

LAUNCH

The Story of HC-7/CSAR

Orphans of the 7th Fleet

by Mark Morgan



Part One

Kaman Aircraft Corp. via CAPT Richard J. Jaeger, USN(Ret)

Ed. Note: This is "Ranger Mark" Morgan's fourth major article for The Hook. As the senior half of the Famous Flying/Fighting Attack Morgan Brothers, Mark admits he's finally given up trying to match brother Rick article-for-article, but takes pride in being part of the only brother team to win the Tailhook Association's Contributor of the Year Award. Mark won the award in 1991 for his two-part operational history of the A-7 Corsair II ("No Slack in Light Attack," The Hook, Su, Fa 1991).

On the afternoon of 5 August 1964, aircraft from *Carrier Air Wings 14* (USS *Constellation*, (CVA-64)) and *Five* (*Ticonderoga*, (CVA-14)) struck targets in the vicinities of Hon Gai, Loc Chao, Quang Khe, and Vinh, Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

The strikes, designated *Operation Pierce Arrow*, were ordered by President Lyndon B. Johnson in retaliation for North Vietnamese P-4 and *Swatow*-class torpedo boat attacks on *7th Fleet* destroyers on 2 August. Notably, the president announced the action on television two hours prior to the actual attack, stating, "Our response for the present will be limited and fitting. . . . We still seek no wider war."

The president's bizarre attempt at televised diplomacy guaranteed that North Vietnamese Army (NVA) air defense artillerymen were ready when the strike forces arrived over their targets. At Loc Chao, NVA gunners shot down LTJG Richard Sather of VA-145; Sather rode his A-1H *Skyraider* into the sea off the target.

At Hon Gai, north of Haiphong, VA-144's LTJG Everett Alvarez Jr. was shot down on his second pass at several PT boats. Alvarez survived the ejection from his burning A-4C and became the first Naval Aviator to enter North Vietnamese captivity. Regrettably, many others would join Alvarez as "guests" of the North Vietnamese as the Johnson administration pursued further "fitting and limited" responses.

During this early period of operations over North Vietnam, options for the recovery of downed aircrew were limited. The situation was mitigated somewhat toward the end of 1965, with the first successful rescue of a Navy pilot from North Vietnam by a Navy helicopter.

Specifically designed by Kaman for the combat search and rescue role, the HH-2C Seasprite was designed with a turret-mounted M-60 7.62mm minigun under the nose and armor plating protecting vital engine and drive train components. The extra weight, however, made the helo too heavy to hover in the humid Southeast Asia environment, and much of the additional equipment was removed.

Several subsequent rescues were performed by Helicopter Combat Support (HC) and Helicopter Anti-Submarine (HS) crews deployed in units of *Task Force 77*. However, it soon became apparent that a dedicated, forward-based SAR unit would have to be established.

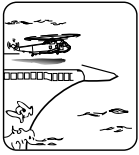
On 1 September 1967, HC-1 Detachment Atsugi, Japan, was redesignated *Helicopter Combat Support Squadron Seven* (HC-7). The new squadron was given the primary mission of combat search and rescue, or CSAR, making it the only unit in the Navy so specifically tasked.

By the end of the war, HC-7 would successfully pull nearly 150 aviators out of the People's Democratic Republic of Vietnam (PDRV) and the Gulf of Tonkin. The squadron's performance in combat would lead to its reputation as "the most highly decorated squadron in Naval Aviation history." However, CSAR was only one component of the squadron's record of achievement.

Concurrent with its activation, HC-7 acquired several detachments. As a result, the unit also found itself flying other missions throughout the war, such as providing vertical replenishment (VertRep) services as a "straight" HC squadron; operating in the VIP transport role; and, notably, playing a major role in the development of the Navy's airborne mine-countermeasure capability.

In the words of one former HC-7 member, "[The squadron] was a rather strange conglomerate, formed out of several HC-1 detachments and other splinter groups into a multi-mission, composite squadron where the only common thread seemed to be that everyone flew some kind of helicopter off ships at sea in approximately the same ocean."





Still, to the Navy flight crews going into North Vietnam on a daily basis, HC-7 was combat SAR.

The Development of Combat SAR

In “The Birth of the Fleet Angels” (See *The Hook*, Wi '81, Page 15) and “Combat Rescue” (Su '82, Page 13), Tommy Thomason discussed the Navy’s early involvement in rotary-winged flight. These activities, while not fully proving the practical value of helicopters, laid the foundation for their use by the Navy as rescue aircraft.

By the onset of the Korean “Police Action” in 1950, HU-1 at NAAS Ream Field, Calif., and HU-2 at NAS Lakehurst, N.J., were flying the Sikorsky HO3S-1, the era’s standard utility and rescue helicopter. Both squadrons provided dets to deployed carriers, and their proximity to the action in Korea made them suitable for combat search and rescue.

The rationale was simple: The aircrews knew and had a right to expect that every possible human effort would be made to rescue them if they went down. Anything less would violate the basic tenets of military leadership and grievously hurt morale.

USN via NAM



USN via NAM



The Sikorsky HO3S-1 (upper) was the first widely used aircraft for search and rescue, seeing extensive service in the Korean War. Following the war, the HUP (above) was employed on board aircraft carriers as plane guard aircraft. The HUP was withdrawn from service when the HU2K (H-2A/B) (right) was introduced in 1956.

However, doctrine and tactics did not exist for combat SAR; Korea was the Navy’s first war that employed helicopters. As with many other combat-driven operational advances, what resulted was a classic “making it up as you go along” approach. Still, the pilots and crewmen pressed on.

The Korean War ended in an armistice at Panmunjom on 27 July 1953. More than 400 Navy pilots and aircrew lost their lives during the conflict, but under the worst possible circumstances, the helicopter had shown itself capable of performing combat SAR.

Post-Korean War 7th Fleet operations quickly returned to a peacetime footing. The hard-earned corporate knowledge of combat SAR faded as helicopters returned to their prewar roles or continued development in other areas. While newer helicopter designs entered fleet service in the utility, transport, anti-submarine warfare and airborne early-warning roles, none were designed with an eye toward armament and survivability in the combat environment.

The concept of CSAR effectively disappeared in the Nuclear Navy of 1953 to 1964. Thus, in Thomason’s words, when a shooting war broke out again in Asia, “. . . the only ingredients remaining were the courage and dedication of the Navy airman.”

Into Vietnam

That courage and dedication were quickly called into play in Vietnam when Navy helo pilots found themselves wading into combat to retrieve downed aircrews. Once again it was come as you are, and this time the learning curve was particularly harsh.

In 1964, HU-1 (AirPac) and HU-2 (AirLant) provided plane guard dets to the attack carriers; embarked HS squadrons performed similar duties on the CVSS. The last few Vertol UH-25B/Cs (HUP-2) were leaving service, and the primary rescue platform was the Kaman UH-2A/B (HU2K-1).

The *Seasprite* was an effective utility helicopter. However, the aircraft lacked weaponry and armor plating—such items were not considered necessary when the requirement that led to the “Hookey Took” was issued in 1956. Well-equipped for its intended utility mission, the H-2 was all that was available to *Task Force 77* for SAR duty during the early months of the air war.

During the spring of 1965, RADM Maurice F. “Mickey” Weisner, ComCarDiv One, directed HC-1 to place a UH-2 on board *England* (DLG-22) for CSAR purposes. The *Seasprite’s* crew, from Unit M in *Ranger* (CVA-61), donned flak jackets, strapped a .30-cal. machine gun to the cabin and stood by. The helo, nicknamed *Angel*, remained on station through the end of *Ranger’s* line period, 12 April 1965.

USN, courtesy CAPT George “Zeke” Zaludek, USN(Ret)



Events in the spring of 1965 further helped drive combat SAR requirements. On 2 March, the U.S. initiated *Operation Rolling Thunder* with strikes on Xom Ban and Quang Khe. The U.S. was going to war in a big, if tightly controlled way. In approving the operation, the President stated the strikes were, “[Part of a] program of limited and measured action against selected military targets.” Four months later, Secretary of Defense Robert Strange McNamara bragged, “Not since the Cuban Missile Crisis has such care been taken in making a decision,” a clear indication of how Washington would run the air war.

There were further indicators. On 5 April, an RF-8A from VFP-63 Det D, *Coral Sea* (CVA-43), took the first photographs of an SA-2 *Guideline* site under construction southeast of Hanoi. No action was taken on the installation due to concerns in Washington that Soviet advisors might be killed in an attack. On 24 July 1965, an SA-2 bagged an Air Force F-4C from the 47th *Tactical Fighter Squadron*; the pilot was killed and his backseater became a POW.

This first of many successful SAM engagements was yet another indicator of the hard road ahead for the military in Southeast Asia. As the air strikes escalated over the coming months, more aircraft would be fighting “Up North” under tight constraints and in the face of an expanding threat. Any military analyst could predict many would not be coming back.

First Rescues

Midway (CVA-41) checked in to Yankee Station on 10 April 1965, two days prior to the departure of *Ranger*. Sharing space with the aircraft of CVW-2 was the UH-2A of HU-1 *Detachment One, Unit Alfa*.

Alpha's pilots, LCDR Weslie W. Wetzel and LT Kent M. Vander-velde, offered to assume the *Angel* duty from *Unit M*; reportedly, "demanded from the admiral" is more accurate. The pilots, with aircrewman AD1 Charles V. Bowman, eventually moved to *Galveston* (CLG-3) and set up shop.

On 20 September they pulled off the first successful Navy rescue inside North Vietnam. LTJG John R. Harris of VA-72 had ejected from his A-4E during a strike on the Cao Hung railroad bridge. Without prior training, preset tactics or even adequate charts, Wetzel and his crew flew to Harris's location roughly 20 miles east of Hanoi, located the downed aviator and saved him from probable captivity. *Unit Alfa* made no further opposed rescues in North Vietnam, but they had shown it could be done.

However, a later rescue by LCDR Chuck Sapp, LT Tim Thomassey and ADJ1 P.C. Jones of HC-2 Det 26, deployed in *Independence*, revealed serious limitations in the UH-2's effectiveness. Operating from *Richmond K. Turner* (DLG-20), the *Fleet Angel* crew had difficulty in rescuing two F-4 crewman from a North Vietnamese mountain top. At altitude, their *Seasprite* could not maintain a hover.

After emptying the cabin, they made the pickup, performing two slow passes over the survivors while dangling the rescue collar. Chuck Sapp received the Silver Star for the mission; Thomassey and Jones were awarded DFCs.

In many ways, this was Korea and the HO3S experience all over again. The UH-2, while a good helicopter, had limitations above and beyond its poor survivability in combat. Fortunately, a near-term solution was already on station.

Arrival of the Sea Kings

In November 1965, following several studies, the SH-3A was authorized for combat SAR duty. The *Sea King* possessed much greater range and endurance than the UH-2 and could therefore cover an expanded area on SAR missions. Additionally, it had two engines, giving it both a greater usable maximum payload and enhanced survivability in a combat environment.

HS-2 in *Hornet* (CVS-12), led by CDR Donald J. Hayes, was given the honor of providing the first combat SAR variants. Five of the squadron's helos were stripped of their sonar gear, repainted in green,

olive-drab and tan, and fitted with M60 door guns. At the same time, Hayes and RADM Evan M. "Pete" Aurand, ComASWGruOne, worked to perfect a method of refueling from an underway destroyer to extend the helo's endurance for long-range missions. Once on duty at Yankee Station, these modified *Sea Kings* were nicknamed *Fetch*.

The squadron worked up a system which placed two of the modified SH-3As on afloat SAR stations each morning. Launch was scheduled to place the helicopters near the coastal ingress and egress points to coincide with the strike force's time-on-target. With these methods, HS-2 managed several rescues during its 50 days on the line; the hairiest mission kicked off on 5 November in what was to become a three-day operation.

First down was *Oak 01*, an F-105D from the 357th TFS out of Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base. The following day two A-1Es from the 6251st Tactical Fighter Wing at Bien



USN via CAPT Bob Vermilya, USN(Ret)



Helo inflight refueling from a destroyer extended the range of the Sikorsky SH-3A, thus making it an ideal search and rescue vehicle. An HS-6 Sea King hoists a refueling hose from the drone helo deck of USS Radford (DD-446) to fill its tanks with as much as four hours of fuel.



Left: Big Mother 70, an HS-2 SH-3A, sits on Alert 5 on the fantail of USS Mahan (DLG-11). The landing area on SAR ships was tight—only a few feet clearance existed between the tailwheel and the deck edge; likewise between the main rotor and the aft missile launcher. **Below:** Bennington (CVS-20), with HS-8 embarked, was one of four ASW carriers in the Tonkin Gulf that carried SAR H-3s. The others were Hornet (CVS-12) with HS-2, Kearsarge (CVS-33) with HS-6 and Yorktown (CVS-10) with HS-4.

Hoa AB, responding to indications the Thud driver was alive, were shot down by AAA. They were joined by an Air Force rescue helicopter, also taken out by heavy AAA. At this point, the HS-2 det was summoned to provide assistance for what was rapidly becoming a classic Charlie Foxtrot.

Flying *Nimble 57* were LTJGs Terry Campbell and Melvin Howell, and aircrewmembers J. Wirth and “Huey” Huseth. LCDR Vern Frank, LTJG Steve Koontz, and Petty Officers Bush and Walker were in *Nimble 62*; they recovered the Air Force helicopter’s crew chief after dark, but that was the only save for the day.

The following dawn—which marked the third day of the op—Campbell, Howell, Huseth and Wirth returned to continue the search, this time in *Nimble 62*. What they didn’t know was that overnight NVA troops had located a survivor and surrounded his position with three machine guns. At this early stage, the rescue helos had no direct voice communications with those stuck on the ground and could only home on beeper.

Campbell and Howell came in low from the south, dodging karst and regularly going IFR in fog. “We hit the downed aviator’s position on the mark,” recalls Howell. “As soon as we cleared the last little ridge and dipped down in the valley, all hell broke out.”

Howell turned to his gunners and yelled, “What are you shooting at?” Huseth and Wirth quickly responded, “We’re not shooting!”

Bullets quickly opened up the aircraft. The crewmen managed to put out a fire in the cockpit, but it was obvious that *Nimble 62* wasn’t going to remain flying much longer. The pilots abandoned the rescue and staggered about five miles southwest to a mountain top. There the crew removed equipment and four M60s, and set up a defensive perimeter.

After about an hour, a UH-2 arrived on the scene. Campbell and Howell had already agreed that the junior men should go first, so Wirth and Huseth departed. A couple of hours later an Air Force HH-3E *Jolly Green Giant* arrived to retrieve the two pilots. After several stops in safe zones spotted across Laos, Howell and Campbell were flown to Udorn RTAFB by an Air America pilot.

The two lieutenants were eventually reunited with their squadron and ship at Cubi Point, and eventually were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. *Nimble 62* was later destroyed on the ground by A-1s, and it was the only aircraft lost by HS-2 during the cruise, which ended on 2 February 1966.

Dave McCracken and Froggy Five

The first month of 1966 marked the commencement of *Rolling Thunder III* and the arrival of the first combat SAR *Seasprite*. Getting the modified UH-2 to the Tonkin Gulf took some doing.

HC-1 *Detachment Five*, led by LCDR David J. McCracken, was directed to take an aircraft and remove everything that wasn’t necessary

from the busted helo and pressed on.

Over the next six months, Det 5 would perform 48 rescues, including five retrievals from North Vietnam. Along the way, they literally wrote the book on SAR procedures, but occasionally they got in trouble for their efforts, usually as a result of not following “proper procedures.”

CAPT McCracken later recalled one particularly frustrating mission that ended in failure. While nearing a downed aviator near Vinh, the *Detachment 5 UH-2* came under immediate heavy fire. “We got shot

USN, via NAM



up,” said McCracken. “The aircraft looked like a sieve. One bullet chipped one of my teeth, which I later lost. Every time I got up high, the big guns would shoot at us; every time I tried to go low to escape them, the little ones would shoot at us.”

The crew called in the A-4 ResCAP to take out the biggest guns—McCracken remembers they were 130mm—and were told the guns couldn’t be bombed because they were on the Vinh airfield’s runway. They therefore were an *unauthorized target*. The crew was eventually forced to abandon the rescue attempt and returned to the ship.

After they recovered, McCracken went over to the carrier to raise hell with the staff about the rules of engagement and their impact on his det’s efforts to save lives. He was intercepted by the admiral’s chief of staff, who took him aside and said, “You’re doing a *great* job, but this is the way we’re fighting the war. Now get back in your helicopter and go back and *continue* to do a great job.”

The situation was sadly typical. Still, at the end of the deployment, *Detachment Five*—a.k.a “Froggy Five”—received the Navy Unit Commendation. It remains the smallest unit ever so honored.

Fine-Tuning the CSAR Network

Rolling Thunder continued and, in April 1966, Yankee Station moved further north in the Tonkin Gulf to a point south of Hainan Island. The northern UH-2 combat SAR station moved north with the task force and was named *Clementine One*; its southern counterpart was given the



LT Steve Millikin, USNR, via NAM



Top: An HS-2 Big Mother barely fits on the flight deck of Mahan, steaming off North Vietnam while on North SAR. **Above:** A pilot's-eye view on final approach to Mahan, April 1967.

name *Clementine Two*. CSAR-modified SH-3A operations continued with the *Indian Gals* of HS-6 in *Kearsarge* (CVS-33) under CDR Robert S. Vermilya.

By now the SAR network had been in place for well over a year. From the start of air operations over the north through October 1966, 269 Naval and Air Force pilots and aircrewmen went down over North Vietnam; of these, 103 (38 percent) were recovered. The rescue rate for aviators who managed to get back feet wet over the Tonkin Gulf was better than 90 percent.

After 1966, however, the success rate steadily declined. The North Vietnamese continued to improve their air defense and worked hard to capture shot down aviators, to the point of offering rewards. The *Golden Falcons* of HS-2 were to confront these more difficult conditions in April 1967, when they arrived in *Hornet* to relieve hard-working HS-8 on board *Bennington* (CVS-20).

HS-2 and the Big Mothers

Upon returning to the Gulf of Tonkin, HS-2 acquired the camouflaged SH-3As and picked up where they left off the previous February. Apparently it was during this cruise the aircraft received the sobriquet "Big Mother."

While the source of the name is uncertain, most agree it was bestowed by *Independence's* (CVA-62) air boss. He was used to operating with the compact UH-2 *Clementines*; the larger *Sea Kings* were a different story and caused him much aggravation, sleepless nights—the works. After a time, he started broadcasting

orders of the "Get that big mother on Spot 9 out of there, *now!*" variety, and the name stuck. *Big Mother* would eventually become synonymous with combat SAR and HC-7.

The cruise proved to be a hard one for HS-2. The first helo was shot down in North Vietnam on 21 May 1967 by AAA; the aircraft was abandoned and destroyed after the four crewmen were rescued.

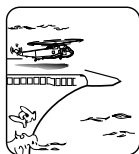
On 23 May, one of the squadron's aircraft went down in Gulf of Tonkin for unknown reasons, with no survivors. An operational accident on 20 June resulted in another SH-3 *Sea King* getting pushed over the side while additional accidents on 6 July and 20 August put two more aircraft in the water, fortunately with no fatalities. On 18 July, one of the squadron's aircrewmembers/gunners, Petty Officer David R. Chatterton, took a small-arms round in the chest during an opposed rescue over the beach. The following day, the squadron suffered its third and final combat loss when a squadron SH-3A was shot down near Phu Ly. None of the crewmen survived. Two helo maintenance personnel supporting the detachment in *Forrestal* (CVA-59) died in the fire of 20 July, bringing to thirteen the total fatalities suffered by the squadron. Eight aircraft were lost during the cruise (including two in operational but non-combat situations).

The *Golden Falcons* finally outchopped with *Hornet* on 18 October, having thoroughly paid the price. Upon its departure, the squadron again swapped equipment with HS-6, once more in *Kearsarge*.

Despite the best efforts of the HS crews, problems with the system were apparent. As the squadrons rotated homeward, much of the hard-won experience and savvy in combat SAR techniques went with them. There was no formal training and, at best, only a quick turnover to the incoming units, summed by one pilot as a "verbal pass down, *i.e.*, 'Good luck.'" According to HS-2 pilot CAPT Steve Millikin, who made a successful rescue from Haiphong Harbor during the 1967 cruise, "It was painfully obvious that something else had to be done," *vis-a-vis* combat SAR.

The situation dictated the establishment of a dedicated combat SAR squadron equipped with specialized helicopters and properly trained personnel.





SH-3A door gunners at work against targets during the rescue by pilot CDR Bob Vermilya of LCDR Tommy Tucker, VFP-63, 31 Aug '66. Crewmen are AWC Tom Grisham (firing M60) and ADR2 Jerry Dunford of HS-6.

The Big Mothers Stand Up

In 1951, HU-1 based at NAAS Ream Field, Imperial Beach, Calif., established a detachment at NAF Oppama, Japan. The det, which later relocated to NAS Atsugi, was tasked with providing station SAR services and maintenance support for the squadron's carrier-based helicopter detachments. Over the following 16 years, HU/HC-1 Det Atsugi gained several additional missions, including a helicopter detachment for *Com7thFleet* providing ComFAirWestPac with general logistics support, establishing a UH-2A/B maintenance support facility at NAS Cubi Point and establishing and operating a forward-deployed VertRep capability.

By 1966, HC-1 was hard pressed to maintain effective control of its numerous detachments. The expansion of the Vietnam War had increased tasking to the extent that the squadron was continuously operating throughout the entire Pacific basin and from pole to pole. Subsequently, CNO letter 102P30 of 14 July 1967 directed the creation of four new helicopter combat support squadrons, each with a different mission.

On 1 September 1967, HC-3 and HC-5 stood up at NAS Imperial Beach with H-46s and UH-2s, respectively, while at NAS Norfolk, HC-6 established to assume the AirLant VertRep mission. Concurrently at Atsugi, HC-7 was established from the former HC-1 SAR/VertRep detachment. CDR Lloyd Parthemer assumed the duty as the squadron's first commanding officer.

HC-7 would grow substantially during the first 18 months of its operations. Upon establishment, the squadron acquired HC-1's attendant *7th Fleet* and ComFAirWestPac responsibilities, including the VIP transport and VertRep missions. On 1 October 1967, HC-7 acquired HC-1's Tonkin Gulf *Clementine Detachments 104* through *109*, as well as the maintenance and station SAR detachment at Cubi Point.

On 19 February 1968, HC-7 *Detachment 110* was established to acquire and operate the deployed SH-3A CSAR aircraft. It would eventually become HC-7's single largest subordinate unit. Det 111 formed on the same date in *Enterprise* (CVA(N)-65) to provide CSAR and logistic support for *Task Force 71* during the crisis involving *Pueblo* (AGER-2).

In February 1969, *Detachments 112* and *113* were formed at NAS Imperial Beach for the aerial mine countermeasures mission—their establishment brought the total number of dets assigned to 14, ranging from Cubi Point to Japan and on to the Tonkin Gulf.

These dets performed six distinct missions, three of which were judged primary—combat search and rescue, vertical replenishment and mine countermeasures. To reflect its three-fold mission, the squadron selected the mythological three-headed dog Cerberus, the guardian of the gates of Hades, as its emblem. HC-7 chose as its name *Sea Devils*.

To man the squadron, the Navy selected pilots, aircrews and maintenance men of what can be termed “varied” experience. CDR Parthemer's background was perhaps typical: tours in F6F-5N night fighters and with VF-31 in F9F-2s and F2H-2s, and 1,800 hours in the Training Command. Parthemer says he decided to switch to rotary wing because he was a “nervous Reservist,” and felt that if qualified in another community, the Navy would probably want to keep him. Prior to

assuming command of HC-7, he had served with HU-1, HS-9 and HS-1.

Whatever their backgrounds, Parthemer recalls that a bunch of men “woke up one morning in assignments at sea and on land, and found themselves attached to HC-7.” With this eclectic mix of aircraft, personnel and operations, the *Sea Devils* set to work.

Into Combat

The new squadron got a good start in the CSAR business on 3 October 1967. LTs Tim Melecosky and Jim Brennan, AE2 Willie Pettitt and ATN3 John Bevan launched from *Coontz* and headed for a downed Air Force pilot. While en route they were diverted to retrieve LTJG Allan D.



Perkins of VSF-3, who had stepped out of his A-4B and parachuted into Haiphong Harbor.

As the UH-2A approached Perkins' position, ResCAP advised Melecosky that the Scooter driver was in the water about 60 yards from an anchored freighter. The *Clementine* UH-2 came in between the ships at an altitude of about five feet.

According to Melecosky, “It was very difficult to shoot at us . . . they were afraid of hitting the merchant vessels.” Perkins lit a flare, the helo slid into a hover and the swimmer jumped out for the retrieval . . . and promptly got stuck in the mud.

Jim Brennan recalls it was quite a sight. “The swimmer was there in the water, his fins sticking up in the air . . . the guy we picked up was a big, long drink of water. He stood up and walked over to the swimmer to help *him* out.” After being free of the mud, the swimmer hooked onto the Scooter pilot and were both hoisted aboard. The helo recovered without further incident and HC-7 celebrated its first combat rescue.

However, things took a bit of a downturn the following day. The same crew lifted once again to locate and rescue a downed Air Force pilot. This particular blue-suiter had collected a SAM the previous day during an attack on the Dap Cau railroad bridge in Route Package VI-B. On 4 October, when they arrived at his last reported position, Melecosky and crew flew into a flak trap and were royally shot up.

The crew aborted and managed to get back over water—but barely—before the UH-2's engine packed it in. Fortunately, a *Sea King* from HS-2 was there to make the pick-up. The shattered UH-2 was left behind. Notably, it would be the only aircraft lost by HC-7 in combat. The unfortunate Thud driver, MAJ Robert W. Barnett, was captured and finished the war as a POW.

On 14 October, the *Clementine 104* team of LT Tom Lax, LTJG Terry Smith, swimmer ADJ2 Roger Clemons and hoist operator ADJ3 John Holtz made the squadron's second successful recovery.

A VAP-61 RA-3B caught fire while on a ferry flight from Cubi Point to Da Nang. All three crewmen cleared the aircraft: the bad news was that two of the men, LTJG M.M. Moser and ADJ2 J.G. Shaw, came down in the middle of a North Vietnamese fishing fleet. Lax and his crew, operating from the guided missile frigate *Pratt* (DLG-13), moved in for the rescue escorted by several VA-25 Spads.



The *Clementine* crew dumped fuel to 850 pounds and retrieved the first man within 30 seconds of entering a hover. They then turned toward the second survivor, who was being bracketed by heavy shore fire. LT Lax flew to a point about one mile south, and once there Clemons and Hultz dumped a smoke bomb out the door. While the North Vietnamese shifted fire to the new position, the helo returned to the second survivor and pulled him out. As the helo left the area for the return trip to *Pratt*, the shore batteries fired a last salvo which impacted in the area of the second retrieval.

Upon questioning the survivor, the helo crew learned this was his *third* successful bailout from an A-3. Clemons asked him if maybe someone was trying to tell him something about being a Whale crewman—the rescuee cheerfully replied that he couldn't wait to get back to his squadron and go flying again.

Meanwhile, Back at Atsugi . . .

As these first rescues were taking place, CDR Parthemer and his staff worked at getting the squadron fully up and operating. The squadron started developing its own doctrine, modifying existing “rules” as they went along based on training and experience of SAR crews to date.

The skipper's Rule No. 1 was simple: “You will wait for ResCAP.” Parthemer admitted this rule was particularly difficult for his personnel to adhere to. “The biggest problem was to get the helo crew to wait. If they had their way, they'd have gone in yesterday.”

Another standard directed the crews to put a swimmer in the water during rescues. This policy had been batted back and forth among squadrons in the past, and often it came down to the commanding officer's or aircraft commander's preferences. Now it was doctrine, with the caveat that the pilots were to use common sense, taking into account sea state, combat situation, weather and other factors.

There were initial problems: The *Sea Devils* quickly lost two helos in operational vice combat situations due to headwork errors. During rescue and swimmer training in the bay, a UH-2 crashed while backing down too fast, almost killing the “victim” in the water. A photograph of this incident made the center spread of *Pacific Stars & Stripes*; not exactly the form of early exposure the squadron had hoped for.

Cubi Operations

Despite this, the Devils did quickly see successes. On 21 October 1967, the NAS Cubi station SAR bird made its first rescue under assignment to HC-7. *Clementine* pilot LTJG Bob Doane had a ringside seat when a VAH-4 Det G A-3B launched for a trip to *Oriskany* (CVA-34).

“We were loaded up and ready to go on station with the North SAR,” Doane recalls. “These guys took off and the A-3 started coming apart, with pieces flying all over the place. It went off the runway and into the water. I believe they got the whole crew out; we picked up one guy—the crewman—and the station SAR bird picked up the rest of the crew.”

Life at Cubi may not have always been that exciting, but it was always busy. All personnel going to *Clementine* and *Big Mother* duty rotated through on their way to the afloat dets. After arrival in the Philippines, they were placed into a pilot/co-pilot/aircrewmen team for training, which included small-deck landing qualifications in preparation for deployment.

Former *Clementine* and 7th Fleet VIP pilot Ed Parker has particularly vivid recollections of the latter:

“I remember my first night landing as a JG, with nugget co-pilot LTJG Gene Gilbert on a DLG coming out of Subic. The airplane wasn't ready and the DLG didn't leave until late. It was the blackest night, like the Black Hole of Calcutta. None of us had done this before.

“We landed and shut her down. I got together with Gene afterwards and he asked, ‘Ed, how often have you done this sort of thing?’ I said it was the first time I'd ever done this. Gene's eyes got big and he said, ‘Ahh, naaaaahhhh. . . .’”

Det Cubi was also responsible for major maintenance of the H-2s, including engine and transmission changes. After early 1968, it adopted the same role for the SH-3As assigned to Det 110. These activities led

In addition to its better known work of combat search and rescue, HC-7 was tasked with multiple missions. Among them were VertRep, VIP transport and minesweeping. Shown at right is an HC-7 CH-46A departing an AFS flight deck with a slingload of supplies for a ship at sea.

to a large-scale operation: At one point the detachment totaled more than 30 officers and 100 men, all assigned PCS. Squadron members and det personnel even adopted their own bar in Olongapo City, the *Rufadora*. According to one former *Big Mother* pilot, the place was more like a neighborhood bar and classier than some of the other local dives because, “You wouldn't be hustled by hookers while you were in there.”

The men of det were also well practiced in cultivating “professional relationships” with other squadrons. Unit personnel regularly decorated the squadron spaces with artifacts from their travels, including the fox tail from the destroyer *Fox* (DLG-33) and the ship's plaque off *Truxton* (DLG(N)-35). The “ultimate” souvenir came from VQ-1: their drinking flag, spirited away from its position at the top of that squadron's most heavily guarded hangar at NAS Atsugi, reportedly by LTJG Joe Skrzypek. Roger Clemons says they later heard one of VQ-1's ensigns was told to retrieve the flag or not bother coming back. Clemons remembers “that ensign must've spent a year out in CTF-77 bouncing around looking for that flag.”

Throughout the war, HC-7 Det Cubi would be the linchpin for the squadron's operations. If at times the various dets seemed to get more press, it remained the aircrews, trainers and maintainers in the Philippines who made it all possible.

1968—One Helluva Year

Rolling Thunder V ended on 31 December 1967, marking the conclusion of a very costly year for the forces in the Tonkin Gulf. The Navy alone lost 133 aircraft in combat. Forty-five Navy men, though, had been recovered from North Vietnam or the Gulf, including HC-7's first 16 saves.

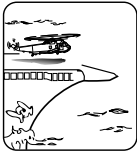
The New Year showed no promise of peace talks between the warring parties and, on 3 January, President Johnson ordered the commencement of *Rolling Thunder VI*. What followed in the squadron's first full year of existence turned out to be one of the most turbulent 12-month periods in the history of the nation.

The squadron's year got off to a rocky start on 23 January, when a UH-2A from *Ranger* crashed in an operational accident. After lift-off, AE2 R.T. Conlin's M60 malfunctioned, sending a round between the two pilots through the windshield and into the main spar of one of the rotor blades. Naturally, the ride suddenly got pretty bumpy, to the extent that pilot LT Andy Curtin couldn't keep his hand on the collective. Neither he nor co-pilot LTJG



USN via CDR Lloyd Parthemer, USN(Ret)





Stephen Salisbury could focus on the instruments. They managed to flare their UH-2 and lower it into the water, and all four aboard, including second crewman AN Bill Wood, were recovered without injury.

According to one former aircrewman, this type of incident was not supposed to happen, as the machine guns had stops to prevent them from firing through the rotor arc. However, the crews weren't too happy with the devices and had filed them off. Sure enough. . . .

Two weeks later, on 23 February, *Detachment 111* formed for duty on Defender Station with *Task Force 71*. A couple of SH-3As, one officer and several maintenance men, en route to HC-7, were on board *Enterprise* following the seizure of *Pueblo*. They were supposed to ride the carrier until the aircraft could be delivered. Instead, when the hard turn to starboard took place, the det found itself augmented by several additional crews and preparing for combat.

However, any plans for combat action against North Korea went out the window when the *Pueblo* was towed into Wonson harbor. Again, the Johnson Administration had been proven impotent, or at least mightily confused. On 16 February, *Kitty Hawk* (CVA-63) arrived at Defender Station and *Enterprise* resumed its transit to the Gulf of Tonkin for its first line period. *Detachment 111* was inactivated and its assets turned over to the Det 110 pool.

Combat over North Vietnam continued. On 31 March 1968, President Johnson made what was probably his most famous televised address concerning the war. First, he ordered the suspension of all bombing north of the 20th Parallel, to take effect the following day. Secondly, he announced he would not run for re-election. On 1 April the United States suspended all combat operations north of 20 degrees, and the line was subsequently moved south to 19 degrees north latitude. The peace talks that the Johnson Administration had long sought started with the North Vietnamese government on 13 May in Paris.



Courtesy CAPT Richard J. Jaeger, USN(Ret)



HC-7 Det Cubi operations provided a change from seagoing life. It was here squadron aircraft received periodic inspections and pilots indoctrination. As is common in the tropics, uniforms and timetables were governed by the hot, humid weather. UH-2 receives maintenance inspection (top) as LTJG Rich Jaeger (above) checks with a maintenance technician.

HC-7 Detachment Summary

HC-7 operated the following detachments during the course of its operations in Japan, Southeast Asia, the Philippines and Southern California:

Det 101	VIP/7th Fleet support	H-3	1967-1971
Det 102	VertRep	H-46	1967-1970
Det 103	VertRep	H-46	1967-1970
Det 104	Clementine, CSAR	H-2	1967-1971
Det 105	Clementine, CSAR	H-2	1967-1971
Det 106	Clementine, CSAR	H-2	1967-1971
Det 107	Clementine, CSAR	H-2	1967-1972
Det 108	Clementine, CSAR	H-2	1967-1971
Det 109	Clementine, CSAR	H-2	1967-1971
Det 110	Big Mother, CSAR	H-3	1968-1975
Det 111	Big Mother, CSAR	H-3	Feb 68
Det 112	Mine Countermeasures		1969-1971
Det 113	Mine Countermeasures		1969-1971
Det Cubi Point	Maintenance/training		1967-1975

HH-3A Big Mothers

The following SH-3A aircraft were modified to the HH-3A configuration and operated by HC-7, using the squadron's VH tailcode:

VH 60	149903
VH 61	149922
VH 62	149912
VH 63	151552
VH 64	149916
VH 65	151553
VH 66	149933
VH 67	151556
VH 70	149682
VH 71	149896

The eleventh HH-3A was lost in a training accident in the Philippines.

Lassen, Cook, Dallas, West and Clementine Two

Following the suspension of the air war Up North, Navy aircraft continued combat operations in the southern portion of the PDRV, South Vietnam and Laos, with particular emphasis on portions of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. One such mission that went awry on 19 June 1968 resulted in one of the most famous rescues of the entire war.

LTJGs Clyde Lassen and Clarence Cook were manning HC-7 *Detachment 104* in *Preble* (DLG-15) on that particular night, operating as the Southern SAR station. They launched with crewmen ADJ3 Donald West and AE2 Bruce B. Dallas at 0022, shortly after receiving word that a *Phantom* crew was down near Vinh.

The stranded airmen were LCDRs John W. Holtzclaw and John A. Burns of VF-33 off of *America* (CVA-66), who had been knocked down by a SAM over Vinh. The two *Tarsiers* ejected from their crippled F-4 and came down in the middle of a rice paddy between two villages. Forty-five minutes of stealthy crawling took them out of the open, across the paddies and up the side of a small, heavily forested and overgrown karst hill.

Lassen and his crew flew the 60 miles to the crash site under the guidance of controllers on board the destroyer *Jouett* (DLG-29), spotted the burning wreckage of the F-4, and moments later just missed being hit by a SAM. In his after-action report, Dallas commented, "Just before we went down from the altitude of 5,000 feet, I saw a fairly large ball of



HH-2C receives a maintenance inspection while on board a guided missile frigate (DLG) on Northern SAR. It was this type aircraft that LTJG Clyde Lassen and his crew flew during a daring rescue for which Lassen was awarded the Medal of Honor.

flame go by the right side of the aircraft. I can't judge how close it missed us or what it was because of the darkness. Also, I was concentrating on trying to find a signal from the survivors."

Burns and Holtzclaw flashed their strobes but were not seen by the helo crew. After the downed airmen fired two pistol flares, Lassen spotted them and moved in for the attempt. The pilot later said:

"We informed the survivors that we had sighted their position and we would land near them, approximately 200 feet down the hill from their position. I made an approach and landed in a rice paddy. As soon as we were on the ground, we began receiving small-arms and some automatic-weapons fire. The survivors stated they couldn't get down the hill, so I lifted and made a couple of orbits overhead."

Partial Panel Approach to a Hover

An A-6 *Intruder* orbiting overhead dropped several flares, and the HC-7 crew came in again for a second attempt. Afterward, in commenting about the following few seconds, Lassen wrote: "With the survivors, crewmen and co-pilot giving me directions, I made a partial-instrument, partial-contact approach to about 100-200 feet over the survivors. The area at this time was well lighted by flares dropped by ResCAP. The survivors' position was between two large trees.

"I made the approach to a fifty-foot hover between the trees, which were approximately 150 feet apart. As the crewman was lowering the rescue sling, the overhead illuminating flares went out and it became pitch dark again. I lost sight of the survivors and had no visual reference. The crewman yelled that we were going



The Legacy

What was the key to HC-7's success? One prime undoubtedly was each squadron member's belief in the squadron's missions, particularly the basic mission of CSAR, and its standing as the only dedicated practitioners of the craft. During the Vietnam War, Navy SAR forces rescued more than 250 downed aircrewmembers from the Gulf of Tonkin and North Vietnam; and of these, HC-7 rescued more than 140. The price was high—in land

Courtesy CAPT Richard J. Jaeger, USN(Ret)



Big Mother 70 awaits the call while on board USS Jouett (DLG-29), North Tonkin Gulf, 1970.

rescue attempts, the Navy lost an average of two SAR aircraft for every three aircrew rescued and one SAR crewman killed or captured for every two aircrew rescued. Many more rescues were attempted than succeeded.

Despite this, the men of HC-7 approached the mission proudly, professionally and even perhaps eagerly, for they knew of its importance. The valor demonstrated during these rescues, successful or otherwise, will always be categorized as "above and beyond." This is reflected in the squadron tally of one Medal of Honor, four Navy Crosses, several Silver Stars, and more than 50 Distinguished Flying Crosses. As one pilot later put it:

"I didn't really see anything ugly my whole time in Vietnam. I didn't kill anyone or see anyone get killed. I got shot at a hell of a lot but it was all impersonal and detached. Besides, I was there to save lives. My mission was rescue."

And for the point of view of those who most needed the expertise of the men of HC-7, we close with the comments of CDR John B. "Pirate" Nichols, in *On Yankee Station* (Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, Md., 1987):

Fixed-wing pilots generally, and jet jockeys particularly, adopted a "machoer-than-thou" attitude toward helo drivers. After all, it was hard for a "rotorhead" to generate enough speed to really hurt himself, and choppers seemed to adhere to the hang glider's motto: Never fly higher than you're willing to fall.

But the combat SAR folks, bless their torque, were always there when needed. They knew they had a corner on the market, and when some hot jet jock screwed up and found himself staring at a plate of pumpkin soup for dinner, the helos came motoring in at all of 140 knots to attempt the rescue. They weren't always successful: Sometimes there simply wasn't enough time, and often the flak was too thick. But the helos had the last word on the subject. After they'd endured the slings and arrows of the fast-movers, they'd unzip wry grins and say, "Yeah, right. Next time you're down in the water and the sampans are coming to get you, call an F-4 to pick you up."

There was no arguing with that logic.

to hit a tree. I added power and was just starting a climb when I hit the tree just aft of the first crewman's position. I felt a large jolt, the helo pitched down and went into a tight starboard turn."

In back, Petty Officer Dallas had been preparing for the pickup.

"We were just a short way from the pilots and dangerously close to the trees," he wrote. "I was starting to let out the hoist when the flares went out and we were in sheer darkness with trees all around us. I started retracting the hoist as fast as possible, and in the process the helo hit a tree on the right side. In my leaning out, I was also hit on the face as the tree went by.

"As soon as the limb hit me I yelled 'get up, get up' and we were out of there and climbing. Nothing but the skill and experience on our pilot's part saved us from crashing."

At some point during the proceedings a couple more SAMs whizzed by. Maintaining control of his badly vibrating aircraft, Lassen called for more flares. Informed none were available, he called the survivors and directed them into the clearing. Again, the *Phantom* crewmen said the helicopter was too far away for them to reach. Lassen applied the collective and again moved out.

Tailhook Collection



LCDRs John W. Holtzclaw and John A. Burns of VF-33 ejected from an F-4J similar to this one on a mission off USS America (CVA-66). They were rescued by an HC-7 crew, headed by LT Clyde Lassen. The helo crew of four was awarded a Medal of Honor, Navy Cross and two Silver Stars for the daring mission.

A Last Attempt is Successful

By this time the helo was down to about 30 minutes of fuel remaining. Still under intense fire and fully aware of the danger involved, Lassen turned on the helo's landing lights and moved in for the rescue. Petty Officers West and Dallas resumed fire with the door guns while co-pilot Cook fired an M16A1 out his window. They managed to keep the enemy down until the survivors stumbled aboard.

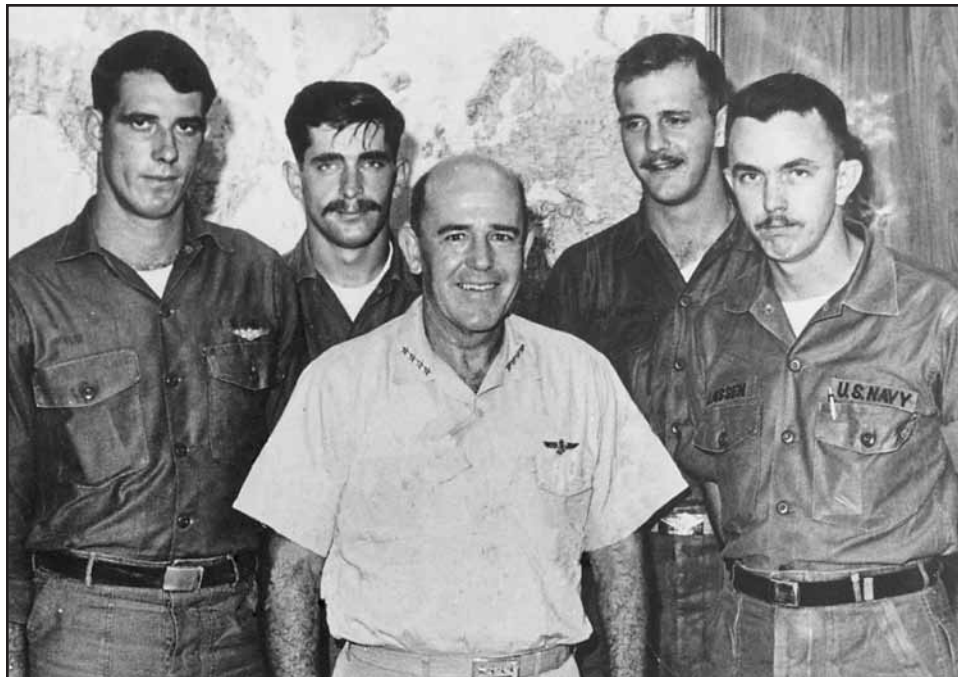
In Dallas's words, "While making the last approach we were under fire from behind us and from both sides. We were returning the fire during landing and takeoff, and I silenced one position that I know of."

It was then that the crew learned the RIO, LCDR Burns, had a sprained left ankle and injured knee as a result of his ejection. As soon as the two fighter crewmen were aboard, Lassen departed the pick-up area and started back toward the Tonkin Gulf.

Clementine Two had been overland for 58 minutes and under fire for approximately 50 when it went feet wet. The right side door—damaged during one of the rescue attempts—came off the plane when Lassen evaded some last AAA over the coast. Otherwise intact, and with Burns the only wounded participant, the *Seasprite* recovered on board *Jouett* at 0240. Only five minutes fuel remained on board.

LTJG Cook was awarded the Navy Cross for his part in the rescue; Petty Officers Dallas and West each received the Silver Star. Clyde Lassen received the Medal of Honor, marking the second award to a Naval Aviator for combat rescues in Vietnam. Lassen received the

ADM John J. Hyland, CinCPac, congratulates Lassen's crew. From left, aircrewmen ADJ3 Donald West and AE2 Bruce Dallas, Hyland, LTJG Clarence Cook and Clyde Lassen.



Medal from President Johnson in the traditional White House ceremony on 16 January 1969.

As the Johnson Administration wound down, HC-7 crews managed several other rescues, including both combat and open-ocean recoveries. On 9 August 1968, the Atsugi crew of LT William Wendt, LTJG Clarence Cook, AMH2 Robert G. Timm and AMH2 James E. Spohn rescued four Japanese sailors who were adrift in the face of Typhoon No. 7 off Kiratsuka City. All four HC-7 members received letters of appreciation from the director of the Kanagawa Prefectural Police and awards from the Japanese Good Conduct Society for their efforts.

No Such Thing as a Standard Mission

Sometimes the SAR missions got a tad confused, particularly when they didn't begin as SAR missions. One HC-7 SH-3A was on a VIP transport flight from Hardy Barracks in Tokyo when it received word

LCDR John Holtzclaw, tired but elated following his rescue by HC-7, is welcomed aboard USS Jouett (DLG-29) by members of the ship's company.

USN via NAM



that a man had fallen overboard off *Coral Sea* (CVA-43). Assistance was requested and the aircraft, flown by LTs Arthur W. Nelson and James P. Quinn with crewmen AMS3 Don Burluson and ADJ2 Walter F. Schoepp, turned seaward.

Bucking headwinds of up to 50 knots, Nelson flew the *Sea King* 90 miles out to sea only to learn the carrier's plane guard destroyer had rescued the sailor. Nelson then turned back toward Atsugi for sorely needed fuel. Nearing home they received another call for help: Two crewmen on board *Porterfield* (DD-682) had been injured in a ship-board accident and one had a fractured skull. Nelson continued to Atsugi, refueled the helicopter, and loaded up with the station medical officer, LCDR Richard F. Meese, and HM2 Hamilton Todd.

Within a few minutes they were airborne again, heading to a position five miles south of Oshima Island, 40 miles south of Atsugi. Dr. Meese was lowered to the destroyer in the rescue sling—once on deck he checked the two injured crewmen and prepared them for evacuation. After hoisting the flight surgeon and crewmen aboard, Nelson turned toward Yokosuka, where the patients entered the Naval hospital. Both eventually recovered.

Operations such as these continued through the end of the year. On Thursday, 31 October 1968, President Johnson announced the halt of all bombing of North Vietnam.



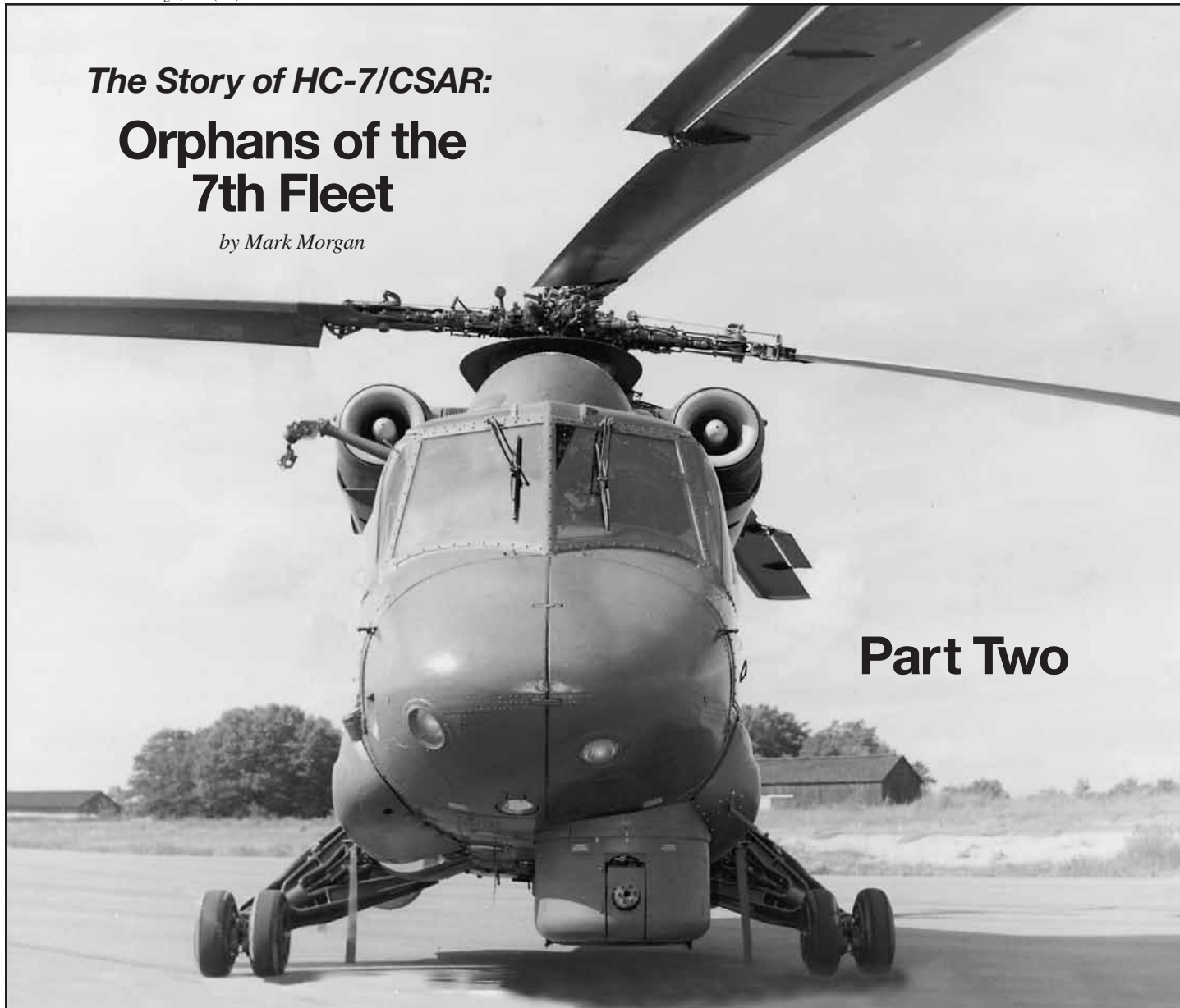
Acknowledgements: The author thanks the following individuals for their contributions: CAPTs(Ret) James Brennan, Robert Cameron, Jim Cavanaugh, Bob Doane, Don Gregory, Rich Jaeger, Robert E. Jones, Terry Lackey, Walt Lester, Dave McCracken, Steve Millikin, Rosario "Zip" Rausa, Mike Reber, Earle Rogers, Jim Spillman, Jeff Wiant, Ed Woolam, Harry Zinser; CDRs(Ret) Ron Abler, Gerald L. Glade, Jan Jacobs, Jim Jowers, John Kennedy, Frank Lockett, Joe LoPresti, Ed Parker, Lloyd Parthemer, Frank St. Pierre, Joe Skrzypek, Joe Vaden, Jim Waring; LCDRs(Ret) Byron Diechman; Melvin Howell, Frank Koch; PHCS(AW) Robert L. Lawson, USN(Ret); ADJ1 Roger Clemons, USN(Ret); AMM1 Bob Elerick, USN(Ret); Bruce Dallas; John Kerr; and Bill Tuttle, Sikorsky Aircraft.

Ed. Note: During a final tour in the Naval Reserve in 1988, Mark had the pleasure of bouncing around in the back end of former Big Mothers 60, 63 and 66 in HC-9, the Reserve successor to HC-7. While in the squadron he served as air intelligence officer, occasional rescue dummy, full-time "Bubba" and the Navy's only "CSAR Bombarrier/Navigator." He rates the tour as a unique opportunity to serve with the finest crews and squadron in the Navy, albeit with the oldest helicopters.

Mark, a 1976 graduate of the University of New Mexico, currently resides in Oak Harbor, Wash.

The Story of HC-7/CSAR: Orphans of the 7th Fleet

by Mark Morgan



Part Two

On Tuesday, 5 November 1968, the nation elected Richard M. Nixon as President. Upon assuming office the following January, he reaffirmed his predecessor's efforts toward peace talks with North Vietnam. Notably, Nixon also ordered the "Vietnamization" of the war effort, with more equipment and responsibility turned over to South Vietnam.

The result was an even greater reduction in the level of combat operations for units stationed in the Tonkin Gulf. Activity shifted southward, with emphasis on operations in South Vietnam and *Steel Tiger* missions in Laos. The Navy reduced force levels in the Tonkin Gulf while everyone waited to see how negotiations would turn out.

On 7 January 1969, the HC-7 *Sea Devils* lost a UH-2A from USS *Constellation* (CVA-64), one of four attack carriers still on station off Vietnam. Described by a participant — some years after the fact — as "one of those Grampa Pettibone-type comedy of errors," LTs Ron Beougher and Joe Skrzypek ran out of gas and ditched their *Clementine* "Hookey Took" off Hainan Island. The crew, which included AE2 Bruce Dallas and ADJ3 Allen Salsbury, were recovered by another HC-7 bird flown by LCDR Ken Kirkpatrick, LTJG Gene Eagen, AMS3 Don Burlison and ADJ2 Victor Martinez, with nothing injured but their egos.

Swim call in the Gulf notwithstanding, combat SAR operations with TF-77 slowed substantially with the bombing halt. However, life at NAF Atsugi was anything but moribund. The squadron was heavily involved in the station SAR business — and equally busy were the ongoing vertical replenishment, mine warfare and 7th Fleet support activities.

A primary search and rescue helicopter was the Kaman HH-2C, designed specifically for "opposed rescue" situations in Vietnam. However, the turret-mounted 7.62mm miniguns proved unreliable and the extra weight of the aircraft made it too heavy to hover in the extremely hot, humid climate.

Vertrep — Cargo at You in a Hurry

HC-7 entered the vertical replenishment (vertrep) mission through a rather roundabout method. In 1964, the Navy acquired the UH-46A *Sea Knight* as a replacement for the UH-34D/E. The first aircraft were assigned to HC-4, the Navy's only vertical replenishment squadron, at NAS Lakehurst in 1966.

The U.S. 6th Fleet, operating battle groups in a relatively confined area, was perfectly suited for vertrep, and HC-4 regularly deployed with the fleet. The 7th Fleet, on the other side of the world, presented a different situation, with units spread all over the theater of operations. As a result, development of vertrep capabilities in that area of the world lagged behind that in the Mediterranean.

The situation changed after the passage of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution by Congress. The 7th Fleet was faced with deploying large numbers of units to the South China Sea and Gulf of Tonkin for an indeterminate period. While on station, fleet units needed regular replenishment services and, therefore, vertrep. HC-4 was selected to establish that capability.

The squadron sent several pilots and crewmembers to Boeing-Vertol in Ridley Park, Pa., for training, where they joined the first HC-1 vertrep

personnel. Both squadrons worked up procedures, trained crews and ran through the same sort of problems, although HC-1 had the most to learn.

At this point, the legendary LCDR Joe Gardner stepped in. A Naval Reservist and former fighter pilot who had been recalled to active duty for Korea, Gardner stayed on after the war and transitioned to helicopters. He eventually landed at HC-4, where he gained a reputation as a pioneer in modern vertrep techniques, many of which are still in use. A subsequent tour at NAAS Imperial Beach near San Diego put him in a position to standardize vertrep procedures and equipment between the two fleets, an effort that was sorely needed.

In late 1967, Gardner brought the first UH-46s to Atsugi to familiarize personnel on the aircraft's characteristics and the mission. He stayed on following the creation of HC-7 and establishment of *Detachments 102* and *103*, and played a major role in formalizing the squadron's new mission.

The UH-46s remained at Atsugi for two years, operating from *Mars* (AFS-1) and *White Plains* (AFS-4) as they rotated through Yankee and Dixie Stations off the coast of Vietnam. Out of the total squadron complement of 110–120 pilots and roughly 500 enlisted personnel, about 15 pilots and 40 enlisted men were assigned to the vertrep detachments at any one time. Each det operated with two aircraft, six pilots, and 18 or 19 enlisted men.

According to former HC-7 *Sea Knight* pilot CAPT Terry Lackey, whereas the combat SAR crews spent three or four months in the Tonkin Gulf at a time, vertrep cruises were “. . . really short. We'd go out for about three to six weeks at a time. . . . [We'd] come out of Yoko, hit Taiwan and load up on fresh vegetables and fruit, hit Yankee Station, completely offload the ship, head back to Subic Bay, load, back to Yankee, offload, then back to Yoko.”

The disparity in deployment schedules apparently did not hurt relations within the squadron. Both Lackey and another widely known HC-7 vertrep specialist, CAPT Mike Reber, agree that everyone got along great.

In Reber's words, it was “a fabulous existence. For one thing, we had a SAR mission, so whichever airplane happened to be up, that plane went. The pilots and crews cross-trained in the different types, so if a UH-2 was dispatched on a rescue, an H-46 guy served as co-pilot. If the UH-46 went, an H-2 type served as co-pilot.”

In 1970, partly in response to the ongoing bombing halt and concurrent reduction in operating levels, *Mars* and *White Plains* were ordered back to the United States. With the ships gone, there was no reason for HC-7 to continue a forward-deployed vertrep unit. Therefore, in October 1970, all Det 102 and 103 personnel transferred to HC-3 at Imperial Beach. For most in the squadron, it had been a good tour in Japan.

The Mine Countermeasures Mission

CDR Don Gregory was HC-7's XO when the squadron picked up the airborne mine countermeasures mission. He feels the assignment made perfect sense; the Navy was discussing seeding mines all the way to the Mekong Delta, and an in-house sweeping capability would have to be available. HC-7 was the logical choice for the mission.

The squadron was already operating in the region and had extensive experience with multiple detachments on Yankee Station. Two new dets, 112 and 113, left San Diego in early February 1969 with two RH-3As in USS *Catskill* (MCS-1), a former minelayer (CM) commissioned in 1944, converted to a vehicle landing ship (LSV) and laid up in 1946. In preparation for the ship's new assignment, the Navy pulled her out of mothballs at Norfolk and installed a flight deck.

Also installed were two elevators capable of lowering helos into the well deck as well as upgraded communications and fueling



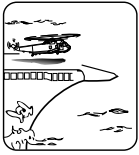
In addition to CSAR, HC-7's mission included vertical replenishment responsibility for 7th Fleet units. Techniques of the mission were transplanted from HC-4 at Lakehurst by LCDR Joe Gardner. HC-7's vertrep capability was later transferred to HC-3 at NAS Imperial Beach. An HC-3 UH-46A is shown with two pallets of Mk 82 bombs bound for the Essex-class carrier on the horizon.

systems to support twenty 36-ft. minesweeping launches. The modified ship was recommissioned in 1967 and transferred to Yokosuka.

The third and last RH-3 was sent over at a later date.

While the detachments were carried as individual units, they operated with a total manning of 7 officers and 18 enlisted men — apparently the det number shifted depending on the operation. The personnel were drawn from HC-5 at Imperial Beach, and possessed a wealth of H-3 experience with much practice time off Southern California in the new RH-3As. What no one had was a lot *operational* experience with the mine gear.





Probably the biggest problem facing Dets 112 and 113 was the lack of suitable areas for training and practice near their base at Atsugi. According to one former OinC, CDR Jim Waring, the unit was fully trained and capable when they left NAS Imperial Beach, which was good because “We had to go through hell to train over there [in Japan] . . . what with 1,500 feet of trailing wire [and] all those fishing boats.” Without adequate ranges for practicing mine countermeasures, the det saw a lot of use in exercises and demonstrations for allies, but that was about it. It never deployed to CTF 77 or South Vietnam.

Exercises consisted of flying two RH-3As onto *Catskill*, loading up the maintenance personnel and sweeping equipment, and heading out for distant lands. Three of these exercises took place in 1969 — the first two, in April and August, came off well. The next, in September, rated a little higher on the difficulty scale, a direct result of the concurrent arrival of a typhoon.

Catskill and her embarked helicopters arrived in T’aichung to spend nearly a month tied up due to the high winds and rain. On one occasion, Jim Waring’s crew attempted to sweep a channel, but had to knock off after only half an hour due to high winds. To top it off, the towed gear became tangled in debris in the water.

Waring recalls that the options were few. They could either cut the expensive mine sweep equipment from the aircraft and lose it, or they could haul in whatever was dragging. They chose the latter course and returned to the ship with fishing nets and an impressive number of those quaint glass fishing floats hanging off the helo’s back end. The crew of *Catskill* shared a good laugh over the incident.

At one point during the detachments’ lifetime a proposal was floated — so to speak — to have them move to an installation in the Republic of Vietnam. From there, they would perform sweeping duties on the country’s various rivers and waterways.

The response from the OinC and crews was succinct: *Bullshit!* While towing the sweep equipment, the RH-3A flew in straight lines at a speed of about 10 knots. The crew knew that with the state of “pacification” in South Vietnam, they’d only have time enough for two or so passes before they were shot down. As one crewman put it, “We might as well have put up a sign saying, ‘Shoot me! Shoot me!’”

The negative response was resoundingly seconded by the skipper, CDR Ron Hipp, who had a tour of duty down south months before and was quite familiar with the situation thereabouts. Up the line, cooler heads prevailed and the proposal was not mentioned again.

In the end, the dets performed for the occasional exercise and demonstration, standing by but never called upon to provide a service. CDR Frank St. Pierre says that despite the circumstances, the minesweep personnel, as with other elements of HC-7, fit right in with the rest of the squadron at Atsugi. “We had good relations — a very good relationship, and everyone enjoyed being there. We did whatever was needed; I also went down to Yankee Station once for SAR duty.”

The Navy decided to stand down *Detachments 112 and 113* in 1970, and they formally disestablished in August. According to former OinC CDR Joe Vaden, part of the reason was “there was nothing for us to do.” Aerial minesweeping was not in great demand in Southeast Asia at the time, assets were limited, and there were ongoing problems with access to training areas.

Besides, the Navy was working up an alternative at NAS Norfolk, Va. Within four years, HelMinRon 12 would operationally prove the concepts advanced by HC-5 and HC-7 Dets 112 and 113.

Flying the Flag

CDR Ed Parker was a junior lieutenant with HC-7 when he was assigned to Det 101, the *Commander U.S. 7th Fleet* support unit. He thought it was pretty neat that he got the job, considering the squadron had 118 pilots to choose from. Together with combat SAR, this mission may have been the one with the most professional visibility, which turned out to be both good and bad.

The det operated a single UH-2A off the *7th Fleet* flagship, alternating between *Oklahoma City* (CLG-5) and *Providence* (CLG-6). The unit was small, even by the squadron’s standards — one helo, two pilots and never more than 10 enlisted men.

Com7thFlt during Parker’s tour was RADM Maurice F. “Mickey” Weisner. According to several sources, Weisner was “sort of a short-tempered guy.” The VIP mission was demanding, with little room for error and lots of opportunity for highly visible screw-ups. These factors contributed to an abnormally high turnover rate for Det 101 officers in charge.

During one flight at Atsugi — without the admiral onboard — two squadron pilots managed to crash one of the UH-2s. On one practice autorotation, an observant Kaman tech rep turned to another pilot and said, “They ain’t gonna make it.” The Hookey Took hit the ground hard, the landing gear collapsed and the helo rolled over.

After they came to rest, the co-pilot turned to the pilot, LT Jim Brennan, and asked “How you doing? You okay?” Brennan responded with, “*Maganda* [Tagalog for “beautiful”]. Just f---ing *maganda*.” Fortunately, Brennan and his co-pilot suffered no permanent ill effects from the crash or inadvertent departure from a controlled career.

The admiral *was* a consideration one day, though, when LT George Togliatti went to Singapore. The weather, at first marginal, became downright nasty during the return trip to Yokosuka. After landing at

the Naval base, the flag “suggested” that LT Togliatti remain on the ground until the weather cleared up a bit. However, once he saw the staff car disappear around the corner, George pulled the collective upward and started back to Atsugi. Before he made it back to home plate, the admiral had already called HC-7’s CO for a conversation, making it quite clear that he did not want LT Togliatti assigned to him in the future.

Scratch One VIP Det Pilot

Ed Parker allowed as how life on the cruiser was great. The two pilots lived in a four-man stateroom with two of the blackshoe (surface warfare) officers. Meals were taken in the wardroom and, as the senior lieutenant onboard, Parker was the cut-off between the two mealtime sittings. Accordingly, he was assigned to sit at the head of the table. That quirk of fate resulted in an early cultural exchange between the brownshoe (aviation) and blackshoe communities, as he recalls.

Courtesy CAPT Richard J. Jaeger, USN(Ret)



In addition to CSAR duties, HC-7 flew the UH-2A in support of VIP operations throughout WestPac. This Seasprite, flown by LTs Rich Jaeger and Harry Bashore, has just discharged a rescue swimmer in a practice SAREx — however, the swimmer, AE2 Al O’Meally, neglected to disconnect his gunner’s belt. He is shown struggling back into the helo for another attempt.

“I had the head seat at this big, long table. They asked me the first night if I would say grace — I turned to (co-pilot) Dave Swan and told him that as soon as I finished with the prayer, he was to sit down and immediately start eating.

“I then said, ‘Good God, good food, good meat, let’s eat,’ and Dave and I sat and started chowing down. The blackshoes just stood there with their jaws hanging open. . . .”

When HC-7 departed for California in late 1971, the squadron turned over 7th Fleet support operations to a detachment of HC-5. The *Sea Devils* were getting out of the UH-2 business, and HC-5 was bringing over the twin-engine UH-2C for the role. Ed Parker was tasked with doing the turnover and served for six weeks with the new guys teaching them the ropes.

During one of the fam hops with an HC-5 counterpart, *Com7thFleet* passed a note to Parker. The note read, “During this operational period, I expect an extra effort to be made on this helicopter. Work on the vibrations. The helicopter vibrates too much.” Ed passed the note over to the new O-in-C and wished him a good tour.

Combat SAR Developments

The *Clementines* and *Big Mothers* remained on station throughout the bombing pause, responding to the occasional calls for rescue, but more often flying logistics support missions. While the tempo of SAR operations was drastically reduced, the need still existed for improved CSAR aircraft, and two new variants arrived in 1970.

In June 1970, HC-7 acquired the improved HH-2C variant of the *Seasprite*. As the squadron found out early in its Tonkin Gulf activities, the UH-2A/B’s usefulness was limited by its single General Electric T58-GE-8B power plant. In March 1965, UH-2A BuNo 147981 gained

a second T58 engine and became the prototype UH-2C. Forty UH-2As and Bs were eventually converted, while another six were mounted out with a 5.56mm minigun in a chin turret, armor, self-sealing tanks and two door guns. With the extra modifications, the “new” helo was designated HH-2C.

While the HH-2C was both more powerful and more reliable, operations with the fleet quickly uncovered a few deficiencies. The addition of the second engine doubled the fuel consumption, with the result that the aircraft had less range and endurance than the single-engine variants. Also, the two intakes demonstrated a propensity for ingesting salt spray in hover, causing corrosion and, in the extreme, engine failure.

Moreover, aircrews quickly learned that the turret gun couldn’t always be safed. On occasion, a few rounds sprayed the landing area during recovery, which tended to ruin the flight deck personnel’s day. The guns were eventually removed from the turrets of all six aircraft and the holes were taped over.

Still, the twin-engine bird provided improvements in payload and survivability. HC-7 quickly converted its *Clementine* dets to the newer model and turned in its last UH-2B on 25 June 1970.

During the same period, Sikorsky embarked on a project designed to improve the capabilities and survivability of the SH-3A *Sea King*. Under Navy contract, Sikorsky bailed an SH-3A and installed two T58-GE-8F turboshaft engines plus additional armor around the engines, transmissions, gunners’ stations and cockpit. Also installed were long-range fuel tanks and two external sponsons mounting remote-controlled TAT-102 7.62mm miniguns.

The resulting aircraft was designated the HH-3A. Ten additional modification kits provided by Sikorsky brought to 11 the total number of upgraded *Sea Kings*. The TAT-102 remote turrets were never popular due to their weight and complexity. They were quickly removed in the field and replaced by door-mounted M60s and 5.56mm miniguns.

More Rescues, and a Move

At the end of 1970, headquarters crews again found themselves making open-ocean medevacs in the Sea of Japan. Two were performed on 11 December 1970, the first of which involved the retrieval of an injured U.S. sailor. The second was somewhat more involved.

Late in the evening hours, HC-7 received word that the chief engineer of the Liberian freighter *Atlantic Sunbeam* was suffering from possible appendicitis and was in serious condition. At the time of the call, the ship was several hundred miles at sea. The following morning an SH-3A crewed by LT Byron L. Diechman, LTJG Dennis P. Dilly, AMH2 Kenneth N. Conner, ADJ3 Gregory B. Beard, HM1 C. Ray Graves and AMH2 Robert “Pappy” Elerick departed Atsugi to effect the rescue.

The freighter was beyond the normal range of an SH-3A, so the helo proceeded to the prepositioned destroyer *King* (DLG-10), refueled and continued to the freighter. After successfully intercepting the ship, Graves and Elerick were lowered to the freighter to check on the ill seaman. The men were on board for some





Left: The Sikorsky HH-3A, a modification of the sub-hunting SH-3A, was reconfigured with upgraded engines and armor surrounding critical components and crew stations, plus extended-range fuel cells. Eleven CSAR Sea Kings were finally made available for operations in Vietnam. Big Mother 64 is shown on the flight deck of USS Coral Sea (CVA-43) toward the end of the War in Vietnam, 26 Sep '73. **Below:** An HH-3A is shown on alert on board a guided missile frigate, ready to launch within five minutes of being called. It took a steady hand to maneuver the large Sea King onto the tiny flight deck with minimum clearance ahead of and behind the helo. Despite this, landing incidents were relatively few.

time, partly due to the sea state. According to Elerick, "It was a great big gray day, the surf was up — way up — and the back end of the ship was jumping up and down."

After recovering Marmarinos, the HC-7 *Sea King* turned back toward Japan. The victim made it safely to the hospital, where he recovered from a perforated ulcer. Elerick recalls that after the mission was completed and debriefed, the crew looked at one other and said, "Man, *that* was kind of hairy."

These and other missions were indicative of the squadron's activities during the bombing pause. Whatever else was going on, HC-7 continued to be tasked with providing a large number of aircraft and personnel around the Pacific for a wide range of missions. In effect, the squadron was in the same position that in 1967 HC-1, the squadron from which HC-7 was formed, found itself. As with its predecessor, the *Sea Devils* had many types of missions and aircraft assigned. Keeping track of personnel, training and operations tended to be difficult at times.

On 6 May 1971, HC-7 transferred from Atsugi to Imperial Beach. SAR operations in Japan were turned over to Atsugi, and HC-5 acquired the Com7thFleet flight duties. The maintenance detachment at NAS Cubi Point became the forward echelon to support the detachments still serving in the Tonkin Gulf.

On 28 July 1971, the squadron turned out in dress whites for a ceremony marking the award of the Presidential Unit Citation to HC-7. The squadron was only the second Navy helicopter outfit to ever receive the Presidential Unit Citation, preceded only by HAL-3. The citation was presented to squadron commander CDR Gerald L. Glade by ComNavAirPac, VADM Thomas J. Walker, in ceremonies at Imperial Beach. Also in attendance was CDR Lloyd L. Parthemer, the squadron's first CO.

The *Sea Devils* were still adjusting to their new home in California five months later when things heated up again in the Tonkin Gulf.

The End of the Bombing Halt

Combat over the North resumed at the end of 1971 with *Operation Proud Deep*, ordered by President Nixon as a response to increased SAM activity near the DMZ and MiG incursions into Laos. For five days CTF 77 aviators were allowed north as far as Vinh for the first time since the October 1968 bombing halt.

The North Vietnamese air defense network did not have much recent practice against large numbers of American aircraft, but it quickly came back up to speed. On the last day of the operation, a VA-165 A-6A *Intruder* (*Constellation*/CVW-9) was shot down by an SA-2 SAM. The pilot, LCDR Frederick Lee Holmes, was killed and his bombardier-navigator, LT Charles W. Burton, went in the water off Vinh and Hon Nien Island and quickly came under fire.

Two *Big Mothers* quickly moved in from their station on board *Denver* (LPD-9), piloted by LTs Jim Spillman and Frank Pineger. As

they approached, they too came under heavy fire and had several SAMs sent their way. Pineger thought he saw the airman in the water, moved into a hover and dropped his swimmer — what he'd actually sighted was some debris. Spillman then broke off in another direction, located the BN's chute, put swimmer AMS3 Tim Smith in the water and made the recovery.

Frank Pineger went back for his swimmer, with Spillman, LT Ken Lowe, AO3 Joe Hillyer and Smith in *Big Mother 63* as back-up. As soon as Pineger's helo slowed down for the pick-up, the guns on Hon Nien opened up again, including a rather large track-mounted weapon that rolled out of a cave. On the first attempt, the swimmer was almost at the door when the hoist cable broke, sending him back into the water. Pineger lowered his bird into the gulf for the recovery of his crewman.

The pilots then called in the clan. One of the carriers sent in a flight of *Corsairs* that proceeded to paste the island, with the two HC-7 helos doing the spotting. Spillman remembers "... the A-7s blew the hell out of that cave! It looked great!" Score one for the good guys.

CAPT Richard J. Jaeger, USN(Ret)



CSAR UH-2C on board *Josephus Daniels* (DLG-27). The *Seasprites* were removed from CSAR service as the Light Airborne Multi-Purpose System (LAMPS) program gathered speed, requiring all available H-2 airframes for conversion that later appeared in helicopter light anti-submarine squadrons. With the last *Seasprite* leaving the line in April 1972, HC-7 CSAR was flown by H-3s.



Clementines Depart

The end of *Proud Deep* marked a period of transition for the *Big Mothers*. During the drawdown the various *Clementine* detachments began to deactivate as the squadron focused upon H-3 operations. The LAMPS program was gathering speed, and all available *Seasprites* were needed for conversion to the ASW mission. The disestablishment of the last HH-2C det, No. 107, came in April 1972. The HH-2 drivers were scattered among the fleet, leaving both HC-7 and CSAR business.

The *Clementines* served only four years with HC-7, but served well. For most of the pilots and crews, like Ed Parker, their duty with the H-2s would always leave the best of memories.

"I never got to take a shot at a rescue due to the bombing halt," he remarks. "I got shot at a couple of times, but never got to do what I was trained for. It's still frustrating.

"However, I had more responsibility and challenges during this time than I did in later tours as a lieutenant commander department head. It was the highlight of my career."

HC-7 now operated a total of 13 aircraft: eleven HH-3As and two SH-3As. Five HHs and the two SHs were continuously on station with Det 110. Of these, three HHs were deployed to the afloat SAR stations for two- to three-day periods, one normally remained on board a host carrier — with the two SH-3As — and one was usually in maintenance. The remaining six aircraft remained at Imperial Beach for training and qualification. This lineup remained constant through the end of the war.

On 23 March 1972, the United States broke off the Paris peace talks in the face of continued North Vietnamese intransigence. One week later, on 30 March, six North Vietnamese divisions invaded South Vietnam.

After four years of fruitless negotiations, President Nixon decided that massive strikes in northern South Vietnam and a "demonstration" bombing of targets in the vicinity of Haiphong were in order. The first missions were launched on 6 April, and through the first week the Navy flew 680 sorties to counter the invasion.

The *Big Mothers* were heavily involved from the start. Around noon on the sixth, a Mayday was transmitted from the first Navy strike group to go up North in three years. CDR Mason C. Gilfry, XO of VA-195 (*Kitty Hawk*/CVW-11), was hit by an SA-2, and it was apparent he wasn't going to make it back to the boat. LT Frank Lockett and his crew in *Big Mother 60* had just completed inflight refueling from *Ouellett* (DE-1077) and were vectored to the location, approximately three miles from the coast.

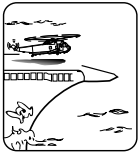
When Lockett, LTJG Louis "Pat" Liles, AE3 Douglas Ankney and ADJ2 Chris Nielsen arrived in the area, ResCAP aircraft reported heavy AAA and at least three SA-2s fired. Gilfry checked in and said that rounds were impacting the water in his vicinity and a boat was heading in his direction. Lockett dropped his rescue swimmer, broke hover to

draw the hostile fire from the men in the water, and then swept back in for the retrieval. The HH-3A then proceeded to *Sterrett* (DLG-31), where Gilfry was examined by the frigate's doctor before his return to *Kitty Hawk*.

From Freedom Porch to Linebacker

The North Vietnamese invasion continued and U.S. forces initiated *Operation Freedom Porch* on 16 April, which also





marked the first extensive use of SAC B-52s up North.

The HH-3A *Big Mother 62*, manned by LT Ron Abler, Pat Liles, Doug Ankney and ADJAN Richard T. Baird, was assigned to *Worden* (DLG-18) for the first night of the operation. As their helicopter approached their assigned station, the crew heard a faint Mayday call over Guard — the ship had been hit by a missile. Abler and Liles immediately turned back and assumed tactical control of the scene, controlling aircraft and communications for the stricken guided missile frigate.

By dawn the crew of *62* had ferried in medical personnel and removed six wounded sailors from *Worden*. Once the situation on the ship was stabilized, it left the line. Abler, Liles and their crew moved over to another deck. It had been a most unusual and dangerous night for the men of *Big Mother 62*.

On 1 May 1972, LT Jim Spillman and his crew of LT Bob Wright, Doug Ankney and Richard Baird were on hand to make another successful recovery of a downed aviator. LT M.G. Surdyk, *Hoboken 401* of VA-94 off *Coral Sea*, collected a SAM over North Vietnam. Surdyk managed to get back over water before he stepped out. However, as was often the case, he came down among the ubiquitous North Vietnamese fishing boats. His wingman chased the boats away while Spillman and Wright brought their *Sea King* in. The swimmer went in the water and hooked himself and the downed A-7 driver to the hoist. The other crewman started pulling them up while the pilot started his egress.

However this time, as had happened to Frank Pineger on 31 December, the cable broke. Fortunately, the two men were already oscillating into the cabin when it happened. Other than being wet and frazzled, they were returned to *Denver* none the worse for wear.

LT Spillman had quite a line period, for another reason — an old bugaboo, the unsafed minigun, also paid a visit. One day Spillman went up on a ShootEx with co-pilot LTJG Chauncey Webb and the det's senior aircrewman to practice on a floating barrel. During the exercise the 5.56mm minigun jammed and Spillman, fully aware of the recent problems the det had been having, turned to the aircrewman and said, "Be sure it's clear. I don't want an incident again." The crewman responded with "No problem," or something to the effect.

One minute later, as Spillman recalls, "The damn thing goes off! It explodes in the cockpit. A round comes into the cockpit and explodes a thermos. The second crewman was sitting in the cabin as a piece of shrapnel hit the armor on the floor and his face — [there was] blood all over the place. We called an emergency, landed on the ship and the doc cleaned up the crewman."

Shortly thereafter, the det received a message from new HC-7 skipper CDR Ed Woolam, saying he wanted a full JAG investigation. In fact, he planned to come out and see for himself what was going on. Spillman thought, "Here I am, first time on the line, and there goes my career."

Except that when Woolam arrived, *Linebacker* was in full swing, the det was making two or three saves a day and the squadron was getting accolades. CDR Woolam became involved with the rescue operations and, according to Spillman, the whole thing "just kind of went away." As the pilot later said, "Timing is so important in your career."

Showtime 100 and the Big Mothers

Over 9 and 10 May, the United States initiated two additional military operations against the PDRV. On the 9th, *Pocket Money* mined the ports of North Vietnam, commencing at Haiphong, and the following day *Linebacker* started with a series of maximum-effort strikes against targets up north. The 10th also brought about the single busiest day in the air-to-air war. A total of eight MiGs were shot down by crews from VF-92, VF-96 and VF-51, but CVW-9 in *Connie* lost two *Phantoms* during the proceedings. One VF-92 aircraft went down over North Vietnam while the second crew, from VF-96, managed to get over the

Gulf before their F-4J, *Showtime 100*, stopped flying.

Three HH-3As from *Okinawa* (LPH-3) moved in for the recovery. *Big Mother 62*, with Frank Pineger, LT John Kennedy, ADRAN E.C. Milledge and ADJ H.D. Freeman, spotted smoke and rescued one survivor. Kennedy later said that things were pretty confused.

"Our Tacan was inoperative and we seemed to be getting meconing [deceptive signals]; we received three navigation vectors, none of which made any sense. We popped up to 500 feet, saw a column of smoke to the south and headed in that direction."

"Not too much later we said we had two Fox Fours [*Phantoms*] in sight, and we were told by the on-scene commander to turn in toward the beach. We saw one man in the water and then another who was

USN via NAM



Above: VA-94 Mighty Shrikes pilot mans his A-7E Corsair II on board USS Coral Sea (CVA-43), May 1972. The aircraft is armed with mines to be laid in Haiphong Harbor. **Below:** USS Okinawa (LPH-3) was the launch point for HC-7 aircraft that recovered LT Cunningham and LTJG Driscoll on 10 May 1972.

closer to the beach. The policy was that the first helo would get the guy who was in the most trouble, so we marked on top of the first survivor and then moved in to pick up the second."

The crew of *Big Mother 62* got their man and then watched as *65*, flown by LTs Tom Kautsky, Joe Driscoll, AMH2 Mike Foley and AT2 Tom McCann, moved in on the second survivor. As described by Joe Driscoll in "Finale" (*The Hook*, Sp '88), there were some problems with the pick-up of the second *Phantom* Phlyer, which almost resulted in Petty Officer McCann taking a swim.

LCDR Bob Jones and LT Mike Ekdall backed up the proceedings in *Big Mother 61*. According to Jones, they too had charged off in search

USN via NAM



Right: LT Randy Cunningham (left) and LTJG Willie Driscoll strike a pose on a VF-96 F-4J. The two shot down their fifth MiG before being downed themselves on 10 May in Linebacker operations. **Below:** Cunningham (leading) and Driscoll leave an H-46 that delivered them to USS Constellation (CVA-64) following their rescue by HC-7.



of the men in the water, in the spirit of competition.

"I had those young guys beat by a mile," Jones reports, "and my crewmen said they saw smoke. We went over there and a few bullets started flying. No, this is the *wrong* place!" Jones retreated and ended up grading Joe Driscoll's and John Kennedy's passes. At 1410, Driscoll called the ResCAP and notified them they had LT Randy Cunningham in 65, and *Big Mother* 62 had recovered LTJG Will "Irish" Driscoll. In 62, Will Driscoll was checked for injuries and then allowed forward to talk to the pilots. John told him that the MiG kills were called in and confirmed, and then had the following exchange:

"Willie, I'm going to give you a treat!"

"What's that?"

"I'm going to kick this baby up to 90 knots!"

Driscoll, the new ace, appreciated the display.

The 100th Rescue

On 24 May 1972, Skipper Ed Woolam, Bob Jones, and crewmen ADJ2 John Dickerson and AN Gordon Canzler made the *Big Mothers'* 100th rescue. In Jones' words, "It wasn't very spectacular. We were just coming back from North SAR, got a call, a guy went in, and we went over and picked him up. Nothing to it." The honored recipient of their attention was *Corsair* pilot LCDR Harvey Eikel of VA-94 off *Coral Sea*. Eikel's rescue was his second of the war by HC-7.

Outbound Det 110 OinC LCDR Al Cope submitted his cruise report at the end of May. In it, he stated that the detachment had been able to keep up with the suddenly increased operating tempo brought by *Linebacker*, but with some difficulty.

"All aircraft were required to be in an up status to meet any SAR commitment that might arise. This significantly increased the maintenance workload, requiring the maintenance crew to regularly work in excess of 14 to 16 hour days. The personnel in the maintenance crew set about this task with an enthusiasm and spirit that belied the fatiguing nature of their job.

"During this two week period, availability was maintained at close to 100 percent, with this detachment launching as many aircraft daily as it had aircrews to man them. This was indeed a tribute to their positive attitude during this period of sustained operations."

Linebacker Continues

By now, the North Vietnamese delegation in Paris was screaming bloody murder, but operations continued to ensure that the lesson that was being administered was fully understood.

On the afternoon of 7 June 1972, *Big Mothers* 66 and 67 launched from the cruiser *Long Beach* (CGN-9) and amphibious assault ship *Duluth* (LPD-6) en route to their SAR station at the mouth of Haiphong Harbor. Once again, a Mayday call was heard, followed by "two good chutes" from the on-scene commander. Flying 66 were LT Craig A. Peterson, LTJG Bill Young, ADJ3 Tim McCarthy and ADJ1 John "Moon" Wilson, and in 67 were LT James S. Kelly, LTJG Hank Frazier, ADJ2 Tinsley, and ADJ3 Kenny.

An RVAH-1 RA-5C (*Kitty Hawk*/CVW-11) had collected a SAM and gone down about 1.5 miles southwest of Isle de Cao Ba. En route, LT Kelly assumed operational control of 66, which was experiencing comm



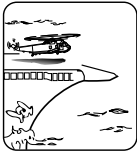
problems, coordinated the approach and successfully retrieved the *Viggie* pilot, CDR Charles H. Smith.

LT Peterson and his crew in *Big Mother* 66 went after the RAN, LT Larry G. Kunz. Swimmer Moon Wilson jumped out of 66 to assist Kunz; unfortunately, he went out too early and too high, and ended up with a half-inch gash above his left eye, a broken rib and a collapsed left lung. Despite his injuries, Wilson still managed to swim over to Kunz to check for injuries and make the recovery. Both were hoisted back aboard for the ride to the *Saratoga*, where the latter had his injuries treated.

During late July-early August, *Big Mother* pilot LT Harry J. Zinser added three rescues to the squadron's tally. His first came on 24 July when he and his crew of LT Joe Driscoll, AT2 Tom McCann and AO3 Joe Hillyer took their HH-3A into Haiphong Harbor, two miles south of Cat Bi Island, to successfully pick up two Air Force men. According to Zinser, when his crew arrived the situation was pretty ugly.

"There was some real heavy AAA and coastal artillery fire from the island," he recalls, with "huge explosions of water going off all around. As we came into the harbor we could actually see a section of the F-4 *Phantom's* tail sticking out of the water. We could also see the boats coming out; the [other] F-4s didn't have anything left to shoot, so they buzzed the boats at five feet and





knocked them over with their exhausts. It was great!" The two Air Force men were pulled from their ringside seats and safely evacuated.

Harry's third retrieval of the long deployment occurred on 7 August, when LT James R. Lloyd of VA-105 (*Saratoga*/CVW-3), was shot down about 20 miles in country by an SA-2 (see "To Those Who Returned For Me," *The Hook*, Wi '97). Zinser, with co-pilot LT Bill Young, crew chief Doug Ankney and gunner AMHAN Matthew Szymanski, pulled Lloyd out in the face of extremely heavy ground fire. The rescue marked the deepest penetration of North Vietnam by HC-7 since 1967.

Word later went around that Lloyd — who at one point successfully escaped from armed North Vietnamese searchers — almost leaped clear through the HH-3 in his haste to get aboard. Actually, according to the 6-ft. 3-in. Ankney, "He was pretty weak and only made it about halfway in. So I just grabbed the back of his life vest, helped him in and we took off." Zinser and Young were awarded the Navy Cross for the mission; Ankney and Szymanski also received awards.

An Anniversary Celebration

On 1 September 1972 *Detachment 110* celebrated five continuous years on Yankee Station. The occasion was commemorated with a "birthday party" on the fo'c'sle of *Kitty Hawk*; a message released by the carrier stated that the detachment had been on the line for 1,827 days, had performed 22 successful rescues since the commencement of the spring offensive, and had saved a total of 116 lives in the Tonkin Gulf, Philippines and California areas.

USN, PH3 J.H. Kirchoff, USN via NAM



Big Mother 45 takes on fuel from *USS America* (CVA-66) during a lull in operations in the Gulf of Tonkin.

Squadron CO CDR Dave McCracken commented, "We have been represented on the line every single day since the squadron was formed in Atsugi, Japan, on 1 September 1967, and we'll probably be here as long as there is a Yankee Station." The message also mentioned the "uniquely decorated" cake employed in the ceremony, complete with cartoon Big Mother and the inscription, "The Geraldine of the Gulf." After the appropriate cutting of the cake, everyone returned to work.

Detachment 110 cross-decked to *America* (CVA-66) on 16 September. The following day turned out to be "Black Sunday" when the attempted rescue of two Air Force crewmen failed.

The try took place south of Haiphong Harbor — the two aviators were the crew of an F-105G *Wild Weasel* assigned to the 388th TFW at Korat RTAFB. Two helos went out looking for them: *Big Mother 70*, crewed by LTs David A. Swan, Gene Gilbert, ADJ3 Tim McCarthy and ADJ2 Robert J. Ford; and *Big Mother 61*, with LT Frank Lockett, LTJG Jerry M. Haggerty and ADJ3s M.R. Harlow and Miguel Melendez.

It was one of those days where nothing went right — the two aircraft came under intense fire from enemy shore batteries during the course of the action. Both downed airmen were dragged under the water by their seat pans and parachutes, despite swimmer Bob Ford's concerted efforts. Later, contact with Ford himself was lost, and he spent a considerable time in the water ducking shells before he was finally recovered.

Post-mission analysis determined the two Weasels were killed in the

ejection sequence, but the efforts of the *Big Mothers* were not overlooked. CinCPacFlt took note in a message dated 241021Z Sept 72:

TO USS AMERICA
PASS TO HC-7 DET

1. ONE OF THE FINEST AND MOST REWARDING OPERATIONS OUR FORCES PERFORM IN SEASIA IS AIR RESCUE. I HAVE NOTED WITH PRIDE THE INTREPIDITY OF THE AIRCREWS ASSOCIATED WITH THE ATTEMPTED RESCUE OF THE PILOT AND CREWMAN OF CONDOR 01. OF PARTICULAR NOTE IN THIS RESCUE EFFORT WERE THE AIRCREW MEMBERS OF BIG MOTHER 61 AND 70, WHO WITHSTOOD HEAVY ENEMY FIRE IN A VALIANT RESCUE EFFORT. THEIR ACTIONS REFLECT THE FINEST TRADITIONS OF THE NAVAL SERVICE. WELL DONE.

ADMIRAL B.A. CLAREY,
COMMANDER IN CHIEF,
U.S. PACIFIC FLEET.

A Brief Lull

The United States suspended tactical air operations over North Vietnam on 23 October 72, marking the conclusion of *Linebacker*. The general consensus among crews was that peace might actually "be at hand," but a particularly rough SAREx on the 29th brought everyone back to reality. On that date, LCDR James E. Sullivan of VA-86 (*America*/CVW-8) was shot down by AAA while on a reconnaissance hop over North Vietnam, landing in Brandon Bay near Mui Falise. LT Earl R. Rolls and his crew launched in one *Big Mother* while Frank Lockett, LT Lewis H. Smalley Jr., and Petty Officers Allan Gaynor and Gary Tremel lifted off a few minutes later in a second aircraft.

Rolls' helo arrived first, only to learn that the on-scene commander had departed to tank. Upon his return, the OSC directed the HH-3A to a fishing boat he thought had picked up the survivor. As the rescue helo approached, armed militiamen in the boat took the helo under fire and scored several hits. One round penetrated the number two engine oil tank, forcing Rolls to shut down the engine. He departed the scene.

LT Lockett then arrived in the second HH-3A and was directed to the same boat by the on-scene commander, where he too was taken under fire. The helicopter's gunner returned the fire, and all of the occupants of the boat abandoned ship with the exception of one motionless body, believed to be that of LCDR Sullivan. At this point several other boats in the area started shooting, and the crew pulled off to contemplate the hopelessness of the situation.

After a few minutes, the pilot contacted the OSC concerning his helicopter's fuel state. He was directed to return to the PIRAZ ships for fuel, and was not recalled. LCDR Sullivan was declared killed in action.

Linebacker II and War's End

The war returned in full bloom on 18 December 1972 with the commencement of *Linebacker II*. The level of operations was intensified over *Linebacker I*, with concentrated air strikes against SAM and AAA sites, enemy army barracks, POL storage areas and Haiphong naval and shipyard areas.

Detachment 110 made one opposed over-water rescue during the brief course of *Linebacker II*. LCOL J.M. Cochran and MAJ M.S. Carr ejected from their VMFA-333 F-4J *Phantom* (*America*/CVW-8) on 23 December, after getting hit by AAA. The retrieval was made by the crew of LTs Craig Peterson, Timothy Trotter, AT2 Tom McCann and ADJ3 G.L. Paul.

Attacks on the North were suspended on Christmas Day for 36 hours and resumed on the 27th at the same level of intensity. Four days later, the North Vietnamese returned to the table and agreed to release all POWs following the signing of the peace treaty. *Linebacker II* officially ended on 30 December.

Thus ended 1972, the last full year of the Vietnam War and HC-7's existence. During the course of the year, Det 110 conducted 48 successful rescues.

On 15 January 1973, LT Vic Kovaleski and LTJG Jim Wise of VF-161 from *Midway* (CVA-41/CVW-5) were shot down by AAA; Kovaleski was saved by *Big Mothers* LT Tom Kautsky, LTJG Hank Frazier, AMS3 Allan Gaynor and AE3 Cady, while ENS Plautz was retrieved by

another unit. The retrieval, Number 141, turned out to be the last combat rescue of the Vietnam War for HC-7.

On 29 March 1973, remaining U.S. combat forces departed the south and U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam disestablished. Formal U.S. involvement in the defense of the Republic of Vietnam was ended.

The End of the Line

While the shooting war in Vietnam had concluded, combat operations in Cambodia continued well into 1973. On 30 June, Congress voted to suspend funding for further operations in the theater, and flights over Cambodia ended on 15 August.

By this time, *Detachment 110* was down to only three aircraft: *Big Mothers* 60 (BuNo 149903), 62 (149912) and 67 (151556). The war was definitely winding down, and SAR missions were few and far between.

On 1 September 1973, HC-7 Det 110 marked the completion of its sixth consecutive year of deployment in *7th Fleet* units. The 2,192 day

CO was rough because they started disposing of the aircraft. The three SH-3Gs went first, and then they started to get rid of the armored birds.

“At least we were all able to get in a lot of running over lunchtime. The mission disappeared, but we had great morale right up to the end.”

The squadron made its last rescue, at NAS Fallon on 8 April 1975. Notably, the *Big Mother* crew was made up of a mix of personnel: HC-7 pilot LT Joe “Giant Killer” LoPresti, aircrewmembers AMH1 Loren Hammond and ADJAN Rollins; HC-1 co-pilot LT Hill and HC-2 crewman ATC Hoffert. The *Crusader* pilot was successfully located and returned to the air station, and the mission was chalked up as “Day, unopposed, overland.”

On 30 June 1975 at Imperial Beach, *Helicopter Combat Support Squadron 7* disestablished. Squadron personnel commemorated its demise with a last big dining in at the Hotel del Coronado. The event was legendary, and an appropriate ending for a legendary helicopter squadron.



USN via NAM



Joe Skrzypek via Mark Morgan



Left: *Big Mothers* on the flight line at NAS Imperial Beach, 7 April 1975. Just two months later, HC-7 was disestablished. **Above:** In a reunion of HC-7 personnel, LCDR Andy Curtin (left), CAPT Ron Beougher (in camouflage jacket) and CDR Joe Skrzypek relive memories of their time in WestPac.

record was noted in ceremonies held onboard *Hancock* (CVA-19). Two particularly notable guests were CDR Mason Gilfry, CAG-21, and LT Will Pear of VA-212, who had been rescued by the *Big Mothers* in April and September 1972, respectively.

On 25 September 1973, HC-7 *Detachment 110* left *Coral Sea* (CVA-43) after having maintained a continuous presence by the squadron at sea for 2,215 consecutive days. Det Cubi closed its doors the following spring, on 21 May 1974. The financial effect on the RUFADORA, HC-7’s “hangout” in Olongapo City just outside the main gate of the Subic/Cubi complex, has not been recorded.

Following the return of all squadron personnel to Imperial Beach, HC-7 continued training and evaluation of CSAR tactics and equipment. However, the squadron increasingly found itself providing plane guard detachments for PacFlt carriers on local ops. In other words, the *Big Mothers* were operating as a “straight” HC squadron, albeit one with the highest experience level in the business.

One of the last at-sea periods for the squadron was in February 1974, when HC-7 Det *Enterprise* went aboard for 10 days of Northern California ops. Two aircraft, *Big Mother* HH-3As 64 and 65, constituted the det. No actual SAR rescues took place. Instead, det personnel busied themselves with CV flight ops as well as hauling mail and passengers to and from NavSta Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay. In his post-cruise report, the det OinC stated, “With the cessation of Southeast Asia hostilities, more of this type det can be expected in the future.”

However, it was not to be. HC-7 — the WestPac vertrep and VIP specialist, aerial minesweeping pioneer and the Navy’s only dedicated combat search and rescue unit — had reverted to the role of “classic” helicopter combat support squadron, and there were now plenty of those around. Following the inactivation of *Detachment 110*, planners looked at ways of giving HC-7 a global capability that included keeping two aircraft and crews on a modified alert, ready for rapid deployment in C-5As. However, with no other wars on the horizon, Navy leaders and defense planners began to deem dedicated Combat SAR as an expensive luxury.

The squadron knew what was coming. According to CDR Walt Lester, the last commanding officer of the *Big Mothers*, “My year as