

URBAN STRIKE: TERRORIST TRAINING FOR RESERVISTS

Story and Photos by Mike Wilson

Growing up a career Marine Corps aviation family member meant transferring from one Marine Corps air station to another every three or four years. Many of the departures and arrivals were punctuated by the staccato beat of CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters overhead.

During those 19 years, I never gave much thought to the CH-46's Marine Corps mission. For me, it was just another aircraft that I loved to watch in flight. However, the Marine Corps has seen the evolution of rotary-wing aircraft in the assault support role from the time it first

evaluated Army WW II helicopters and encouraged the Bureau of Aeronautics' development of larger ones, to the similarly piston-engined ones of the Korean War and the turbine-powered helos of today.

Last year, the reservists of the Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron (HMM) 774 Wild Goose, NS Norfolk, Va., provided me an opportunity to observe the primary mission of the venerable CH-46E in its role within the aviation combat element (ACE) of a marine expeditionary unit (MEU) during a training exercise.

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CH-46Es from HMM-774 approach the landing zone to drop off the second wave of Marines for Urban Strike 2002.







Cpl. Mark Pratt of HMM-774 scans the sky around his Sea Knight on the way to pick up the first wave of Marines for the exercise.

The MEU is composed of a command element (CE), ground combat element (GCE) and an ACE. The CE conducts the planning and execution of operations, while the GCE is a reinforced infantry battalion. The ACE is a reinforced helicopter squadron comprised of CH-46, CH-53 Sea Stallion, AH-1W Super Cobra, UH-1N "Huey," AV-8B Harrier II and CONUS-based KC-130 Hercules aircraft, along with other supporting units. The mission of the ACE is to provide assault support, fixed- and rotary-wing close-air support, airborne command and

control, and low-level air defense. All of these elements may undergo special operations capable (SOC) training during the predeployment workup.

Typically, personnel from an MEU (SOC) embark aboard three or four ships of an amphibious ready group (ARG) consisting of amphibious assault (LHA/LHD), amphibious transport dock (LPD) and dock landing (LSD) ships. The ACE and CE travel on board an LHA/LHD, while the GCE is dispersed among the ARG.

When reserve Marine Air Group (MAG) 49 began planning Urban Strike 2002, HMM-774 was included in the planning phase. The exercise was designed to provide the participants with a realistic training scenario to hone their combat skills and capabilities in close quarters battle/combat on par with their active-duty counterparts.

Post 11 September 2001 tasking requirements changed the tempo of the planning phase. As MAG-49 operations officer Lieutenant Colonel John Shamburger put it, "Although it takes six calendar months to plan and coordinate this exercise, the actual time involved for these reserve Marines was 10 days."

Upon their arrival at NAS JRB Willow Grove, Pa., the participants from HMM-774, Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron (HMLA) 775, Marine Aerial Refueling Transport Squadron (VMGR) 452, Marine Fighter Attack Squadron (VMFA) 321, MAG-49, Patrol Squadron (VP) 64 and the Trenton, N.J.-based Battery G, 3rd Battalion,

14th (3/14) Marines gathered to conduct final preparations for the next day's exercise.

The training provided a "real-world" scenario. A cell of terrorists were located in a small desert town, and the ACE aboard "*Willow Grove*" (LHD) was tasked to lift the 3/14 Marines of the GCE from "*Trenton*" (LPD) into a nearby landing zone under the watchful eyes of a section of VMFA-321 F/A-18 Hornets. The 3/14 would then sweep the town to capture whatever personnel, computers and documents could be found and return to



Above, this CH-46E from HMM-774 flies over the New Jersey countryside in formation with another squadron Sea Knight, right, shown carrying personnel from Battery G, 3rd Battalion, 14th Marines.

base. To keep the terrorists preoccupied, a section of HMLA-775 Super Cobras and “Hueys” would provide long-range close-air support and spotting for an artillery battery. Lt. Col. Shamburger would act as assault support coordinator aboard a VP-64 P-3C Orion orbiting several miles away.

The day of the exercise dawned with clear skies, and the VP-64 Orion took off, followed by the VMGR-452 Hercules. Our flight aboard a CH-46E lifted off at 1330 bound for Trenton to pick up the first wave of 3/14 Marines. Once loaded, we headed for the combat town nestled deep within the Warren Grove, N.J., Air National Guard range. A few minutes out, our pilot began humming the theme from “Apocalypse Now” as we dropped to just above tree-top level, and shortly the Marines were ready to offload. I jumped off with them to observe the ground Marines in action. About 30 minutes later, the second wave arrived and I boarded the Sea Knight for the flight to NAES Lakehurst, N.J., a forward area refueling point. After topping off with fuel, we headed back to Warren Grove to begin the extraction of the GCE. Except for one green-behind-the-gills Marine sitting directly behind me, the extraction went quickly and smoothly. After returning the last group to Trenton, we headed to Willow Grove where the engines were shut down at 1725 to officially complete our participation in the exercise.

Following post-flight debrief, all the players gathered for a critique of the day’s event. Wild Goose personnel assumed the role of teachers to explain the finer points of



the CH-46E assault support mission and what the aircrew expects when inserting or extracting Marines. Overall, everyone felt the exercise was a success.

At the end of my three-day visit, the men and women of HMM-774 had shown me what they have always known: the Marine Corps and the nation continue to get their money’s worth from the CH-46E Sea Knight. ✪

Mike Wilson is a professional photographer specializing in Naval Aviation. Special thanks to Major A. T. Ryan, DSS/NATOPS Officer, MAG-42-Det B/HMM-774, for his assistance with this article.