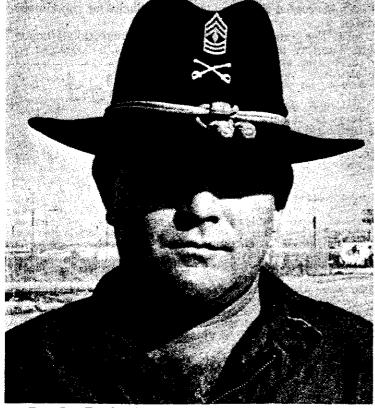


Gne Look at the Hats Tells You It's F Troop

By SPEC. 4 JIM SMITH S&S Statt Correspondent BIEN HOA, Vietnam — Soon after the 1st Cav. Div. was organized in 1921, one of its horse soldiers' most important jobs was patrolling the Mexican border to prevent smuggling of narcotics and liquor as well as cattle rustling and gun running.

The modus operandi of the Cav. has changed. Horses were replaced by jeeps in 1943, and



First Sgt. Franklin East in his Cav hat. "I'm still in Vietnam, and I'm gonna keep it on until I leave." (S&S)

today the 3rd Brigade—the last remaining 1st Cav. Div. element in Vietnam—relies mainly on gunship and reconnaissance helicopters to help its infantrymen defend U.S. installations and men in the Saigon area. Pershing rifles and sabres have given way to rockets, grenades and minigun fire.

But F Troop, 9th Cav., 1st Cav. Div. (airmobile) retains one important link with the past.

Its enlisted men and officers wear a black stetson hat with their duty uniforms or civilian clothes. It's a badge they're proud of.

"It's like back in the states," 1st Lt. Dwight L. Jobe said. "You don't mess with a guy's car or his woman. Well, you just don't mess with a man's Cav hat. If you want to get into a fight, that's probably one of the quickest ways to do it."

F Troop, a "scout" company which flies light observation helicopters ("Loaches") exclusively, is the only outfit in the 3rd Brigade authorized to wear the hats. Most of the men don't take off their hats until they go to sleep, troop officials say.

"I was at the 90th replacement in Long Binh last month and some sergeant told me to" take off my Cav hat," said Troop First Sergeant Franklin East. "He said it wasn't authorized. I said the commanding general has authorized the hat to be worn in Vietnam, I'm still in Vietnam and I'm gonna keep it on until I leave.

"The hat is a great moralebuilder for us," he said. "I've been in the army 22 years, and I've never seen a unit with more pride and more esprit de corps than this one." The hats are ordered from a firm in St. Louis and delivery sometimes takes as long as three months. Most men order three or four to make sure they get at least one, Jobe said.

Once the hat arrives, it becomes a prized possession.

One officer had his hat on the empty front observer seat of his "Loach" and two Communist small arms rounds went through it, Jobe said.

"He just kept wearing the raggedly thing. He wouldn't get a new one.

"Another man we had was killed and his family wrote several letters to us asking that we send his hat as something they could remember him by. We couldn't. It burned when the man's bird went down."

The only difference in the hats are the rank insignia on them and the color of the braid. Officers wear gold braid, warrant officers wear silver and enlisted men wear yellow braid. Each hat bears crossed sabres, and each man wears his hat differently, Jobe said.

"The way he wears it becomes a trademark of the individual. Some turn the front up like a pirate hat, some turn the sides up like a cowboy, some just leave the brim straight. No matter how we wear them, we just want to let everybody else know that we're the meanest SOBs in the valley."

The closeness of the unit members comes mainly from the fact that each is a volunteer who specifically requested duty in a cavalry scout unit. That closeness — and the hats — has sparked some criticism from outsiders.