Army Aviation: Balloon to Apache
An Historical Perspective

Inflation of the balloon Intrepid to reconnoiter the Battle of Fair Oaks, 1862.

The roots of Army Aviation can be traced back to 1861 and the formation of the Civil War-era Balloon Corps which pioneered the missions of reconnaissance and artillery spotting.

Between World War I and World War II, while the Army Air Corps was concentrating on increasing capabilities for what had become its primary missions - bombing, close air support, and air-to-air combat - the Artillery was experimenting with using smaller, unsophisticated aircraft for adjustment of artillery fire. On 6 June 1942, the War Department authorized the Artillery to have as organic aircraft two "Cub" type aircraft in each Artillery Battalion. These aircraft were flown and maintained by artillery personnel - separate from the Army Air Force - to do the same mission as the Balloon Corps of the Civil War. What has now become Army Aviation was born.

WWI Aviator Badge

In July of 1947, the U.S. military underwent a major reorganization. The Department of Defense was created and absorbed the War and Navy Departments. The three major elements of the

military became the Army, Navy, and Air Force. This action had little effect on Army Aviation. The Army, like the Navy and Marines, retained its organic aviation to perform the missions proven in World War II.

Of greatest significance during the interim between World War II and Korea was the awakening of interest in the helicopter. The Air Force had employed Sikorsky helicopters to a very limited extent, primarily for air rescue in the Far East in World War II. This, combined with technological advances in the helicopter, alerted the military to its greatest potential.

During the Korean conflict, the helicopter proved to be a battle-worthy vehicle. The Army employed the Bell H-13 with two external litters for frontline medical evacuation. Using the H-13s, the Army evacuated 21,212 wounded.

Significant events occurring between the Korean and Vietnam conflicts included:

- The turbine engine was introduced to power helicopters and fixed wing aircraft.
- The Army initiated development of the first turbine-powered helicopter designed specifically for the Army. Successively designated the XH-40, HU-1, and UH-1, the "Huey" was intended to be used for medical evacuation.
- The OV-1 Mohawk was developed as the Army's first surveillance airplane.
- The U-1 Otter, CV-2 Caribou, and CV-7 Buffalo were procured to increase the capability of the Army's fixed wing fleet.
- The OH-6 and OH-58 were developed to replace the OH-13 and the L-19.
- The H-25 and the CH-47 were developed to replace the CH-21s and the CH-34s. The CH-54 flying cranes, developed for the German government, were procured to replace CH-37s.

- Rockets, missiles, and machineguns were fired from OH-13, CH-21, CH-34, and CH-37 helicopters. Tests indicated that the helicopter could be a very effective weapons platform.

- The Howze Board brought together the new technology aircraft and the concept of substituting aircraft for ground vehicles in all functions for combat. The result was the true airmobile concept embodied in the organization of the Air Assault Division and the doctrine for its employment.

Vietnam began with Army Aviation operating a fleet of reciprocating engine-powered aircraft including the L-19, L-20, U-1, U-8, Oh-13, CH-19, CH-21, and CV-2. The UH-1B was introduced with makeshift armament flying as a gun ship. Shortly thereafter came the UH-1D and H, replacing the CH-19 and CH-21. The 1st Cavalry Division deployed with a full range of modern turbine-powered aircraft. Eventually, the OH-6s replaced the OH-13s and the AH-1G Cobras supplemented the UH-1B, C, and M model gun ships. OV-1s and U-21s supplemented the fixed wing aircraft.

Since Vietnam and through its formation as a separate Branch of the Army on 12 April 1983, Army Aviation has continued to modernize with new turbine-powered aircraft. The Army can be justly proud of its OH-58D, UH-60, AH-64, and CH-47s which performed so admirably in DESERT STORM, OIF and ENDURING FREEDOM. With the integration of the AH-64D Longbow, MH-47E, and MH-60K, Army Aviation stands on the threshold of a new century more mission capable than ever.