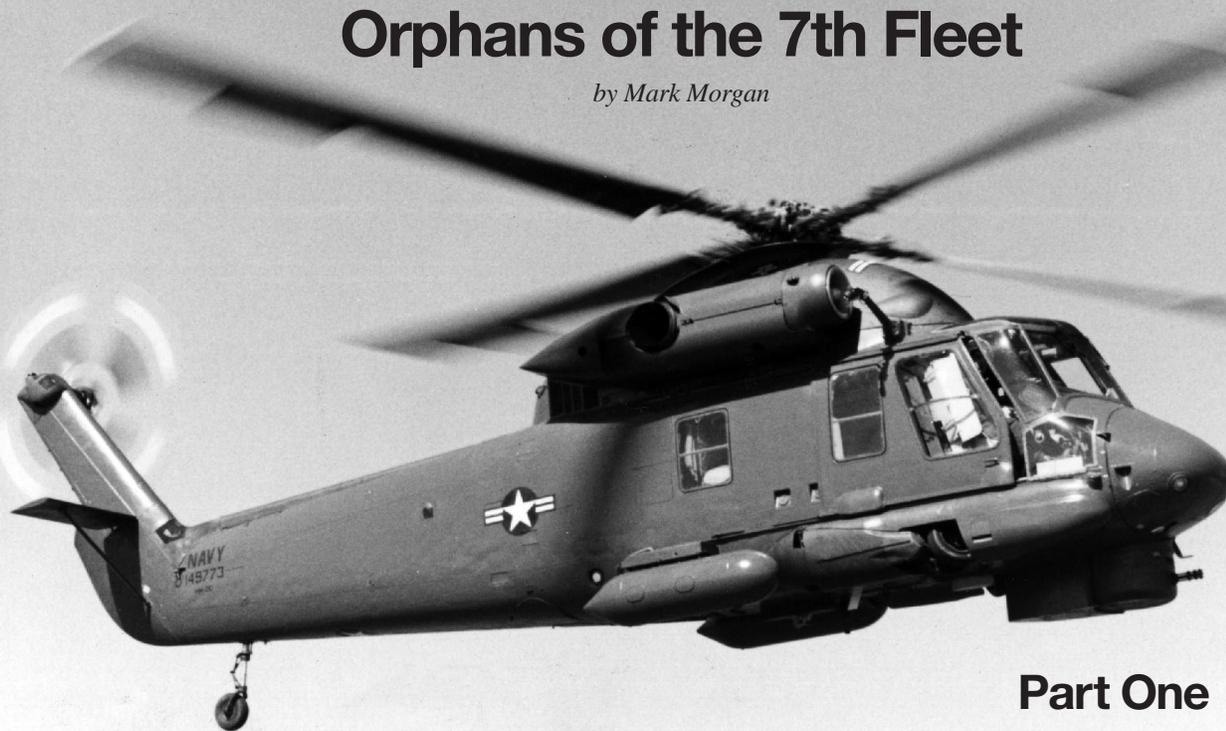


LAUNCH

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 CVSSs. 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. Vanderfelde, 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.

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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” Huseh. 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, Huseh 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?”

Huseh 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 Huseh 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



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.



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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 Cerebrus, 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 Melecovsky 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 Melecovsky 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 Melecovsky, "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, Melecovsky 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.

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.

Courtesy CAPT Richard J. Jaeger, USN(Ret)



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.

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



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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.



LT Clyde Lassen

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.

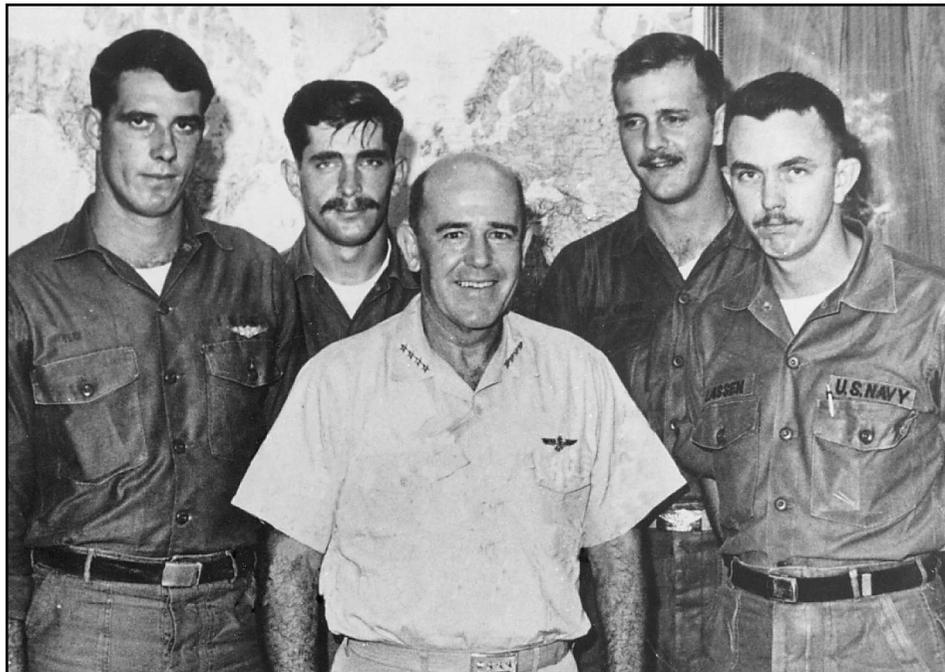
In Dallas's words, “While making the last approach we were under fire from behind us and from both sides. We were returning the fire during landing and takeoff, and I silenced one position that I know of.”

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, aircrewmembers ADJ3 Donald West and AE2 Bruce Dallas, Hyland, LTJG's 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 Burleson 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 shipboard 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 Bombardier/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.