

Helicopter pilot Thomas G. Stubbs was like a kid at Christmas this week. Just a year ago Wednesday he left the United States for a 12-month tour in South Viet Nam. This week, he returned home.

When he and 400 other members of the 8th and 57th Light Transportation (helicopter) companies first landed in Saigon, the size of the American military community almost doubled. They were advised to wear short-sleeved shirts and sports slacks "like neat-looking American tourists." Now an estimated 3000 ~~fat~~ American servicemen in fatigues or khakis are stationed in Saigon.

Little did ~~the~~ tall, blonde blond Chief Warrant Officer Stubbs, a rank referred to as Mister in U. S. Army terminology, realize the experiences ahead for these units, which were to be the first helicopter companies in history to be used for assault-type combat support missions of carrying troops into battle zones, resupplying them and evacuating battle casualties under enemy gunfire.

It was a year in which the 8th Helicopter Company ~~in~~ flew 5,500 hours, carried 2,500 troops into battle, and transported 2,350 tons of supplies. Of the original 20 H-21 Shawnee helicopters, called "banana boats" because of their upward curvature, only twelve are still operational. All but two have been hit at least once and many have a number of "ound "wound stripes" painted in day-glow international orange.

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One pilot was hit five times in six consecutive days. Mister Stubbs was to see ~~thxxxx~~ several of his unlucky unit mates get "short tours." Three were killed in action; four others were wounded in action. All received Purple Hearts to give the 8th the highest battle casualty rate of all helicopter units. (Among all other helicopter units, two have been killed in action; 15 wounded in action).

"We grew into this situation," Mister ~~Sh~~ Stubbs explained. "When we first came, we were fat, dumb and happy. We didn't know what was happening. We ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ thought we might be training troops. We didn't know if there was a war here or not."

On his first mission, the helicopters ~~was~~ landed under enemy ground fire. The first ship was "ounded "wounded" on returning to Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport. "After that, we know there was a war here," Mister Stubbs laughed. "It brought back old memories." He, like many of other members of the unit, are veterans of Korea.

Mister Stubbs, on that first mission, drew enemy groundfire. Last week, 310 missions later, he again was shot at as his helicopter almost ~~al~~ landed on top of two Viet Cong guerrillas armed with Thompson submachineguns.

The crews were ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ surprised at times at what they were being attacked with. Several water buffalo and one elephant charged the helicopters as they approached landing zones. The unit has been fired at by modern-day carbines, automatic rifles and 32 .30 calibre machineguns; by home-made shotguns and sigguns. One ship was hit by a four-inch bolt fired from a grenade launcher. "The Viet Cong have crude weapons," Mister Stubbs explained. "We've had everything but kitchen sink thrown at us."

(More)

For months Lt. Arthur A. Williams of Ft. Bragg, North Carolina, maintained he was being fired at by the spears and bamboo arrows of the primitive mountain tribesmen.

"Go have a couple of drinks," he was told. "Pretty soon they'll be throwing elephants at you."

But last week his suspicions were confirmed. A 15-inch bamboo arrow was lodged in the fuselage of a helicopter returning from a mission.

"We've learned old-fashioned, old Indian type guerrilla warfare," Mister Stabbs said. "We were a modern Army when we came here. We had to learn how to go backwards instead of forwards."

The 8th Helicopter Company moved into the central one-third of Viet Nam, a jungled mountainous area once used as Emperor Bao Dai's favorite hunting ground for elephants, tigers and buffalo-like gaur. It was not to be a happy hunting ground for the 8th. The mountains were steep, often demanding the chopper's maximum power for maneuverability. The landing zones were so small only three or four ships could land at one time. And often the Viet Cong had planted 12-foot bamboo stakes into the "tiger grass." The rotor blades of Helicopter 2085, nicknamed "the Great Ghost," received football-sized holes in them after one mission of fighting these anti-helicopter poles. Often rotor blades had to be mended in the battle zones with ~~adhesive~~ masking tape before the ship could be flown home. Last week, the rear end of one helicopter was shot off. The crew at first decided to destroy it, but later devised a cargo sling to hold it together long enough to fly it out of the landing zone.

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"We've landed in areas they'd court martial us for in States," States," Mister Stubbs explained. "It's everyday stuff here. At home, nobody flies over jungles; we fly around them."

It was to be a trying year of continual improvement for the 8th. At first billeted in ~~unimpressive~~ make-shift, over-hot tents, most of the time filled with dust and all of the time filled with mosquitoes, the unit in September moved into ~~that~~ its new quarters, a series of low-slung, semi-permanent buildings called "Camp Goldberg." Grass, flowers and banana trees were nursed along in the sandy soil. ~~Stagnant~~ Each building was appropriately named by the six men living there. The 130th Medical Detachment ~~as~~ dispensary was named "Blood Suckers Haven." The "House of Gonna" was named after a chief warrant officer ~~xxx~~ who "was always gonna do something but never did." The food storage hut was known as "Toomain Tavern;" the electricians resided in "Live Wires" shack; the radio hut was called "Short Circuits." "Ground Zero" was named after Lt. Williams Williams who devised a bombing rack for E-21's, but never received permission to use it.

The maintenance detachment, the key to keeping helicopters flying, at first repaired ships on the hot parking ramps along the airstrip. "We were shade tree mechanics without a shade tree," explained 34-year-old SFC. George C. Daws, shop foreman from Fayetteville, North Carolina. In September, maintenance crews moved into two large tin-roofed shops named Guthrie Hanger and Land Lone Hanger.

(More)

The confidence of the Vietnamese troops gradually increased. Those who at first would not leave their defensive outposts to board the helicopters finally learned to ride them. And those who once would not leave the helicopter without a machinegun in their backs to force them to jump into the landing zone are now willing to fight.

"The war is going our way for a change," Mister Stubbs said. "We're fired at less and fewer ships are being shot down. The ARVN's (Army of Republic of Viet Nam) are fighting harder."

Despite the continual improvements, the unit had its dips.

"July was a hard-luck month," Mister Sub Stubbs explained. "Everything went wrong. Dysentery hit the company so hard we held briefings in the latrine. The wind blew so hard the palm trees laid flat on the beaches and the rotor blades stood straight up in the air."

Air supplies couldn't be get in and for two weeks the company ate G-rations. There was no mail. Sand blew one-half-inch deep on the floors.

Company commander # Major Charles Hardesty was shot down. One quick-witted maintenance crewman plugged the bullet hole in the fuel line with "peanut butter," a sealing compound, while ~~ARVN~~ ADp AD-6 fighters held off the Viet Cong. Five minutes after Hardesty flew out, the Communist guerrillas moved in.

Hardesty was luckier than others. On July 15th, the new commanding officer, Major Robert Cornell of Vicksburg, Mississippi, who had already received a Purple Heart in Mekong Delta action, started on a routine reconnaissance mission. Viet Cong ground fire killed the pilot, Chief

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Warrent Officer (CWO) Joseph A. Goldberg. The ship veered out of control and crashed, killing SP-5 Harold L. Guthrie, the crew chief. An American ground advisor who survived was shot by a guerrilla band.

Maj. Corneil and SP-5 James E. Lane, gunner, fled into the jungles. Six hours later, the gunner died from wounds and exhaustion. Corneil was rescued by his own executive officer only after the pilot saw the sun reflected reflecting from Corneil's bald head.

The July total: ~~fix~~ 3 ships totally destroyed; 3 killed in action; one wounded in action.

The old "banana boats," which have dotted Viet nam's skies from dawn to dark, are battered and tired. They are categorized into "sick" ones and "well" ones--those with enough power to pull out quickly of a landing zone.

"The H-21's are just a bunch of heli copter parts moving in the same direction wrapped together in tin foil," the pilot of the swank turbo-jet HU-1A helicopter said. "I'd be scared to even ride in one."

Last month the helicopters of the 8th began receiving a new paint job. The U. S. Army lettering and bright white star, good Viet Cong targets marking the gasoline tank, were erased and wavy camouflage colors of browns and greens were splattered on to blend with the jungle terrain.

During the year, four other troop-carrying helicopter companies have moved into Viet Nam to help the 8th and 57th, bringing total U. S. helicopter strength to about 200 ships.

Reflected Reflecting on his year in Viet Nam, Mister Stubbs admitted he was so excited about going home, "I can sleep only three hours at a click. "It's just like waiting for Christmas."

"Yeah, last year Santa Claus came on a water buffalo," said

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Capt. Robert Kuhn, four formerly 8th operations chief who also left for the States this week. "This year ~~commencement~~ he came early."

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Check photos for pix of arrow in helicopter fuselage.