# "Killing Is Our Business

AT Khe Sanh, the distinctive pump and whir of hundreds of helicopter rotor blades began at 7 a.m., even before the morning fog started to lift. Drowsy pilots walked out to their UH-1 Hueys and malevolent-looking OH-6 Cobra gunships, checked out the oil levels, the instruments and the control linkages, and then strolled back to their tactical operations centers. The call to combat came as it has almost every day since the Laotian operation began, well before midmorning. At the heavily sandbagged T.O.C. of the 4th Battalion, 77th Field Artillery, 101st Airborne Division, blond, mustachioed Warrant Officer Fred Hayden, 27, set down his cup of tea and sprinted out onto the oil-soaked pad. Zipped into his brown flame-resistant flight suit, he had already scrambled into the front seat of his Cobra by the time Copilot Ronald Lee Walters, 22, clambered into the rear. Within two minutes the Cobra was bound for Fire Base Ranger on a hilltop eight miles inside Laos, where South Vietnamese troops were trying to fight off a North Vietnamese attack.

Walters dipped the Cobra's nose and rolled out to the northwest. A set of scrambled alphabet letters came in over the T.O.C. radio, and Hayden pulled out his "Whiz Wheel" decoder to decipher the grid coordinates of his mission. As their chopper raced over the bomb-pocked Laotian countryside, a second Cobra pulled up alongside. Twenty minutes later, the Cobras arrived over a scene of total chaos. As Hayden and Walters carved circles in the sky several thousand feet above the fire-scarred hilltop, they watched errant rockets from choppers already on the scene blazing into friendly and enemy positions alike. Other ships, including Medevac Hueys, milled around the Ranger landing zone but were unable to penetrate the murderous curtain of fire.

The pilots pushed the Cobra into a steep dive. Before they pulled up—at about 500 ft.—Walters had fired two pairs of 2.75-in. rockets into enemy positions. Diving again, Hayden let go with his 7.62-mm. minigun against a pocket of North Vietnamese caught in the open near the perimeter wire. Terrified, the Communists scattered back into the tree line, leaving 15 bodies on the ground. There was another strike, then another and another, until Hayden had expended his entire 2,500-lb. load of ordnance. By noontime, he was back at Khe Sanh to refuel, rearm and wait for the next assignment.

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Hayden was lucky at Ranger, where, as he puts it, "*nobody* knew what was going on." In the week-long battle for the hilltop fire base, a number of U.S. than a few of those that wobbled back to Khe Sanh were thoroughly shot up. Since the Laotian operation began on Feb. 8, the loss rate of U.S. helicopters—normally about one per 16,000 sorties—has quadrupled. So far during the Laos operation, Communist gunners have knocked out no fewer than 61 helicopters, about 10% of the fleet originally committed to Lam Son 719. More than 160 other birds have been brought down but later hauled back to their

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HAYDEN & COBRA AT KHE SANH

bases by other choppers. A total of 31 U.S. crewmen have been killed, 44 wounded, and ten listed as missing.

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The pilots who fly the U.S. command's 3,500 birds form a thin, olive-drab line, the rearguard of the U.S. withdrawal. Mindful of congressional curbs on the use of ground troops outside Viet Nam, the Administration describes chopper activities in Laos and Cambodia as "air support." Even though pilots may never set foot on the ground, however, they are as deeply involved in ground tactics as the G.I.s who drove Patton's tanks or the cavalrymen who spurred Sheridan's horses.

For the moment, at least, the obvious tactical virtues displayed by helicopters in Laos have helped to silence debate not only in Congress but also among some longtime chopper critics. In *No Exit from Vietnam*, British Counterinsurgency Expert Sir Robert Thompson charged that helicopters had "exaggerated the two great weaknesses of the American character—impatience and aggressiveness." Thompson fretted that the U.S.'s problems in Indochina were rooted partly in a "fatal fascination" with technology. The chopper, he said, was responsible for "the one-star generals who regard their tour of duty in Vietnam as an opportunity to in-

# and Business Is Good"

their helicopter howdahs at government expense."

For their part, the champions of the chopper describe it as the first breakthrough in ground combat since the gasoline engine allowed infantry to maneuver on wheels. The chopper supplies the allies with a command-and-control craft, a scout plane and fighter, an ambulance, a troop transport and a tow truck—all rolled into seven or eight varieties of bird. U.S. helicopters in Viet Nam have flown an astounding 30.6 million sorties in the last decade, logged more than 11 million flying hours, and hauled 4,500,000 tons of cargo. Without the helicopter to set up fire bases atop precipitous hills and leap-frog troops from position to position, says Brigadier General William J. Maddox Jr., director of Army aviation, the battle in Laos would have been "tree by tree along Highway 9."

MARK GODFREY

"SUPER JOLLY GREEN GIANT" LIFTING AMMO

The cost has been high in men and machines. At least 27,000 helicopters have been hit by enemy fire since the U.S. entered the war; 3,300 have been destroyed at a cost well over $1 billion. The human cost: 460 Army pilots, 1,002 crewmen, 525 passengers.

The men who pilot the choppers are usually young (average age: 22) and cocky, certain that they are an elite. More than half of the 22,000 chopper pilots the Army has trained since 1966 have been made warrant officers, a kind of limbo grade that the pilots find appealing. Ranking between enlisted men and commissioned officers, the new warrant officer-pilots avoid both the "hassling" that the grunt endures and the responsibilities that an officer carries. And though they are addressed as "Mister" rather than "Sir," at least they are not "Hey, you," and they can get a beer at the officers' club.

The younger pilots are a curious combination of professional soldier and green high school graduate. If they are not in one of the starchier units like the 101st, they decorate their machines like so many jalopies—or minibuses. Wicked-looking to begin with, Cobras are even more fearsome when shark's teeth, skulls or lightning bolts are painted on them. And naturally, there are names. One Huey sports THE GRIM REAPER. A gunship is emblazoned with KILLING IS OUR BUSINESS AND BUSINESS IS GOOD. Then there is the black pilot, possibly mythical, who flies a UH-1 named—what else?—FREE HUEY.

First stop for would-be chopper pilots is sere Fort Wolters, Texas, where they spend 16 weeks learning to handle light training helicopters. Then come 16 weeks of more advanced work at Fort Rucker, Ala. For the first eight weeks, Rucker students fly only under hoods, learning to maneuver their prized Hueys on instruments alone.

Warrant Officer Candidate Jarema Majkut finds that "it takes a lot more skill to fly a helicopter" than other aircraft. "Basically, an airplane wants to fly," he says, "and a helicopter wants to crash." The pilots are well paid for their talents. With flight and combat pay, Fred Hayden clears $11,400 a year—enough to put him in economic striking distance of a New York City patrolman (base pay: $12,150 a year).

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Chopper pilots earn every penny they get. In one company at Khe Sanh called the Lancers, the pilots have organized a pool; the pot—$5 from each aircraft commander—goes to the ship with the greatest accumulation of bullet holes when Lam Son finally ends (choppers that crash are disqualified). Says soft-spoken Huey Pilot John Oldham, 22, of Peculiar, Mo.: "If you think about getting killed, it will screw you up. You just do the job you are trained for." Over Laos, where the elaborate Communist antiaircraft system is especially potent, the pilots fly high—but not on grass. There may be plenty of pot smokers in Viet Nam's foxholes, but there are very few in its helicopters, where a man may have to monitor five radios at once, handle a number of lethal weapons, and manipulate complex controls.

Staying in the air over Viet Nam was difficult enough in the days of the old H-21 "Flying Bananas." Back then, in the early 1960s, one Viet Cong trick was to set up long spears and trip wires along the ground in such a way that they would be set off by the rotor wash of low-flying choppers. On occasion, startled pilots would find one of the V.C.'s wicked little missiles imbedded in the tail booms when they landed. Now as then, helicopters are extraordinarily vulnerable. Even a single rifle bullet in the huge disc-shaped target formed by the whirling blades and the complex rotor-hub mechanism can cause a ship to tear itself apart in mid-air.

In Laos, the huge CH-47 Chinooks and CH-54 Skycranes are doubtless the safest choppers, primarily because the expensive machines ($1.3 million to $2.1 million) are rarely risked in "hot" areas. Perhaps most dangerous are the bulb-shaped $106,000 IOHs (for light observation helicopters). Flown by pilots whom even other pilots describe as "crazy," they buzz along at treetop level to draw fire and expose enemy positions. For protection, the IOHs rely mainly on their 150 m.p.h. speed. In Laos, that has not been enough; six have been lost and the U.S. command has limited IOH flights across the border.

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Narrow as they are head-on (36 inches), the Army's sleek $457,000 Cobras have broad flanks, and they are fully exposed to enemy gunners during the pull-out after a strike. Probably the most available targets over Laos today are the ubiquitous Hueys, which serve as everything from VIP tour buses to combat assault gunships that fire 6,400 rounds of minigun fire in a minute. Though U.S. pilots generally give ARVN high marks for bravery, some pilots complain that the South Vietnamese have misused Medevac on occasion. Angry flyers tell of having braved fierce Communist fire to answer ARVN calls, only to find "shammers"—men swathed in bandages but with no wounds—when they arrive. Other pilots gripe that ARVN commanders sometimes purposely minimize hostile activity in an area. A typical radio exchange over Laos, heard last week:

*ARVN:* Come on in; there's nothing happening here.

*Pilot:* Then why are you whispering?

*ARVN:* They might hear us.

*Pilot: Who* might hear you?

Despite such kinks, U.S. commanders are convinced that their new brand of airmobile warfare is a success. In fact, there is some concern among the brass that "the other side" is all too appreciative of the chopper's virtues. Soviet pilots, they note, have been flying Russian helicopters, including rocket-firing gunships, in support of the little-noticed guerrilla struggle in the Sudan (TIME, March 1). When the allies went into Cambodia last spring, Hanoi's General Vo Nguyen Giap himself hastened to one of Cambodia's eastern provinces for a look-see. His means of transportation was a Soviet-made helicopter.