



The Pride of the Marines: Marine One Crew Chiefs



By Chuck Lloyd and Rick Llinares

It's six p.m. The evening television newscast features the president's arrival somewhere in America. A helicopter known as *Marine One* touches down, a hatch opens and an enlisted Marine in a flawless Dress Blue uniform positions himself to the side of the exit. As viewers across the country focus on the chief executive waving to the crowd, the young Marine renders a perfect, crisp salute and resumes his vigilance from the position of attention.

Although they are arguably the most visible Marines in America, the ceremonial duties performed by the enlisted personnel of Marine Helicopter Squadron (HMX) One, Quantico, Va., represent only a tiny fraction of their awesome responsibilities. There is little doubt that members of the public and press are aware of and duly impressed by the "spit and polish" of the Marines they see snapping smartly to attention as the president approaches or departs from an HMX-1 helo. But few realize that each of these

Marines is an experienced Naval Aircrewman and a highly qualified helicopter crew chief.

Just like any other Fleet Marine Force (FMF) helicopter crew chief, an HMX-1 crew chief is responsible for the upkeep of "his" aircraft. He ensures that all maintenance cycles and inspections on the aircraft are completed. An expert mechanic, it is the crew chief who inspects the work of other maintenance personnel, "signing off" the helicopter as safe and ready for flight only when he is satisfied that all completed work meets his high standards. VH-60N *Blackhawk* crew chief Sgt. C. J. Meade, 25, of Shawsville, Va., is typical in expressing the pride of "ownership" that all crew chiefs have for their aircraft. "I've been 'given' an aircraft that is essentially mine to maintain and to keep mission ready 24 hours a day," Meade said.

Invited to apply for orders to the elite unit by HMX-1's fleet

information brief team which regularly tours the FMF, all crew chiefs begin their assignment with Marine Helicopter Squadron One on the "Green Side." So called because of the department's support function to other Marine Corps units, the Marines assigned to the Green Side serve as crew chiefs in the CH-53E *Super Stallion* and the CH-46E *Sea Knight* for six months to a year. When not supporting a presidential mission, these aircraft and personnel perform missions ranging from test and evaluation to providing helicopter support for the various commands at Quantico, including The Basic School, Officer Candidate School and the Marine Corps Combat Development Command. (See "HMX-1: 'The First and Finest,'" p. 12.) A small percentage of HMX-1 crew chiefs comes right out of Basic Helicopter School and acquires flight time as a crew chief while assigned

to the Green Side. Regardless of background, once a crew chief has had hands-on

Left, Sgt. John P. Delbaso takes great pride in representing the U.S. Marine Corps to the public and in providing safe and efficient transportation to the nation's chief executive.



experience working in HMX-1 and has obtained a final security clearance, he is eligible for selection to serve with the Executive Flight Detachment, also known as the “White Side.”

Sgt. John P. Delbaso, 24, of Albany, N.Y., was chosen from the FMF to serve with the *Nighthawks* of HMX-1. An experienced CH-53D *Sea Stallion* crew chief, Sgt. Delbaso was attached to Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 363 three years ago when the HMX-1 fleet information brief team visited his unit. “The squadron’s mission appealed to me,” Delbaso said. “Carrying the president of the United States to unique places sounded pretty exciting and interesting.” Now qualified as a VH-3D crew chief, Delbaso quipped, “Actually, our operations are similar to troop lift in the FMF, but the customers sure are different.”

Due to its unique mission of providing executive transport, the detachment’s VH-3D *Sea King* and VH-60N *Blackhawk* helicopters sport distinguished green and white paint schemes. Often referred to as “White Tops,” the helos are unique both in their configuration for use by VIPs and in their assignment to HMX-1, the only Marine Corps squadron to operate these Sikorsky aircraft.

Once assigned to the White Side, crew chiefs select either the VH-3D or VH-60N as their aircraft. Sikorsky factory-trained instructors and technical representatives then tutor them in the specifics of the helicopter’s systems. They receive hands-on training under the watchful eye of experienced crew chiefs and complete a qualification program called Crew Member Training, which includes written and oral exams as well as a check ride. Successful completion earns designation as a crew chief in the chosen aircraft.

White Side crew chiefs perform duties transporting the vice president,

senators and congressmen, foreign dignitaries and other official guests. Because their mission allows them to operate in close proximity to the president, all crew chiefs assigned to the White Side must pass a rigorous background investigation and receive a security clearance.

The most sought after duty for a White Side crew chief is the responsibility of transporting the president of the United States. When the chief executive is aboard any Executive Flight Detachment helicopter, that aircraft is called *Marine One*.



Sgt. C. J. Meade inspects the tail rotor gear box on his VH-60N *Blackhawk*. “Everything about the way my aircraft looks and operates reflects on me. So, I work that much harder to keep my plane just a bit nicer than the next guy’s.”

Selection as a *Marine One* crew chief is a highly prized distinction. Often 10 or more White Side crew chiefs are eligible and qualified at any moment for a single *Marine One* position. A minimum of a year’s experience as a crew chief in one of the two executive transport

helicopter types is required prior to consideration for selection.

Candidates are nominated by the other White Side crew chiefs for this distinct honor. As a slot opens, a small panel convenes and reviews the performance of all candidates. Each Marine’s initiative, technical knowledge, level of motivation and esprit de corps is evaluated. A list of the top three candidates is compiled and put to a vote. The results are forwarded to the commanding officer who either approves or disapproves the selection.

“It was the little things I did that really paid off,” recalls Sgt. Meade. “I tried to keep my haircut a bit neater, my shoes better shined and I tried to be as professional a crew chief as possible. For me, it’s one of the most enjoyable aspects of this job . . . knowing that your peers really respect what you do,” he stated.

A newly selected *Marine One* crew chief typically serves for one year due to the high potential for burnout and the impact that continuous travel may have on the Marine’s family. Each quarter, the selection process begins again. As a new *Marine One* crew chief takes over, an outgoing crew chief goes back to the White Side and continues crewing for the vice president and performing other White House missions. Former crew chiefs who rotate back to the White Side provide an outstanding instructional base for newly assigned Marines.

The crew chiefs rotate shifts, taking turns crewing for *Marine One* helicopters. They work two days on, two off and every other weekend. Short trips include flights to and from the White House to Camp David, Md., or to Andrews Air Force Base, Md.—home of *Air Force One*, the president’s Boeing 747. Overnight trips can be to anywhere in the country or overseas, wherever the president’s business takes him. *Air Force One* flies the president to an appropriate airfield near his desti-

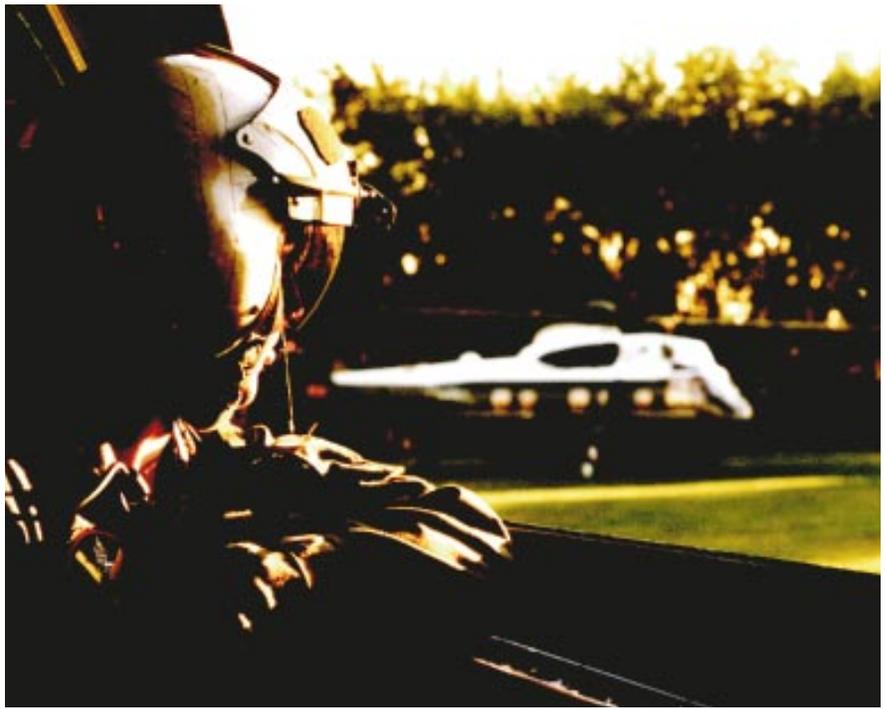
nation, while *Marine One* provides transportation to and around the local area.

Overseas trips require that the presidential helicopters be carried to their final destination inside an Air Force C-5A *Galaxy*. Transporting the VH-3D and VH-60N overseas is a familiar but challenging task which requires extensive planning and coordination to guarantee that a helicopter is at the president's disposal when needed. It takes 12 to 16 hours to disassemble and prepare a single HMX-1 *Sea King* for loading onto the C-5A, a significant effort on the part of the crew chief.

After a flight to the final destination, which may last 12 or more hours, *Marine One* crew chiefs are responsible for unloading their helos and moving them into a secure location. They then begin the 12 to 16 hour buildup process to ensure the helicopters are ready for the president's arrival. Before the president flies on a reassembled aircraft, it must log five hours of post-maintenance flight time. It is then eligible to be signed off as ready for a VIP flight. The *Marine One* crew chiefs then change into their Dress Blue uniforms and stand by.

Flying and performing in-flight tasks while wearing the distinctive Marine Corps Dress Blue uniform is an aspect of White Side crew chief duty that is truly unique. Sgt. Meade commented, "Flying in Dress Blues isn't too bad unless it's hot outside. My secret for always looking good is simply to have another complete set with me at all times. You can never predict what will happen when you are wearing Dress Blues." Sgt. Delbaso added that the timing and selection of which preflight duties to perform while still in a flight suit and which can be done in the dress uniform takes a bit of prior planning. "A little more thought goes into your performance of certain checklist items. You don't want to be crawling up the side of the aircraft to check something in your Dress Blues," Delbaso said.

Although every day in the life of a *Marine One* crew chief holds the promise of an interesting adventure, a



The most sought after duty for an HMX-1 crew chief is the responsibility of transporting the U.S. commander in chief. Here, an HMX-1 Green Side helo crew provides support for a presidential lift by a White Side VH-3D *Sea King*.

typical day goes something like this:

Usually one of the first to arrive, often before dawn, a *Marine One* crew chief spends the first few hours of his workday preflighting and cleaning his aircraft and preparing his Dress Blue uniform. He then boards the helicopter with the rest of the crew and flies to the alert facility at Naval Station, Anacostia in southeast Washington, D.C. The crew briefs and stands by to depart for the White House when requested to provide presidential transport. While on a transport mission, awaiting the president's return to the aircraft, the crew chief cleans his helo again, whether it needs it or not. The president is then flown back to the White House and the helicopter returns to the squadron hangars in Quantico, where post-flight maintenance is performed. The helicopter is cleaned once more, this time from top to bottom, inside and out. The final cleaning is an all-hands effort by Marines in White Side Maintenance.

With the flight completed and the aircraft in the hangar, it might seem that the crew chief's day has ended. Not so. If any equipment has broken down and maintenance is required, a

crew chief will stay with the helicopter until it is returned to an "up status. Often, crew chiefs work in pairs, even on local Washington, D.C., flights, to ensure proper coverage of these long workdays.

Marine One crew chiefs exhibit an enormous amount of pride and professionalism in the execution of their duties. They relish the fact that they have been entrusted with the responsibility of providing safe transportation to their commander in chief.

Sgt. Meade summed it up: "The best part of my job is that during an executive transport flight, it's usually just me, or me and one other Marine outside the aircraft. It's really exciting to realize that all those people are checking you out, and that the professionalism you show in everything you do reflects credit on the entire United States Marine Corps. I'm very proud of that." ✈

This article was based on a chapter of *Warfighters II*, about Marine Corps aviation, to be published this fall by Schiffer Publishing Ltd., Atglen, Pa. *Naval Aviation News* Editor Cdr. Diana Cangelosi and HMX-1 public affairs officer Maj. Ben Mathews also contributed to this article.