



HC-8 Farewells the Phrog

By Lt. Benjamin Armstrong



On 23 September 2004, the HH-46D Sea Knight flew with Helicopter Combat Support Squadron (HC) 8 for the last time, marking the squadron's transition to the MH-60S after flying the Sea Knight for almost twenty years. The Dragon Whales were established in December 1984, when the squadron was created from aircraft and personnel of HC-6. Sixty sailors and four H-46 Sea Knights (one A model and three D models) set up shop in the hangar next door to HC-6 at NAS Norfolk, Va., and by the end of 1985 HC-8 had grown to 14 aircraft and 275 sailors. Today, the squadron consists of 12 aircraft, 50 officers,

and nearly 300 enlisted personnel. It is part of the Helicopter Tactical Wing, U.S. Atlantic Fleet at Naval Station Norfolk, Va. Squadron aircraft and personnel are organized into teams and operate under the detachment concept. Each detachment goes to sea with a contingent of approximately 6 pilots, 1 maintenance officer, 22 enlisted members, and 2 aircraft. Squadron detachments deploy on LPH, LHA, LHD, AOE, and T-AFS class ships of the Second, Fifth, and Sixth Fleets, and sail to the Mediterranean and Caribbean Seas, Atlantic and Indian Oceans, and the Arabian Gulf.

Photo by PH1(AW/SW) Steven Harbour



The Dragon Whales' mission is critical to the Navy's capability of deploying and remaining at sea and on station for months at a time. HC-8 detachments perform vertical replenishment (VERTREP); conduct passenger, mail, and internal cargo transport; and provide continuous search and rescue (SAR) coverage while at sea. The Dragon Whales also perform drone recovery, special operations aerial training, and basic fleet support to Navy, Army, and Air Force units located along the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts.

The operational history of the Dragon Whales reads like a lesson in late twentieth century American foreign policy. In twenty years, HC-8's CH-, UH-, and HH-46s flew over 110,000 hours in support of peace and wartime operations around the globe. Whether it was providing bombs, bullets, band-aids or beans, Dragon Whales aircraft (dubbed "Bay Raiders" for their BR tail code) have participated in nearly every major military operation that has occurred since the squadron's creation.

In 1990, three HC-8 detachments deployed to the Middle East where they maintained the readiness of coalition forces for Operation Desert Shield. For almost fifteen years, HC-8's "Phrogs" (as the Sea Knight is affectionately known) supplied allied forces in the continuous operations in and around Iraq. From Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, to Operations Provide Comfort in northern Iraq and Southern Watch in the south, to current operations within Operation Iraqi Freedom, Dragon Whales aircraft have been making their overheads and moving the supplies required by troops in conflict.

Dragon Whales have supplied the troops in Somalia, Bosnia, Haiti, Croatia, and Kosovo. HC-8's Phrogs have performed counternarcotics work throughout the Caribbean and along the U.S. Atlantic seaboard. Since their first night vision goggle-capable amphibious search and rescue detachment deployed in 1994 aboard *Nassau* (LHA 4), the squadron has flown amphibious SAR and naval special warfare missions with the East Coast's amphibious ready groups and SpecWar units.

But the H-46D isn't only a war machine. The Dragon Whales have employed the Phrog's multimission capabilities on countless missions of mercy. Detachments have served in the relief efforts following hurricanes Andrew (1992), Emily (1993), and Floyd (2000). In 1992, Det 5 supported the visit of Pope John Paul II to the Dominican Republic and flew passenger transport missions in support of his entourage. The summer of 1996 found Bay Raider aircraft serving as search and recovery platforms for operations following the crash of TWA Flight 800 off Long Island, New York. In 1997, HC-8 Sea Knights took part in Operation Obelisk, which pulled over 2,500 civilians from civil war-ravaged Sierra Leone.

In recent years, H-46Ds from HC-8 flew naval special warfare missions to New York City following the attacks of 11 September 2001. Within a month, two detachments were taking part in Operation Enduring Freedom, supplying both the aircraft which struck Afghanistan and the ships that brought allied forces to the fight. By spring 2002, two more detachments had joined Enduring



PH2 John L. Beeman

Freedom, operating both around Afghanistan and with Joint Task Force Horn of Africa.

With the arrival of the new millennium, Navy rotary wing aviation began to change. The entire organization of helicopter operations began to shift with the implementation of the Helicopter Master Plan. The venerable Phrog, after almost forty years of serving her country, was slated for retirement and the MH-60S began arriving at HC squadrons. A planned merging of the HC and HS communities into Helicopter Sea Combat (HSC) squadrons was on the horizon. In December 2000, the first MH-60Ss were delivered to the Navy at NAS North Island, Calif. Following transitions by sister squadrons HC-3 (San Diego), HC-5 (Guam), and HC-6 (Norfolk), the Dragon Whales awaited the delivery of its first helicopter with “the new car smell.” New aircraft were a first for HC-8, since her original four H-46s were almost twenty years old when the squadron stood up in 1984.

With the end of the road for the H-46D in sight, and plans already in the works

Above, this time-lapse photograph captures an HC-8 MH-60S conducting vertical replenishment between *Mount Baker* (T-AE 34) and *Harry S. Truman* (CVN 75). Below, a Dragon Whales MH-60S from *Kearsarge* (LHD 3) drops a rescue swimmer during a training exercise.



PH3 Angel Roman-Otero

for flights to the boneyard, the Phrog was called upon yet again to serve her country. In January 2003, the Dragon Whales were put on alert and instructed to prepare detachments for deployment in support of what would become Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Thoughts of the future were put on hold, and the Phrogs went to work.

Within seven days the first detachment was out the door. In the midst of a personnel and aircraft transition, the squadron deployed five surge detachments of H-46Ds, just as the first MH-60S arrived at the hangar. Ten aircraft and almost 200 sailors went to sea on five ships headed for the Arabian Gulf and eastern Mediterranean.

Over the next nine months, HC-8’s Phrogs helped supply the sailors, soldiers, and Marines who liberated Iraq. A sixth detachment was deployed in March, marking the largest number of detachments away from home at any one time in the squadron’s history. The H-46D continued to demonstrate its versatility, flying every mission from



PH2 Michael Sandberg

VERTREP and cargo moves at sea, to enemy prisoner-of-war operations and medevacs in Iraq and Kuwait, to special warfare extractions in Liberia. For the first time since the Vietnam conflict, aircraft from HC-8 conducted vertical replenishment operations to an aircraft carrier while the carrier simultaneously launched strikes into combat.

As the detachments began to roll home from the war, the pace of the transition quickened. New MH-60s continued to arrive and the Phrogs were stricken in one-for-one exchanges. The detachment concept made the transition easier, allowing for the squadron to operate as a composite unit with separate H-46D and MH-60S sides of the house. In January 2004, HC-8's first MH-60 detachment deployed in support of Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom on board *Wasp* (LHD 1.) In June and July the squadron's Sea Knights were called to sea one last time to support security operations for the G8 summit in Georgia and to conduct SAR support for shipboard testing of the MV-22 Osprey.

The retirement of HC-8's last two Sea Knights in

During a VERTREP mission in an MH-60S, AM2 Joseph Broderick and AE3 Christopher Lovell of HC-8 prepare to receive a cargo pallet from *Seattle* (AOE 3) as *John F. Kennedy* (CV 67) approaches.

September 2004 marked the end of an era for the squadron. Although the Dragon Whales' mission remains the same, discovering the strengths and limitations of the new airframes will require some changes and will

probably result in some growing pains. In April 2005, most of the squadrons in the HC community will simultaneously transition to Helicopter Sea Combat squadrons, at which time HC-8 will become HSC-28. HC-2's redesignation in 2006 will mark the end of the HC-to-HSC transition.

With changes in both name and aircraft, it would be easy to assume the squadron identity will shift. Yet, on the day of the H-46Ds' final flight, two detachments of HC-8 MH-60s were at sea, carrying on the strong tradition of service started twenty years ago by a handful of aircraft and sailors. Whether flying -46s or -60s, under the HC or HSC designation, the pilots, aircrewmembers, and maintainers will always remember their storied past. ✈️

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HC-8's Final Phrog Flight

By Lt. Benjamin Armstrong



The last flight of an HC-8 H-46D Sea Knight cranked engines and spun the blades at 1000 for takeoff on the morning of 23 September 2004. After all the conditions the airframes had flown through in their 39 years—from jungles to deserts to cold northern seas—it was a beautiful, sunny, autumn day. The flight marked the end of an era for the Dragon Whales as the squadron farewelled the tandem-rotor aircraft that was the workhorse of the Navy for four decades.

Hundreds of Phrog drivers, aircrewmen, maintainers, and well-wishers gathered in the HC-8 hangar to observe the final flight. With an MH-60S in trail, Bay Raiders 16 and 33 made a final pass in formation. In the definitive Phrog maneuver, the two aircraft sideflared to a stop over the inboard runway to the cheers of the waiting crowd. Aircraft commander Lt. Sam Nesius, copilot Lt. James Thomas, crew chief AO2 Chris Pearce, and rescue swimmer AT1 Jason Van Buren taxied Bay Raider 33 to a stop in front of the hangar. Bay Raider 16, piloted by aircraft commander Lt. Pat Quirk, copilot Lt. Paul Lee, crew chief AT2 Jake McLaughlin, and rescue swimmer AT3 Matt

HC-8's Bay Raider 16 and 33 fly over Norfolk, Va., on 23 September 2004, marking the end of the Sea Knight's service with the squadron. Photo by PH1 (AW/SW) Steven Harbour.

Stephens, pulled in behind. The crews ran through their shutdown checklists, chopped back the engine condition levers, and put on the rotor brakes for the last time, to a hearty round of applause from the crowd.

A brief ceremony followed, during which CO Cdr. Peter Brennan pointed out that Bay Raiders 16 and 33 were delivered in 1965, but “the crews, on the other hand, were delivered much later,” an allusion to the fact that the oldest of the current crewmembers was born almost 10 years after his aircraft rolled off the assembly line. John Morgenstern—a Boeing technical representative who has worked on and flown the H-46 since the 1960s—presented a plaque from Boeing, recognizing the over 110,000 flight hours, 550,000 tons of cargo, 138,000 passengers, and 700 lives saved by H-46Ds flown by HC-8.

The ceremony wound to an end and the crowd began to break up. With almost 40 years of service under their blades, the two aircraft represented an amazing amount of history and evoked some emotional memories. At the same time, the introduction of the MH-60S opens a new chapter in the HC community's history.