



The Most Highly Decorated Navy Squadron in Vietnam?

by CAPT Robert E. Jones, USN (Ret.)

As a former member of Helicopter Combat Support Squadron Seven, I had been told, with no reason to disbelieve the tellers, that HC-7 was the most highly decorated Navy squadron in the Vietnam War. The prima facie evidence, coupled with my own knowledge of the squadron's exploits, only served to confirm that as fact. After all, one Medal of Honor and four Navy Crosses, that I knew of, were enough to silence most doubters at happy hour. That fact, along with the number of Silver Stars and Distinguished Flying Crosses that I could personally recount, would normally subdue all but the most vociferous doubters.

Now, I'm going to admit, up front, that I can't really *prove* that HC-7 was the most highly decorated Navy squadron in the Vietnam War. The OPNAV and SECNAV awards sections, as well as the Naval Historical Archives, were all helpful, but simply do not keep records of individual awards by squadron. Mr. John Elliott of the Naval Historical Section was particularly helpful and provided the annual squadron histories submitted during those years. The information presented here has been gathered from several sources, including those histories, interviews and scrapbooks of people who were there, and my own recollections and those of other former squadron members. CAPT Don Gregory, the third commanding officer of HC-7, was also a great source of information.

At first glance, HC-7 would appear to be a most unlikely candidate for the title of "most decorated." It was a rather strange conglomerate, formed out of several HC-1 detachments (dets) 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.

Upon establishment on September 1, 1967, the squadron had four H-46 and three H-2 helicopters at the home base in Atsugi, Japan. On

September 6, the squadron picked up two more H-2s in conjunction with the Atsugi area SAR responsibility and incorporated HC-1 Det Cubi on October 1, along with all combat search and rescue (CSAR) responsibility for the Tonkin Gulf. The original squadron had nine dets which included vertical replenishment (VERTREP), Seventh Fleet flagship support, H-2 CSAR, and the maintenance and training det at Cubi. Dets 110 and 111 were added in February 1968 to provide H-3 CSAR and logistics support, and Dets 112 and 113 were formed with the incorporation of the RH-3 minesweeping mission in February 1969. So, in its heyday, HC-7 performed at least six distinct missions: airborne mine countermeasures, VERTREP, Yankee Station logistic support, dedicated flagship support (Seventh Fleet helo det), Atsugi area SAR services, and combat search and rescue. A great deal of the pioneer work in VERTREP and minesweeping was done in that squadron and many of the officers and men went on to further develop those warfare specialties in the early VERTREP and airborne minesweeping squadrons.

But, as they say, that's another story. This one is primarily about Combat Search and Rescue—HC-7 Det 110, the *Big Mothers*, flying H-3s from carriers, and Dets 104 through 109, the *Clementines*, stationed on small decks throughout the Tonkin Gulf. Our motto described our mission: "Combat SAR Prevents POWs."

As regards awards, there were two primary factors that tended to promote large numbers of individual awards for HC-7 aircrews: the nature of the mission and the operational concept.

First of all, in regard to the mission, the rescue of downed airmen from the grasp of the enemy simply makes for good PR. Second, it was a tough mission with little going for the crews in the way of training, equipment, or support. As a result, anytime a helicopter went



A Big Mother Sea King prepares to land on a confined deck on North SAR station. U.S. NAVY

inland in North Vietnam and returned, the success was due almost solely to the performance of the crew. In the way of equipment, the early H-2s and H-3s had some bolt-on armor protection around critical areas such as engines, transmissions, tail rotor gear boxes, and pilot seats. There were, however, no missile warning systems, chaff or flare dispensers, or any other means of missile defense. The single-engine H-2s were helped, to some degree, by the installation of "gold stripe" engines—when they were available. These were engines that were assembled using only critical components that had been specifically tested, measured, and found to be especially close-tolerance and fault-free. As a result, the maximum operating limitations were raised to provide an extra margin of emergency power, a small but very real advantage in that environment. At any rate, whether the protection afforded by the armor was worth the extra weight is debatable at best. With a reasonable fuel load and the high density altitudes prevalent in that part of the world, 125 knots was about max speed, with all controls full up and forward.

Both models were armed with a General Electric mini-gun, mounted in the cargo door, and an M-60 in the personnel door. Although the guns were used to some extent in the early days to suppress ground fire, their overall utility was questionable. They may have provided the crew some measure of confidence (or false se-

curity, as the case may be), but very little in the way of real self-defense.

Although the HH-3A and the HH-2C, designed specifically for CSAR, were introduced later on, probably the only real improvement was in the form of an extra engine for the H-2. The HH-3A was of particularly poor design and had to be completely reconfigured at Cubi to make it a viable rescue vehicle.

The primary means of protection for the rescue helo was advertised as the escort aircraft from the air wing, although there was never any opportunity for training or practice. The only time the helo and escorts ever worked together was during actual rescues: OJT at its worst. Individual crew training was negligible to nonexistent and consisted primarily of practice swimmer drops and low-level, overwater evasive maneuvers passed from one pilot to another. There was no formal training program, no mountain or jungle flying training, little night flying with minimum night proficiency, and no tactics. Night rescues were to be illuminated by flares from escort aircraft, a concept that worked better in theory than in practice, as reflected in the night rescue described later in this article. Most night rescues were actually made using the helo landing lights, which provided a great target. As for crossing the beach, the decision was left to the pilot whether to go in high and take his chances with missiles or to go in low and deal with ground fire, neither of which were very

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good options. It did, however, make for some passionate barroom debates. Combine these disadvantages with the intensity of coastal defenses, especially in the latter part of the war, (crews eventually stopped even looking at the flak charts, it was just depressing), and it starts to become clear that any crew to venture within about three miles of the coast and make a rescue and return had some pretty impressive stories to tell. The fact is that the primary factor responsible for the success of most rescues was the crewmembers themselves, both helo and escorts, and their ability to improvise, react to the situation at hand, and simply do their best under the circumstances. Quite simply, it was their dogged determination to press on regardless of the odds—personal heroism.

The other advantage that tended to foster a

large number of awards was HC-7's longevity on Yankee Station. While other squadrons cycled through the Gulf, the HC-7 dets were deployed continuously from September 1967 through the end of the war—2,127 consecutive days at sea! The dets were always there, moving from ship to ship, the people and aircraft rotating endlessly from Atsugi to the heavy maintenance det at Cubi to Yankee Station and back—so that whatever, or whenever, action might develop, HC-7 was on the scene, whether for Alpha Strikes during the hot war or routine RECCE flights during the bombing hiatus.

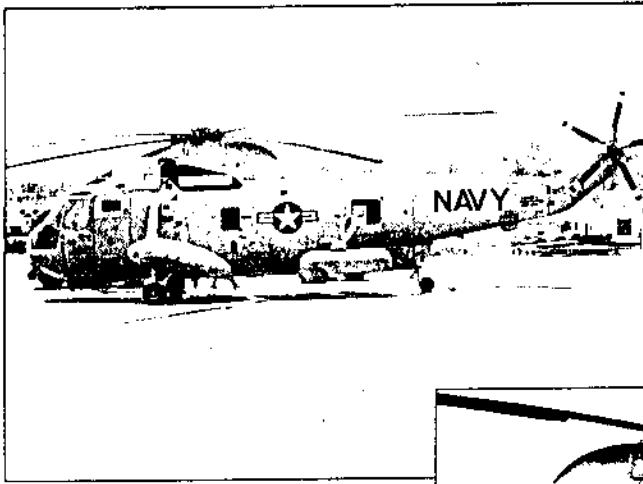
This notion that the mission promotes heroism is clearly borne out by a review of the efforts at CSAR in the early days, before the advent of HC-7. The same conditions of equipment and training existed then, only considerably more so. The original crews had nothing except the tradition that is bred into every helicopter pilot: once a SAR situation develops, it becomes the *only* mission, and all that really matters is to get to the survivor, regardless of risk—and they did.

The best I can tell, the first crew to go into North Vietnam to rescue a downed aviator was LCDR Wes Wetzel and LT Kent Vander Velde. Deployed on an HC-1 detachment aboard USS *Midway*, LCDR Wetzel convinced the admiral that he should take an H-2A aboard a cruiser off the coast of North Vietnam to provide a ready SAR capability.

With no training or knowledge of the terrain, the crew penetrated into North Vietnam and res-



Four of the five HC-7 Det 110-assigned H-3s prepare to cross-deck to another carrier, an event that took place on the average of every two to three weeks. US NAVY



(Left) The experimental twin mini-gun pods on this HH-3A moved the center of gravity too far aft and were replaced with a standard configuration M-60 machine gun in the forward port personal hatch and a mini-gun in the starboard cargo hatch. (Below) First crewman AMH-1 "Pappy" Elerick gives Big Mother H-3 a freshwater wash between launches off the coast of Haiphong, North Vietnam. U.S. NAVY



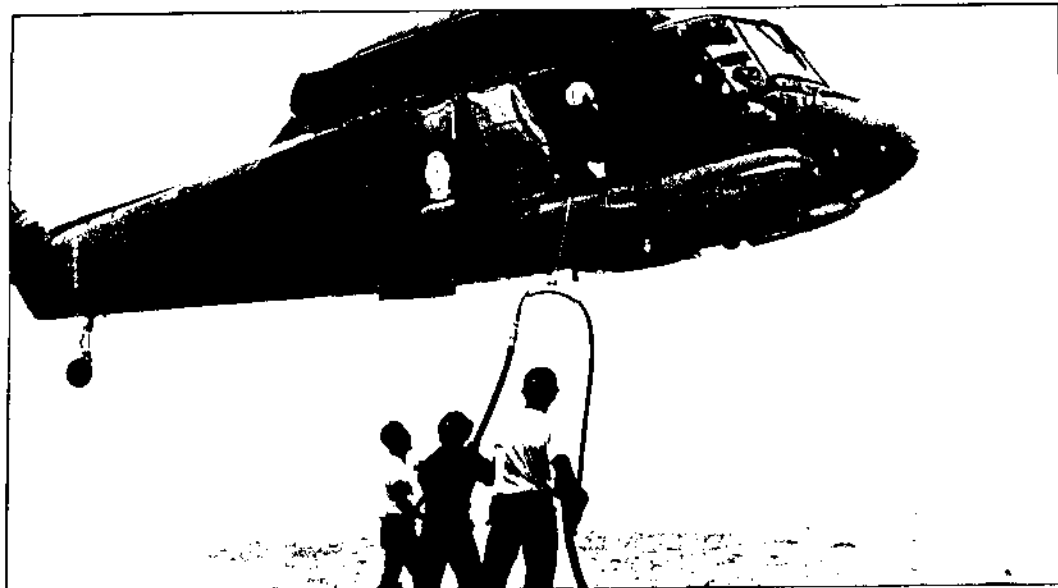
cued a down aviator, for which the entire crew received DFCs. This worked so well that a similar det was formed from the HC-2 SAR det aboard *Independence*. LCDR Chuck Sapp and LT Tim Thomassey, with ADI P. C. Jones as first crewman, took an H-2 aboard the USS *Richmond K. Turner*, a DLG off the northern coast. As CAPT Tim Thomassey, former Commanding Officer of USS *Forrestal*, tells the story, they too soon found themselves inland to rescue a crew of two that had crashed on a mountain top. Unable to hover at that altitude, they threw everything they could over the side, including some very expensive electronic gear, dumped fuel to the minimum, and managed to pick up the first survivor. With him on board, however, they were again too heavy to hover, with nothing left to jettison. So they lowered the "horse collar," and dragged it across the ground while air taxiing fast enough to stay airborne, but, as it turned out, too fast for the survivor to get into the rescue device. He did, however, manage to get one arm hooked through the horse collar, and was dangling fifty or so feet below the helo as they went over the sheer cliff in a dive for airspeed. Later, when the pilots apologized for the hairy ride, he said, "Don't worry, I could have hung on all the way to San Francisco." That was worth a Silver Star and a couple of DFCs for the crew.

The first true CSAR det, HC-1 Det 5, was formed in early 1966, with one armored H-2. This det, headed by LCDR Dave McCracken on USS *Coontz*, had eight rescues, five of which were opposed, and resulted in a Silver Star and two DFCs for LCDR McCracken alone. Det 5 was also awarded the Navy Unit Commenda-

tion, the smallest unit ever to receive that honor. The success of this early det confirmed the value of a ready CSAR capability and spawned five more HC-1 dets that eventually were absorbed by HC-7.

The first H-3s to get involved in the CSAR business were from HS-2, commanded by CDR Don Hayes, off USS *Hornet*, in the fall of 1965. HS-2 sent two helos to Mary Station (later North SAR) in support of Alfa Strikes. This again proved so successful that when *Hornet* left station for a port visit, HS-2 would leave a det on a CVA to provide the continuing CSAR capability. LTs Mel Howell and Terry Campbell, members of one of those dets, were shot down over the north in a rescue attempt and were themselves rescued by the Air Force *Jolly Green Giants*. CDR Hayes says that, to the best of his memory, HS-2 made about seven rescues during that 1965-1966 cruise, one of which earned LT Vern Frank a Silver Star when he went into the north at night and found the survivor only when he illuminated his face by holding a cigarette lighter under his chin.

During that time HS-2 introduced some true innovations that commenced to lay the foundation for CSAR. For example, they rigged an A-



A single-engine UH-2A Seasprite, similar to the one that LT Lassen used to make his during night rescue, completes an inflight refueling in the Tonkin Gulf. U.S. NAVY

4 wing tank internally in the helo to gravity-feed fuel directly into the fuel tanks. This extended the range considerably and could be jettisoned when empty if need be.

Probably of most importance, however, was the work HS-2 did in developing the concept and techniques of helicopter in-flight refueling from a surface ship (HIFR). Without the ability to HIFR, many of the rescues that were to follow simply would not have been possible. LTs Harry Zinser and Bill Young, for instance, in a later rescue for which they were awarded the Navy Cross, were airborne for over eleven hours and HIFR'd several times before the decision was finally made to send them over the beach at night.

The tradition established by those early pilots is exemplified by people like LT Robert "Vann" Goodloe, who later went over the beach twice with HS-6, both resulting in DFCs, even though in one case he was called off by the Air Force A-1 "Sandies" and had to listen helplessly as they described the capture of his fellow airmen. HS-6 rescued twenty-six airmen during that cruise. This tradition was part and parcel of the fabric that was to become HC-7.

The first official H-3 CSAR capability was introduced by the formation of HC-7 Dets 110 and 111 on February 19, 1968. Det 110 was formed onboard USS *Kearsarge* on Yankee Station with six H-3s, four configured for CSAR and two for logistic support. Det 111 was formed aboard USS *Enterprise* specifically to

provide CSAR and logistic support off the coast of Korea during the Pueblo Crisis. Det 111 was eventually merged into Det 110 to perform the logistic support side of the mission that averaged 41,000 pounds of mail, 69,000 pounds of cargo, and 800 passengers per month for the rest of the war. Even during the most slack periods of the war, Det 110 serviced every ship in the Tonkin Gulf with the daily "Yankee Station Log Run."

What was it like to go into North Vietnam in a helo in those days? What did these people do to deserve such high recognition from their countrymen? An NAS Atsugi newspaper article (author unknown), written at the time LT Clyde Lassen was awarded the Medal of Honor, very nicely describes the experiences of the crew. I quote:

Lassen and his three-man crew rode their UH-2A *Seasprite* rescue helo around SAM missile sites, anti-aircraft gun emplacements, and through a pile of automatic weapons and small arms fire to snatch two downed F-4 *Phantom* flyers from the heart of North Vietnam.

At twelve minutes past midnight on June 19, a search and rescue (SAR) alert was received aboard the USS *Preble*. A *Phantom* fighter had been hit by enemy fire and gone down twenty miles inland over the North. There were two survivors.

Lassen and his crew, members of Helicopter Combat Support Squadron Seven's (HC-7's) South SAR detachment aboard the *Preble*, were in the air ten minutes later and speeding toward the crash scene, about sixty miles away.

High Guides

High-flying fighters had established communication with the downed flyers and guided the rescue helo over the beach. It would be fifty-eight minutes before the helo crew would see that beach again and for fifty of those minutes they would be sprayed with enemy fire.

The aiding fighters steered the helo around SAM and anti-aircraft sites which, coupled with voice communication from the survivors, guided the helo to the men, located one-half mile south of the 19th parallel near Vinh.

The darkness made pinpointing the survivors' position difficult so "We asked the survivors to fire a pistol flare. They did and we spotted their position," said Lassen.

Small Arms Fire

The two men were located on the side of a heavily wooded hill covered with thick underbrush. Small arms fire crackled through the night.

Lassen told the stranded pair he would land about 200 feet downhill from them. He landed his aircraft in a rice paddy but was forced to take off immediately as small arms fire blanketed the area.

"Come and get us, come and get us," the survivors cried into their radio as Lassen maneuvered between the trees and hovered above their position. Flares dropped by the planes overhead illuminated the hill as Lassen moved into position, and a crewman lowered the rescue hoist.

Flares Go Out

Suddenly the four Atsugians were plunged into darkness as the flares went out. "It was pitch dark again. I lost sight of the survivors and had no visual reference," Lassen explained.

"Get up," screamed a crewman.

Lassen applied power and started to climb just as the helo smashed into a tree. "I felt a large jolt, the helo pitched down and went into a tight starboard turn. I regained control and waved off," said Lassen.

The support aircraft had run out of flares and the HC-7 crew was forced to orbit the area and wait for more illumination to arrive. Lassen informed the survivors they would have to come down off the hill and into the clearing. The survivors' movement was hampered by the small arms fire.

During the five-to-ten-minute wait, the hostile fire increased. When the new flares arrived the hill was once again bathed in light and Lassen brought his bird in for a second landing, but the survivors informed him that he was not close enough, and he again launched.

Low on Fuel

Bullets ripped through the night at random, and the helo was running low on fuel. They had been in the immediate area for forty-five minutes and the situation was critical.

The survivors reported the enemy moving in on them and Lassen moved in for a final attempt to retrieve the pair. As he was moving, a ball of flame passed just under the *Seasprite*, and automatic weapons opened up on the rescue craft. The overhead flare died just before touching down, and Lassen was forced to turn on his spotlight to complete the landing. This drew intense fire, which the crew returned from the chopper's machine gun.

"We touched down in a marshy area, and during the two minutes it took the survivors to reach the helo, we were under continuous fire," said Lassen.

Come From Brush

Suddenly, a pair of mudsplattered men erupted from the underbrush, their flight suits hanging in tatters, and dashed across the twenty-yard clearing and dove into the helo.

With both of its guns blazing, the rescue bird lifted off and began the return trip to the coast.

During the twenty-mile journey back to the safety of the sea, the helo was traveling about 140 knots per hour [sic], and one damaged door of the aircraft was ripped away. Automatic weapons fire followed the six Navy men all the way to the beach.

The *Seasprite* touched down on the deck of the USS *Jouett*, the radio command center for the operation, at 2:50 a.m. with only five-to-ten minutes of fuel remaining.

One rescued pilot termed the effort "one of the most daring and heroic rescue efforts ever made."

While maybe not typical, this story is certainly representative of the heroic efforts of the aircrews of HC-7. Any one of a number of stories are just as exciting: LTJG Jeff Wiant, Navy Cross; LTJG "P. D." January, DFC; LT Harry Zinser, Navy Cross; LT Bill Young, Navy Cross; LT Jim Spillman, Silver Star, AE2 Bruce Dallas, Silver Star; ADJ3 Donald West, Silver Star; LT Tim Melecosky, four DFCs; LT Mike Trinnich, DFC; ADJ3 Robert Reichard, Silver Star and Purple Heart; LT Dick Everett, DFC; LCDR Gary McConnell, Silver Star; LTJG Doug Wassmer, DFC; LTJG John Nichols, DFC; LTJG Don Nicholson, four DFCs; and on and on. In one awards ceremony alone, held on March 28, 1968, HC-7 personnel were awarded one Navy Cross, one Silver Star, two DFCs, one Purple Heart, five Air Medals, one Navy Commendation with Combat "V" and a Letter of Commendation from the Air Force. In another, nineteen medals were presented, including one Navy Cross, two Silver Stars, four DFCs, one purple Heart, one Bronze Star, and ten Air Medals.

With the resumption of the bombing effort in April 1972, Det 107, the last *Clementine* det, was disestablished and melded into Det 110 to provide a centralized CSAR capability. From then through the end of the war, the *Big Mothers*

made 48 rescues, 35 of which were opposed, for which the aircrews were recommended for three Navy Crosses, six Silver Stars, and 102 Air Medals.

While this array of awards and decorations is impressive, it represents only a part of the real contribution that HC-7 made to the Navy and civilian populace wherever its helicopters and crews happened to be. From providing disaster relief to victims of devastating mudslides in the mountains of the Philippines, to the search for a small child lost in the mountains of Japan, HC-7 was always there; rewards ranged from the Philippines Presidential Unit Citation for the former, to the personal thanks of a father for the latter. A brief tour of the bylines of articles extracted from local newspapers and various Navy publications provides a feel, however inadequate, for some of the contributions made by the members of HC-7:

"HC-7 Helo Helps Stranded Student"

"HC-7 Helo Crew Receives Awards for Daring Rescue"

"Copter Performs Mercy Mission"

"Chopper Medevacs Officer"

"Chopper Crew Flies Triple Mission"

"HC-7 Helo Makes Emergency Flight"

"Chopper Aids in Medevac"

"Helo Makes Risky Pickup"

"HC-7 Mercy Men Notch Another Medevac Rescue"

"Mercy Pilot Medevacs Medic From Submarine Tender to Capture DFC"

"VERTREP Copter Rescues 2 Men"

"HC-7 Angel Flies Medevac Mission"

"Angel Wins Fight Against Weather"

"HC-7 Men Thanked For Mercy Mission"

Each is a story in itself—many as heroic as the more visible combat rescues made under fire. I wish I could tell you about some of them; like the H-46 pilot who landed on a submarine when he became low on fuel during a MEDEVAC, rather than leave without the patient (yes, I know helos can't land on submarines)—or the Commanding Officer, with no place to land, who hovered with only the nose wheel of his H-46 on the side of a mountain to discharge a medical crew and stayed in that position for over thirty minutes, even as he watched the fog close in, until they returned, then made a "0/0" vertical takeoff up the mountain. I know! I know! None of this proves that HC-7 was the most highly decorated squadron in the Vietnam war. But I'm not sure it's all that important. It was certainly a squadron that remains unique in the annals of Naval Aviation. Cross-decking from one ship to another every two-to-three weeks, they lived aboard every aircraft carrier to oper-

ate from Yankee Station and every ship assigned to North and South SAR stations throughout the existence of the CSAR effort in the Tonkin Gulf. Her aircrews logged over 20,000 shipboard landings, and the *Big Mothers* alone rescued over 150 aviators.

Labeled the "Orphans of the Tonkin Gulf" by one flag officer after a particularly frustrating cross deck of Det 110, the people of HC-7 were, in fact, a rather unorthodox lot, bouncing from ship to ship, sleeping in sick bays, passageways, in or under the helos, or not at all. It was a wonderful collection of "orphans," though, with more than their share of heroes, whose members distinguished themselves as war fighters in combat and humanitarians in both war and peace.

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CAPT Robert E. Jones, USN (Ret.), was born in Salem, Kentucky, and enlisted in the Navy in 1957. Selected for the NROTC program from the fleet, he graduated from Ohio State University in 1962 and earned his wings as a helicopter pilot at



Ellyson Field in 1964. He served as Officer-in-Charge of HC-7 Det 110, the Big Mothers, from 1970 to 1973 and remobilized the Combat SAR forces in the Tonkin Gulf in 1972 when the bombing effort was resumed. During the first six weeks of that mobilization, the Big Mother aircrews averaged over one hundred flight hours per month while making eleven rescues.

CAPT Jones served as Executive Officer of HC-2, the Navy's first helicopter squadron, when it was disestablished in 1976 and established HM-14, the Navy's first operational airborne mine countermeasures squadron. In 1977 he took over as Commanding Officer. He served as Air Officer in USS Iwo Jima (LPH-2), as Commanding Officer of NAS Whiting Field, and as Director of Air Training on the staff of the Chief of Naval Education and Training in Pensacola, Florida, until his retirement in 1987.

His personal awards include the Bronze Star, Meritorious Service Medal, and Air Medal, as well as numerous campaign and unit awards.

CAPT Jones currently serves as Director, Quality Management, for UNC Support Services, headquartered in Annapolis, Maryland. He and his wife Barbara live in Pensacola, Florida.