

This Day in History... January 12, 1962

Operation Chopper

On January 12, 1962, American forces participated in their first major combat of the Vietnam War – Operation Chopper.

When Vietnam gained its independence from France, the country was divided into North Vietnam – aided by communist countries, and South Vietnam – supported by the United States.

The communist Viet Cong (National Liberation Front or NLF) was fighting guerrilla warfare in the south. In an effort to stop the spread of communism, President Dwight Eisenhower sent a Military Assistance Advisory Group to South Vietnam in November of 1955. Their task was to train the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN).



Vietnam War stamp from the Celebrate the Century Series



This stamp was issued on Veteran's Day in 1979 and pictures the ribbon of the Vietnam Service Medal.

The buildup of American personnel and weapons continued in the following years. In December 1961, a US Navy transport carrying about 400 US Army helicopter pilots support staff arrived in Saigon, South Vietnam's capitol city. The ship was also carrying 82 H-21C Army helicopters, nicknamed "Flying Bananas," because of their curved shape.

On January 12, 1962, Operation Chopper was implemented. The H-21C helicopters were used to transport 1,000 South Vietnamese paratroopers to an enemy stronghold just 10 miles west of Saigon. Transporting troops by air was a new tactic, and surprised the enemy, who quickly retreated into the dense forest. The operation was a victory for the Americans and South Vietnamese, who captured an important underground radio transmitter. However, it also provided the North Vietnamese with new combat experience they would use later in the war against US troops.

The mission marked a new era of combat for the United States in the Vietnam War. By 1963, there were 16,000 US troops in the country, and that number increased dramatically as the war progressed. The Vietnam War has been called America's first helicopter war. Helicopters were used extensively to transport troops into the jungle, quickly evacuate the wounded, and support ground troops with firepower.

Over time, the Viet Cong became skilled at attacking the choppers as they landed, but air mobility remained an important strategy for the US throughout the war and in conflicts that followed.

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