



A large HMM-774 CH-46E Sea Knight helicopter is the central focus, parked on a sandy tarmac. The helicopter's main rotor blades are blurred, suggesting it is either starting to spin or has just stopped. The number '432' is visible on the front of the fuselage. Several ground crew members in tan uniforms are positioned around the helicopter, engaged in refueling or maintenance tasks. The background is a clear, light blue sky. The overall scene depicts a busy operational environment at an air base.

HMM-774 Completes OIF Deployment

By LCpl. James B. Hoke

Brushing the grit from their faces and the sand from their eyes, the members of Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 774 completed their second deployment to Al Asad Air Base, Iraq, and headed home to NS Norfolk, Va., on 1 April. The Marines with HMM-774, Marine Aircraft Group 16 (Reinforced), 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing, spent the previous seven months transporting Marines and cargo, providing assault support, and maintaining their aircraft in support of

Operation Iraqi Freedom. It's the second deployment the squadron has completed in 19 months.

"Our mission is to augment with the active duty forces and provide full mission capable Marine helicopter assault support in the time of a national crisis," CO Lt. Col. Leo A. Kilgore said. "There's not any other Marine squadron out there that has deployed 14 of the last 19 months. Some squadrons have been out there for 10 months. Some have been out there 12

Members of the ground crew at Al Asad Air Base, Iraq, refuel a pair of HMM-774 CH-46E Sea Knights. On 1 April the squadron completed its second deployment to Iraq in 19 months. Photo by LCpl. Brandon L. Roach.



A crew chief with HMM-774 waves from his CH-46E Sea Knight as it comes to a stop following a long mission out of Al Asad Air Base, Iraq. Photo by LCpl. James B. Hoke.

months in the last few years, but none have done 14 months in a 19-month period.”

As most deployed squadrons are filled with active duty Marines, the Wild Goose squadron is composed of Marines from three of the duty categories—the reserves, active reserve, and active duty. “A lot of these Marines are reservists, which is about 50 percent of the squadron,” Kilgore said. “They live in places like Connecticut and Ohio. When we were in the United States, they didn’t get to go home every weekend or see their families that often. When you get right down to it, they have gotten to see their families a total of 90 days in the last two years.”

Regardless, they have kept mission accomplishments to a maximum. “We haven’t dropped a flight,” Sgt. Maj. Steven M. Golder said. “The Marines have met every mission and the planes have always flown above 80 percent mission capable. It is very impressive to see these young Marines working the way that they do. They’ve

covered every mission that they had and did everything they were supposed to do.”

While many of the Marines with HMM-774 are preparing to get reacquainted with the day-to-day lives they left behind months earlier, more than a few find themselves glancing back toward the desert. “This is where the mission is,” assistant aircraft maintenance officer Maj. Paul W. Voss said. “This is where you want to be as a Marine. This is a reserve unit that has been activated going on two years now. You have a pretty diverse crowd of reservists, active reservists, and active duty Marines working together, and they are all seasoned veterans.”

However, most of the Marines with the Wild Goose squadron are ready to hang up their uniforms for a short while and get back to normal life. Golder, who has served 27 years in the Marine Corps and is scheduled to retire soon, said that for the squadron members, this



homecoming was more than getting back to their families. “They want to get back to what they call the real world. They want to enjoy life for awhile. With the constant rotation of 24 hours on and 24 hours off with a day off a month, they are just ready for a break.”

Time at home also allows Marines in the squadron to look back on a job well done. This includes several

achievements during the past two deployments that Kilgore believes stand out above all the rest. “Not one person has been hurt or killed, and I haven’t had to plan for a memorial service,” he said. “We’ve definitely proven the mettle of reservists and we’ve also proven that the system works. They did their job, and I can’t think of a better squadron to take home right now.” ✈

Above, a Sea Knight gives off a radiant glow from lights on the flight line during night operations at Al Asad Air Base, Iraq. HMM-774 CO Lt. Col. Leo A. Kilgore, right, talks to a Marine during the squadron’s final formation before leaving Iraq. HMM-774, which completed its second deployment in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 19 months on 1 April, operates with a mixture of reserve, active reserve, and active duty Marines.

