

A/159 ASHC 101 ABN Pachyderms Supporting the USMC
By [Andrew Belmont](#)

Throughout U.S.A. military history there have been numerous occasions where Army units have aided Marine Corps units in their combat operations. No shame or blame on the Corps as the Army has more manpower and heavier weapons to support sustained operations.

There was a unique situation during the month of March 1969 when a single Army aviation company of 16 CH-47 helicopters with 5 crewmembers each influenced combat operations for the 3rd Marine Corps Division, I Corps Military Operational Area aka Demilitarized Zone. The A Company - "Pachyderms" - of the 159th Aviation Battalion, 101st Aviation Group, 101st Airmobile Division suspended its on-going operations adjacent to the 3rd Marines and moved slightly north to Marine Corps Vandegrift Combat Base. Beginning on the first of March '69 the USMC launched Operation Purple Martin to force the North Vietnamese Army (PAVN) 246th Regiment out of South Viet Nam and to secure the southern half of the DMZ. A Co. arrived on the 1st of March and stayed at Vandegrift till 1 April. With just two weeks of A Co. support Marine commanders from company level to division level recognized that the Pachyderms were turning the tide of Marine combat operations with timely, gallant, unparalleled support. To show USMC Command's appreciation a 'sincere pat on the back to A Co. crews' was demonstrated with a presentation of 'Impact Valor Awards' on 19 March '69 at the Vandegrift helipad.

LTG R. Stilwell, USA, XXIV Corps Commander, Maj Gen R. Davis 3rd Marine Commanding and BGen F. Garretson Assistant Division Commander presented six Distinguished Flying Cross medals and twenty-two Air Medal w/Valor device. Unfortunately a number of the Vandegrift awards were not recorded in individual DD201 files with supporting General Orders (G.O.), the paperwork necessary for Veteran benefits as well as the personal recognition of those challenging days of combat with a determined foe of PAVN regulars. Concerning the mid-March 'Impact' awards of the six DFC's presented, only four had proper G.O. paper work and only four of the twenty-two Air Medal w/V were recorded with G.O. and none of the enlisted crewmen received proper G.O. paperwork.

On the first of April, A Co. resumed its regular operations with the 101st out of its Phu Bai helipad - "The Beach." In May of '69 the U.S. Army recognized A Co.'s valor during the second two weeks of its Marine Corps assignment of March. LTG Stilwell and MG Melvin Zais, 101st Commanding, presented ten Distinguished Flying Cross medals and twelve Air Medal w/Valor device. Fortunately the Army's May awards were recorded with G.O. paperwork but there were two issues of concern with these awards. During April of '69 several crewmen rotated home and were not recognized in the May ceremony and a DFC recipient at Vandegrift had been shot down and KIA along with his entire crew.

As the Internet has become an "Information Highway" I set out on a quest to find out if CW2 Harold Eckert (KIA) was properly recognized for his two DFCs and was his family notified of his heroism. If you have ever tried to correct your military records of years gone by you may appreciate that as a non-relative of Harold, the task of securing official information about a comrade was a challenge. In this case where to even start? Army, Marines, 101st, Pentagon ... ? I was able to track down a source who took interest in my request, at the U.S. Army Human

Resource Command, Fort Knox, KY. So back and forth with email the government man confirmed that Harold Eckert family did have information about one DFC, the Army May award. CW2 Harold Eckert family was somewhat aware their loved one was heroic and I hope it eased the reality of his KIA. But there was still the matter of the second DFC that Harold had earned.

Aware that there were still so many other A Co. crewmen without General Orders officially documenting their heroism, I searched for more information. I discovered that Military General Orders are stored at The National Archives at College Park, MD.

Further on-line search of The National Archives I was able to find: ARC Identifier 2,579,373/MLR Number A1 250/Boxes 1 - 54 Series record group 472. This series of the Archives file system are unique to the 101st RVN 1969. These records include daily Army military matters such as: promotions, reassignment, transfer in and out of country, etc. and recording awards and decorations. All other Army units can be tracked down with similar Identifiers. None of these records are available on-line but can be viewed and copied in person at College Park, MD.

I volunteered my brother Paul (Col, USAF (Ret.)) and his wife Peggy who lived in Northern VA to visit the Archives in MD. One must register with the Archives, pay a small fee, watch a video on proper handling of official documents and when all the i's are dotted and the t's crossed one is good to go for repeated visits to the Archives. I suggested names of A Co. pilots and listed a few G.O. numbers that I gathered from fellow Pachyderms that remain in frequent contact via email. Paul and Peggy did diligent research of many boxes with thousands of records in each box to determine that the name markers and specific order numbers that I suggested were found with recorded G.O. paperwork, but other names I was interested in e.g. Harold Eckert with unknown G.O. number could not be found. Paul noted that the file boxes had numerous inserts noting that G.O. xxx1 could not be found or xxx8 thru xxx15 not found.

Four years ago I attended a mini-reunion of former A Co. enlisted mechanics and Chinook flight engineers and connected with three of the FE's that I flew with in March '69. We confirmed our connections of those days and were enlightened by each other's perspective. Guy in front seat vs guy in the rear watching, directing internal and external mission loads, monitoring hydraulic systems and an eye on two other crew. Each FE reported that they did not receive any G.O. paperwork for the Air Medal w/Valor. Back to the Internet and on-line searching of The Archives did not yield any desired results. I hired a professional archive researcher and as soon as The Archives resumed operation after their Covid shutdown, he took up my search. \$955.00 later the pro researcher reported "Noted G.O.s Found But Numerous Series Of Missing Files That Could Be Relevant". The pro did search several other data files but no other Valor awards for A Co. 159th ASHB were found. Bottom line the G.O.'s that were recorded in one's DD201 file were found in the Archives, G.O.'s missing from 201's were missing from the Archive.

Pachyderms! The crewmen of A Company, 159th Aviation Support Helicopter Battalion can stand proud for the extraordinary combat service to the Marines, the Army and U.S.A. The Valor awards were presented and our only record are some faded photographs. Aged like so many of us.



1 Silver Star 7 DFC 22 Air Medals with V for Valor



LTG Stilwell, XXIV Corp Commander MAJ Dan Butler, Company Commander A Co.
159th ASHB 101st Airmobile



WO Belmont Vandegrift DFC

BGen Garretson



LTG Stilwell

WO Belmont DFC



WO Nevling DFC WO Tom Andrews AMwV MajGen Davis 3rd Marines Commanding



MG Melvin Zais, 101st Airmobile Commander, WO Tom Andrews
Dist. Service Medal (4), Silver Star (2), DFC (2)



Spc 4 Salinas, Brig. General F. Garretson, Assistant Div. Commander



Spec 4 Mark Sweeney

Lt. General XXIV Corps Commander