

Conference Text MHHV May 2026

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Thanks for the opportunity to be here etc.

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As an idea (after Leonardo Da Vinci!), helicopters had been considered well before the Second World War for military uses. In February 1938 a landmark flight in a Focke-Wulf Fw-61 by Hanna Reitsch at the sports stadium in Berlin could be considered the helicopter's debut.

Show Early Choppers

Igor Sikorsky's two-seat R-4 was the first mass produced helicopter and was first used by the US Army Air Forces at the closing stages of the Pacific War in 1945.

The helicopter was used in the Korean War, for personnel transport and logistics behind the front-line but its main value was in medical evacuations (Mobile Army Surgical Hospital—M*A*S*H of course). All the US services had helicopters but it was the Army that in 1951 dispatched three medical units to Korea, each with four H-13s, the Bell *Sioux*. A pilot was able to carry two passengers inside its bubble cockpit or two litter patients on racks outside.

The French had been operating American made helicopters in Indochina in 1954. Of their 35-odd helicopters, at least four H-19s were destroyed by the Viet Minh.

In Algeria in the late 1950s the French were the first to develop the helicopter as a useful troop carrier and gunship. This did not go unnoticed by the US Army. The French after all, were using American helicopters. At the peak of that war, 1960, there were 600 helicopters in Algeria.

37,000 flying hours had been achieved with the loss of only sixteen helicopters.ⁱ

Show Sycamore & Whirlwinds

The British response over twelve years to the Malayan Communist Insurgency was huge. Beginning with military and police actions to contain the aggression, starvation of the mainly Chinese squatter communities in the dense jungles became a military objective aimed at controlling the terrorosts. Royal Air Force Squadrons 195 (Sycamores) and 155 (Whirlwinds) and Royal Navy Fleet Air Arm 848SQN (Whirlwinds) were amongst a plethora of fixed-wing squadrons. All helicopters were underpowered, unarmed and required fixed wing armed escorts wherever they went.

A cost comparison labled as an “**attractiveness ratio**” between the Whirlwind and the fixed-wing Auster came out at 30:1 in favour of the Auster.ⁱⁱ

It was in Malaya that the use of defoliants (a mixture of 2-4-5-T and 2-4-D called *Trioxone*) was first carried out by fourteen helicopters from 155SQN and became the precedent for their use in Vietnam. When deciding to deploy *Agent Orange* in Vietnam, Secretary of State Dean Rusk explained to President Kennedy that Britain's use of herbicidal warfare in Malaya provided an instructive precedent and proved that chemical warfare could defeat an insurgency.

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Berlin was ever the hot-spot. Europe was where large numbers of helicopters were expected to be needed. Thousands of tanks were ready to contest the vast plains that lay between Berlin and Moscow so being able to rapidly move large numbers of troops quickly behind the tanks to hold the ground was an important role for the Army. The USAF however claimed the right to ALL offensive air power and so the US Army had to rely in the USAF for the protection of Army's resources, troops and aircraft.

When construction of the Berlin Wall began on 13 August 1961 and with the US reserves called up on 31 August, events began to overtake plans.

Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara was concerned that project time lines stretching out to 1970 were dangerously conservative. The USAF was perhaps too concerned with nuclear strikes, missiles and long range bombers but the US Army which had about 600 aircraft in the mid-1950s by 1961 had over 5,000 aircraft all the way up to trans-sonic aircraft and well over 100 funded project streams of many varieties.

McNamara altered funding streams to speed up acquisitions and ordered a study of US Army tactical mobility. The study concluded that army helicopters could provide airmobile assets necessary to enhance ground forces' combat effectiveness. Troops with support from the Army's armed helicopters could be inserted anywhere on a battlefield to engage the enemy.ⁱⁱⁱ It took an agreement in 1966 between the US Air Force and Army for the transfer of the Army's Caribou aircraft to the Air Force while the Army kept its pilots and was now able to protect its own aircraft.

As events in Europe quietened, Vietnam began to unravel. US Army advisor numbers increased and so did the need for their mobility. In 1962, there were about 32 helicopters of doubtful capability in Vietnam — by 1965, there were about 250 and most of them Bell Hueys.

Bell Huey & Navy B Model

The Bell 204, designed in 1955, gained acceptance for the US Army's transport and observation roles in 1961-62. By 1969, the peak of the Vietnam War, there were around 70 assault helicopter companies of Hueys in country, each with 31 aircraft. About 1,000 helicopters flew combat missions every day.

Another 4,000 aircraft, Chinooks, Sky Cranes, light observation helicopters and fixed wing made up the remainder of the US Army inventory. Over 11,000 helicopters went to Vietnam.

Vietnam was to be a proving ground for all manner of helicopter tactics. The standard adopted early was enough helicopters on line daily to carry an infantry company in one lift, which came down to ten troop aircraft. Larger combinations were gathered as suited the whims of the generals—80 or 100 troop aircraft with possibly 40 gunships buzzing around the outside; terribly unwieldy formations at best and not suited for the ground in Vietnam. Huge areas were needed for the landing zone—something approximating the size of Melbourne or Canberra Airports with the troops going straight into an attack once out of the helicopter. There would have been a few helicopters left behind in that LZ had there been an enemy willing to take on American groups that way in South Vietnam.

The Bell Huey underwent a series of reasonably rapid upgrades from the initial 700 SHP of the “A” and “B” models to the 1,400 SHP of the UH-1H with its bigger cabin and load carrying capability. Always a crew of four, two pilots in case one was shot. There were two crewmen; a Crew Chief who did routine maintenance (although we all took part in cleaning at the end of the day’s flying) and the other a Gunner who maintained the M-60s. They provided protective fire going into and out of the LZ. When we were shot down, the pilot’s pistol or revolver was pretty useless so we pilots took their M-16s and the crewmen looked after the M-60s.

Slide of General Huey Pix

The H-model was the work-horse for troop lifting. Called the *Slick* for its clean interior, troops mostly sat on the deck, feet on the skids ready to go the moment the aircraft touched the ground – troops out in about five seconds and the aircraft departing for the next load.

Slide of OPS ROOM & Back Seat Huey Pix

Up above all of this was the Air Mission Commander in his Command and Control aircraft. Three people in an assault helicopter company were the air mission commanders (CO, XO and OPS O). In the back of this UH-1H aircraft would be the commander of the troops we were carrying. An artillery coordinator was usually there as well.

Slide of ARVN Soldiers

If South Vietnamese troops were carried, an American would be part of the “Back Seat” team to translate if necessary to the Air Mission Commander what the battalion commander wanted. It was the battalion commander who always called the shots— it was his troops we were carrying and while there may have been spirited discussion, we helicopter pilots were a poor second to his troops!

UH-C Gunships & Smokey here

The troop lift flight was always accompanied by four gunships with at least two continuously on station while the other two refuelled and re-armed.

The gunships had a variety of weapons, 7- or 19-a-side rockets, two flexible aimed miniguns (6,000 rounds of 7.62mm) and the Frog XM-40 grenade launcher (150 rounds). Gunship sortie time was around 2 hour and it took 30 minutes to refuel and rearm before going back on station. With such a heavy weapons load, the “C” model was always struggling to fly as the overriding consideration was full fuel and armaments and then the pilots worked out how to get airborne. As fuel and armaments were used, so the aircraft became more manoeuvrable.

Gunships & AH-1G Cobra here

The Bell 207 was the forerunner of the Huey Cobra AH-1G and had a rapid introduction into service. The maiden flight was in 1965, in Vietnam by 1967 and by 1969, was common and everywhere.

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The almost exclusive use the helicopter had consequences at the tactical level. Using it as an aerial command post reasonably safe from ground fire and giving orders to the man on the ground, many said that the commander's place ought to be with his troops.

Helicopters were easier to insert troops, to engage and disengage when away from the beaten track. No long marches, no trucks bouncing on rough roads subject to ambush and land mines, no all-night guard duty in the rain. For the South Vietnamese this was important as they needed to guard the roads and bridges which were soft targets at night. Another important issue was that the ARVN had not been trained for night-fighting which was generally initiated by an ambush. For everyone, it was nice to retire to a cooked meal with a beer or two and a dry warm bed.

On the other side, the noise of the approaching helicopters served as a warning and gave plenty of time for the opposition to decide what to do. The enemy could stand and fight or retire as it suited. From a tactical perspective for the US and ARVN, no ground was held. To go to the same place the next day and fight the same battle that took place yesterday changed little.

One thing did stand out. The terrain of Vietnam was almost impossible to traverse let alone hold. Nothing other than a helicopter could work to transport troops into battle in the jungles, mountains or flooded paddy of the Mekong Delta flat lands. The helicopter was now the army's new truck.

Continuing Blank Slide from above

RANHFV

Given 9SQN RAAF was supporting the Army, why shouldn't the Navy's Fleet Air Arm have a bit of the action? A number of proposals were in the mill that began from the premise that four (American) helicopters would assist RAAF capability. It was finally resolved that a contingent of Fleet Air Arm helicopter aircrew and maintenance personnel would integrate into the US Army's 135th Assault Helicopter Company. Eight pilots, eight aircrew, and a team of experienced maintainers so that in the end it looked like a small helicopter squadron of 48 men without aircraft—the RAN Helicopter Flight Vietnam.

There were four Contingents, each serving a year, between 1967 and 1971. Sight unseen, and a gesture of some significance, the American CO of the 135th decided that the Australian OIC should be the XO of his Company. The rest of us were fully integrated into the Company's structure and apart from our beards and uniforms, we were to all intents and purposes in the US Army. Our radio callsign, EMU came from the acronym for experimental military unit. Our American comrades were a bit miffed when they learnt the bird didn't fly but were happier when told it was pretty aggressive!

Before it was an Assault Helicopter Company, the 135th had been a Caribou unit in Vietnam. It was disbanded in late 1966. The aircraft stayed in Vietnam with the USAF, and the aircrew returned to the Army. In early 1967, a new 135th Aviation Company (Air Mobile Light) was formed at Fort Hood, Texas. It reached the full complement of personnel and aircraft in May. Cargo shipment of the aircraft and maintenance equipment began on 17 September 1967 for Vietnam.

On 1 October 1967, the personnel flew out from Austin, Texas, in C-130s and C-141s for the long flight to Vietnam.

On 4 October in Vung Tau, the CO, LTC Rennie M Cory met his unit for the first time. Twelve days later, the US Army met the Australians who had flown in from Sydney.

While the helicopters were being assembled, all pilots were sent off to neighbouring companies to fly as co-pilots. Some went to lift companies, others to fly night missions in gunships. From raw novices as far as combat was concerned, in the next two weeks the aircrew went into the thick of combat. On 3 November 1967 after two weeks' indoctrination, the 135th was declared operational.

Two weeks later on 18 November 1967, the first EMU aircraft to be shot down was a gunship with an Australian pilot as the aircraft captain. For his actions in defending his crew while on the ground he received the US Army DFC.

Show VN General

While the 135th did sterling service for the Australian Task Force at Nui Dat, as 9SQN capability increased, so the 135th was moved to a much wider remit of operations that quickly covered all of III and IV Corps Tactical Zones. Very soon, plans were issued for the 135th to move.

plus Map of bases we stayed at.

So, after just eight weeks at Vung Tau the company left for a spot at Blackhorse, north of Phuoc Thuy Province well away from Nui Dat. This was the home of 11 Armored Cav, carved out of rubber plantation and jungle.

There were to be three similar moves, Bear Cat in December 1969, Dong Tam October 1970, and finally Di An in October 1971. These moves were done for the most part by company personnel while the aircraft continued daily operations.

During TET68, there was a plan for the 135th to relocate to the besieged city of Hue in I CTZ which in the event, didn't happen. There was plenty going on for the 135th in and around Saigon including a combat assault into Tan Son Nhut airport.

As a company, on a daily basis, we could be anywhere in III or IV CTZ, occasionally into II CTZ up on the Cambodian border. It mattered not a great deal to us. The daily brief hardly changed: be at such and such a grid reference for the first pick up and come home when the battalion commander released us. A day's flying could be as short as four or five hours but when things got harder 14 ½ hours actual combat flying was my longest day.

And the next day, more of the same. We flew every day of the week and were required to provide a full complement of ten lift ships, four gunships and the C&C aircraft. Frequently a spare Slick came out with us in anticipation of having someone shot down—sixteen aircraft out of the Company's 31 aircraft complement. The maintainers were amazing given they only had our aircraft at night to work on.

Five or six days of combat assault and then one as direct combat support, a euphemism for far more dangerous flying. We flew single ships day or night to bases under direct or impending attack. In a month, we might get one or two maintenance stand-down days. Monthly flying hours for the company were in the order of 3,500 to 4,200 hours, about 1,500 hours more than the maintenance supply chain could provide. This created all sorts of serviceability issues.

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I left Sydney town in a Boeing 707 at night on 9 September 1968, and arrived the next afternoon at Blackhorse in pouring monsoonal rain. The next day, I drew my flight helmet and Chicken plate, test fired my revolver, and flew the UH-1H for 30 minutes. From 12 September, I flew 16 of the remaining 18 days of that month.

Eventually 1,250 hours flying over the year — roughly two out of every three days for the whole year. I flew nearly as many hours in one month as I would have in a peaceful year back in Australia.

The RANHFV operating directive was different to that of RAAF 9SQN. Theirs required relatively safe landing zones usually reconnoitered by the SAS prior to the arrival of the slicks. **Ours had nothing about LZs nor for that matter did we have specific rules of engagement:**

Should you be allocated a task, which in your opinion is contrary to the provisions of this Directive, endangers the national interests of Australia, or is likely to imperil unduly your flight, you are to report the situation to COMAFV, having first informed your commanding officer of the 135AHC. You are to establish safeguards to ensure that your aircraft and personnel do not violate the territory, territorial waters or airspace of countries bordering South Vietnam, nor to take part in operations near the Cambodian border.

As a co-pilot for my first 200 or so hours flying, no American aircraft captain would be worried about his Aussie co-pilot. In the event, we rarely knew if an LZ was going to imperil us until we got there (**unless of course we were going back to one that was already hot!**). Letting our American CO know was useless if he wasn't flying as Air Mission Commander, then it was our Australian OIC instead. The irony was when I was the Company Operations Officer, I flew as Air Mission Commander imperiling the flight myself.

COMAFV was too far away and so we ignored the directive. The bureaucrats were safe, they could always say we told you so and we didn't listen.

At heart, our directive was clearly pointing out the differences between the Australian and American war fighting. Australia could not afford the casualties nor the helicopter attrition and so Australian troops would advance on foot to engage and retire to disengage. We were in an American unit, not an Australian one so engaging the enemy full on was the norm.

Our day began at 0430 with aircraft inspections by torchlight, and if all was well, off to breakfast. A confirmation of the first PZ and then at 0600, we would fly out. Flight Leader managed the route around artillery lines of fire.

From that point on, everything was in the lap of the gods. If enemy contact was made, then we would be committed to more troops into the same or a nearby LZ, medevacs and crew rescues

and repeat, repeat, repeat! Mostly our company was sufficient for the day but occasionally we linked up with a second one, two companies of troops into an LZ.

Each combat assault took roughly 20 minutes from pick up to landing zone, so five assaults every 2 ½ hours then hot refueling and back to the fray. If things were quiet, we could shut down somewhere and wait for the troops to be picked up and taken home. The simple fact is that with troops to deliver, we could fly into a dozen quite separate LZs all possibly close to each other for more companies of soldiers to close with the enemy and then late at night return the troops to their base before we could go home ourselves.

The 135AHC only recorded a tally of Combat Assaults in November 1967 (1,793) and December 1967 (3,839). Putting all this into a big picture, given all of us flew well over 1,000 hours of combat, then my tally of landing zones was 3,000 to 4,000!

The US 7th and 9th Infantry Divisions loved Eagle Flights. Instead of being one flight of 10 Slicks, we split up into two flights of five. Flying here and there, we landed in a likely spot but the troops didn't disembark until we received enemy fire. At that point the troops would go and the other flight would be called over to reinforce, unless of course they had stirred up a hornet's nest as well.

Let me digress a little to give a reasonably vivid picture of how we went about our business.

Intro Here with Bob Anders Hot LZ Pix then with the AWM movie...

Jed Hart's story. **Open with Gunship firing etc.**

Later, with hundreds of Combat Assaults under my belt, I wouldn't recall one PZ or LZ from another. But that day I remember our Air Mission Commander guiding the Lead ship of the flight to "land short of the three burning helicopters." I thought about our Nowra work-up where we had trundled happily in to land in neat formation and hovered gently down onto the grass. When you're training, the machine gun rounds go in only one direction; there is no shooting back. This wasn't like that at all. There were rockets and mini gun being pumped into the tree lines bordering our LZ by our own light fire team, and our gunners and crew chiefs were hammering away with M-60s as hard as they could go from every slick, but we were still under heavy fire. When you are in a flight of ten helicopters you aren't weaving and ducking, you are following your leader, slowing down and coming to a halt right where the shooting is. It wasn't comfortable. Our helicopters stayed in the hover seconds while troops were hurled out into the paddies; it was done quickly, but we were all no faster than the slowest ship. Once we'd completed the first insertion we flew off for another load so we could do it again.

Supple & Symons Photo with Mike Perrott lunch Photo

Late one afternoon ... our gunship was hit by .50 calibre machine gun [fire]. Tracers the size of golf balls crashed through the Perspex and we were on our way down. Clearing the crash site we took cover behind a rice dyke, defending ourselves as best we could with the weapons at hand. We were on our own and would be soon overrun by the advancing

PAVN troops.

I don't know what, if any, discussion took place between Mick Perrott and his co-pilot, but they were well aware that by coming to our aid it was odds on that they would not survive the attempt. In spite of extremely heavy and constant enemy fire they did manage to carry out a dramatic and skillful rescue of all four of us. There were some relatively minor gunshot wounds and their very well-ventilated chopper didn't fly again for a long time. This was not an isolated incident; in fact, this form of reckless valour or temporary insanity was a regular event and not considered unusual. Thanks Fellas, forever indebted.

Blank Slide Unit Citation for Gallantry Photo.

Short statement on the RANHFV Unit Citation for Gallantry

Numbers^{iv}	Destroyed Enemy Action	Pilots KIA	Crew KIA
7,013	3,305	1,074	1,103

<i>YEAR</i>	<i>AIRCRAFT HOURS</i>	<i>HFV HRS</i>	<i>TROOPS</i>	<i>CARGO Tons</i>	<i>A/C HITS</i>	<i>A/C LOST/ DAMAGED</i>	<i>COY KIA/WIA</i>	<i>VC KIA</i>	<i>STRUCTURES/ SAMPANS</i>
1967/68	29,532	8,386	163,316	905	40	10 / 51	10 / 10	54	108 / 2
1968/69	35,025	9,159	255,846	586	152	12 / 117	12 / 23	422	117 / 259
1969/70	31,777	9,735	243,740	670	296	4 / 123	9 / 20	471	632 / 184
1970/71	20,373	5,488	146,301	839	202	4 / 86	6 / 18	151	282 / 104
TOTALS	116,707	32,768	809,203	3,000	690	30 / 377	37 / 71	1,098	1139 / 549

Neil Sheehan's tribute to the helicopter crews from his A Bright Shining Lie, John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam, pages 762-63, is a fitting tribute.

The aviation units were the sole combat element of the US Army that did not come apart under the stress of the war in Vietnam. ...The Army airmen never cracked. Whether it was the oneness of man and acrobatic flying machine, whether it was the equally shared risk of officer pilot and enlisted crew member, whatever the reason, the men of the helicopters kept their discipline and their spirit.

Close with Vietnamese people photos and death of Ho Chi Minh then MaxS Photo

ⁱ Rollie, Beau G, *Helicopters in Irregular Warfare: Algeria, Vietnam, and Afghanistan*, Master of Military Art and Science Thesis, Faculty US Army Command and General Staff College, West Point, NY, 2001, p. 10 – 11.

ⁱⁱ Cited in Major Arthur D. Barondes, Concepts Division, Aerospace Studies Institute, Air University Maxwell Air force Base Alabama, *The Accomplishments of Airpower in the Malayan Emergency (1948 – 1960)*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lieutenant General John J. Tolson, *Vietnam Studies Airmobility 1961-1971*, Department of the Army, 1973. Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 72-600371.

^{iv} VHPA Statistics.



**Just Another Day in the Delta –
EMUs in Vietnam
Royal Australian Navy Helicopter Flight
and
US Army 135th Assault Helicopter Company**

CMDR Max Speedy DSC RAN Retd.







RAN Fleet Air Arm Sycamore

Possibly HMS Albion

848 SQN Whirlwinds





**Bell XH-40
Prototype of the
UH-1A Helicopter
and many more**

**RAN Fleet Air Arm 723SQN
UH-1B**

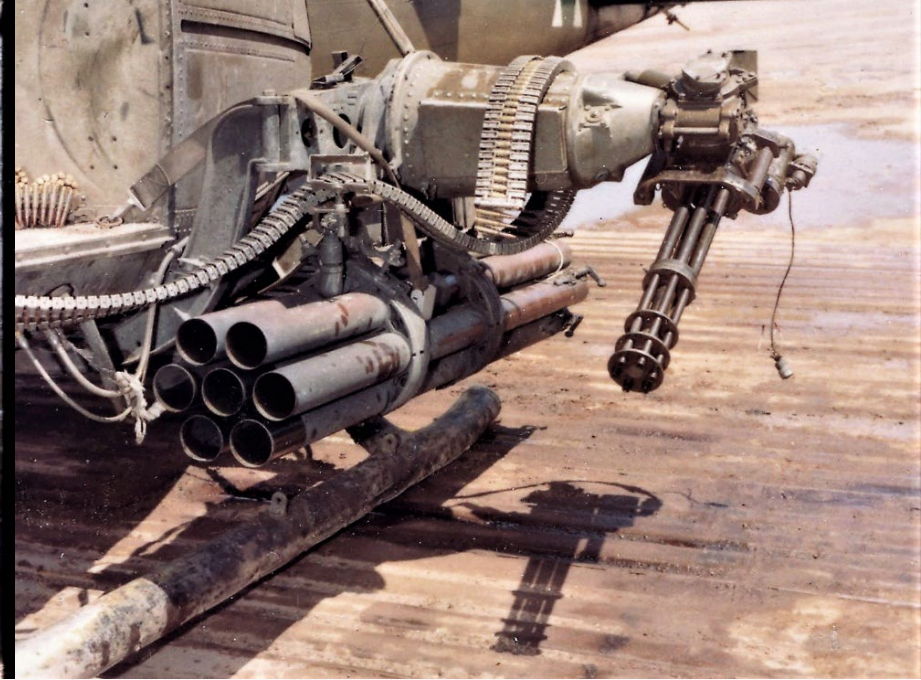


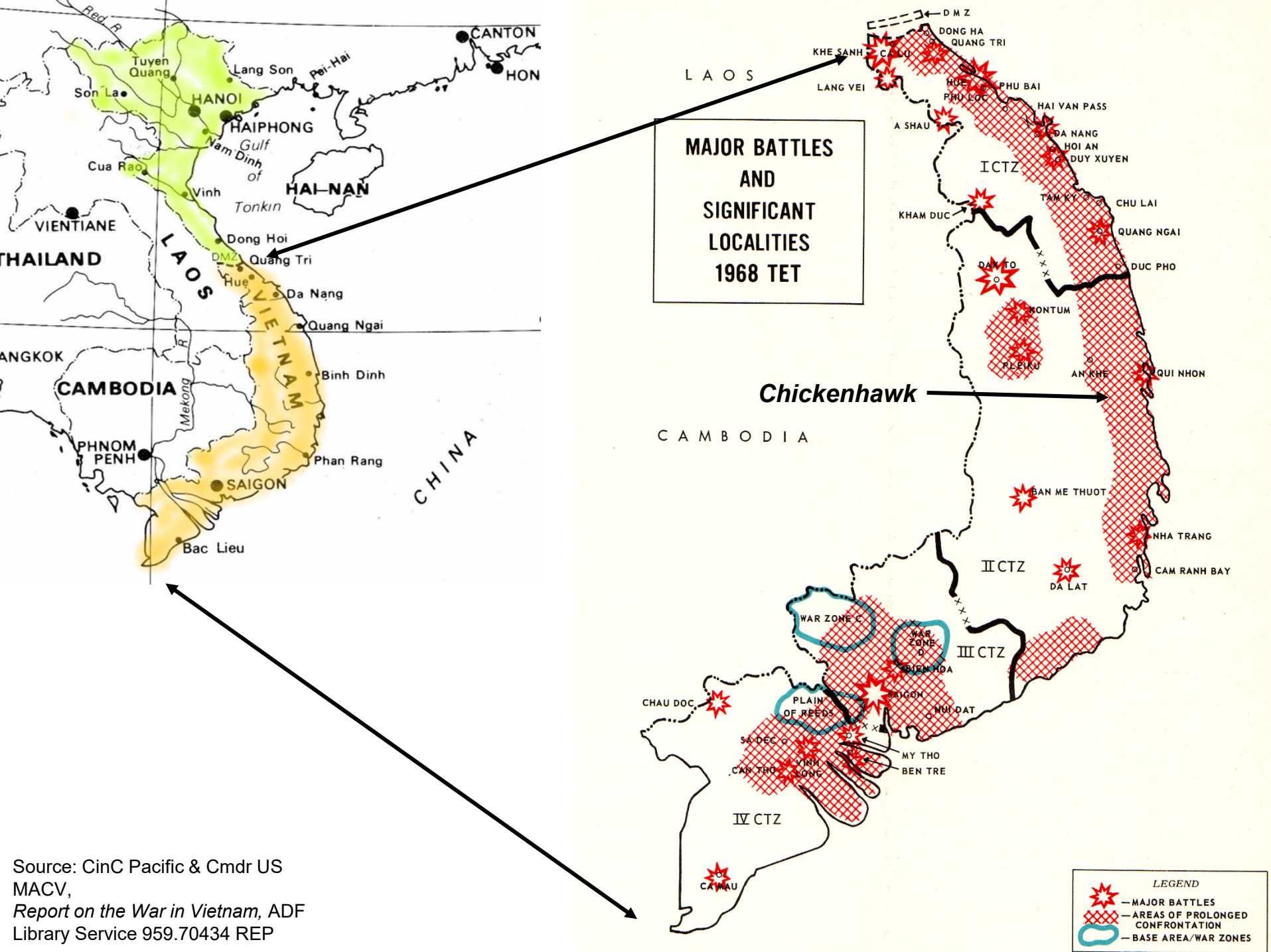












Source: CinC Pacific & Cmdr US MACV, *Report on the War in Vietnam*, ADF Library Service 959.70434 REP







Tom Supple and Rick Symons, Gunship pilots.

Rescued from a PAVN Bn HQ by Mike Perrott.





Unit Citation for Gallantry

Second since WW II



135th AHC Statistics

<i>YEAR</i>	<i>AIRCRAFT HOURS</i>	<i>HFV HRS</i>	<i>TROOPS</i>	<i>CARGO Tons</i>	<i>A/C HITS</i>	<i>A/C LOST/ DAMAGED</i>	<i>COY KIA/WIA</i>	<i>VC KIA</i>	<i>STRUCTURES/ SAMPANS</i>
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Huey Statistics

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