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**5th Weather Squadron Enlisted Weather Warriors
Airmobility By Storm During The Vietnam War**

by
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They were weather warriors--Air Force enlisted weather forecasters and observers assigned to the 5th Weather Squadron during the Vietnam War. Their primary mission was to provide meteorological support to the United States Army, Vietnam (USARV). Much of this support centered on airmobility, the backbone of Army operations during the war. With M-16 rifles in one hand and tactical weather equipment in the other, forecasters and observers stormed into battle with their sister service. This essay presents a brief history on the 5th Weather Squadron enlisted weather warriors who supported Army airmobility operations during the Vietnam War from mid-1966 to mid-1968. Their story reflects on the evolution of Army airmobility in Vietnam, the activation and organization of the 5th Weather Squadron, and significant combat events leading up to and beyond the Tet Offensive. Army combat strategy in Vietnam shaped weather support requirements.

The U.S. Army's ground war in Vietnam was largely unconventional. It involved a seesaw warfare that usually required small, mobile combat elements. This approach emerged from ill-defined battle lines and a strong enemy that preferred to use hit-and-run tactics--set up an ambush, strike, then retreat. (1:212; 4:10) To counter these tactics, the USARV employed airmobility.

Being airmobile meant the capability to quickly airlift a division's combat elements to and from a battle site. Generally, this was accomplished using helicopters, but fixed-wing aircraft were also used to deliver troops and supplies. In addition, close air support played an important role in protecting and aiding friendly ground forces. (1:212; 4:10) The combat environment in Vietnam provided the testing grounds for airmobility.

The field test of the airmobility concept came when the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) and its 440 choppers arrived in the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) during the summer and fall of 1965. Air and ground components were effectively combined and exploited to form the nucleus of Army “search-and-destroy” (or “clear-and-secure”) capabilities. Airmobile operations revolutionized Army combat tactics. The technique was so successful that it was extended to the other Army divisions. (1:212; 4:10,15) A dynamic aviation mission and a rapidly rising operations tempo in Vietnam demanded an expansion of weather support to the Army.

The 5th Weather Squadron was borne from growing Army support requirements in Vietnam. During the first six months of 1966, a limited number of forecasters and observers were available to support over 350 battalion-sized Army operations. To conduct these operations, the Army increased its helicopter inventory from 1,200 to over 5,500. In response, Headquarters Air Weather Service (AWS) expanded its Southeast Asia theater organizational structure and augmented manning accordingly. On 8 July 1966, AWS activated the 1st Weather Group at Tan Son Nhut, RVN, under the 1st Weather Wing at Hickam AFB HI. The 5th Weather Squadron, one of three squadrons under the 1st Weather Group, was activated on the same day and settled in at Long Binh Army Installation. (2:5,50; 4:11,13) The new squadron overcame some unique organizational management challenges to effectively serve a dispersed and highly mobile USARV.

The 5th Weather Squadron organized to provide meteorological services throughout the USARV. Beneath the squadron were seven weather detachments (Dets), one each with Headquarters I and II Field Forces, and one at each of the five permanent Army airfields in Vietnam that operated independently of either field force. Subordinate to each of the two

detachments at the field force level were five or six operating locations (OLs) with missions to support Army divisions, brigades, and sometimes regiments. Although not formally designated units, combat weather teams (CWTs), usually consisting of three observers, were attached to each brigade. Hence, 5th Weather Squadron troops were located with Army troops at all echelons. With some exceptions, this basic organizational structure remained as described throughout most of the war. (1:212; 4:12) All levels in the organizational structure were concerned with weather impacts on Army airmobility and ground operations.

Poor weather conditions, common in Vietnam, hampered or sometimes prevented air support critical to the success of airmobility operations. Even Army helicopters, the workhorses of airmobility, were not immune from Vietnam's weather. They could not operate in zero-ceiling and zero-visibility conditions. The crew had to see the target. Helicopter gunships were not equipped to deliver ordnance through clouds or heavy haze. A minimum 500-to-1000 foot cloud base with good visibility allowed the gunship pilots to acquire the target and deliver ordnance. Unfortunately, these low cloud bases forced the gunships to fly at lower heights where they were more vulnerable to enemy ground fire. Fixed-wing aircraft, to include close air support, were also severely restricted by inclement weather. (4:15) Weather played a major role in planning and conducting Army operations such as Operation "Attleboro."

Enlisted weather forecasters and observers were heavily involved in airmobility support during Operation "Attleboro." On 4 November 1966, the 1st Infantry Division deployed to support the 25th Infantry Division engaged in heavy fighting with the Viet Cong's 9th Division near Dau Tieng. Some 2,000 American and Allied troops were employed. Viet Cong forces were eventually overcome. The operation was reportedly the most successful to date in terms of

Viet Cong losses in men (over 1,100 killed), material, and base camps. Major General DePuy (1st Infantry Division Commander) underscored the value of the weather support to the operation when he approved the Bronze Star Medal for all 18 members of the 5th Weather Squadron who supported his division at Phu Loi. (4:19) Included in this honored group were: TSgt Raymond L. Stolarski, TSgt John W. Ashworth, SSgt Lewis P. Gibson, SSgt Orland H. Taylor, A1C James R. Abbott, and A2C John R. Bamrick. (2:76; 4:19) These men took on more than weather support.

Many of those recognized with a Bronze Star had taken the initiative to qualify as door gunners in Army gunships. These gung-ho weather troops sought qualification for this duty because non-fighting observers were a luxury (and a liability) on missions. In addition to their normal duties, these men volunteered to fly special weather reconnaissance missions in light Army aircraft and helicopters to obtain on-the-spot information on operationally significant weather. (1:213; 4:19) This input was invaluable to operations planning. Teamwork between Army soldiers and Air Force weather personnel paid big dividends in the heat of battle.

Members of Detachment 11, 5th Weather Squadron faced the fire in the spring of 1967. The 9th ARVN Division, supported by the 13th Aviation Brigade, engaged two Viet Cong battalions in Vinh Long Province. The detachment commander, Capt John L. Conley, and his three weathermen, TSgt Ken Bates, A1C William Roche, and A1C Nicky Underwood, volunteered to help prep and load munitions. For ten hours they assembled high explosive rockets and carried them to the helicopters, providing critical firepower used against the enemy. They also assisted in evacuating casualties from the helicopters. (2:81) These and similar combat situations helped

prepare weather personnel for the numerous enemy assaults during the Tet Offensive. The enemy selected the weather and the day for battle.

The Tet Offensive was timed to coincide with the poor weather of the northeast monsoon and the traditional Vietnamese Tet celebration for ushering in the lunar new year--29 January 1968. The northeast monsoon produced extensive and persistent rain, low cloud bases, and poor visibility to hindered airmobility operations and concealed enemy troop movements. Conditions were ripe for an enemy attack. On the evening of 30-31 January 1968, the communist Tet Offensive began attacks at a hundred locations from the demilitarized zone to the Mekong Delta and the Ca Mau Peninsula. The North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong struck at nearly 40 major towns and cities. In the largest offensive to that date, about 84,000 of the 200,000 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops south of the 17th Parallel attacked 36 of the 44 provincial capitals in the RVN. (4:19-20) The operations tempo quickly rose to a frantic pace.

The Tet Offensive demanded prompt action. The Army's shifting tactics and force applications resulted in the relocation and activation of several 5th Weather Squadron OLS, CWTs, and weather facilities. These changes focused on providing weather support at the fight to better serve airmobile operations in the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) and 101st Air Cavalry Division. These units moved into the northern provinces. 5th Weather Squadron units were ready to go when the cavalry moved out. Weather forecasters and observers deployed to Camp Evans and Camp Eagle with the Army. (4:59) These camps were within easy striking distance of Hue.

With a population of 140,000, Hue was the third largest city in the RVN. Employing 7 to 10 battalions, the enemy carefully selected the time of the attack. Under concealment of fog, the

enemy shuttled 16 battalions of regular units into the city. By daybreak, 31 January 1968, the enemy controlled all but the city's northern corner. Action was taken immediately to relieve the pressure on Hue. Three marine battalions, 11 South Vietnamese battalions, and eventually four battalions from the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) were sent to the city. Some of the most furious combat of the war ensued. Much of it was house-to-house. (4:20-22) Both weather and combat conditions tested weather troops at the battle of Hue.

Deployed forecasters and observers worked under austere conditions to provide weather support to Army ground and air operations at Hue. The manpower and equipment changes during the period, combined with Army's tactical flexibility, resulted in an almost impossible command and control situation. Communications were poor. Voice circuits were scarce in the tactical outfits, particularly in the rapid reaction forces such as the airborne and aircavalry units. Weather data circuits were down as much as 60 percent of the time so few weather products made it in to or out of the field. Field work also denied forecasters access to critical weather satellite and radar information. As a result, most combat support forecasting was done at the local level where enlisted forecasters used crude rule-of-thumb and single station forecasting techniques to overcome data shortfall. (4:52,59; 5:ii-iv,1-2,7) These problems plagued weather operations right up to the siege of Khe Sanh.

On 1 April 1968, Capt Taylor (OL-2, Det 31 OIC) and his weather observer team departed Camp Evans for Landing Zone Stud to support Operation Pegasus--the relief of Khe Sanh that kicked off the same day. His observing team included Sgt Victor Bertoni, Sgt Kenneth G. Flett, Sgt Alton J. Keel, Jr., and Donald R. Toay. The 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) was heavily involved in supporting the troops at the besieged Khe Sanh. For the first time, the 1st Cavalry

Division (Airmobile) had made an assault as a division entity. Every committed battalion came into combat by helicopter. Capt Taylor and his men worked out of Landing Zone Stud throughout the operation, answering questions from the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) commander (Major General Tolson) and his staff about weather impacts on flying operations. (4:24,60)

Weather had major impacts on military operations during the siege at Khe Sanh. The topography combined with the northeast monsoon to cause a virtual fog factory. For any one day the best weather during the siege lasted only six hours when clouds were scattered-to-broken condition between 1,000 and 2,000 feet. Visibility was never much better than five miles. Because fog kept the runway closed 40 percent of the time, commanders wanted to know when dense fog would burn off each day long enough to permit helicopter assault and support operations. (4:24,60) Occasionally, weather observers were required on the Khe Sanh battlefield.

Trained Marine Corps weather observers at Khe Sanh transmitted hourly weather reports except when the fighting grew too intense. However, their barometer began to give erroneous altimeter settings, a critical reading for safe airdrops of cargo. Following a call for volunteers, an observer stepped forward. There is some doubt as to who this individual was, but sources indicate it may have been Sgt Robert A. Ballard. He volunteered for this duty within 3 days of completing a 6-month extension to his 1-year tour. He flew to Khe Sanh with a new barometer, a AN/PMQ-7 weather observing kit, an M-16 rifle, and a side arm. In the coming days he operated with minimum sleep to produce reliable barometric pressures and other weather observation data

needed for air operations. (1:319) Focus shifted to a ground maneuvers as Khe Sanh became more secure.

As the Marines and various elements of the division moved along Highway 9 to Khe Sanh, Capt Taylor's observing team moved with them. Soldiering and surviving occupied most of their time in the first week. They returned to Camp Evans the day Pegasus concluded, 15 April 1968. (1:319; 4:60) Attention quickly turned to the A Shau Valley.

Four days later, when the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) launched its "reconnaissance in force" into the A Shau Valley, Capt Taylor and two observers went into the valley's northernmost extremities with the 3d Brigade's initial air assault and deployment. His two observers were A1Cs David B. Gittens and David B. Miller. They were armed with 38-caliber pistols, M-16 rifles, and grenades, and were equipped with some tactical weather gear and an FM radio. (4:61) Contact with the two airmen was easily lost using FM radio, so pairs of observers were alternated out of a half-way point in the A Shau Valley in an effort to network radio weather reports. A1Cs Gittens and Miller relayed their weather observations to the new team situated with an artillery battery on the side of a hill ("Signal Hill") overlooking the valley. Observations received on "Signal Hill" were then relayed to Camp Evans. (4:61)

Weather observer Sgt Robert F. Cunningham served on Signal Hill. "It was muddy and wet at the top of the barren mountain," Sgt Cunningham stated about his experience in the A Shau Valley. Their position was in a pass marking an airmobile helicopter route into the valley. They provided weather information on visibility, clouds, and winds used by pilots in flight planning to determine the safest flight path through the mountains. The observers rose each morning an hour before first-light to take weather readings and relay them to division headquarters. It continued

until dark when they took turns with others, sleeping and standing guard. Army intelligence estimated a full enemy battalion surrounded the weathermen. Enemy contact was common. Sgt Cunningham recounted, "One time, I saw movement only about 25 feet or so from my foxhole. I heaved a couple of 'frags' [fragmentation hand grenades] and the mortars chopped up the immediate area. We made no attempt, however, to check the area afterwards. We were under orders not to fire our rifles as the flash would give our exact position away. It was, all in all, quite an experience--one that I'll never forget." (4:63-64)

As with many units, the 5th Weather Squadron saw its gravest days in terms of casualties during the Tet Offensive and in the months that followed. It was during this period the squadron suffered 3 fatalities and 10 injuries due to hostile action. In fact, three of the four AWS weathermen (all enlisted) killed in action in Vietnam were assigned to the 5th Weather Squadron. (4:67,74)

4 January 1968: An Khe AI, RVN, OL-2, Det 31. Twenty-seven mortar rounds impacted in the vicinity of the weather station. One round exploded on the roof of the weather station producing over 100 shrapnel puncture holes throughout the facility. The duty observer, Sgt Robert A. Ballard Jr., received a shrapnel flesh wound. (5:Appendix 5)

7 February 1968: Camp Evans, RVN, OL-2, Det 31. An unknown number of mortar rounds impacted in the vicinity of the weather station tent and living area. Sgt David B. Miller received a minor shrapnel wound. (5:Appendix 5)

4 March 1968: Ban Me Thuot AAF, RVN, Det 10. At about 0300 hours, the Army's permanent airfield at Ban Me Thuot came under enemy 82MM mortar attack. Most of the weathermen were asleep in their hootch when the second mortar round penetrated the roof and

detonated before they could take cover. SSgt Reese J. Wardell (Forecaster) was seriously wounded and was later evacuated stateside. SSgt Thomas L. Banes was also wounded and later returned to duty. SSgt James C. Swann (Chief Observer) and SSgt Edward W. Milan (Observer) both suffered multiple, penetrating shrapnel wounds. SSgt Swann died instantly. SSgt Milan was taken by helicopter to a field evacuation hospital at Tuy Hoa Air Base. He died enroute, having never regained consciousness. SSgts Swann and Milan were both married. (5:Appendix 5; f:69)

7 March 1968: Dau Tieng AI, RVN, CWT3, OL-2, Det 32. The weather station, tower complex, and weather living area, all located in an abandoned villa, took 3 direct hits when Dau Tieng received an unknown number of mixed 122MM rocket and mortar fire. SSgt Emmette W. Woods (Observer) received a shrapnel wound. The living area was destroyed and the weather station was heavily damaged. (5:Appendix 5)

7 March 1968: Lai Khe AI, RVN, CWT3, OL-1, Det 32. Three mortar rounds impacted in the vicinity of the weather station. One round landed 25 yards from the station and the concussion of the explosion wounded SSgt Jere P. Norman (Observer). (5:Appendix 5)

13 March 1968: Dak To, RVN, CWT 1, OL-4, Det 31. A 122MM rocket impacted approximately 6 feet from the CWT tent used as living quarters. A1C Max D. Dalton (Observer) was slightly wounded when he was knocked down by the blast while attempting to gain cover in a bunker. (5:Appendix 5)

18 March 1968: Landing Zone Baldy, RVN, CWT 2, OL-6, Det 31. SSgt Eduardo Garcia, Jr., was a passenger in a jeep heading north, approximately five miles north of Landing Zone Baldy on Highway 1 in Vietnam. Married and the father of two sons, SSgt Garcia was returning

to his base camp at Chu Lai where he supported Americal Division elements. His jeep party passed a burning village. They turned around and were ambushed. SSgt Garcia received mortal wounds from an AK-47 assault rifle while exchanging gunfire with the enemy. He had been in country since 19 February 1968. (5:Appendix 5; f:69)

9 May 1968: Camp Evans, RVN, OL-2, Det 32. At 0730 Camp Evans received an unknown number of 122MM rocket rounds. Several rounds impacted near the weather tents putting all three vehicles assigned to the OL out of commission and wounding SSgt Robert C. James (Chief Observer) and SSgt John E. Gordon (Observer). (5:Appendix 5)

7 June 1968: Phu Loi AI, RVN, OL-1, Det 32. One friendly artillery round impacted 20 meters from the weather barracks. The barracks suffered extensive shrapnel damage. MSgt Franklin A. Bills (Forecaster) received 3 shrapnel wounds. (5:Appendix 5)

In addition, the following individuals received Bronze Star Medals with a Valor device during the same period: SSgt Joe L. Markham (OL-3, Det 31), SSgt Larry D. Scoggins (Det 11), Sgt Barton J. Whalen (Det 11), Sgt Ronald Maxechuk (Det 11), and Sgt Max D. Dalton (OL-4, Det 31)

The hardships of combat forged strong bonds between airman and soldier. Lt Col Cummins, 5th Weather Squadron Commander from August 68 - October 69, pointed out that “our men wear the patches of the Army units we support. We live with them, eat with them, and, if there’s trouble, we fight alongside them.” (1:214)

Sgt Michael Connell (CWT Chief, Phuoc Vinh, OL-2, Det 31) had this to say about his Army brothers in arms from the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile): “We get a very deep sense of satisfaction working with the ‘Cav’ because it is a division noted for its success against the

enemy..and the information we obtain and pass on plays a vital role in the planning of each operation.” (3:31)

The 5th Weather Squadron enlisted weather warriors have a proud history. The genesis of this history is found in the evolution of Army airmobility during the Vietnam War. This led to the activation of the 5th Weather Squadron which organized its resources to provide tailored weather support to USARV operations at all echelons of command. The squadron’s most valuable resources were the forecasters and observers who gave their all, and sometimes their lives, to make airmobility count against the enemy at Hue, Khe Sanh, in the A Shau Valley, and in numerous battlefields across Vietnam. They were weather warriors--they were warfighters--they were the 5th Weather Squadron forecasters and observers who helped make Army airmobility operations a success in the Vietnam War. As a brigade commander in the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) put it, “We fight three things: the enemy, the terrain, and the weather, and the 5th Weather Squadron provides us with the answers about the weather.” (1:218-219)

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