

The RoadRunner Story

The Name and the Fame

150th CHFM – Maintenance Detachment

Viet Nam – 1964-‘65

In the autumn of 1964, the huge buildup of US forces in Vietnam had not yet begun. The only US Army troops in Vietnam at that time were a number of Special Forces teams scattered about the length and breadth of the country, a few Army helicopter companies and a logistical structure that provided support the Army units.

Then, in August 1964, the Army sent an additional helicopter company from Fort Benning, Georgia to the Mekong Delta in Vietnam to augment the limited combat support provided to the Vietnamese Army in that region. The **62d Aviation Company**, as it was known, consisted of 25 UH-1 (“Huey”) helicopters and crews. It was organized with two platoons of troop lift aircraft and an armed helicopter platoon whose aircraft were equipped with rockets and machine guns to provide suppressive fires for the essentially unarmed lift helicopters as they brought troops into landing zones in enemy territory.

All aviation units in Vietnam found it necessary to develop singularly distinctive call signs for radio identification and air-to-air communication with each other. The 62d adopted the code name “Outlaws” for its call sign. The armed platoon within the Outlaws named itself the “Mavericks”.

A vital and key support unit attached to the 62d Aviation Company was the **150th Maintenance Detachment** whose mission was to keep the 62d helicopters flying 24 hours a day if necessary. The 150th had been activated at Fort Eustis, Virginia in August 1964 and deployed to Vinh Long, Vietnam along with the 62d Aviation Company in September 1964. Vinh Long was in the heart of the rice-rich Mekong River Delta region.

Captain Frederick (Tim) Bisch was the first commander of the unit. **SFC James W. Proctor** held the position of NCOIC in the 150th. **Chief Warrant Officer John C. Moodt** was second in command of the unit which consisted of nearly 80 outstanding, talented and highly qualified maintenance personnel who kept the Outlaw aircraft at over 85% availability during most of the first year of combat operations.

The nature of the 150th's support mission in Vietnam demanded that a maintenance team go wherever a helicopter was in need of repair. This included both home-based hangar-maintenance as well as battlefield recovery and repair, often under fire, after a helicopter was shot down as a result of enemy fire. Their mission required the team to be constantly

on alert, prepared for rapid response, and exhibit fearless performance and tireless effort in achieving their mission.

Therefore, when it came time to select a radio call sign for the 150th, those attributes seemed to describe that little desert bird called the **Roadrunner!** The Roadrunner is a sturdy bird, adaptable to its every environment, known for its lightning quickness, capable of short, intense flight when necessary and possessing a distinctively long tail not unlike that on the UH-1 helicopter. The mission of the 150th Maintenance Detachment required all the attributes of the Roadrunner bird and thus was born the Viet Nam Roadrunner!

The distinctive Roadrunner logo of the 150th was designed by one of the multi-talented members of the 150th, **Bob Koonce**. Bob sketched out a spindle-legged, long-beaked cartoon character of the bird, in full running motion, with a tool box in one "hand" and a wrench in the other. It was an immediate hit with the men of the unit and was quickly painted onto the nose panel of the maintenance helicopter that became known throughout the Mekong Delta by the name "Roadrunner".

The Roadrunners, because of their technical skills and dedication, as well as their unique call sign, quickly established an outstanding name for themselves throughout the Mekong Delta.

Captain Tim Bisch, as the first commander of the 150th, was therefore, the first Roadrunner. Captain Bisch was not only a highly skilled aircraft maintenance officer but also an excellent aviator. He personally flew test flights in aircraft that had been repaired to ensure that the helicopter was ready to be turned back to its crew for combat missions. In addition, he volunteered to fly combat missions with both the Outlaws and Mavericks to better understand the nature of the environment in which Army aviators lived. His courage and dedication as an officer and leader was perilously demonstrated on one of those missions that took place on June 16, 1964.

Captain Jack Sanford, an original member of the Outlaws, was commander of the "Mavericks", the Outlaw's armed helicopter platoon. That morning, Sanford asked Tim Bisch if he would like to fly with him on a mission to search for an American Army captain who had been reported as captured in an ambush on a road near Vinh Long. Vinh Long was a small airfield, protruding from the rice paddies of the Mekong Delta, that served as home base for the Outlaws, Mavericks and Roadrunners. Moreover, the captured officer was a personal friend of Tim's and it was imperative that a search mission be launched as quickly as possible before the Viet Cong could escape with their captured American officer.

Captain Tim Bisch readily agreed to accompany Captain Sanford who would command the operation. The mission was to be flown with three armed helicopters, flying at nearly ground level, searching for any sign of enemy activity that might provide an indication of the location of the captured officer. The location of the ambush was less than five miles from the Vinh Long airfield, thus the team was on-station within minutes.

Almost immediately after arriving over the target area, the Maverick team began taking ground fire from concealed Viet Cong units along a tree-lined canal separating the rice paddies. The Maverick team made several rocket and machine gun firing passes before the ground fire became so intense that they were forced to pull off. USAF fighter-bombers were brought in to attempt to suppress the ground fire with bombs and napalm. Shortly thereafter the Mavericks were given permission to return to the area and resume their search.

Within minutes, the aircraft in which Captain Bisch was flying received several direct hits and the helicopter crashed in a ball of fire. Both pilots, Captains Bisch and Sanford, were ejected through the front windshield of the helicopter, still strapped in their seats. One of the other two crew members, the crew chief, **Michael P. Moritz**, was killed as a result of the crash. The door gunner, **Damion Giacchino**, was thrown out of the aircraft into the rice field, but survived.

A rescue helicopter was called in and, in spite of continued ground fire, the crew was able to pick up Bisch, Sanford and Giacchino. Captain Jackie W. Sanford, Maverick Lead, died of his injuries enroute to a hospital. Captain Bisch, Roadrunner, suffered critical injuries and was unconscious for several weeks. Following his recovery, Captain Bisch ultimately returned to duty and completed a full military career, retiring as a full colonel. As a sad footnote to the Roadrunner story, **Captain John Schumann**, the Army officer who was the object of the search mission, reportedly died while serving as a POW in North Vietnam.

The story of this action dramatically emphasizes the role that all soldiers of such combat support units as the 150th were prepared to perform in the Vietnam conflict. The men of the 150th performed their mission with as every bit as much bravery, dedication and valor as any front-line unit.