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Author(s): Herbert P. Lepore

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The Coming of Age: The Role of the Helicopter in the Vietnam War

Herbert P. Lepore

Setting the Stage

For many Americans, the Vietnam War was the most divisive war ever fought in our nation's history. Most Americans old enough to remember it—or even to have fought in it—can reflect on how it tore at the very core of the nation's political, sociological, educational, and moral fiber. Through the medium of television, Americans had a front-row seat to the suffering, death, and destruction emanating from that war.

During their almost ceaseless television exposure to the Vietnam War, Americans had etched in their memory the image of a military machine not heretofore seen very often on the evening news in America's homes. That machine was the military helicopter.

True, American troops had used the helicopter earlier in the Korean War, but its use was limited primarily to medical evacuations, transportation, and logistical support. Television coverage of the Korean conflict was miniscule compared to that given the Vietnam War, so popular awareness of the helicopter was limited. All of the American service arms had helicopters during the Korean War, but probably it was the Army that made the most significant use of the relatively new helicopter. In early 1951 the Army dispatched three medical detachments to Korea, each with four H-13 medical evacuation helicopters, which were used to evacuate over 221,000 American wounded to mobile Army surgical hospitals, otherwise known as MASH units. The Korean War was unique in that the extensive use of the helicopter for aerial medical evacuation of seriously wounded fighting men added a new dimension to the art of war—ironically, one of saving lives.

The Marine Corps used the helicopter in the Korean War with the establishment of helicopter transport squadrons, which provided tactical transportation, reconnaissance, and logistical and medical support. The Marine Corps had been the only armed service to begin experimenting with the tactical use of helicopters after World War II. In fact, the concept of "vertical envelopment" dated back to 1947, but was more extensively developed only after the Korean War.

As the conflict in Korea slowly wound down in 1953, the U.S. Army sent to Korea the first two of what would become known as helicopter transportation com-

panies, the 6th and the 13th Helicopter Companies, which had H-19 helicopters. These were used to carry United Nations negotiators to Panmunjom, Korea, to negotiate an armistice with the North Koreans and the Communist Chinese forces on 27 July 1953. The same two companies were also used in the repatriation of United Nations prisoners of war.

Of course, the Korean conflict was not the first war in which the helicopter was used in a combat environment. During World War II, in April 1944, the Army Air Forces had used a Sikorsky R-6 helicopter to evacuate wounded personnel in Burma. (1)

After the end of the Korean War in 1953, adaptability of the helicopter to military doctrine underwent serious discussion and evaluation. The Army and the marines tested and used helicopters as troop transports during the 1950s and early 1960s. Korea had provided a suitable paradigm about the efficiency of the helicopter for transporting troops and supplies over difficult, insurmountable terrain. Tactical doctrine, therefore, was irrevocably changed, because soldiers and equipment now could be moved with celerity to an objective, no matter what the terrain. During the Korean War a number of U.S. Army combat officers envisioned the possibility of using armed helicopters. If these machines could move men and materiel regardless of terrain, they reasoned, could they not also provide close air support to ground troops—an innovation that would change military doctrine in future wars. However, it was not until several years after Korea that the Army at Fort Rucker, Alabama, surreptitiously placed guns and rockets on helicopters and test-fired them to assess the helicopter as an aerial weapons platform. The reason for the secrecy lay in the fact that other Army combat arms, such as the Infantry, Artillery, and Armor, believed that the use of ordnance and armaments doctrinally was restricted to them and, therefore, should not be given to an interloper such as an organic Army aviation element. The Army was also involved with the Air Force in an ongoing dispute about close air support to ground units. That function ostensibly was delegated to the Air Force as a result of the Key West Agreement of 1947. By the late 1950s, however, the Army was allowed to field the pentomic division's Aerial Combat Reconnaissance Platoon, which uti-

lized armed helicopters. Yet by the end of the 1950s, acceptance of the armed helicopter was still limited in most military circles, and it would not be until the 1960s that the existence and use of armed helicopters were finally accepted within the Department of Defense. Compared to those of the Korean War period, the helicopters of the late 1950s and early 1960s were larger, more powerful, and, of course, armed. (2)

Changes in the Wind: Preparation of the Helicopter for War

The inauguration of John F. Kennedy to the presidency in 1961 brought about profound changes that affected Army aviation—particularly regarding the use of the helicopter. The political and military doctrine of “massive retaliation” promulgated during the 1950s no longer was an acceptable option. One reason for the diminishing influence of the massive retaliation strategy was the onset of “brush-fire wars.” These were small wars fought with conventional weapons in the so-called Third World or nonaligned regions and involved the use of guerrilla or paramilitary forces. At the time of John F. Kennedy’s inauguration such a war already was taking place in Southeast Asia involving North Vietnam (aligned with the Soviet Union) and South Vietnam (an ally of the United States). (3)

In the late 1950s and into the 1960s, the United States and the Soviet Union became caught up in a mutual frenzy of supplying arms, advisers, and equipment to buttress their respective allies in Asia. In 1961 the U.S. Army sent its first armed helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft to support South Vietnamese troops. By 1963 the United States had 21,000 military advisers (the equivalent of a reinforced division) in South Vietnam. They were being supported by one of the most significant fixed-wing aircraft in the Army’s inventory in South Vietnam, the twin-engine CV-2 Caribou transport. It served the Army well, with a short-field landing and takeoff capability that made it highly suitable for Vietnam. In April 1966, however, the Army relinquished it to the U.S. Air Force as part of a memorandum of agreement by which the Air Force, in turn, no longer claimed any suzerainty over tactical helicopters in South Vietnam. (4)

The military and political activity taking place in South Vietnam during 1960-62 evinced the need for the Army to examine its helicopter requirements and tactics—particularly in regard to South Vietnam. Lt. Gen. Gordon B. Rogers chaired a board in 1960 which had as its primary mission the upgrading of Army aviation elements, such as tactical, surveillance, and

observation aircraft, particularly helicopters. The concept behind the upgrading was the need to meet tactical contingencies such as conventional wars, brush-fire wars, or what would later be referred to as low- or mid-intensity conflicts. Akin to the upgrading was the board’s recommendation that the soon-to-be-ubiquitous UH-1 (Huey) helicopter become the primary helicopter in the Army’s active aircraft inventory. The Rogers Board also recommended the procurement of the CH-47 (Chinook) twin-engine cargo helicopter. Both of these aircraft were to acquit themselves well in the ensuing Vietnam War. (5)

Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara in 1962 ordered a study on the tactical mobility of the Army ground forces, particularly in regard to airmobility, i.e., the use of helicopters to transport troops to a given area and to provide close air support. Ironically, the Army for all intents and purposes already was utilizing airmobile operations at the time. In 1962 Mr. McNamara ordered Lt. Gen. Hamilton H. Howze, the Army’s first director of aviation, to establish and chair a board to implement this study. The Howze Board, as it came to be known, convened at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, in 1962. It performed numerous tests and studies and posited the thesis that Army aircraft, particularly helicopters, could provide airmobile assets necessary to enhance ground forces’ combat effectiveness. The concept of airmobility entailed the use of helicopter-borne troops to be inserted anywhere on a battlefield to engage the enemy quickly and effectively. Airmobility was tailored for the subsequent Vietnam War and used with effect. The Howze Board also recommended the fielding of a cavalry combat brigade to fight brush-fire wars. The Department of Defense, however, deferred action on this full recommendation, although it did create and test an air assault division, which included an organic helicopter battalion.

The 11th Air Assault Division was established at Fort Benning, Georgia, to test all facets of airmobility. The division passed its airmobility tests by the end of 1964 and on 1 July 1965 assumed operational status as a tactical division, renamed the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile). The “1st Air Cav,” as it became known, had its own organic aircraft and could provide its own tactical and logistical support.

The division’s activation came none too soon. Because of political and military perturbations in South Vietnam in the spring of 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson decided to deploy tactical units. The 3d Marine Division was the first such unit, deploying in April. In July 1965 the 1st Cavalry Division received

its orders. It deployed in August 1965 and arrived in South Vietnam in September. It became the Army's first division-size unit to engage the enemy and to spend over 2,000 days in South Vietnam, thus making the 1st Air Cav the longest-serving Army unit "in country" during the war. It received numerous citations and awards for combat. (6)

The Call to Combat: Army Aviation at War in Vietnam

South Vietnam was a milieu conducive to the use of the helicopter in both tactical and nontactical situations. The country lacked an extended road and highway system, and the roads that did exist often came under attack by the Viet Cong or North Vietnamese Army (NVA), thus precluding or restricting their use. In addition, the varied topography of South Vietnam, which included an extensive canopy of jungle, mountainous terrain, swamps, and an expansive delta, was ideally suited to the use of helicopters for lift and support purposes. Throughout the period of active American participation in the Vietnam War (1961-73), the Army and Marine Corps divisions in country had organic helicopter units, as did a number of Army brigades that served in South Vietnam. American combat units normally were not in country very long before they were in the field engaging the enemy. Three things favored American ground forces: tactical mobility, firepower, and logistical support. All three were achieved with the helicopter. (7)

The use of helicopters in the Vietnam conflict was to change forever the American doctrine of tactical warfare. Helicopters proved to be multidimensional. They performed tactical airmobile missions, including the insertion and extraction of ground forces; rescued downed aviators (along with Air Force fixed-wing aircraft); provided close air support with the UH-1 and AH-1 (Cobra) helicopter gunships; performed aerial reconnaissance; and undertook medical evacuation missions, known as "dust off" missions. Approximately 390,000 wounded American fighting men's lives were saved by medical evacuation helicopter crews during the Vietnam War. This was more than ten times the number of American lives saved by helicopters in Korea. There are at least three reasons for this seemingly disparate statistic: helicopters in the Vietnam War were able to carry more litter cases than the small H-13 helicopters used during the Korean War; there were more field hospitals; and the Vietnam War simply was a longer war. On the other hand, medical evacuation was more difficult during the Vietnam War

because medevac helicopters often had to land in or near hotly contested landing zones. In Korea, most medical evacuations took place in terrain that was more accessible, out of range of enemy fire, or to the rear of a fixed defensive position such as a bunker or foxhole.

Helicopters provided the majority of the logistical support missions in the field and to fire bases and isolated outposts throughout the length and breadth of South Vietnam. Unique to this war was the fact that light and medium artillery could be lifted and moved as needed by helicopter from one fire base to another with reasonable alacrity. This capability saved American lives and was instrumental in thwarting enemy attacks.

The helicopter was not without its detractors, however. It seemed to some that unit commanders often used the helicopter as an aerial command, control, and communications platform from which they surveyed the battlefield below and used radio communications to guide subordinate unit commanders on the ground. Many tacticians believed the commander's place was on the ground with his troops. Another criticism directed against airmobility was that it reduced the ability or desire of ground units to move on the ground against the enemy, fix him, and destroy him. It appeared that it was easier in the mind-set of infantry commanders to insert troops quickly, engage and defeat the enemy, and extract the American troops—only to have to repeat the same tactical process eventually. Some commanders posited the complaint that the extensive use of the helicopter in Vietnam, coupled with the noise of the aircraft, merely served as a timely warning to enemy on the ground that American troops were coming into a specific area, thereby giving the enemy time either to stand and fight or disengage and withdraw to fight somewhere else at his option. The helicopter was also assailed as being too lightly armed to withstand ground fire. This complaint begged the question of whether ground security was capable of defending disputed landing zones. Throughout the American participation in the Vietnam War, this problem was not always resolved, even when areas were softened up by close air support or supporting fire from fire-based artillery units. The NVA and the Viet Cong often tenaciously attempted to close with the helicopter-inserted infantry so as to preclude the effective use of close air support.

There is merit to these criticisms, or to what might be considered by some as cavils, but the following should be noted: the terrain, along with the tactical and political dicta of the war, precluded the use of large numbers of American troops to occupy a position on

the ground for an extended period of time. The enclave or fortress mentality, which had beset the French and had contributed to their defeat in the earlier Franco-Viet Minh War, was not a desirable option, though used somewhat by the marines at Khe Sanh in early 1968 before the Marine withdrawal in April (more on this subject later).

Since the terrain and dearth of roads favored the defender, not the attacker, movement on the ground—even with armored and artillery support—was often hazardous and time consuming. The argument certainly can be made that tactical unit commanders should be on the ground with their troops; still, the tactical fluidity of the situation often necessitated having a unit commander airborne where he could make the proper decisions based on his aerial observations of what was happening below. It was true that the helicopter was lightly armored, noisy, and could at times compromise tactical situations by these shortcomings. Yet, it must be remembered, this was an unconventional war in many ways and, as mentioned earlier, favored not the attacker, but the defender. The use of the helicopter by the U.S. Army and Marine Corps in the attack mode markedly reduced this advantage for the enemy. (8)

With the implementation of the helicopter as an instrument of war, it became imperative that the Army have a means whereby it could maintain tactical and administrative control of all its divisional and nondivisional helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft in Vietnam. It did this through the creation and use of the 1st Aviation Brigade, which served in Vietnam from May 1966 to March 1973, after which it was sent to Fort Rucker, Alabama, as a training brigade. In 1988 it became a combat aviation regiment. While in Vietnam, the brigade had under its suzerainty nondivisional aviation assets numbering at times as many as 4,000 rotary-wing and fixed-wing aircraft and 24,000 troops. During the war the 1st Aviation Brigade and its support units became involved in four significant tactical operations that warrant examination. (9)

The first noteworthy tactical situation in which the brigade and its units became involved was the Tet offensive of January-March 1968. In this operation the brigade responded to the precarious tactical situation wrought by the NVA's and Viet Cong's sudden incursions into major cities throughout South Vietnam. The 1st Aviation Brigade established an airborne command and control operation, while simultaneously beginning successful counterinsurgency operations that eventually drove the enemy out of the urban areas and restored the tactical status quo. This illustrated well that unit

commanders did not have to be on the ground to begin offensive or countervailing action against the enemy. Doctrinally, the ground commander was to become more flexible than he had in previous wars. He therefore had a better grasp of what was happening on the ground and could move his troops quickly to where he needed them. This was effectively done to stem the Tet offensive.

The second important operation involving Army aviation units was the April 1968 orchestration of the relief effort by the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) to lift the North Vietnamese Army siege of the embattled Marine base at Khe Sanh. Dubbed PEGASUS, the operation successfully combined airmobile operations and a sustained road march by 1st Cavalry "sky troopers" and Marine units to lift the siege.

The third significant operation utilizing Army helicopters in South Vietnam was the U.S. and South Vietnamese Armies' incursion into neighboring Cambodia in May 1970 to ferret out and destroy NVA units and their supply depots. Although a presidential order allowed troops to advance only thirty kilometers into Cambodia, the deployment succeeded in uncovering a number of large North Vietnamese ammunition and food caches. These finds subsequently were transferred back to South Vietnam, where they were either destroyed or—in the case of the food—given to local villagers.

The fourth and final important large-scale operation involving massed Army helicopters in South Vietnam was LAM SON 719 (January-April 1971). It was a combined land and airmobile, mid-intensity-level operation. The mission was the coordinated insertion of South Vietnamese troops by air and armored units into Laos to drive NVA regulars out of areas contiguous to the South Vietnamese border. American lift helicopters ferried South Vietnamese troops into Laos and helicopter gunships provided close air support, destroying a number of North Vietnamese P-76 tanks. The Army, however, suffered the loss of approximately 100 helicopters, most shot down by Soviet-built 37-mm. antiaircraft guns. Because it was monsoon season in Southeast Asia, some helicopters were lost to the pervasive inclement weather. During LAM SON 719, Army helicopter pilots were often forced to fly in what could be described as at best marginal conditions. Helicopters in Vietnam did not have tactical radar on board, so pilots had a difficult time flying during inclement weather. The fact that more helicopters were not lost during this operation was due in large measure to the pilots' flying skills and bravery. LAM SON 719 itself incurred a great deal of controversy both



UH-1B Bell (Huey) picking up 1st Air Cavalry reconnaissance troops north of Bong Son Plains, South Vietnam, June 1967.

within and without military circles as to its efficacy and results. The operation, however, served as a “lessons learned” study for the Army, in that it brought out the need henceforth to have more heavily armed helicopters in such operations, as well as attendant and better close air coordination with the Air Force and integration of supporting fire. (10)

During the Vietnam War, the Army had a number of helicopters in its inventory that played important roles. The UH-1 Huey was a multifaceted aircraft serving as a troop carrier, gunship, medevac helicopter, and cargo carrier. The CH-47 Chinook and the CH-54 Flying Crane (Tarhe) were primarily supply, lift, and transport helicopters. The Army also had two observation helicopter models that acquitted themselves well in South Vietnam: the OH-6 Cayuse (Loach) and the OH-58 Kiowa. However, the most formidable helicopter to serve in Vietnam was the AH-1 Cobra gunship, which first arrived in country in 1967. The Cobra carried 7.62-mm. machine guns, pylon-mounted 2.75-inch rocket launchers, a 40-mm. M75 grenade launcher, and an M134 minigun. It wreaked much havoc upon enemy units, equipment, and personnel during its time of service in Vietnam and is still used by the Army.

Reflections

The Vietnam War was in many ways a most imperfect war, fought by fallible men using flawed

tactics; yet it was a war where battles were often brief and bloody, where tactical and logistical support often decided issues of success or failure, and where dying or living was minutes or seconds away. It was a war in which the tactical helicopter came of age and added a new dimension to warfare, that of airmobility. Though an imperfect and seemingly ungainly aircraft, the ubiquitous helicopter touched the everyday lives of the young men who fought in the harsh climate and terrain of South Vietnam. It took them into battle, provided close air support, supplied and resupplied them, and evacuated the wounded and the dead. In turn, 2,700 helicopter pilots and crewmen died during the conflict supporting their comrades on the ground. Seven helicopter pilots and crewmen received the Medal of Honor, two of them posthumously.

The Vietnam War has been over almost two decades. Its veterans, once boys and young men, are now middle aged, and most have gone on with their lives. Yet it is unlikely that any of these veterans have forgotten their images of the helicopter in Vietnam. To many, it was the first aircraft they saw when they landed in country and the last one they saw as they were leaving for home. Time and distance have blurred many memories about the Vietnam War, but one memorial to service in that conflict stands—the helicopter that served the Army well.

Since the Vietnam War the helicopter has changed, as have helicopter tactics. The gunships such as the



CH-54 Sky Crane (Tarhe) lifting a 105-mm. howitzer at a fire base in Vietnam.

venerable AH-1 Cobra and the newer AH-64 Apache are more heavily armed and now provide firepower and standoff capability heretofore not envisioned. Both of these aircraft more than proved their mettle in the recent Gulf War. Other helicopters with better lift and supply capabilities, such as the UH-60 Black Hawk, have been integrated into all facets of helicopter doctrine. Airmobility tactics, helicopter lift capability, aerial surveillance, and aeromedical evacuation techniques all have been refined to meet the contemporaneous needs of the U.S. Army. The visionaries of the

1950s and 1960s who dared to promulgate the thesis that armed helicopters had a place in military battlefield doctrine have long been vindicated, and though many of these men are no longer with us, their vision will always be remembered. Because of them the military helicopter has come of age to make the U.S. Army a more effective and responsive fighting force.

Dr. Herbert P. Lepore is command historian, U.S. Army Armament, Munitions and Chemical Command, Rock Island, Illinois.

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Selected papers will be published in a volume; limited partial stipends are available. Brief proposals are invited now (not more than twenty lines) with a brief biographical sketch (ten lines), both on a single sheet of letterhead stationery. Feel free to submit more than one proposal—often the topic determines the selection.

Proposal deadline: 1 October 1994, although early submissions are strongly encouraged.

Future Conferences in the Series:

The Life, Times, and Legacy of George Washington	September 1998
The Life, Times, and Legacy of Thomas Jefferson	September 2001
The Life, Times, and Legacy of Theodore Roosevelt	September 2004

For further information, contact Dr. William D. Pederson, Department of History and Social Sciences, Louisiana State University in Shreveport, One University Place, Shreveport, LA 71115-2301, (318) 797-5337 or 797-5351.