

C-J REVIEW OF ARMY REPORTS

101st's air-crash rate not excessive for role

By JAMES MALONE  
The Courier-Journal

FORT CAMPBELL, Ky. — The aviation safety record of the 101st Airborne Division at Fort Campbell — which in June suffered its worst helicopter accident in nearly a decade — is worse than the Army's overall record the past five years.

But the division has had fewer accidents per hour flown than the average for all combat brigades, Army records show.

The records were obtained by The Courier-Journal under the Freedom of Information Act after the June accident, in which two Blackhawk helicopters collided in midair, killing six soldiers and injuring 35.

That was the fourth major helicopter accident in four years involving the 101st Aviation Brigade, the flying units of the 101st Airborne Division. A total of eight soldiers died in those crashes.

The Army's aviation accident record has improved in the last 10 years, according to a recent report by the General Accounting Office, and Fort Campbell officers say the 101st also is doing better, thanks to safer equipment and increased training of pilots.

They also pointed out that the

FINDINGS

■ The 101st Aviation Brigade's rate of major helicopter accidents the last five years — 1.7 per 100,000 flight hours — is somewhat higher than the Army's rate of aviation accidents for that period — 1.4.

■ The 101st's aviation accident rate is less than the rate for active-duty combat units — 2.1 per 100,000 flight hours — including the 101st.

■ Two-thirds of the 101st Airborne Division's helicopter pilots have eight or fewer years of experience, but, like the Army's aviation accident record, the division's record has improved the last decade with safer equipment and better training.

101st would be expected to have a higher accident rate than the Army as a whole, because of the demanding training its pilots undergo — including many nighttime and ground-

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# 101st's crash rate isn't excessive, reports conclude

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hugging flights.

The Army tracks Class A accidents — those involving deaths, permanent disability or damage exceeding \$1 million.

The statistics provided by the 101st Aviation Brigade show that its Class A accident rate the past five years was 1.7 per 100,000 flight hours. That compares with 1.4 for the entire Army and 2.1 for the Army Forces Command, the active-duty combat aviation units (including the 101st).

The division's accident rate does not include crashes involving the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, which also has companies that train at Fort Campbell. Its accident rates were not available from regiment headquarters at Fort Bragg, N.C.

Five soldiers from that unit died in March when an MH-47E Chinook helicopter crashed in Logan County. And a regiment pilot was killed in an Apache helicopter crash during a live-fire exercise at Fort Campbell in July 1994.

David Harvey, who covers military aviation safety for Rotor & Wing Magazine, said the 101st Airborne's five-year accident rate was "a little higher than the Army would like." He added that the 1994 fiscal year, when two soldiers died and three were injured in two major crashes, was a "terrible year."

The Army's goal is for units to have less than one Class A accident per 100,000 flight hours, which the Army overall accomplished last year, Harvey said.

He said the 101st's performance was "certainly nothing outrageously" out of line. "You would expect them to be faced with a number of (flying) challenges. But the Army will be concerned and will be working to lower" the accident rate.

This week, officers of the 101st Airborne granted an unusual interview to The Courier-Journal to discuss aviation safety in the division, which has about 14 percent of the Army's 2,000 front-line helicopters.

"Given what we ask (crews) to do and the environment we ask them to fly in, it's remarkable that we keep such a healthy accident rate, and that speaks to how we train," said Col. William Braddy, the 101st Airborne's chief of staff.

Referring to the four Class A accidents since 1992, Braddy said, "You're dealing in the land of very small numbers," considering that the 101st's pilots spend between 45,000 and 50,000 hours in the air each year — the equivalent of more than five years.

The general public might have misconceptions about how the division trains, Braddy said. Fort Campbell's choppers can be seen daily lumbering over the Pennyriple region. However, to carry out the division's unique mission as part of the Army's quick-response contingency force, a little more than half the flying is done at night, and almost all of it is tactical. That means helicopter pilots often are flying just above the ground, to avoid radar detection, or they are ferrying material suspended from slings, or troops.

Aviation experts say that operating under those conditions and the use of night-vision goggles greatly reduce margins for error. While the goggles help pilots see in the dark, they limit depth perception and peripheral vision.

"The public should believe we're taking every reasonable effort to control the accident rate and to keep it as low as possible," Braddy said.

He credits training and an aggressive safety-review program that he said has been a model for other services.

"We investigate every accident with an intensity that's hard to describe," Braddy said. "We open ourselves completely and honestly. We take off

ation units can be more selective in the pilots they train. Braddy calls the current corps of newly trained warrant officers "the best that we've ever had."

Overall, records show that 67 percent of the brigade's pilot corps are first- and second-grade warrant officers, meaning they have eight or fewer years of experience. It also means they are on their first or second assignment.

"The hand we're dealt is two-thirds of our pilots being youngsters," he said. But Braddy could not say whether there are more or fewer junior pilots now than in the past.

Downsizing has not meant a decrease in spending on training. The budget for flight training fell from \$25.3 million in the 1992 fiscal year to \$19.1 million the following year, but it has climbed back up, to \$29.3 million this fiscal year.

Training is constant, from time spent in multimillion-dollar flight simulators to airtime in Blackhawk, Chinook, Kiowa or Apache choppers, said Warrant Officer 5 Troy Duplessis Jr.

The simulators at Fort Campbell are booked around the clock. Duplessis, who has more than 30 years with the Army, said he still learns something every time he flies.

Ron Ball of Murray, an Army Reserve captain with 800 hours piloting a Kiowa, said the Army never stops preaching safety. Officers know well that a serious flight accident and injury under their command can mean the end of their careers, he said.

Equipment, including night-vision goggles and electronic navigation aids, also has improved dramatically in recent years, Ball said.

Equipment has become so reliable that most serious accidents can be linked to human error, Braddy said. The General Accounting Office says that human error was a factor in 76 percent of Army flight accidents in the 1994 and 1995 fiscal years.

That GAO report was sought by Democratic Rep. Ike Skelton of Missouri, a member of the House National Security Committee, following several military crashes in 1995.

The GAO found that Army Class A crashes declined from 52 in the 1975 fiscal year to 10 in 1995. The accident rate fell from 3.5 per 100,000 flight hours to 0.8 during that time.

"The increased media coverage of these accidents left an impression we were seeing higher numbers of crashes and deaths," Skelton said in a prepared statement when the report was released earlier this year.

Still, Skelton called the crashes a "billion dollar-a-year problem for the military. . . . One crash is too many. One death is too many," his statement said.

Skelton recommended that the separate branches of the military cooperate in finding crash causes and preventing accidents.

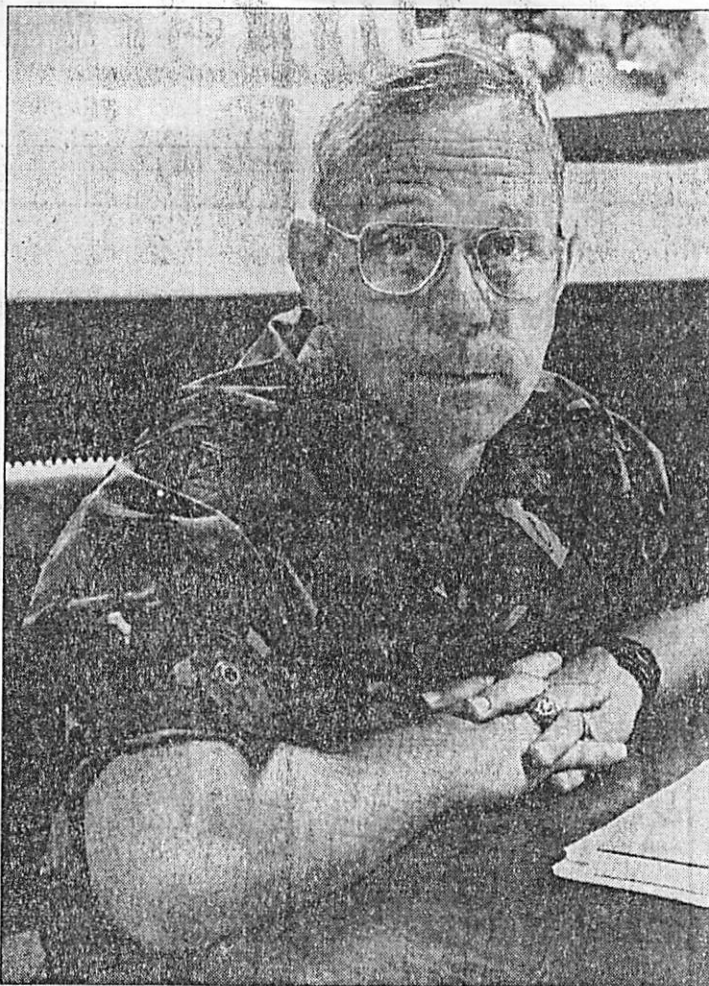
## Base sharply reduces exercises open to public

FORT CAMPBELL, Ky. — Fort Campbell is sharply curtailing the number of live-fire exercises it opens to the public in the wake of an accident in June that injured several civilian observers and killed six soldiers.

Col. William Braddy, chief of staff of the 101st Airborne Division, said, however, that the new policy was not a result of the midair collision of two Blackhawk helicopters that spewed debris toward civilians.

Instead, he said an Army survey indicated people preferred experiences other than live-fire demonstrations, such as talking to soldiers and observing the Air Assault school. The post has held about 10 live-fire demonstrations a year for civilians.

"We are relooking at the whole civilian visitors' program," Braddy said.



BY JAMES MALONE, THE COURIER-JOURNAL

Col. William Braddy, chief of staff of the 101st Airborne Division at Fort Campbell, credits training and an aggressive safety-review program with lowering the division's aviation accident rate.

## ARMY AVIATION ACCIDENTS

Chart covers fiscal year 1992 through last June 27 and shows:

1. The number of Class A helicopter and airplane accidents (those that involved death, permanent disability or more than \$1 million in damage).
2. The Class A accident rate per 100,000 flight hours.
3. Deaths.

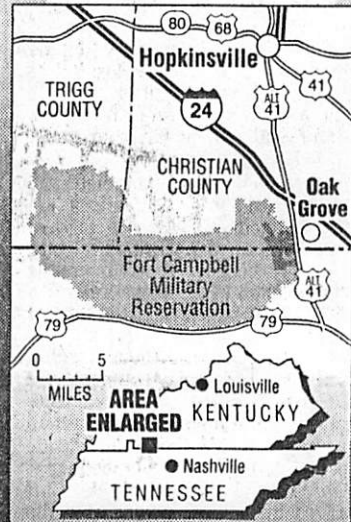
Accidents involving the 101st Aviation Brigade at Fort Campbell involved helicopters only.

Army overall	
Accidents	73
Rate	1.4
Deaths	70

Combat forces	
Accidents	29
Rate	2.1
Deaths	35

101st Aviation Brigade	
Accidents	4
Rate	1.7
Deaths	8

Source: 101st Airborne Division, Fort Campbell



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