

The Choppers Prove Their Worth in War

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SAIGON.

The war in South Viet Nam is the world's first helicopter war.

It has been just over three years since the first American "choppers"—42 H-21 "bananas boats"—arrived in Saigon aboard the United States aircraft carrier Core and surprised the inhabitants by showing that they could, indeed, fly.

Since then, U. S. helicopters have carried more than one million passengers and 40,000 tons of cargo over South Viet Nam. Out of the 32,000 American military personnel in the country, close to a third—nearly 7,500 men—belong to helicopter units. And of the more than 230 American military men who had been slain in Viet Nam, a high proportion have been "chopper boys."

"The helicopter has made the difference between holding our own in the war and failure," one U. S. officer says. "The Vietnamese keep asking for more and more helicopter support, and we've now increased helicopter effectiveness 100 per cent."

"The helicopter in a counterinsurgency operation provides mobility for the ground forces that they could never achieve otherwise in this terrain. When the Viet Cong hit a town, by the time government troops can get there on the ground the Reds are gone. The helicopter can get there 10 times as fast."

FIRST WAR USE

The Viet Nam war is the first in which helicopters have been used in quantity, both for airlifting troops and, armed with rockets and machine guns, for ground-support operations. The rotor-driven aircraft have some obvious advantages for this kind of war: they can land and take off from small clearings inaccessible to even propeller-driven planes. And they can hover almost motionless to scout and pound enemy positions in a way that faster-flying planes cannot.

For the same reasons, of course, the helicopters are more vulnerable to Viet Cong ground fire.

The first American pilots, who were told to wear sports shirts and slacks to "look like American tourists," flew their H-21's off the Core before an expectant crowd of thousands, most of whom appeared confident the odd aircraft would plunge into the Saigon River.

"The streets around the ship were roped off," Lt. Col. Robert Dillard, who flew the first helicopter, O-49, off the carrier, recalled recently. "But thousands of people were backed up for blocks. They had never seen helicopters before and didn't think they could fly. But when the choppers did fly, they all applauded like mad."

Almost two and a half years later—on June 27, 1964—Col. Dillard again flew his O-49 for the last time—in a special ceremony in which all the famed "banana boats" were retired from Viet Nam and replaced by the more modern turbojet Hueys.

INDEX OF WAR

The increase in the intensity and pace of the war against the Communist guerrillas is indexed by the increase in the number and caliber of helicopters. The first two H-21 companies were soon to be accompanied by three more, plus a Marine helicopter squadron. Later, the five companies of the slow-moving, highly vulnerable H-21's were replaced by turbo-jet Hueys, and four more Huey companies were added for a total of nine.

Besides cutting down the chief advantage of the Communist guerrilla—his mobility—the helicopters have brought under government control areas totally inacces-



sible by any other means. They are used to transport province chiefs throughout their villages and to supply isolated outposts with food and pay.

A visit to the helicopter units throughout the country produces a collection of stories—some fantastic, some funny, some sad. Most of them displaying as one infantryman explained, "the day-in-day-out courage of these pilots. The things they are willing to do is incredible. I've seen the medical evacuation choppers fly at night 120 miles from Saigon to Camau to pick up the wounded—and when they couldn't get them all, they came back for the others."

One American division adviser said: "These helicopters are flying stagecoaches. They take in the pay; sell stamps and money orders; cash paychecks, and are a small department store. On the circuit last week, we had only one carton of cigarettes and four boxes of razor blades left. They've carried around the Thanksgiving turkeys, birthday cakes and mattress bags of toys to isolated outposts at Christmas time."

In the northern seacoast city of Qui Nhon, the field is named after a crew chief who never returned. The heavily Communist infested Mekong Delta provinces have been called "the graveyard of choppers" and the charred skeletons of downed helicopters are visible in the rice paddies and treeless.

But rarely do the "chopper boys" recall these incidents. "There's no shortage of courage among chopper boys," one American ground adviser muttered.

The words of one company song go:

"History will buy violets,

For dead chopper pilots."