

"Mini-History" Notes of the AH-1G NETT March 1967-July 1968 --  
prepared for Paul Young.

In January 1966, the undersigned was contacted by Major General (then Major) Joseph N. (Jim) Jaggars, III. Major Jaggars was the Department of the Army Staff Officer (DASO) for the AH-1G HueyCobra Helicopter, in the Office of the Director of Army Aviation. Major Jaggars informed me that a special team was being assembled to introduce the AH-1G into combat operations in Vietnam. Jaggars had been my Commanding Officer in the UTT, 68th and 197th Aviation Company (same company with multiple name changes). He asked if I might be interested in going back to Vietnam to participate in the introduction of the AH-1G Cobra to combat operations. I told him I would be most interested in such an assignment, since I had been back from Vietnam since July of 1965, and was probably going to be ordered back to Vietnam for a second tour shortly. Additionally, I had been present in early July 1965 when Bell Helicopter's Vice President, Hans Weichsel first discussed the AH-1G HueyCobra with then Br!

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ier General Jack Norton, Commander of the Support Command, and General William C. Westmoreland, Commander of all U.S. Forces in Vietnam (COMUS MACV). General Westmoreland told Mr. Weichsel that he would support the introduction of the Cobra into the Army's inventory. However, he stipulated that for him to do so, the aircraft had to be in country and ready for combat operations within two years.

I asked Jim Jaggars who else was going to be on the team, and he advised me that the team would be headed up by Major (later LTC) Paul F. Anderson. Jaggars informed me that Paul Anderson was assigned to AVSCOM in St. Louis, and had been working diligently on putting together the organizational support and deployment plan for what was soon to become the U.S. Army's AH-1G (HueyCobra) New Equipment Training Team (NETT). Jaggars said that because of my background experience in armed helicopter operations, Major Anderson agreed that I would be given a relatively free hand to select the pilots for the team. Major Anderson had served an earlier tour in Viet Nam. However he had been assigned to a CH-21 troop transport unit in 1963, and was not familiar with armed helicopter operations or, for that matter, potential pilot candidates who might be suitable for the AH-1G NETT

Major Anderson was, however, very familiar with the supply, maintenance and logistical support activities as they applied to

the fielding of a new aircraft. He also elected to select the enlisted members of the team, with the aid of the First Sergeant, Ellis W. Spear. First Sergeant Spear had been assigned to the Maintenance Department at Ft. Eustis, and personally knew the finest helicopter technicians in various areas of expertise. These individuals would be vital in keeping this new aircraft flying in an austere combat environment. Major Anderson also hand-picked Major Nicolas P. (Nick) Stein, whom he had known before, as his Maintenance Officer. Major Stein had been assigned as a Test and Acceptance Pilot at the Bell Helicopter plant in Hurst, Texas, and was immediately available for reassignment to the AH-1G NETT.

The guidelines regarding who could be eligible for selection for the team were relatively simple. To be selected, individuals had to be combat experienced helicopter gun ship pilots, and had to have been back from a previous Viet Nam tour for at least a year. Because of the relatively short time frame in which I was required to recruit suitable candidates, I relied heavily on my past association with members of the UTT (later redesignated the 68th, 197th and 334th) Armed Helicopter Companies. I had commanded the 1st Platoon of the UTT (Playboys) and, therefore, initially approached individuals with whom I had served and who had demonstrated exceptional flying skills and courage under fire.

The first individual I contacted was Captain (later Major) Jerry W. Childers. Jerry had been a Fire Team Leader in the Playboy Platoon. He was a bright, hard working and highly decorated Army Aviator, who had earned a Silver Star, as well as many other decorations, during our previous tour. Without hesitation, he accepted my invitation. The next individual I contacted was Captain Robert R. (Bob) Matlick. Bob had been a Fire Team Leader in the 2nd Platoon of the UTT (Raiders), and was assigned as an instructor in the Gunnery Committee at the Aviation Center in Ft. Rucker. Bob was considered by many to be one of the most knowledgeable individuals in the U.S. Army on helicopter gunnery techniques. I next contacted CW-2 Michael J. (Mike) Davis, a Playboy Platoon Wing-Man from my previous tour. Mike was also highly decorated and his bravery (as well as his propensity for getting into trouble) was legendary among his fellow gunship pilots. He was to be my life insurance policy. After Mike Davis, I contacted Warrant Officers James M. (Jim) Lee and Christopher G. (Chris) Hunt. Both had been members of the Playboy Platoon of the UTT and were regarded as outstanding young combat pilots.

Recognizing the need for a truly exceptional pilot to serve as our Standardization Instructor Pilot, I asked CW-3 (then CW-2) John D. Thompson to join the team. John, who initially learned to fly as a Crew Chief on an H-34, had also served in the Raider Platoon of the UTT and was considered by his associates to be the finest helicopter pilot ever to wear Army Aviator wings. This was a great tribute to Thompson, since the other members of the team were all great pilots in their own rights. Following Thompson, I requested Captain Lyle C. (Mac) McCarty to join us. Mac had served in the UTT, shortly before I was assigned to the unit, and had a reputation that preceded him as a solid gunship pilot as well as a "can do" type officer.

Fearing that I might be perceived as being heavily prejudiced in favor of former UTT members (which I was), I contacted CW-3 (then CW-2) Harold Simpson, and asked him to join us. Harold was an unknown quantity to me, but he had been a member of the gunship platoon of the famous 114th Aviation Company in the Mekong Delta (Cobras). To those who knew him, Simpson was alleged to be utterly fearless and, occasionally, somewhat fearsome.

Recognizing the need for an individual who could master the relatively complex weapons systems of this new aircraft, and keep them operating, I sought out Captain James P. (Jim) Pratt, and made him our Armament Officer. Jim was an Armor Aviator who, like Simpson, came highly recommended. I also invited CW-3 (then CW-2) John F. (Jack) Atkinson to join the team. Jack had also served in the UTT and was a colleague and contemporary of John Thompson's. While I didn't know Jack very well, I respected John Thompson's judgment so much that I immediately accepted his recommendation. And that is how "The Dirty Dozen", as we were sometimes called, was formed.

It should be noted that with the exception of Majors Anderson and Stein, who were highly capable Transportation Corps Maintenance Officers, all members of the team were combat-experienced gunship pilots, who were absolutely convinced that they were the very best the Army had to offer. This proved to be both a blessing and a curse. It was a blessing because, believing they were the best, they went about proving it through their performance. It was also a curse, because anytime you gather that many Prima Donnas in one place, you are bound to encounter enormous ego problems, as well as intense competition between individuals.

For example, as an acceptance pilot at the Bell Helicopter Plant in Ft. Worth, Nick Stein probably performed several hundred

power-off autorotations each week. He was a superb pilot who could do things with a helicopter that others could only dream about. When I announced that John Thompson would be our Standardization Pilot, because he was the best pilot in the organization, Nick immediately challenged that assertion and said, "Show Me!" After a couple of hours flying together, Stein came into our headquarters at Grand Prairie, Texas, and acknowledged that I was right. He stated that John Thompson was, in fact, the best pilot with whom he had ever flown. Considering Nick's well-deserved ego, this was the ultimate compliment John could have been paid.

In April of 1967, the team gathered at the Western Hills Motel, near the Bell plant at Ft. Worth Texas. We were all pumped up, ready to go, and anxious to get our hands on Bell's new, fully integrated attack helicopter. Unfortunately, only two of these aircraft existed at this time, and both were prototype models belonging to Bell Helicopter. Because they were almost totally involved in the ongoing test and evaluation program, these aircraft were not immediately available for training of the AH-1G NETT's personnel.

Talk about Command and Control problems! Imagine, if you can, 12 hot pilots and 23 eminently qualified enlisted maintenance men, who were making \$16 per day TDY Pay (a lot of money in 1967) on top of their normal salaries, with virtually nothing to fly or to maintain. We were located at a National Guard facility in Grand Prairie (between the cities of Dallas and Fort Worth) where opportunities to drink, party, chase girls and squander money on frivolous activities were limitless. Knowing that unless we had something to keep them from going astray, we would surely encounter enormous discipline problems, I assigned the officers the mission to write Standard Operating Procedures on a variety of subjects related to flying the new attack helicopter. I charged the enlisted men with similar, maintenance-related, responsibilities. I also instituted a mandatory Physical Training formation at 0700 each morning, where we commenced the day with calisthenics and a brisk mile run. Needless !

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ay, for the first few days, many of the team members suffered greatly. However, in a short time, peer pressure and the example set by some of the older guys on the team, caused the remaining team members to "suck it up" and get with the program. It sure cut down on the all-night partying and it was during this time that a group of men went from being a "team" to being a "Team". It was a great day for the Team when we were informed that ground school classes would commence, at Bell's facilities for all Team members

on the various systems of the aircraft, and that AH-1G ships # 1 and # 2 would be made available for pilot training at Bell's Globe Plant.

Bell provided two really outstanding Instructor Pilots, named Ron Erhard and Jake Hart, to check our pilots out in the HueyCobra. It should be noted that ship # 1 had retractable skids, which were later eliminated in production models. The rationale was that pilots flying nap-of-the-earth might not have time or the presence of mind to lower the skids in the event of a forced landing. In addition to learning to fly the aircraft, pilots received very detailed ground school instruction on all the systems of the AH-1G, as were the enlisted members of the Team. It was a very busy time for the Team members, and a very frustrating time for some of the production technicians who were trying to produce the aircraft on schedule. As the aircraft were coming down the production line, NETT members were crawling all over them and suggesting changes. For instance, we knew from practical experience where certain switches and gauges ought to be, and in some cases, the engineers who designed th!

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rcraft did not. One NETT innovation led to the development and use of unique arm rests for the Copilot-Gunner's cockpit. To accommodate different-sized pilots, the arm rests were remade in several, individual layers of different thickness, which were "stackable" in any combination and which were secured in-place by Velcro(r) "hooks" on their bottoms and "loops" on their tops. Extra 'layers' were secured to Velcro(r) "loop patches" which were glued to the cockpit's aft bulkhead, on each side of the seat's armor plating. This "seemingly minor cockpit customization" allowed any pilot, regardless of his size, to securely brace his arms, in perfect alignment with the cyclic and collective grips, and greatly eased their transition to the "side-arm" controls of the AH-1G's front cockpit. Despite our interruptions on the assembly line, Bell factory personnel met their deadlines and were both patriotic and proud of their new aircraft. They were also most helpful to our Team.

Augmenting the Team were hand picked Technicians from Bell, Lycoming, Emerson Electric, Cadillac Gauge, Collins, etc., who would deploy with, and become an integral part of the Team once we were on the ground in Vietnam. If you think leadership problems with "hot shot" military Team members was a challenge, you should have witnessed some of the wild things our civilian Tech Reps did.

We trained hard at Bell's facilities and played hard throughout