




An HS-4 Seahawk prepares to land aboard *Ronald Reagan* (CVN 76) while steaming in the Indian Ocean. *Reagan* departed on her maiden six-month deployment in January. Photo by PHAN Kathleen Gorby.

BLACK KNIGHTS BEGIN EVENTFUL DEPLOYMENT

By Ltjg. Brandon Sheets



From the beginning of *Ronald Reagan's* (CVN 76) maiden deployment, Helicopter Antisubmarine Squadron (HS) 4 has seen plenty of action. In addition to training for antisubmarine warfare, surface surveillance control, logistics, combat search and rescue, and naval special warfare missions, the Black Knights have been training daily to maintain SAR readiness. While deployed aboard the newest carrier in the fleet, the HS-4 maintenance team is working all hours to keep two HH-60H and four SH-60F Seahawks ready for flight. The technology on board *Reagan* has allowed the Black Knights to hold training/safety lectures and intel briefs weekly. Digital systems and flat screen monitors have been integrated throughout every squadron ready room on the ship, allowing for time-sensitive briefs, navigational updates, and weather information to be passed simultaneously to each squadron.

HS-4's transit across the large expanse of the Pacific was not without its share of exciting moments, as the squadron executed three separate medevac missions. Two of those took place on 6 January, the second day of the six-month deployment, as *Reagan* completed carrier qualifications off the southern California coast. The crew of Lt. Doug Chase, Ltjg. Brandon Sheets, AW2 Ben Chavez, and AW2 David Rankin transported a heart attack victim from *Nimitz* (CVN 68) to Balboa Medical Center in San Diego. Upon their return to *Reagan*, they learned of an additional medevac mission, but this one was assigned to the relief crew of Cdr. Scott Bischoff, Ltjg. Bill Guheen, AW2 Colin Koss, and AW3 Garrett Keller. This crew made a return trip to San Diego with a patient who had become seriously ill on board the carrier.

A more challenging mission was still ahead, however. As *Reagan* steamed toward the Hawaiian Islands on 9



Left, Ltjg. Brandon Sheets performs a preflight inspection on an SH-60F Seahawk on the flight deck of *Ronald Reagan* (CVN 76). Photo by PH3 Christopher D. Blachly. Below, HS-4 mechanics work on a helicopter's rotor assembly between flights. Photo by PHAN Kathleen Gorby. Facing page, a Black Knights SH-60F departs *Lake Champlain* (CG 57) following a passenger transfer. Photo by PH3 Aaron Burden.

January, the strike group received a distress call from the MV *Princess Jasmine*, approximately 815 miles northeast of Oahu. One of the members of her crew was complaining of severe chest pains. USNS *Rainier* (AOE 7) was the closest Navy vessel, and their HSC-21 det retrieved the patient to begin medical care. Meanwhile, *Reagan* began to steam at best speed to close *Rainier* and get the Black Knights within range. A two-plane flight launched on an extended open ocean transit, led by LCdr. Andy Jouhal, Lt. Josh Fagan, AWC Rich Ham, and AW2 Paul Caudillo. The second helo had the crew of LCdr. Mike Noonan, Ltjg. Stephen Huber, AWC Matt Shicks, and AW2 Josh Rothrock. The weather cooperated, allowing the crews to safely fly a 300-mile round trip and transfer the patient back to *Reagan* for proper medical care.

On 28 January the Black Knights were thrust into the spotlight as routine flight operations turned into near-disaster. The pilot of an F/A-18C ejected from his aircraft while attempting a night trap on board *Reagan* off the coast of eastern Australia. The HS-4 crew headed by Lt. Dave Sechrist was on the scene, and AW2 Colin Koss lowered AW2 Matt Louviere into the black ocean. Though the heavy seas presented a challenging environment, AW2 Louviere swam toward the survivor and successfully hoisted him back into the safety of the hovering helicopter.

The low-light conditions demanded that Lt. Sechrist and copilot Ltjg. Stephen Huber maintain an aggressive instrument scan to keep the helicopter in place and complete the mission. Just 18 minutes passed from the time of the mayday call to the moment the survivor arrived safely on *Reagan's* deck. RAdm. Michael Miller, commander of the *Reagan* carrier strike group, recognized the accomplishments of the crew by awarding each member a Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal.



Cdr. Bischoff, HS-4 CO, acknowledged that it takes the entire squadron to be ready for these types of flights, and commended the efforts of all Black Knights. "That is how the months of practice, grooming aircraft, and attention to detail pay off. All of you play a role in this. When we stick together, do by-the-book maintenance/flight procedures, and strive to be the best in our business, we get positive results."

As RAdm. Miller commented, "HS-4 continues to maximize their resources of aircraft and personnel alike to provide a multimission helicopter platform for *Reagan*." Each department in the squadron including admin, maintenance, operations, and safety, has contributed to the early success of the 2006 cruise. As the Black Knights have shown, the HS community continues to provide the Navy with a highly capable helicopter platform. Any mission, any place, any time. ✈️

Ltjg Sheets is a pilot with HS-4.

