused, surprise attacks – a slick might land four or five heavily armed men at the door of a particular hooch, and in they went. There was one case where the Special Operations men talked a 162nd slick into hovering over a hooch so they could jump directly through the roof. While the ship was at a hover the object of the mission came out the front door and gave the aircraft a burst from his AK. It was all down hill from there - but with a happy ending. Violent in execution, short in duration, and surprisingly free of friendly and enemy casualties, the Phoenix raids were a unique and highly effective brand of offensive operations. The Vultures and Copperheads loved them.

On May 27th, SP4 Andrew P. Susi, a Vulture crew chief on WO Mike Coonrod's ship, was killed on a CA southeast of Can Tho in the “Mickey's Ears” area. This was a very prominent series of bends in the river that looked just like Mickey Mouse ears from the air. A lift of ARVN troops were inserted into one of the “ears” into what turned out to be an ambush. The Copperheads covering the lift ships had recommended the LZ be

moved but the Vietnamese province chief in the C&C ship insisted the LZ be right in the “ear”. As soon as the slicks touched down the entire LZ lit up with automatic weapons fire. WO Eric Bray was the fourth ship, and when the VC opened fire he brought his ship up to a high hover and did petal turns so his gunners could lay down suppressive fire. The ARVNs were cut to pieces as they exited but all the Vulture ships managed to make it out of the LZ. On the way out, SP4 Suzi was hit in the head by a single round. He made it back to the hospital in Can Tho but died the next day. Sadly, he was only days away from completing his tour. The copilot, Lt William Healy, was also wounded but not seriously. There was suspicion of collusion between the ARVN province chief and the VC but no one ever knew the whole story. Many felt that WO Bray saved a lot of lives by his actions that day.

One day in midyear WO Willard and Cpt Stewart were cruising along in their gunships at tree-top level heading to Ca Mau when they suddenly broke over 20 to 30 NVA troops bathing in a stream. As can be imagined, it was bare asses running all over the place and the CE/gunners asking if they should shoot (maybe that American sense of fair-play!). WO Willard and an NVA soldier (who had made it to his AK) dueled it out. He would shoot at Willard with the AK, Willard would shoot a rocket at him, and so on. WO Willard won the contest on the third or fourth rocket.

Another interesting incident happened around midyear. The CO went on R&R and left the most senior Captain, a platoon leader, as acting commander. The Platoon Leader had been in country a couple of months and figured he was about ready for AC, so he cut orders appointing himself as an Aircraft Commander. On his first day flying as AC he was supposed to land at the Binh Thuy Navy field. He was talking to the Binh Thuy Navy tower but shot his approach to the Binh Thuy Air Force Base. Unfortunately, he cut off an F-4 flown by a full colonel on final approach and that was the end of his AC days for a while!

In the 70-71 period the company had a slick painted flat black (to cut down on shine and glare in the moonlight). It was equipped with a zeon light panel on the right side of the cargo compartment with 7 large zeon bulbs. The ship would fly at night into suspected areas of enemy activity looking for lights or fires. It would then light up the area and call in gunships to see if they could draw fire. If so, they would unload on the target. The zeon ship was almost always flown by CW2---- Smith?, an experienced pilot who had been in country over 2 years.

June 1970 was a sad month for the 162nd. On June 20th a Copperhead fire team on a recon mission took fire from a hooch in a small clearing surrounded by tall trees. They returned fire and set up for a rocket run but the trees obstructed their angle of attack. WO Alex Spence, the aircraft commander, then began a rocket run at a steep angle so as to be able to get a clean shot at the hooch. However, for some unknown reason he did not pull out of the dive and the ship ([65-09454](#)) hit the trees, rolled over and exploded. WO Spence, the pilot (WO Robert F. Colatruglio) and CE (SP4 Joseph P. Lutz) were killed on contact but the gunner, PFC Gary Catlett, survived with serious injuries. He escaped from the crash and a nearby slick dropped a rope and carried him to a clearing where they put him on board and took him to the hospital. He was medivac'd back to the US. The cause of the crash, whether it be enemy fire, target fixation, or something else, could not be determined.

Three days later on June 23rd, a slick ([67-17594](#)) with a Vietnamese woman and 7 Navy passengers on board departed Ca Mau at around 1800 hours for Can Tho. Roughly 5 minutes later at an altitude of 1,500 feet the mast apparently snapped off just below the rotor head assembly. Subsequent investigation revealed that “mast bumping” had occurred. A heart-breaking 12 souls were lost in this unthinkable accident, with 3 members of the crew being 20 years old or younger. The crewmembers were WO Daniel J. Hallows (AC), WO Lawrence M. Moore (pilot), SP5 Denis J. Dillon (CE) and PFC James W. Lenz (gunner). May God bless them all. From the nature of the weapons recovered it appears the passengers may have been SEALS or part of the CIA Phoenix program.

One day around mid-year, the 162nd planned a company party and the flight platoons had been able to return from a CA a little early in anticipation of the party. One of those engine shipping containers was filled with ice and beer. Everyone had had a few beers and were standing around waiting for the steaks to cook when the Operations Officer came running over to the group. He said a loach had been shot down and they needed to insert some troops asap. Then he turned to the first platoon leader, Cpt Bill Howell, and asked how many of his crews were ready. Cpt Howell immediately answered “all of them”. At that point the entire first platoon headed toward the flight line, running, staggering and falling all over each other like a scene from the Keystone Cops. However, once they made it to the aircraft, they quickly sobered up and it was all business. They picked up and inserted the troops but were not able to rescue the loach crew. The VC had beat them to it.

One day in mid-1970, WO Robert Good was AC of a slick that had an engine failure south of Can Tho. The ship was empty and he made an autorotation into a flooded rice paddy, setting the aircraft down with no damage. WO Good had put out a May Day call that was picked up by a medivac ship not far away. There was no dry ground where they landed so WO Good put a smoke grenade on the synchronized elevator of the ship to signal the pick up ship. When the aircraft was sling-loaded back to Can Tho, WO Good was there when the CO came by to take a look at it. Although there was no damage and he had made a great autorotation, Major Moore saw where the smoke grenade had scorched the sync elevator and had a fit. He chewed WO Good out—for damaging the ship. It was hard to please a perfectionist!

Sometime in August of '70 the [SEALS](#) and MACV were searching for a VC/NVA POW camp in the U Minh Forest area. They had carried out several Sniffer missions and confirmed a great deal of human activity in the area. One day the Vultures took part in an ARVN six-ship, no-prep raid in the U Minh about half way between Ca Mau City and Rach Gia in an effort to surprise and overrun a suspected POW camp. They landed and stayed in place instead of pulling pitch and getting out. According to Cpt Bill Tuttle,

“The local bad guys must have bugged out while we were enroute, because you could still smell the faint odor of wood smoke. The ARVN grunts found the compound underground—three stories, complete with a generator room, pumps, a decent-sized hospital, and a clothing and equipment manufacturing area with 50 Singer sewing machines, but no live POWs—just dog tags stuck in the walls. The VC had kept the guys in 3’x3’x5’ cages dug into the sides of the tunnels, and when they died, they just collapsed each cage roof to bury them. They tamped the dirt down, then tucked their dog tag chains into the wall. Kind of reinforced your desire to go out fighting if you went down while flying single ship.”

According to the briefing before the raid, there were supposed to be three confirmed US and 10-15 ARVN’s being held in the POW camp. One of the US advisors who went down into the tunnels said they found five sets of US dog tags and "a lot" of ARVN ID’s on the second level and he had heard that there were more down on the third.

Cpt Tom Rodman remembers another SEAL mission as follows:

“My year as a Vulture was memorable. I lost my Cherry on my first flight. Had to fill in as a Copperhead co-pilot during a hot CA. Got shot down on the first pass. This was a picture of things to come. My memory is failing me but, I fell out of the sky 4 more times that year. The worst was flying a SEAL mission without Seawolf guns to cover my rear. One of the birds lost a fuel cap so they didn't leave the flat boat at Ca Mau. We ran into some VC bobbytrapping a canal and decided to shoot them up because the guns were on the way. They weren't. We got shot up and hobbled back to the deck and landed. A couple of the SEALs

were shot up along with the belly of our slick. Had to be hooked out the next day.”

On August 26th the Vultures were on a CA supporting ARVN troops and were departing a hot LZ when the lead ship (69-15429, a brand new aircraft) was hit by an RPG at an altitude of about 200 feet. The aircraft exploded and all aboard were killed. The crewmembers were WO William H. Laurence (AC), Cpt Stephen D. Carr (pilot and first platoon leader), SP5 Benny R. Halstead (CE), and SP5 Larry B. Jacobson (gunner). It was WO Laurence's first flight after making AC and many remember how proud he was of that achievement. The CA was only 10-15 minutes from Can Tho and the Operations staff were listening to the radio traffic when the ship was hit. They were stunned by the news--to be so close yet so helpless. It was a sad loss!

In the August-September period the 162nd lost nine ships with engine failures. The third stage compressor blades were apparently faulty and that group of engines failed at around 1200 hours. WO “Tuna” Williams was lucky enough to be in on 3 of the engine failures.

In the fall of 1970 the 121st AHC and 336th AHC at Soc Trang began training Vietnamese air force (VNAF) personnel en masse to take over their function and subsequently turned their aircraft, equipment and facilities over to two newly formed VNAF squadrons. In the South Vietnamese armed forces all aircraft, including helicopters, were part of the air force and these two units had US air force rather than army advisors. Unfortunately, the advisors were mostly jet jockeys who had been through a 25-hour helicopter transition course and had no clue as to how to run air mobile operations and support ground troops. Soc Trang airfield was turned over to the Vietnamese air force and the remaining US troops either stood down or were transferred to Can Tho. The Vultures and Boomerangs at Can Tho ended up taking up some of the slack with the Tigers and Warriors gone.

One evening in the fall there was a USO show at the Officers Club. The 162nd crews were out on missions and arrived late for the show but quickly made up for lost time. Some of the men took to the stage and proceeded to help out the performers with singing and dancing. Major Beauchamps, the CO, got up to herd everyone back to their seats but ran into the Airfield Commander just entering the Club. Unfortunately, the Airfield Commander didn't appreciate the humor of the situation and reacted very negatively. He booted the Vultures out of the Club, telling them not to come back. It took a while for the CO to get back on speaking terms with the Airfield Commander.

Late in the year, SP4 Dan Pannunzio was CE of V369 on maintenance run to Long Binh. Although it was a little awkward they put a crated tail boom and transmission in the cargo area of the Huey and flew it back to Can Tho. Because of poor aerodynamics and wind resistance they had to stop to refuel at My Tho and Vinh Long. When the ship landed at the POL pad they jumped out, grabbed the fuel hose and then realized they couldn't access the tank because the open cargo door blocked it. They couldn't close the door because of the tail boom cargo and finally ended up getting a skinny-armed Vietnamese to reach between the fuselage and door to unlock the emergency window release. So much for using their head!

Keeping the hangar rats supplied with vital aircraft parts was a critical activity that sometimes involved quite a bit of horse-trading. As WO Fred Auger recalls:

“On top of my test pilot duties, I was stuck with the aircraft parts supply department. This did allow me my own aircraft (369) that was permitted anywhere in Vietnam to acquire parts for our flock of birds. Most good parts had to be stolen or traded. Certainly the crucial parts, such a push pull rods, were always in high demand by every helicopter unit. A dozen of these rods could buy you just about anything conceivable. I accidentally ordered 100 of these rods

from the USA depot. It took forever to get them. When they finally came in, I had cornered the market on a very crucial part of the UH C,D,H aircraft. Needless to say, the 162nd ate steaks for quite some time. I would fly as far as the lower I Corps area for my trades. It was a long flight with several fuel stops. That's why I became so proficient with all of my navigation equipment with special attention to Saigon radar. Those were the days. And to think I was just 22 years old.”

Shortly after assuming command of the 162nd in October, Major Moore ended a longstanding initiation rite for new pilots, much to the chagrin of some and the relief of others. The initiation usually took place late at night after most people were asleep. The “old-timers” would get together and go drag the unsuspecting “newbie” out of his hooch and hold him down on the ground while one of them dropped his underwear and sat on the face of the new guy. This procedure was known as the “Crack 6” and initiated all new pilots into the unit.

The wood, two-story barracks and other permanent facilities were finally completed in November and the company moved out of the tent city that had been home for the first 15 months at Can Tho. It was beginning to look a lot like a nice company area but when the monsoon rains came it was still a muddy mess in some areas. Unfortunately, the bunkers were built partially underground and no one considered what would happen in the rainy season. At that time of year the bunkers usually had about 2 feet of water in them. Some people simply got on top of the bunkers during mortar attacks with their cameras and tape recorders and tried to direct the VC fire to the ragged ships they hoped would be hit.

In early December, the Vultures and Copperheads were on a CA east of Can Tho. The LZ was full of water and the ships hovered over small raised islands so the ARVN's could jump off. Lt Ken Barnard was AC in one of the ships and they began taking heavy fire as they came into the LZ. The ARVN's would not get off so the CE was throwing them off. As the lead ship lifted out of the LZ, Lt Barnard saw a VC step out from behind some grass roughly 10-15 yards in front of his ship and aim his AK-47 directly at his copilot. Three rounds went through the right windshield and the VC then aimed at Lt Barnard. Six rounds went through the left windshield. Since the ship was hovering, it was above the VC and he had aimed too high. No one was hit. Lt Barnard then pulled full power and tilted the rotor forward at a sharp angle in an attempt to hit the VC with the rotor blade as he took off. However, the VC went completely underwater and was not touched. As they lifted out of the LZ they could see an ARVN with an M-60 dangling from the skid of the ship in front of them. He hung on until around 200 feet AGL and then fell into a rice paddy. Lt Barnard displayed the windshield in his hooch for weeks afterwards.

There was a sad event in the company on [Christmas](#) Eve. A gunner from one of the flight platoons, PFC Samuel E. Dick (20 years old) received a letter from his girlfriend informing him she had been on several “acid trips” with his friends back home and she didn't want to see him again. PFC Dick went to the arms room and told the armorer he wanted to clean his M-16. He took it back to his barracks, loaded it, put the barrel in his mouth and pulled the trigger. God rest his soul! He was just as much a casualty of the war as those killed by enemy bullets.

On December 27, the 162nd was on a CA roughly 15 miles south of Rach Gia. The flight of slicks were subjected to intense automatic weapons fire from well-entrenched NVA positions surrounding the LZ. During the third insertion several ships were damaged from heavy fire and one (WO Lee Dike) was shot down. The Copperheads provided suppressing fire as the crew was extracted by and covered the downed ship until it could be sling-loaded out later in the day (maintenance later counted 38 bullet holes in the ship). One of the gunships (66-15008, CE SP5 Curt Krouse) also came under heavy fire and took roughly 10 hits. The gunner, Sgt Ames, was hit in the face with shrapnel and the AC, WO Bruce Bonner, had rounds go between his legs, into his seat and over his head but was not hit. They flew back to a staging area and shut down to check damage. After looking the ship over closely they reloaded and continued their mission, flying roughly 8 more hours that day.

On arrival back at Can Tho, a maintenance inspection discovered some serious damage, including a swash plate push/pull tube that had been hit and half the diameter was missing –scary!! The ship stayed in maintenance for several weeks, had an engine failure on its first flight out and was destroyed.

(There may have been several Silver Stars or DFC's awarded for the December 27th incident. Can anyone provide more detail?)

During the year 1970, aircrews of the 162nd officially accounted for 600 enemy kills and over 1500 sampans destroyed.

Other memorable incidents during 1970 include:

- pt Lonnie Ames, maintenance officer, was relieved for taking a shot at a hooch maid who stole his watch. C
- P5 Greg Price, a maintenance team chief, decided he'd like to fly and transferred to a flight platoon. His [ship was shot down](#) on his first flight out of Can Tho. SP5 Price figured that was enough flying for him and came back to maintenance. S
- t Imanuel Sieving and his gunship crew were shot down near Moc Hoa one night around midyear. They landed on the bank of a canal and held off the VC until morning when they were rescued. L
- he XO and 2nd platoon leader flying C&C were awarded a Silver Star for picking up the crew of a downed Copperhead gunship (WO Mike Perrin, WO Peter Lautzenheiser, SP4 Greg Boska and SP4 Leroy). T
- O "Tuna" Williams was flying a defoliation mission on Christmas Eve and forgot to switch radios when he tried to inform his accompanying gunships that he was taking fire. A slick 25 miles away responded "I don't give a damn, I'm not there." W
- t. Guy Smith, son-in-law of then Secretary of State Dean Rusk, was wounded on a CA and Major Loveless had to call the State Department in Washington to explain the circumstances. L
- ome of the Vultures took part in a SEAL raid where they grabbed a VC paymaster for the local VC battalion, complete with payroll. They all took some VC NLF "Liberation Money" as souvenirs. S
- he 271st Innkeeper Chinook that picked up AC # 555 (a fully loaded gunship) T

downed upwind of a village on Go Cong Island dropped the gunship on takeoff. There was a TV crew from a major US network in the village at the time gathering “local color” footage and they scattered as a cloud of red smoke and CS gas drifted through the village. The Vultures heard about this for weeks.

- O Dennis O’Brien had to write home to ask his parents for money to pay off his gambling debts so he could DEROS. He owed so much they wouldn’t let him Vietnam without paying his debts (whoever he owed apparently could pull a few strings!).

1971

Major Walter Moore was the CO as the year began and was replaced by Major Hudson Schnell in March, followed by Major Ronald Brooks in August.

In January 1971 US ground troops saw their last action in the Delta when D Troop, 7/1st Air Cav, supporting the ARVN 9th Infantry Division, was inserted to relieve a US Special Forces camp under attack on Ta Bec mountain (one of an air cav squadron’s four troops is an infantry troop of some 200 men).

Around 2 am on New Years Day, someone at 13th CAB decided a convoy due in from Saigon was late (at 2 am, it sure was!!) and asked the 162nd to send a slick up to look for the convoy. The pilots, and everyone else, had been celebrating the holiday with a few rounds of drinks as was their (daily) habit and had just went to bed. Fortunately for the crew, the ship never made it out of the revetment. The tail boom ended up on top of the revetment with the aircraft resting at an odd angle.

However, another ship was then launched. Cpt Phil Dolberg, being the “least drunk” of the bunch was sent out to search for the convoy. He recalls that “if I hadn’t had a few glasses of liquid courage, I would have never gone out at night and flew at tree top level down the road with my landing light on searching for the convoy.” He didn’t find it.

On the afternoon of January 2nd one of the Cav units got into trouble and had a couple of ships shot down in an LZ. The Vultures were called on to insert troops into the LZ and rescue the downed crews. A flight of 4 Vulture ships made 3-4 insertions at night under very heavy fire. The lead ship kept his navigation lights on steady bright (while the others in the flight went to black-out) and shot his approach to a strobe light on the ground in a tight LZ. It was a dark night with no moon and a harrowing experience for those involved. All of the AC’s were awarded DFC’s.

The Moc Hoa missions continued into early 1971. As WO Lee Dike describes, they could be a little tricky sometimes:

“We had a regularly scheduled night mission to Moc Hoa, up in the Plain of Reeds. We would start getting ready for it about two maybe three in the afternoon and depart in order to arrive at the airfield during daylight and in time for chow! We then briefed with our back seat, a Special Forces advisor type and go over details of our work for the evening.

Night flying out of Moc Hoa was an adventure to say the least. Most of us only had tactical instrument tickets and some of us had never flown an ILS or VOR approach—not that there were many of them around.

I remember one particular flight. We got called about one in the morning. We loaded supplies, started the aircraft and waited for the flare pots (our runway lights) to be lit and departed. Once in the air we called paddy control (ATC) and the coordinates of our destination were given to them by the back seat. Paddy control then vectored us to our destination. It was a clear night: we could see and make out tree lines and rice paddies very clearly. Every now and then we could see a campfire off in the distance.

After 25-30 minutes, a call from ATC confirmed our proximity to our destination. We began a wide circling pattern while the back seat communicated with the ground troops. Someone spotted lights on the ground. I looked in the direction indicated and strained to pick up the lights. I finally saw them and began a slow approach. The lights got brighter as we approached in the darkness. At 150-200 feet, I switched on the searchlight. In the glare we saw a patrol of four or five men holding flashlights (the lights we were making our approach to). I brought the aircraft to a low hover over a rice paddy and the supplies were kicked out—we spent minimal time doing this! The men on the ground took the supplies and disappeared in the direction of the tree line. I pulled in power and climbed for altitude.

Back in the air we again made contact with paddy control for a radar vector, this time back to Moc Hoa. We called operations five to ten minutes out with an ETA. As we got closer we could see the flare pots being lit for our approach. We landed, the pots were extinguished, we shut the aircraft down and we waited for a possible next flight.

At daybreak we were finished, said our farewell and headed back to Can Tho. A shower, shave, something to eat and sleep were waiting. If we didn't get the same mission that night, we went to the Officers Club which opened at noon.”

Beginning in early 1971, the 162nd picked up the mission of supporting the US Embassy in Cambodia. Several times a week, and sometimes daily, two slicks were sent to Phnom Penh for the day to fly the embassy staff to various locations within a couple of hours of the capital. These were fun, but exhausting, missions and sometimes a little scary. For some reason the embassy insisted that the army markings on the helicopters be covered with tape, which made a rather silly looking sight.

Crews on the Cambodian missions were forbidden to spend the night in Cambodia, except in case of emergency. The ships had to be available by 6-7 am. This required that the crews wake up around 3 am so as to take off by 4:30 am and fly in the dark to Phnom Penh to arrive by 6 am. Often they flew all day and didn't get back to the roost in Can Tho until 9-10 pm. A long day—especially if you had the same mission the next day!

Early one morning in the first few months of 1971 CW2 Bill DeGoey and WO Ray Buchter left Can Tho only to have an engine failure shortly after take off. For some reason they couldn't maintain rotor RPM in autorotation and fell through when their rotor RPM became too low to sustain even an autorotative descent. They were flying a Charlie model “borrowed” from the 191st and the crewchief and gunner were both from the 191st. They hit the ground like the proverbial ton of stuff and the aircraft was demolished. They hit so hard that WO

Buchter's seat was broken - the tubular metal that the canvas webbing was stretched over was broken into two pieces. WO DeGoey was evacuated with a spinal compression injury from which he later recovered. The crew chief and gunner were both injured but not seriously. This was a mini-gun ship and they received leg injuries when the ammo cans beneath the rear seat (with all 6000 rounds of 7.62mm rounds in it!) broke loose and went flying forward when they hit the ground. Later that day, WO Buchter was released from the hospital. WO Peter Lautzenheiser remembers him staggering around the second story balcony near the Copperhead lounge shouting something along the lines of "Boy! We really f---d up that aircraft!" He was drunker than a skunk and feeling no pain. The reality was that he'd had a fairly close brush and was mighty glad to have escaped without serious injury.

The 162nd had a great recovery team during the 1971 period. Led by SP6 Tim Lawrence, the Hangar Rat Recovery Team had the procedure down pat. They could land in a PZ and rig a ship for sling-loading out by Chinook in less than 2 minutes. Unfortunately, the Chinooks often had a nasty habit of dropping the ships. The 162nd lost several this way.

Cpt Steve Garber, Operations Officer, recalls an incident early in the year when he was on a GCA (ground controlled radar approach) into Can Tho airfield. The smoke and haze from rice farmers burning their fields was so thick it was impossible to see the ground. He was vectored in by the radar operator but on final approach the operator suddenly said something to the effect, "Sorry, but I've lost you. Please take over and land visually." That's a hell of a thing to hear on an IFR approach! Luckily as he got closer he was able to make out the runway.

WO Allan Cease remembers one of his first flights in country in early 71. The mission was to go to an ARVN outpost on an island in a river north of Can Tho and transport a load of marijuana to an LST anchored not far away. It seems the Vietnamese had been growing it right next to their outpost. It was spotted one day by the Delta Regional Advisory Command (DRAC) staff as they flew over it.

A few nights later, WO Cease and WO John Young, the AC, were scrambled for a C&C mission to the same outpost where they directed Cobras in beating off a VC attack. (Perhaps the VC were mad about losing their share of the marijuana crop!) When the Cobras left to rearm and refuel, WO Young dropped down to 200 feet and his gunner got a couple of kills as some VC tried to leave the island by sampan. This was pretty frightening stuff for someone like WO Cease who had just arrived in country.

During the 70-71 period, the Vultures and Copperheads spent a great deal of time supporting the 9th ARVN Division. The 191st (Boomerangs), the only other AHC and sister unit at Can Tho also supported this unit as well as other units but often could not field enough ships for scheduled combat assaults. As a result, the 162nd ended up flying most of the CA's. Obviously, this did not foster a friendly spirit of cooperation between the two units.

On March 1st the 162nd received word that 2 aircraft commanders with more than 90 days left in country should immediately be sent up to the 101st Airborne Division in I Corps to take part in Lam Son 719. Apparently the 101st was running out of AC's and needed replacements fast. An AC draft went out to a number of units and each was directed to contribute 2 AC's. That night the CO, Major Moore, called all the pilots together in the room used as a bar in the lower level of the pilots quarters building. He put the name of every one eligible in a hat and drew 2 names out. WO Charles Thomas and WO "Tuna" Williams were the lucky winners. They left the next day and were assigned to C Company, 101st Aviation Battalion where they took part in the push into Laos. They had a "hot" time in Laos!

No one who was there can forget the tragic mid-air collision on March 17th just off the end of the runway not far from the 162nd area. An Air America Porter was landing and was hit by a Cobra from C/16th Cav that had been doing autorotations. Everyone on both ships were killed.

On March 22nd the 162nd was called on to help out in a bad situation. C Troop, 16th Cav had a Cobra shot down in an area near the U Minh Forest where they drew heavy enemy fire. The Cobra was hit by 51 caliber fire and autorotated safely but the two pilots were killed before they could exit the ship. The Vultures were called on to bring in troops. Cpt Durwood Gooden and CW2 Paul Anderson led a 5 ship flight into the LZ over known enemy positions (at the insistence of the 13th CAB Commander). They took a round in the fuel cell, the ship caught fire and blew the tail boom off at 200 feet AGL on short final. The aircraft then spun out of control into a flooded rice paddy. Three of the crewmembers survived but the gunner, SP4 Dennis M. Hotaling, and some of the troops on board did not. The pilot and CE were seriously injured but Cpt Gooden less so, and he returned to the 162nd after recovering.

A second ship in the CA with Cpt Gooden was also shot up on short final, caught fire and crashed into the LZ. The AC, Lt Kenneth Barnard, and his crew survived the crash and managed to escape the burning ship but several troops on board were killed in the crash. The crews of both downed ships were picked up WO John Young who took a tremendous amount of fire while hovering around the LZ to retrieve the crews. WO Young was awarded the Silver Star for his actions in this incident. (Some think the Battalion Commander, not WO Young, was the one who picked up the 2 crews and received the Silver Star. Can anyone confirm???).

Many remember either the Battalion Commander, LTC Ruby Whitehead, or the 164th Group Commander (Delta 6) joined them for the second and third lifts into the LZ with his VIP ship that had fancy yellow leather (or plastic) seats and steps.

In April, the 162nd and 191st carried out a number of large CA's with 3-4 regiments of ARVN troops in and around the U-Minh Forest area in the far south of the Delta to counter NVA forces infiltrating from Cambodia. This all Vietnamese action (other than US aviation support) involved very heavy fighting, lasted several months and virtually destroyed the 359th NVA Regiment. The ARVN units inflicted hundreds, if not thousands, of casualties and successfully blocked the NVA units from establishing major base camps in the U-Minh.

Several people recall a slick door gunner who came over from the infantry after already spending a couple of tours in country. Shortly after he arrived his ship spotted some VC in a free fire area. The gunner opened fire and killed two of the VC and then demanded that the pilot land so he could cut off their ears. Everyone thought the guy was a nut case and he didn't last long in the company. It was rumored he was given a "Section 8" discharge. Unfortunately, anyone who spent a couple of years in the infantry probably wasn't very "normal" after that experience.

According to Cpt Bill Howell there was a man in the company in late 70-early 71 with an uncanny ability. "We had a guy who could give us warning for incoming fire as soon as it left the tube no matter how much noise was around him. One night we were in one of the tents (before we had barracks) listening to *Sly & The Family Stone* and he was lying on one of the bunks. All of a sudden he sat up, yelling 'incoming'. Approximately 10 seconds later the rocket hit the airfield. I don't know what kind of sixth sense he had but he knew every time before the round hit the ground."

Toward mid-year the 162nd was host to two experimental gunships with the acronym of INFANTS for "Infrared Night Fighter ANd Tracker System". Each of the two M model gunships had a normal "slaughter ship" configuration—miniguns and 14 rockets. However, infrared searchlights were mounted on the miniguns and a camera was in a ball turret on the nose. A TV screen was mounted on the console between the pilots. The INFANTS had originally been formed in late 1970 as part of the Bounty Hunter gun platoon of the 191st AHC

(and the Copperheads had occasionally worked with them) but as the 191st was slated for stand down in September they were attached to the 162nd.

The Vultures supported the INFANTS and provided a C&C ship to navigate for and direct the INFANT team on nightly patrols of the canals south and east of Can Tho down to the U-Minh Forest. The INFANTS flew low along the canals and engaged targets without displaying any visible light, even on the darkest night (there were 3 small blue lights on top of each INFANT ship to enable the C&C ship to see them and navigate for them). For the six months or so it was attached to the 162nd the INFANT fire team was very effective and destroyed hundreds of sampans, and probably got a similar number of KIAs. The psychological impact of two gunships accurately identifying and engaging targets in complete darkness must have been terrifying to the VC/NVA. However, the INFANT ships required a great deal of maintenance support and were withdrawn in late 1971.

In 1971-72 the Vultures routinely had 2 or 3 slicks on night missions. In addition to the INFANT C&C, another aircraft (the Firefly ship) with an infrared/white light search light (actually an M-48 tank search light) and a 50 cal door gun flew perimeter security around Can Tho and patrolled canals to the south and east. A third ship, the Nighthawk, equipped with a 50 cal door gun on one side and a hand controlled minigun on the other, often worked with the Firefly ship in patrolling canals. At times, the Nighthawk ship also mounted a hand controlled belt-fed 40 mm grenade launcher and had 4 gunners on board—sort of a mini version of Puff the Magic Dragon. When large targets were located, either by the INFANTS or the infrared search light of the Firefly, Navy or Marine fighter bombers were called in. The Marines also ran a night mission over the Delta with an aircraft that could detect people on the ground, even inside bunkers, through heat differential. The Marine and Navy aircraft coordinated closely with the Vultures on these night missions.

Once a significant target was found, the infrared search light of the Firefly was trained on it and the fighter bombers called in. When the strike aircraft were in position the search light was switched to white (visible) light with a narrow, focused beam to guide the bombers to the target. With the INFANTS, Firefly, and the Marine aircraft with the heat differential equipment all working together, there was no escape for the VC/NVA—they had no way to hide!

Many pilots and crews enjoyed the night missions, especially patrolling the canals for VC traffic, and tended to specialize in them. As Cpt Stan Gause recalls, his first 400 hours of flight time with the Vultures was almost entirely at night. Also in the Navy, Air Force and Marine crews, the same people tended to fly the night missions and the Vultures were pretty much on a first name basis with them. At times the night missions involved only one or two ships and it was a lonely feeling to be over the vast expanse of the Delta all by yourself with no one to help if you went down.

However, at other times the night skies over the Delta seemed downright crowded as Navy, Marine, and Air Force fighters as well as Army Cobras and C models stacked up overhead awaiting their turn to unload on a target. Sometimes it was a real party when you came upon a good target—that's what made it a fun job! The Vultures were instrumental in taking the cover of darkness away from the VC and denying them unhindered access to the canals of the lower Delta during this period.

The Firefly mission was often something of a fun job and the crew sometimes got a kick out of scaring the devil out of anyone spotted on the ground—enemy or friendly. The CE would locate someone with his searchlight in infrared mode, narrow the beam to a very intense beam of roughly 3 feet diameter, and then switch over to white light. Of course, this blinding flash of intense light would terrify the unsuspecting target and often produced an interesting reaction.

Despite all the night flying the Vultures still managed to log their fair share of bar time at the O Club and various establishments in downtown Can Tho. Transportation was scarce so some of the pilots often

“appropriated” whatever vehicle was parked in the vicinity of the O Club. The 164th Group Commander occasionally visited the O Club and on one particular evening around mid-year he left his jeep parked outside the Club with a chain and lock on the steering wheel. A group of 162nd pilots staggered out of the Club looking for a ride downtown and noticed the jeep. They immediately piled into the jeep and headed for the main gate, stopping to pick up stragglers along the way and ended up with 18 people in (and on) the jeep. Of course, movement of the steering wheel was restricted by the locked chain so whenever the jeep could no longer stay on the road, they stopped, everyone got off, picked up the jeep and repositioned it on the road. They got off and walked out the main gate then piled back onto the jeep and headed downtown, stopping every 20 yards or so to pick up and move the jeep. This set a record for the most drunken pilots in a single jeep—one that probably still stands! Needless to say, the 164th Group CO wasn’t impressed.

One day in the summer, Cpt Garber and Cpt James Elliot, gun platoon leader, were running a CA near Rach Gia with 5 slick and 4 guns. They were suddenly pulled off the mission and diverted to Chi Lang on the Cambodian border just south of the Mekong (near the Seven Sisters area). The Special Forces had established a camp there to train Cambodian army troops.

The Vultures and Copperheads supported the Special Forces camp on a “training” mission that ran into an NVA regiment. Over a 2 day period there were 50 Cambodian, 20 ARVN and nine US Special Forces troops killed in the engagement. Cpt Garber recalls being awake for more than 48 hours and then sleeping for 24 hours straight on returning to Can Tho. At one point he was on a night mission when he turned the ship over to his copilot, just as tired and dazed as himself, who did not take over the controls. Both pilots sat there thinking the other one was flying when in fact no one was. The ship began a slow descending turn as the cyclic tipped over. They both then realized that no one was flying the aircraft and grabbed the cyclic.

Also around mid-71, the Vultures and Copperheads were on a 12 ship ARVN CA several miles south east of Dong Hung when the NVA opened up on them as they landed. The lead ship landed on top of a concrete bunker and the others landed in a V formation behind it. SP4 Jack Tibbets, gunner in the lead ship, killed two NVA that came out of the bunker and dragged a wounded ARVN back on board before his ship took off. No one on board was wounded but the AC’s helmet mike cord was severed by bullet. The flight went back to the staging area and SP4 Tibbets counted 38 holes in his ship. They prepared to lift more ARVNs into the LZ but the first group had encountered heavy fire and withdrew to more defensible positions.

Around this same time a rather bizarre incident occurred. WO Andy Gagnon and gunner SP4 Jack Tibbets were preparing to take off on a firefly mission one night when a Major who had some staff job at Can Tho showed up on the flight line and took the copilot’s place—probably to get his hours in for flight pay that month. They were later called out to an ARVN outpost to provide illumination and assist in repelling VC coming through the perimeter wire. This was during the monsoon season and there were low clouds and poor visibility. At one point the Major took over the controls and almost immediately began a slow roll to the right. When he reached a 45 degree bank, WO Gagnon realized something was wrong and tried to take back control of the ship but the Major would not turn lose of the cyclic. As WO Gagnon struggled for control, SP4 Tibbets hit the Major over the head with an M-60 buffer rod in an attempt to make him turn the controls loose. In fact, he hit him so hard that his helmet cracked in half and he was knocked out.

WO Gagnon then regained control of the ship and flew back to Can Tho, radioing for an ambulance (since the Major was unconscious). They picked up a copilot and continued on with the mission until daylight. On their return to Can Tho the next morning the crew was called in and interviewed individually by Major Brooks, the CO. When SP4 Tibbets went in to tell his side of the story to the CO, Major Brooks already had a good understanding of the situation and told him “it would have been much simpler and a lot less paperwork if you had just killed the SOB.”

When the US ground troops left the Delta in 1970 most of the medivac (Dustoff) aircraft were also withdrawn. This, coupled with the fact that ARVN units didn't seem to have any air medical evacuation support, meant the 162nd and other assault helicopter units often performed medivac missions for both US and ARVN troops. Medivac missions were unique in that they gave the crews an incredibly strong sense of pride, satisfaction, sadness and futility, all at the same time. Cpt Gause recalls:

“It’s hard to describe the feeling of achievement and pride in knowing that we actually saved another human’s life for once instead of trying to kill him. Yet seeing men barely alive with their limbs and bodies blown to shreds was incredibly saddening, leaving you depressed and with a sense of helplessness. Some of the ARVN troops we picked up had 2, 3 or even all 4 limbs missing or badly mangled but they still clung to life with an Asian stoicism and resignation. I never saw a Vietnamese trooper cry, or even show any strong emotion, only that haunting look of sadness in their eyes.”

During 1971 the Vulture mess hall went from one extreme to the other—from extremely poor to exceptional, all within a few months. Early in the year, the mess sergeant was court-martialed for skimming off the company rations. It seems he had been in-country a long time, 4 or 5 years, and had a restaurant downtown, complete with a Vietnamese wife, or whatever. One day, one of the unit police at the main gate stopped the deuce and a half that picked up and returned the civilian KPs employed in the mess hall. He stopped the truck because he thought something was leaking from it. However, subsequent investigation revealed a false bottom in the bed of the truck and a compartment full of Vulture rations. The mess sgt was very fortunate the MPs whisked him away—he wouldn't have lasted long if he'd been sent back to the roost!

After this episode a new mess sergeant (SFC ___?___) and mess officer (Cpt Ronald Cabral) were brought in and they did a magnificent job. Everyone in the 162nd at the time fondly remembers the Vulture mess hall and the food served in the later half of 1971. The mess hall went through several contests and inspections and was actually awarded a plaque by USARV as the “Best Mess Hall in Vietnam”. Those steaks and lobsters served every Friday evening locked up the award.

Since most men in the company went to the Can Tho Officers, NCO or EM clubs they normally didn't use their liquor ration. Cpt Cabral collected ration cards each week and bought alcohol which he took down to the Navy base at Rach Gia to trade for local lobsters. Then he went to a nearby SeaBee base and traded more whisky for steaks. Not only was the food incredible but the mess hall staff really got into the swing of things and took great pride in their work—just like in a fancy restaurant. Tables were set with linen table cloths, silverware and flowers. Colorful curtains, “mood” lighting and wall decorations were added and music played during mealtime. It was the only 5 Star mess hall in Vietnam, maybe even the entire US Army. High ranking officers came down from Saigon just to eat in the Vulture mess hall.

Later in the year the Vultures were on a CA south of Vinh Long. When the slicks landed one of the gunners, SP5 ___?___ Barnhart, jumped out to assist a wounded ARVN. Somehow his ship took off without him and he was reported missing. SP5 Barnhart was found a couple of days later in a cat house in downtown Can Tho. Although it is not clear what he did when he was left in the LZ, it must have been something big since he was later awarded a Silver Star for his actions that day. (DOES ANYONE HAVE MORE INFORMATION ON THIS INCIDENT??)

In late 1971 a serious incident occurred in which the First Sgt was “fragged”. As Sgt Robert Pilkinton recalls:

I can't remember the 1st Sgt's name. However I do remember he was of island decent. We, the Copperhead CE's and gunners called him Top Pineapple (but not to his face). A very thick, stout man with the reputation for a martial arts background. Myself and a couple other Copperheads were sitting between our hooch and bunker late one night. Suddenly, the silence was shattered by this god-awful explosion in our near proximity. We grabbed some weapons and ran towards the explosion. We rounded the corner to find Top staggering out the doorway holding his ears and black smoke rolling out the door. The door was blown off the hinges. The first thing out of his mouth, besides smoke, was, 'I want the SOB that tried to kill me, bring him to me.' I found the ring, handle and parts of the grenade case. The dumb ass used a concussion grenade instead of a frag. As the crowd grew someone fingered a disgruntled PFC or SP4 that was pissed at Top and talking about fragging him earlier that day. I really didn't know the guy personally. He was brought to Top. The last thing I saw, Top had him pressed against the wall beside the blown-out door punching him in the chest with his extended index finger (hard). They disappeared into the room and we left. It was never talked about much after that night, except for our chuckles now and then at his poor choice of weapons. We liked Top. All I can tell you after that is, the next day the guy was gone. We figured transferred, but who knows—a lot of strange things happened in Vietnam!

In December, the Vultures and Copperheads were on a CA that had a novel twist—literally. Lt. Edwin Clapp was leading a CA down south into what was expected to be a hot LZ. On long final he spotted a tornado a couple of miles away coming directly toward the LZ. He broke radio silence and diverted the flight while the tornado passed over the LZ. When it passed, the slicks then turned on final and landed in an LZ with plenty of VC all around but none in condition to put up a fight. Not just luck or execution—maybe it was STS!

Some of the other memorable events that took place in 1971 include:

- wo pilots who had a little too much to drink in downtown Can Tho one night stole a jeep to make it back to the airfield before curfew. T
- O “Duke” Christian had not yet made AC but grew a handlebar moustache which, according to the unwritten code among the pilots, was an adornment strictly reserved for AC's. His room was “fragged” with purple smoke one night to teach him a lesson. W
- ome joker strung explosive engineer “det” cord for a clothes line for the mamasans and set it off with a full load of clothes. S
- he CO was awarded a DFC for crossing the Cambodian border at 6,000 feet. T
- he Vultures and “Darkhorse” pilots from C/16th Cav from across the runway were trashing each other at the O Club one night and came very close to a free-for-all. T
- ammy Davis, Jr. visited Can Tho as part of a USO tour and asked which unit was the most remote on the airfield. When told the Vultures were at the far end of the runway he said he'd like to put on a show there. He walked all the S

way to the 162nd mess hall and put on an impromptu show. The Vultures loved it.

- pt Garber started his engine with the main rotor tied down, brought it up to 6600 rpm and looked up to see the rotor blade was not moving (most people didn't think this was possible but apparently it is if the rotor blade is not allowed any initial movement). C
- Some pilots didn't like the long walk home from the O Club at night and routinely appropriated whatever jeep was parked near the club. They would drive it to the roost, even if the steering wheel was chained, and abandon it. Whenever anyone at Can Tho lost a jeep the Vulture roost was the first place they looked. S
- The Nighthawk ship was called out to an outpost one night and directed to a VC target. The ship had twin 60's on one side and a minigun and searchlight on the other. They dropped a number of flares but some were defective and their parachutes did not deploy. They worked over the area with the minigun and killed a few VC and learned the next day that they had managed to bag a KIA with one of the defective flares. T
- In early 1971, the VC published wanted posters with pictures of individuals in the Copperhead gun platoon. The rewards weren't much but the Copperheads got a big laugh out of it—and they stayed a little more alert whenever they went into Can Tho! I
- Some recall the incident where a Vulture slick picked up an ARVN Major, a few other ARVNs and two VC prisoners from a field location in the U Minh and ferried them to Bac Lieu for interrogation. Enroute the Major grabbed one of the prisoners and threw him out of the aircraft at an altitude of some 2000 feet, apparently because he refused to talk. Yes, it was horrifying and against the rules of war—but the VC did things just as bad, or worse, and on a far larger scale! The remaining prisoner quickly decided he would talk and was singing like a bird by the time they reached Bac Lieu. S
- On Peter Byrne was out on the flightline one day and asked to see a Chinese 9mm pistol that someone had acquired by trading with some Cambodian troops. As he was admiring the pistol he pulled the trigger and put a nice hole through the windshield of an H model. He took a great deal of rubbing over that one! W

1972

The year began with Major Ronald Brooks in command. He turned over the company to Major Ronald Grooms in January who remained in command through stand down.

On January 11th the company lost a Copperhead gunship. A fire team was covering a Chinook resupplying an ARVN base near Ca Mau when the lead gunship (65-09543) suddenly exploded in mid-air, possibly hit by an RPG or large caliber weapon. The lost crewmembers were Cpt Robert W. Vehling (platoon leader), WO John David Eddy, SP4 G. Wayne Tawney and Sgt. Leonard H. Mantooth. All losses were sad but this one especially so. Cpt. Vehling had an identical twin brother who was a pilot at another unit at Can Tho. He was almost inseparable from his brother during their off-duty time. Seeing him at the memorial service the next day was a heart-wrenching sight still vivid in the memory of those who were there that day.

Another Copperhead gunship was shot down in January and may well have set a record for number of hits. While attacking a target in the U-Minh forest area, the ship came under fire from a minigun the VC/NVA had recovered from a downed loach and rigged up as a ground-fired weapon. The Copperhead ship took a total of 212 hits from the minigun and crashed. Amazingly the only casualty was the gunner who was hit in the foot by a minigun round. The crew managed to set the aircraft down and were picked up almost immediately by a nearby slick.

On a lighter note, many will remember the spider monkey named Pete, owned by one of the men in the commo shack. It was kept chained to a pole outside the commo shack but got loose one day and one of the junkies in the company (unfortunately there were a few of them at that time) shot him up with heroin. The monkey then went crazy and ran around the barracks excreting in his hand and throwing it at anyone he considered deserving. This, in turn, ticked off quite a few people who pulled out their M-16's and hand guns and started shooting at the monkey. No one hit him but they did manage to put a lot of holes in the sheet metal roofs, creating more gripping and complaints when it rained. The poor monkey finally died after a couple of days running around on the roofs and being shot at by half the company.

In early 1972, the combat missions were gradually winding down and more and more were ash & trash. Cpt Gause recalls going on many of the Cambodian Embassy missions and noticing how poorly equipped the Cambodian Army was. The Cambodians had few machine guns and many of them were using World War II era Japanese bolt action rifles. The Vultures had accumulated a large amount of excess weapons over the preceding few months so Cpt Gause and others on the Cambodia run began taking over excess M-60's, initially to trade for SKS rifles and 9 mm pistols as souvenirs for the Vultures. Beginning with one or two per flight, this trade quickly grew into a significant "gun-running" operation.

Since the Cambodian Army didn't generally have access to M-60 ammunition, the Vultures began supplying that as well. It got to the point where each slick making the trip to Phnom Penh was loaded up with weapons and ammunition. Initially it was traded but later simply given to the Cambodians. The Cambodians always treated the Vulture crews like royalty and took them on a tour of the local sights wherever they landed. The 162nd crews liked the Cambodians (who were refreshingly open and friendly to Americans) and decided to help their war effort by giving them excess weapons and ammunition. No attempt was made to hide this activity. The US military attaches at the Embassy knew full well what the Vultures were doing and tacitly agreed to look the other way.

The 162nd Assault Helicopter Company flew its last operational mission in late-March 1972 and stood down on April 3rd, 1972 after more than six years of war. Aircraft and equipment were taken to Saigon and turned in over the next couple of weeks. Getting rid of the equipment turned out to be a major problem. Only the amount

of equipment listed on the unit property book could technically be turned in but the 162nd had far more equipment than it was authorized.

Since it was one of the last US units in the Delta to stand down (and THE last AHC), many of the previous units to stand down had given their excess equipment to the Vultures. As a result, the Vultures had numerous extra vehicles, weapons and even extra aircraft. For example, the company was signed for a total of 61 M-60 machine guns but in fact had several hundred of them. There were M-60's stuffed in almost every nook and cranny. A similar situation existed with almost all weapons and it took a great deal of negotiation, threats and shouting to turn in the large amounts of excess equipment. In some cases, much of it simply ended up at the bottom of the Mekong River, buried around the airfield or in the South China Sea. More than one truck loaded onto the ferry at Can Tho for the trip across the river didn't quite make it to the other side!

There was also a strong rumor that one of the extra and badly damaged aircraft was buried beside the runway one night. This may not have been true but there were some suspicious looking marks left by a bulldozer one night. The maintenance folks also had a C model Hangar Queen they used for spares that hadn't flown in months. It took a lot of work to put it back together so they could fly it up to Vung Tau one last time to turn it in. By mid-April all equipment was disposed of, the last man signed out of the unit and the colors shipped to Ft. Hood, Texas. The 162nd AHC passed into history.

The old tradition of new pilots drinking the "Green Mother" as an initiation rite into the company survived to the end. Just before departing, many pilots gathered at the Can Tho O club for one last time and downed a Green Mother to the memory of those who went before them.

[The 162nd served in Vietnam for a little over 6 years and 2 months.](#) During this time it built an unsurpassed record as an assault unit. It was one of the best, a proud unit that led the way and helped establish the traditions of Army Aviation. The 162nd logged more than 175,000 hours of "blade time" in 192 aircraft assigned to the company during its service in Vietnam. A total of 60 aircraft (31% of the total) crashed and incurred major damage, including 33 that were completely destroyed.

There were many fine aviation units in this helicopter war. Some may have accomplished more and certainly some incurred more casualties. However, the 162nd had no equal in terms of individual motivation, dedication, esprit de corps and service to our country. May God bless the men of the 162nd.

In a sense, the stand down of the 162nd also marked the end of an era in Army Aviation and close fire support for ground troops. The company was the last assault helicopter unit in Vietnam to use that extraordinary aircraft—the UH-1C model gunship. Despite the fact that it was notoriously difficult to takeoff fully loaded and often would not even hover like a normal helicopter, the aircraft flew beautifully once in the air. The 540 rotor system gave it amazing maneuverability.

It was an incredible feeling to slide, bump and bounce down a runway on takeoff, nursing every ounce of torque, and then reach translational lift. You could feel the power, an invisible hand lifting the aircraft into the sky. Every pilot who ever flew a C model gunship loved it. Ground troops in a firefight also loved the C model. It could not stay on station as long as, or carry the ordinance of, a Cobra but it flew low and slow enough to see all the action and spot things other aircraft missed. The uncanny ability of an experienced crew chief and gunner to find targets that others missed was unbelievable. They had eyes like eagles. The C model could provide accurate and effective fire literally within a few feet of ground troops, far closer than any other type of aircraft. The closeness to the ground and the ability of the ground troops to actually see the gunship crews provided an immense psychological lift to the infantry.

During its 6 years of service in Vietnam, the 162nd lost 39 of its members killed in action.

THE ROLL OF HONOR IS LISTED BELOW:

<u>Name</u>	<u>Date KIA</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Hometown</u>
PFC Ronnie R. Lovett	4/11/66	18	Phoenix, OR
WO James W. Bruhn	11/15/66	29	Alma, NE
SP4 Willard A. Philson	2/1/67	23	Gering, NE
Major Paul R. Karas	2/3/67	32	Alexandria, VA
Major William R. Phillips	2/3/67	37	Enterprise, AL
SP4 Isaiah A. Dobbins	2/7/67	23	Magnolia, NJ
SP4 Willard A. Godfrey	2/7/67	29	Milton Junction, WI
PFC Lawrence A. Dietz	7/27/67	19	Palos Verdes, CA
SP4 Charles A. Jones	8/8/67	18	Charleston Heights, SC
WO Larry A. Harke	12/19/67	26	Seattle, WA
WO John F. Holz	12/19/67	26	Harrisburg, PA
SP4 Anthony V. Campaniello	12/19/67	21	Corona, NY
SP4 Robert D. Kline	12/19/67	19	Long Beach, CA
CW2 Vernon R. Tweedy	3/5/68	27	New Orleans, LA
WO Vernon L. Leuning	3/5/68	21	Yakima, WA
SP4 Brian T. Murray	3/5/68	21	Lorain, OH
SP4 George D. Novakovic	3/5/68	19	Kenosha, WI
SP4 Benjamin H. Binengar	2/4/69	25	East Peoria, IL
Cpt Frank H. Brinson	1/5/70	28	Statesboro, GA
WO Edward B. Melody	2/23/70	21	Fayetteville, AR
WO Gerard F. O'Conner	4/25/70	22	Herington, KS
SP4 Andrew P. Susi	5/27/70	20	St. Johnsville, NY
WO Alex C. Spence	6/20/70	23	Tonawanda, NY
WO Robert F. Colatruglio	6/20/70	22	Warren, MI
SP4 Joseph P. Lutz	6/20/70	19	Deerfield Beach, FL
WO Daniel J. Hallows	6/23/70	19	Holland, NY
WO Lawrence M. Moore	6/23/70	20	East Point, GA
SP5 Denis J. Dillon	6/23/70	21	San Marcos, CA
PFC James W. Lenz	6/23/70	18	Milwaukee, WI
WO William H. Laurence	8/26/70	24	San Antonio, TX
Cpt Stephen D. Carr	8/26/70	26	Barre, VT
SP5 Benny R. Halstead	8/26/70	20	Glen Morgan, WV
SP5 Larry B. Jacobson	8/26/70	21	Norma, ND
PFC Samuel E. Dick	12/24/70	20	Honolulu, HI
SP4 Dennis M. Hotaling	3/22/71	21	Middletown, NY
Cpt Robert W. Vehling	1/11/72	24	Greenwood, IN
WO John David Eddy	1/11/72	21	Ann Arbor, MI
SP4 Gary Wayne Tawney	1/11/72	22	Charleston, WV
Sgt. Leonard H. Mantooth	1/11/72	21	Louisville, KY

In such a close knit unit each man was precious and a friend to many. They made the supreme sacrifice in service to their country. Anyone of us could easily have been in their place. They were our compatriots, our friends, and will always be in our hearts, every day, as long as we breath. Although we age with the passing

years, they do not grow old but remain forever young in our minds eye. Forever 19, 20 years old, their life cut short at the very beginning of its journey, never to experience the love, friendships and pleasures we experienced as we grew older.

In the words of the British poet Lawrence Binyon,

“They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.”

It is up to us to make sure their memory remains alive. By our conduct we honor them and make their sacrifice not in vain. May God take their soul in his hands and may we meet again someday.

Epilogue

The 162nd Assault Helicopter Company was reformed at Ft. Hood, Texas in mid-1972 and sometime later transferred to Germany. Cpt Paul Fellencer, Vulture pilot from the 67-68 era, relates:

“Years later while on a business trip to Germany, I think it was 1982, I was at the Officers Club one evening at Rhein Mein AFB near Frankfort and there was a large noisy group of people having a party. They were having a farewell dinner for the final stand down of....the 162nd AHC!! I didn’t want to intrude so I listened to a few toasts and left the club saddened and somewhat depressed. The coincidence of my being there that night and listening to those really “young” people talk about closing down something so important to me had a profound effect on me.”

Although the 162nd AHC is gone the Vulture tradition is still alive in today’s army. B Company, 2nd Battalion of the 227th Aviation Regiment at Ft. Hood are the present day Vultures.

Contributions to this history have been made by the following former members of the 162nd Assault Helicopter Company:

Stan Gause (71-72)
Bill Greenhalgh (68-69)
Richard Freesland (67)
John Davenport (67-68)
Tom DeMars (68-70)
Joe Estores (65-66)
Paul Fretts (67)
Ron Gresham (68-69)
Art Cline (67-68)
Mike McPherson (66-67)
Lou Dinnan (68-69)
Ed Brock (65-67)
Chuck Carrillo (68-69)
Edwin Dean (67-68)
Thomas Beauchamps (70)
Ron Miller (65-66)

Mike Rush (69-70)
Walt Stewart (69-70)
Harlan Scheibe (6-68)
Kerry Watson (71-72)
Dar Schuett (65-66)
Richard Rhoads (71-72)
Ronald Case (67-68)
Dan Pannunzio (70-71)
Bill Howell (70-71)
Jim Christiansen (66-67)
Bob Truckenmiller (66-67)
Phil Bishop (68)
Mike Rigney (70-71)
Robert Bostwick (70-71)
Allan Cease (71)
James Wright (68)

Edwin Clapp (71-72)	Kenneth Barnard (70-71)
Walter Ellis (70-71)	Dill Fouts (68)
Jackie Tibbets (71-72)	Rick Lloyd (69-70)
David Saunders (68-69)	Jim Pepler (67-68)
Mike Royse (66)	Ed Brown (65-66)
“Duke” Christian (71-72)	Steve Garber (71)
Don Nickolson (70-71)	Bob Goulas (67-68)
Paul Wentzel (68)	David Holt (69-70)
Don Welch (67-68)	Bob Good (70)
Brian Busch (70-71)	Rick “Tuna” Williams (70-71)
Jim Cox (68-69)	Tom Turner (65-66)
Walter Sharpes (71-72)	John McCamish (67-68)
Mike Hall (67)	Mark Coletta (71-72)
Peter Lautzenheiser (70-71)	Ray Holleran (65-66)
Bill Rettenmund (65-67)	Joe Harbison (69-70)
Dennis Hickman (66-67)	Ray Swindell (65-66)
Bill Tuttle (69-70)	Dennis Montgomery (68-69)
Jack Donahue (68-69)	Rod Rodowick (66-67)
Nick Riviezzo (66-67)	Dennis Morris (68-69)
Dennis Bankson (69)	Tom Barnes (68-69)
Len Matlick (71-72)	Dennis Stoner (70)
Tim Lawrence (70-71)	Howard Clampitt (65-66)
Paul Fellencer (67-68)	Neil Townsley (71)
Tom Broadbent (68-69)	Dave Bonifield (68-69)
Richard Moran (69-70)	Fred Auger (69-70)
Mike Kolanik (68-69)	Tom Broadbent (68-69)
Dave Bonifield (68-69)	Paul Stevens (65-66)
James Ramsey (66-67)	Lee Dike (70-71)
Darrell Moore (67-69)	Ed Walsh (66-67)
Cliff Penton (71-72)	Art Jenkins (69-70)
William Currie (66-67)	Robert Pilkington (70-72)
Dennis O’Brien (69-70)	Tom Rodman (70-71)
Eric Bray (69-70)	

162nd AHC Honors and Awards

Valorous Unit Award, 4 November - 20 November 1966

Meritorious Unit Commendation, 1 January – 31 December 1967

Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Palm, 1 March 1966 - 26 March 1967

Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Palm, 27 March 1967 - 17 May 1968

Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Palm, 1 January 1969 – 1 June 1969

Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Palm, 15 December 1969 – 10 October 1970

Republic of Vietnam Civil Action Medal, First Class, 19 December 1966 - 28 June 1969

Republic of Vietnam Civil Action Medal, First Class, 1 May 1969 – 15 May 1970

Campaign Participation Credits

Vietnam Counteroffensive	25 Dec 1965-30 Jun 1966
Vietnam Counteroffensive, Phase II	1 Jul 1966-31 May 1967
Vietnam Counteroffensive, Phase III	1 Jun 1967-29 Jan 1968
Tet Counteroffensive	30 Jan 1968-1 Apr 1968
Vietnam Counteroffensive, Phase IV	2 Apr 1968-30 Jun 1968
Vietnam Counteroffensive, Phase V	1 Jul 1968-1 Nov 1968
Vietnam Counteroffensive, Phase VI	2 Nov 1968-22 Feb 1969
Tet 69 Counteroffensive	23 Feb 1969-8 Jun 1969
Vietnam Summer-Fall 1969	9 Jun 1969-31 Oct 1969
Vietnam Winter-Spring 1970	1 Nov 1969-30 Apr 1970
DA Sanctuary Counteroffensive	1 May 1970-30 Jun 1970
Vietnam Counteroffensive, Phase VII	1 Jul 1970-30 Jun 1971
Consolidation I	1 Jul 1971-30 Nov 1971
Consolidation II	1 Dec 1971-29 Mar 1972
Vietnam Cease-Fire	30 Mar 1972-28 Jan 1973