1981

HISTORY OF THE 20th SPECIAL OPERATIONS SQUADRON



MEMORANDUM

Date: 27 Dec 94

From: 20 SOS/CCX

To: WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

Subject: DOCUMENT CLASSIFICATION

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1. The documents contained herein are portions of the 1ST/16TH SOW histories for the dates shown on each document. The SOW histories as a whole are classified for the most part.

2. The documents in this binder are a compilation of materials from varied sources and have all been declassified if necessary. Sheets showing declassification are all posted in the last document protector for each respective binder.

3. Any materials you feel may be of questionable classification you are encouraged to bring to my attention and I will endeavor to alleviate your apprehensions.

SQUADRON HISTORIAN

UNCLASSIFIED

0000209

HISTORICAL REPORT

TWENTIETH SPECIAL OPERATIONS SQUADRON (20 SOS)

1 January - 31 March 1981

COMMANDER

WILLIAM E. TAKACS, Lt Col, USAF

MISSION STATEMENT

The primary mission of the 20th Special Operations Squadron, as detailed in the Designed Operational Capability (DOC) Statement, is extremely comprehensive because it includes both unconventional warfare (UW) and psychological operations (PSYOPS). The squadron is tasked to conduct day or night penetration into hostile or enemy controlled territory to accomplish clandestine infiltration, exfiltration, aerial gunnery support, reenforcement, and resupply of UW forces. These operations include tactical low level navigation, night vision goggle (NVG) operations, airland/airdrop techniques, and entail land and water overflight. The second part of the primary mission is conduct of psychological operations: which includes speaker operations and aerial dispensing of leaflets.

Corollary missions give the squadron the flexibility and varied capabilities for which special operations units are noted. These missions include:

a. Recovery of personnel, which entails evasion and escape operations, and combat search and rescue (SAR). SAR operations would normally be prosecuted from forward operating locations where dedicated Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service (ARRS) forces are not available. SAR efforts would include the majority of ARRS techniques; search and location of survivors, airland or aerial recovery (i.e., hoist, stabo rig), first aid and transportation to the nearest medical facility.

b. Helicopter shipboard operations (joint service).

c. Medical evacuation of injured personnel.

d. Humanitarian and civic action programs.

e. Limited photo reconnaissance, by hand held or modularly installed camera systems.

f. Other missions, as directed by higher headquarters.

MANNING

	AUTHORIZED	ASSIGNED
Officers	57	51
Enlisted	80	78
Civilians	0	0
	137	129

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KEY PERSONNEL

COMMANDER	William E. Takacs, Lt Col
OPERATIONS OFFICER	William J. Barnes, Lt Col
EXECUTIVE OFFICER	Wayne D. Corder, Lt Col
FIRST SERGEANT	Malcolm G. Aldridge, MSgt
ADJUTANT	James L. Shipley III, 2d Lt

KEY PERSONNEL CHANGES

Major Louis Grant was assigned on 12 January 1981 as Assistant Director of Operations (HH-53).

SPECIALIZED EQUIPMENT

The squadron's aircraft equipage, as authorized by Air Force Programming Documents, includes six UH-1Ns and nine HH-53Hs, all special operations forces (SOF) configured.

a. Various items of specialized equipment are available for the unit's primary and corollary mission. This equipment includes:

(1) The MM-93 subsystem, which consists of 7.62 mm electrical gatling guns capable of firing 4000 rounds a minute.

(2) The M-23 subsystem, which includes 7.62mm gas operated machine-guns capable of firing 560 rounds per minute.

(3) The 2.75 inch folding fin aircraft rocket (FFAR) which is normally configured with a nine pound warhead (UH-1N only).

(4) Alternate methods of infiltration/exfiltration can be accomplished by rope ladder, rappeling, rescue hoist, and stabo rig.

b. The following UH-1N specialized equipment is within our capabilities but is presently not on hand.

(1) The UH-1N loudspeaker system, designed primarily for psychological operations, can broadcast a taped or live sound over a two mile radius.

(2) The 2090-3 spray system, a self contained, windmill operated aerial spray system with a capacity of 200 gallons.

c. A highly sophisticated avionics package has been installed to provide remarkably accurate navigational capabilities to include terrain following. The helicopter can operate successfully in total darkness or IMC at terrain following altitudes with no visual outside references. When conditions permit, night vision goggles can enhance the mission be reducing the crew workload. These missions will be primarily conducted at night. The following equipment has been installed to provide these capabilities;

(1) Terrain Following/Terrain Avoidance Radar (TF/TA)
(2) Forward Looking InfraRed Sensor (FLIR)
(3) Central Avionics Computer (CAC)
(4) Inertial Measuring Unit (IMU)
(5) Doppler Navigation
(6) Symbol Generator System (SGS)
(7) Projected Map Display (PMD)
(8) Radar Warning Receiver (RWR)
(9) Flare/Chaff Dispensers.

CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

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16 Jan a UH-1N was deployed to the Army Aviation Center at Ft. Rucker, Al to stand static display for the 3588 FTS.

18 Jan 4 HH-53's deploy to Dobbins AFB, Ga, for Pave Low/mountain training.

28 Jan the Squadron begins moving into the four, double width trailers purchased to accomodate the influx of additional personnel that arrived throughout 1980.

15 Feb, 3 HH-53's and 2 UH-1N's deploy to Dobbins AFB, Ga to participate in mountain tactical training.

24 Feb 2 HH-53H helicopters leave Dobbins AFB to participate in a JCS directed exercise at Pope AFB, N.C. They return 1 Mar.

9 Mar a UH-1N departs Hurlburt Field, proceeding to Hunter AAF, Ga, to participate in pre-exercise planning for the annual Solid Shield exercise.

2 Mar The squadron UH-1N's supported Army Special Forces units in support of exercise Goblin Laser in the local flying area.

26 Mar 7 HH-53H's departed Hurlburt Field, on a classified mission.

30 Mar a UH-1N piloted by Major Joseph V. Wildinger and Major Charles Svoboda rescued a U.S. Coast Guard seaman from heavy, storm swept seas when the USCG launch itself capsized during an attempted rescue of a civilian fishing vessel in distress. The seaman was located on a rock jetty, completely cut-off from the mainland by 7-10 foot high waves.

Quarter Flying Hour Programmed Allocation:	UH-1N	515 Hours
	HH-53	840 Hours
Quarter Hours Flown:	UH-1N	426.9 Hours
	HH-53	697.8 Hours

SORTIE AND HOURS FLOWN

	TYPE	SORTIES	HOURS
January	UH-1N	115	152.6
	HH-53	134	297.6
Febuary	UH-1N	119	167.6
	HH-53	115	198.3
March	UH-1N	65	106.7
	HH-53	79	219.9
TOTAL	UH-1N	299	426.9
	HH-53	328	697.8

SPECIAL PROBLEMS

Heavy operational tasking continues to create administrative, training and logistical problems beyond what might ordinarily be encountered in a long-established squadron.

0000116

HISTORICAL REPORT

TWENTIETH SPECIAL OPERATIONS SQUADRON (20 SOS)

1 April - 30 June 1981

COMMANDER

WILLIAM E. TAKACS, Lt Col, USAF

MISSION STATEMENT

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Corollary missions give the squadron the flexibility and varied capabilities for which special operations units are noted. These missions include:

a. Recovery of personnel, which entails evasion and escape operations, and combat search and rescue (SAR). SAR operations would normally be prosecuted from forward operating locations where dedicated Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service (ARRS) forces are not available. SAR efforts would include the majority of ARRS techniques; search and location of survivors, airland or aerial recovery (i.e., hoist, stabo rig, first aid and transportation to the nearest medical facility.

b. Helicopter shipboard operations (joint service).

c. Medical evacuation of injured personnel.

d. Humanitarian and civic action programs.

e. Limited photo reconnaissance, by hand held or modularly installed camera systems.

f. Other missions, as directed by higher headquarters.

MANNING

	AUTHORIZED	ASSIGNED
Officers	57	51
Enlisted	80	78
Civilians	0	0
	137	129

KEY PERSONNEL

COMMANDER	William E. Takacs, Lt Col
OPERATIONS OFFICER	William J. Barnes, Lt Col
EXECUTIVE OFFICER	Wayne D. Corder, Lt Col
FIRST SERGEANT	Malcolm G. Aldridge, MSgt
ADJUTANT	James L. Shipley III, 2d Lt

KEY PERSONNEL CHANGES

Lt Col Mark Schibler was assigned on 4 June 1981 as Chief of Weapons and Tactics.

Sra Paula R. Maier was assigned on 15 June 1981 as Chief of Administration.

SPECIALIZED EQUIPMENT

The squadron's aircraft equipage, as authorized by Air Force Programming Documents, includes six UH-1Ns and nine HH-53Hs, all special operations forces (SOF) configured.

a. Various items of specialized equipment are available for the unit's primary and corollary mission. This equipment includes:

(1) The MM-93 subsystem, which consists of 7.62mm electrical gattling guns capable of firing 4000 rounds a minute.

(2) The M-23 subsystem, which includes 7.62mm gas operated machine guns capable of firing 560 rounds per minute.

(3) The XM-218 subsystem, which includes .50 cal gas operated machine guns capable of firing 750 - 850 rounds a minute.

(4) The 2.75 inch folding fin aircraft rocket (FFAR) which is normally configured with a nine pound warhead (UH-1N only).

(5) Alternate methods of infiltration/exfiltration are rope ladder, rappeling, rescue hoist, stabo rig, and zodiac boat.

b. The following UH-1N specialized equipment is within our capabilities but is presently not on hand.

(1) The UH-1N loudspeaker system, designed primarily for psychological operations, can broadcast a taped or live sound over a two mile radius.

(2) The 2090-3 spray system, a self contained, windmill operated aerial spray system with a capacity of 200 gallons.

c. A highly sophisticated avionics package has been installed to provide remarkably accurate navigational capabilities to include terrain following. The helicopter can operate successfully in total darkness or IMC at terrain following altitudes with no visual outside references. When conditions permit, night vision goggles can enhance the mission by reducing the crew workload. These missions will be primarily conducted at night. The following equipment has been installed to provide these capabilities:

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(8) Radar Warning Receiver (RWR).
(9) Flare/Chaff Dispensers.

CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

26 Apr - 13 May.	4 UH-1Ns and 2 HH-53Hs participated in Solid Shield to support Army Special Forces. UH-1Ns deployed to Ft. Stewart during this exercise.
28 Apr - 23 May.	2 HH-53Hs deploy to Pisa, Italy for FLINTLOCK '81.
28 Apr	UH-1N Static Display at Duke Field for Airbase Ground Defense personnel.
29 Apr	HH-53H Static Display for REDCOM.
11 May - 29 May.	2 HH-53Hs deployed to Ft Cambell to train the 2/75 Rangers.
13 May	Aircraft 66-14433 departed for Navy Dallas to conduct Texas Instrument radar tests
18 May & 9 June.	3 UH-1Ns and 1 HH-53H participated in a live fire demonstration on R-52 and static display at Eglin AFB.
10 Jun - 18 Jun.	2 UH-1Ns participated with JSOC assets at Ft Bragg in a demonstration of the UH-1N capabilities to MACOS (Military Airlift Combat Operations Staff) personnel.
14 Jun - 27 Jun	3 HH-53Hs deploy to Dobbins AFB for PAVE LOW/mountain training.
16 Jun	1 UH-1N provided a live fire demonstration and 1 HH-53H provided a PAVE LOW demonstration for Admiral Watson of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Quarter Flying Hour Programmed Allocation:	UH-1N	508 hours
	HH-53H	903 hours
Quarter Hours Flown:	UH-1N	526.1 hours
	HH-53H	753.7 hours

SORTIE AND HOURS FLOWN

	TYPE	SORTIES	HOURS
April	UH-1N	115	158.7
	HH-53	70	241.6
May	UH-1N	118	159.5
	HH-53	92	210.9
June	UH-1N	143	207.9
	HH-53	118	301.2
TOTAL	UH-1N	376	526.1
	HH-53	280	753.7

SPECIAL PROBLEMS

Heavy operational tasking continues to create administrative, training and logistical problems beyond what might ordinarily be encountered in a long-established squadron.

HISTORICAL REPORT

TWENTIETH SPECIAL OPERATIONS SQUADRON (20 SOS)

1 July - 30 September 1981

COMMANDER

WILLIAM E. TAKACS, Lt Col, USAF

MISSION STATEMENT

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e. Limited photo reconnaissance, by hand held or modularly installed camera systems.

f. Other missions, as directed by higher headquarters.

MANNING

	AUTHORIZED	ASSIGNED
Officers	57	53
Enlisted	80	77
Civilians	0	0
	137	130

KEY PERSONNEL

COMMANDER	William E. Takacs, Lt Col
OPERATIONS OFFICER	William J. Barnes, Jr., Lt Col
EXECUTIVE OFFICER	Wayne D. Corder, Lt Col
FIRST SERGEANT	Malcolm G. Aldridge, MSgt
ADJUTANT	James L. Shipley III, 2d Lt

KEY PERSONNEL CHANGES

Captain James G. Dunbar was assigned on 18 September 1981 as Chief of Plans.

SPECIALIZED EQUIPMENT

The squadron's equipment, as authorized by Air Force Programming Documents, includes six UH-1Ns and nine HH-53Hs, all special operations forces (SOF) configured.

a. Various items of specialized equipment are available for the unit's primary and corollary mission. This equipment includes:

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(4) The 2.75 inch folding fin aircraft rocket (FFAR) which is normally configured with a nine pound warhead (UH-1N only).

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(8) Radar Warning Receiver (RWR)
(9) Flare/Chaff Dispensers

CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

10 Jul - 17 Jul	2 UH-1Ns and 4 HH-53Hs participated in FOL demonstration and VIP support for the President's Security Council at Nellis AFB, Nevada.
17 Jul - 23 Jul	2 HH-53Hs deploy to Kirtland AFB from Nellis AFB for mountain training.
7 Aug - 11 Aug	4 UH-1Ns departed via C-5 to Puerto Rico for OCEAN VENTURE.
14 Aug	UH-1N used to support Lt Gen Welch, 9 AF/CC.
31 Aug	VIP support for Brig Gen Hughes using UH-1N.
8 Sep - 23 Sep	6 HH-53Hs deploy to West Coast to participate in POTENT CHARGE III/MARVEL EXODUS exercises.
29 Sep	Sgt Luis Caraballo died in an HH-53 crash while undergoing training with the 1550 ATTW.

Quarter Flying Hour Programmed Allocation:	UH-1N	508 hours
	HH-53H	903 hours
Quarter Hours Flown:	UH-1N	526.1 hours
	HH-53H	753.7 hours

SORTIE AND HOURS FLOWN

	TYPE	SORTIES	HOURS
July	UH-1N	120	173.8
	HH-53	142	316.7
August	UH-1N	122	158.7
	HH-53	74	135.7
September	UH-1N	100	130.0
	HH-53	131	391.4
TOTAL	UH-1N	342	462.5
	HH-53	347	843.8

SPECIAL PROBLEMS

Squadron has administrative problems due to lack of experienced DA personnel. DA is below manning and requires a 7-level TSgt. Heavy operational tasking continues to interrupt upgrade flying training, causing inconsistency and drawn-out training.

HISTORICAL REPORT

TWENTIETH SPECIAL OPERATIONS SQUADRON (20 SOS)

1 October - 31 December 1981

COMMANDER

WILLIAM E. TAKACS, Lt Col, USAF

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c. Medical evacuation of injured personnel.

d. Humanitarian and civic action programs.

e. Limited photo reconnaissance, by hand held or modularly installed camera systems.

f. Other missions, as directed by higher headquarters.

MANNING

Officers	45	47
Enlisted	68	72
Civilian	0	0
	113	119

KEY PERSONNEL

COMMANDER	William E. Takacs, Lt Col
OPERATIONS OFFICER	William J. Barnes, Lt Col
EXECUTIVE OFFICER	Wayne D. Corder, Lt Col
FIRST SERGEANT	Malcolm G. Aldridge, SMSgt

KEY PERSONNEL CHANGES

TSgt David P. Turner was assigned on 1 October as the NCOIC of Administration.

2d Lt Shipley was PCAd to 1 SOW/DO complex

SPECIALIZED EQUIPMENT

The squadron's equipment, as authorized by Air Force Programming Documents, includes six UH-1Ns and nine HH-53Hs, all special operations forces (SOF) configured.

a. Various items of specialized equipment are available for the unit's primary and corollary mission. This equipment includes:

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c. A highly sophisticated avionics package has been installed in the HH-53H Pave Low to provide remarkably accurate navigational capabilities to include terrain following. The helicopter can operate successfully in total darkness or IMC at terrain following altitudes with no visual outside refrerences. When conditions permit, night vision goggles can enhance the mission by reducing the crew workload. These missions will be primarily conducted at night. The following equipment has been installed to provide these capabilities:

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(9) Flare/Chaff Dispensers

CHRONOLGY OF EVENTS

5 Oct - 29 Oct	4 UH-1Ns participated in exercise BOLD EAGLE.
5 Oct - 22 Oct	5 US NAVY UH-1Ks from HAL-4 worked with UH-1Ns in exercise BOLD EAGLE.
7 Oct - 21 Oct	3 HH-53Hs deployed to Brunswick NAS, Maine to perform training with 10th SFG.
10 Oct - 30 Oct	2 HH-53Hs participated in exercise BOLD EAGLE.
11 Oct - 13 Oct	2 HH-53Hs deployed to Pope AFB to support 1st Bn, 75th Inf Rangers in conjunction with exercise BOLD EAGLE.
18 Oct - 20 Oct	4 UH-1Ns and 2 US NAVY UH-1Ks conducted FOL training during exercise BOLD EAGLE.
24 Oct - 29 Oct	2 UH-1Ns support Air Base Ground Defense Personnel during exercise BOLD EAGLE.
1 Nov - 15 Nov	3 HH-53Hs deployed to Ft Campbell, Ky. to conduct training with 1st Bn, 75th Inf, during exercise CERTAIN TRIBUTE.
4 Nov - 5 Nov	UH-1N used to conduct TAC directed LUU-10/B signal, smoke and illumination test.
9 Nov - 10 Nov	HH-53H deployed to Ft Bragg, S.C., to train with 5th SFG for upcoming exercise BRIGHT STAR.
24 Nov	HH-53H conducted orientation flight for Maj Gen David L. Gray, Commandant of the Air War College.
27 Nov - 12 Dec	2 HH-53Hs deploy to Khartoum, Sudan to participate in exercise BRIGHT STAR.
2 Dec	UH-1N flown VIP support Lt General Welch, 9AF/CC.
4 Dec - 15 Dec	3 HH-53Hs deployed to Dobbins AFB, Ga for unit Mountain Training.
27 Dec -	3 HH-53Hs deployed to Charleston AFB, SC for SAR support to locate downed F-4 pilot.

Quarterly Flying Hour Programmed Allocation:	UH-1N	470 hours
	HH-53H	717 hours
Quarter Hours Flown	UH-1N	485 hours
	HH-53H	807.9 hours

SORTIES AND HOURS FLOWN

	TYPE	SORTIES	HOURS
October	UH-1N	147	176.7
	HH-53H	132	314.2
November	UH-1N	103	153.5
	HH-53H	79	199.8
December	UH-1N	82	154.8
	HH-53H	145	293.9

SPECIAL PROBLEMS

Heavy operational tasking continues to interrupt upgrade flying training causing inconsistency and drawn-out training.

TAC's CREWS RESCUE

Rescue is normally MAC's business, specifically the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service (ARRS). But recently TAC and TAC-gained Reserve units have been pressed into the role, and they handled it superbly.

The 302d Special Operations Squadron, AF Reserve, and the 20th Special Operations Squadron, 1st Special Operations Wing, were deployed to Red Flag 81-1 at Nellis AFB, Nevada, in late November 1980. With Detachment 1, 57th Fighter Weapons Wing, permanently stationed at Indian Springs Air Force Auxiliary Field, Nevada, they joined forces in a tremendous rescue effort at the MGM Grand Hotel in Las Vegas on the 21st of November.

The three units are equipped with helicopters: the 302 SOS has CH-3E "Jolly Green Giants"; the 20 SOS and Det 1 have UH-1N "Hueys." Throughout the day as the hotel burned, the Hueys landed on the roof and Jolly Green Giants ran hoist operations to the upper floor balconies. Together they rescued 79 people. Det 1 rescued 57. The 302d saved 15 from the balconies by lowering their flight engineers on hoists to reach the balconies. The 1 SOW provided crewmembers to augment the 302d and also helped rescue survivors from the roof using their Hueys. They also transported firemen and rescue workers with their equipment to and from the burning hotel.

Thanks to their efforts and the efforts of their maintenance and support crews, the catastrophe was nowhere near as bad as it could have been. Nellis and Indian Springs firefighters also pitched in to help fight the fires. The Nellis command post helped coordinate Air Force participation with the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police and Fire Departments.

Less than 3 months later, on 10 February 1981, Det 1 was again scrambled to help in a hotel fire at the Las Vegas Hilton. They were notified at home at 8:25 p.m. Their first helicopter was in the air 25 minutes later; the second was five minutes after the first. This time they saved nine people from the fire.

TAC is proud of these crewmembers who risked their lives flying to save others in the two fires.

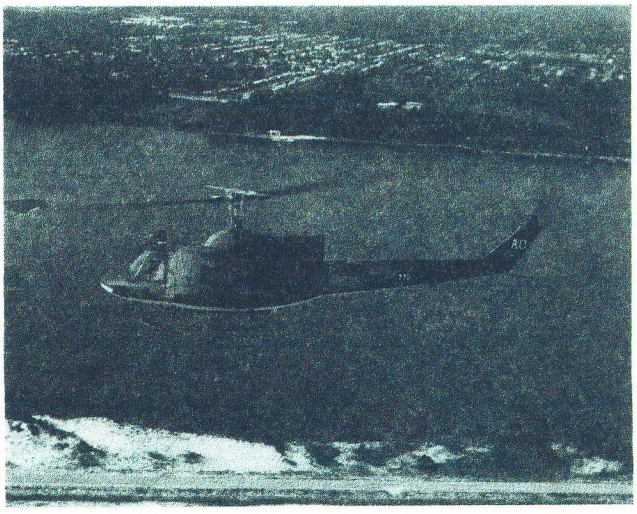
302d Special Operations Squadron (AFRES)
Luke Air Force Base, AZ 85309
MSgt James Connett
Capt David Ellis
TSgt Jerry Fletcher
TSgt James Hodges
TSgt Daniel Jaramillo
Maj Lawrence Lybarger
Capt Michael Martin
Maj William Ponder
MSgt William Reynolds
MSgt Everardo Reynoso
Capt Lester Smith
Lt Col Bruce Wood



20th Special Operations Squadron
Hurlburt Field, FL
SSgt Edgardo Acha
SSgt Cordis Blackwood
1Lt Robert Donnelly
MSgt Jesse Herrell
Maj Warren Hubbard
2Lt Richard Kianka
Maj Burton McKenzie, Jr.
1Lt James Mehegan
MSgt Richard Mustered
Capt Howard Stevens
Lt Col William Takacs
1Lt Frank Wallace
SMSgt Floyd Watson, Jr.
1Lt Dyke Whitbeck



Det 1, 57th Fighter Weapons Wing
Indian Springs Air Force Auxiliary Field, NV
1Lt Bob Antoniazzi
SSgt Tim Barr
SrA Steve Bisso
SrA Larry Clarke
TSgt Mike Codini
1Lt Mark Comer
Maj Larry Doege
2Lt Brian English
2Lt Bob Ferguson
2Lt Brian Galbreath
Capt Scott Holman
2Lt Guillermo Jimenez
Capt Joseph Kruppa, Jr.
AIC Stuart Lambert
1Lt Quinn Nixon
2Lt Tom Palmer
Sgt Bob Rogers
Capt Doug Stewart



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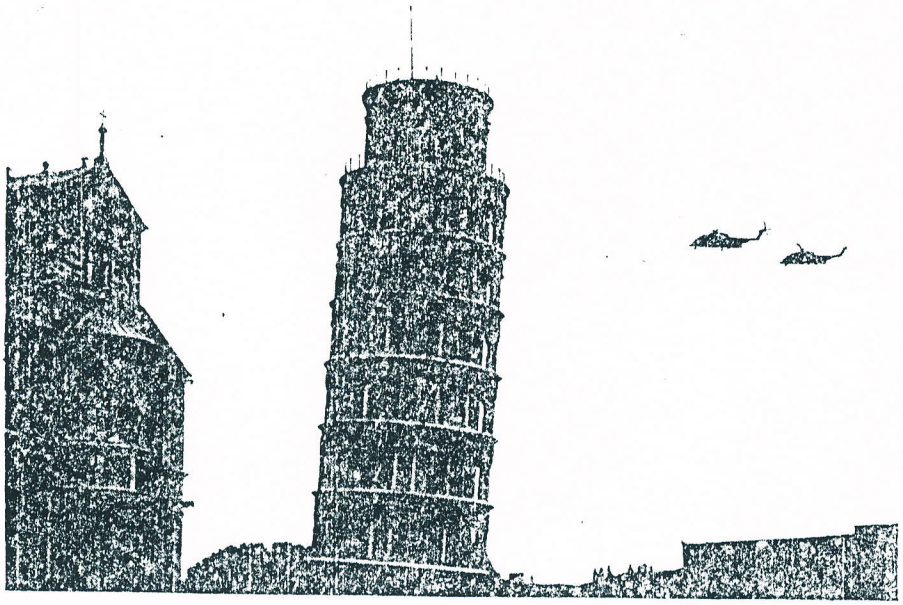


Photo by Capt John Folkerts

53's 'buzz' Leaning Tower of Pisa

Two HH-53H Pave Low helicopters from the 20th Special Operations Squadron fly by the Leaning Tower of Pisa during their recent deployment to Italy to participate in Exercise Flintlock 81.

20th SOS trains at Dobbins AFB

Four HH-53 helicopters, aircrews and support personnel from the 20th Special Operations Squadron arrived at Dobbins Air Force Base, Ga. Sunday for two weeks of mountain terrain flying exercises.

The exercise will be the first of a series of deployments to Dobbins AFB designed to aid training of aircrews in flying over all types of terrain. While the area around Hurlburt Field is relatively flat, the blue Ridge Mountains will provide ample area to practice in mountainous terrain fluing.

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HISTORY OF THE 1st SPECIAL OPERATIONS WING (U)

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V. 2
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HISTORY OF THE 1st SPECIAL OPERATIONS WING (U)



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HISTORY OF THE 1st SPECIAL OPERATIONS WING

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HISTORY OF THE 1st SPECIAL OPERATIONS WING (U)

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the Commando

February 6, 1981

Vol. 20 No. 5

Fort Walton Beach, Florida



Photo by 2nd Lt. Neal McFeeters

New addition to Airpark

Hurlburt Field's newest addition to the Airpark, a UH-1 helicopter, gets hoisted into place. The long awaited project was the culmination of the efforts of operations, maintenance and engineering squadrons on base. The story of how Hulburt acquired the aircraft will be in next week's edition of the COMMANDO.

20th SOS crews assist in hotel fire rescue

"It was a disaster – a tragedy – I just don't have the words for it. The helplessness of those people, waving towels and signs at us, and we just couldn't reach them ..."

Those were the words of a Hurlburt Field pilot assigned to the 20th Special Operations Squadron one day after he'd flown his UH-1N Twin Huey helicopter uncounted times to shuttle survivors and seriously injured people from the rooftop of the burning MGM Grand Hotel in Las Vegas, Nev., last Friday.

Already being referred to as the second worst hotel fire in American history, the tragedy claimed 84 lives and injured 300 others. The toll might have been higher were it not for Air Force assistance.

Hurlburt maintenance and aircrews had just finished flying a heavy schedule of night flying Thursday evening, participating in exercise Red Flag 81-1 at Nellis AFB, Nev. The crews were asleep in their downtown Las Vegas quarters when the call for help came from the Nellis AFB command post early Friday morning.

Received message

1st Special Operations Wing exercise deployment commander Lt. Col. Wayne Corder received the urgent message at 7:45 a.m.: "The MGM Grand is burning – helicopters are needed immediately to rescue the people trapped in the building."

Colonel Corder notified operations officer, Maj. Don Nieto, and maintenance officer Capt. Roger Poe, who went door to door waking the maintenance and aircrews. After hurriedly dressing and gathering flight gear, the crews made a quick trip to the Nellis flightline. There, maintenance readied the three available UH-1N Hueys while flightcrews held a quick briefing to assign crews, and coordinate call signs and radio frequencies. The Hueys lifted off at 8:30 – just 45 minutes after the call for help.

Upon arrival at the scene a few minutes later, the helicopters were directed to the MGM Hotel parking lot which would serve as a landing pad and air operations command post. There they were joined by six other helicopters from Tactical Air Command units. They were CH-3Es from the 302nd Special Operations Squadron (Reserve) at Luke AFB, Ariz. and UH-1Ns from the 57th Fighter Weapons Wing, Detachment 1 at Indian Springs Auxiliary Field, Nev.

Lt. Col. William Takacs, commander of the 20th SOS, joined a CH-3E crew, as did 1st Lt. Frank Wallace, also of the 20th SOS. Lieutenant Wallace operated the aircraft's hoist as the big CH-3E hovered by the hotel to lift people off of balconies.



Meanwhile, the Hueys were dispatched as shuttles to and from the top of the MGM Hotel. Throughout the day, 20th SOS crews flew a total of 13 hours carrying firemen, rescue squads, paramedics and supplies to the roof of the burning hotel. Crews of the 20th picked up 36 people and are credited with saving five critically injured peoples' lives.

Grim task

In the afternoon, after the fire was under control, the Green Hornet crews participated in the grim task of moving bodies from the roof to the parking lot, until flight operations were suspended at dark.

"We were going on pure adrenalin," said Maj. Warren Hubbard, pilot of a 20th SOS Huey. "The horror, the incredible pressure, didn't even get to us – we were just detached, almost like a psychological defense mechanism."

Major Hubbard said the reality of the disaster hit him that night back in his hotel room. "I realized this was a real life 'Towering Inferno.' I really hit bottom thinking about that."

Helicopters first arriving at the scene could just as easily have been landing in a combat zone, according to Capt. Lester Smith of the 302nd SOS. "There was a lot of smoke obscuring our vision and we weren't able to get in on our initial passes," he said. "The metro choppers (city police controlling the entire effort in their own helicopters) called us off. But then the smoke cleared and we managed to get in. The metro did a super job in controlling the environment. Radio discipline was excellent. No extraneous chatter."

High praise

Capt. Howard Stevens, a 20th SOS pilot, also had high praise for command and coordination at the scene. "I was amazed at the resources they had available," he said, "and was really impressed by the fire department, the police and everything else. It was well organized and they were well in control, especially since this is the kind of thing you don't practice for."

Major Hubbard noted the incredible way the community turned out to help. "We were there only an hour, and already there were ambulances, food for the workers, and school buses for transporting uninjured victims. It was a total community effort, with city, state and military people – everyone – showing genuine concern."

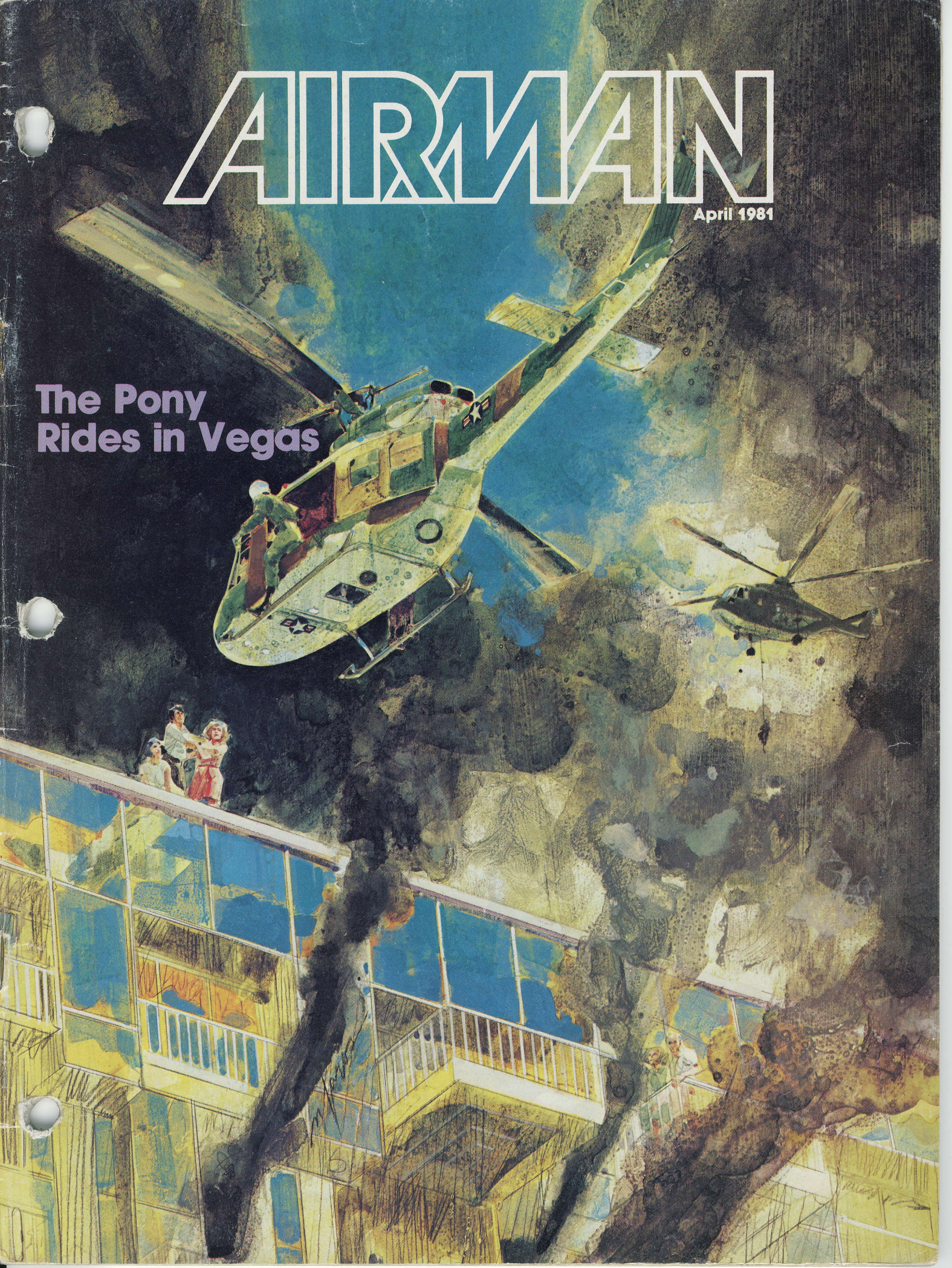
Other 20th SOS aircrewmembers involved were 1st Lt. Robert Donnelly, MSgt. Jesse Herrell, SSgt. Cordis Blackwood, 2nd Lt. Richard Jianka, MSgt. Richard Mustered, SSgt. Edgardo Acha, 1st Lt. James Mehegan, 1st Lt. Dyke Whitbeck, Capt. Burton McKenzie and SMSgt. Floyd Watson.



UH-1N TWIN HUEY helicopters were flown by members of the 20th Special Operations Squadron in the massiv rescue effort at Las Vegas' MGM Grand Hotel which burned last Friday. The aircraft and crews are assigned o temporary duty to Nellis AFB for exercise Red Flag 81-1.

AIRMAN

April 1981



The Pony Rides in Vegas

When a Community Caught Fire



Because of the migratory nature of military life, there is often an unasked question on the minds of long-time residents of cities and towns near bases about how service members and their families look at the community as a whole.

Are they really part of or apart from?

Despite the fact that military people seem to go out of their way to join and belong to long lists of organizations, churches, and whatever, that question and another persist in many communities. Are those efforts mere show or do they have substance?

In a word, do military people care?

We already know the answer, for who among us hasn't in one way or another left behind a piece of ourselves wherever we've been stationed? It was an unconscious effort to add to the common good. It may have been as innocuous as a tree we planted, one we'd never see grow in beauty, or as meaningful as serving on a community committee that through hard work got something substantive accomplished.

Yes, we know how we feel, but how about our civilian friends and neighbors?

For them, Las Vegas, of all places, a city many think has a heart as cold as cash that thumps blatantly just under the thin skin of all that fun-and-games glitter, should have provided all the answer they will ever need.

For a time late last November, the city . . . no, the community . . . proved—maybe for the first time on so large a scale—it had a soul. And for many Air Force members and their families who had personal parts in the proving, it was proof-positive that they did, indeed, care.

When fire broke out at the MGM Grand Hotel last November (see "The Pony Rides in Vegas," page 2), Air Force members stationed at nearby Nellis AFB, Air Reserve helicopter crewmen from Florida and Arizona assigned to Nellis for a Red Flag exercise, and an active-duty helicopter unit from the Indian Springs (Nev.) Air Force Auxiliary Field responded to the city's plea for help without so much as a blink.

Joining together with divergent segments of the community, the Air Force made the effort a one-for-all kind of undertaking.

It would be difficult to add up all the individual Air Force efforts and get a meaningful total. Numbers mean nothing when lives are at stake, but Nellis people certainly did themselves proud.

The helicopter crews deservedly got most of the publicity, but there were so many other sincere contributions: Among them, the Nellis Fire Department covering North Las Vegas to free local firefighters for duty downtown; the donation by the base of litters, blankets, air bottles, and the like; and the many Nellis volunteers who did whatever city authorities asked of them.

And why shouldn't Air Force people help? After all, as 2nd Lt. Richard Kianka said, "People forget that we live in the communities, too, and we take a real interest in what goes on in them. I live in a community, and I have as much interest in helping civilians as they do in helping themselves.

"Just because we're in the Air Force doesn't mean that all we care about is the Air Force and nothing else."

Kianka's words had more than passing impact. A helicopter co-pilot who took part in the dangerous rescue mission at the MGM, the young officer doesn't even live in the Las Vegas area. He is assigned to the 20th Special Operations Squadron at Hurlburt Field, Fla.

One officer who does live in the Vegas area, 1st Lt. Robert Antoniazzi, a helicopter pilot with Det. 1 of the 57th Fighter Weapons Wing at Indian Springs, added a personal touch to his feeling of community.

"My wife," he said, "goes by the MGM every day on her way to school. She heard about the fire on the radio as she neared the hotel. When she got there, she offered our pickup truck if it would help.

"The whole thing about helping was a heart-warming experience. I live in Las Vegas and people think of it as being cold because of the gambling and all. But when this thing happened, it [the cooperation] was fantastic."

Patrolman Tom Mildren of the Las Vegas Police Department's Air Support Unit and one of the first on the scene when the fire broke out, put the whole picture into perspective a few weeks later.

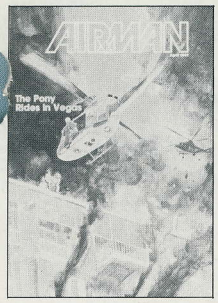
"The way everyone cooperated reminded me of a small community in a catastrophe," he said. "This town doesn't have that kind of reputation, but it sure pulled together that day. I couldn't believe it!"

The many individual efforts, then, military and civilian alike, *can* be totaled up, at least in a general sense. The sum is success for a community that, at least for a time, saw its borders stretch all the way to Florida and Arizona.

Believe it, Tom, it happened. And it would again, very soon, on a smaller scale.

Not three months later the Las Vegas Hilton was allegedly set aflame, and the Air Force again responded. This time the Indian Springs unit brought down nine guests from the roof, and 25 firefighters and three fire-fighting vehicles from Nellis arrived to help.

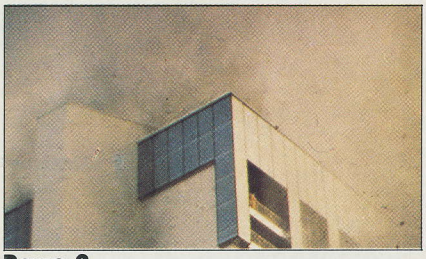
The question about community on the minds of many, then, should have been answered once and for all—twice!



FRONT COVER. Air Force helicopter crews helped rescue many during the MGM Grand Hotel fire in Las Vegas. Illustration by Nick Jaros. Story begins on page 2.

AIRMAN

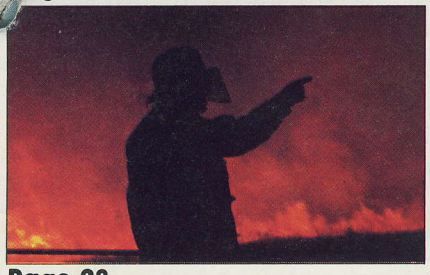
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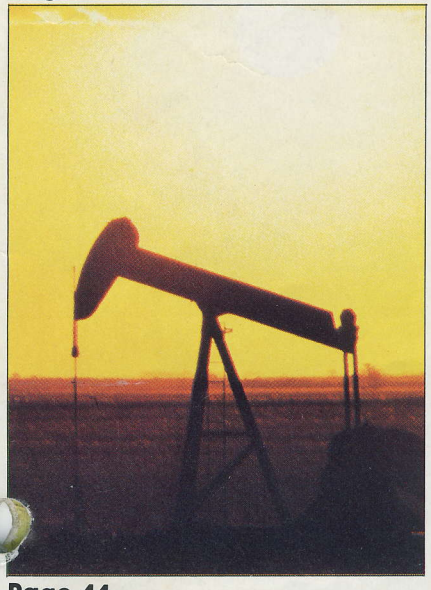
Page 2



Page 20



Page 28



Page 44

2 The Pony Rides in Vegas
A Las Vegas cop led Air Force helicopters to the rescue.

14 The 'Spanish Experience'
"Vaquero" and his family chose life in the pueblo of Ipila.

20 Shooting for a '10'
Testing our air defenses during a William Tell exercise.

28 California Firestorm
When George AFB volunteer firefighters went to the blazes.

36 Making the Best of Stress
There's a message here for "Type A's" and other achievers.

44 Before the Lights Go Out
The continuing search for alternate energy sources.

Departments

11 Air Force Report
13 Letters
32 Short Bursts
35 Here's Jake

***BACK COVER: AIRMAN Gallery, the KC-10* Extender.**

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"That's Incredible!" TV co-host John Davidson said.
And that it was when *METRO 2* asked for . . .

The Pony Rides in Vegas

by Robert K. Ruhl

Air Force members who thrilled to the written accounts and the often spectacular TV news film of fellow blue-suiters taking part last November in the hazardous effort to save lives during the deadly fire at the MGM Grand Hotel can be justifiably proud. It was a superior humanitarian action in the very best tradition of the service. But there was another story, one almost unknown to readers and TV watchers but talked about at length by the Air Force crews. And they only knew part of it. It all began with two men of uncommon courage.

Looking straight down on it from high in the Las Vegas sky, the towering hulk of a hotel, all pale-pink granite and glistening glass, looks just like . . . well, a capital T. The illusion also hides within its clean lines the fact that the long, thin beams of the T's crossbar and post are in reality wings of stacked-high rooms.

For those awake or still fast asleep on that sun-bright Friday morning last November in the caverns of accommodations that comprise the biggest portion of the 43-acre hotel complex, the simple T shape would soon take on a dreaded symbolism.

This day theirs would be a cross to bear, heavy with pain, sorrow, and death. This day theirs would be a travail wet with tears.

The MGM Grand Hotel, the elegant, opulent "Lady of the Strip," her reputation for luxurious living known the world over, was burning.

The inferno, though, that would claim 84 lives and cause injury to upwards of 700—the second deadliest hotel fire in U. S. history—was but a weak drift of smoke when Sgt. Harry Christopher of the Las Vegas Police Department's Air Support Unit and his partner, Patrolman Tom Mildren, first noticed it.

They had just risen above surrounding buildings after lifting off in their helicopter at the conclusion of a going-on-duty briefing in a police substation a short flight from the hotel.

In minutes the two officers would be fighting through dense, billowing, black smoke for the lives of those hotel guests able to make it to the roof of the 26-floor structure.

Their actions would also trigger a chain of events that would bring desperately needed help from the Air Force as well as from many other quarters. Additionally, it would set off a community-wide act of caring that dispelled the oft-hurled charge that all that glitters in this city of lights is but gold and silver.

That spirit, like many of the patrons occupying the more than 2,000 rooms in the hotel, hadn't yet been roused when Christopher and Mildren in their stubby little Hughes 500 flew straight as a string toward the gathering curtain of black that was fast hiding sections of the MGM.

The pall hadn't clouded Christopher's view, not for a moment. He saw his responsibility clearly. The burly veteran of almost 19 years in the department and a former Air Force jet mechanic is the kind of man who meets mountains head-on, no quarter asked or given.

"The closer we got, the bigger the column of smoke got," he said. "When we got to the hotel, it was engulfed in smoke. I told Tom that if people start coming up to the roof, we're going to start loading them. As quick as we got

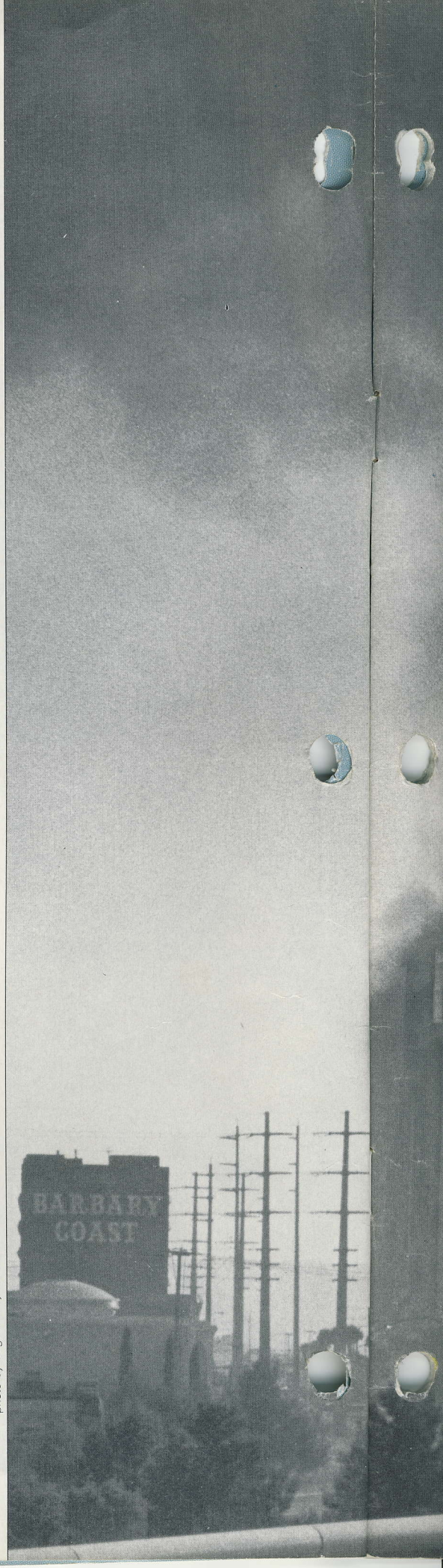


photo by SSgt. Danny Perez



photo by MSgt. Rick Diaz, AAVS



photo by MSgt. Rick Diaz, AAVS

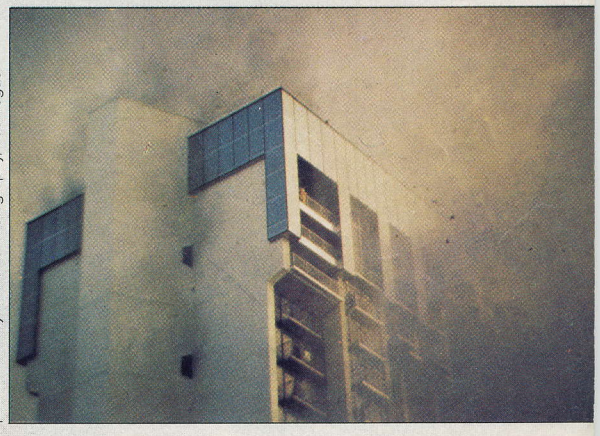
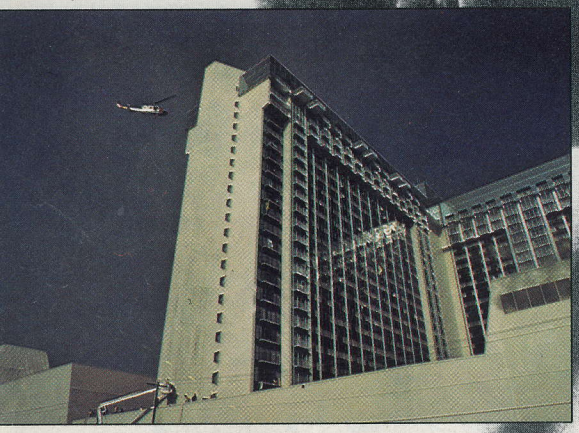


photo courtesy of Don's Photography, Las Vegas

OPPOSITE AND THIS PAGE: Heavy smoke envelops the MGM Grand Hotel. CLOCKWISE (from top left): UH-IN *Huey* from Det. 1 of the 57th Fighter Weapons Wing circles near the MGM (not in photo). Det. 1 crewmen offload emergency medical equipment on roof of the hotel. Smoke traveled quickly, both inside and outside the MGM, to upper floors.







photos by MSgt. Rick Diaz, AAVS



CLOCKWISE (from top): *Huey* approaches roof where exhausted firefighter rests. On the ground, blankets and sheets used to cover both the living and the dead tell a grim story. In moments when the clouds of smoke dissipated, there were few telltale signs of the battle for life going on inside the huge hotel.
RIGHT: Woman survivor is reeled into a CH-3E helicopter.

photo by SSgt. Danny Perez

there, people started breaking out windows and coming out on their balconies.

"When they saw us, they would get away from the windows and off the balconies. The next thing they'd be on the roof."

It was the only way.

A wind of fire had reportedly roared through the world's biggest gambling hall, the casino downstairs, whipping in scant seconds across the 140-yard stretch of roulette, blackjack, and dice tables, and a thousand or more slot machines.

Acrid smoke and toxic fumes were swirling upward through the ventilation system, stairwells, and elevator shafts.

There was no way down, only up.

Entirely on their own in the first frightening minutes of the fire, the two officers set down on the roof through smoke so thick that only the rotor downwash, whirling away the worst of the dusky cloud, provided any visibility.

"We landed, Tom got out, and the people charged the helicopter," Christopher said. "It was total panic. People were screaming and crying and clawing and yelling and beating each other. Only the strongest were going to get on that helicopter. The women be damned."

"The men were fighting the women to get on," Mildren continued. "People thought the flames were right behind them." And nobody knew differently.

After hurriedly loading people into the helicopter, Mildren ran forward and jerked open the cockpit door only to be met eye to eye by Christopher, who was dejectedly shaking his head no. "The thing that will stick with me for the rest of my life was the look on Tom's face," the sergeant said slowly, reliving the speck in time. "It said, 'You're not going to leave me here?' "

To Christopher, there was absolutely no other way. With the crowd in a frenzy, he needed Mildren on the roof to bring about order and make sure the helicopter wasn't overloaded.

The young police officer, a nine-year veteran with a smooth, even voice that doesn't quite hide the stick of authority in his demeanor, quickly shut the door.

"It took me a second or two to realize why Harry wanted me to stay," Mildren said, remembering the increasing crowd of people clambering hysterically up the stairway on the south wing. There was no time to think about it anymore.

"I was having to yell at them at the top of my lungs to stay back," he said, "and I had to use a lot of physical restraint. I had to scream over their screams to get through to them. In thirty minutes I was hoarse.

"I'd get them organized . . . no, I'd get them pushed back enough so the helicopter could land again. As soon as it would touch down, it was just another free-for-all. I'd have to pull some off who were fighting very hard to stay on."

In time, as Mildren did his best to calm the crowd, two men came forward to help. Quickly the trio set about loading women first, "but now and then a man would break loose," the patrolman said, "and try to fight for one of those seats the women had."

Meanwhile, Christopher, prodded by an eerie, unshakeable foreboding that "people were going to die if we didn't get them off that roof *right now*!," was pushing himself and his helicopter. Up and down, up and down they went, from the roof to the ground below and back again—a yo-yo of sorts on a tight string.

"Every time I went back to that roof," the sergeant said, "I hoped Tom was still standing. I really wasn't sure if he could survive. That's the God's truth, but I also knew keeping him there was the only way.

"I had made up my mind that if he was unconscious when I got up there, I was going to get out of that helicopter, no matter what, and get him and put him aboard."

Because the fire had first been reported as an innocent kitchen flare-up, the massive response of police, fire, medical, and rescue personnel was precious minutes in mobilizing. It was frustrating for Christopher. With no one to help during his first few descents to the ground, the people on board had to be left on their own to get off the aircraft. They did, many before he even touched down, and they were banging dangerously into the sides and undercarriage of the helicopter—and some all too close to the tail rotor.

With the seriousness of the situation now clear, help came in a hurry. A group of fellow police officers arrived to help unload passengers, and Paul Kinsey, having just finished an emergency run in his "Flight for Life" air-ambulance helicopter from Valley Hospital, landed on the roof.

The crowd, now numbering about 150, charged Kinsey's aircraft, equipped with wheels rather than skids, and began pushing it perilously across the roof. Mildren again took charge, muscling the throng back and pulling excess passengers off the chopper.

In order, then, came Ray Poss in a Silver State helicopter and Dennis Mack in one from Action—both pilots for the two helicopter-for-hire companies—to lend a much-needed hand. Christopher set up a race track flight pattern that ran from the roof to a hotel parking lot on the ground, out and around, and then back again to the roof.

As fast as one helicopter would be loaded by Tom Mildren, another would land. Soon the crowd on the roof had been evacuated. It was something on the order of 30 minutes since the two officers had first spotted the wisp of smoke.

The first crisis, at least, had passed. Two hundred and fifty to 300 people—nobody was counting noses—had been pulled off the roof by the four helicopters.

"Time meant nothing," Christopher was to say later. "From seven-twenty in the morning until noon seemed like five minutes. I don't know what happened at any one point."

For a time the roof was unexplainably empty, firefighters were battling the blaze in the casino and on the lower floors of the portion of the hotel that fronts on Las Vegas Boulevard (the Strip), and medical and rescue personnel were on hand.

The day, though, wasn't done for Christopher and Mildren. As they flew a blade's length from windows using a public address system to try to calm those inside the hotel, they were able to surmise that scorching heat outside the rooms was keeping patrons from reaching the roof.

Those people were trapped, undoubtedly thousands of them, and the entire MGM, as far as anyone knew, could roll up in a caldron of flames at any moment.

No, the day wasn't yet over for the sergeant and his partner. Harry Christopher himself was soon to become a voice in the smoky darkness around the hotel, a voice of hope for those in the hotel who didn't even know his name or what he was doing to help them—the voice of *Metro 2*.

He had much yet to say to many, those fliers already at the MGM, and, as in the case of the crews of nine Air Force helicopters, those scurrying to get there.

"Scurrying" was the right word, all right. As fast as they were contacted for helicopter help by city authorities, consolidated command post personnel at Nellis AFB, eight miles to the northeast of the city, were on the phones.

Those city authorities knew, certainly, that they could count on help from Detachment 1 of the 57th Fighter Weapons Wing, located at Indian Springs, some 40 miles from Nellis. But it was a stroke of blind luck—or was it?—that two TDY helicopter units were taking part in a Red Flag exercise, part of Tactical Air Command's on-going, combatlike readiness program, and could be made available.

Thus, the 20th Special Operations Squadron of the 1st Special Operations Wing, Hurlburt Field, Fla., and the 302nd Special Operations Squadron, an Air Force Reserve unit from Luke AFB, Ariz., joined the Indian Springs detachment. The three would prove to be a godsend.

In the minutes following notification from the command post—from 7:38 to 7:45—the units were on the run.

It's an exaggeration, of course, but the 20th SOS members, in contract quarters downtown and having gotten to bed late

after flying a night Red Flag mission, still managed to challenge the land-speed record for airmen in a scurry as they raced to the base.

At the very least, they certainly surprised Nellis gate guards as they whizzed by to their aircraft. One of their cars was even left steaming in a parking area, its radiator having boiled over. Forty minutes after their call, three 20th UH-IN *Hueys* were lifting off.

Maj. Larry Doege, commander of the Indian Springs detachment, and co-pilot 1st. Lt. Quinn Nixon were already at the controls of their *Huey* when the call came. They were preparing to take off on a morning range mission. Det. 1's maintenance specialists "busted their butts," in the words of one of their officers, to ready two other unit helicopters, which hadn't been scheduled to fly that day, for duty at the MGM.

At the 302nd's quarters on base, Lt. Col. Bruce Wood, the commander, was banging on doors. His unit had also flown a Red Flag mission the night before and two of its CH-3E helicopters had later developed mechanical problems. Having spent most of the late-night hours repairing and checking out the aircraft, the crews had dropped into bed somewhere around midnight.

In one of those strange quirks of circumstance—"the rest of the story," as commentator Paul Harvey would say—the crews preparing to fly off into the unknown in one of the biggest rescue undertakings of its kind ever were not members of the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service, trained specifically to save lives.

These were Tactical Air Command—TAC—people, those from the 20th SOS and 302nd (TAC-gained in wartime) skilled in behind-the-lines, sometimes-covert missions that come under the general heading of special operations. Those from Det. 1, also a TAC unit, have a broad-based mission, including working with the Departments of Energy and Defense on matters involving the vast Nellis range complex.

Rather than trained paramedics in the back, the pilots would carry flight engineers, known until recently as flight mechanics—a proud job title that many of the older heads would just as soon keep. It fits nicely with the "old sarge" image. But only an outsider would consider the apparent irony of mechanics flying off to save lives. The "mechs" or their pilots didn't or don't.

Handymen all, the "guys in the back" know the innermost secrets of their machines. But seasoned by many emergency missions flown to rescue people stranded on mountain tops, drowning in flood-driven rivers, or injured in highway accidents in remote locations, they have also earned every accolade for their lifesaving abilities.

They were hardly out of place, then, as they strapped themselves down, two to a chopper, in the cabins of the aircraft. The helicopters—three each from each of the three units—would be on their way shortly, moving out, then up, and then straight toward the MGM Grand Hotel.

For 79 people, they couldn't be coming fast enough.

The scene that rose to greet the aircrews as they took off in intervals was awesome, even surreal. News accounts reported the plume of smoke rose 2,000 feet above the MGM.

"It flattened out over the valley and looked something like the cloud you see in nuclear explosions." said 1st. Lt. Mark Comer of Det. 1. He and the others from his unit would be the first Air Force crews to reach the scene.

"Unreal" was Lt. Col. Bruce Wood's reaction. "To see that happening in a beautiful setting like that, with all the attractive buildings surrounding the MGM, was just unreal."

With the exception of Wood, whose flight engineers pulled two survivors off the roof and into the CH-3 on their in-bound flight, the other Air Force pilots were directed to land at the MGM and await instructions.

Because of the CH-3's size, the 302nd's pilots selected an open field to the south of the MGM to put down. The others landed in a parking lot on the east side of the hotel. It had been quickly cleared of all vehicles, even police cars, by wreckers. No time for discussion.

It was a sight to behold. Tom Mildren remembers counting something like 22 helicopters, blades turning, in the parking lot at one time. They seemed to have materialized from nowhere. Help was coming now by blade from the federal government, business, the Air Force, and from other sectors. It was also arriving by truck, car, school bus, and ambulance.

"I have never seen so much cooperation from so many private businesses," Mildren said a couple of weeks later, "and people donated their homes, food, and their clothes. Every organization was donating something."

As the Air Force helicopters began to be employed to carry fire, medical, and rescue people and supplies to the roof, the smaller civilian helicopters were freed to flit here and there in the area picking up whatever was needed. But the crush of helicopters in the area also portended a possible aerial traffic jam with serious connotations. As Lt. Col. Wayne Corder, 1st SOW mission commander (deployed), said: "My first concern was that we didn't 'weld' two aircraft together."

Sgt. Harry Christopher, the commanding voice of *Metro 2* on the helicopter radios, would see that that didn't happen. Later he would praise the pilots for their "good, common sense," professionalism, and for "not playing John Wayne up there and doing things on their own." At any one time, there were nine to 12 choppers in the air, and a mix of civilian and military aircraft at that. Christopher kept them all in tight rein.

"He was kind of a combination control tower, approach control, and mission commander," said Maj. Warren "Smokey" Hubbard, aircraft commander on one of the 20th SOS *Hueys*. "He was calling in helicopters and letting everybody know where everybody else was. He was sorting things out and letting all of us know what was needed.

"I don't think it would have gone any smoother if we had all sat together and had a three-hour briefing and planned it as an exercise."

Hubbard's co-pilot, 2nd Lt. Richard Kianka, a former aircraft commander on an Army *Cobra* gunship, nodded his agreement. "I've been around accidents where there was a lot of confusion. But at the MGM nobody did anything he wasn't told to do. The majority of the credit has to go to *Metro Two*."

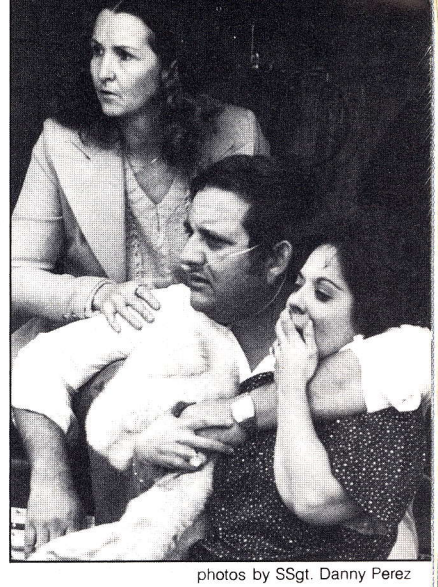
Sitting on the ground, his aircraft's rotor blades turning slowly, Smokey Hubbard studied the hotel while he waited to be called into action. The waiting for him, like the others, was grinding.

"From every window and from every balcony people were waving towels and bedspreads. I realized then there were a whole lot of people trapped on those upper floors. [Officials later determined that most of the deaths had occurred above the 19th floor.] 'My God,' I thought, 'look how many people are still in there and can't get out!' "

Capt. Scott Holman from Indian Springs was watching, too. "A man about halfway up the east side of the south wing was throwing out fifty to a hundred feet of bedsheets tied together into a rope. We were just hoping he wouldn't go. I could just see all those bedsheets pulling apart. He stood there for about four minutes and finally crawled back in the window."

"When you see people in that situation, you just want to go and help," said Maj. Hubbard. "My 'backenders' wanted to get into it so bad that I was having trouble holding them back. I told them *Metro Two* has this under control. He'll call us when he needs us. It was part of the feeling of helplessness. We just wanted to do something besides wait."





photos by SSgt. Danny Perez



A wellspring of emotion, ranging from stark terror to anxiety and bewilderment, is frozen on the faces of those who were part of the MGM tragedy.

photo by MSgt. Rick Diaz, AAVS

Larry Doege was the first to be called to the roof. "On the first few flights, we really couldn't see the roof, just the outline," he said.

Then one by one the other *Hueys* followed. The American flag was hanging limp from the flagpole atop Maxim's across the street. A good sign! Strong winds 26 stories up could bounce the helicopters around like cardboard boxes.

Initially, the choppers took up firemen, paramedics, medical supplies, rescue personnel, and various kinds of equipment. They brought back those exhausted.

When firemen felt they had the blaze contained, they began directing those guests who were able down the stairways. Those who were seriously injured or suffering from smoke inhalation were brought to the roof for rapid evacuation.

Problem was, nobody was really certain the fire was under control. There was the very real fear that without warning the flames might rise up in wrathful anger and sear through the roof as though it were so much crinkled paper. After all, the heavy, black smoke *was* belching upward in heavy clouds at times.

The fire could very well be sucking in shallow breaths, as it were, all the better to exhale suddenly in a red-hot hiss of destruction.

Then there was the roof itself, a gauntlet of antennas, pipes, ventilator outlets, conduits, stretchers, and other medical equipment—the debris left by those who had already gone before.

The "backenders" would more than earn their keep helping the *Huey* pilots inch their way into safe positions to take on survivors.

That Friday, November 21, less than a week before Thanksgiving, Det. 1 would carry 57 survivors to safety. "You could see a big thank-you on their faces," Maj. Doege said. "But their eyes just stared at you. They wanted to say something." Many couldn't.

The 20th SOS, the last Air Force unit called in to help, brought down five survivors, but the unit transported some 150 rescue personnel, firemen, and paramedics either to or from the roof. The 20th and Det. 1 shared the grisly task of descending with the dead.

To the 302nd, an organization with its roots in rescue operations and with a much-heralded past [It had been an air-rescue unit exclusively from its inception in 1956 until its mission changed in 1971] fell the challenge of somehow plucking survivors off the balconies. As Maj. Hubbard would say, "It made your heart pound just watching that operation."

The 302nd's CH-3s were the only helicopters equipped with a rescue device called a hoist, a high-speed, hydraulically operated winch used to reel in a steel cable with a bulletlike forest penetrator attached to one end. The penetrator, which is lowered on the cable to a survivor or victim, has seats attached that fold out like flower petals.

Metro 2 needed that kind of help and asked for it. The 302nd gave its "tally ho." The squadron's three *Ponies–Pony* is a helicopter call sign in the unit—would give it a go.

At best, though, it would be an improbable, if not impossible, undertaking to even reach those people. There was no straight-down way because the balconies were covered by overhangs. Then, too, many guests were near panic and trapped more than 200 feet above the ground.

The plan was to somehow reach the survivors, place them on the penetrators, and have them reeled into the helicopters. The pilots of the three helicopters would have to hold their aircraft in a very steady hover and pay close attention to their surroundings. A portion of their rotor blades would be spinning precariously over the roof of the hotel itself.

How, though, to get to the balconies?

MSgt. William Reynolds, one of the flight engineers on Capt. Michael Martin's *Pony,* felt he had the answer. Maybe a 15-foot tie-down rope carried on the choppers could be used. Attached to the penetrator, maybe, just maybe, it could be used as a throw-line. A flight engineer dangling on the end of the hoist could throw the line to those on the balconies and they could pull him in.

To anyone's knowledge, the procedure had never been used in this way before. "It just seemed like the thing to do," said Reynolds, a 51-year-old station manager of the Mesa, Ariz., post office who joined the National Guard when he was 17 and has had continuous service ever since. He joined the Air Force Reserve in 1962 when he became a member of the 302nd.

A rugged, weathered man with wrinkles like ridge lines etched across his face, Bill Reynolds brightens a sunny day when he smiles. He can also understate getting out of bed in the morning.

Reynolds and his long-time sidekick, MSgt. James Connett, talked it over and Bill went forward to Mike Martin with the idea.

"It was my decision to make as the aircraft commander," said Martin. "They were very gung-ho about wanting to try it. The idea seemed logical, but I had to weigh several factors: Was the fire about out? Was the whole thing about over? Or were all those people about to die? There was also a risk to the survivors' lives, swinging out on the penetrator twenty-six floors up.

"In addition, if an engine failed . . . well, we'd all be going down."

Martin also factored in what he described as "excellent maintenance that makes our machines very reliable," the amount of smoke still pouring from the roof intermittently, and the possibility the "fire was about to erupt through the roof."

He said yes.

Slowly and carefully he and his co-pilot, Capt. Dave Ellis, maneuvered their CH-3 as close as they dared to a 26th-floor balcony where five people stood. Because of the overhang, Reynolds would still be several feet from the balcony railing when he was let down on the cable.

The jury-rigged operation worked beautifully. To the shouts of "God bless you!" and "Thank God!" that were all but drowned out by the deafening racket of the helicopter's two engines, Reynolds came slipping over the railing.

"They were in a state of shock and panic, but they treated me like a long-lost son," said Reynolds. "They had gone as far as they could go on their own. They had no qualms, except maybe for one of the three women, about getting on the penetrator."

Reynolds strapped one on at a time, the group helped position the survivor, and Connett operated the winch. After each was safely aboard *Pony 2,* Connett would let down the penetrator and oscillate it back and forth until Reynolds could grab it.

Bill Reynolds was working quickly. The smoke was so thick inside the room that he could barely make out a towel on the floor about a foot inside the sliding-glass door to the balcony.

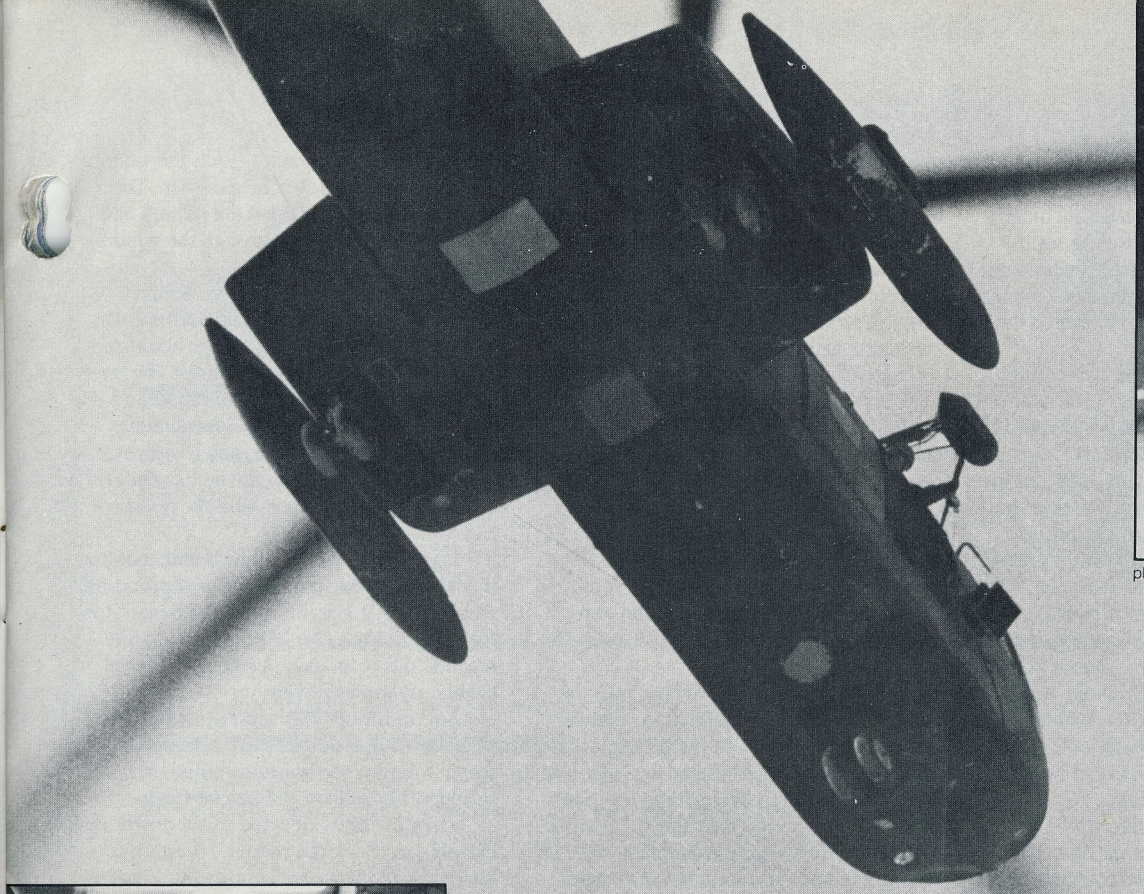
There was also some ominous rumbling from inside the hotel.

Once the five survivors were aboard the helicopter, Reynolds began strapping himself on the penetrator. He was working blindly with Connett, who, because of the balcony overhang, couldn't see him unless the chopper moved a short distance away. Somehow the slack in the cable tightened too quickly, yanking the veteran flight engineer's legs through the wrought-iron railing and around a post. The sudden jerk almost broke his legs.

When finally he was reeled into the helicopter, he couldn't walk. He could, however, operate the hoist for Jim Connett. *Pony 2* was moving toward another balcony.

Down the 54-year-old grandfather went. A military man since 1945 and on flying status for 22 years, the graying, curly-haired Air Reserve Technician had first flown rescue missions on the venerable HU-16 *Albatross* amphibian. He was no stranger to danger.

On the balcony was a lone woman, who appeared apprehensive. She had made a feeble first effort to grab the rope, something Connett couldn't understand until he realized she was concerned about her skirt billowing up.





photos (left and above) by MSgt. Rick Diaz, AAVS



photo by SSgt. Guido Locati Jr.

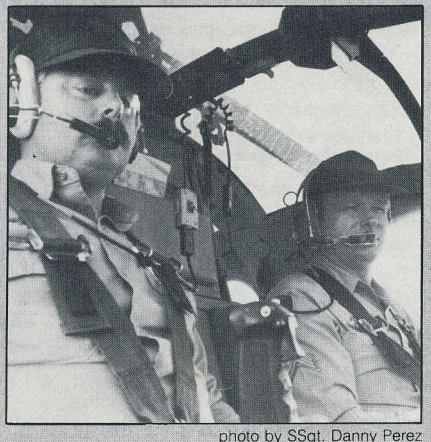


photo by SSgt. Danny Perez



photo by MSgt. Frank Reid



CLOCKWISE (from bottom far left): Four members of the 302nd SOS who took part in the rescue operation: (from left) Capt. Michael Martin, MSgt. James Connett, TSgt. Daniel Jaramillo, and MSgt. William Reynolds. Maj. Larry Doege piloted the first Air Force helicopter to arrive on the scene. Patrolman Tom Mildren (left) and Sgt. Harry Christopher of the Las Vegas Police Department's Air Support Unit.
LEFT: TSgt. Jerry Fletcher of the 302nd SOS is lowered near a balcony.
ABOVE: Flight engineer from the 302nd straps survivor onto a forest penetrator.

Motioning and yelling, Connett tried to get her to put modesty aside for the moment. On another try, she took the rope but merely draped it over the railing. Sizing up the situation from above, Reynolds had Martin move *Pony 2* closer to the balcony and Connett grabbed the railing and rolled over it onto the deck.

Once on his feet, Connett had trouble talking the woman into getting on the penetrator. ("Maybe it was the way she saw me come in," he quipped.)

It was literally an on-again, off-again undertaking as Connett tried to strap the woman onto the penetrator. Despite his assurances, she kept wanting to get off.

"All the time there were two men standing inside the room just watching," the flight engineer said. "I couldn't understand why they weren't assisting. One was even trying to climb up the glass from inside."

Connett finally secured the woman, maneuvered between her and the railing, and rolled her over the top. Up she went as Reynolds worked the winch.

There was a U-shaped piece of steel, possibly part of a scaffolding rig, on the balcony, and Connett, who couldn't find a latch to what he thought must be a sliding-glass door, heaved it through the glass.

Both men inside appeared to be dazed, their speech and reactions slow. One was obviously panicky, and Connett had to hold his hands while helping him through the broken pane for fear he'd grab the broken glass.

Connett strapped him on the penetrator while at the same time trying to talk the other man into coming out on the balcony for some fresh air. It didn't work. Once he maneuvered the first man on the penetrator over the railing, Connett looked back. There was no one.

From outside he peered into the room looking for the man. He could only see about 10 feet back. An explosion inside and the sound of glass shattering sent him back to the rail to await pickup. Pictures of walls giving way in massive fires filled his mind.

"Oh, hell, maybe this is it," he said to himself as he wrapped his legs around a balcony post. "I figured if I went, the whole railing was going with me. That's when I looked down and realized what a ways it was to the ground. 'Oh, God, not this way!' was all I could think to say. It would be whichever way He decided, but I didn't particularly want to go that way." In minutes Reynolds had him up.

"You know," Mike Martin was to say later, "here are two guys I've known for three-and-a-half years. You know they are good at what they do, but you've never seen them when their lives were in danger.

"Without any hesitation, they had volunteered to go down and do what they did. You think they are ordinary joes like the rest of us, but they aren't. They're heroes. Different, however, from others like them who are walking around out there, they had the chance to prove it."

Two other flight engineers from the 302nd were also getting their chance.

TSgt. Daniel Jaramillo, a young, barrel-chested Phoenix police officer in civilian life, on Bruce Wood's *Pony 3,* and lanky TSgt. Jerry Fletcher, a production controller for Lockheed Aircraft Service of California who works at Luke AFB, on Capt. Lester "Ed" Smith's *Pony 1,* were left on their own like the others to figure out how best to reach the balconies. The flight engineers had no communication among themselves unless they were on the same aircraft.

Jaramillo chose to be swung into the balconies without using a rope. Fletcher decided to tie a rope to his gunner's belt, throw the rope out to those on the balconies, and be pulled in as were Reynolds and Connett. And unlike the others, Jaramillo, credited with rescuing a pregnant woman among the six survivors he put on the penetrator, also chose to ride up the hoist with each one.

The picture of the two flight engineers at work made up part of a "tableau that will remain forever with me," said Lt. Col. Wood.

"I'm holding the helicopter on the roof eaves while Danny's going down to a balcony. Off to my right is a *Pony* facing me. I'm looking the pilots right in the eye. And there's Fletcher swinging on the end of the cable.

"Then there's a third *Pony,* and I'm looking those pilots in the eyes. Their penetrator has disappeared in the smoke. Straight in front of me is this reflective glass [decorative hotel trim] and I can see Danny in it. I can also see Caesar's Palace, the Dunes, the Aladdin, and the smoke. Through the cockpit glass down by my right foot I'm looking at two people below me, a man and a woman, waving their towels.

"It was unreal."

There were a few other episodes that bordered on the same, but not all were as haunting.

Although still obviously downcast because he had not been able to breathe life back into a man lying on a balcony, Jaramillo could still work up a smile about some of his trapezelike exploits.

"Once I crashed through a window [they were sealed shut]," he said, "but I wasn't badly hurt. It must have been safety glass because it shattered in around me.

"Later I got a good swing—in fact, too good!—and I'm heading for a balcony. There were three people inside the glass door and they huddled in a corner. The penetrator caught the tip of the railing, and I went over it, smashing through the window and landing on the floor.

"The people just looked at me like, 'Where the hell did you come from?' "

Jerry Fletcher could also laugh at himself.

On his one trip down the hoist, he was pulled into a balcony where a man and a woman were standing. "She asked me if she could take her purse, and I said yes," related the veteran who spent 10 years on active duty and has been with the 302nd 15 years.

"I put her on the penetrator and sent her up. The man was telling me how proud he was of the Air Force. When the penetrator came back down, he held onto me while I reached out to grab it. I put him on—no problems—and he went up."

Looking around the room while he waited once again for the penetrator, Fletcher spotted the purse, hung it on his arm, and strapped himself on the rescue device.

"Then the crew decided to fly down the building to check out rooms. I was looking into each room when I got to thinking, 'Huh, I wonder what somebody in one of those rooms will think about me with this purse on my arm?' "

It probably wouldn't have mattered. Actions speak louder than looks. And the actions of the 302nd that chilly Friday morning may very well have saved the lives of 17 people—people who most likely had run through all their hope.

On TV's "That's Incredible!", which one week showed film of the Air Force crews in action and a few weeks later had representatives of the three units on the show, co-host John Davidson said of all the Air Force participants in the MGM rescue effort, "They are truly American heroes."

But those same Air Force people, all of whom still wonder what all the fuss is about, will tell you a different story. "Heroes" doesn't rest well with them.

"You don't want to blow this thing out of proportion," said Bill Reynolds. "It's a job we train for. It's a job we did. It is hard to say we've done a lot, but if you've saved one life . . . well, we would have loved to pick up five hundred more."

"You know who my heroes are?" asked Jerry Fletcher, not expecting an answer. "They're Captain Smith, Major [Lawrence] Lybarger, and Tech Sergeant [James] Hodges. They got me back."

Fair enough, then, but would any of them go back?

Danny Jaramillo: "In a minute!"

Jerry Fletcher: "Right now!"

Bill Reynolds: "I would!"

Jim Connett: "Definitely!"

Mike Martin: "Wouldn't you?"