

Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 364: Purple Foxes Support Operation Iraqi Freedom

Story and Illustrations by Morgan I. Wilbur

Under the light of a full moon, a CH-46E Sea Knight lifts into the hot night air in Al Anbar province, Iraq, and the offloaded Marines make their way toward the rest of their tour in country. The helo is from Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 364, known since the Vietnam War as the Purple Foxes. The squadron is flying in support of II Marine Expeditionary Force (Forward) (II MEF) engaged in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). After flying combat missions during OIF in 2003, the squadron returned to Iraq in March 2005 to support the forward deployed 2d Marine Aircraft Wing.

The squadron was activated in September 1961 as Marine Helicopter Transport Squadron (Light) 364 flying the HUS-1. It changed to its current title the following year, and by 1967 was flying the CH-46. The Purple Foxes deployed to Vietnam for three combat tours, amassing nearly 70,000 flight hours. Deactivated in 1971, the squadron was reactivated in 1984 and has been flying ever since.

During its recent deployment to Iraq the squadron operated from Al Taqaddam, flying casualty evacuation (CASEVAC), medical evacuation (MEDEVAC), and other assault and support missions, responding to calls from anywhere in Al Anbar Province. CASEVAC missions involved picking up recently wounded casualties for transport to a hospital; MEDEVAC flights involved transporting stabilized patients between hospitals. In addition to the regular flight crew, Navy corpsmen flew on these missions to provide lifesaving care to not only coalition warfighters, but also civilians

and enemy prisoners of war. While these casualty evacuation corpsmen were directly responsible for the care of the injured, everyone in the squadron was dedicated to saving lives. Flightline mechanic and aerial observer Cpl. Joshua McClintock explained, “we as a whole unit put everything aside and flew many hours, but that meant nothing to us compared to the 300-plus Iraqis, civilians, and service members who got to go home and see the smiling faces of their loved ones. That is what we will hold in our hearts forever.”

Squadron maintainers kept the aircraft operational despite 120 degree temperatures and sandstorms that blew dirt into any opening in the helicopters. In the dry season, under cloudless skies for months, the unrelenting sun beats down in an unvarying crush of heat and light. Even in the summer, nighttime temperatures do not moderate until the early hours of the morning. Squadron personnel working outside were particularly

susceptible to becoming heat casualties, so they had to stay ahead of the curve in terms of hydration.

Logistics officer Major Gabriel Valdez concluded, “the days were long, hot, and full of unique hurdles and obstacles. When we finished this deployment we all had great satisfaction knowing that we made a difference to someone’s life as a result of standing around the clock CASEVAC mission for 7 months in the II MEF area of responsibility.”

Art Director Morgan I. Wilbur deployed to Iraq in August as a combat artist to document Navy and Marine Corps support of OIF for the Navy Art Collection.



Above, a Purple Fox CH-46E picks up a patient for a MEDEVAC mission. Facing page, a squadron helo lifts into the night sky after dropping off Marines in Al Anbar province, Iraq.

