





HT-18 Vigilant Eagles

Story and Photos by Ted Carlson

Helicopter Training Squadron (HT) 18 was established on 1 March 1972 and is a component of Training Wing 5. Colocated with sister squadron HT-8 on board NAS Whiting Field, Fla., HT-18 is comprised of approximately 70 officers, 30 enlisted personnel, and three civilians. The Vigilant Eagles train Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard helicopter pilots; provide refresher and transition training to fleet aviators and flight surgeons; train students from foreign nations such as Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, and Saudi Arabia; and provide executive transportation in the Pensacola area.



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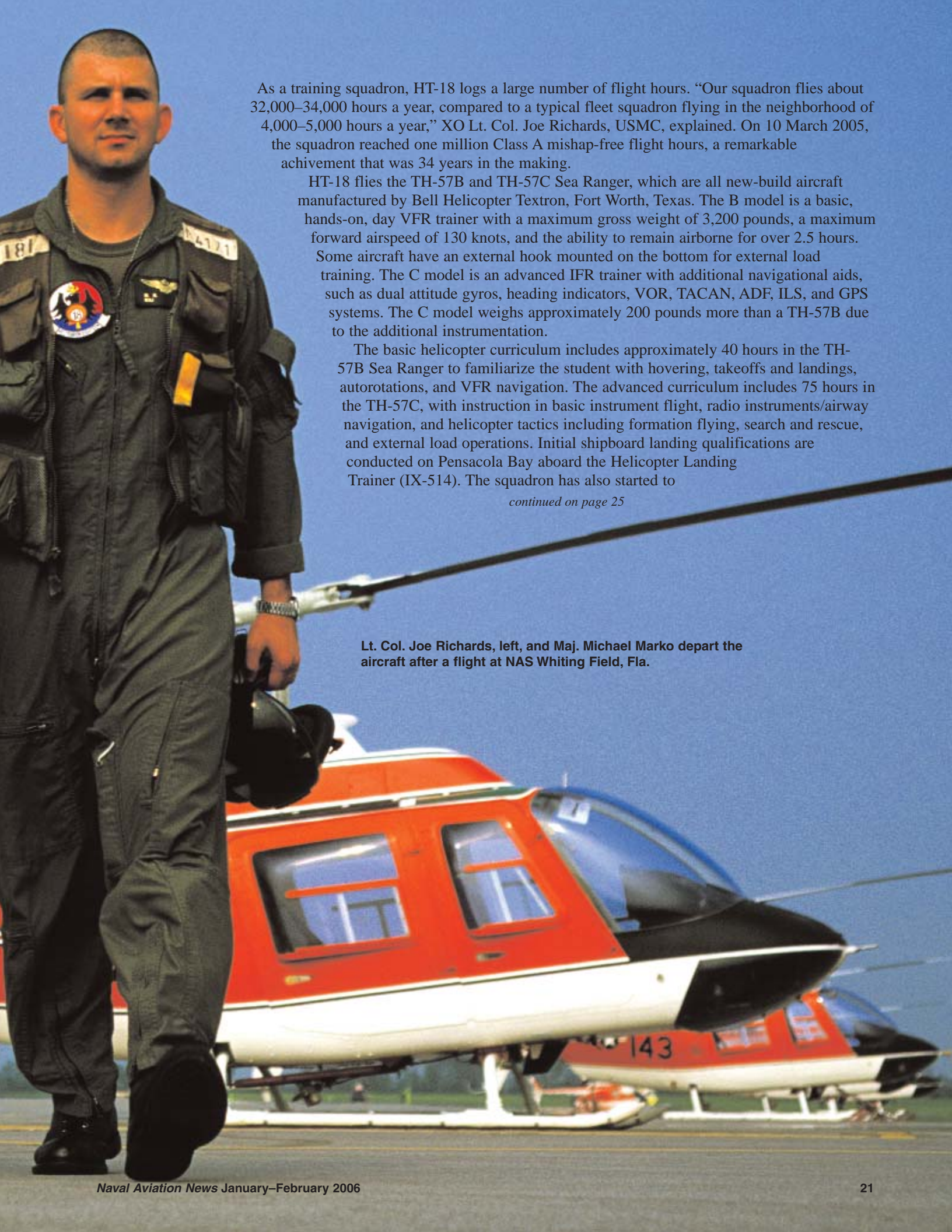


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As a training squadron, HT-18 logs a large number of flight hours. “Our squadron flies about 32,000–34,000 hours a year, compared to a typical fleet squadron flying in the neighborhood of 4,000–5,000 hours a year,” XO Lt. Col. Joe Richards, USMC, explained. On 10 March 2005, the squadron reached one million Class A mishap-free flight hours, a remarkable achievement that was 34 years in the making.

HT-18 flies the TH-57B and TH-57C Sea Ranger, which are all new-build aircraft manufactured by Bell Helicopter Textron, Fort Worth, Texas. The B model is a basic, hands-on, day VFR trainer with a maximum gross weight of 3,200 pounds, a maximum forward airspeed of 130 knots, and the ability to remain airborne for over 2.5 hours. Some aircraft have an external hook mounted on the bottom for external load training. The C model is an advanced IFR trainer with additional navigational aids, such as dual attitude gyros, heading indicators, VOR, TACAN, ADF, ILS, and GPS systems. The C model weighs approximately 200 pounds more than a TH-57B due to the additional instrumentation.

The basic helicopter curriculum includes approximately 40 hours in the TH-57B Sea Ranger to familiarize the student with hovering, takeoffs and landings, autorotations, and VFR navigation. The advanced curriculum includes 75 hours in the TH-57C, with instruction in basic instrument flight, radio instruments/airway navigation, and helicopter tactics including formation flying, search and rescue, and external load operations. Initial shipboard landing qualifications are conducted on Pensacola Bay aboard the Helicopter Landing Trainer (IX-514). The squadron has also started to


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Lt. Col. Joe Richards, left, and Maj. Michael Marko depart the aircraft after a flight at NAS Whiting Field, Fla.



integrate night vision goggle (NVG) training into the curriculum to prepare the students for what they will experience in the fleet. Lt. Col. Richards said, “Currently we have 6 aircraft that have been modified with NVG-compatible lighting, and ultimately we will have 15 NVG-capable TH-57s. Our goal is to introduce NVGs to all students coming through here.”

Each year several hundred aviators graduate from HT-18 and earn their wings of gold. Richards said, “Every other Friday, the students graduate in the presence of their families. Seeing the ceremony and that personal moment held every two weeks—it doesn’t get old. It is a fun job and I always look forward to coming to work every day.”

HT-18 Operations Officer Maj. Michael Marko concluded, “As long as the basic skill set that is required to check into fleet squadrons remains the same, we will fly the TH-57 and give the students the necessary skill that enables them to progress into their assigned fleet helicopter. The instructors put in 10–12 hour days and fly two to three times a day on hot days. I am proud of all the talented instructors we have here who work so hard every day to produce the well-trained aviators on their way to fleet.” 

Ted Carlson is a photojournalist specializing in Naval Aviation.

The author thanks Cdrs. Gerald Briggs, John Fleming, and Pam Kunze; Lt. Col. Joe Richards; Majs. Michael Marko and Karl Stoetzer; LCdr. Eric Sturgill; Capts. Sean Dickman and Andreas Lavato, USMC; Lt. Matt Knowles; Ltjg. Shaun Robertson; and the rest of HT-18.

