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USCG AVIATION DURING THE VIETNAM WAR

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UNITED STATES COAST GUARD AVIATION IN THE VIETNAM WAR

Introduction

During the 1960s and early 1970s, the United States engaged in one of the most controversial and challenging military campaigns in our nation's history. While the war ultimately ended in defeat for the U.S. and South Vietnam, many tales of great American heroics can still be told. Unknown to many people, a significant number of heroic accounts during the Vietnam War involved United States Coast Guard Aviation. The following discussion examines USCG aviation in Vietnam. Specifically, the current study provides a short background about the Vietnam War and the importance of USCG aviation support. Significant contributions of USCG chopper pilots are also explored in detail. In addition, special emphasis is placed on the exploits and contributions of USCG chopper pilot Lt. Jack C. Ritticher. Lastly, discussion is provided concerning the roles the USCG may play in the future with respect to national security.

Background - Why USCG Chopper Support was so Important in Vietnam

The Vietnam War began in the late 1950s as an ideological conflict between communist North Vietnam and U.S. supported South Vietnam. For U.S. troops unaccustomed to the tropical climate and dense jungles, fighting presented many challenges.

For starters, troop movements by conventional means were virtually impossible. In fact, as one expert explains, the triple-canopy growth and foliage of the jungle was so thick that "moving 100 meters and hour was making good time."¹ Not only did this mean that effective movement of ground troops was difficult, but it also meant that transporting heavy artillery and other conventional weaponry was nearly impossible. This left U.S. troops with only one option - learn to fight against an enemy significantly more experienced and adept at utilizing jungle warfare tactics. Disadvantaged in many ways, enemy ambushes and attacks often left scores of U.S. soldiers seriously wounded and/or dying in remote areas of the Vietnam jungles. With medical help days or even weeks away by foot, the only viable option was to provide chopper support and airlifts out of dangerous jungle combat zones.

***The contribution of USCG Aviators (chopper pilots) during
the Vietnam War***

By the 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson had begun to fully recognize the need for search and rescue support in Vietnam. In response, Johnson urged his Joint Chiefs of Staff to assign this much needed service to the U.S. Air force. The Air Force responded by creating the Air Rescue Service (ARS). As one

¹ James E. Westheider, *The Vietnam War* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007), 110.

expert explains, the ARS relied heavily on helicopters like the HH-3E's, HH43B/Fs, and HU-16E's.¹ But, as the ARS soon discovered, conducting rescue operations in Vietnam presented many unanticipated obstacles and challenges. For one, the climate and tropical conditions wore heavily on the helicopters themselves. Secondly, rescue operations into enemy territory placed helicopter pilots and their crews in extreme danger. As a result of these factors, the ARS experienced many failures and growing pains which raised concerns all the way to the White House in Washington. In recognition that the ARS was effectively over burdened and undermanned, U.S. Air Force officials began looking for help from other sources. This provided the USCG with the opportunity to fulfill a vital role in air and rescue operations in Vietnam.

The U.S. Air Force and USCG Exchange Program

In cooperation with the U.S. Air Force, an agreement was established in late 1967 to create a pilot exchange program between the ARS and the USCG.² This agreement opened the door for USCG aviators to be placed in positions of command during critical rescue operations. In fact, by early 1968, USCG aviators were piloting HH-3E helicopters and support aircraft on

¹ Simon Dunstan, *Vietnam Choppers: Helicopters in Battle 1950-75* (Osprey Publishing, 2003), 166.

² *Association of Naval Aviation* (Turner Publishing Company, 2003), 30.

daily missions deep into enemy territory. Immediately following the creation of the pilot exchange program, however, U.S. Air Force officials began recognizing that lack of manpower was no longer the most significant problem in rescue operations. The problem, more exactly, was the extreme distances USCG helicopter pilots needed to travel into enemy occupied territories during rescue operations. In many cases, in fact, downed pilots and soldiers in need of rescue and support were simply beyond the limited flying range of the HH-3E. As a proposed solution, U.S. Air Force and Coast Guard officials developed plans for providing midair refueling of helicopters. This placed many USCG aviators in the cockpit of HC-130Ps which provided in-flight refueling for helicopters flown by USCG pilots as well.¹

Specific Successful Missions by the USCG in Vietnam

Many stories of heroism and success involving USCG aviators in Vietnam can be told. One of the most well known stories occurred in July of 1968 over the North Vietnamese jungle near Dong Hoi. As the story goes, Lt. Colonel Jack Modica was hit while flying his F-105 Thunderchief over enemy territory. Modica

¹ The U.S. Coast Guard Aviation Association. "*Coast Guard Aviation in Vietnam - Combat Rescue and Recovery*". aoptero.org, n.d.
<<http://uscgaviationhistory.aoptero.org/history06.html> (accessed August 11, 2009).

radioed to command control informing them that he believed he could guide his wounded craft far enough to reach the Gulf where he would eject and be rescued without incident with the enemy. The pilots jet aircraft, however, soon began losing altitude and Modica was forced to eject into the North Vietnamese jungle. Unfortunately for Modica and USCG rescuers, the pilot hit his head when landing on the ground and was knocked unconscious for two hours.¹ This gave the enemy time to advance into the area and effectively surround Lt. Colonel Modica's position. A number of attempts were made until nightfall to rescue the downed pilot but with no success. The following morning, rescue operations recommenced by orders of Air Force commanders. By this time, however, Modica's physical condition had deteriorated and the pilot was unable to walk as a result of a broken pelvis bone.² Once rescuers spotted Modica's smoke signal, a pararescue jumper (PJ) was forced to descend into the jungle and find the downed pilot. After nearly 20 minutes of searching, Modica was located and harnessed to a lift. As the PJ and Modica began their ascent to the helicopter, however, Vietcong gunfire opened up. By the time the two were hoisted above the tree line, the helicopter had taken more than 40 direct hits to the hull, all rotors had

¹ John Moseley, *U.S. Coast Guard Aviation in Vietnam Combat Rescue and Recovery* (Pterogram Publications, 2004), 5.

² *Ibid.*

been hit, and 9 bullets had penetrated the self-sealing gas tank.¹ Upon return to the airbase, the helicopter was declared unfit to fly and scrapped. Modica and all crew members survived the rescue, however.

In addition to USCG rescue operations for downed pilots, many missions to extract ground soldiers were also conducted during the war. One of the better known stories took place in the summer of 1968 in west of Vietnam in Laos. As the story goes, an Army special forces team had been trapped in a canyon in the Shau Valley. Two USCG helicopters were dispatched to the area to attempt an extraction of the ground forces. As the first helicopter approached the valley, however, enemy gunfire severed a fuel line which covered everyone in the helicopter in jet fuel. Due to the danger of fire, the helicopter was forced to return to base. Shortly thereafter, a second helicopter attempted the rescue but was shot down killing the entire crew. Finally, as a third USCG helicopter was dispatched to the area, the special forces were able to make find their way to a safer location at the bottom of the canyon where they were successfully extracted.² While this story demonstrates extraordinary bravery and personal sacrifice on the part of USCG

¹ Moseley, *U.S. Coast Guard*, 5.

² *Ibid*, 11.

part of USCG aviators, the more important point concerns the fact that similar USCG heroics were common throughout the entire Vietnam War.

The Critical Leadership and Support Provided by USCG Aviators

As knowledge of the success of USCG rescue operations spread, U.S. Air Force officials began recognizing the real value of the USCG pilots - that is, their experience and skill as helicopter pilots was unmatched. Although the U.S. Air Force first began using the helicopter at the end of World War II, the machine was never used extensively even during the Korean War. In fact, until the mid 1960s, the U.S. Air Force had largely relegated use of the helicopter to a light transport operations, but it was rarely used in combat missions.¹ Following President Johnson's suggestion that rescue operations be improved, U.S. Air Force officials scrambled to develop effective procedures and training for helicopter pilots. The problem, however, was a lack of experience within the Air Force itself. Matters were compounded by the fact that helicopter pilots were forced to fly in the challenging and dangerous tropical environment of Vietnam. In contrast, USCG pilots had been using helicopters for a wide range of purposes dating back many years. The USCG used helicopters, for instance, during rescue and support operations

¹ Paul M. Edwards, *The Korean War* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006)

following hurricane Betsy as well as for maritime operations on the Great Lakes and open seas.¹ As a result, USCG helicopter pilots had developed skills and know-how well beyond that of U.S. Air Force pilots. But, it was not just the superior knowledge and capability that made USCG helicopter pilots a critical part of operations in Vietnam. The USCG has a long standing tradition of providing support beyond the call of duty. When USCG pilots reached Vietnam the attitude behind this tradition translated to actions in the field. More specifically, USCG pilots were instrumental in providing vital training and support for the less experienced Air Force pilots. In expressing his appreciation for the support of USCG helicopter pilots, Master Sergeant Jack Watkins of the U.S. Air Force stated in an official report that "what really cannot be determined is how many of us made it through our tour due to their willingness to pass along their skills to the other pilots."² In the final assessment, it follows, the critical leadership and support provided by USCG aviators during the Vietnam War may represent their most significant contribution.

¹ Dennis L. Noble, *Rescued by the U.S. Coast Guard: Great Acts of Heroism Since 1878* (Naval Institute Press, 2004), 165.

² Moseley, *U.S. Coast Guard*, 5.

Lieutenant Jack C. Rittichier - USCG Coast Guard Chopper Pilot

Hero

One of the unspoken heroes of the Vietnam War was Lieutenant Jack C. Rittichier of the USCG. Interestingly, Lt. Rittichier began his military career in 1957 with the United States Air Force. His first assignment was with the Strategic Air Command's 340th Bomb Wing based at Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri.¹ Although Rittichier's four years of service with the U.S. Air Force did not provide him with actual combat experience, he did earn his wings flying the B-47 and also gained significant knowledge about military aerial combat and support procedures. Upon finishing his service for the air force in 1962, Rittichier decided to join the USCG. After being named Lieutenant in 1963, Rittichier served for the next three years in search and rescue operations in the United States. His services during this period of time were exemplary and resulted in numerous recognitions and awards for his rescue efforts and achievements during various natural disasters and emergencies. In 1967, Rittichier helped establish an exchange program with the U.S Air Force rescue operations in Vietnam.² This allowed

¹ United States Coast Guard. "*Lieutenant Jack C. Rittichier, USCG - Coast Guard Aviator No. 997*". U.S. Department of Homeland Security, n.d. <<http://www.uscg.mil/history/people/RittichierJack.asp> (accessed August 11, 2009).

² Ibid.

Rittichier to volunteer for service in Vietnam and join the 37th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron (ARRS) at Da Nang.¹ The majority of rescue services operated by the ARRS involved airlifts of downed pilots out of enemy territory. That is, flying various types of transport helicopters, rescue pilots were required to hover over, or actually land, in enemy territory often under heavy fire. Downed pilots were then attended to on the ground and/or lifted into the rescue helicopter. Almost immediately upon arriving in Vietnam, Lt. Rittichier found himself flying these exact types of rescue operations. In fact, within Rittichier's first month of service he was assigned to action as a commander of Sikorsky HH-3E transport helicopter, commonly referred to as the "Jolly Green Giant" because of its overwhelming size and color.² Lt. Rittichier soon showed that he was more than just a capable pilot by successfully conducting three critical rescue operations over a matter of just weeks. In fact, for his remarkable performances, Lt. Rittichier was awarded three successive Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) awards - an accomplishment that took many excellent pilots months or even years to achieve.

¹*Association of Naval Aviation* (Turner Publishing Company, 2003), 30.

² Walter J. Boyne, and Michael Fopp. *Air Warfare: An International Encyclopedia*, Volume 2 (ABC-CLIO, 2002), 568.

Lieutenant Jack C. Rittichier Final Mission

With three DFCs under his belt, Lt. Rittichier was called upon for what would be his final mission on June 9, 1968. By all accounts, Rittichier and his crew encountered hellfire as they approached a downed Marine Corps pilot in enemy territory. To make matters worse, the downed Marine Corp pilot had sustained a leg injury which prevented him from being able to move on his own. He was also located in terrain consisting of thick trees and forest which made it impossible for the Lt. Rittichier to land his jolly green giant. All factors considered, Lt. Rittichier and his crew would be forced to utilize their pararescue jumper (PJ) to rescue him - that is, "a dangerous procedure under any conditions as the helicopter would need to remain in a hover while the PJ deployed."¹ In other words, Lt. Rittichier and his jolly green giant would be a sitting target for the Vietcong. After another rescue team had unsuccessfully made three attempts at extracting the downed Marine Corp pilot, Lt. Rittichier and his crew agreed to give it a try. On their first pass over the downed pilot, Lt. Rittichier experienced heavy gun fire and were forced to withdraw. Following an air

¹ United States Coast Guard. "*Lieutenant Jack C. Rittichier, USCG - Coast Guard Aviator No. 997*". U.S. Department of Homeland Security, n.d. <<http://www.uscg.mil/history/people/RittichierJack.asp> (accessed August 11, 2009).

assault by U.S. attack jets on the Vietcong positions, however, Lt. Rittichier was able to maneuver his aircraft into the area. But, hovering over the downed pilot, the jolly green giant once again experienced heavy enemy fire. According to eyewitness reports, the chopper was then hit by a barrage of enemy shells and crashed to the ground in a ball of fire while trying to escape beyond the tree line.¹ All crew members including Lt. Rittichier were killed in the explosion. In 1996, Lt. Rittichier was posthumously awarded the Silver Star for his heroics and ultimate sacrifice.

***Conclusion/Final Discussion - Addressing the Roles of the USCG
in Future Threats to National Security***

The current study has examined USCG aviation in Vietnam. Specifically, a short background about the Vietnam War has been presented with analysis concerning the importance of USCG aviation support. In addition, significant contributions of USCG chopper pilots have also been explored in detail. And finally, the exploits and contributions of USCG chopper pilot Lt. Jack C. Ritticher have been presented. As explained in the current study, in the days of the Vietnam War, USCG aviation activities abroad were generally limited to search and rescue operations in conjunction with the U.S. Air Force. Moreover, on the domestic front in 1960s and early 1970s, the primary duties and

¹ Moseley, *U.S. Coast Guard*, 5.

responsibilities of the USCG involved policing the coastlines to protect the nation against smuggling, conducting rescue and support operations during natural disasters, and patrolling the Great Lakes. With the events of September 11, 2001, however, everything would change. That is, following the horrific terrorist attacks in New York, Americans were forced to realize that the battle for democracy and freedom does not always take place on foreign soil. In expressing similar thoughts, less than two years after the 9/11 attacks, Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta explained that "our nation faces a maritime threat unmatched in the capability of mass destruction."¹ Stated differently, we now live in a world where the possibility exists that a terrorist could conceal a nuclear bomb inside a container as small as a piece of luggage. As our first line of defense, the USCG, therefore, has an entirely new scope of responsibilities in protecting the nation. More precisely, threats of biological or nuclear attacks demand that the USCG has proper intelligence, adequate surveillance, as well as the means and capabilities to respond rapidly and effectively against the stated. In the future, this means that the role of the USCG will be central to national intelligence. The USCG, therefore, must be effectively linked with all branches of the

¹ Thomas P. Ostrom, *The United States Coast Guard, 1790 to the Present: a History* (Elderberry Press, Inc., 2004) 96.

military as well as agencies like the FBI and homeland security agencies such as the Domestic Nuclear Detection Office, the United States Secret Service, and the Office of Intelligence and Analysis.¹ The role of the USCG, therefore, becomes a matter of serving as the arms and legs for these various entities by acting as a real deterrent to present threats and dangers to the United States. In the final analysis, more precisely, the role of the USCG in the future becomes paramount to America's national security. It is therefore more important than ever for the nation's political leaders to heed the call and make efforts to provide proper funding and support for the USCG.

¹ CNN Inside Politics. "Coast Guard Joins Homeland Security". CNN.com, 2003 <<http://www.cnn.com/2003/ALLPOLITICS/02/25/homeland.security/index.html> (accessed August 14, 2009).

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