

WELL BEFORE DAWN

**by
George C. Miller**

Not always, but usually, helicopter units in Vietnam flew their missions in broad daylight but the units never really slept. Aircrews returning from a day's mission were far from being done for the day. Aircraft commanders and their copilots had to complete the logbook, a walk around post flight inspection and report to flight operations for debriefing. The gunner collects the two M-60 machine guns and heads for the armory for a couple of hours of weapon cleaning and maintenance. Flight engineers and crew chiefs do their post flight inspections, top off all fluid levels and generally prepare the bird for the next days flights. Maintenance discrepancies that they can't handle are coordinated with the company maintenance platoon. Hours after landing the crews head to the mess hall for a meal or to the clubs for a drink and meal. By now it is 2000 hours or so and time for some quick letter writing, reading or just relaxing with the stereo playing favorite tunes in their hooch's. Armed Forces Television broadcasts four hours a night from an orbiting C-47 airplane and Tuesdays the program Combat and 12 O'clock High keep the whole camp busy. As the clock swings past 2130, most lights are out and the flight crews are trying to get some sleep, sometime hard, due to the adrenalin rush from the day's mission. It is already known that tomorrow will be a maximum effort as it is everyday. An uncertain calm settles over the company, hopefully not interrupted by enemy mortars or incoming rocket fire.

None of the lights are off down at the flight line. In flight operations, one of the operations officers is receiving mission requests for the next day, platoon leaders are matching crews who will man the aircraft and clerks are making out mission sheets. Platoon leaders scheduling pilots are trying to put experienced aircraft commanders with less qualified co-pilots insuring the best crew mixes. With the high tempo of daily operations, crew rest is taken into consideration and the more rested pilots are scheduled first up. At intervals, pilots must be scheduled with one of the unit instructor pilots for proficiency check rides and possible promotion to aircraft commander. A few doors down the night maintenance crews are working in the hot humid hangars preparing enough aircraft to meet tomorrow's maximum effort. They must produce seven fully mission capable aircraft plus two spares. The direct support maintenance detachment is turning wrenches on the more serious problems that the company maintenance platoon is not authorized to repair. Sheet metal mechanics are applying more permanent patches to the bullet holes that the flight crew hastily patched with green tape during the days missions. The Charge of Quarters (CQ) is on duty in the orderly room keeping a phone watch for anything that may come in from higher headquarters. He also reviews his list of wakeup calls that will begin in the early hours of the morning. Around 0130 on the new duty day, the CQ wakes the first cook and the KP's (kitchen police) who will begin preparing breakfast. Lights are now on in the mess hall kitchen and fresh coffee is made to replace what has long since turned to mud for the night shift maintenance and operations crews. The CQ has a map of sorts that shows each soldiers bunk in all the hooch's in the company area. The same map is available in the flight operations.

Most of the missions will require the aircraft to be in the air before sunrise, which occurs around 0600. The flight operations crew begins waking the flight engineers, crew chiefs and

gunners at 0330, followed shortly by the aircraft commanders and pilots. The crews quickly wash-up, usually in the dark and head for the mess hall for breakfast. Breakfast consists of eggs, bacon or ham, oatmeal, dried fruit and dry cereals. Reconstituted milk, juice and coffee make up the available beverages. This will be the last chance for the crews to fully relax until after dark. Breakfast complete, the crew chiefs are each issued a case of C-Rations that will sustain their crews for the rest of the day. The flight engineers head for their birds for the daily inspections and prepare for the preflight inspection that the pilots will perform. The gunners pick up the two M-60D machine guns and as much ammo that they can beg, borrow or steal from the arms room. The pilots are in flight operations receiving their briefings for the day's missions, collecting the classified frequency lists and signing for the morphine. The clock is ticking and as 0500 approaches, the crews are united at the individual aircraft and the preflight inspection and preflight crew briefing are completed with particular attention to escape and evasion procedures and the rules of engagement.

At long last the aircraft are fired up, pre-taxi checks are made and the aircraft commander commands "ramp up" and the flight engineer reports "ramp up, ready in the rear. The gunner and crew chief report "clear right, clear left" and the long day begins. In the hours before daylight the pace has been hectic but everyone performs with the professionalism, calm and precision that comes with experience, training, and esprit.

Radios come to life, "ops, Pachyderm One-Six rolling, ops, Pachyderm Two-Four departing, ops, Pachyderm Three Bravo on the roll." As the sun is rising in the east, in turn, seven aircraft and crews head into harms way to support our most precious commodity, the soldiers on the ground, American, Australian, Korean or South Vietnamese. Everyone in the aircraft is confident in our machine and each other; after all "it only happens to the other guy."

The unit in this story is the 200th Assault Support Helicopter Company, a CH-47 Chinook unit based at Bear Cat. This story was repeated, on a daily basis, in units from the Mekong Delta to the Demilitarized Zone during the Vietnam War.