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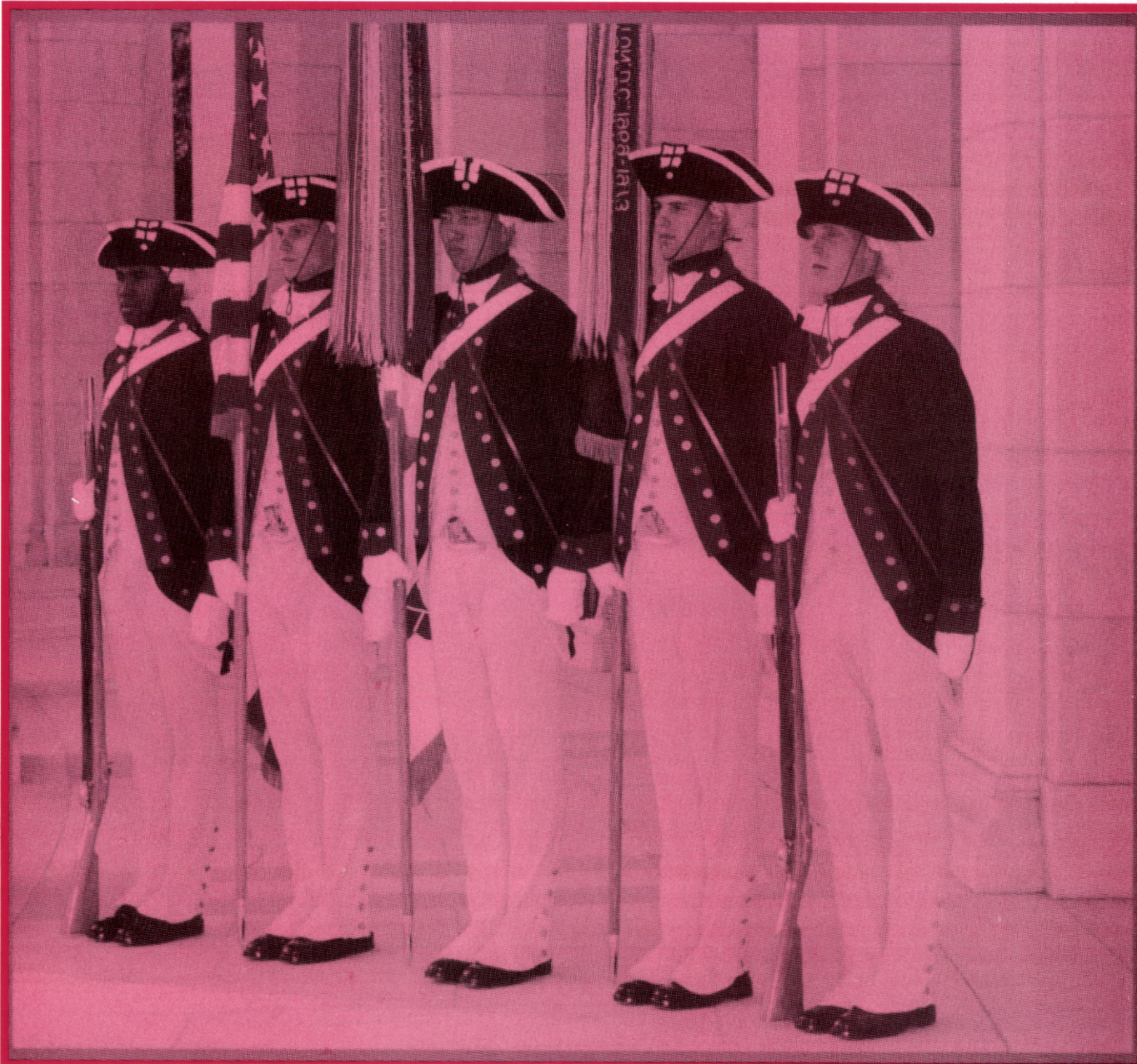
Aviation

Digest

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"America Must Lead "

The Role of the Helicopter in the Vietnam War

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Setting the Stage

To many Americans, the Vietnam War was one of the most divisive wars ever fought in our nation's history. Most of us old enough either to remember it, or to have fought in it, reflect on how the war tore at the very core of the nation's political, sociological, educational, and moral fiber. Through the television (TV) media, Americans had a front-row seat to view the death, destruction, and suffering emanating from that war. During our almost ceaseless TV exposure to the war, the presence of a machine not heretofore seen often on TV was etched indelibly in our visual imagery and psyche. That machine was the military helicopter.

True, American troops had used the helicopter in the Korean War; however, use of the helicopter in the war was limited primarily to medical evacuation (MEDEVAC), transportation, and logistical support. TV coverage of the Korean War was minuscule as opposed to the later Vietnam

War so not much was known about the helicopter.

All American armed forces had helicopters in the Korean War; however, the Army provided the most significant use of the somewhat nascent helicopter. The Army used it mostly for MEDEVAC of over 21,000 wounded American fighting men to mobile army surgical hospitals (MASHs). The Korean War was unique in that, by the extensive use of the helicopter for aerial MEDEVAC of seriously wounded fighting men, a new dimension of saving lives ironically was added to the art of war.¹

From the end of the Korean War in 1953 to 1962, adaptability of the helicopter to military doctrine was seriously discussed and evaluated. The U.S. Army and the U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) tested helicopters for transporting troops during the 1950s and early 1960s. During the late 1950s, the Army secretly placed guns on helicopters and test-

fired them at Fort Rucker, Ala., for possible use as aerial weapons platforms.

The reasons for the secrecy were as follows: Other Army combat arms—infantry, artillery, and armor—believed the use of ordnance and armaments was restricted doctrinally to them; therefore, they thought the helicopter should not be given to an interloper like the organic Army Aviation element.

The Army also was involved in an ongoing dispute about close air support (CAS) with the U.S. Air Force (USAF). The USAF abhorred the very notion that the Army should have any aircraft armed and capable of providing some degree of CAS to ground units. That function ostensibly was delegated to the USAF because of the Key West Agreement of 1947. But, by the late 1950s, the Army was allowed to field the aerial combat reconnaissance platoon, which used armed helicopters. However, by the end of the 1950s, ac-

ceptance of the armed helicopter was still inchoate in most military circles. Not until the 1960s were armed helicopters accepted totally within the Department of Defense (DOD).²

Preparation of the Helicopter for War

The accession of John F. Kennedy to the Office of President of the United States, in 1960, brought about profound changes that affected Army Aviation—particularly as far as using the helicopter. The military and political doctrine of “massive retaliation,” espoused during the 1950s, no longer was a viable option.

This doctrine asserted that, if the then existent Soviet Union attacked the United States, and/or its allies, the United States would retaliate with a massive nuclear strike against the Soviets. Supposedly, the massive retaliation was to have been a nuclear quid pro quo.

Thus, the possibility of a nuclear strike was enough to serve as a deterrent. Actually, what happened was that the two superpowers realized the use of strategic nuclear weapons would serve no purpose other than mutual annihilation. So massive retaliation, if not extinct, was at best somewhat extant.

Another reason for the diminishing influence of massive retaliation was the nascence of “brushfire wars.” These were small wars fought with conventional weapons in Third World or nonaligned regions and involved using guerilla and/or paramilitary forces. Such a war was already taking place in Southeast Asia at the time of John F. Kennedy’s inauguration. As we know, the region

was Indo-China and was comprised of two countries: North and South Vietnam. The former was aligned with the Soviet Union; the latter, with the United States.³

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the United States and the Soviet Union were caught up in a mutual frenzy of supplying arms, advisers, and equipment to support their re-

longer claimed any suzerainty over tactical helicopters in South Vietnam.⁴

The military and political activity taking place in South Vietnam in the 1960–1962 timeframe showed the need for the Army to examine its helicopter requirements and tactics—particularly as far as South Vietnam.

Lieutenant General Gordon B. Rogers, U.S. Army, in 1960 chaired a Board with the primary mission of upgrading Army Aviation to meet any tactical contingencies like brushfire wars or what would later be referred to as low- or mid-intensity level conflicts.

Akin to the upgrading was the Board’s recommendation that the soon to be ubiquitous UH-1 Huey helicopter become the primary helicopter in the Army’s active aircraft inventory. The Rogers Board also recommended procurement of the CH-47 Chinook cargo helicopter. Both of these air-

craft acquitted themselves well in the ensuing Vietnam War.⁵

In 1962 the Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, decided to conduct a study on the tactical mobility of the Army ground forces, particularly airmobility—the use of helicopters to transport troops to a given area and as a means of CAS.

Mr. McNamara later instructed General Hamilton H. Howze, the Army’s first Director of Aviation, to establish and chair a board to implement this study. The Howze Board, as it was known, convened at Fort Bragg, No. Car., in 1962.

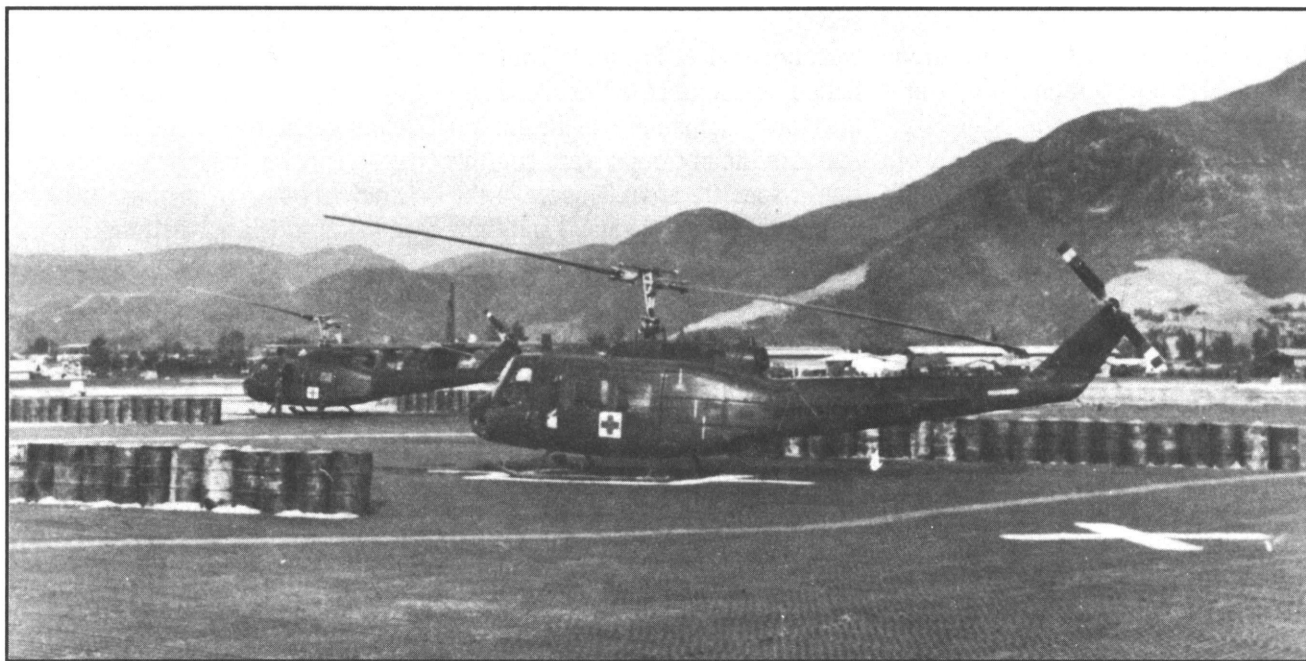
The Board members performed numerous tests and studies, and posited the thesis that Army aircraft,



General Hamilton Howze established a board to study the use of the helicopter to transport troops.

spective allies in Indo-China. In 1961 the U.S. Army sent its first helicopter and fixed-wing aircraft to support South Vietnam. By 1963, the United States had 21,000 military advisers (the equivalent of a reinforced division) in South Vietnam.

As an aside, one of the most significant fixed-wing aircraft in the Army’s inventory in South Vietnam was the CV-2 Caribou, a twin-engine, medium transport. It served the Army well and had a short field landing and takeoff capability; therefore, it was suitable for incountry use. However, in April 1966, the Caribou was relinquished to the USAF as part of a memorandum of agreement (MOA) which, in turn, no



UH-1 Hueys used in MEDEVAC, known as dustoff missions.

particularly helicopters, could provide airmobile assets needed to enhance the combat effectiveness of ground forces. The Board also recommended fielding a cavalry combat brigade to fight brushfire wars.

The DOD, however, deferred the action on this recommendation. But DOD decided to create and test an air assault division replete with an organic helicopter battalion.

The 11th Air Assault Division was established at Fort Benning, Ga., to test all facets of airmobility. The Division passed its airmobility tests by the end of 1964. On 1 July 1965, it assumed operational status as a tactical division and was renamed the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile). "The 1st Cav," as it became known, had its own organic aircraft; it could provide its own tactical and logistical support. The Division's activation was none too soon.

Because of the military and political disturbances in South Vietnam in the spring of 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson decided to deploy tactical units to South Vietnam. In July 1965 the 1st Cavalry Division received its orders for deploy-

ment. It deployed in August 1965, arrived in South Vietnam in September 1965, and became the Army's first division-size unit to engage the enemy.

This Division spent more than 2,000 days in South Vietnam—thus making it the longest serving Army unit incountry during the war. It received numerous citations and awards for its combat activity. The Marines, however, were the first to be sent to South Vietnam with the deployment of the Third Marine Division in April 1965.⁶

Army Aviation at War in Vietnam

South Vietnam was a country conducive to the use of the helicopter in both a tactical and nontactical environment. The country was bereft of an extensive road and highway system. The roads in existence often came under attack by the Viet Cong and/or North Vietnamese Army (NVA), which precluded or attenuated their use.

Besides this situation, the varied topography of South Vietnam, which included an extensive canopy of jungle, mountainous terrain, swamps, and an expansive delta should be

considered; therefore, the helicopter was used for lift and support purposes.

Throughout the period of active U.S. participation in the Vietnam War (1965–1973), the Army and Marine divisions incountry had organic helicopter units, as did a number of Army brigades that served in South Vietnam. American combat units normally were not incountry very long before they were in the field, sometimes called the "bush," engaging the enemy.

Three things favored American ground forces: tactical mobility, firepower, and logistical support. All three were achieved with the helicopter.⁷

The use of the helicopter in the Vietnam conflict was to change forever the American doctrine of tactical warfare. Helicopters were found to be multidimensional. American combat units conducted tactical airmobile missions that included: insertion and extraction of ground forces; rescue of downed aviators; CAS with the UH-1 and AH-1 Cobra helicopter gunships; aerial reconnaissance; and MEDEVAC missions, known as "dustoff" missions.

The MEDEVAC helicopter crews saved about 390,000 wounded American fighting men's lives during the Vietnam War. This figure was more than 10 times the number of American lives saved by helicopters in the Korean War.

Two reasons for this seemingly disparate statistic were that helicopters in the Vietnam War were able to carry more litter cases than the small H-13 helicopters (precursor of the OH-13E (MEDEVAC)) used during the Korean War. In addition, the Vietnam War itself was a longer war.

Finally, helicopters provided the majority of logistical support to troops in the field, fire bases, and isolated outposts throughout South Vietnam. Unique to this war was the fact that light and medium artillery could be lifted and moved, as needed, by helicopter from one fire base to another with reasonable alacrity. This capability saved American lives and was instrumental in thwarting enemy attacks.

However, the helicopter was not without its detractors. It seemed unit commanders often used the helicopter as an aerial command, control, and communications (C³) platform from which they surveyed the battlefield and communicated by radio to guide subordinate unit commanders on the ground. Many tacticians believed the commander's place was on the ground with his troops.

Another criticism directed against airmobility was that it reduced the ability or desire of ground units to move on the ground against the enemy, fix him, and destroy him. Apparently, in the mindset of infantry commanders, it was easier to insert troops quickly; engage and defeat the enemy; extract the American troops; and eventually repeat the same tactical process.

Some commanders posited the complaint that the extensive use of the helicopter in Vietnam, coupled with the noise of the aircraft, had

served as nothing more than a timely warning device. The noise from the helicopter alerted the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese on the ground that American troops were coming into a specific area. This gave the enemy time either to stand and fight or disengage and withdraw to fight somewhere else at his time and choosing. The helicopter also was assailed as being too lightly armored to withstand ground fire.

Though there is merit to these criticisms, or what might be considered by some as cavils, it should be noted that: The terrain, along with the tactical and political dictums of the war, precluded the use of large numbers of American troops to occupy a position on the ground for an extended period of time. The enclave or fortress mentality, which troubled the French and brought about their defeat in the earlier Indo-China War, was not a desirable option.

As was previously mentioned, the terrain and surfeit of roads favored the defender, not the attacker. Movement on the ground, even with armored and artillery support, often was hazardous and time-consuming. The argument certainly can be made that tactical unit commanders should be on the ground with their troops. However, the tactical fluidity of the situation often necessitated having a unit commander airborne where he could make the proper decisions based on his aerial observations of what was happening on the ground.

Finally, it was true that the helicopter was lightly armored, noisy, and could, and sometimes did, compromise tactical situations by these shortcomings. Yet, it must be remembered, this war was an unconventional war in many ways, and as mentioned earlier, favored not the attacker, but the defender. The use of the helicopter by the U.S. Army and USMC reduced markedly this defender advantage of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese.⁸

With the implementation of the helicopter as an instrument of war during the Vietnam conflict, the new Army had to have a means whereby it could maintain tactical and administrative control of all of its divisional and nondivisional helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft in Vietnam. The Army did this with the creation and use of the 1st Aviation Brigade, which served in Vietnam from May 1966 to March 1973. After that time, the 1st Aviation Brigade was sent to Fort Rucker, Ala., as a training brigade, until 1988 when it became a combat aviation regiment. While in Vietnam, the Brigade had under its suzerainty 4,000 rotary-wing and fixed-wing aircraft and 24,000 troops. During the war, the Aviation Brigade and its support units became involved in four significant tactical operations that warrant examination.⁹

The first noteworthy tactical operation in which the Brigade and its units became involved was the Tet Offensive from January to March 1968. In this operation the Brigade and its units responded to the precarious tactical situation wrought by the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong armies' sudden incursions into major cities throughout South Vietnam.

The 1st Aviation Brigade established an airborne command and control (C²) operation. At the same time, successful counterinsurgency operations began that eventually drove the enemy out of the urban areas and restored the tactical status quo.

The second important operation involving Army Aviation units, in April 1968, was the relief operation by the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) to lift the North Vietnamese Army seizure of the embattled USMC base at Khe Sanh. Dubbed PEGASUS, the operation successfully combined airmobile operations and a sustained road march by 1st Cavalry "Sky Troopers" and Marine

Corps units to lift the seize.

The **third** significant Army helicopter operation in South Vietnam was the incursion of the American and South Vietnamese Armies into neighboring Cambodia in May 1970 to ferret out and destroy North Vietnamese units and their supply depots. The Armies were allowed to advance only 30 kilometers (km) into Cambodia because of a presidential order. However, the deployment into Cambodia was successful. The Armies uncovered a number of large North Vietnamese ammunition and food caches. These caches were later transferred back to South Vietnam where they were either destroyed or, as far as food, given to local villagers.

The **fourth** and final important large-scale operation involving mass use of Army helicopters in South Vietnam was LAMSOM 719, which took place from January to April 1971. This mid-intensity-level operation had as its mission the coordinated insertion of South Vietnamese troops by air and armored units into Laos to drive North Vietnamese regulars out of areas contiguous to the South Vietnamese border. American lift helicopters ferried South Vietnamese troops into Laos. Helicopter gunships provided CAS for the South Vietnamese and destroyed a number of North Vietnamese P-76 tanks. The Army suffered the loss of about 100 helicopters, most of which were shot down by Soviet-built 37 millimeter (mm), radar-directed, anti-aircraft guns. Some helicopters were lost because of the pervasive inclement weather resulting from the monsoon season in Southeast Asia.

During LAMSOM 719, Army helicopter pilots often were forced to fly in what at best could be discerned as marginal weather. Helicopters serving in the Vietnam War did not

have tactical radar on board, so pilots had a difficult time flying during inclement weather. The fact that more helicopters were not lost during this operation was due, in large measure, to the flying skills and bravery of these pilots. LAMSOM 719 itself incurred a great deal of controversy within and without military circles as to its efficacy and results. The operation served as a lessons learned report for the Army. It also brought out the need for the Army to have more heavily armed

were the OH-6 Cayuse (Loach) and the OH-58 Kiowa. However, the most formidable helicopter to serve in Vietnam was the AH-1 Cobra gunship, which first arrived incountry in 1967. The Cobra carried wing-mounted 7.62mm machineguns, 2.75-inch rocket launchers, a 40mm M75 grenade launcher, and an XM 134 minigun. It caused much havoc upon enemy units, equipment, and personnel during a period of service in South Vietnam. The Army still uses the AH-1.



OH-6 Cayuse used for observation

helicopters in such operations, and attendant and better close air coordination with the USAF.¹⁰

During the Vietnam War, the Army had a number of helicopters in its inventory that played important roles during the conflict. The UH-1 Huey was a multifaceted aircraft serving as a troop carrier, gunship, MEDEVAC helicopter, and cargo carrier. The CH-47 Chinook and the CH-54 Sky Crane Tarhe were primarily supply, lift, and transport helicopters.

The Army also had two observation helicopters that acquitted themselves well in South Vietnam. They

Reflections

The Vietnam War was, in many ways, a most imperfect war, fought by imperfect men, using imperfect tactics. It was a war in which battles often were brief and bloody, tactical and logistical support often counted for success or failure, and dying could be seconds or minutes away. It was a war in which the tactical helicopter came of age and added a new dimension to warfare, that of mobility.

Though an imperfect, and seemingly ungainly, aircraft, the ubiquitous helicopter touched the everyday lives of the young men who fought in the harsh climes and terrain of South Vietnam. The helicopter took them into battle, provided CAS, supplied and resupplied them, and evacuated the wounded and the dead. In turn, 2,700 young helicopter pilots and crewmen died supporting their comrades on the ground during the war. Seven helicopter pilots and crewmen received the Medal of Honor, two of them posthumously. The Vietnam War has been over almost two decades. Veterans of that war who once were boys are now middle-aged. Most of them have gone on with their lives, attempting to live the American dream. Others, tragically, have withdrawn into the

inner sanctum of their pain and suffering, not being able to exercise the memories and horrors of war in a land too distant, yet too well remembered. However, it is unlikely that any of these veterans have ever forgotten the helicopter and its role in their lives in Vietnam.

To many, the helicopter was the first aircraft they saw as they were leaving the country to return home. Time and distance have blurred many memories about the Vietnam War, yet one memorial to that war stand—the helicopter. It served a contingency in Vietnam that depended on

it often for many things. It served the constituency well. This constituency came of age in the brutal milieu of Vietnam and so did the helicopter. Together they are an indelible part of American history. May we never forget either those who fought in Vietnam or the helicopters that served them well.



AH-1 Cobra escorting two UH-1 Hueys In Vietnam



AH-1 Cobra In low-level attack mode, Vietnam



AH-1G helicopters refueling, Vietnam 1969



AH-1 helicopter (OV-1 Mohawk In background), Vietnam

ENDNOTES

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