

# The Vietnam Airlifter

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## COMBAT CONTROLLERS HAVE TO BE TOUGH

KHE SANH COMBAT SUPPORT BASE — “Any man who works for me had better be an individualist and hard headed to boot if he wants to be a success as a Combat Controller ” asserts Capt. Donald R. Howie, OIC of the Combat Control Team (CCT).

After nine months as chief of the 834th s CCT, the captain should know what it takes to be a winner. He’s seen action all over Vietnam and was operating near the Laotian border at Khe Sanh.

A Combat Controller is the first man into a forward location. Equipped with a radio jeep and a supply of gasoline, he sets up shop as soon as he arrives and proceeds to guide aircraft into the field. He has complete responsibility for contacting each aircraft by radio, giving them landing instructions and talking them “around” any hostile fire in the area.

He must be able to make decisions based on what he knows and, once made, he must stick to this decision.

Sometimes a two-striper will have control of all aircraft at a particular airfield,” added the captain, between bites of a C-Ration breakfast. “In this case he must be able to make decisions on what he has been taught and overrule the recommendations of senior men not in his career field.”

“Me? I love my job,” he explained. “This is the only place in the world where a Combat Controller can perform as he was taught. I’d like to come back for another tour, but since there is only one officer slot in Southeast Asia, I’m pretty sure I won’t be able to.”

“Since there are no other officers with my specialty over here, I have a free hand how I deploy my troops. We’re allowed to operate pretty much the way we want to as long as the job gets done. It’s more meaningful than some other jobs because you are in on both the planning and executing stages.”

Finishing the C-Ration ham and eggs he tossed the can into the fire and strolled back to the radio jeep and a session of reminiscing about the past nine months.

It’s a fairly exciting life over here. I’ve never been in a firefight or had anyone shooting directly at me, but I’ve had my share of rocket and mortar attacks.”

“There was the time at one base when enemy mortars blew up a fuel bladder not 100 yards from our jeep. Exciting wouldn’t be the word. I guess scared would come pretty close to how I felt.”

During one operation, he was controlling airlift operations into an isolated airfield on the border when the strip came under attack. “They were shooting helicopters off the end of the runway,” he related. “You feel pretty lucky to get out of a situation like that without losing any aircraft.”

“The aircrews put a lot of faith and trust in the controllers when they are coming into a field,” he continued, scanning the skies with an unconscious habit. “Anytime a field I’m working comes under attack and I can get the aircraft off safely, I feel like I’ve done my job.”

Article Sent by Patrick Aguilar

Note From Bob Bieber; Mike, Interesting blurb on Don Howie. Article is dated April 1971. I replaced him last week in Feb 1971. He left country 1st week of March 1971. .... Bob Bieber.

P.S. Army controlled air traffic at Khe Sahn in 1971 for operation Lam Son 719.