



Keystone

Communist troops charging up a hill in Laos: Suddenly, a conventional war

of the Nixon Administration's policy in Indochina. And last week in Laos, where 20,000 South Vietnamese troops were trying to slice through the Ho Chi Minh Trail, American helicopters were playing a crucial role in what could be the climactic battle of the Indochina war. After a weeklong pause—during which South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu swept his cupboard nearly bare of reserves—a U.S. helicopter flotilla leapt fresh troops westward along Route 9 and, despite stout North Vietnamese resistance, reportedly captured the vital crossroads around the town of Tchepone. The Communists fought with everything they had; some 50 Soviet-made tanks ringed Tchepone, and for the first time in the war, enemy batteries in North Vietnam fired surface-to-air missiles at U.S. planes across the border, drawing new "protective reaction" strikes in reply. At the same time, North Vietnamese gunners in Laos blazed away at U.S. helicopters, and with each hit they underscored the choppers' chronic vulnerability to ground fire. In the process, they threatened not only the safety of allied troops, but many of the Pentagon's pet theories about the usefulness of helicopters against a well-equipped foe.

League: For now, after years of almost unchallenged supremacy against lightly armed guerrillas, helicopters were finally running into a far more sophisticated threat. All of them—from the fragile observation choppers to the squat Huey transports and even the potent, needle-nosed Cobra gunships—were often easy game for the vast array of enemy anti-aircraft guns that waited in Laos. "The moment the South Vietnamese stepped over the border, they were playing in a different league for much higher stakes," said one experienced observer. "This isn't a guerrilla war or even a semi-guerrilla war. It's as close to conventional warfare as you'll get in Southeast Asia."

Allied military planners had known

all along, of course, that the North Vietnamese were well dug in, and they had budgeted for losses running as high as 60 per cent among the Hueys assaulting defended positions. Even so, there were unexpected difficulties. Southern Laos was studded with enemy anti-aircraft sites—principally 51-cal. machine guns and high-firing 37-mm. flak guns—and some of the batteries proved to be guided by radar. In addition, enemy tanks were present in unforeseen numbers; they were hard for the gunships to knock out (particularly since many of the choppers had not been issued armor-piercing rockets), and they were surprisingly accurate when they fired back at the helicopters. "We never thought that we would see so many tanks," said the commander of one Cobra unit, "or that the anti-aircraft positions would be so numerous and well-designed."

The enemy barrage produced many crippled ships, like the Huey that Warrant Officer Harold Smith manhandled back to the big Khe Sanh base in South Vietnam last week, fuel dripping from a jagged hole in its belly. "They hit us at 2,500 feet," Smith reported. "In Vietnam, I've never even been fired at above 1,500 feet." But the cripples were lucky, for many choppers never came back at all. By the end of the week, the U.S. command listed 61 helicopters lost since the start of Operation Lam Son 719, including a few that crashed due to accidents. And that figure was conservative, for whenever the Army's rescue ships could recover the carcass of a downed helicopter, it was not counted as shot down, even if it happened to be a total wreck. The air crews themselves scoffed at these efforts to play down the losses. "Man, I got shot down badly twice in one day myself, and I saw them leave eight birds behind at a single LZ," said one pilot. "The numbers they're putting out really mislead people back home."

Because South Vietnam has few pilots

and helicopters to spare (page 41), the Americans were carrying the brunt of the air battle. And as the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) renewed its drive, U.S. losses climbed. In one assault by the ARVN First Division on an enemy position south of Route 9, 30 of the 60 Hueys involved were badly damaged, and eight others were destroyed outright—all in less than half an hour.

The North Vietnamese Army, however, was not the only enemy that the pilots had to contend with. Khe Sanh, the main forward base in South Vietnam, was a vast bowl of red laterite dust that swirled up in gritty geysers each time a helicopter landed, and soon clogged the delicate mechanisms of every aircraft in the operation. "Our compressor blades look like ceramics," complained one American commander. "The dust is caked on, just as though it had been baked in an oven. The only thing that you can use to clean the compressor blades are walnut shells—no kidding, walnut shells—and they're in short supply."

But in spite of everything, most of the traditional gung-ho spirit was still evident among the helicopter pilots. When they gathered after a day's work, there was a distinct aura of the Lafayette Escadrille or the RAF during the Battle of Britain. At the air-cavalry base in Quang Tri, young pilots working the Laotian front play darts and raucous games of pool as they gulp their beers. On the wall is a roster of the unit's pilots, and the names of the dead or missing are turned poignantly upside down. And even indoors, the young fliers like to swagger around in black stetsons.

Breed: The pilots do not try to hide their pride in belonging to an elite outfit. By virtue of the risks they take and the fantastically lethal equipment they command, the chopper crews regard themselves as a breed apart from other soldiers, much less the folks back home. "You've got to be a complete idiot or a medal-hunter to do this job," exults one of them. "When I get home," says a black pilot, "some cop will probably hassle me sometime. I'm going to tell that mother that I fired more rounds in a minute than he can buy in his lifetime. But then," he shrugs, "how can you make people understand that I have a gun that can soak a football field with bullets in a few seconds? The American public probably can't absorb that."

But in many respects, it is not hard to understand the mystique that goes into being air cavalymen. In an age of push-button jets and missiles, they are flying in slow, seat-of-the-pants aircraft that allow them to sample the Red Baron bravado of a bygone age in aerial warfare. "Up there, you feel like a fighter pilot in one of those old World War II Mustangs," explains Jack Loadholt of Savannah, Ga., who, at 21, may be the youngest captain in the United States Army. Other pilots reach back even further for comparisons. "It must be a lot

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