

The air assaults during LAMSON 719 were met with intense opposition from a highly sophisticated NVA antiaircraft system

The Army Aviation Story

Part XII:

The Late 1960s

Major David H. Price

THE AIRMOBILE concept was tried and tested in battles large and small throughout the Vietnam years. No major battle was fought without helicopters providing the transport, reconnaissance, communications and firepower that only rotary wing aircraft could contribute.

During the Tet Offensive of 1968 the armed UH-1 Huey and the few AH-1Huey Cobras incountry were widely acclaimed as having thwarted the enemy's attempt to seize Saigon's Tan Son Nhut Air Base. The relief of Khe Sanh was accomplished by the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) later that year. The overall aggressive and determined efforts of the ARVN and its allies in 1968 seriously stunned the NVA offensive and set back the enemy's timetable for victory substantially. Without the helicopter the Allied victory might not have been so thorough; it might not have been won at all.

The war changed after 1968. Pressures on the homefront in the United States to get out of the war reached a new high after the Tet Offensive. The policy of Vietnamization, or turning the war back over to the ARVN, was quietly adopted by the United States. The enemy had been hurt badly in 1968, however—so badly that he could not launch a major campaign during the following 2 years.

In order to assure the safe withdrawal of American forces, President Richard Nixon decided that the enemy's sanctuaries in neighboring Cambodia had to be destroyed. In 1970 U. S. and ARVN airmobile forces, in conjunction with ground thrusts, attacked into Cambodia. The operation was a resounding success. The NVA logistics system in Cambodia was destroyed. Major General Elvy R. Roberts, commanding the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), had these

words of praise for his troopers who participated in the Cambodian operation:

... The results are impressive. You killed enough of the enemy to man three NVA regiments; captured or destroyed enough individual and crew served weapons to equip two NVA divisions; and denied the enemy an entire year's supply of rice for all of his maneuver battalions in our AO. You captured more rocket, mortar and recoilless rifle rounds than the enemy fired in all of III Corps during the 12 months preceding our move into Cambodia. And perhaps most important, by working together in an airmobile team, you disrupted the enemy's entire supply system, making chaos of his base areas and killing or driving off his rear service personnel.

Only time will tell how long it will take the NVA to recover, but of this you can be sure—you have set the enemy back sufficiently to permit President Nixon's redeployment plan to proceed with safety while assuring that our Vietnamese Allies maintain their freedom. This is your achievement. This is yet another demonstration that you of the 1st Cavalry Division deserve—and have earned again—the accolade of the First Team. It is my honor to have served alongside you during this crucial and historic period.

Lieutenant General John J. Tolson III summed up the 1st Cavalry's Cambodian operation:

The 1st Cavalry Division operation in Cambodia far exceeded all expectations and proved to be one of the most successful operations in the history of the First Team. All aspects of ground and air combat were utilized—air cavalry, armor, infantry and mechanized infantry. The U. S. Air Force reconnaissance, tactical air and B-52s performed yeoman duty throughout the campaign there. This team effort, spearheaded by the airmobile flexibility inherent in the 1st Cavalry, carried the war to the enemy and defeated him in his own backyard.

By 1971 U. S. ground troops were well on their way out of the Vietnam conflict. The government of Vietnam decided to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos with a large-scale ground and air operation. Only ARVN troops were to be used. U. S. Soldiers were not to set foot in Laos. A major portion of U. S.

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support, however, was to be in the form of helicopters, both in the transport and air cavalry roles.

The air assaults during LAMSON 719 were met with intense opposition from a highly sophisticated NVA anti-aircraft system. Casualties among helicopter crews were much higher than in the usual South Vietnamese environment. Some critics said the Army's airmobile concept had met its Waterloo.

The losses of helicopters and crews during LAMSON 719 were of great concern to the Army. But when measured against the hostile environment and the accomplishments, the losses were not considered excessive. Brigadier General Sidney B. Berry Jr., a key Army commander during the Laos operation made the following assessment:

Our experience in conducting airmobile operations in support of LAMSON 719 confirms the soundness of the concept and principles of airmobility developed by the U.S. Army. We have, of course, modified and adapted specific tactics and techniques to cope with the operational environment. But airmobility principles and concepts have proven sound and valid.

Living and operating in the ground Soldier's environment, the armed helicopter escorts troop-lift helicopters flying the Soldier to and from his operations, escorts helicopters delivering ammunition, food, water, supplies and mail to the Soldier, and es-

corts the medical evacuation helicopter rescuing the wounded Soldier from battle. The armed helicopter flies underneath ceilings measured in hundreds of feet to locate targets threatening or attacking the Soldier to deliver timely, responsive, accurate fire within tens of feet of the Soldier's position.

The fighter-bomber has a unique capability to place heavy firepower and a variety of ordnance in close support of the ground Soldier. The fighter-bomber's most distinctive characteristic is its ability to deliver heavy bombs in support of the ground Soldier. The fighter-bomber flies underneath ceilings measured in thousands of feet, to deliver heavy bombs within hundreds of feet of the ground Soldier's position and lighter ordnance even closer.

The armed helicopter and fighter-bomber team works effectively in LAMSON 719. Armed helicopters of the air cavalry reconnoiter objective areas, landing and pickup zones, and their approach and departure routes; acquire and mark targets on which the forward air controller directs air strikes; conduct low level bomb damage assessments; and work with the forward air controller in developing additional targets for air strikes. Armed helicopters and tactical air work together to prepare the objective area, landing and pickup zones and approach and departure routes for safe passage and landing of the troop-lift and heavy-lift helicopters in and out of the landing zone while the forward air controller directs air strikes into adjacent target and danger areas.

The helicopter and its crew have proven remarkably hardy and survivable in the mid-intensity conflict and hostile air defense environment of LAMSON 719. We have lost remarkably few helicopters and crewmembers in view of the heavy small arms,



the anti-aircraft, and mortar and artillery fires our aircraft and crews have experienced while conducting extensive airmobile operations on NVA home ground. This is even more remarkable in view of the numerous airmobile operations conducted in support of Vietnamese ground units located in small perimeters, surrounded by NVA units and weapons, and often in heavy contact with the enemy.

To assess and evaluate properly our aircraft and crew losses, one must measure these losses against the campaign plan, mission, total sorties, and number of exposures to enemy fire, and accomplishments. When viewed in this perspective, we have fared better than the most optimistic prophet would have dared predict.

For more than 30 years critics have been claiming the helicopter is vulnerable. The Army believes that its airmobile forces can survive in most intensities of combat and can be effective in dealing with many different operational scenarios.

One of the most revealing experiences of LAMSON 719 was the attack helicopter's frequent encounter with enemy armor. Attack helicopters in the air cavalry role often encountered enemy light tanks while on reconnaissance in Laos. Upon sighting tanks the cavalry gunships would engage them by fire to maintain contact, then normally turn the target over to the Air Force and continue their reconnaissance. If no fighter-bombers were available, the helicopters would attack the enemy tanks with their own weapons. Often the Cobra's ordnance was insufficient to destroy the tank. Had antitank weapons been available to the Cobra in Laos, many tanks would undoubtedly have been destroyed. General Berry was convinced:

... We need now tank-defeating armed helicopters. Had we entered LAMSON 719 with a helicopter armed with an accurate, lethal, relatively long-range antitank weapon, we would have destroyed many more NVA tanks and would have rendered more effective close support to Vietnamese ground forces. As I consider

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our experience against NVA tanks in LAMSON 719 and ponder what would face us on a European-type battlefield, I am absolutely convinced that the U. S. Army must field immediately an armed helicopter with an effective tank-killing capability. If the AH-1G Cobra mounting the TOW gives us that required capability the soonest, fine. I hold no brief for any particular weapons system, but I do hold the firm conviction that we need now the armed helicopter tank-killer.

The Army has acted in consonance with General Berry's urging, and now possesses tested attack helicopters especially equipped to kill tanks. Capable crews have been trained. All that remains is to try them in combat.

The present-day Army is striving not to forget the lessons it learned in Vietnam. Currently the focus is on the high threat environment which the European battlefield would present. The recent Mideast wars have been carefully studied. New aircraft and related equipment is being fielded, tested or is on the drawing boards—hardware that will give the flying Army deadly striking power in all types of weather, day or night, against any and all expected threats. New organizations are being formed to exploit this dynamic doctrine. The 6th Air Cavalry Combat Brigade unfurled its colors at Ft. Hood, TX, in 1975. Interestingly enough the Howze Board recommended a similar unit more than a decade ago. The Army Aviation Story, from balloons to tank-killers, is a story of dedicated Soldiers who cared enough to fly "Above The Best."

The one inescapable conclusion is that the airmobility concept is irreversible. The thousands of officers who have learned to think and fight and live in three dimensions will never allow themselves to be restricted to two dimensions in the future. Airmobility will change and grow, but it is here to stay . . .

Lieutenant General John J. Tolson III



GLOSSARY

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|---------------------|---|----------------|---|----------------|---|
| AAH | advanced attack helicopter | FARE | forward area refueling equipment | NVA | North Vietnamese Army |
| ACR | armored cav regiment | FARRP | forward area refueling and rearming point | RHAW | radar homing and warning set |
| ADA | air defense artillery | FEBA | forward edge of the battle area | ROTC | Reserve Officers' Training Corps |
| ADIZ | air defense identification zone | FLIP | flight information publication | RVN | Republic of North Vietnam |
| AGL | above ground level | FM | frequency modulated | S&C | safety and control |
| AIM | Airman's Information Manual | fpm | feet per minute | SIP | standardization instructor pilot |
| AO | area of operations | FTX | field training exercise | SLAR | side looking airborne radar |
| ARTEP | Army training and evaluation program | GCA | ground controlled approach | SOP | standing operating procedures |
| ARVN | Army of the Republic of Vietnam | GCI | ground controlled interception | SWH | Schwaebisch Hall NDB |
| ASH | advanced scout helicopter | IFR | instrument flight rules | TO | technical observer |
| ATC | air traffic control | ILS | instrument landing system | TOE | table of organization and equipment |
| ATFCQA | advanced terrain flight confidence/qualification area | IMC | instrument meteorological conditions | TOW | tube-launched, optically-tracked, wire-guided |
| Atk Hel | attack helicopter | IP | instructor pilot | UHF | ultra high frequency |
| C&C | command and control | IR | infrared | USAATCA | U.S. Army Air Traffic Control Activity |
| CCP | communications check-point | KTG | Kitzingen NDB | USAREUR | U.S. Army, Europe |
| CINC-USAREUR | Commander in Chief, United States Army, Europe | kts | knots | UTTAS | utility tactical transport aircraft system |
| CONUS | Continental United States | LO | liaison officer | VHF | very high frequency |
| CP | command post | LZ | landing zone | VIP | very important person |
| CPX | command post exercise | medevac | medical evacuation | VMC | visual meteorological conditions |
| DOD | Department of Defense | MI | military intelligence | VOR | VHF omnidirectional range |
| ECM | electronic countermeasures | MTA | major training area | VR | visual reconnaissance |
| ETD | estimated time of departure | NATO | North Atlantic Treaty Organization | WUR | Wurzburg VOR |
| | | NAVAID | navigational aid | | |
| | | NBC | nuclear, biological, chemical | | |
| | | NDB | nondirectional radio beacon | | |
| | | NM | nautical mile | | |
| | | NOE | nap-of-the-earth | | |