
The 281st Aviation Company: The Roots of Army Special Operations Aviation

by Dr. C.H. Briscoe

Dedicating Army helicopter units to the support of special-operations ground forces — a concept that seems basic today — was, in fact, a by-product of the Vietnam War.

In April 1964, the United States initiated efforts to upgrade the quality and the timeliness of U.S. strategic intelligence. To bring the collection of strategic intelligence more under American control, the U.S. created Project Leaping Lena, which would penetrate the Ho Chi Minh trail. That project led to the creation of Special Forces Detachment B-52 (later called Project Delta).¹

The success of B-52 led to increased operational demands that resulted in the formation of Projects Omega (B-50) and Sigma (B-56), both of which ran from May 1966 to May 1967. As special operations

expanded across the borders of Cambodia and Laos, the Omega and Sigma projects led to the creation of Command and Control North, South and Central under the Military Assistance Command Vietnam-Studies and Observa-

tions Group, or MACV-SOG. Project Delta remained the only special-operations force under the command of the 5th SF Group.²

The increased operational demands also left less time available for B-52 to train replacements, prompting the establishment of the MACV Recondo School to train new personnel for the teams. The training at the MACV Recondo School was later expanded to include long-range reconnaissance teams that were assigned to U.S. and allied forces.³

At the urging of Majors Arthur Strange and Charlie Beckwith, the 145th Aviation Platoon (lift) was placed under the operational control of the 5th SF Group on Dec. 25, 1965, to provide dedicated helicopters and crews for Project Delta's training and operational missions. One month later, the 6th Aviation Platoon (attack) joined the 145th to form the 2/171st Aviation Company.

On July 14, 1966, the 281st Aviation Company (assault helicopter) assumed the mission of supporting the 5th SF Group, and it retained that mission until Feb. 23, 1970. According to Clyde J. Sincere Jr., once the 281st was assigned to support the 5th Group, "U.S. Special Forces became more responsive in fielding mobile-reaction forces to deal with crisis situations."⁴

With the exception of operational security, deception was the most important factor during helicopter infiltrations of teams.⁵ Experience had proved that infiltration was best accomplished at last light —



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The "Wolf Pack" patch of the 281st Aviation Company.



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A crew chief from the 281st stands beside a UH-1C "Hog Frog" that is equipped with 2.75-inch rocket pods and a "chin-mounted" 40 mm grenade launcher.

pilots could still see well enough to insert the force and slip away from the landing zone, but in a few minutes, air and ground elements would be covered by darkness. Because the enemy soon became familiar with that tactic, U.S. forces had to devise methods of confusing him as to the exact point of debarkation. Helicopters often set down briefly at three or more points in the vicinity of the primary landing zone to create uncertainty, and teams rappelled into very small clearings or climbed down rope ladders into old bomb craters.⁶ Another trick was to fly three helicopters in single file. The lead helicopter would touch down momentarily to discharge its reconnaissance team as the other two aircraft passed overhead. The lead helicopter would then rejoin the flight as the last one in the file.⁷

Rapid extraction of a compromised team was extremely important, and command-and-control elements had to be prepared to extract teams at a moment's notice. Captain Bill Larrabee, who was a Project Delta operations officer, explained, "We have our own choppers assigned to us. We have three choppers — two gunships and a slick — manned at all times. The crews sleep on them. If one of our patrols gets into trouble, [they] only [have] to whisper one word into a radio, and the choppers are in the air to get [them] out, day or night."⁸

During the Vietnam War, night helicopter flying was risky business, because night-

vision goggles were not available. Limited time for remaining on the objective (about 20 minutes) also made night operations more difficult.⁹ Aircrews had to rely on strobe lights and pen flares to guide them to the teams that were waiting to be extracted. But once the members of the aircrew established visual contact with the team on the ground and made verbal identification, the team could no longer use strobes and flares. Their use was forbidden in order to protect the pilot's night vision. To further protect the pilot's night vision, the co-pilot focused his attention on the instruments inside the cockpit while the pilot focused his attention outside the helicopter.

The probability that a force would have to be recovered before the completion of its mission was inversely proportional to the size of the force. Road-runner teams (composed of four Vietnamese) and long-range reconnaissance teams (composed of two SF soldiers and four Vietnamese) were the most vulnerable to enemy forces. Ordinarily, helicopters lifted small patrols from landing zones. But if a team had to be recovered from a position that was unsuitable for the aircraft to touch down, rescuers would lift team members using a rope ladder or a block-and-tackle rig. Team members could snap-link onto the ropes or hold on to the ropes and lock arms.¹⁰

Use of the folding ladder to facilitate helicopter extractions dates back to the

World War II helicopter demonstrations of Otto Sikorsky.¹¹ But it was not until Sergeant Major Charles T. McGuire designed the first-generation individual extraction harness — initially a snap-link and rope sling that fit under the armpits, and later a web harness — that soldiers could escape in seconds, ascending with the aircraft.¹² Holding on with their arms, however, denied rescued soldiers the ability to return fire during lift-out.

The second-generation harness, the STABO system, corrected the problem and allowed the soldiers to keep their hands free. The STABO rig proved to be one of the most innovative reconnaissance hardware items produced during the Vietnam War. Another insertion/extraction system was the metal-rung and cable-ladder system that was created for the U.S. Navy CH-46 helicopter. Master Sergeant Norman Doney adapted that system for use with UH-1 helicopters.¹³



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A warrant-officer pilot and crew chief of the 281st's 22nd Assault Platoon stand in front of their "slick" command-and-control helicopter.

Excerpts from the mission reports of several Project Sigma road-runner and recon teams in the vicinity of Phouc Vinh and near the Long Nguyen Secret Zone in the III Corps Tactical Zone highlight the danger of helicopter extractions under fire:

RT Msn 1 extracted by sling under fire vic XT988682 at 011810 May 1967.

RT Msn 4 extracted by sling under fire vic YT008813 at 030850 May 1967.

RT Msn 13 infiltrated vic XT981651 at 151245 May 1967. Team encountered VC force of seven men at 151500 May and opened fire, killing 2 VC.

RR Msn 1 was fired on vic XT678527 during movement to LZ. One man wounded in action, left arm (died of wounds) and team extracted under fire at 281710 April 1967 vic XT665509.

RR Msn 22 infiltrated vic XT938346 at 140807 May 1967, and was extracted by rope ladder vic XT973389 at 151000 May 1967.

RR Msn 23 infiltrated vic XT941622 at

150837 May 1967. Team observed 30 man VC platoon vic XT956637. At 151430 May, team spotted by estimated two VC platoons vic XT963363. VC fired a rifle grenade near the team and began advancing. A team member threw an M-26 grenade when the VC were about 15 meters away, killing five VC. Team took cover in two old foxholes and killed four additional VC. Gunships suppressed fire and team was extracted under fire vic XT963636 at 151525 May 1967.¹⁴

The pilots who flew those dangerous missions were young men, 19 and 20 years old, who were attracted by the adventure of the Army's helicopter pilot program. Possessing superb hand-and-eye coordination, courage and a youthful sense of invincibility, the pilots of the 281st regularly flew their birds into hot LZs with little or no thought for their own safety, and they forced their aircraft to do things that they were not designed to do. The Hog Frog pilots loaded their gunships with so many rockets and with so much ammo that they routinely had to perform a "lift and bounce, lift and bounce" maneuver on their skids in order to get their birds airborne.¹⁵

Directed by their crew chiefs, the pilots eased their aircraft down through triple-canopy jungle, with limbs and branches only inches from the rotors. When the aircraft were low enough, the aircrew would drop a jungle penetrator or a STABO kit to pick up the ground forces; then they would reverse the process to escape. These acts required superb coordination and complete trust among the aircrew.

The lines below are taken from the poem "Fire in the Hole," written by James R. Jarrett, who served in Project Delta. They reveal the strong bond that formed between the special-operations ground and aviation forces in Vietnam:

*Darkened jungle holds the fate,
Comrades trapped beyond the gate.
Aircraft screaming fast and low,
Death pursues the team below.
Courage their shield from loss of hope,
Hope as frail as STABO rope.
Rotors whine, gunners in the door,
Swiftly go these dogs of war.*

*A creed unknown to most mankind,
Never leave a man behind.*

The effects of the Vietnam War were numerous, and many are still with us today. The STABO rig of the Vietnam era has evolved into the single-point individual extraction system. While helicopter rappelling continues to be the staple of the Air Assault School, the fast-rope insertion-extraction system offers more advantages to the ground forces and reduces helicopter hover time.

But one of the most significant effects is the hereditary connection of the 281st Aviation Company to the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment. Often the importance of training special-operations ground forces and air elements together is overlooked, but operations in Panama, Southwest Asia and Afghanistan have revalidated the need for that training. The strong camaraderie, created in training and reinforced in combat, between the Army SOF ground forces and their organic air assets during Vietnam not only continues, but promises to pay dividends in future operations. ✂

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Notes:

¹ Project Leaping Lena required a large amount of specialized equipment. Because Captain Larry O'Neill, the supply officer, habitually marked the shipments for Detachment B-52 with a chalk triangle, the unit became referred to as Project Delta. Colonel Robert Mitchell and Fred Funk, interview by Dr. C.H. Briscoe and Dr. Kenn Finlayson, 4 September 2001, transcript, hereafter Mitchell & Funk interview, U.S. Army Special Operations Forces Archives, U.S. Army Special Operations Command, Fort Bragg, N.C.

² Colonel Francis J. Kelly, *Vietnam Studies: Special Forces 1961-1971* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1973), 107-08; Mitchell & Funk interview.

³ Kelly, 107-08; Mitchell & Funk interview.

⁴ Shelby Stanton, *Special Forces at War: An Illustrated History, Southeast Asia 1957-1975* (Charlottesville, Va.: Howell Press, 1990), 153.

⁵ Kelly, 143; Mitchell & Funk interview.

⁶ Mitchell & Funk interview.

⁷ Kelly, 143.

⁸ Jim Morris, *War Story* (New York: Dell, 1979), 278-79; Mitchell & Funk interview.

⁹ Kelly, 143; Mitchell & Funk interview.

¹⁰ Kelly, 146-47.

¹¹ Ralph Alex, "How Are You Fixed for Blades? The Saga of the Helicopter, Circa 1940-60," in Walter J. Boyne and Donald S. Lopez, eds., *Vertical Flight: The Age of the Helicopter* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1984), 21-22.

¹² Kelly, 146-47.

¹³ The STABO rig, which freed the individual's hands to fire his weapon during ascent, was developed by Major Robert L. Stevens (the ST of STABO), Captain John C. Knabb (the AB of STABO), and Sergeant First Class Clifford Roberts (the O part of STABO). Shelby L. Stanton, *Rangers at War: Combat Recon in Vietnam* (New York: Orion Books, 1992), 303; Mitchell & Funk interview.

¹⁴ Kelly, 205-10.

¹⁵ Mitchell & Funk interview.