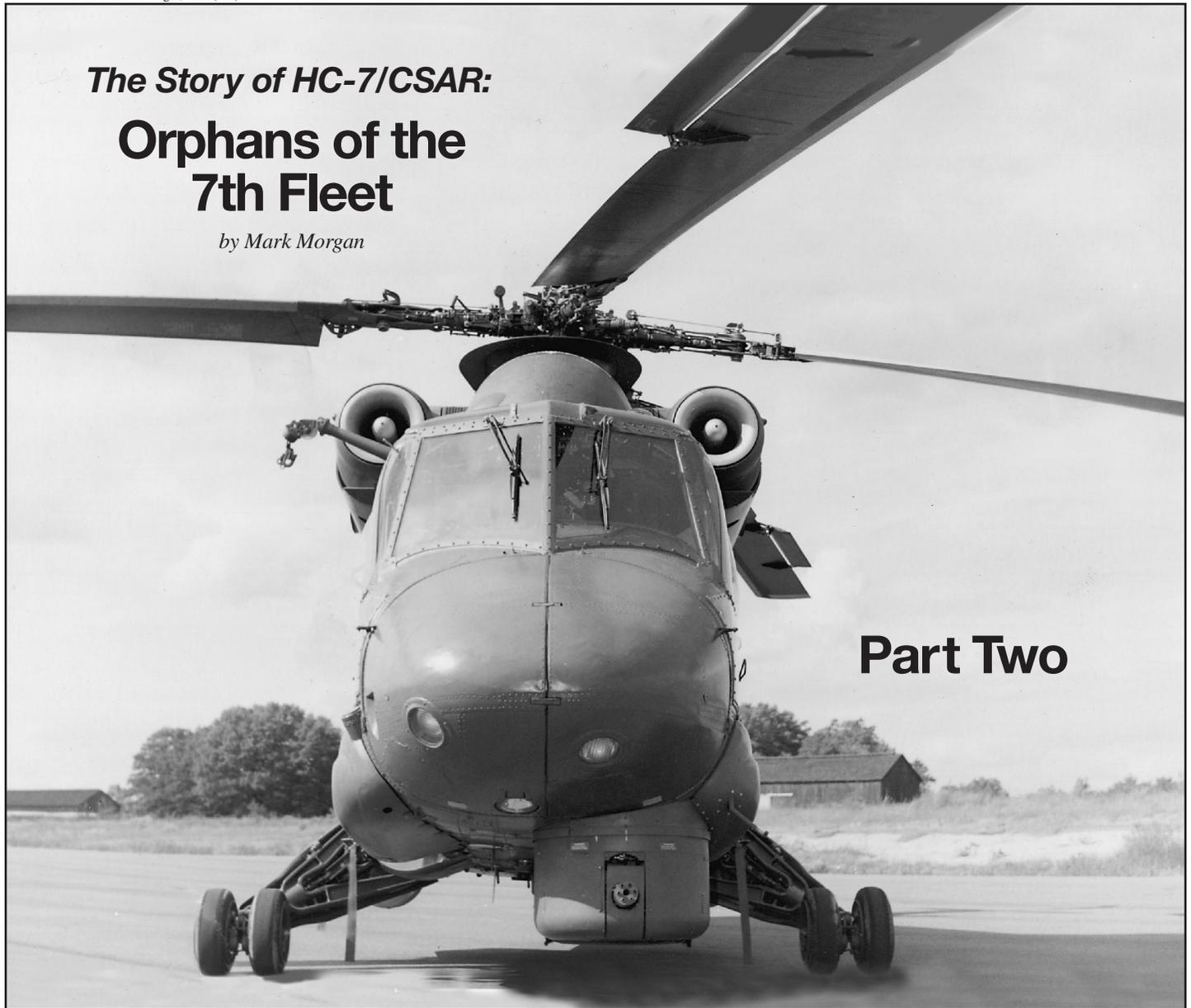


# The Story of HC-7/CSAR: Orphans of the 7th Fleet

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.

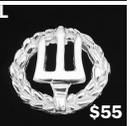
While the detachments were carried as individual units, they operated with a total manning of 7 officers and 18 enlisted men — apparently the det number shifted depending on the operation. The personnel were drawn from HC-5 at Imperial Beach, and possessed a wealth of H-3 experience with much practice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



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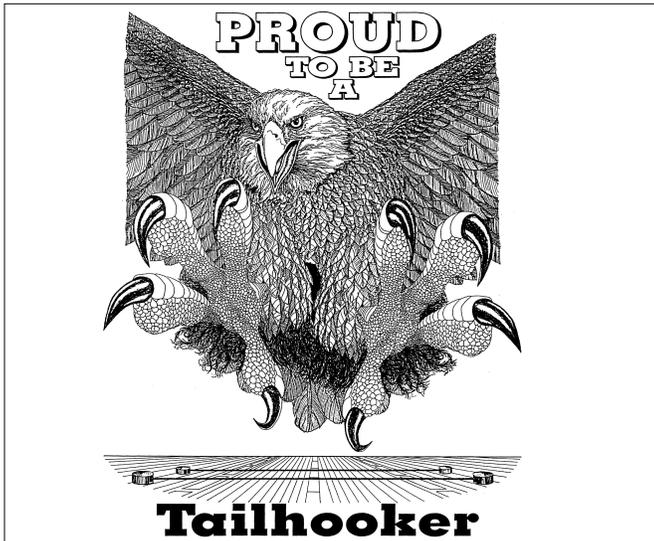
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Probably the biggest problem facing Dets 112 and 113 was the lack of suitable areas for training and practice near their base at Atsugi. According to one former OinC, CDR Jim Waring, the unit was fully trained and capable when they left NAS Imperial 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.

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*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



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**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



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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



USN via NAM



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

USN via NAM



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

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, aircrewmen 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.



Joe Skrzypiek 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 Skrzypiek relive memories of their time in WestPac.

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