

LOW LEVEL HELL 1

A brief introduction to the helicopters used in the Vietnam War.

In December 1961, a U.S. aircraft carrier docked in Saigon harbour, onboard were two Companies of U.S. army helicopters, less than 2 weeks later these helicopters airlifted approximately 1000 South Vietnamese paratroopers into a suspected Viet Cong HQ complex 10 miles outside of Saigon in operation 'Chopper', the first 'airmobile' combat action in the Vietnam War, they met with only slight resistance from a surprised enemy and captured an up to then elusive underground radio transmitter. So successful was this deployment that it was followed in 1962 by three more Companies. To provide a better command and control structure for the growing fleet of helicopters, the 45th Transportation Battalion was deployed to South Vietnam and assumed command of all five companies then in theatre, the five companies were (in order of arrival) the 57th, 8th, 93rd, 23rd and 81st Transportation Companies, and in April 1962 the first Marine helicopter squadron arrived. During this time the 57th Medical Detachment (Helicopter Ambulance) were sent to Vietnam, and it flew it's first mission on 12 May when one of it's helicopters flew 40 miles up the coast from Nha Trang to Tuy Hoa to pick up a U.S. Army Captain suffering from an extreme fever. The helicopter had entered the Vietnam War and would become and remain one of the most potent symbols of that war.

Although the helicopter had been in use for troop transportation since as early as the Korean war, it was considered by many to be nothing but an expensive toy vulnerable to anyone with a pea shooter or catapult and, as such, although it was useful for such things as casualty evacuation or rescuing downed pilots, it's use as an assault vehicle was out of the question.

However, in the early 60s it was seen by the Army that due to the extreme terrain prevalent in Vietnam the 'rotary wing' aircraft would be more suitable for the movement of troops than the 'fixed wing variety, and, even as the first aviation units were deployed to Vietnam and were making their first tests in combat, the Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara asked General Hamilton Howze, Commanding General of the Strategic Army Corps and of XVIII Airborne Corps at Fort Bragg, to report on the potential of airmobility and the helicopter in the U.S. Army.

The Howze Board submitted it's final report on the 20th of August 1962, and the principal tactical innovation to come out of it was the 'Air Assault Division'. This division was to have 459 aircraft compared to about 100 in a standard infantry division, ground vehicles would go from 3452 down to 1100 thus reducing the airlift requirement for strategic deployment, artillery would consist of 105 MM howitzers and 'Little John' rockets (transportable in Chinook Helicopters), this greatly reduced fire power was to be augmented by 24 armed

Mohawks (a fixed wing reconnaissance aircraft) and 36 Huey helicopters armed with 2.75 inch rockets.

The recommendations of the Howze Board plus the experiments already carried out by the army made possible the order to form an Air Assault (test) Division on the 7th January 1963.

The new unit took the colours of the 11th Airborne Division which had contained the first Paratrooper Battalions formed in 1940 and the division's title was changed to the 11th Air Assault Division (test).

For the next 2 years it experimented with airmobile techniques until in March 1965, President Johnson made the decision to convert it to a fully fledged combat unit and send it to Vietnam as part of the build up and tactical deployment of regular U.S. forces, the new division was to carry the colours of the old 1st Cavalry Division.

Due to the bravery and skill of its troops and the innovative tactics that they had developed, the 1st 'Air' Cavalry Division became one of the best and most effective combat divisions the U.S. Army had ever fielded, and its principal helicopter the UH1 'Huey', became a military legend, but, although it was by far the most numerous and famous, the Huey was not the only helicopter used in Vietnam, and the Cav, were not the only division to use them, by this time nigh on every division in the U.S. Army boasted its own aviation element (with troops every bit as brave and skilled as those in the 1st Air Cav) and the variety of helicopters in use was as varied as the uses to which they were put, and as such it is the intention of this article to concentrate on this and, rather than look at the tactics used, take a quick look at the hardware that made those tactics possible and which made this one of the most innovative periods in military history.

Before listing the ones used in Vietnam, I should mention that all of the helicopters used by the U.S. army were (and still are) classified under five main 'types', these are:

UH. this is short for 'Utility Helicopter' and is used for helicopters that have a primary function as troop transports.

AH. this is short for 'Attack Helicopter' which covers all helicopters that are designed to carry weapons for ground support.

OH. this is short for 'Observation Helicopter', these are helicopters that are designed to carry out reconnaissance missions.

CH. this is short for 'Cargo Helicopters' and covers all helicopters designed primarily as equipment transports.

HH. this is short for 'Heavy Helicopters', this covers all large helicopters not covered by the other classifications.

Sometimes these classifications were changed for a helicopter that was converted to do another task, such as the 'CH 47' Chinook Gunships which were reclassified 'ACH 47', however, this was not always the case as the UH1 'Huey' gunships kept their original classification. Another anomaly was that many helicopters were referred to simply with the prefix 'H' why this was I haven't been able to find out.

Anyway on with the list.....

UH1 BELL 'IROQUOIS'.

The UH 1 is better known as the 'Huey', (a name that came from it's first title which was 'HU 1') and is possibly the most famous helicopter in the world. The first model, the UH 1A was delivered to the U.S. Army on the 30th June 1959, and was the first type of the many Hueys used in Vietnam when 8 were shipped in with the 57th Medical Detachment, these were superseded by the UH 1B which had a more powerful engine and a stronger airframe, the 'B' could carry 7 troops or three stretchers and medical attendants but it's particular fate was to go on to become the primary Huey Gunship when it was armed with various weapons including, quad M60 7.62 MM machine guns ('flex guns') and 2.75 inch rockets in 7, 19 or 24 rocket 'pods', other weapons carried were twin 7.62 MM 'miniguns' capable of firing 2000 rounds per minute and a turret mounted 40MM automatic grenade launcher. After the 'B' model came the 'C' which had a modified rotor system, but it was never as numerous as the 'B'. The next modification was to lengthen the payload bay by about 3.5 feet, this was the UH 1D, it was capable of carrying 10 troops and it was this model that was to become the quintessential 'Slick' (troop transport) and the most numerous Huey used, other modifications were to construct a model from Aluminium instead of the Magnesium alloy the other models used, add a rotor brake and to change the wiring from Army direct current to Navy/Marine alternating current, this model was the UH 1E and was for use by the Navy and Marines. The only other model used in Vietnam was the UH 1H which was exactly the same as the 'D' except for a more powerful engine that enabled it to carry up to 14 troops in the right conditions.

UH2 KAMAN 'SEASPRITE'.

The Seasprite was used mainly by the U.S. Navy as a search and rescue aircraft and it saw extensive service in South East Asia. The Seasprite was first delivered to the Navy in December 1962 and was used with various updates throughout the whole Vietnam War. Between 1963 and 1964 the army acquired a small amount of UH2s and, with different engines and weapon loads evaluated it's ground support capabilities, whilst in army service the UH2 was renamed the 'Tomahawk'.

UH21 VERTOL 'SHAWNEE'.

The Shawnee first flew in the mid fifties under the name of the 'Vertol Workhorse' but was renamed the Shawnee in 1962. The Shawnee was a 'Twin Rotor' helicopter with two large three bladed rotors, one at each end of a strange looking bent fuselage which earned it the nickname of the 'Flying Banana'.

It was the Shawnee that arrived in Vietnam in 1961 with the first U.S. helicopter units, but, although it gave satisfactory service during the early years of the Vietnam War, it had been totally phased out by the more versatile 'Huey' by 1965.

UH34 SIKORSKY 'CHOCTAW'.

The Choctaw was used by the U.S. Army through the late Fifties and early Sixties, but it was with the U.S. Marine Corps (who called it the 'Seahorse') that it saw the most use during the Vietnam War. It was used for much of the same sort of operations as the Huey troop transports and could carry 16-18 troops. It was also made in England under license by Westland as the 'Wessex' and is still used today as a search and rescue helicopter.

AH1 BELL 'COBRA'.

In order to provide escorts for their Helicopter troop transports, and ground support once the troops were on the ground, the U.S. Army formed the Utility Tactical Transport Helicopter Company (U.T.T.H.CO.), this unit experimented with and developed various weapon systems to mount on it's UH1s. These armed helicopters were known as 'gunships' and were used throughout the whole of the Vietnam War, however, it was found that the heavily laden gunships could not keep up with the lighter and therefore faster transports, and, once at the combat area the gunships were limited in the amount of time they could stay on station due to their increased fuel consumption (this was known as 'loiter' time). To address this problem the U.S. Army decided to develop a helicopter that was designed specifically as an attack helicopter rather than just a transport helicopter with added weapons, and, on the 1st of September 1967 the first AH1G Cobra arrived in Vietnam. The Cobra (or 'Snake' as it became known) was a development of the Huey using as many parts of that helicopter as possible, however, rather than having the pilots sitting side by side, the new helicopter had them sitting behind each other, this meant that both pilots had an excellent field of view and that the helicopter was narrower and more streamlined than the Huey (the cobra's fuselage is actually only 3 feet wide), added to this was a more powerful engine and redesigned rotor system which resulted in a significant increase in speed. The Cobra had two small stub wings with two 'hard points' for mounting weapon systems on each side. The weapons that the Cobra carried were similar to those used by the UH1 gunships, however, due to it's increased performance the cobra could carry more of those weapons than it's counter part, in fact the Cobra could carry twice as much ordnance as the Huey and still reach the target area in half the time and stay on station for nearly three times as long, the Cobra also had a chin mounted turret with either a single minigun (early models) or a minigun and 40mm automatic grenade launcher or twin miniguns or grenade launchers, this turret was aimed and fired by the co-pilot/gunner (who sat in the front seat) and had a field of fire of 230 degrees, this amount of firepower made the Cobra so feared by the Communist forces, that many units

had standing orders not to shoot at the 'skinny' helicopters. The U.S. Marines also acquired Cobras, however their models had twin engines and were reclassified as the AH1J 'SeaCobra'.

OH13 BELL 'SIOUX'.

Due to the adverse terrain prevalent in Vietnam it was found that the standard reconnaissance techniques were difficult and yielded little information for the effort involved, therefore when the 1st Air Cavalry Division arrived in Vietnam it had on it's strength, squadrons that were equiped specifically for the role of providing reconnaissance for the rest of the division, these units were known as 'Air Cavalry' squadrons (as opposed to 'Air Assault'). So successful were they, that eventually 'Air Cav.' squadrons supported every division serving in Vietnam. Initially the various elements of the Air Cav units flew in what were called 'White' or 'Red' Teams, White teams normally consisted of two Observation Helicopters or 'Scouts' as they came to be called, and Red Teams consisted of the same number of 'Gunships'. Later the scouts and gunships were put together in 'Pink' Teams, and became combat units in themselves able to find and destroy enemy units without the need of further support, if further help was needed these units had what were called Aero Rifle Platoons (A.R.P.s), which were Infantry units transported in slicks who could be dropped in if it was desired, these units were known as 'Blues' (due to their call sign colour being Blue). At first the only helicopter available to be used for the scouting role was the H13 'Sioux' this helicopter was a veteran of the Korean war where it was used as a Medevac helicopter, it was a small bubble canopied helicopter which carried two crew, a pilot and an observer, the problem with the H13 was that it had only a small fuel capacity and could not stay on station for very long, also due to it's bubble canopy and 'frame' like tail construction it was susceptible to small arms fire, however it proved useful and was kept in service even when it's replacement arrived.

OH23 'RAVEN'.

Although it was first used as a trainer, the OH23 arrived in Vietnam as an Observation Helicopter, in 1965 with the U.S. 1st Infantry Division. It was similar to the OH13, and was used in much the same way although it was no where near as numerous.

OH6 HUGHES 'CAYUSE'.

The first OH6A Cayuses arrived in Vietnam as replacements for the OH13 and OH23, in March 1967, and it went on to become the archetypal 'Scout' helicopter of the Vietnam War. The 'Loach' (a nickname derived from the initials L.O.H. which stood for Light Observation Helicopter) was a small, fast, egg shaped helicopter with a V shaped tail and a four bladed rotor, it was armed with a

forward facing minigun on the left hand side fired by the pilot and carried up to three crew, the pilot and co-pilot in the front and the gunner or 'torque' as they were called armed with an M60, sitting in the back on the right hand side behind the pilot, although in practice the scouts would often fly without co-pilots to save on weight. The OH6 was faster and better protected than the H13 and was loved by those who flew in them (Earlier this year I got a chance to fly in one myself).

OH58 BELL 'KIOWA'

The Kiowa arrived in Vietnam in late 1969 where it was intended as a replacement for the Cayuse, however it proved to be neither as effective as the Cayuse or as popular, and, most of those that arrived in Vietnam were used for either liaison or command and control duties. Since the Vietnam War the Kiowa has become the standard U.S.Army scout helicopter and partners the AH64 Apache in the same way as the OH6 partnered the Cobra.

CH37 SIKORSKY 'MOJAVE'.

The Mojave arrived in Vietnam in 1963 to fill the Heavy Helicopter Recovery role, but it was never particularly numerous (there were 9 in Vietnam in October 1964), and other helicopters such as the Chinook and the Sky Crane soon arrived and took over the job.

CH46 BOEING-VERTOL 'SEA KNIGHT'.

The Sea Knight was basically a smaller version of the Chinook and had the same twin three bladed rotor set-up as it's big brother, it was originally intended to be a medium transport and assault helicopter, but the Army considered it to be too heavy for the assault role and too light for the transport role, and went on to use the UH1 as it's assault helicopter and the Chinook for the heavier transport jobs. The Navy and Marine Corps however had a different opinion to this and acquired the Sea Knight in its hundreds, and although it never attained the glory of it's big brother, it served the Marines and Navy successfully throughout the Vietnam War and still does.

CH47 BOEING-VERTOL 'CHINOOK'.

The CH 47 was designed to meet the U.S. Army's requirement for an all weather medium transport helicopter, and was actually a larger development of the Sea knight which had already been turned down. The Chinook was a large helicopter with the same twin rotor set-up as both the Sea Knight and the earlier Shawnee, and could carry up to 44 troops or between 7,000 and 8,000 lbs of cargo depending on it's operational area. Four Chinooks were converted to gunships as an experiment to compete with the Cobra, they were armed with a 40MM grenade launcher in the nose and had a 20MM cannon and 19 rocket pod on

either side, in addition to this they also had five 50 cal. MGs or M60s (two each side and one on the tail ramp) fired by crew members, this firepower made the 'ACH 47' as it was called, a formidable aircraft and earned it the nicknames 'Guns A-Go-Go' or the 'Go-Go bird', they were reasonably successful but the Cobra arrived, and it was decided that the Chinook was too valuable as a transport and no further aircraft were converted. The Chinook still flies with armies all over the world including ours and was a major asset during the Falklands War.

CH53 SIKORSKY 'SEA STALLION'.

The Sea Stallion was designed as a Twin Turbine Heavy Assault Transport Helicopter for the U.S. Navy and the Marine Corps, and served with both of these services from 1967 onwards. The U.S. Airforce acquired the Sea Stallion at about the same time but redesignated it the HH53, it was used by the Airforce primarily as a long range rescue and recovery helicopter and served in that role along side the HH3 'Jolly Green Giant' and, as it was larger than the HH3 it was given the name of the 'Super Jolly Green Giant'.

CH54 SIKORSKY 'TARHE'.

The Tarhe is better known as the 'Sky Crane' and is a strange insect looking helicopter that was designed as a universal military transport aircraft, in Vietnam it was used primarily to carry heavy artillery ordnance and land it in areas that were impossible to reach by any other means, it was also used to recover downed aircraft and is credited with the recovery of damaged aircraft worth 210 million dollars. It could also carry troops or cargo in detachable pods that wouldn't look out of place in an episode of Thunderbirds, it's actual lifting capacity was up to 20,000 lbs. The sky crane was not used for combat duties (at 2.2 million dollars apiece they were a bit expensive to risk) but it did occasionally drop 10,000 lb bombs known as 'Daisy Cutters' to provide instant Landing Zones in otherwise inaccessible jungle regions.

HH3 SIKORSKY 'JOLLY GREEN GIANT'.

In Vietnam the HH3 was used as a long range rescue and recovery aircraft tasked with the job of rescuing air crew who had been forced down in North Vietnam, with it's auxiliary fuel tanks it had a range of 625 miles and could reach any point in North Vietnam and return home, and along with the CH53 it was responsible for the rescue of hundreds of air men who would otherwise had fallen into the hands of the North Vietnamese Army and spent long years in imprisonment.

HH43 KAMAN 'HUSKIE'.

The Huskie was yet another helicopter used in Vietnam for air crew rescue, it had a strange tandem rotor system which had the rotors alongside each other on either side of the fuselage, again it was one of those aircraft that did it's duty but was over shadowed by it's more glamorous counterparts.

Well that's the list, I have deliberately avoided giving too many statistics for each of the aircraft as this would have taken up far too much room, however if you are into such things I have listed several books in the bibliography at the end of this article that should give you more than sufficient satisfaction.

THE GAME AT SALUTE.

This article was originally conceived to give the reader a quick introduction into the helicopter war in Vietnam. It was intended as a companion piece to the game we will be doing at Salute 97. The game is a Party game designed to give an impression of what it was like to fly a helicopter during combat in the Vietnam War, there are several different scenarios that reflect different missions that were carried out by helicopters.

The rules we will be using are based on an excellent set of space ship combat rules called 'Silent Death' that are marketed by I.C.E. we have added a couple of bits here and taken away a couple of bits there and we think they now give quite a reasonable feel for helicopter actions, however please note that although the rules are relatively simple, they are still complex enough that we will be imposing an age limit of over 14 years old during the day.

Most helicopter actions seem to have happened at one of two height bands, either the helicopter is high enough to avoid ground fire, this was at about 1500 feet, and was normally used during the journey from their base to the combat zone, or once it arrived at the combat zone, it dropped to heights that allowed it to be hit by most weapons, as such the helicopters on the table are on stands that give a suitable three dimensional impression but do not represent any specific height.

The models, figures and scenery being used are from various manufacturers and have been constructed and painted by various members of the Warlords involved in putting on the game, however I would personally like to thank Mike Percy and SHQ miniatures for the help they gave in getting hold of some harder to find kits and for supplying the excellent crew figures in all of the model helicopters.

Well that's about it, other than to say that if this has given you an interest in the subject, or even if it hasn't but you fancy having a quick exciting game, come along and sit down as you will be more than welcome.

Graham Green
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GOOD BOOKS TO READ BIT.

An Illustrated Guide To The Air War Over Vietnam.	<i>Salamander</i>
Vietnam Helicopter Handbook.	<i>PSL</i>
Vietnam Choppers, helicopters in battle 1950-1975	<i>Osprey</i>
Warbird 47, Army Gunships In Vietnam	<i>Arms and Armour Press</i>
Bent and Battered Rotors	<i>Squadron/Signal Publications</i>
Hunter Killer Squadron	<i>Presidio</i>
Low Level Hell	<i>Dell</i>
Chickenhawk	<i>Corgi</i>
Easy Target	<i>Presidio</i>

There are a few more but as I have yet to read them I won't list them!

