

Virginians at War

Vietnam War: Air Operations

Transcript

NARRATOR: Virginians have always stood at the crossroads of the fight for freedom. It is a battle in which we all reap the benefits.

In the decade following the Korean War, America led the fight against communist aggression around the world. Decades of political upheaval in Vietnam, a small country in Southeast Asia, pitted the communists from North Vietnam against South Vietnam.

In the late 1950s, the United States sent troops to Vietnam and in 1964, the conflict escalated into an all out war. As the Vietnam War dragged on, and frustrations grew, opinion back in the US turned against the war, causing internal strife across the nation. In 1975, after nearly two decades and over 58,000 US troops killed in action, the United States withdrew from Vietnam, leaving a legacy of questions and doubts for our country, and for soldiers.

The Vietnam War saw the first use of helicopters as tactical weapons. A decade earlier, in Korea, helicopters were used for medical evacuation for the first time. This fledgling operation led to the development of more sophisticated rotor craft, including gun ships like the Cobra, heavy lift helicopters such as the Chinook, and the go-to multipurpose Huey. The results were more efficient attack forces, and search and rescue efforts, changing the tactics of the American fighting forces, then and now.

VIETNAM WAR AIR OPERATIONS - HELICOPTERS

SMAIL: I think the helicopter [] war in Vietnam, I mean it was the defining item of the war. I mean it was the first time that helicopters were used and the helicopters were...if anything, it was a helicopter war if you know what I mean, it was the centerpiece of the war and the way we conducted our operations in Vietnam. It would have not been anything like what it was without the helicopters.

LOUISELL: New concept, 250 helicopters, a thousand aviators. You're...it wasn't "call a motor pool and get trucks" or "call the air field and get airplanes." You had units that were attached to each other, that were married to each other. So you didn't have to talk a lot, you didn't have to go through a lot of rigamarole, we're going to do this, thus, and

so, and everyone knew what the heck they were going to do and what the other guy was going to do and it worked like a charm.

COMBAT

SMAIL: I flew the UH1H, the Huey, everybody calls it the Huey, that was the helicopter that was primarily used for combat assaults, insertions, extractions. It was just your all around stuff hauler. It was, it was kind of a thrilling job, I mean....a lot of adrenaline from time to time.

SHELTON: The majority of the missions were just boring, every day, ho hum, take a resupply here, take some rice here, taking this there. It wasn't...you never knew when you were going to get shot at, most of the times you weren't getting shot at, but you never know, you never know.

WHITEHEAD: You can feel almost every bullet that hits, it moves the helicopter. It kind of...you know when you're hit, when it's hit you. But like I said, it can take, it can take a lot of beating, it just depends on where that one bullet hits, you know. It just can't take a beating in certain places. You know, you could shoot a BB through it. But you're sitting on lead seats, steel seats, you know they got a thick thing under your butt so if it comes up through there, all it does is bruise you real bad.

SHELTON: Well it's always scary when somebody's shooting at you. I was flying one day and the guy I was flying with got killed, made it kind of personal. His name's up on the wall out there right now. Shot a lot of automatic weapons at us but there's only one round hit the helicopter and it hit him, so that was scary. And he got the Distinguished Flying Cross, and they gave me an Army Commendation Medal and years of nightmares.

KAMA: I took a round inside my engine and the engine decided it was gonna quit, gave me just enough time to get to the ground then it just stopped. It was a very hard impact. You get everybody out of the aircraft, you strip your aircraft of all [] so you can set up a perimeter outside, far away from your aircraft, and you hope to God that you come out alive. You're a pilot, your domain is up in the air, and being down in the ground, you're kind of out of your element. You're scared because you don't know exactly what's going on down there. Then the other part is of you going down in fire, which is something that you don't wish to go through because the aircraft will burn fast. Just do your job. It's...the mind is a wonderful thing, it can block things out that you don't need to think about.

SMAIL: The closest I ever came to death, I was coming out of an LC, I was the last ship out of five ships and the whole world lights up on me and we have a big hole in a chin bubble. I get back to base and this helicopter is just riddled, there were an RPG round that had come up through the chin bubble, lodged in the engine instruments and it had not exploded. I would not be giving you this interview today if that wasn't a dud round. So, I think that's probably as close as I ever came.

SHELTON: The special forces people were getting so hammered that they were dropping those bombs and all rockets so close we were picking up shrapnel in our rotor blades. And as luck, we made a couple of flights out of there, and as luck would have it, my helicopter was the last one to go in, the last bunch of troops got on board and actually they were running backwards firing, and if you can picture a Huey helicopter co-pilot, pilot, you got your radio panels here, this one American got in and just fell across, got in between us and was leaning in front of me shooting out the window at whoever, I'm not looking, I'm just trying to stagger into the road, and right in front of me, and I'm sitting here just staggering, you can overreact and pull off too much rotor RPM with a weight like that and you're going down, and I'm just trying to bounce that thing in the air, and this one VC right in front of me aimed an AK-47 right...it might have been aimed right here...but to me it was aimed right at me, I had nowhere to go but right over top of him, he did this number like this right in front of me, I can only think his gun jammed or he freaked out or something because he had me dead to rights. And I'm thinking okay, I've passed him, he's gonna get us from the rear, and we didn't take any rounds from him. But that was hairy. It's a good feeling that you've actually helped save someone's life.

JORDAN: Say okay, we're coming in. Make two or three circles you know, you pop a smoke for your position. And once he comes down, if you don't get on there then you're left. He gonna come down enough for you to step on there, you gotta all ride together, know how to dive in, sometimes on top of each other to get on this chopper. All the choppers, once they come down, they're going to come right down, then they going right back up, quick. And you be late if you want to, but you'll be left alone.

AKERS: The day that I got shot I don't know if I was afraid. And I got a piece of shrapnel in my leg, and I yelled up to the guy that was in front of me "Hey, man, I got my Purple Heart." I raised up the [] and got shot just...it had to have been just after I let this grenade go. Because I got shot in the arm and in the chest. I had what they called a sucking chest wound because every time I took a breath you could hear it. [imitates sound], excuse me. And he saved my life. He took my thumb and shoved it in my chest

and tied my, tied my hand down. Smart. No corpsman. And he had already called for the choppers, beautiful sound. That first chopper came in and came down and just hovered. I think they threw two of us on the chopper, could have been just me, I don't know, I didn't count. They threw me on the chopper and the chopper took off.

SEARCH AND RESCUE

YOUNG: So our primary function was to...was combat, was search and rescue with combat as our specialty. An A-7, Jim Lloyd, Lieutenant Jim Lloyd got shot down North of Vinh, which was about 20 miles inland in North Vietnam and we were on a destroyer, the USS England, and it was about ten o'clock at night. And so we were launched on alert launch to go see if we could help out with recovering Lieutenant Lloyd. One of the amazing things is that it was black, we had a lot of...so it was very, of course we had all the lights off except for the tell light that went up, so that you know our aircraft above us, our [] could see us or come close to seeing us. So we were not visible. First we expected that he would be captured before we got there. We know that the pilot has managed to evade and has gotten away from them. So we found him, we were vectored into him by the on scene commander, but we got, he got, one of us got the distances mixed up so we basically flew by Jim Lloyd on the first pass. And we almost flew into a tree, so we turned on our landing lights so we wouldn't, you know, have problems with running into things. Of course now you've got this helo doing 360 and basically turning around coming back with the landing lights on, and probably the bad guys were maybe a half a mile away, so of course now, things start getting...well we started taking fire. And of course our crewmen are firing, firing back and so it gets real hectic. But again, we regained sight of Jim Lloyd, he's talking to us on the radio, so then we just go into automatic mode about there he is, okay we're going to make an approach. And two pilots up in front, we're just not paying attention to what's going on outside. I mean the crewmen are the ones that are seeing that, and so we make an approach. We end up lowering our gear, which is one of the procedures that our squadron taught was that if you could hand the helicopter, you do that instead of using the hoist. And he ran out into a rice paddy, the last fifty feet or so from where he was hiding, and so we went ahead and landed the aircraft. Well the crewmen had put down the hoist, the jungle penetrator, and so of course Jim Lloyd, got to talk with, as soon as he sees that jungle penetrator, he says "well I'm going for that aircraft." So he gets down on his knees and hooks up to the jungle penetrator, then we land beside him. But the noise is so bad that he doesn't know it, so he's got his head down ready to get yanked out, and we're sitting there five feet away from him, so the crewman has to reach down and grab him, and of course there's always a story about who did what, but basically pulled him into the aircraft. So it was quite a night, quite a night.

UNEXPECTED

EDGERTON: We took off at 1400 and at 1405 there was a bang, bang, bang and its engine stopped and we were...this young warrant officer pilot was looking for a place to put that helicopter down and well, we went crashing into the jungle. That helicopter was destroyed, the last fifty...probably fifty feet because the trees around there, probably 80 feet high. We screwed right into the ground. We crawled away, literally crawled away, because my leg was bent and it needed to be straightened out for me to stand up and walk. The pilot did that. We were scared. We could hear the helicopters within ten, twelve, fifteen minutes tops. There was clear blue sky above all those clouds, because all of a sudden at my arm's length, there was a triangle of blue sky. And within seconds, the gun ships arrived. The Hueys, the Cobras. You know it's a wonderful feeling to know that here come, here comes the cavalry. Four men risked their lives to pick us up. They didn't, weren't looking for any special credit. They just did what was their job, and that was to get those US soldiers out of the Ia Drang valley. Safely. What comes of all of that is an appreciation of what men do for each other in combat. You don't fight for your country. You enlist to serve your country, but when the time comes, you fight for yourself and the man next to you.

PABST: No, never got shot down. I ran into a mountain one night. Just went by, the copilot and the crew chief on the starboard side were left in and I went...you know, they say heroes don't know that they're heroes. I went back into the burning aircraft and pulled the crew chief out on the port side, and pulled him over with me, you know, far enough away from the aircraft. I never thought about what I was doing. It never occurred to me that I could get killed going back in that aircraft, 'til I got out if it. And then I'm sitting there thinking, that was stupid. Not that I'm a hero, by no means am I a hero. All I did was, go, at the time, do what I thought was right. Which it turned out good because he lived, he survived.

HOME

KAMA: You catch the 707 going home. Got on the 707, and I remember there's a bunch of pilots on board, and we asked the stewardess, the first thing was, could you do us a favor? Go up to the pilot and make sure he calls for artillery clearance before he gets off the ground.

SHELTON: Oh you dream about it all year, and you get the wheels clear and you're up...when you feel like you're out of the small arms range, you start the cheering and stuff and when the captain came over and said we're basically feet wet out over the ocean, that's when you knew you were going home, and like I said, it was nonstop cheering.

WHITEHEAD: And my dad...my dad....sent me a letter asking me what I wanted when I got home, and I said I really don't want anything Dad, but if you want to get me something I'd like a GTO convertible 4 speed. And it was in the garage when I got there. Unbelievable, '69 GTO, it was unbelievable. And I got home and there's a big welcome home stand across my whole house, all my friends were out there, it was just wonderful. Treated me like a hero.

SMAIL: My kids came across some of my medals. I got the Bronze Star and the Distinguished Flying Cross, and they gave me the Air Medal about 44 times. And you know, "Dad what did you do in Vietnam?" Not much. And I've never really talked to my kids about it. May have been because of the way we were treated, I can't explain it, but I don't like talking about it, because it never felt like I did much.

VIETNAM HELICOPTERS

- 11,827 helicopters deployed
- 5,086 destroyed in combat
- Over 10 million flight hours logged
- Over 40,000 pilots served
- 2,202 pilots killed in action
- 2,704 crewmembers killed in action
- Over 500,000 medivac missions
- 900,000 patients airlifted
- Average time from wounding to hospital - less than one hour

Interested in learning more? Join us at vawarmemorial.org/learn for more films and resources! Contact education@vawarmemorial.org with any questions or if you have a correction for this film's transcript.