



The UH-1 Helicopter: Icon of the Vietnam War by Cheryl Fries

“We rode to war in a Huey, and that whop-whop-whop is burned into our brains.”

- General Harold Moore, commander, Battle of Ia Drang

Every modern war has its icon, the technological development essential to the conflict, the one that changes the course of battle and becomes, ever after, symbolic of the time. The Civil War’s cannon, World War I’s machine gun, World War II’s tank — each left its mark on the landscape and the soldier. Vietnam’s icon was the helicopter, specifically the UH-1 utility helicopter soldiers referred to as “the Huey.”

The geographic and political realities of Vietnam called for a new kind of warfare, one the U.S. Army termed “Airmobile.” Remote battle zones, mountains topped in old-growth hardwood jungles, and poorly developed roads eliminated motor vehicles as a means of quickly moving masses of troops and supplies. Helicopters took over. In Airmobile warfare, flocks of helicopters took troops and supplies to strategic locations, monitored operations from the air, engaged in battle, and evacuated forces. The famed U.S. Army 1st Cavalry joined aviation units already in Vietnam to pioneer Airmobile operations, trading its horses for helicopters and creating an archetype followed by the 101st Airborne, the 1st Aviation Brigade, and several other aviation units and smaller detachments. Many helicopters were used in Vietnam, but none was as widely employed as the Huey.

The UH-1 “Iroquois,” popularly dubbed the Huey, is known as “the workhorse of the Vietnam War,” used by all military forces for troop transport, medical evacuation, and combat assault. Hueys transported soldiers and supplies to the lines as the horses for a modern cavalry. The U.S. Army and Marine Corps made them into gunships, modifying them with machine guns and air-to-ground rocket pods and putting them to work in frontal assaults. Hueys carried officers to develop battle plans, soldiers to battle, nurses to orphanages, and “Donut Dollies” to entertain troops. Outfitted with broadcasting systems, they ferried Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) messengers. And, perhaps most significantly, Hueys were the technology behind “Dustoffs,” evacuations of the wounded so-named by a pilot who gave his life doing it. The ability to swoop into the battle, load the Huey with wounded, and fly to evacuation hospitals, started in Korea and refined in Vietnam, has been called “one of the major medical innovations of the Vietnam War.” This quick transport meant that more than 90

percent of wounded soldiers who reached a medical facility survived. The medical evacuation technology gained in the Huey experience of Vietnam came home to become the air rescue operations we today take for granted.

The Huey is an enormously versatile helicopter, easily modified for various missions. The interchangeable interiors of the Huey allowed for easy conversion from troop carrier to ambulance. It was also an amazing machine, capable of flying in extreme stress and relatively easy to get in and out quickly—a feature crucial in troop extraction and rescue missions. Those who flew and maintained them, the pilots and crew chiefs, are fiercely loyal to the Huey, even though many have flown many other aircraft.

More than 7,000 Huey helicopters served in Vietnam and nearly half were lost. 2,177 Huey crew members were killed in action. Because the Huey was always there for them, for soldiers on the ground, the distinctive WHOP WHOP of the Huey's 48-foot rotor blades slapping the air was the sound of their lifeline.

Cheryl Fries, *In the Shadow of Blade*. www.intheshadowoftheblade.com. 2012.