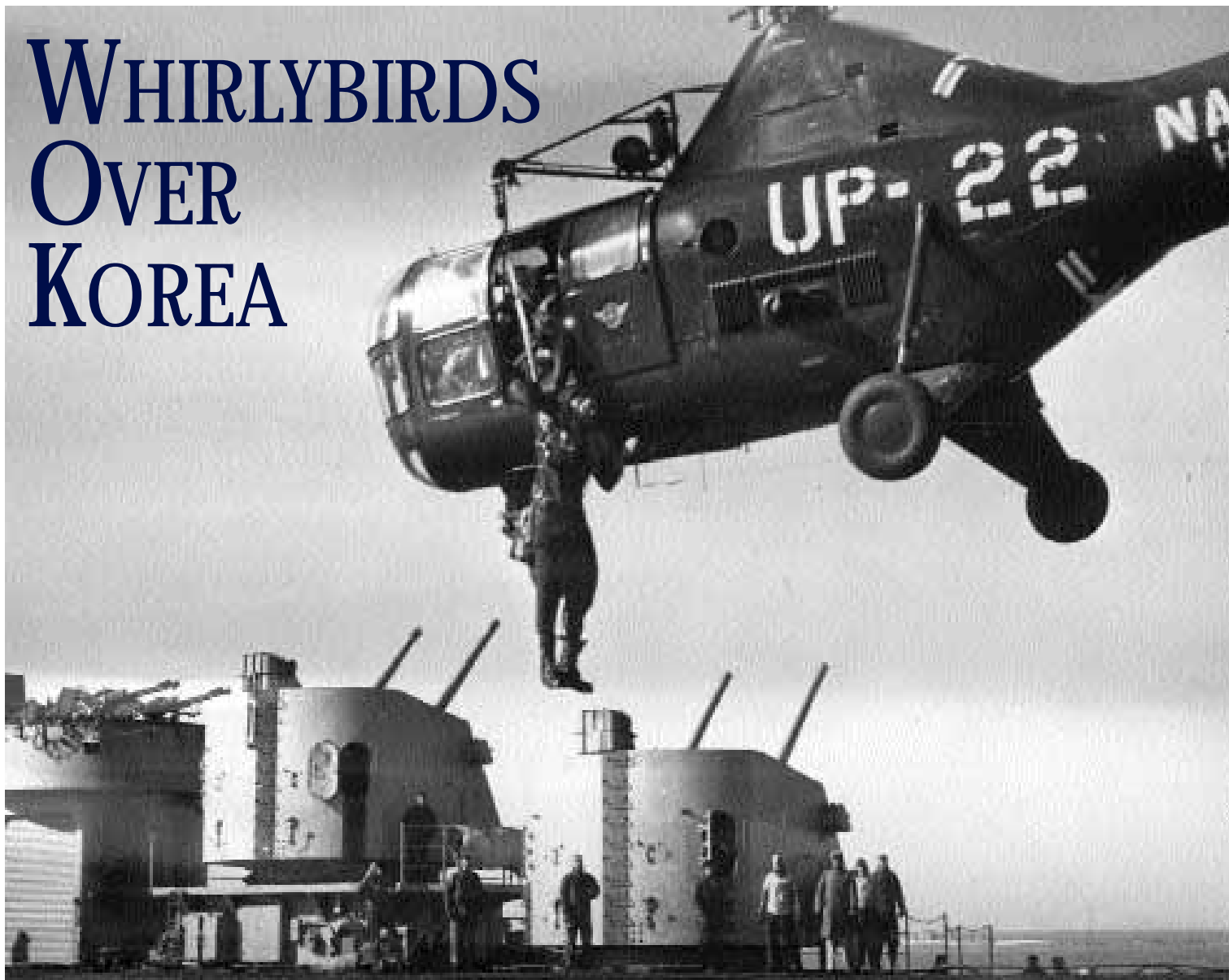


WHIRLYBIRDS OVER KOREA



Owen Maupin

On 5 August 1952 Colonel Robert Galer, commanding officer of Marine Air Group 12, led a flight of 31 aircraft against targets in the mountainous area of North Korea southwest of Wonsan. As he made his attack, enemy fire struck the engine of his AU-1 Corsair, prompting the Marine pilot to bail out. Landing just feet from where his aircraft crashed, the aviator quickly moved away from the area and made his way to higher ground, all the while keeping in radio contact with the rescue combat air patrol. In short order an HO3S helicopter appeared and made its way up the slope of a valley to Galer's position. Lieutenant E. J. McCutcheon nursed all the power that his craft could muster, its rotor blades just nine feet from the hillside on which Galer was located. Triggering a smoke flare to

alert the rescuers to his location, the Marine pilot, who had received the Medal of Honor for service during WW II, emerged from some bushes and made his way to a rescue sling lowered from the helicopter. In short order the aviator was aboard and the HO3S headed east, taking antiaircraft fire along the way and flying through patches of fog in the night sky until, with its fuel almost exhausted, it safely touched down on the deck of a rescue vessel off the coast. It was business as usual for the helicopter in the skies over Korea.

Whether engaging in search and rescue behind enemy lines, rescuing men like Col. Galer from certain captivity, performing plane guard duties at sea with the carriers of Task Force 77, evacuating casualties or airlifting Marines to distant battlefields, the helicopter came of age during

the war in Korea. When North Korean troops crossed the 38th parallel into South Korea on 25 June 1950, helicopter assets in both the Navy and Marine Corps were indeed small, but size belied the great strides made in integrating rotary wing aviation into fleet operations.

After leaving most of the helicopter development to the Coast Guard during WW II, the Navy established Experimental Squadron (VX) 3 on 1 July 1946 to serve as a training squadron for helicopter pilots, replacing it with Helicopter Utility Squadron (HU) 2 on 1 April 1948. HU-2 not only continued the training mission, but also began providing detachments for utility and search and rescue missions. Between July 1946 and July 1950, VX-3 and HU-2 trained 238 helicopter pilots. This number included 37 Marines, and no service could match the Corps' dedication to the helicopter. During the early postwar years, Marine Experimental Helicopter Squadron (HMX) 1 carried out countless training exercises that

proved helicopters were a viable method for more quickly transporting leathernecks from ship to shore during an amphibious assault. Their efforts made an immediate impact once the shooting started.

In response to a letter from Commander Fleet Air, Japan on 1 November 1951, Rear Admiral Herbert S. Duckworth, Director of Aviation Plans in the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, wrote, "We have been flooded with data and pressure to get more helicopters. Every possible means is being employed in Washington to increase production, speed up development and learn everything we can about helicopters." At the time of this letter the naval inventory included 163 helicopters, a figure that by war's end had jumped to 661—reflecting the importance of these slow, ungainly, but highly effective aircraft.

With no ship-versus-ship engagements, naval surface

Opposite, another life is saved as an HO3S-1 of Helicopter Utility Squadron 1 returns a pilot to the deck of the aircraft carrier *Valley Forge* (CV 45) during operations off Korea on 7 February 1951. As evidenced by heavy clothing visible on the flight deck personnel, it was a cold day to go into the drink. Below, crouching under the weight of his pack, a Marine scrambles away from an HRS helicopter of Marine Helicopter Transport Squadron 161 after it delivers him to a remote, battle-scarred hilltop in Korea.





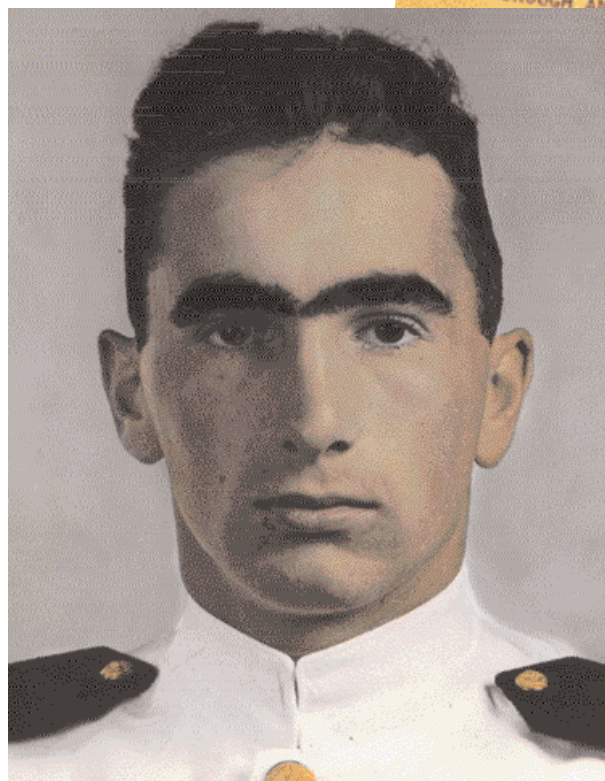
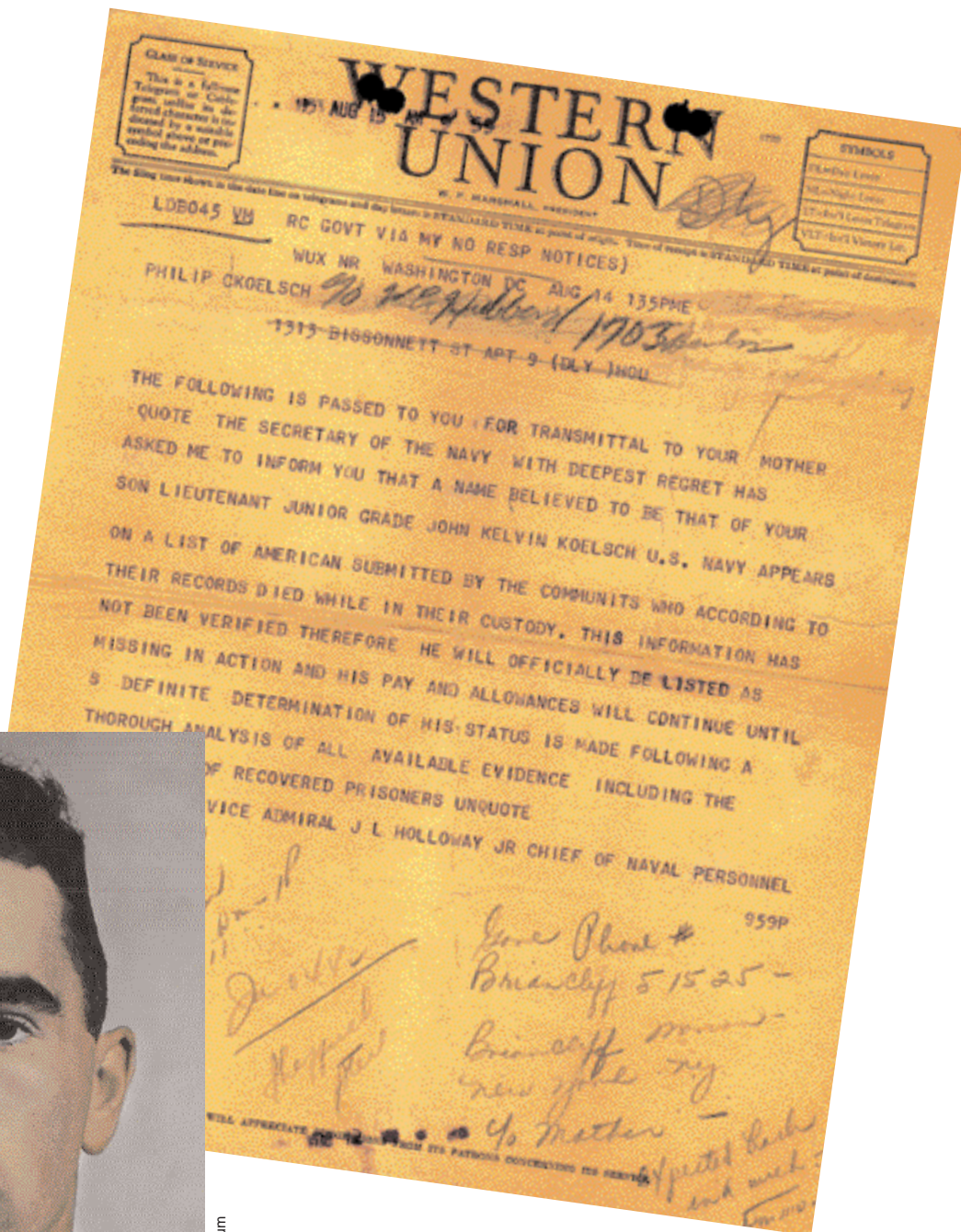
HRS-2s of Marine Helicopter Transport Squadron 163 airlift cargo earmarked for the Seventh Marine Division ashore from the escort carrier *Sicily* (CVE 118) on 2 September 1952. Helicopters greatly benefited the logistics of supporting assaults from the sea.

forces operating in Korea devoted most of their attention to providing gunfire support for troops ashore and minesweeping of major harbors, most notably Wonsan. Like floatplanes in earlier years, helicopters increased the accuracy of naval gunfire by serving as aerial spotters, a task that began in the war's early months when the cruiser *Helena* (CA 75) employed an HO3S helicopter for spotting as she fired her guns on targets near Tanchon. With Navy ships operating relatively close to shore in these bombardment missions, mines took their toll, sinking five ships and damaging three other vessels. With their ability to fly at low speeds and hover over water, helicopters proved capable platforms in hunting for mines. Their crews often were able to see underwater

mines from altitudes that evaded lookouts on board ships. Recalled one minesweeper skipper, "The helicopters had many friends in minesweepers."

Yet, it was in the business of saving aviators' lives that Navy helos made their most wide-ranging contribution to combat operations in Korea. Between 25 June 1950 and 27 July 1953, a total of 1,254 Navy and Marine Corps aircraft were lost to both enemy antiaircraft fire and operational causes. Operating with the carriers of Task Force 77, HO3S helicopters were always in the air during flight operations, quick to reach pilots and aircrewmembers whose planes were forced to ditch. This was most critical in the harsh environment of Korean winters, when spending just minutes in the frigid water could

Right, this original telegram sent to Philip C. Koelsch relayed the dreaded news that his brother, Ltjg. John K. Koelsch, below, died in captivity. Koelsch was taken prisoner following a July 1951 rescue attempt. He was the first helicopter pilot ever to receive the Medal of Honor.



Images courtesy National Museum of Naval Aviation

mean death. In Korea helo crews also found themselves flying combat rescue missions for downed aviators, a particularly hazardous duty given the slow speed of helicopters which made them vulnerable to enemy fire. At least nine Navy and Marine Corps helicopters were lost while engaged in search and rescue missions.

Among them was the HO3S flown by Lieutenant (jg) John Koelsch and Aviation Radioman George Neal, who despite worsening weather and the onset of darkness on 3 July 1951 flew into North Korea in an attempt to rescue

Marine Captain James V. Wilkins.

Hit by enemy fire that caused their helicopter to crash while Wilkins was in the rescue sling, Koelsch and Neal managed to get out of their stricken craft and joined the Marine in avoiding captivity for nine days. Koelsch died in a prisoner of war camp, and was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor, becoming the first helicopter pilot to receive the nation's highest award for heroism. Other stories of heroism abound. One incident included Ltjg. John Thornton, who was shot down while attempting to rescue members of an intelligence team. He gave up his chance to be rescued, wielding a rifle and facing certain captivity to cover the team members as they boarded other rescue helicopters bound for safety. The devotion to duty of the helicopter crews paid off as evidenced by the record of the choppers operating in the waters off Wonsan from LST 799, which between March 1951 and November 1952 rescued 22 downed pilots.



Mej. Bud Yount

Above, distinctive with its fishbowl canopy, an HTL-3 of Headquarters Squadron 12 sits at K-1 airfield near Pusan in 1951. Right, the open clamshell doors on the nose of an HRS-2 reveal the Sikorsky helicopter's 550-horsepower Pratt & Whitney R-1340 engine. This helicopter was assigned to Marine Helicopter Transport Squadron 163 at MCAS El Toro, Calif.



National Museum of Naval Aviation

It was the Marine Corps that logged the first extensive rotary wing operations of the Korean War, with Marine Observation Squadron (VMO) 6 arriving in theater in August 1950. Operating HO3Ss, which could muster a top speed of just 103 mph and were limited in their load-carrying capability, the squadron provided vital support to the operations of the First Provisional Marine Brigade as it fought desperately in the Pusan Perimeter. The brigade commander, Brigadier General Edward A. Craig, found his helicopters to be valuable platforms from which he could control the movements of troops on the ground, and VMO-6 pilots flew their share of medical evacuation, observation, search and rescue and resupply flights, which continued until the end of the war. True to the Corps ethos of aviation serving the man on the ground, one day in April 1951 saw VMO-6 HTL-4 helicopters, notable because of their fishbowl cockpits, pull 77 wounded leathernecks from the front-line. As testament to the helicopter's ability, during the Korean War it took just 30 minutes from the time a man was wounded to the moment he was delivered to a

hospital ship. This contrasted sharply to the WW II experience, when it was not uncommon to see surgeons working on casualties from the previous day.

The mountainous terrain of Korea also advanced the Marine Corps' efforts at employing helicopters in vertical assault. In April 1951 Marines took delivery of the first HRS troop transport helicopters from Sikorsky. With its engine housed within clamshell doors on the nose, the HRS could carry 1,500 pounds of cargo or eight fully equipped troops and provided the ability to transport a sizeable force extended distances, thus influencing events on the battlefield. Assigned to Marine Helicopter Transport Squadron (HMR) 161, the first HRSs arrived in theater in September 1951 and made an immediate impact. That month they participated in Operation Summit, the first large-scale airlift of troops and supplies by helicopter in the history of warfare. On 21 September,



Above, covered by armed aircrewmembers, an HO3S of Helicopter Utility Squadron 1 takes aboard survivors from a Thai corvette that ran aground during a blinding snowstorm off the coast of Korea on 16 January 1951. Left, helicopters proved an ideal platform for ground commanders to ascertain troop movements and positions. The two stars on the fuselage of this HTL-4 indicate that Maj. Gen. John T. Selden, Commanding General of the First Marine Division, is aboard for an observation hop.

Cpl. Roy E. Duncan

the HMR-161 birds carried 224 troops to relieve a Republic of Korea unit as well as 17,722 pounds of cargo to the vicinity of the battle, despite heavy fog. This led to larger operations, including Operation Switch on 11 November 1951, during which 12 HRSs made 262 flights in transporting an entire battalion to the front-line. In addition, over the course of four days in February 1953, Marine helicopters lifted 1,612,306 pounds of cargo to two regiments in the field. "A bright new chapter in the employment of helicopters by Marines," wrote Lieutenant General Lemuel C. Sheperd, Jr., Commanding General of Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, following the first helicopter airlift by the Corps. His comment rings true for the entire war.

Today, Navy and Marine Corps helicopters perform every conceivable mission. Transport helicopters carry

leathernecks ashore wherever duty calls and AH-1W Super Cobras, armed to the teeth, fly protective vigils over the ground troops conducting patrols in search of the enemy. CH-46 Sea Kings transfer pallets of ammunition and supplies between ships at sea as part of vertical replenishment operations. SH-60 Seahawks hover over vast blue waters, and some lower their dipping sonar in the cat and mouse game of tracking enemy submarines. On many a day a Marine renders a crisp salute to the commander in chief as he boards HMX-1's *Marine One*. It is the latest chapter in the story of the helicopters begun half a century ago in a place called Korea.

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