

# END OF BIG MOTHERS

"SAR Alert! SAR Alert! Stand by to launch Big Mother!"

Two minutes later the heavy gray helo rose from the fantail of USS *Sterrett* and lumbered into the twilight of the waning afternoon. CIC briefed the helo crew over the radio, giving vectors and distances to find the A-4 *Skyhawk* pilot shot down 32 miles inside of North Vietnam. As the aircraft electrical circuits warmed up and became effective, en route to the coast, the stabilization equipment came on the line to make the big aircraft's flight a little smoother. Checking the flak charts, the pilot elected to cross the beach south of the hills around Vinh to avoid the heavy concentration of AAA sites about the city. The helo crew's body armor in place, weapons cleared and ready, all stations rigged for rescue, and with the A-4 rescue escort on its wing, Big Mother called "feet dry" as they crossed the shore line in the descending darkness.

Once safely past the guns of Vinh, Big Mother turned north. The on-scene commander in another *Skyhawk* cleared the radio emergency guard frequency of all traffic except himself, the helo and the downed pilot. All other assets, including the escort flight, were switched to SAR primary frequency. The on-scene commander made a diving pass and steep pull-up to mark the survivor's position. The arriving helicopter began a descent and approach but 87mm and 100mm AAA fire erupted from the trees and nearby ridges below, driving the helo to the north.

The rescue escort A-4 made several passes at the gun emplacements, successfully suppressing enemy fire enough for Big Mother to make a low-level, high-speed run-in to a hover

over a bamboo grove. While the helo crew lowered the forest penetrator through the thicket, hundreds of ground troops peppered the aircraft with small arms and automatic weapons fire.

As soon as the downed A-4 pilot on the hoist was clear of the trees, Big Mother broke hover and departed while the rescue escort continued to suppress the heavy AAA fire. Moments later the survivor was safely aboard the bullet-riddled helicopter.

Retracing their path to the coast, the heavy helo and the escort jinked and maneuvered, continually avoiding the intense AAA from guns along the entire route. The escort *Skyhawks* made repeated bomb attacks beneath Big Mother, suppressing the heavy flak and silencing several of the gun positions.

Back aboard *Sterrett* all was considerably more comfortable for LCdr. Eikel of VA-93, thanks to the skill and teamwork of the crew of Big Mother 74, the on-scene commander from VA-94, the escort pilots of VA-93 and the SAR coordination efforts of CTF 77 in the Tonkin Gulf. This rescue, in the early evening of August 30, 1968, was not unlike a number of others accomplished by the Big Mothers of HC-7.

But Helicopter Combat Support Squadron Seven has ended an era — after nearly eight years of heroic service. The only Navy helicopter squadron ever specifically designated and tasked with the combat search and rescue mission, HC-7 plucked more than 150 downed Navy, Marine and Air Force pilots from North Vietnam and the Tonkin Gulf.

Commissioned September 1, 1967, as a general utility squadron based at Atsugi, Japan, HC-7 provided SAR,



vertrep, minesweeping, VIP transport and general helicopter services to the fleet. By the end of 1971, HC-7 had shed all of its original missions save combat search and rescue and had moved to NAS Imperial Beach, Calif. The squadron flew Kaman HH-2Cs and Sikorsky HH-3As from detachments aboard various ships in the Seventh Fleet. A heavy maintenance support detachment was based at NAS Cubi Point. The squadron provided attack and fighter pilots in Southeast Asia a dedicated professional search and rescue force trained and equipped to accomplish rescues under the most hostile conditions.

The HH-3A is specially equipped with self-sealing lines and fuel tanks, a high-speed rescue hoist, armor plating over vital areas, a high-speed fuel dumping system to allow the helo to rapidly lighten its load, and a GE mini-gun capable of firing up to 4,000 rounds of 7.62mm bullets per minute.

When the communist spring offensive of 1972 called for renewed air attacks against North Vietnam, HC-7 had further consolidated its assets to an all H-3 force in an afloat detachment (Det. 110), a maintenance detachment at Cubi Point and a headquarters home guard at Imperial Beach. With five HH-3As, Det. 110 operated for more than six consecutive years on-station in the Tonkin Gulf. Aircraft and crews staged operations from one of the many aircraft carriers and deployed three helicopters to forward pre-position areas on the decks of DLGs and cruisers in search and rescue picket stations along the coast



**A copilot plots reported survivor location and checks flack positions en route to another rescue, far left. Left, a Big Mother H-2C lands aboard DLG-26.**

of Vietnam. One remained aboard the carrier in a ready alert status and the fifth helo underwent maintenance and repairs.

Frequently, during heavy bombing raids against the enemy, all five of the Big Mothers were in an airborne alert status, orbiting near the coast awaiting the call to action that might mean another rescue. But, generally, each helo and crew would rotate through the three SAR picket stations and return to the carrier about every third day for much needed upkeep and rest.

The carrier might be home to Det. 110 for as long as a month, or as briefly as one or two days, but the men of the Det. had to conduct a cross-deck transfer of the entire detachment about every ten days. Living in passageways, working in gear lockers, these vagabond "orphans of the Seventh Fleet" seemed to emerge from cruise boxes and laundry sacks to compile an amazing record of daring rescues and to earn the envied distinction of being the most highly decorated squadron of the Vietnam Conflict.

HC-7 counts among its achievements the awarding of the Medal of Honor to the then Lt. Clyde Lassen (the only Navy pilot during the Vietnam Conflict to be so honored), four Navy Crosses, several Silver Stars, more than 50 Distinguished Flying Crosses, numerous Bronze Stars and countless Air Medals and Navy Com-

mendation Medals. In all the time the squadron was accumulating these, it did not lose a single aircraft or crew in combat.

Big Mother rescues include the first aces of the Vietnam War, Navy Lieutenants William Driscoll and Randy Cunningham, who were pulled from the waters of the Tonkin Gulf moments after they were shot down following their fifth Mig kill.

The monumental task of repairing the frequently battle-damaged aircraft and performing organizational and depot level maintenance fell to HC-7 Det. Cubi Point. The helicopters were sent to Cubi and after repair, back to the line on the most readily available deck headed in the desired direction. There were, of course, many ships which passed back and forth between the Tonkin Gulf and the Philippines.

Det. 110 departed for Conus on September 25, 1973. Det. Cubi left on May 21, 1974.

The maintenance and flight crews similarly rotated from stateside bases to Cubi Point and thence to Det. 110 via ship or COD aircraft. They would normally spend approximately three or four months of a six month deployment on Yankee Station. The remainder of their time was spent at Cubi Point where they flew logistic support and unopposed search and rescue missions.

At Imperial Beach, the "palace guard" carried on the myriad func-

tions necessary to operate a combat squadron. Even while confronting the difficulties of retaining continuity in the face of the high turn-over rate brought on by personnel cruise rotation, the command planned and managed the continuing pilot, aircrew and maintenance training program. It also fulfilled commitments in support of ComFAirSDiego/ComASWWing Pac.

The headquarters group flew various missions in the San Diego area including deep water environment survival training. It also dispatched training detachments to NAS Fallon, Nev., in support of soon-to-deploy air wings.

At Fallon, air wing pilots worked closely with HC-7 and other units. Training involved search and rescue exercises and helped pilots gain invaluable experience as on-scene commanders, rescue escorts and as survivors of mock AAA fire and aggressor forces. Flying these simulated, overland SAR missions allowed the Big Mother crews to hone their skills and to share with the air wing flyers the lessons they had learned during previous live combat search and rescue.

In response to improvements in enemy technology and to new developments in our own capabilities, the Imperial Beach aircrews frequently tested and evaluated new equipment. Some of this was incorporated in aircraft on station in the Tonkin Gulf — for example, the chaff and flare dispensing devices which were installed for antimissile defense.

Now, after nearly eight years, HC-7 has been disestablished. The combat search and rescue capability of the squadron has passed to HC-1.

Big Mother has stepped down but many will remember her.