

'Gunsmoke' -- Rescue for downed choppers

By PFC William Hutchison
 CHU LAI, (23rd Inf. Div. 10)
 "Gunsmoke Recovery." This is
 Chu Lai Control. There is a bird
 down."

With these words the men
 of "Gunsmoke Recovery" spring
 into action. Captain David

Sebright, (Hopkins, Mich.), and
 First Lieutenant John Swartzel,
 (Waynesville, Ohio) dash to their
 UH-1H Huey "slick" and start
 cranking up. The gunners and
 four riggers, all Pathfinder
 trained, gather any special gear
 they will need and clamber

aboard. Sixty seconds after they
 get the call, the chopper is on its
 way.
 Speed is essential. As Sergeant
 Mark Johnson, (St. Louis)
 stated: "When a bird goes down,
 Charlie knows its down, so it's a
 race for you to get to the bird
 before he does."

If it is a Huey-type craft that
 is down, Sebright sets his bird
 down and drops off his four
 Pathfinders. It is their job to rig
 the downed ship and prepare it
 for a CH-47 "Chinook", that is
 dispatched to pick up the copter
 and take it to Chu Lai for repair
 or salvage.

It takes the Pathfinders only
 two to three minutes to rig an
 intact Huey. For a "Chinook" it
 usually takes 10 minutes to
 ready the big bird for pick-up by
 a CH-54 "Skycrane."

An OH-6A "LOH", which is
 rigged by only one man, takes
 three to four minutes with the
 help of someone from ground

security. Which as Private First
 Class William "Ralph" Sexton,
 (Olympia, Wash.), stated:
 "Usually ends up being the
 Lieutenant or platoon sergeant.
 Wrecked aircraft take longer
 to rig depending on the damage
 they have sustained."

Since their formation on the
 26th of December 1970
 "Gunsmoke Recovery" has
 recovered 180 downed
 "Americal" copters. They are
 the only division size recovery
 unit in Vietnam. They have
 copied much of their operation
 from "Pipesmoke Recovery",
 who operates in the South on a
 corps level.

"Pipesmoke Recovery" knows
 as much or more about rigging as
 anyone in the world, said
 Johnson.

The Pathfinders are from
 Headquarters and Headquarters
 Company, 14th Aviation
 Battalion. They are airborne
 qualified and have completed a
 five-week special training
 program at Fort Benning,
 Georgia. There they learned
 aircraft rigging techniques, how
 to set up landing zones and
 direct aircraft, plus additional
 parachute training.

But as Swartzel stated: "Most
 of what the Pathfinders know,
 they learned—OJT (on-the-job
 training) out there."

The men recall vividly their
 first mission. They were in the
 ready room preparing to close
 up for the night. Corporal
 William Lundy, (Oconee, Ga.),
 commented: "What do we do if
 we get a night mission, sir?"

"I can't think of any reason
 why we should have a night
 mission," replied Swartzel. No
 sooner had the words left his
 mouth than "Gunsmoke
 Recovery" was notified that
 they, indeed, had a night
 mission.

When the recovery "slick"
 reached the coordinates of the
 downed bird they found
 nothing—none of the promised
 gunships, flare ships, or ground
 security. While they patiently
 circled about, an infantry
 company located the downed
 copter 10 miles away.

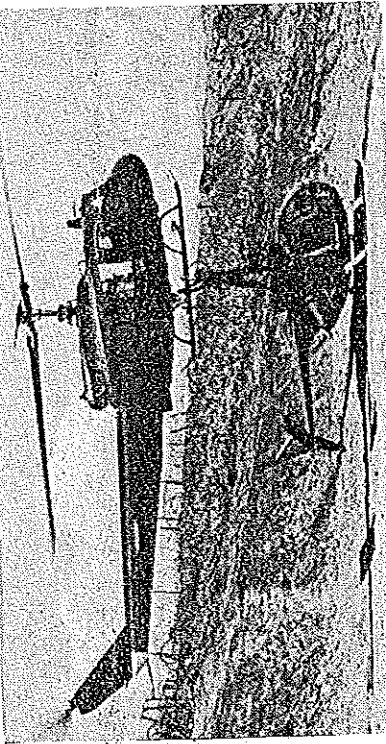
With the flare ships providing
 illumination, AH-1G "Cobra
 gunships" giving air support and
 an infantry company for
 security, the "Gunsmoke"
 chopper came in and deposited
 the nervous riggers.

Fifteen minutes later, the
 downed craft was ready to be
 lifted out and the Pathfinders,
 "virgins" no more, were equally
 ready to get out.

With two birds on stand-by at
 all times the men of "Gunsmoke
 Recovery" have retrieved as
 many as five downed choppers
 in one day and they all occurred
 after 1700 hours.

The Pathfinders and the pilots
 even though they have had no
 training or experience in the
 recovery of downed aircraft,
 have not lost one craft.

As Swartzel stated: "It is our
 responsibility to rig these birds
 up right and see there are no
 problems getting them back to
 Chu Lai."



"Gunsmoke Recovery" team rig up this LOH (Light Observation Helicopter) to be transported back of Chu Lai for repair. (U.S. Army Photo)

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Chu Lai, Vietnam

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