

# HELICOPTER HORSEMEN BUSY IN KOREA



ONE OF TOUGH FLYING JOBS FOR HMR-161 WAS TO CARRY HEAVY BARBED WIRE COILS

**M**ARINE "horsemen of the sky" paused momentarily to acknowledge their second anniversary in Korea, then whisked off in their whirling "workhorses" on the many missions still before them.

Right now, they're primarily engaged in hauling essential supplies to new mountain-peak outposts and other areas throughout the division. The work continues to be hazardous since many landing areas, cut out of sharp ridges, are barely large enough to set the 'copter's four wheels on. Sometimes they can't land at all and have to hover just above the ground while loading and unloading. In one day recently they hauled over 66,000 pounds of cargo to these outposts.

Two years ago on Sept. 2 Marine Helicopter Squadron 161 landed at Pusan to become the first such unit to operate in Korea. The 287 officers and men brought with them 15 Sikorsky transport 'copters, HRS-1's.

They also brought with them a Latin motto, "Equitatus Caeli"—Horsemen of the Sky. (See inside back cover.) They didn't know then, however, how appropriately the description would fit the squadron during the succeeding two years.

They were the first to experiment in lifting complete units, up to and

including a whole battalion of fighting Marines and their equipment from the rear to the front, bringing another back. They also flew the first night helicopter troop lift in history. Each operation was a success.

In a five-day period last February, HMR-161 'copters hauled more than two million pounds of food and ammunition in support of two front-line Marine regiments. The operation, designated *Haylift II*, was carried out without a hitch.

They were also called on to lay communication wire, make reconnaissance, do artillery spotting, resupply inaccessible hilltop outposts and even aid in anti-guerilla patrols.

Greatest of all, however, is their complete success in what is normally considered a secondary mission—air evacuation of the seriously wounded.

For the record, Marine 'copters have never restricted their mercy flights between front-line aid stations and rear areas to daylight hours only. They've responded promptly to urgent calls during the night as well, often in drenching rain and blinding fog, a hazardous job in any pilot's manual.

On July 24, only a few days before the cease-fire was effected, the flying workhorses set a new mark in air evacuation of wounded during a 24-hour

period. Sixty-three gravely wounded Marines were lifted to rear aid stations, 12 of them during darkness.

## Copter Races With Death

On the very night of the cease-fire, an urgent call was received to evacuate a Marine who had accidentally stepped on a land mine. It happened just 15 minutes before the front was stilled by the truce. A Marine chopper virtually began a race with death.

Cpts. Harold W. Hawkins and Rodney E. Montgomery, Jr., rushed the wounded Leatherneck from the division area to the *Haven*, a Navy hospital ship in Inchon harbor.

The weather was so bad that the pilots couldn't see the ship when they reached it. Flares were set off, but to little avail. Finally, the ship literally "talked" the 'copter in to a safe landing by radio. The pilots could not get back off the ship until late the next morning when the weather cleared.

In another instance, two Army casualties at an aid station near Seoul needed immediate air evacuation to a hospital ship. The weather was so poor that no 'copter squadron in Korea would order their pilots to fly.

But Marine Cpts. Robert J. Bury and Kenneth N. Peterson, HMR-161 pilots, volunteered to attempt the flight. Staff Sgt. Kenneth O'Brien asked to go along as crew chief.

To get to Seoul from their converted rice paddy field in the forward area, the flying horsemen had to fly their chopper over jagged mountains and then follow low along railroad tracks to find their way, disregarding ever-dangerous wires and powerlines. Picking up the two casualties, whose lives hinged on the success of the mission, Bury and Peterson sped for a ship they could not even see.

When they did reach it, they couldn't tell one end of the ship from the other in the dense, hovering fog. They approached dangerously low and first attempted to land on the bow, believing it to be the stern where the 'copter platform is located. After tedious minutes of blind maneuvering, they finally landed with their human cargo.

How many lives and limbs of fighting men in Korea have actually been

saved by helicopter evacuation will probably never be known. HMR-161 alone evacuated more than 2,600 casualties before fighting ceased late in July. Three hundred of these were night missions.

Lt. Horace G. Love, a Navy doctor serving with the First Division, summed it up this way:

"When it comes to saving lives and limbs of combat casualties, Marine helicopters have proved to be greater than penicillin, the myecins or any other wonder drugs."

Dr. Love, who spent six months with front-line battalions of the U. S. Marines and Korean Marine Corps, called the Marine helicopter system of evacuation from front-line aid stations "the greatest innovation in military medical history." He predicted that such a system would eventually be adopted in civilian medical practices.

Chopper pilots and crews also feel strongly about casualty evacuation. Capt. David S. Boesch, declared that evacuating the wounded is the most gratifying mission the aerial workhorses can perform.

"We seldom worry about any hazards involved when it comes to lifting casualties," Boesch explained. "We feel that our own problems are secondary to the saving of a life."

This was undoubtedly the same feeling LCol. Russell R. Riley had when, upon his own initiative, he landed his chopper in the middle of a mine field to take out casualties.

Col. Riley was flying supplies to the front lines last February 24 when he passed over a field in which a brush fire was flaming. It had been started by enemy white phosphorous shells.

### Mine Field Takes Toll

Suddenly there was an explosion which called his attention to a Marine fire-fighting party in the field. The men had entered a mine area and detonated one of the mines. Three casualties resulted.

Riley hovered his 'copter only long enough to survey the situation, then sped to a supply point, dropped his cargo and returned at once to the mined area. Disregarding the fact that the area was obviously heavily mined, he landed his four-wheeled 'copter near the casualties and quickly evacuated them.

After leaving them at a medical



ROCKET LAUNCHERS FLOWN IN BY HMR-161 POUNDED COMMUNISTS, THEN WERE EVACUATED

company, the colonel returned again to the mine field to evacuate the third casualty. Another chopper had already done the job, but he landed a second time to evacuate the remaining fire-fighters rather than allow them to go again through the mine-ridden field.

Since the cease-fire, the "horsemen of the sky" have done less evacuating, but no less workhorse missions. They evacuated wounded and sick prisoners repatriated through operation *Big Switch* at Freedom Village. And there are still occasions when Marines are seriously injured through accidents, requiring immediate removal by air.

Despite its many close shaves and seemingly impossible missions, HMR-161 has still managed to maintain an amazing safety record. By the end of Korean hostilities, the squadron had

chalked up more than 17,500 hours off the ground. Unit casualties have numbered only two pilots and three crew members.

During the same period, the whirling workhorses made 20,000 flights, carrying over 6,400,000 pounds of cargo, 36,000 pounds of mail and nearly 60,000 passengers.

Col. Owen A. Chambers, the squadron's commanding officer since March, added up the impressive and unsurpassed record when he explained, smilingly, "It's an old saying that the 'copter can do anything a horse can do."

But Leathernecks of the First Marine Division believe firmly and appreciatively that their choppers, the flying workhorses of HMR-161, can do much more than any horse—and better!

—By 2nd Lt. R. B. Morrisey.



MARINE GUIDES CHOPPER PILOT TO LANDING TO PICK UP WOUNDED MAN IN STRETCHER