HC-2 Desert Ducks

Story and Photos by Tony Holmes

In today's Navy, most frontline aircraft types operating from carrier decks or smaller surface vessels are well into their second decade of service. Indeed, Naval Aviators proudly boast about the age of their F-14 Tomcats, S-3B Vikings, EA-6B Prowlers or H-60 Seahawks, all of which are still very much mission capable despite their advancing years. But in terms of frontline longevity, these machines are barely reaching puberty when compared with the positively geriatric UH-3H Sea Kings of Helicopter Combat Support Squadron (HC) 2, based at Naval Station Norfolk, Va. Dubbed the *Fleet Angels*, HC-2 operates 13 UH-3Hs and 3 VH-3As (ex-presidential support helicopters) which are between 35 and 40 years old. Despite their advancing years, the Sea Kings are expected to remain in service until at least 2010.

Det 2, based at Naval Support Activity Bahrain, is one of only a handful of Navy units that are still plying their trade with the Sea King. Affectionately called the "Desert Ducks," the detachment is equipped with three helicopters and staffed by 32 air and ground personnel, who spend six months at a time based in Bahrain prior to returning to parent squadron HC-2.

Formed in 1972, Det 2 has a long history of providing logistical support for Navy vessels in the Arabian Gulf. Helicopter Antisubmarine Squadron 1 formally took over this role in 1976–1977, and a newly established HC-2 was given the tasking in 1987. Sea Kings and H-46 Sea

Knights have fulfilled the ship replenishment mission in the gulf since the detachment was first established, with stripped out SH-3D/G/Hs taking over the role completely in the late 1980s.

The detachment is usually led by a lieutenant commander, although both the commanding officer and executive officer of HC-2 also take their turn in the rotation schedule by regularly joining Det 2 in Bahrain. During the author's visit, the officer in charge (OIC) was veteran Sea King pilot Lieutenant Commander John Ries, who outlined the detachment's mission in theater. "Det 2 is the primary logistics transport for all small-deck ships operating in the Arabian Gulf," Ries said. "Typically, we fly two days a week, during which we visit anywhere between 3 and 10 ships depending on how many are in the gulf. We are their primary source for passengers, mail and priority stores while they are at sea. We also fly special missions with the SEALs [sea-air-land team], providing them with a platform from which to conduct insertion and extraction techniques usually via paradrops and fast-rope operations. In addition, we offer rapid transportation for explosive ordnance demolition teams, and can fill the search and rescue mission if required."

With the implementation of United Nations (UN) sanctions against Iraq following the invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, naval vessels from some 15 countries have been conducting maritime interception operations in the northern Arabian Gulf in order to prevent merchant ships from transporting illegal cargo, specifically oil. At sea for weeks on end—enforcing resolutions prohibiting trade in cargo originating from Iraq and any imports not accompanied by a UN authorization letter—these predominantly U.S. Navy vessels rely on HC-2 Det 2 to

Facing page, despite its advancing years, the "truck" configured UH-3 can still be thrown around the skies with ease thanks to the removal of the heavy antisubmarine warfare gear that was once crammed into its fuselage. The Sea King's distinctive boat-shaped hull is clearly visible as Duck 744 breaks away from the camera helicopter. Left, copilot and Det 2 OIC LCdr. John Ries has been flying Sea Kings for almost 15 years. HC-2 personnel spend six months forward deployed with Det 2 in Bahrain, which is seen as a good posting.

keep them supplied with crucial cargo.

Despite their age, the trio of Sea Kings operated by the "Desert Ducks" carry out this unglamorous mission year round, in all types of weather. According to LCdr. Ries, "The Sea King is ideal for this mission. The H-46 does not have the legs to fly the long ranges that we do, the H-60 cannot carry the same outsized loads and the H-53 cannot operate from small-deck vessels."

Above, Duck 740 will depart *Hopper* (DDG 70) once the refueling crew has safely stowed the hose and cleared the flight deck. Facing page, every time a "Desert Ducks" UH-3 sorties on a mission from Bahrain, it is manned by a pilot, copilot and two enlisted crewmen, one of which is a qualified rescue swimmer. Secured to the helo by his gunner's belt, AE3 James Harms uses the Sea King's in-flight communications system to keep the pilots informed of their progress as they close on the flight deck of the cruiser *Vicksburg* (CG 69).

Designed during the Cold War to hunt Soviet submarines from aircraft carriers, the Sea King has an outstanding maximum unrefueled range of 625 miles. (Too heavy to work from small surface ships when it was first developed, it began operating from destroyers in the 1980s.) Its long legs are greatly appreciated by the crews of Det 2, whose mission when in theater is a six-hour sortie in support of vessels conducting maritime interception operations off the Kuwaiti coast. These warships are usually cruising between 180 and 190 miles north of Bahrain. Thanks to its long range, the Sea King is well suited to this mission, although the helicopter is usually refueled at least once from one of the vessels on which it lands. The crew prefers not to shut down while aboard, as the H-3's systems are most vulnerable to failure upon start-up.

The Heat Is On

The Arabian Gulf in summer can be one of the most inhospitable environments in the world, reaching its highest temperatures between April and October. LCdr. Ries explained, "Our six-hour missions can be a hard slog in the middle of summer, where the outside air temperature is regularly 120°F to 130°F. Typically cruising at 120 knots at a height of 100 feet, we always have a breeze blowing through the helicopter, but it feels just like a hair dryer!" Ries continued, "Despite the constant heat, the unit remains fully functional in even the hottest temperatures. We try to schedule our sorties for early morning and late afternoon flights in the summer, and we make sure that we take plenty of water with us when we fly. The temperature is obviously cooler after sundown, but we cannot transport passengers at

Mission accomplished, the crew of Duck 740 poses in front of their helicopter on the ramp: Left to right, Det 2 OIC LCdr. John Ries, Ltjg. Scott Dantvscher and AE3s James Harms and Jordan Prisler.

night over water. That is a standard [Naval Air Training and Operating Procedures Standardization] rule. We can only fly passengers at night should an emergency medevac or search and rescue situation arise." The extreme heat also affects the Sea Kings' performance. The Det 2 crews have to precisely calculate their rate of fuel burn and the power required to land for every ship recovery during the summer months. LCdr. Reis added, "This allows us to carry the maximum amount of cargo out to the vessels without pushing the H-3s beyond their heat-reduced capability. Our cargo-carrying capacity is reduced by about 1,500 pounds between the summer and winter months due to the heat."

Accumulating between 30 and 40 flying hours a month when assigned to Det 2, crews soon work out the best way to operate around individual classes of ships in order to maximize the UH-3's marginal hot weather performance. LCdr. Ries said, "We operate from all kinds of decks. The *Oliver Hazard Perry* (FFG 7)-class guided missile frigates are among our favorites due to the vessel's low deck that is closer to the waterline. This reduces our power requirement when coming in to land, which of course helps our performance in hot weather. Probably the hardest ships we regularly service are the *Arleigh Burke* (DDG 15)-class guided missile destroyers, as we have only one choice when lining up for a recovery. We employ a starboard-to-port lineup when approaching a DDG, which gives the copilot in the left seat reduced visibility of the deck."

Maintaining Reliability

Operating the oldest aircraft in the Navy, HC-2 periodically rotates its airframes through Bahrain in order to keep the fatigue life constant among its aging fleet of helicopters. Being the farthest flung detachment equipped with the UH-3, Det 2 is at the end of a long supply chain. With the parent unit struggling to keep a stock of some of the more esoteric spares for its Norfolk-based helicopters, the detachment in Bahrain routinely has to grapple with a shortage of parts for the Sea Kings. LCdr. Ries said, "Our oldest H-3 was accepted in 1961, while the remaining two airframes are also rapidly approaching their 40th birthdays. When operating aircraft of this vintage, things routinely break. Our biggest maintenance issue here in the det is availability of some of the key parts needed to keep these veterans airworthy. With so few airframes left in the Navy, some parts are hard to come by, even though we have the priority on spares due to our deployed status. Yet, despite its age, the H-3 is an eminently sustainable helicopter in the utility role as long as parts remain available."

HC-2 Det 2 will continue to operate its UH-3s for some time, because H-46Ds have priority for replacement with new MH-60S Seahawks within the helicopter tactical wings on both coasts. (In March 2002 HC-5 received the first three MH-60S helicopters to be delivered to an operational squadron.) Until HC-2 bids farewell to its Sea Kings, the seasoned helicopters will continue to carry out their vital mission serving the squadron and the Navy.

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HC-2 Fleet Angels History

An HC-2 UH-2D Seasprite flies close to a Soviet Ka-25 Hormone, top, over the Mediterranean Sea in 1972.

Providing search and rescue, vertical on-board delivery and executive transport in support of the Atlantic Fleet, Helicopter Combat Support Squadron (HC) 2 is home-ported at Naval Station Norfolk, Va., as part of Helicopter Tactical Wing, U.S. Atlantic Fleet.

The first HC-2 traces its lineage back to 1 April 1948 when the Navy's first operational helicopter squadrons—Helicopter Utility Squadrons (HU) 1 and 2 —were established at NAS Lakehurst, N.J., to provide utility services to ships of both the Atlantic and Pacific fleets. Flying Sikorsky HO3S-1 and HO4S helicopters, HU-1 and HU-2 performed a wide range of missions. As the versatility of the helicopter was proven with the advent of more advanced types, such as the Piasecki HUP-2, new units with more specialized roles were formed.

In July 1965, HU-2 was redesignated HC-2, and although it continued to fly a variety of missions, increasing emphasis was placed on plane guard and logistics support for carrier battle groups. Flying the UH-2 Seasprite, detachments from HC-2 saw considerable service while deployed to Southeast Asia during the Vietnam conflict. In 1972, HC-2's UH-2s were supplanted by 20 SH-3G Sea Kings. Living up to its *Fleet Angels* nickname, HC-2 boasted an outstanding search and rescue record, completing 2,318 rescues between 1 April 1948 and its disestablishment on 30 September 1977 when the unit fell victim to budget cuts.

The second HC-2 was established on 1 April 1987 at NAS Norfolk with personnel and equipment drawn from detachments formerly parented by support squadrons HC-6, Helicopter Antisubmarine Squadron (HS) 1 and Helicopter Mine Countermeasures Squadron 12. Equipped with SH-3A/Gs drawn from HC-6 and HS-1, HC-2 was stood up in order to unify the combat support elements of these dissimilar Atlantic Fleet squadrons. Initially nicknamed the *Circuit Raiders*, the unit quickly chose to continue the traditions of the first HC-2 by adopting the name *Fleet Angels*.

During Operation Desert Shield/Storm, the diverse abilities of HC-2's personnel and aircraft were put to the test. Operating four stripped out SH-3G/Hs during the conflict, the unit's Det 2 "Desert Ducks" (supported by HC-1 and HS-75) met all the challenges presented to the detachment in the Arabian Gulf. Det 2 distinguished itself by successfully participating in multiple search and rescue missions, strategic movements of prisoners of war, medical evacuations, mine searches and many other missions.

Reequipped with UH-3Hs and VH-3As in 1992–1993, HC-2 maintains two overseas dets, as well as supporting Atlantic Fleet vessels in home waters. It also conducts all fleet replacement training for Sea King crews, a role that the squadron assumed in October 1996.