

'Always prepared': Hornets true to motto for past 30 years

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Jan. 1 marked the 30th anniversary of the 20th Special Operations Squadron. Thirty years ago, the 20th SOS activated with only one helicopter, a shared trailer and an opportunity to follow in their forefathers footsteps.

The "20th" designation brought with it a prestigious history, including successful missions and humanitarian aid during the Vietnam War and the presentation of the Medal of Honor to one of its members.

Originally established as the 20th Observation Squadron in 1942, it changed designations and names several times until it was consolidated with the 20th Helicopter Squadron in 1956. In 1967, when joined by the UH-1F/P helicopters assigned to Project Lucky Tiger, they became the 'Green Hornets.' It was on a 20th Helicopter Squadron mission that 1st Lt. James Fleming earned the Congressional Medal of Honor for heroism during combat.

Between 1956 and the deactivation of the squadron in 1972, the 'Green Hornets' were used for both conventional and unconventional warfare missions.

After reactivation as the 20th SOS, it lacked the necessary manpower and equipment. "We had to share a trailer with the Combat Controllers," said retired Col. Robert Mayo, the first commander of the 20th SOS. "We were at half our strength and had one helicopter, a CH-3, to our name. We used to stand on the flightline for our turn to fly."

As the new commander, he sent the instructor pilots to the Reserve special operations squadron at Luke Air Force Base, Ariz. to be trained on the CH-3 Jolly Green Giant and the UH-1 Huey. One of the original Hueys assigned to the 20th SOS, tail number 69-6654, is currently in use at the 6th SOS at Hurlburt Field, Fla.

"We had to go to the Panama Canal for our check rides," Mayo said. "We were trying to get realistic training without an accident, and that was hard to do."

As the pilots were trained, more helicopters found their way to Hurlburt Field. By the summer of 1976, they were able to fly the first four-ship formation at night.

"What put the 20th SOS on the drawing board was the Joint Counter Attack program exercise," Mayo said. "We played the part of the Russians and even painted the helicopters in their color scheme."

A Russian helicopter pilot trained the crews in tactics and procedures. During the exercise, held at Fort Rucker, Ala., the helicopters went up against fixed-wing aircraft.

Every hit was recorded, and by the end of the exercise, the 20th SOS had proven, by a five-to-one ratio, the helicopters were better at defeating almost all other aircraft. Only A-10's, which had a one-to-one ratio of hits, were considered competition for the helos.

It was during this exercise the infamous red scarf became a part of the 20th SOS flight suit. While at Fort Rucker, one of the crew chiefs found a bag of rags with red tablecloths inside.

"He stuck the tablecloth on the end of a stick as a flag on the flightline truck, to get our students to follow him," said retired Maj. John Grove, a former member of the 20th SOS. "The rest were cut up for crew scarves. Since we were playing the part of the Russians, it worked."

Another milestone for the squadron was the initiation of night-vision goggles.

Introduced to the 20th SOS in the late 70's, they were the first squadron in the Air Force to use NVG's in flight. The crews were taught to practice walking at night with the goggles and then riding bicycles.

"After that, we used them full-blown in the cockpit," Mayo said. "We always carried a roll of tape with us to cover up the panel lights in the cockpit, leaving only the 'danger' lights visible." Significant changes kept the young squadron learning as the years passed. In May 1980, eight HH-53H Pave Low helicopters found a home at the 20th SOS, providing the squadron with a heavy-lift, long-range helicopter.

According to the squadrons' history, within a month's time following the devastating Operation Eagle Claw mission, where five members of the 8th SOS were killed during the Iran hostage rescue, a decision was made that the long-range capability of the Pave Low would be needed if a second rescue attempt was to be successful.

Orders to move the Pave Low helicopters from the air rescue squadron at Kirtland AFB, N.M., were received on a Friday and by Monday morning, personnel and equipment had been transferred to Hurlburt Field. It wasn't until 1987 that the squadron replaced the HH-53 Pave Low with the MH-53 Pave Low, the only helicopter used by the squadron today.

In April 1981, while training at Kirtland AFB, they were called upon to aid with rescue attempts during devastating hotel fire in Las Vegas. Their job was to transport the fire, medical and rescue personnel to the roof, to assist an already-taxed local police department.

Also during the 1980's, the 20th SOS was to support Operation Bahamas, Antilles and Turks, a drug enforcement task force. Using the UH-1, they supported the OPBAT mission for two years, snagging one of the largest drug busts in history in 1985 — more than 1,800 pounds of cocaine, valuing \$300 million dollars.

Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf stated in 1991 "the 20th SOS had the distinction of starting the war (Desert Storm)." Using concepts and tactics never used before, the Pave Low led eight AH-64 Apache attack helicopters into Iraq to destroy the early warning systems. It was also during this time the 20th SOS did the first combat search and rescue since the Vietnam War, rescuing Navy Lt. Devon Jones.

On Sept. 11, 2001, the 20th SOS was training in North Carolina. The squadron quickly responded to assist with initial recovery efforts in New York and Washington, D.C.

Since then, the 20th SOS has supported operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. "Watching our guys in Iraq; seeing their professionalism and mission focus is what I'm most proud of," said Lt. Col. Scott Howell, 20th SOS commander. "They maintain a great attitude despite being deployed all the time."

Today, the 20th SOS is the second most deployed unit in Air Force Special Operations Command.

"We responded within 24 hours after Sept. 11 and continued until August 2004 without a break," Howell said. "After a four-month reconstitution period interrupted by Hurricane Ivan, we were back on the road in CENTCOM in January 2005. Even with our deployments, we were still able to assist after Hurricanes Ivan, Charley and most recently Hurricane Katrina." Operations weren't the only thing the 20th did well. Their people were considered a more valuable asset.

Col. Tommy Hull, former 20th SOS commander, said the moment he will remember the most was returning Navy Lt. John Alvarez to flying status, after he lost his leg as the result of a crash. Alvarez received an athletic prosthesis that would enable him to manipulate the controls of a

helicopter.

One year later, he did his first re-qualifying flight. Since Navy Lieutenant Alvarez was the first-ever Navy exchange pilot with AFSOC, an inter-service transfer was arranged so he could stay on permanently with the 20th SOS as Capt. Alvarez, U.S. Air Force.

"I held a commander's call in the 20th auditorium," Hull said. "I told them about John's status and that he was back. The doors opened, and in walked John. There wasn't a dry eye in the house." "The teamwork, the brotherhood and the support from the 20th is what made it possible for me to come back," said now Lt. Col. Alvarez, 6th SOS commander.

The squadron history books reflect accomplishments of the 20th SOS are too numerous to mention but its dedication to the mission and each other is evident in everything they do. One special tactics officer, Capt. Frank Rodriguez, 720th Operations Support Squadron Advance Skills Training commander, has worked with the 20th SOS many times. He shared a journal entry that best describes the relationship the 20th SOS has with other units.

December 5, 2001

War reared its ugly face today, a day I will never forget. As the (MH) 53s arrived, the scene was what one would expect accompanies the plot of war: gruesome, horrid and painful. As I approached the helicopter, I was greeted by one of the Pararescuemen, I gave him a heads up on the EVAC (evacuation) plan. The back of the bird was carpeted with bodies; blood stains soaked through all the bandages and blankets. The U.S. flag drew and commanded your attention, draped over one of the killed in action. The flag was only red and blue, as the white had been overcome by the blood.

Amidst the chaos, a sense of pride came over me, because as the madness enveloped the situation, special tactics Combat Controllers, Pararescuemen and AFSOC aviation forces held it together and answered the call making sense out of madness.'

The 20th SOS had once again lived up to its motto, "Semper Paratus," always prepared.



An MH-53J Pave Low flies past one of Saddam Hussein's palaces in Iraq. 20th SOS photo.



Three Airman fast rope from a MH-53J Pave Low helicopter to the deck of USS Mount Whitney after completing a special operations mission. 20th SOS photo.



Navy Lt. Devon Jones, left, runs towards the Pave Low that rescued him during Operation Desert Storm. The 20th SOS conducted the first combat search and rescue since the Vietnam War. 20th SOS photo.



A Pave Low releases flares. 20th SOS photo.



Two Pave Low helicopters conduct nighttime infiltration mission. 20th SOS photo.