

# CGAS MIAMI: GUARDING FLORIDA

Story and Photos by Ted Carlson



**T**here's rarely a dull moment at Coast Guard Air Station (CGAS) Miami, Fla. Based at Opa-Locka Airport, the busy air station is home to three types of aircraft: the HH-65A *Dolphin* helicopter and the VC-4A *Academe* and HU-25C *Guardian* fixed-wing aircraft. The *Dolphin* specializes in short-range search and rescue, while the *Academe* provides logistical and VIP support to Coast Guard District 7. The HU-25C, unofficially nicknamed "Nightstalker," provides an all-weather, day or night, air-to-air capability. Its mission includes search and rescue, law enforcement (marine, environmental and drug), logistics and migrant repatriation operations.



Lieutenants Glen Gileno, left, and Gary Polasky guide their HU-25C "Nightstalker" over the dazzling lights of Miami.



Left, an HU-25C and HH-65A fly loose formation off the Florida coast. The HU-25C carries the AN/APG-66 air-to-air and air-to-ground radar and a WF-360 forward looking infrared turret under the belly of the aircraft. The VC-4A, below, is the oldest aircraft in the Coast Guard's inventory. VC-4A pilot and program manager LCdr. Doug Hatfield said, "When I first flew the VC-4A, it just seemed big. We jokingly call it 'fly by wire' as the flight controls are attached to cables with no hydraulic boost. Actually, it is a smooth and steady flying plane, kind of like an old 1962 Cadillac!"



This author had an opportunity to tag along one afternoon on a Nightstalker mission over an area in the Bermuda Triangle, looking for anything suspicious. About 20 minutes after a low-altitude search pattern was established, a crew member spotted something about a mile away. The pilots quickly altered course and headed toward the target, which turned out to be six refugees waving frantically from a rubber raft. Seeing the simple raft struggling in the huge ocean brought home the desperation of these individuals seeking a better life.

The circling HU-25C closely monitored the raft's location, but the situation began to deteriorate as darkness fell. A Coast Guard cutter was summoned, but would take over two hours to arrive on scene. Someone in the raft shined a flashlight at the jet periodically until the cutter

was a mile away. When the ship turned on its powerful searchlights and established good visual contact with the raft, the Nightstalker, now low on fuel, headed to base.

According to the aircrew, the search and surveillance missions are hit and miss. Sometimes they go weeks without finding anything; at other times they make contacts every day for weeks in a row. Once the crews have completed their mission by directing a cutter to the scene, they typically do not hear the details. However, in this situation, most individuals who attempt to make it to the United States by boat are repatriated to their country.

To the HU-25C crew, this was just another mission. But they are an invaluable asset in the effort to keep a watchful eye over the airways and waterways of eastern Florida. 



Left, observer AMT Maurico Barajas, left, and dropmaster AD Ralph Cieslinski prepare to drop a floating transmitting beacon from the HU-25C, bottom. Right, from the observer's post, AMT Barajas scans the vast ocean for anything out of the ordinary—from possible drug activity to boats carrying refugees, below.

