In recognition of the Bicentennial, the *DIGEST* is publishing three new chapters of The Army Aviation Story. This is the second of these articles. The first was "The Army Aviation Story, Part X: The Early 1960s," which appeared last month. Part XII will appear in August

The Army Aviation Story Part XI: The Mid-1960s

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BY EARLY 1965 the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) was being beaten on the battlefield. More American assistance was needed to stave off defeat—specifically ground combat troops. Intelligence reports held that the Vietcong and their North Vietnamese allies would attempt to cut the Republic of Vietnam in two at its narrow waist in the central highlands. If airmobility enthusiasts were right, could not this threat be thwarted by a fast-moving, hard-hitting force?

In March 1965 the decision was made to send the 11th Air Assault Division (T) into combat under the colors of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile). The advance party of the "First Team" arrived at An Khe in the central highlands of Vietnam in August 1965.

By November 1965 the 1st Cav was locked in heavy combat in the central highlands southwest of Pleiku near the Cambodian border at a place called the Ia Drang Valley.[1] The enemy was aggressive, determined, disciplined and fought fanatically for 35 days. Many of their I.D. cards had been issued in Hanoi.

Ia Drang was a dramatic victory for the "First Team." During the battle, the division's aircraft hauled 5,048 tons of cargo to the troops in the field; in addition, 8,216 tons were transported from seacoast depots to tactical resupply points, all by the division's organic aircraft. Whole infantry and artillery battalions were lifted by helicopter into, around and out of the battle area. About 2,700 refugees were flown by helicopter to safety. With all this, only 59 aircraft were hit by ground fire and only four were shot down. General William C. Westmoreland, then commanding all U.S. forces in Vietnam, had this to say about the victory at Ia Drang: "The ability of the Americans to meet and defeat the best troops the enemy could put on the field of battle was once more demonstrated beyond any possible doubt, as was the validity of the Army's airmobile concept."

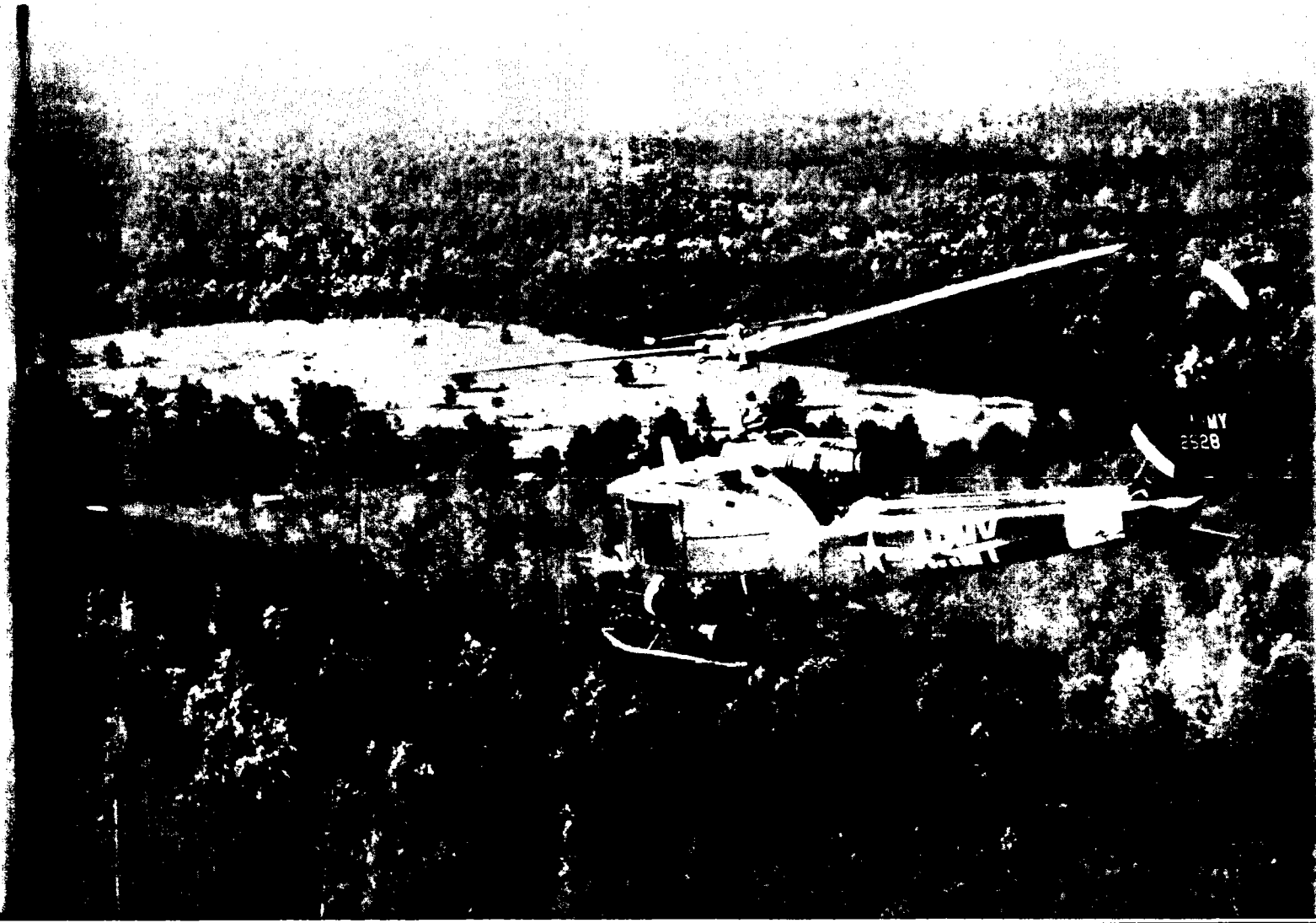
At this point in The Army Aviation Story it is appropriate to temporarily depart from the chronological approach to discuss the general nature of the airmobile concept and to glance at the evolution of the armed or attack helicopter because without the helicopter gunship, the airmobile concept could not have progressed as it did.

The Nature of Airmobility: Think about the term "organic aviation." In World War II, aerial artillery adjustment was performed by observation squadrons centralized at the corps level. In other words, the airplanes were commanded and controlled at least three echelons of command higher than the firing battery. Thus, the observation squadrons were organic to the corps but not to the firing battery. Lieutenant General C.W.G. Rich, director of the 11th Air Assault Division tests,[2] articulated the concept of increasingly responsive and effective airmobile support in the following statement:

> I wish to distinguish between three fundamental levels of airmobility. *First*, an aviation unit can be given to a combat force on a temporary basis for a specific operation. This is equivalent to a corps truck company attached to a division for a one-time move. Such an operation involves two separate staffs working out detailed plans to integrate the SOPs and techniques of two separately trained organizations. *The second level* is represented by the organic aviation in an Infantry Division. This approach benefits from unity of command, day-to-day training and intangibles such as esprit. But it is limited to a company lift capability; it does not permit replacement of ground vehicles by aircraft; its equipment is not tailored to aircraft capabilities; and it could never represent the primary thrust of the division. *At the third level* a much greater gain is possible when the organization is specifically trained and equipped to exploit the continuing close tactical integration of heliborne lift as a primary means of maneuver, accompanied by readily available aerial fires and by highly responsive aerial reconnaissance and support systems. In my opinion, the combat power offered at these three levels rises on a geometric, rather than an arithmetic scale, and only at the third level do we find a new potential in the tempo of operations, in range over extended distances and in freedom from heretofore formidable terrain obstacles.

General Rich makes the point that only at the third level does the potential for drastically changing the "tempo of operations" lie. Effective support, indeed sometimes the most cost-effective aviation support, can be rendered under conditions properly described as first or second level. Such was the case in Vietnam with the 1st Aviation Brigade to which all non-divisional Army aviation was assigned.

At its peak during the Vietnam years, the 1st Aviation Brigade[3] comprised the largest single Army aviation command in the world. The philosophy of support begun in the early years of the Vietnam conflict continued under the Brigade. For example, in the Brigade's 164th Combat Aviation Group, which operated in the Mekong Delta, each of the three aviation battalion commanders went daily to the ARVN division headquarters that they supported in order to ensure that the thrust of their effort was



forward--toward the Infantryman who relied on the helicopter for support. This same philosophy of support permeated the 1st Aviation Brigade, whether support was being rendered to U.S., ARVN or allied troops.

The Brigade was effective. Lieutenant General John J. Tolson III recounts its accomplishments during calendar year 1967:

> [The 1st Aviation Brigade] airlifted more than 5 million troops—the equivalent of 313 Infantry divisions . . . Brigade aircraft flew more than 1.2 million hours, the equivalent of 137 years. The Brigade was credited with killing 10,556 Vietcong, sinking nearly 10,000 supply sampans and destroying more than 10,400 enemy structures and fortifications.

General Creighton Abrams, as commander of U.S. Forces in Vietnam, paid the highest tribute to the 1st Aviation Brigade on behalf of the ground combat Soldiers:

> It has always been interesting to me to note that the aviators and men of this Brigade have been taken into the brotherhood of the combat arms. Not by regulation, not by politics, but they have been voted in by the Infantry . . . the charter members of that secluded club, the combat arms.

General Rich's third level of airmobility has been best exemplified in the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) and in the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault). General Tolson, a former commander of the 1st Cavalry Division in Vietnam, offers this astute observation on the advantages of the airmobile division:

> The tactical advantages of the airmobile division can be summed up as follows: increased efficiency due to the repeated association of units; thorough integration of its assets because of close association and command relationships; and the ability to take a different conceptual approach because of its assured assets. The impact of organizational and command relationships has a direct and distinct impact on the quality of support. There is no denying that general support units rarely tend to identify closely with the supported unit, at least not as closely as organic units. This is a simple truism of human nature.
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> The epitome of "superior" airmobile tactics, as contrasted with "good," is the capability to exploit not only an opportunity but the trends and changing patterns in enemy activity. This requires a flexibility which is much more difficult to initiate and accomplish when non-divisional units are involved. This is particularly true of air cavalry. More than any other unit, the air cavalry development in Vietnam has proven the need for quick reaction to meet the demands of the situation as seen by the commander on the scene. Adaptation to a change in environment is more feasible and more likely when the unit is organic.
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> The airmobile division commander is able to plan a complete campaign based on airmobility as opposed to a campaign which, as an incidental element, employs airmobile assets in some of its battle plans. As a corollary, I know of no other major organization besides the airmobile division [in which] the commander is willing to consistently commit all his forces on a day-to-day basis; that is, not keep the traditional reserve. The airmobile division commander *knows* that he can extract a reserve out of *his* deployed units as needed because he has the assets and the training to do so. This is a major economy of force.
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> By changing our perspective from that of the division commander to the individual Soldier, we can perceive one of the often forgotten advantages of airmobility. It is ironic to me, after the millions spent to reduce a few pounds from the Infantryman's rifle, that many Soldiers would end up carrying as much (or more) total weight as the doughboy of World War I. A Soldier, when he exits a helicopter, becomes the Army's most important extension of the airmobile concept; and his individual load should consist of the bare essentials needed for the next few hours—basically ammunition and water. To avoid the classic Soldier's syndrome of holding onto everything he owns, the 1st Cavalry Division developed a technique for keeping all the personal equipment of the individual in squad bundles that were consistently delivered when needed. This was a tremendous boost to morale as well as a very real increase in effectiveness. However, this seemingly simple technique has to be relearned several times in every campaign.
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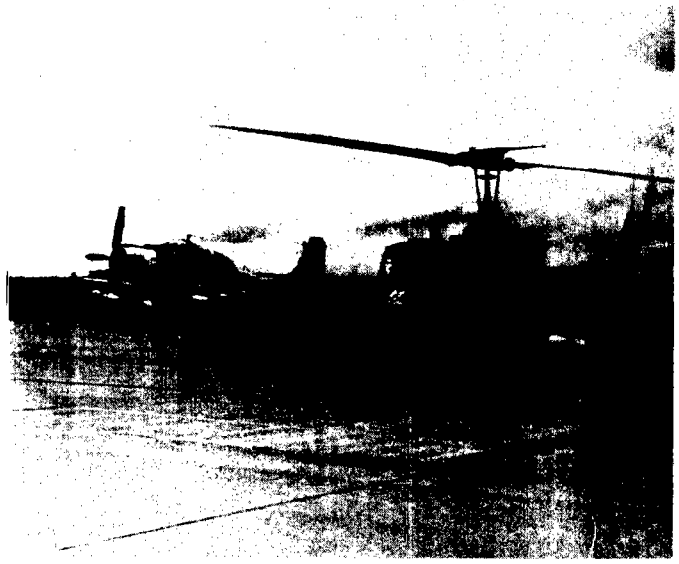
> When the terrain and circumstances permit, armor and airmobility complement each other in a natural way to form an unbeatable team. Airmobility gives the commander unique capabilities in reconnaissance, maneuver and logistics while the armor gives the shock and firepower which have characterized it in the past. Air cavalry and airmobile infantry can find and fix the enemy so that armored and mechanized forces can be brought in at the decisive moment to finish him.



Prior to the arrival of the UTT, lift helicopters were escorted by B-26 and T-28 aircraft

The Armed Helicopter: The development of the armed or attack helicopter was essential to the growth, and indeed the survival, of the airmobile concept.[4] The U.S. Army Aviation School at Ft. Rucker, AL, had sponsored several basic tests of various helicopter and weapon mixes in the 1950s and in the early 1960s conducted a regular course for selected student aviators. The "Tactics" or "Tiger" Course as

it was called, included both what was known of aerial gunnery at that time and nap-of-the-earth flying. The Tactics Course was begun in 1962 and furnished many of the first trained armed helicopter aviators in Vietnam. Though the Tactics Course was deleted from the curriculum in 1964, the trend toward the widespread Army use of armed helicopters continued its enthusiastic growth in the combat zone.

The Utility Tactical Transport Helicopter Company (UTT) fielded some 20 armed UH-1 Hueys in Vietnam combat in 1962. The weapons used were twin .30 caliber ground-type machineguns and 2.75 inch rockets. They were attached to the aircraft by makeshift, locally fabricated mounts.

The UTT mission was to provide armed escort to the unprotected columns of lift helicopters which carried the Infantry into battle. Suppressive fire was delivered on enemy targets during the flight to the landing zone and during landing. The rules of engagement varied from time to time with changes in ARVN leadership. At first, armed helicopter crews could not fire unless fired upon. But, as the war wore on, the rules of engagement were relaxed.

Prior to the arrival of the UTT, lift helicopters were escorted by B-26 and T-28 aircraft. After the armed helicopters assumed the escort role, the number of lift helicopters hit by ground fire dropped drastically. Soon each separate lift company had 7 to 10 armed Hueys organic, to provide its own escort and suppressive fire support.

Armed helicopter teams could linger in the battle area after the lift ships had departed the landing zone. Because they flew so low and slow, with four pairs of eyes in each aircraft, the armed helicopter crewmen soon became noted for their ability to spot and kill the enemy quickly and efficiently. ARVN commanders and their U.S. advisors began to use the gunships in place of artillery. The role of "over-the-shoulder" aerial fire support of ground units developed almost overnight. Often the Infantry did not detect the enemy until the distances between the two were 10 or 20 meters (sometimes less). The advisor would hesitate to call artillery or fighter-bombers for fear of hitting his own men. The armed helicopters were able to place deadly fires on the enemy even though he was very close to friendly troops. Therefore, the helicopter gunship filled the gap between the infantry unit and the other traditional forms of fire support. Aerial fire support from armed helicopters soon became a vital part of every ground commander's operational schemes.

The armed UH-1 was slow and its ammunition capacity was limited. Also, if the armed Huey left the lift formation to suppress ground fire enroute to the landing zone, it could never catch up in order to be in position to support the critical landing phase. A faster, more maneuverable gun platform was required. That turned out to be the AH-1G HueyCobra attack helicopter.

The AH-1G HueyCobra is a faster, more maneuverable gun platform than the UH-1

The Cobra proved its worth time and again, from its introduction in 1967 to the end of the U.S. presence in Vietnam. It was fast and deadly, and in addition to machineguns and rockets, the Cobra could launch a variety of 20 and 40 mm ordnance with devastating accuracy. During LAMSON 719, the incursion into Laos in 1971, the Cobra proved it could survive in a high threat antiaircraft environment. Not only could it survive, it could kill tanks. The implications of the attack helicopter for future battlefields, in a European environment for example, were indeed thought-provoking.

Next Month: Part XII, The Late 1960s

For Additional Information See Previous Issues Of The ***DIGEST:***

[1] "1st Cav Div (Airmobile)," August 1965, Inside Back Cover; "Over The Beach," April 1966, page 18; "Airmobile Firepower—Hallmark Of The 1st Cavalry Division," March 1967, page 19; "Ride A Slick Ship," June 1966, page 23; and "Highway Mission—Airmobile Style," November 1968, page 2.

[2] "The Army Aviation Story, Part X," June 1976, page 4.

[3] "Hawk Colors Flying At Fort Rucker," May 1973, Inside Back Cover.

[4] "We Armed The Helicopter," June 1971, page 2 and "The Armed Helicopter Story Parts I through VI," July through December 1971.