



Pancho and the Diamondheads

A Crew Chief and UH-1 961

Story by **Greg Morehead**

From Fort Rucker, Alabama a 19-year old Army aviation mechanic's boots stepped on Vietnamese soil ten days before Christmas, 1967. Far from his hometown in Texas, Gonzalo "Pancho" Salazar was assigned to B-Company of the 25th Aviation Battalion, known as the Diamondheads. Their assigned mission was attack support for the ground elements of the 25th Infantry Division and their primary equipment consisted of eight UH-1C gunships (later AH-1 Cobras) and two UH-1D Hueys ("slicks"). Pancho's new home was the Diamondhead's base at Cu Chi, Vietnam, which was roughly 25 miles NW of Saigon. Known by some as "Hell's half acre," their base was within an area of operation that included the most heavily contested region of the war-torn country.

Replacements in the Diamondheads were treated well by their more seasoned comrades because it was obvious the "new guys" would soon be counted on in combat. Immediately after Pancho's arrival a tall, handsome Alabama crew chief took him under his wing. Edward Pike was a likeable young soldier who became a true friend to Pancho. Pike loved being a crew chief and expressed passion in flying on his UH-1 Huey, tail number 961. As the 1968 Tet Offensive commenced Pike jumped aboard 961 and flew off with his Diamondhead brothers to support the 25th Infantry, who were engaged in intense fighting. He left full of life, a model soldier and human being. When '961 returned it carried the body of Edward Pike, who had been shot through the head with a heavy caliber enemy round. On his 45th day in Vietnam, Pancho lost a good friend and 961 needed a new crew chief. Pancho knew what he needed to do—he volunteered to take 961.

Because B-Company was the attack element of the 25th Aviation Battalion, 961 was called on to perform many duties that the slicks of A-Company (Little Bears) were not tasked with. Fellow Diamondhead Ron Leonard expressed their combined affinity for their trusty slick: "961 was

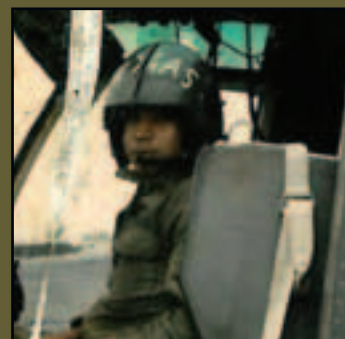
our old Smoke Ship. Innumerable medals had been earned in that ship. It still had the bullet holes of honor and battle scars it acquired with us in Vietnam. It had rescued LRRP teams from certain death, it had medi-vaced dying soldiers to the 12th Evacuation Hospital who otherwise wouldn't have survived, and it had rescued downed pilots and crews. Yes, she was a hero herself.

While various pilots from the Diamondheads would take them into battle, Pancho and his door gunner, Jack Mosley, were assigned as permanent caretakers of 961. Frequently pilots James D. Skelton and Jerry Boyington handled the job up front. One of the many missions in 961, which these four men were decorated for heroism, took place on June 13, 1968. When needed, smoke screen equipment was installed on 961 that injected diesel fuel into the exhaust to create a white cloud behind the helicopter as it flew low, between the enemy and friendly positions. Usually 961 was escorted by two gunships when laying down smoke, but on this day the enemy was within 50 yards of the 2nd of the 27th Wolfhounds, 25th Infantry. They were too close to risk gunship passes so the 961 crew made multiple screening passes, drawing enemy fire and effectively returning fire. The crew of 961 laid down smoke through multiple passes for four hours, lasting into the darkness of night. The citation for award of the Air Medal with V-Device stated: "...During smoke screening passes, Specialist Salazar placed extremely accurate fire on enemy positions, thus allowing friendly units to advance and retrieve their casualties. Although constantly receiving intense enemy fire on every pass, Specialist Salazar, with complete disregard for his own safety, continued to place devastating fire on the hostile emplacements..."

It was only one of many memorable missions for the crew of 961 for which they were awarded medals for valor—just another day for Pancho and the Diamondheads. 🇺🇸



▲ Crew Chief Edward Pike



▲ Gonzalo "Pancho" Salazar



▲ "Pancho" and Jack Mosley (door gunner) with 961 (2002).