

501st Combat Aviation Battalion, USAREUR

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I served in the 1st Armor Division from approx. July 1976 thru May 1979. I had the honor of serving with several different units. I will attempt to provide my memories during the time that I served with each unit on some sort of time line. As you read this you will invariably find misspelled and missing names. I apologize, but this is as close as my memory will provide.

1976

F Co. 123RD MAINT BN. (JULY 76 – OCT 77)

Cpt. Darrell Stoker was the CO and Robert Lewis was our 1st Sergeant. In the hangar SFC Cherry was the production NCO, SFC Reeves was the back shop NCO and SFC Slade ran the forward support platoon. As a 1st Lt. and the only other commissioned officer in the company I was the hangar OIC. Our maintenance aviators were, CW2 Jon Bourland, CW2 Bob Abbott, CW2 Dan Zimba, and CW2 Craig Wade.

Cpt. Stoker rotated back to the States in August of 1976, consequently I ended up commander of the company till our new commander arrived. My interim command was from Aug thru Sept 76, which included REFORGER 1976.

Cpt. David Hudspeth assumed command in Oct 76. He remained commander thru out the remainder of my time in the unit. Shortly after Cpt. Hudspeth took command, CW2 Wade transferred to the Division Aviation Co., CW2 Bourland had an emergency reassignment to CONUS due to a dependent illness. CW2 Risner filled the void left by Jon and Craig.

OH-58 WHITE-OUT AND SUBSEQUENT CRASH JUST OFF OUR RAMP

It was around Dec 76- Jan 77, we were just starting to recover from the extremely heavy workload as a result of REFORGER 76. Our hangar was wall to wall with broken a/c. The 1st Brigade Aviation Detachment Commander, a Captain, had flown down with WO1 Ron Ward from Illesheim, to reclaim one of their OH-58's that we had just repaired. It was snowing cats and dogs. The only people still flying at the airfield were CW2 Risner and myself, due to the snowstorm. I had just quit, due lack of visibility. I attempted to convince the Detachment CO to wait out the storm to no avail. Mr. Risner and I watched as the Detachment Co's a/c whited out Mr. Wards a/c on take-off. Unfortunately, that caused Mr. Ward to lay his a/c on its side. No one got hurt, but the aircraft. Accident board questions got rather interesting when Mr. Risner and I were ordered to testify.

1977

F Co. 123RD MAINT/D Co. 501ST CAB

In the late spring of 1977 1st Lt. Alan Soper and another 1st Lt. (don't remember his name) joined F Co. Soper took the forward support platoon and the another 1st Lt. took the back shops. Mr. Zimba rotated to CONUS in the spring. Mr. Abbott rotated back to CONUS late in the year.

In July 1977 I was promoted to Captain by Ltc. Barnaby Commander of the 123rd Maintenance Battalion.

For REFORGER 77 Lt. Soper, Ssg Gallimore, Sgt Minot, and I took a small detachment to the field in southern Bavaria around Neu Ulm. Thanks to Sgt Minot we had an exceptional "camp". All the amenities of home, to include a daily evening run to McDonalds. Lt Soper and I enjoyed 2 weeks of hard flying all over the AO resolving various aircraft issues for the units assigned to the 1st Armored Division. At the conclusion of the exercise we again had a hangar full of a/c at Katterbach in some need of support level repair.

SOTAS UH-1

Just after REFORGER 77 we had a SOTAS UH-1 attached to us for maintenance support. They did all their own work, just needed us for parts. These were unique and highly confidential aircraft. Their mission was to go up to the Czech border at altitude, somewhere above 6000 ft. slow down to about 30 knots, raise their retractable skids, start rotating that big rectangular boom under the belly, and then transmit all the intelligence it saw. The claim was the info they gathered was accurate within 50ft. During a mission the 42 degree gearbox activated a chip light, so it had to be changed. On the very next mission on a Friday night with heavy fog and snow, while in orbit at altitude the "new" gearbox failed. This put the aircraft in a very steep and tight descending spiral. The CW4 pilot managed to make a mayday call, tether the boom, lower the retractable skids, and then execute a tail rotor failure landing with high gross weight,

in the dark, in a snow covered corn field. The only damage to the aircraft was he over flexed the tall skids on landing. We were sent on part of the "hunt" to find them in the dark.

BACK TO 1977

About this time we changed our name to D Co/501st Combat Aviation Battalion.

Here I need to digress for just a moment. When the 501st was formed the first battalion commander was Ltc. Rodney Hooper. The command sergeant major for the newly formed battalion was Robert Lewis. (Not 1st Sgt Lewis from F 123rd/D Co, he was still there.) CSM Lewis had previously been the 1st Sgt. for D Trp 1/9 Cav 1st Cav Division Ft. Hood. I had served with him at Ft. Hood from June 1974 thru December 1975. An absolutely exceptional soldier.

Our newly formed battalion was assigned to 1st Brigade of the 1st Armored Division. The commander of the 1st Brigade was Col. Kirk. He was an old school tanker. (WWII/Korea vintage) He didn't think much of us aviators. Our battalion just being formed and coming out of a REFORGER with having done extensive flying was in a shambles. His confidence in us was demonstrated by his refusal to fly in any of our aircraft. Col. Kirk had a reputation of "no-notice" walk thru hangar or motor pool inspections. If something didn't meet his level of expectation he usually employed a tactic of throwing repair parts to emphasis his dissatisfaction. On tank parts that's ok, they are pretty durable. But throwing aircraft parts, that generally caused issues. I received a couple of his inspections while at D Co. and got by with no parts destroyed, but other units were not nearly so lucky. As you can imagine he was creating all kinds of concerns for Ltc. Hooper. 501st Hq was located at Katterbach, while 1st Brigade Hq was located in Illenheim. In fact, Col. Kirk's office overlooked poor C Co's flight line and hangar.

Since I was the support level maintenance officer I was always well aware of the readiness status of all the line units, i.e. A, B, and C companies. Since B and C were AH-1G units their readiness or "a/c available to fly missions" was really sensitive. Each unit had 21 Snakes and was supposed to have 85% (18) mission ready at all times.

C Co. was having difficulties. Their commander, a Major, was having health issues and ended up in the hospital. The company maintenance officer was unfortunately young and inexperienced. It was his first maintenance assignment. They had just come out of their first REFORGER with the 1st Armored Div.

Col. Kirk was raising havoc with C Co. daily and was also making Ltc. Hooper's life miserable. We had a "meeting" on what to do. (Maj. Foster who later took over command D Co., the then Division Aviation Officer, and maybe a couple more officers besides me were present at the meeting, but Ltc. Hooper was not) Conclusion was, I was to be temporarily attached to C Co. maintenance for 30 days to hopefully give them a boost.

APPROX. NOVEMBER 1977

C Co. 501ST

On arriving at C Co. I learned that only 10-11 of the snakes were actually flyable. I had thought there were 15 mission ready from their status reports.

Before the first day was over, Col. Kirk paid us a visit. I just happened to be on the hangar floor when he came "smoking" in. Whatever possessed me to report to him in the middle of the hangar floor I don't know. I should have run.

The Col. had acquired an altimeter on his way thru the hangar (to use to emphasize his dissatisfaction). I saluted him held out my hand and asked for the altimeter back. He returned my salute, gave me the altimeter, and left. Col. Kirk never paid us another visit while I with C Co.

The worst "hangar queen" was an AH-1G missing its main rotor system, transmission, engine, and ENTIRE tail boom assembly to include drive shafts, gearboxes, tail rotor, etc.

My temporary assignment got extended indefinitely on the very first day on the job.

1978

Maj. Amoit took command of C Co. around late Dec 77 or Jan 78.

APPROX. FEBRUARY 1978 WINTER MANUEVERS

Maj. Amoit was aggressive and good. He negotiated for C Co. the privilege of flying attack support for a German Panzer battalion for this exercise. Rather high profile. We started the exercise with 18 AH-G's mission ready. We flew hard. The maneuver was about 2 weeks long. At the completion of the exercise we had ALL 21 AH-1G's including the hangar queen flying missions.

The soldiers of the maintenance platoon did an absolutely heroic job. The maintenance warrant was one of the best I ever served with. In less than 120 days they took an absolute mess and turned it into something to be extremely proud of. Return from maneuvers with more aircraft flying than when maneuvers began.

Here's the sad part. They accomplished this feat so fast that I never really got to know them. Consequently, for the life of me I cannot recall any of their names, though I can still see many of their faces. But I do remember Sp6 Breden now that I saw his contribution.

I returned to D Co.

1978 FEBRUARY

D Co. 501ST

OH-58 CRASH AT GRAFENWOHR

An OH-58 belonging to A Co. was detached and stationed to support (I believe) the 2nd Brigade out of Graf. The a/c developed a fuel drain valve leak. The detachment maintenance warrant decided rather than just drain off the fuel, he would ground run the fuel off. Take less time. So, while he was sitting in the a/c burning off the fuel, he decided to read the book he had brought along. The inherent bounce of the a/c on the ground made it difficult to read. So, the pilot pulled in a little pitch to smooth things out. That worked real well, until he fell asleep. Aircraft burnt off fuel, got light enough to fly, aircraft tried to fly with pilot asleep, aircraft laid over on its side. That I believe is the aircraft in the trailer that Wilberto Gonzales is referring to.

TIDBITS I REMEMBER ABOUT D CO HANGAR

This was a really nice hangar, it had been built during WWII. On the second floor around the outer perimeter of the hangar we had offices for our maintenance warrants, production and quality control, and one for the maintenance officer. (thanks to good nco's, the offices were nicer than any at bn hq) We had a big enough prop shop for a complete snake main rotor system. Then of course avionics, sheet metal, etc. We had an overhead hoist/crane that we used to pull rotors, engines, etc. We could even lift and move an OH-58 with it. There was a rendition of the blimp Hindenburg catching fire on one of the walls. (Shown in picture #6 at the left top rear provided by Kevin Matthews submission) The best part though was the "big plate" in the middle of the floor. This was an elevator that led to an underground system for transporting aircraft from hangar to hangar. The Germans had developed this during the war to keep from getting their aircraft bombed or strafed. At the end of the war the tunnel system was supposedly flooded and left in that fashion. In a building with a real funny chimney, just to the south (I believe) of our hangar, was a huge diesel engine that ran a generator to power the airfield. A little old German man would periodically come by, start it up and exercise it.

Tale from SFC Reeves: He claimed to have spent many evenings in the late 60's- early70's on the barrack steps of F Co. with the singer/song writer/actor Kris Kristofferson playing guitars. If SFC Reeves said it, it was the truth.

MARCH 1978

A Co. is now in trouble with their maintenance. Ltc. Hooper "wants" me to go see if I can help. I would rather stay with D Co. Reassigned to A Co. March 18, 1978.

A Co. 501ST

Maj Mike Sloniker was the commander, Cpt. James Mullen was the executive officer, Cpt. Mike Uzelac was the operations officer, Cpt. Greg Smith ran the general support aviation platoon,

1Lt. John Barton ran the scout platoon. I don't remember if Cpt. Nutter or Cpt. Quilfoyle ran the lift platoon. I think Cpt. Wall was at one of the brigade detachments. I had the maintenance platoon. CW2 Cal Lawrence was my rated maintenance warrant. WO1 Guyer was the non-rated maintenance warrant. The NCO's for the unit were exceptional. My platoon NCO's were SFC Ogden and SFC Perkins.

TIDBIT

1Lt. Wayne Oedewalt was the OH-58 instructor pilot. He and I were in the same platoon at Ft. Riley for our ROTC summer camp training in 1972.

SAD TIDBIT

CW2 Ray Frank was one of our UH-1 pilots. He gave his life in the "Blackhawk Down" battle in Mogadishu. He is in our company photo, 3rd row down from the top 3rd from the left.

The general support platoon had the tough job in the company as their mission was to provide aircraft for all the 1st Armor Division "brass" i.e. 3 separate combat brigade commanders, the division support command commander, 2 assistant division commanders, the division commanding general, and basically any other miscellaneous mission. The "brass" placed a unique demand on aircraft. Typically short notice missions. Each member of the select group of "brass" had their special dedicated air crews, and special dedicated aircraft. You absolutely could not substitute the air crews or aircraft. The "brass" all had special communication needs, not necessarily what the army thought was sufficient. Fortunately our avionics section chief SP5 Robinson was a literal genius. All of our "brass" had their special radios. We could talk to anybody anywhere anytime. A problem with all these "special needs" radios is they had a tendency to overheat the batteries in the UH-1's and boil them over. Thanks to SP5 Robinson he came up with a wiring modification that solved the problem.

TIDBIT

General Haig would regularly make visits to the division. His aircraft always used our ramp to park. Invariably when his aircraft landed the battery would be either boiling over or ready to. Don't know how many times we replaced his battery for him. We never told him our secret, because we were "illegal".

APRIL 1978

C Co. NO NOTICE FLY-BY

Early in April I was out on the A Co. ramp working with a crew on an aircraft, when operations personnel started hollering about C Co. in bound.

Major Amoit had somehow convinced Col. Kirk to permit C Co. to do a fly by over Katterbach. They kept it a secret from Ltc. Hooper and his staff. Remember this is the Colonel who didn't think much of aviators and still refused to ride in his assigned OH-58. C Co. had 28 of their 33

aircraft in the formation with 21 of the aircraft being AH-1G's! Col. Kirk was riding in the gunner seat of the lead AH-1G!!!! They came over low and tight, then landed the entire flight on the airfield.

A group of A Co. aviators to show their respect to C Co. managed to quickly assemble a "full moon V formation" on the roof of the operations portion of our hangar. C Co's formation loosened up somewhat when they came over our hangar.

BACK TO A Co. APRIL 1978

Colonel Kirk started using his OH-58 and to my knowledge made only one other "hangar visit".

I don't remember if it was in the spring of 78 or 79, but we were tasked with flying border patrol up on the Czech border for a period of time. I believe the scout platoon got the mission. We were all excited about it cause of the additional qualification the pilots would get and the fun of flying so close to the "bad guys". One of the 58's spun a tail rotor driveshaft bearing on a Friday about midway thru his flight (yes, I know, why does everything always happen on a Friday, but it did). The pilot sat the aircraft down on the side of what he claimed was a big grassy hill. Division wanted us to take a crane and flatbed trailer up and take it off the hill, we wanted to sling it out. They thought that was too risky. Division wouldn't even let us just change out the drive shaft either. Too close to the border. (About ¼ mile off.) After talking to the pilot a little further we determined the pilot had skillfully landed in a small grassy field on what was in essence a mountain slope. We would not even be able to land a UH-1 next to him and the nearest road was "some" distance away. By now it was getting dark, so nobody was going anywhere. The West Germans living in the area had showed up by now too. They decided to take the pilot home for the night for dinner and an impromptu neighborhood party. Division really wanted that aircraft off the border!!! So, we decided to take a couple UH-1s up to the border Saturday morning to just "see" what was needed. CW2 Thorsen had extensive sling experience from the 101st and he graciously volunteered to fly one of the UH-1's. The UH-1 I was in just happened to have sling gear, and an experienced rigging crew. Maj. Sloniker was sort of kept in the dark with respect to what was on my aircraft. Everything went according to plan, until the drone parachute came off the 58 about ½ way to Bamberg airfield. The OH-58 rolled about 30 degrees to the right and then attempted to swing up and stick CW2 Thorsen's aircraft in the belly. After a brief but intense conversation on the radio Mr. Thorsen agreed to not "punch-off" the stricken 58. We slowly proceeded to Bamberg. By now our secrecy had been compromised and there was a "party" waiting for us to arrive at Bamberg. Since the 58 was rolled, Mr. Thorsen could not set the stricken bird down. So we flew ahead, greeted all the "brass" waiting for us and when Mr. Thorsen arrived 4 of us got ahold of the 58 and twisted it around so it would sit down. I was "asked" to not do that again, but not by Maj Sloniker. All was good.

SEPTEMBER OR OCTOBER 1978

FATAL OH-58 CRASH

Again on a Friday afternoon. CW3 McCall was departing Graf in an OH-58 with either the 2nd or 3rd Brigade Chaplain (I don't remember which), and a sp4 from that brigade enroute to meet his wife who had just arrived in country, when his aircraft developed a sudden severe vibration and came apart at about 1000ft AGL. We learned this from his last radio transmission.

Upon arrival at the crash site what struck me as strange was; all the aircraft parts were in a very small area. It appeared as if the aircraft had fallen almost straight down. What type of failure could have caused that?

Within 30 days we learned that Mr. McCall had experienced a tail rotor blade failure. When the tail rotor blade departed the aircraft the out of balance caused the tail rotor gearbox and other blade to depart, the then out of center of gravity condition caused the main rotor to enter the cockpit and then depart the aircraft. Consequently the aircraft fell basically straight down. The aircraft came to rest up right with minimal forward imprint on the ground.

At the same time we learned the cause of the crash, we also got a bulletin on suspect OH-58 tail rotor blades. Of the 25 OH-58's assigned to A Co. 21 of the aircraft had suspect blades on them. The procedure for inspection was to take the blades to the base dispensary every 10-15 flight hours and have them x-rayed. We were looking for a crack being generated from the inside working its way out at the internal reinforcement riser at the base of the blade. The problem was supposedly wide spread thru out the Army and they did not have enough blades to replace them all.

I received the opportunity to brief General Starr 1st Armor Division Commander on the cause of failure.

WINTER REFORGER 1979

During October of 1978 in preparation for the winter REFORGER, the exercise/umpire staff needed a place to work. Our hangar was selected for their use. Consequently we had to relocate. The only place available on the airfield was the old wooden hangars down at the other end of the airfield by B Co. The roofs leaked, no electricity, no heat, and decayed floors. We erected our field maintenance tents and a couple of GP smalls inside the hangars, fired up our generators, fueled up the heaters, and went to work. We were there thru February 1979, basically the entire winter. Fortunately the troops got to go home to nice warm barracks at night.

Col. Kirk made a "hangar visit" to inspect our working conditions and was appalled.

With the vast majority of our aircraft now parked outside, we were at the mercy of the winter weather. A previous submission comments on skids sinking and sticking in the mud, is a very

accurate submission. Most of our aircraft were parked on un-improved pads. We started to wiggle the skids when we sat down to make a little bigger trough and hopefully not freeze too bad. Then on aircraft start-up, go thru a procedure of wiggle the tail to break loose the skids, have the crew chief check for sure, and then very slowly attempt to pull up to a hover. We bent a few skid cross members before we got it right.

The strangest incident though, happened to CW2 Randy McGuire (he and I served together at D Trp 1/9 Cav 1st Cav Division). Randy was one of the pilots for one of the assistant division commanders. He flew a UH-1. He had warmed his aircraft up in preparation for a mission and then shut it down to wait for the general, standard procedure. When the general was enroute to the airfield Randy started his a/c again, standard procedure. The general gets on board they take off. Right when the aircraft achieved transitional lift the flight controls locked-up. Mr. McGuire got to land his aircraft sliding backwards down the runway. He was not in a good mood. There apparently had been some moisture, snow or ice up around the rotor system or transmission area. When he warmed up the a/c it melted and went down into the "hell hole", i.e. center section where the push pull tubes and hydraulics sloppy-links are located. When he restarted and picked the aircraft up to a hover the air moving thru the hellhole super froze the moisture on the hydraulic links taking away their ability to move properly. When we went to repair the aircraft we could find nothing wrong. In fact we didn't fix anything, just flew the a/c back to its parking spot. Some of our senior T/I's and NCO's put their heads together and finally came up with what caused the problem and we duplicated it on another aircraft. After that, procedure was warm-up aircraft, shut-down, open hellhole, wipe dry transmission, and all control linkages. Never had another problem.

REFORGERs or any maneuver for that matter starts early for the general support aviation unit. Everyone needs to go somewhere to see or do something. It was not unusual for our aircraft flight hours to increase dramatically 2 to 3 weeks before the maneuver started and maintain that pace for 2 to 3 weeks after the conclusion of the maneuver.

The pilots, they loved it, but for us in maintenance platoon, it always took a physical toll on us.

For REFORGER 1979 with our primitive and barren working conditions it was amazing how well the troops performed. We actually came out of the exercise in great shape with respect to aircraft available for missions. However, I can't say that for my NCO's they were flat worn out.

When we moved back to our normal hangar, we were greeted with all new fresh paint and nice new back shops.

Somewhere around February or March 1979 CW2 Lawrence and CW2 Johnson from D Co. were involved in an auto accident. CW2 Lawrence had to be medevaced back to CONUS.

OH-58 POWER TURBINE NUT ESCAPE

Sometime in either 1978 or 1979 we received a bulletin that the rear power turbine nut on our engines was susceptible to severe corrosion as a result of the salt in the air. Especially in

Europe. The procedure was, remove your engine and ship it to a designated repair facility. When the facility received your engine they would send you a replacement engine. Parts like engines were hard to get during this time. So what started happening was unethical units would ship their failed engines to the repair facility knowing they would get back instead a good engine. We were the recipient of 2 of those bad engines. The first one failed on the flight line during run-up. I didn't know Pfc. Forster our engine man could move so fast. The second one failed when I had the aircraft at a hover. Shortly after that, they changed the procedure to; each unit would get back their original engine.

MAY 1979

A Co. 501ST

As I made one last walk thru the hangar to say my good-byes, I noticed a pallet of parts sitting on the hangar floor. There sat 21 new pairs of OH-58 tail rotor blades. My tour was complete.

