HELICOPTERS

The association of special operations and helicopters dates back to World War II and Lieutenant Carter Harman's YR-4B rescue mission. During the 1950s, the H-19 helicopter was used by the Air Resupply & Communications Service.

When involvment in Southeast Asia began to escalate, the helicopter was evaluated for use in combat there. The Boeing-Vertol H-21 was available in large numbers, but were not able to operate in the mountainous northern part of South Vietnam. The underpowered H-21 could not cope with the higher elevations. Loading and unloading was difficult and the H-21's large size made it a easy target. The H-21 was armed with a .30 caliber machine gun in the right door, but this was not a satisfactory arrangement. The machine gun had a limited firing arc, had inadequate firepower, and made loading and unloading the chopper even harder.

Fighting over the role of airpower, and the helicopter in particular, between the Air Force and Army led the Air Force to abandon plans to form a number of helicopter troop carrier squadrons. The Army experimented with the helicopter, especially the UH-1 Huey to develop the armed helicopter gunship.

By the mid-1960s, the Air Force decided it needed helicopters in Southeast Asia to support its own mission there.

In June 1965, the 2nd Air Division in South Vietnam initiated a request for 25 Air Force CH-3C helicopters and aircrews. The helicopters would provide airlift support for forward locations like Army Special Forces camps. They also would be used for transporting combat control teams and airfield survey teams, for casualty evacuation, and for resupplying sites that were otherwise inaccessible.

On 8 October 1965, the 20th Helicopter Squadron was activated at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, South Vietnam with fourteen CH-3Cs. The 20th's mission was to augment combat search and rescue forces, perform casualty evacuation, to support communications sites, airfield construction, and the tactical air control system, to transport air liaison officers, and to perform counterinsurgency operations.

The 20th began combat operations in December 1965. By March 1966, the 20th was flying an average of nearly 1000 sorties per month from Tan Son Nhut, Da Nang, and Cam Ranh Bay. When the 14th Air Commando Wing was activated in March 1966, the 20th was assigned to the new wing. In June, the 20th moved to Nha Trang, where it began to concentrate on the unconventional warfare role. A detachment of CH-3s, nicknamed "Pony Express", were deployed to Nakhon Phanom RTAFB, Thailand to support Thai

3E in the unconventional warfare role. In 1980, the 20th's CH-3E section began to transition to the HH-53H. In 1983, the 20th's UH-1N section was assigned to Operation BAT, the drug interdiction effort in the Bahamas. In 1985, that mission was passed on to the 48th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron, along with the UH-1Ns. Today, the 20th flys only the MH-53J Pave Low. In 1989, the 20th was involved in Operation JUST CAUSE and in 1990 and 1991, was instrumental in Operations DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM. Following the Gulf War, the 20th was involved in Operations PROVIDE COMFORT and SOUTHERN WATCH in the Persian Gulf region. 20th personnel and aircraft were deployed to the region in early August 1990 and remained until January 1993.

THE SON TAY RAID

In November 1970, General LeRoy Manor commanded the USAF Special Operations Force, headquartered at Eglin AFB, Florida. Months earlier, Manor had been placed in charge of an all-volunteer, multi-service assault force. The assault force was a handpicked group of U.S. Army Rangers and Air Force H-53 and H-3 helicopter and MC-130E Combat Talon aircrews. Their mission: rescue American prisoners of war from the Son Tay Prison near the North Vietnamese capital of Hanoi.

Manor was a combat veteran, a former commander of the 37th Tactical Fighter Wing in Southeast Asia. He had flow 345 combat missions in World War II and Vietnam, had been the Air Force's top briefing officer on Southeast Asia at the Pentagon. As commander of the USAF Special Operations Force, he had been responsible for the training of U.S. and allied air force personnel in unconventional warfare.

Manor's commandos trained at Duke Field on the Eglin AFB reservation where a full-size replica of the Son Tay camp had been erected. The "camp" was built from 2x4 lumber and target cloth so it could be dismantled and hidden from Soviet spy satellites that passed over the Eglin reservation twice each day. Building the mockup took 710 six foot 2x4s and 1500 yards of target cloth. Trees were dug up and replanted so that their positions relative to the mockup were exactly like the real thing.

The plan was for an HC-130 tanker and two MC-130E Combat Talons to lead the raid. The HC-130 would refuel the choppers over Laos before the final leg of the flight into North Vietnam. One of the Combat Talons would lead in the assault force of one HH-3 and five HH-53 helicopters. The remaining Talon would lead in a strike force of A-1 Skyraiders in support of the raid. The Talons, with their sophisticated navigation systems, could guide the raiders in under the North Vietnamese radar net.

The crew of the HH-3 faced the greatest challenge in the assault on the prison camp. The HH-53s were too large to land inside the compound and would have to land outside the prison walls. The HH-3, carrying a small assault team, would crash land in the clearing in the

where the rest of the assault force was already engaged. About 55 North Vietnamese guards were dead or wounded and the Americans were going through the cells looking for prisoners of war. There were none. Photographers went through the cells, taking pictures.

The assault force commander called in an A-1 strike on the bridge north of the prison over which North Vietnamese reinforcements could arrive. Demolition charges were planted in the wreckage of the expendable H-3 and the commandos began to board the HH-53s for the ride home. Twenty seven minutes after the raid began, the choppers were back in the air with all the commandos aboard. There had been no Americans killed in the assault and only one wounded, a flesh wound to the inner thigh. As the choppers made their withdrawal, the charges in the H-3 went off, destroying what was left of it.

Although the raiders had achieved total surprise, the fact that they found no prisoners was disheartening. Later, it was learned that the prisoners had been moved months earlier. Faulty U.S. intelligence had failed to discover that the POWs had been moved. In spite of the failure to rescue any prisoners, the raid struck deep into enemy territory, almost to Hanoi, the capital city of North Vietnam. The raid proved to be a psychological victory for the American forces. The surprised and worried North Vietnamese moved all U.S. POWs from outlying camps to the prison known as the "Hanoi Hilton", feeling they could better defend it against future rescue attempts. This move and rumors of the raid that reached them buoyed the spirits of the POWs, many of whom had been held in isolation prior to the raid.

THE MAYAGUEZ INCIDENT

On 12 May 1975 in the Gulf of Siam, 60 miles off the Cambodian coast, a Cambodian Khmer Rouge gunboat forced the American container ship *SS Mayaguez* to heave to. The Communist gunboat crew boarded the hapless freighter and seized it, taking its crew as hostages.

The ship was tracked by U.S. reconnaissance planes as it sailed for the small Cambodian island of Koh Tang, a tiny cross-shaped speck of land four miles long by one mile wide. Diplomatic efforts to recover the ship and its crew came to a standstill as the Cambodian government refused contact.

On 13 May, as 250 U.S. Marines boarded transport aircraft in Japan and the Philippines for U Tapao, Thailand, three CH-53C Super Jolly helicopters from the 21st Special Operations Squadron took off from Nakhon Phanom Royal Thailand Air Force Base. They were joined by three HH-53Cs from the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron. Aboard the choppers were volunteers from the Air Force Security Police Squadron at Nakhon Phanom RTAFB, also known as NKP.

The security policemen from NKP were to be an assault force if they were required before the Marines could arrive at U Tapao.

About an hour into the flight, one of the special ops choppers lost a main rotor blade and crashed, killing all four crewmen and 19 security policemen. Plans for an assault on the island of Koh Tang were put on hold due to the accident.

Working around the clock, maintenance crews for the 21st SOS and 40th ARRS put every helicopter possible into commission.

On 14 May, aircrews flew the H-53s south to U Tapao where the Marines were arriving.

At Koh Tang, reconnaissance aircraft observed a small fishing boat run from the island toward the mainland. The crew of the aircraft tried to turn the boat back, but failed, fearing that they might injure the very people they were trying to rescue. The pilot's judgement was good; although

"Woody" Elwood Rumbaugh, the senior flight mechanic, vanished in the sea after helping the copilot escape the aircraft.

The second aircraft, KNIFE 22, was luckier. Facing heavy fire from the island, KNIFE 22 was badly hit. Aborting the attempt to land on the island, KNIFE 22 limped back to the Thai coastline with a serious fuel leak, barely making it to safety.

map of area

KNIFE 23, approaching the east beach, was hit by large caliber weapons. the tail was shot away and an engine was destroyed. It crashed in the surf, but the 20 Marines and five aircrewmen aboard escaped into the nearby trees. KNIFE 31, the fourth chopper making its approach to the east beach behind KNIFE 23. KNIFE 31 was hit in the fuel tanks and it exploded into flames. KNIFE 31 crashed on the edge of the shore. Five of the 26 men aboard were drowned or killed by enemy fire as they escaped the wreckage. Hits in the cockpit had left the pilot, Major Howard Corson, dazed. Flight mechanic Staff Sergeant Jon Harston led Corson to safety, but copilot First Lieutenant Richard Vandegeer was killed returning enemy fire. Survivors from KNIFE 31 were picked by a boat from the destroyer *USS Robert C. Wilson* which was just arriving in the area of operations.

The fifth 21st SOS chopper, KNIFE 32, with First Lieutenant Mike Lackey at the controls, rescued the three survivors from KNIFE 21 and headed for the beach. After putting 14 Marines ashore, KNIFE 32 lifted off for U Tapao with battle damage from 75 separate hits. Two 40th ARRS choppers, JOLLY 42 and JOLLY 43, each landed 27 Marines, taking numerous hits from enemy fire. Both returned safely to U Tapao.

At this point, there were 89 Marines ashore on the western side of Koh Tang island and the 25 survivors from KNIFE 23 on the eastern beach, pinned down by enemy fire. The assault was just more than an hour old.

JOLLY 41, also an ARRS chopper, had flown cover for KNIFE 32 as the crew of KNIFE 21 was rescued. After aerial refueling, JOLLY 41 tried to land 27 Marines on the west beach. Enemy fire was too heavy and the attempt was aborted. It was now 0730 local time. Thirty minutes later, JOLLY 41 tried again, but was driven away again by ground fire.

Meanwhile, the Marines had been landed aboard the *Holt* by the first three ARRS choppers. JOLLY 13 headed for east beach in an attempt to rescue the crew from KNIFE 23. Taking heavy ground fire, the helicopter's left flare case

OV-10 Bronco forward air control (FAC) aircraft from the 23rd Tactical Air Support Squadron, 56th SOW, at NKP. Directing naval gunfire from the *USS Wilson*, the OV-10s provided support for the troops on the ground. The naval guns knocked out a Cambodian gunboat which had run aground near the eastern beach. This gunboat had rained heavy caliber gunfire on the choppers as they approached the eastern beach. also arriving were five surviving H-53s, four from the 40th ARRS and one from the 21st SOS.

photo OV-10

It was 1820 hours and dusk was rapidly approaching. After fighters softened up the area around the eastern beach where KNIFE 23's survivors were still pinned down, JOLLY 11 approached the shore, turning its ramp to the beach. This would give the survivors a clear path into the aircraft. JOLLY 12 and KNIFE 51 were providing fire support for the rescue. Khmer Rouge troops charged JOLLY 11's right side and met a hail of fire from the personnel door minigun. After the longest three minutes a helicopter crew ever spent on the ground, JOLLY 11 lifted off with all 25 survivors from KNIFE 23 and headed for the *USS Coral Sea*.

JOLLY 12 hovered over the wreckage of KNIFE 23 to be certain there were no survivors still aboard. JOLLY 12 took heavy hits from the island and recovered aboard the *Coral Sea*, out of commission. The aircraft looked like a Swiss cheese.

The decision to extract the assault force was made, but there were only three choppers available now. KNIFE 51 went in first and loaded quickly, taking off for the *Coral Sea*. The CH-53C would have to refuel aboard the carrier. JOLLY 43, with its makeshift fuel line, was next into the beach. Fifty four Marines boarded JOLLY 43 for the trip to the aircraft carrier as the HH-53 took more hits. JOLLY 44 swept in behind JOLLY 43 and recovered 44 of the remaining Marines, landing them on the tight deck of the frigate *Holt* to save time. twenty five minutes later, JOLLY 44 was back, picking up all but about 29 of the remaining Marines and sustaining battle damage from enemy fire. JOLLY 44 landed on the *Coral Sea* safely, but out of action.

KNIFE 51, now refueled, made the approach to the dark beach in smoke and haze, landing with the aircraft partially in the water. The Khmer Rouge soldiers pressed the attack on the chopper as the Marines boarded. The miniguns aboard KNIFE 51 lit up the jungle as the gunners returned fire.

Technical Sergeant Wayne

DRAWDOWN

As the *Mayaguez* drama unfolded, the 56th Special Operations Wing, parent command for the 21st SOS at NKP, was folding its tents to leave Southeast Asia, part of the drawdown of U.S. forces. On 14 May, the 656th Special Operations Wing was activated at NKP to absorb the resources of the 56th SOW and to close the U.S. portion of Nakhon Phanom. The 56th moved back to the U.S. in May - June 1975, relocating to MacDill AFB, Florida as the 56th Tactical Fighter Wing.

The 656th SOW became operational on 30 June and was deactivated on 22 September 1975 when Nakhon Phanom Air Base closed.

In 1975, the USAF Special Operations Force was consolidated with the 1st Special Operations Wing. 1st SOW became the single manager of all USAF special ops assets, reporting directly to Headquarters, Tactical Air Command. Active duty special ops units had been reduced to a single wing at Hurlburt Field and two squadrons overseas. As the Vietnam-era drew to a close, USAF special operations forces were down to only ten percent of their former strength.

At this point, the 1st SOW consisted of a composite force of MC-130E Combat Talons, AC-130H Spectre gunships, and UH-1N and CH-3E helicopters. The 1st Special Operations Squadron in the Philippines and the 7th SOS at Sembach, Germany also possessed MC-130E Combat Talons.

By 1 January 1976, the 1st SOW was placed under control of Tactical Air Command's 9th Air Force, an indication of the de-emphasis special operations was receiving. To further complicate matters as the 1970s drew to a close was the idea to consolidate special operations forces with air rescue forces. Consolidation was at first opposed by the Military Airlift Command and Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service. MAC felt that special ops covert missions could jeopardize the worldwide goodwill enjoyed by the ARRS. Foreign governments might refuse overflight permission for humanitarian missions if the service was also flying special operations missions. The lack of enough helicopters to meet all the Air Force's requirements and the realization that a consolidated force would cut costs and reduce the amount of personnel and equipment required soon led MAC and ARRS to change their minds, however.

Tehran. C-141 Starlifter transports would land and the helicopters would recover at Manzarieh and be abandoned. Helicopter crews, Delta Force, Rangers, and the rescued hostages would all board the C-141s for the flight out of Iran.

A number of contingencies were examined and planned for in the initial planning stages of EAGLE CLAW. One critical point remained throughout: a minimum of six helicopters were required to accomplish the mission. Planners expected at least one to abort, so eight were provided for the job.

As the actual mission unfolded, the first C-130 landed at Desert One and had to detain a busload of Iranians passing on the nearby highway. Minutes later, two tanker trucks appeared. One was destroyed, but the second one escaped.

The eight helicopters had taken off from the *Nimitz* as planned. About two hours and forty minutes into their flight, helicopter #6 aborted for impending main rotor blade failure. The chopper landed in the desert and its crew was picked up by #8. At nearly four hours into their flight, the helicopters encountered a freak thunderstorm, known as a *haboob*. It kicked up the fine dust of the Iranian desert, drastically reducing visibility. The helicopters became separated in the *haboob*.

Helicopter #5, suffering a tactical navigation system failure, a gyro failure, and a radar failure aborted and returned to the *Nimitz*, leaving only six choppers for the mission.

The helicopters straggled into Desert One, the first one fifty minutes late. They quickly began to refuel from the tanker C-130s and the assault force began boarding the choppers. The rescue force was nearly ninety minutes behind schedule when the ground commander, U.S. Army Colonel Charlie Beckwith, was informed that helicopter #2 had developed hydraulic problems and could not continue. Repairs could not be made in the field. With only five choppers operational, the decision to abort the rescue was made.

map of area

Helicopter #3 took off to clear a space for helicopter #4, which still needed to refuel from the tanker. Chopper #3 could not maintain its hover due to the high altitude at Desert One and its own high gross weight. It banked into the C-130 tanker and both aircraft exploded instantly.

Debris and exploding ammo flew. Sixty four Delta Force troops escaped from the rear of the burning tanker, but three Marines in the RH-53D and five

CONSOLIDATION

The failure of the Iranian rescue prompted the Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force to order reassignment of nine HH-53H Pave Lows from ARRS to the 1st SOW on 14 May 1980. By 17 May, eight aircraft had been transferred from Kirtland AFB, New Mexico to the 20th SOS at Hurlburt Field. The ninth aircraft was still undergoing modification at Naval Air Station Pensacola, Florida.

The HH-53H helicopters, which had become operational only months earlier in 1980, were the result of a number of upgrades of the old HH-53C Super Jolly Green Giant rescue helicopter. The modification program was code named "Pave Low" and the name stuck on the helicopter. The Pave Low program had actually begun in the late 1970s to augment combat rescue forces with an all weather, nighttime, low level capability.

The transfer of the Pave Lows, including aircrews and maintenance personnel to special ops, created a lot of hard feelings in the Military Airlift Command and the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service towards Tactical Air Command.

Following the Desert One disaster, a Special Operations Review Group was commissioned and the Air Force began to take a look at its future needs with the Air Force 2000 Study. As a result of the studies, special operations gained new empnasis. Active duty Air Force special operations forces were still aligned under the Tactical Air Command and consisted of the single wing at Hurlburt Field, and two squadrons overseas.

The Air Force 2000 Study recommended that special operations be placed under HQ USAF as a Special Operations Agency or in a major command as a numbered air force. Military Airlift Command, which was now a proponent of consolidating special ops and combat rescue forces, argued that placing these assets under MAC control would be the most efficient way to manage both special operations and rescue forces. Since MAC already controlled most C-130 and helicopter aircraft and personnel anyway, MAC argued that it was only logical that MAC should control the special ops assets. The logic of the argument finally convinced TAC commander General

During Operation BAT, the 20th had flown more than 3,000 sorties which had lead to the capture or destruction of more than $1.5 billion in drugs, and the aircraft, vessels, vehicles and equipment used to smuggle them.

The 23rd Air Force was still having growing pains when President Reagan ordered U.S. intervention in the island nation of Grenada. The nearly overnight transfer of the Pave Low aircraft from ARRS to TAC in 1980 had created a lot of hard feelings on both sides. The transfer of special ops to MAC in 1983 rekindled some of that resentment on the part the special operators, who believed that airlifters could not (and should not) command combat forces.

In October 1983, Operation URGENT FURY began and the 23rd Air Force had its baptism of fire.