

A Tale of Two Units: The 129th Assault Helicopter Company

by Kenneth Finlayson

THE 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR) provides rotary wing (helicopter) aviation support to today's Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF). The "Night Stalkers" are the premier practitioners of long-range, low-level night operations. During the Vietnam War, the 129th Assault Helicopter Company performed missions similar to those associated with modern SOF aviation. Inactivated in the years after the Vietnam War, the 129th was resurrected during the formative years of the 160th SOAR.¹

The 129th Assault Helicopter Company was formed on 3 July 1965 and activated on 5 July 1965 at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. The unit deployed to Vietnam where it served from 21 October 1965 to 8 March 1973. The company was assigned to the 10th Aviation Battalion, part of the 17th Aviation Group. An Assault Helicopter Company, the principal mission of the 129th was the tactical air movement of troops and equipment within the area of operations. In conjunction with this mission, armed helicopters provided suppressive fire support to protect the insertion of troops. The organization of the company reflected these two missions.

When the unit arrived in Vietnam, it was organized into four platoons. Two of the platoons were "lift platoons" flying Bell UH-1D "Huey" helicopters. (In 1968 the unit received newer "H" model Hueys). Called "Slicks" because the cargo area of the helicopter was devoid of seats or other equipment to facilitate carrying troops and cargo, these two platoons formed the "Bulldog" element of the company. Supporting the two lift platoons was one armed platoon, nicknamed the "Cobras,"

flying the UH-1B model "Hog" Hueys. (Later in the war, Bell fielded the AH-1 Cobra model attack helicopter, a two-man gunship.)² The fourth platoon in the company was the service platoon that included the aviation maintenance, supply, and mess teams.

After a year in Vietnam, the company reorganized into a five-platoon configuration by adding a third lift platoon as well as the 394th Aircraft Maintenance Transportation Detachment and the 433rd Medical Detachment (Air Ambulance) for additional maintenance and medical capability.³ The average strength of the company was 15 officers, 52 warrant officers,



The troop-carrying element of the 129th was known as the Bulldogs. A UH-1D with the Bulldog Logo.



UH-1D "Slick" was the troop-carrying aircraft of the 129th.



129th Vietnam shoulder patch



10th Aviation Battalion Distinctive Unit Insignia



17th Aviation Group Distinctive Unit Insignia
66 Veritas



A UH-1D of the 129th lands atop a ridge in Vietnam. The mission to deliver troops and equipment dictated landings such as this.



The principle mission of the 129th was to support the air assault operations of the United States and its allies.

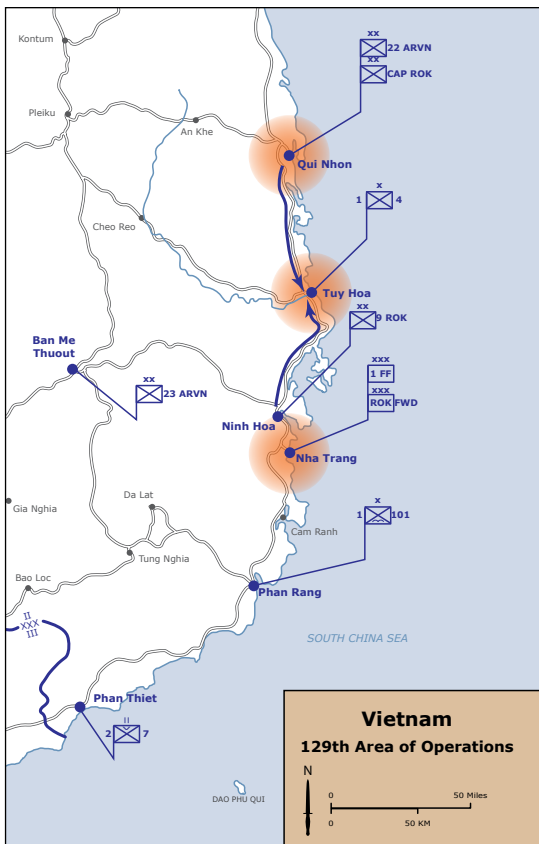
and 152 enlisted men. The two flying elements, the “Bulldogs” and “Cobras,” were the reason behind the company motto “Bite and Strike.” The unit compiled an impressive record during the eight years it was in Vietnam.

The 129th supported a wide variety of units and missions in Vietnam. The company flew in support of the U.S. 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), 4th Infantry Division, and 25th Infantry Division, as well as the 5th Special Forces Group (SFG). The 129th also worked extensively with units of the Republic of Korea (ROK) 2nd Marine Brigade (Blue Dragons), the Army’s Capitol (Tiger) Division, and 9th (White Horse) Division, as well as the 47th Army of Vietnam (ARVN) Regiment.⁴

Many of the missions performed were similar to those now associated with Army Special Operations Aviation (ARSOA). On 13 March 1966, the company joined with the 48th and 117th Assault Helicopter companies that supported the 1st Brigade (Airborne), 101st Airborne Division, to conduct a battalion-sized night

combat assault in the vicinity of Tuy Hoa. This was the first large night insertion in the war. The insertion took place at 0140 hours into a series of rice paddies marked only by the flashlights of Pathfinder Teams.⁵ Later, the 129th would insert and extract Long-Range Reconnaissance Patrols (LRRPs) from the 101st and Special Forces teams from 5th SFG.⁶ Support to ARSOF units in the Republic of Vietnam made the 129th a forerunner of the 3-160. Another was its ability to rapidly deploy as a unit.

In the parlance of the time, the 129th was an “airmobile light” aviation company. The unit was designed, and trained extensively, for rapid displacement from one location in theater to another. The unit could, and frequently did, dismantle the entire company operation, pack, palletize equipment, and relocate with the objective of being capable of launching missions upon arrival. All the mess equipment, tentage, and supply and service equipment were palletized for loading onto U.S. Air Force C-130 aircraft, which also carried the company’s wheeled vehicles.⁷ The company helicopters self-deployed to the new location, and the unit was normally capable of meeting all support requirements on the day it arrived. Between January 1966 and September 1967, as an example, the



Map of Vietnam highlighting areas where the 129th conducted missions.



When the 129th returned to Fort Bragg in 1973, it was part of the 82nd Aviation Battalion.



82nd Aviation Battalion Distinctive Unit Insignia

unit made seventeen tactical deployments to various locations in South Vietnam.⁸

The 129th remained in Vietnam until 1973, when the unit returned to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. For its service in Vietnam, the unit was awarded two Valorous Unit Awards, two Meritorious Unit Commendations, the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry, and the Vietnamese Civic Action Honor Medal. Thirty-nine members of the unit were killed in action during the 129th's eight years of service in Vietnam.⁹

On the company's return to the United States, the 129th became B Company, 82nd Aviation Battalion, at Fort Bragg. Further restructuring of aviation assets in the battalion resulted in the inactivation of the 129th on 15 September 1979. After a seven year "break in service," the 129th Special Operations Aviation Company (SOAC) was activated at Hunter Army Airfield, Georgia, on 3 October 1986, under the command and control of the 160th Special Operations Aviation Battalion.¹⁰ Major Gene Edwards was the first commander.

The 129th SOAC was activated as part of 1st Special Operations Command (SOCOM) and joined with the four Special Forces Group aviation detachments and the 160th Aviation Battalion as the Army's Special Operations Aviation components. Task Force (TF) 160 was the Army's response to Desert One, the failed attempt to rescue the American hostages in Iran in 1980. Henceforth the Army would have dedicated aviation support to Army special operations forces. Task Force 160 was based at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, and initially consisted of a headquarters and headquarters company, five aviation companies, and a maintenance company. From



1st Special Operations Command shoulder patch

October 1986 until January 1988, the 129th remained a separate aviation company supporting 1st SOCOM.

The newly reactivated 129th SOAC bore little resemblance to the Vietnam-era 129th Assault Helicopter Company. Designed to be a separate aviation company, the 129th was organized into a headquarters platoon, three flight platoons, and a maintenance platoon. The unit received new UH-60A Black Hawks directly from the Sikorsky production facility in Stratford, Connecticut. The 129th pilots picked up the aircraft at the factory and flew them to Corpus Christi, Texas. The installation of larger additional internal fuel tanks, advanced avionics, fast-rope extraction systems, an electronic hoist, and satellite communications equipment converted the UH-60As into the SOF-specific MH-60A models.¹¹ The company received fifteen MH-60As, five of which were subsequently allocated to the 617th Special Operations Aviation Detachment (SOAD) that was dedicated to provide aviation support to the Special Operations Command South (SOCSOUTH) in Panama.¹² (See sidebar.)

Chief Warrant Officer 4 (CW4) Todd Thelin was one of the first pilots assigned to the 129th and was part of the crew that picked up the new Black Hawks. "When I reported in there were only six people, the commander and his two instructor pilots, one crew chief, plus another pilot and an E-7 [sergeant first class] who reported in the day before me. We had a hand-me-down desk and three chairs in a borrowed office in the Hunter [Army Airfield (HAAF)] Legal Center,"¹³ said Thelin. The first priority was to get the new aircraft.

"In the first couple of months our flying consisted of going up to Connecticut to pick up aircraft at the factory," Thelin related. "We normally picked up two at a time so our group consisted of four pilots and our one crew chief, Sergeant Bruce Willard. Once we picked up the aircraft, our standard route went west from the factory to the Hudson River. Then we flew down the river, took a few photo [opportunity] turns around the Statue



The 129th picked up "Vanilla" UH-60A Black Hawks from the Sikorsky factory and took them to Texas to receive the special operations modifications.



The MH-60A Black Hawk was the first MH-60 model used by the 129th to support Army Special Operations Forces.

of Liberty, exited south past the Verrazano Narrows Bridge, and headed southwest for the long boring flight to Texas.”¹⁴ The delivery flights were in daylight and took two or three days, with the flight stopping every two hours. It took eight trips over four months to pick up the new Black Hawks and deliver them to Corpus Christi. When the modifications were completed, the aircraft were delivered to HAAF and training commenced in earnest.¹⁵

Major James A. Cerniglia, who replaced Major Edwards in August 1987, was the second and final commander of the 129th. He commanded the unit until the company was inactivated in 1989. The 129th’s mission was to “provide long-range rotary-wing air lift support to special operations units, Rangers, Special Forces, SEALs, and others [“White SOF”]. The primary customers were Special Forces units.”¹⁶ To support these units, the 129th underwent an extensive training program. As Cerniglia described the training program, “The focus of attention was on night, long-range, low-level flight operations. The unit trained in Europe, Canada, off-shore in the Gulf of Mexico, Panama, Honduras, and in almost every state in the U.S. Flight crews were required to attend rotary wing egress [in-water exit “dunker”] training at Jacksonville, [Florida] every six months, and regularly conducted night vision goggle ship landing training with the Navy. Survival training, weapons training, land navigation, and an extremely demanding physical training program complimented the personal skills [individual tactical and survival] training required by the Army Training Program.”¹⁷



Special Operations Command South shoulder patch

Captain Richard W. Sheppard, a flight platoon commander, noted that the training program was not the only mission for the company. “At the time, we were



Chief Warrant Officer 5 Charles B. Lapp in the “Dunker” prior to immersion.

617th SOAD

THE 617th Special Operations Aviation Detachment (SOAD) was the first forward-deployed Army Special Operations Aviation (ARSOA) element in the Army Special Operations Forces inventory.¹ Born out of Initiative 17, which was the joint Army and Air Force directive that aligned rotary-wing (helicopter) aviation under the Army and fixed-wing aviation under the Air Force, it supported Special Operations. The 617th was formed out of the 129th Special Operations Aviation Company (SOAC) to replace the five Air Force UH-1N Hueys based at Howard Air Force Base, Panama.²

The 129th SOAC was activated at Hunter Army Airfield, Georgia, on 3 October 1986. Of the original 15 MH-60 Black Hawks assigned to the 129th, five were stationed at Howard AFB in September 1987, in what became the 617th SOAD. For the first eighteen months of the detachment’s existence, a platoon from the 129th deployed to Panama on a 180-day temporary duty (TDY) rotation to man the unit. The rotations continued until March 1989, when the 617th accepted the transfer of the five aircraft and stood on its own.³ In July 1994, the 617th became D Company, 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment.

The mission of the 617th was to provide rotary-wing aviation support to Special Operations Command South (SOCSOUTH), at that time based in Panama. The 617th was under the operational control (OPCON) of SOCSOUTH. Administrative control (ADCON) of the unit was through the 129th SOAC, part of the 160th Special Operations Aviation Group (SOAG). The 617th provided the aviation support to all SOF units operating in the SOCSOUTH area of operations. In December 1989, the 617th participated in Operation JUST CAUSE in Panama, providing aviation support to the SOF forces involved.

- 1 Major Walter Rugen, “The Impact of Forward-Based Special Operations Aviation,” *Special Warfare*, Summer 2001, Vol. 14, No. 3, 23–25.
- 2 Lieutenant Colonel Andrew N. Milani II, “Evolution of the 3-160th SOAR Through Desert Storm,” *Special Warfare*, Summer 2001, Vol. 14, No. 3, 14.
- 3 Lieutenant Colonel (retired) Richard W. Sheppard, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 9 February 2007, Fort Bragg, NC, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Chief Warrant Officer 5 Charles Lapp, 3rd Battalion, 160th SOAR, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 11 April 2007, Fort Bragg, NC, notes in the USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.



Fort Kobbe and Howard Air Force Base are located on the Pacific coast of Panama near the western end of the Panama Canal.



Aerial view of Howard Air Force Base, Panama, home of the 617th Special Operations Aviation Detachment.

recruiting, training, and deploying, all at the same time.”¹⁸ In order to man the 617th in Panama, one platoon deployed to Fort Kobbe on a 180-day temporary duty (TDY) rotation. This rotation continued for two years, until 1989, when the 617th became OPCON (operational control) to SOCSOUTH.¹⁹ After two hectic years supporting Army SOF world-wide, the 129th was again inactivated, but its lineage was perpetuated.



160th Special Operations Aviation Group beret flash

On 16 January 1988, the 129th Aviation Company was inactivated at Hunter Army Airfield, Georgia, and was immediately reconstituted as A Company, 3rd Battalion, 160th Special Operations Aviation Group (Airborne) (SOAG).²⁰ The Modified Table of Organization and Equipment (MTOE) for the company was the same as that of the former 129th, which authorized seven officers, twenty-six warrant officers, and ninety-four enlisted soldiers.²¹ Company A became the nucleus for the new 3rd Battalion, 160th SOAG. The stand-up of

the new battalion would take another year.

The 3rd Battalion was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Dell L. Dailey. On 2 June 1989, Dailey officially activated the battalion. At the time of its activation, 3rd Battalion, 160th SOAG, consisted of Headquarters and Headquarters Company (HHC) commanded by Captain Richard W. Sheppard, A Company commanded by Major Mark Ochsenbein, B Company (briefly under First Lieutenant Eric Peterson), then commanded by Major Bruce Bridges, C Company led by Major Conway Ellers, and D Company commanded by Major Robert Brunns.²²

The elements of the former 129th formed the heart of the battalion. The mess section, vehicle maintenance section, supply, parachute riggers, and battalion staff came from the headquarters platoon of the 129th. Company A, after formally transferring five MH-60A Black Hawks to the 617th was built around the ten remaining 129th aircraft. B Company was equipped with eight MH-47 Chinook helicopters that required extensive SOF-peculiar modifications to configure them into the MH-47. C Company was created from the 129th aviation maintenance platoon.²³ D Company was to provide command and control of the flight detachments supporting each of the four Special Forces Groups. Each SF Group had a flight detachment of four MH-60A Black Hawks. At the direction of 1st SOCOM, D Company was created to standardize training and support for the detachments located at



Training with the 7th Special Forces Group over Lake Huron, Michigan, using the troop ladder method of ascending to the helicopter.



Crews of the 129th training with members of 7th Special Forces Group helocasting in Panama.



The 129th flew MH-60A Black Hawks during deck landings with the Navy off the coast of Virginia.



Training using the Stabilized Body Operations (STABO) harness. This system can be used for insertion and extraction of troops.



160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment beret flash



160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment Distinctive Unit Insignia

Fort Lewis, Washington, Fort Campbell, Kentucky, Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and Fort Devens, Massachusetts. In early 1990, the SFG flight detachments were disbanded to provide the force structure spaces for what was to become the 2nd Battalion, 160th SOAG.²⁴ With the transfer of the SF Group flight detachments, D Company's mission was complete.

The mission of 3rd Battalion was to support the same "White" SOF units as the 129th. When the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (Airborne) was activated from the 160th SOAG on 26 June 1990, the 3rd Battalion shared some of the White SOF support mission with the newly-created 2nd Battalion. The first combat deployment for the 3rd Battalion was as Task Force 3-160. The 3rd Battalion, with elements of the 2nd Battalion, deployed in support of ARSOF in Operation DESERT STORM in September 1990. During the six-week war, TF 3-160 flew fifty-seven combat missions in support of Special Forces without losing any soldiers.²⁵

The success of TF 3-160 in Operation DESERT STORM was the capstone of a four-year evolution in which the 129th SOAC became the 3rd Battalion, 160th SOAR. The 129th lineage goes back to the Vietnam War. The flight missions performed by the 129th Assault Helicopter Company in support of SOF elements laid the foundation for the long-range night penetrations that are the hallmark of the Night Stalkers. ♣

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The MH-60L Black Hawks and MH-47G Chinooks are the latest models in use by the 3rd Battalion, 160th SOAR.

- 2 Alex Fernwalt, "129th Aviation Company History," <http://www.huey.co.uk/129th.php>, 1-5.
- 3 First Lieutenant Edwin Steven Brague Jr., "Unit Historical Outline: 1 January 1966 to 31 December 1966," <http://www.129th.net/history/1966.html>, 3. **First Lieutenant Brague, the compiler of the 1966 unit historical report, was killed on 7 January 1967 while on a mission with the 129th.**
- 4 Brague, "Unit Historical Outline," 7-9.
- 5 Brague, "Unit Historical Outline," 2.
- 6 Brague, "Unit Historical Outline," 4-6.
- 7 "Airmobile Light," *Hawk Magazine*, 1st Aviation Brigade Public Affairs Office, September 1967, <http://www.1stavnbd.com/Articles/129art1.html>, 1-3.
- 8 "Airmobile Light", 2.
- 9 Fernwalt, "129th Aviation Company History," 5.
- 10 Lieutenant Colonel Andy Milani, "Evolution of the 3-160th SOAR Through Desert Storm," *Special Warfare*, Summer 2001, Vol. 14, No. 3, 14.
- 11 Lieutenant Colonel (retired) Richard W. Sheppard, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 9 February 2007, Fort Bragg, NC, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Milani, "Evolution of the 3-160th SOAR Through Desert Storm," 15; Chief Warrant Officer 5 Charles Lapp, 3rd Battalion, 160th SOAR, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 11 April 2007, Fort Bragg, NC, notes, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 12 Sheppard interview.
- 13 Chief Warrant Officer Todd Thelin, 3rd Battalion, 160th SOAR, e-mail to Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 15 March 2007, copy, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 14 Thelin e-mail.
- 15 Thelin e-mail.
- 16 Colonel (retired) James A. Cerniglia, e-mail to Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 7 March 2007, copy, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 17 Cerniglia e-mail.
- 18 Sheppard interview.
- 19 Lieutenant Colonel (retired) Richard W. Sheppard, e-mail to Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 12 March 2007, copy, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 20 Headquarters, Department of the Army, General Orders No. 3, 16 January 1988, copy, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 21 Department of the Army, MTOE 1-257JFC58, FC 1088 dated 16 January 1988, copy, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 22 Colonel Andrew N. Milani II, United States Army Special Operations Command, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 9 February 2007, Fort Bragg, NC, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Milani, "Evolution of the 3-160th SOAR Through Desert Storm," 16; Sheppard document.
- 23 Sheppard interview; Milani, "Evolution of the 3-160th SOAR Through Desert Storm," 16.
- 24 Sheppard document; Milani, "Evolution of the 3-160th SOAR Through Desert Storm," 16.
- 25 Milani, "Evolution of the 3-160th SOAR Through Desert Storm," 22.

Endnotes

- 1 While not a SOF aviation unit, the 129th did support SOF elements on the ground. The most direct link from the 129th to the 160th was First Lieutenant Bryan D. Brown, who was assigned to the 129th from September 1971 to April 1972. The former commander of the 160th SOAR, General Brown is currently the Commanding General of United States Special Operations Command.