

**HISTORY OF THE
189th ASSAULT HELICOPTER COMPANY**

Shortly before Thanksgiving 1966, the U.S. Army began assembling a group of aviators at Ft. Carson, Colorado. The mountainous area around Ft. Carson, it was hoped, would give the aviators a certain degree of training in mountain flying before being deployed to its ultimate destination, the Central Highlands, Republic of Vietnam.

Being one of the first Army units to receive the new UH-1H Huey, the area was also ideal for testing the new H Model at mountainous elevations. Sister companies, the 187th & 188th were also forming and receiving H models at Ft. Campbell, Kentucky during the same time period.

The initial pilots of the 189th were an odd lot. Of the seven fixed & rotary wing rated Majors assigned to the unit, Major John J. Webster was chosen to command. Many of the Majors in the unit were primarily "old" fixed-wing drivers and were not particularly overjoyed with the idea of going to Vietnam with a helicopter outfit.

The remaining aviators, both lieutenants and warrant officers were fresh out of flight school. While lacking maturity and flight experience, they were an enthusiastic and gung ho group. Only one Warrant Officer had seen prior service in Vietnam and that was as a crew chief.

The first ninety days or so were spent doing supply actions, as the unit was to deploy with full organic equipment. All new aircraft were picked up from the factory in Ft. Worth, Texas and ferried to Ft. Carson. Each day began with physical training capped with an increasingly longer run around post. As this was winter in Colorado, physical training was suspended on those mornings that the temperature was below 28 degrees Fahrenheit.

In preparation for deployment, the unit began a series of field exercises the first week of 1967. While the snow and ice posed many problems, the improved engines in the UH-1H performed magnificently. As part of the exercise, the gun platoon was conducting its own type of training in the ways of war and survival.

Eventhough the unit was testing the new aircraft during Colorado's winter, they felt sure that the added power of the H model would perform just as effectively in the real test which lay ahead, the hot jungle of Vietnam. The next task was ferrying the aircraft to California for shipment overseas.

The arduous task of loading several hundred CONEX containers then fell to the troops. Every CONEX had to have specific markings and a manifest detailing its contents. This was complicated somewhat by the units determination to circumvent regular supply channels and commandeer as much station property from Ft. Carson as possible. Who was to know what lie ahead. Vehicles were prepared and loaded aboard trains for shipment to the point of debarkation.

As the end of April approached and with the final shipment of the units equipment, the men were given their last leave and told to report back by the first of May for deployment. At this time, the units final destination in Vietnam was classified and therefore unknown to the unit.

On May 3, 1967, the unit was broken into contingents and departed Colorado Springs airport via a U.S. Air Force C-141 Starlifter. While enroute to Pleiku AFB, Vietnam intermediate stops were made at Elmendorf AFB, Alaska and Yokota, Japan. The sweltering heat of Pleiku was indeed a change from the cold mountain air of Colorado where it had snowed 4 inches the day before.

May being late in the dry season, the unit had a few days to move into Camp Holloway and get tents setup before the monsoonal rains set in. Having evolved into the 189th Assault Helicopter Company upon arrival in Vietnam, the unit was assigned to the 52nd Combat Aviation Battalion.

The unit was assigned a bare piece of ground alongside the runway as a permanent bivouac area. Seeing that the assigned area lay outside of the Battalion's perimeter, the first order of business was to extend the barbed wire to encompass the units new home. Tents were erected and sandbagged. Officers and enlisted personnel shared equally the backbreaking task of filling sand bags with the red earth of Pleiku. Revetments for the slicks were then built of steel planking, soil and sandbags. The aviators alternated days working on construction and days flying as copilots with sister companies in order to learn the area around Pleiku and gain some experience flying in a combat environment.

The gunship pilots with their usual hefty amount of bravado decided to seek their combat fortunes using the callsign 'AVENGER'. Their platoon patch would feature the grim reaper emerging from a coffin. The slick pilots followed the theme by selecting 'GHOST RIDER' as their callsign and characterized by a patch featuring a ghost armed with a .30 caliber machine gun. It then followed logically, to name the revetment area, where the slicks would park their aircraft, the 'GRAVEYARD'. The gun platoons C (Charlie) model gunships were unable to park here. When fully loaded with ammunition the Charlie models were not able to hover high enough to clear the barbed wire apron which surrounded the GRAVEYARD. Instead the Charlie models were kept in an area easily accessible to the runway. This area became known as the 'ARSENAL'.

Late May saw the arrival of the units helicopters at the port of Vung Tau, a coastal city in III CORPS and also an incountry R&R site. Much excitement accompanied the air crews fortunate enough to go to Vung Tau to ferry the aircraft to Pleiku. The chance to RON in an old French hotel, sample Bier 33 and consort for the first time with the local Vietnamese bar girls was a welcome respite from the heat and red dust of Pleiku. Vung Tau was relatively peaceful at the time and the rule was no side arms openly displayed while out on the town. Being still new in country, most of the 189th troops elected to go out armed but concealed rather than surrender the newly issued Smith & Wesson revolvers. Wanting to depart Vung Tau with the proper amount of flourish, the units first real in-country flight was a full company formation flight from Vung Tau up the coast to Cam Ranh, Qui Nhon and thence inland over Route 19 through the An Khe and Ming Yang passes to Pleiku. A full scale flyby at Camp Holloway was made to announce the presence of a brash new kid on the block to both local VC and sister companies.

Operational requirements demanded that the transition be made as quickly as possible into a full scale combat flying unit. It is significant to note that both the aircraft commander and pilot of most crews had very little, if any, combat experience, yet went directly into flying operational missions. Scarcity of qualified aircraft commanders dictated it.

To prevent a major reorganization of the unit when the original members returned to the states (DEROSed) after their one year tour ended, pilots with varying DEROS dates were infused from other units. To make up for these newer members, some of the original men were transferred out to other units. During this shuffle, a new commander came on board, Major Bobby L. Sanders.

The first series of operations that the 189th participated in was support of the 1st Brigade, 4th Infantry Division based in the schoolhouse of the abandoned hamlet of LeThan, better known to the Americans as Jacksons Hole. Jacksons Hole lay west of the Catecka Tea Plantation and was very near the Cambodian border. Single ship hover hole LZs (Landing Zones) were encountered for the first time. LRRP (Long Range Recon Patrol) insertions and extractions, medical evacuations and occasional hostile fire, all provided necessary learning situations for the still unseasoned 189th.

That was all to change as the rainy season progressed. The 189th was sent to Dak To in support of the 173rd Airborne Brigade which was already involved in a tactical emergency. One company of the brigade had climbed the ridgeline south of the Dak To airstrip and was in heavy contact with a superior size force of NVA (North Vietnamese Army) regulars. The mission entailed reinforcing the beleaguered company and bringing out casualties. The airborne troopers quickly recognized the value of the H models flown by the GHOST RIDERS in lifting much heavier than normal loads out of the postage stamp size LZ on the side of the ridge. The AVENGERS gave a good account of themselves in the units baptismal by fire, delivering the close in accurate fire support that they were to become acclaimed for. It was the kind of mission that made some of the more reflective soles realize that these next few months would require every bit of luck, skill and courage a fellow could muster.

October 1967, found the 189th in support of Operation Prairefire, the high stakes, top secret, cross border reconnaissance game. Across the border in Laos and Cambodia, the rules were much different and the standards expected of pilots much higher. Normal military protocol, rank, etc. were subordinated as natural leaders, up to the challenge surfaced. Friendships formed, based on trust and mutual interdependence. Foremost was the determination by all participants, that they would stick to the bitter end of the mission to ensure no friendly forces were left behind in enemy territory.

It is impossible to determine whether the GHOST RIDERS or the AVENGERS encountered more hostile fire on these missions. While GHOST RIDERS were hovering above triple canopy jungle, using Maguire rigs to extract the teams on the ground, the AVENGERS were on station providing withering fire support. These missions established once and for all that the NVA had developed the Ho Chi Minh trail into a high speed highway, capable of rapid movement of men and equipment into all part of South Vietnam.

January 1968, ushered in a new life-style for the officers and men. The barely hospitable tents, with their rain barrel bathtubs, had finally succumbed to the constant rain and were forsaken for wooden hootches and real showers in the center of Camp Holloway. The local VC were not kindly disposed to letting the Company enjoy their new quarters. With the move came nightly mortar attacks, which made it inadvisable sleeping above ground. At times, as many as 150 rounds a night were thrown at the men. In an effort to stop the nightly barrage, half of the gun teams were kept on alert at night after putting in busy days in hopes of silencing the tube.

Enemy activity at area firebases and troop concentrations in outlying areas fell to almost nothing as TET approached. In a nationwide coordinated attack, CHARLIE struck every town and provincial capital as the Vietnamese New Year arrived. The AVENGERS flew all night long responding to requests for firesupport in the Pleiku and Kontum areas. As a result of one mission near the Kontum airfield, they were credited with killing 165 NVA regulars. The GHOST RIDERS were kept just as busy defending the Camp Holloway perimeter with door guns stripped from the slicks. They successfully repelled a sapper attack that followed one of the all to frequent mortar barrages. The spirit of the unit, as a whole, was evidenced by the fact that every person not employed elsewhere spent their nights on the perimeter reinforcing the normal contingent of guards. It was through the efforts of these men and men of other units that Camp Holloway was able to survive the 1968 TET offensive with relatively little damage.