

June 8, 1967

U.S. engages NVA & VC in Operation Malheur

The first phase of Operation Malheur began on May 11, 1967 when more than 4,400 paratroopers of the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, and supporting troops, landed in the areas west and northwest of Duc Pho, Quang Ngai Province, Republic of Vietnam. The mission of the Soldiers from the 1st and 2nd Battalions, 327th Infantry Regiment and 2nd Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment was to, "find, fix and destroy Viet Cong (VC) /North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces, and to neutralize VC/NVA base camps" in the area of operations. Supporting elements included: the 2nd Battalion, 320th Field Artillery Regiment, responsible for direct fire support, the 176th Helicopter Assault Company, which transported Soldiers from base camp to the area of operations and flew combat support, and the 178th Aviation Company, which provided the heavy lift capability for the field artillery units.



The 2nd VC Regiment, 3rd NVA Division operated in the area, and provided the main opposition to the American force. During the month-long operation, U.S. forces fought 18 engagements, inflicting heavy casualties, and capturing more than three-dozen weapons and 58,000 pounds of rice.¹

During the early morning hours of May 15, 1967, personnel of the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, were ambushed in the Song Tra Cau riverbed by an estimated battalion-sized force of the North Vietnamese army with numerous automatic weapons, machine guns, mortars and recoilless rifles. The enemy force fired from a fortified complex of deeply embedded tunnels and bunkers, and was shielded from suppressive fire. Upon learning that the



1st Brigade had suffered casualties during an intense firefight with the enemy, then-Maj. Charles S. Kettles, (photo left) volunteered to lead a flight of six UH-1D helicopters to carry reinforcements to the embattled force and to evacuate wounded personnel. As the flight approached the landing zone, it came under heavy enemy attack. Deadly fire was received from multiple directions and Soldiers were hit and killed before they could leave the arriving lift helicopters.

Jets dropped napalm and bombs on the enemy machine guns on the ridges overlooking the landing zone, with minimal effect. Small arms and automatic weapons fire continued to rake the landing zone, inflicting heavy damage to the helicopters. However, Kettles refused to depart until all reinforcements and supplies were off-loaded and

wounded personnel were loaded on the helicopters to capacity. Kettles led them out of the battle area and back to the staging area to pick up additional reinforcements.

Without his courageous actions and superior flying skills, the last group of Soldiers and his crew would never have made it off the battlefield.²

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty, LTC Charles S. Kettles (photo left) was awarded the Medal of Honor during a White House ceremony on July 18, 2016. Read the full [citation](#).



The second phase of Operation Malheur began, June 8, 1967, immediately after the conclusion of the first, sending the paratroopers of the 101st on another search-and-destroy mission. Operation Malheur concluded on Aug. 2, 1967. The following is a condensed version of the Intelligence Analysis included in the Division [after action report](#).

Intelligence Analysis

The operation was conducted against the 2d VC Regiment, 3d NVA Division and 1st VC Regiment, 2d NVA Division. Local units were also contacted throughout the operation and Base Area 122 was found not to contain significant facilities or enemy forces.

The first phase of the operation was conducted in Base Area 124, the SONG TRA CAU VALLEY and western BA TO District. All three battalions of the 2d VC Regiment were contacted. Interrogation of prisoners and translations of documents revealed that the battalion commanders of the 93rd, 95th and 97th Battalions were killed. The enemy was found to be well fed and amply supplied with ammunition. The enemy fought well from prepared positions to protect his base camps and when he felt he had the advantage. Western BA TO District appeared to be a rear area. Supplies of new clothing and equipment were captured. Prisoners taken here identified the 107th Anti-Aircraft battalion (a new identification) to be in the area. No direct contact was made with the 107th Anti-Aircraft battalion. The enemy units were fragmented during this phase.

In the second phase the Brigade continued to pursue to the 1st VC Regiment and 2d VC Regiment. The enemy moved from base area to base area in an attempt to evade contact and regroup. The SONG VE VALLEY was cleared of civilians and cattle to deny their use to the enemy. Several large caches of rice and salt were discovered and either destroyed or evacuated. The Long-Range Reconnaissance Platoon conducted raids in the SONG VE VALLEY to bring out people who could give information regarding conditions there. The raids revealed considerable intelligence information and resulted in the capture of a local Viet Cong political cadre leader. The enemy was believed to be concentrating in Base Area 123 and that area was again penetrated forcing the enemy to flee from the hills out onto the coastal plains. Prisoners revealed the 97th Battalion was low on food and ammunition and morale was poor. In the MO DUC Valley, the local Viet Cong Head Quarters was attacked resulting in the District Chief and his secretary being killed, his replacement, a courier, and the production chief captured. The files of the MO DUC District were also captured. A VC prison camp was found based on information received from a refugee and agent reports. Twenty-two prisoners were freed, all of whom were Vietnamese Nationals.³

The G2 Air subsection of the Intelligence and Counterintelligence section included the OV-1C (Red Haze) assets of the 73d Surveillance Airplane Company (SAC). Initial OV-1C (Mohawk) production examples simply amounted to an OV-1A with an "AN/UAS-4 Red Haze" infrared (IR) sensor system in addition to its optical cameras. The AN/UAS-4 could spot fires, hot ground vehicle engines, and other evidence of enemy activities at night, in poor weather, or under jungle canopy.



The effect of Red Haze was reduced considerably because the farmers burn their fields during the dry seasons. It was also learned through captured documents that the VC have implemented counter measures against Red Haze in the form of night fire discipline which resulted in limited use of Red Haze during Operation Malheur. Red Haze was not available on a responsive basis in any case.³

The continuing rivalry between services and their war-fighting doctrines regarding rotary and fixed wing aircraft is also evident in the Army intentions to use the Mohawk for tactical support in Vietnam. Here is a short review of the Mohawk capabilities in addition to the Red Haze infrared cameras:

The Mohawk had originally been designed to carry a light war load, and the US Army didn't see any reason not to make use of the capability in Vietnam. The Army had Grumman refit a number of OV-1As (including two of the JOV-1A prototypes) and OV-1Cs with all six stores pylons and install a Mark 20 fixed reticule gunsight in the cockpit for the pilot. These modified aircraft were redesignated "JOV-1A" and "JOV-1C". In principle, they could carry:

- XM14 (SUU-12) 12.7-millimeter (0.50-caliber) Browning machine gun pods with 750 rounds each.
- XM18 (SUU-11) 7.62-millimeter (0.30-caliber) General Electric six-barreled "Minigun" Gatling gun pods with 1,500 rounds each.
- XM13 40-millimeter automatic grenade launcher pods.
- 7-round LAU-32/A or 19-round LAU-3/A 70-millimeter (2.75-inch) rocket pods.
- 4-round LAU-10/A 127-millimeter (5-inch) Zuni rocket pods.
- 113-kilogram (250-pound) Mark 81, 225-kilogram (500-pound) Mark 82, or 450-kilogram (1,000-pound) Mark 83 general-purpose bombs.
- 450-kilogram (1,000-pound) Mark 79 napalm tanks.

Sidewinder air-to-air missiles.

Other stores included flares pods, smoke generators, and the M4A supply container. It is unclear if all these stores were actually qualified, and unlikely that all of them were actually carried in service. It is particularly hard to believe Sidewinders were ever carried operationally, or that the Army even had them in inventory.

The actual number of JOV-1A/C conversions is unclear: some sources hint that a number of Mohawks were converted to an armed configuration and not redesignated, and that the JOV-1A/C designation was only given to armed machines with dual controls. A total of 59 JOV-1A/Cs is cited but is a bit untrustworthy.

Air Force brass saw the JOV-1A/C as an Army attempt to perform the close-support mission, which they insisted was their job and objected loudly. The Army formally changed the name back to OV-1A/C, though they did not remove the pylons or the gunsight. Many of these aircraft would serve in Vietnam, often carrying smoke rockets, plus sometimes more lethal stores for "self-defense". The Air Force remained very touchy about the issue, even demanding that Grumman get rid of company brochures that highlighted the Mohawk's attack capability. In 1965, the Pentagon handed down a directive dictating that the Army would not operate armed fixed-wing aircraft.⁴

References:

1. Department of the Army, Headquarters 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, Combat After Action Report, Operation MAHLEUR (MACV/RCS/J3/32), 2 September 1967
2. <https://www.army.mil/medalofhonor/kettles/> Operation MAHLEUR Overview
3. Department of the Army, Headquarters 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, Combat After Action Report, Operation MAHLEUR (MACV/RCS/J3/320, 2 September 1967
4. <http://www.airvectors.net/avmohawk.html#m3> The Grumman OV-1 MOHAWK