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Saigon, Vietnam

August 20, 1966

Batman--page 1

SAIGON, VIETNAM--Batman aviators, equipped with super-sensitive closed circuit television, are swooping over the Vietnam skies to spot Communist troop movements at night.

Five helicopter "Batmobiles" and seventeen pilots, gunners and crew chiefs form a highly-classified test team here to experiment with multi-million-dollar "low light level television," commonly abbreviated LLL-TV. The special test team arrived in Vietnam in March and by June began flying its secret ~~missions~~ night missions. Since the group is not a U. S. Army unit and has no numerical designations, team members ~~has~~ baptized the group "Batman," because, as one of them explained, "bats like our television can see at night." A "Bat Patch" ~~was~~ showing a black batman inside a white television screen was designed and produced at a dingy Saigon embroidery shop. It is worn daily by team members on front of their fatigue shirts. The same emblem <sup>m</sup> was painted on each of the five specially-equipped ~~has~~ helicopters. Children of the pilots sent dime store decals of Batman to their fathers, who liberally pasted them on doors and briefcases ("We call them Bat-cases"). A special jargon emerged. ("Our missions are called Batcaves"). So did Batman jokes. ("Where does Batman go ~~in~~ the first thing in the morning? The Batroom.").

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"None of us have gone as far as getting Batman capes," one aviator explained. "But one crewchief scrounged a black flying suit, which is not regular Army issue. None of the other helicopter units know what LLL-TV means. They just know us as 'one of the Batmen'."

The U. S. Army isn't especially eager to have anyone know about LLL-TV--one of the most ambitious projects in night warfare experimentation for combatting Viet Cong and North Vietnamese units who sleep in the daytime and raise havoc in the countryside at night. The American military command here has clamped a high-level military classification on details, effectiveness and tactical employment of the LLL-TV.

"The ~~z~~ TV camera is just like any other one--except it can see at night," one of the test aviators explained. "Suppose I walk out~~side~~<sup>doors</sup> and it's as dark as the inside of a football. There is actually some moonlight or starlight there, but it doesn't seem that way to the human eye. So, the TV camera picks up the little bit of available light, magnifies it, makes it look like a normal picture on the TV screen--and I can see quite well what's ~~going on~~ moving on the ground beneath ~~me~~ me."

(More)

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Each of the five test helicopters--the standard ~~UH-1~~ UH-1 Huey used in combat--is equipped with six black boxes totalling 129 pounds in weight and worth US\$5 million in research and development. The six pieces are: a 45-pound, foot-long movable television camera "which sticks out of the nose or the chin of the helicopter like a big black whisker," two nine-inch television monitor screens for black-and-white images, a control unit, an electronic unit and a power supply.

"We look at the two television screens in each helicopter just like the ones in our homes," one pilot explained. "If I fly along the Saigon river at night, I can see piers and ships--without the television I might not see the ground. This is a new principle different from radar or infra-red. The rest of the details are classified."

The Batman aviators have one of the most dangerous flying jobs in the war--for they fly far lower than most helicopters and 85 per cent of their missions are at night. Every pilot has been shot at at least once; most of them have been shot at ~~many~~ almost every night mission they've flown; none have been shot down however. The Batmen refused to discuss many of their missions, since ~~it~~ <sup>they</sup> involved tactical employment of the LLL-TV. But one pilot described this mission:

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"Once two of our choppers went down to the southernmost tip of Vietnam for a night ~~mission~~ test flight and I saw something I never saw or heard of before in Vietnam. I saw a company-sized Viet Cong unit fire on our chopper on command--that is, every Viet Cong fired simultaneously on order. It looked like dozens and dozens of flashlight bulbs going off in a second. The pilot pushed the mike button and ~~we~~ radio-ed that he was being fired at. Before he finished talking, our escort gun ships were plastering the area with rockets and machinegun fire. The Viet Cong didn't even hit our Batmobile. Like ~~3~~ bats, we fly without lights."

Ironically, the Batmen in Vietnam don't know much about the Batman craze "in the real world," GI jargon for the U. S. A. "We ~~don't~~ <sup>don't</sup> know <sup>EXPLAINED</sup> Batman is the rage in the United States, but we don't really know what it is, <sup>^</sup> <sup>FUBV</sup> "We've never seen the TV program yet."