

21st SPECIAL OPERATIONS SQUADRON



MISSION

LINEAGE

21st Pursuit Squadron (Interceptor) constituted, 22 Dec 1939

Activated, 1 Feb 1940

Inactivated, 2 Apr 1946

21st Helicopter Squadron constituted, 24 Feb 1956

Activated, 9 Jul 1956

Inactivated, 15 Oct 1957

Activated, 30 Jun 1967

Organized, 15 Jul 1967

Redesignated 21st Special Operations Squadron, 1 Aug 1968

Inactivated, 22 Sep 1975

21st Pursuit Squadron (Interceptor) and 21st Special Operations Squadron consolidated, 19 Sep 1985. Consolidated squadron retains 21st Special Operations Squadron designation.

Activated, 1 May 1988

STATIONS

Moffett Field, CA, 1 Feb 1940

Hamilton Field, CA, 10 Sep–Oct 1941

Nichols Field, Luzon, 20 Nov 1941 (air echelon operated from Clark Field, 9–15 Dec

1941)
Lubao, Luzon, 25 Dec 1941
Bataan, Luzon, 4 Jan–Apr 1942 (a portion of the air echelon operated from Mindanao, 9 Apr–1 May 1942)
Donaldson AFB, SC, 9 Jul 1956–15 Oct 1957
Shaw AFB, SC, 15 Jul–27 Nov 1967
Nakhon Phanom RTAFB, Thailand, 27 Nov 1967–22 Sep 1975 (air echelon operated from Ubon RTAFB, Thailand, 11–13 Apr 1975; *USS Midway*, 20 Apr–2 May 1975; U–Tapao RTNAF, Thailand, 2–5 May and 14–16 May 1975)
RAF Woodbridge, England, 1 May 1988
RAF Alconbury, England, 1 Apr 1992

DEPLOYED STATIONS

Batman AB, Turkey, 13 Jan–18 Mar 1991
Diyarbakir AB, Turkey, 6 Apr–10 Jun 1991
Brindisi AB, Italy and Incirlik AB, Turkey, 2 Mar–12 Jul 1993

ASSIGNMENTS

35th Pursuit Group, 1 Feb 1940–15 Jan 1942
Eighteenth Air Force, 9 Jul 1956
Ninth Air Force, 1 Sep–15 Oct 1957
Tactical Air Command, 30 Jun 1967
507th Tactical Control Group, 15 Jul 1967
56th Air Commando (later, 56th Special Operations) Wing, 27 Nov 1967
Thirteenth Air Force, 30 Jun–22 Sep 1975
39th Special Operations Wing, 1 May 1988
352nd Special Operations Group, 1 Dec 1992

ATTACHMENTS

24th Pursuit Group, c. 20 Nov 1941–2 Apr 1946
63rd Troop Carrier Wing, 9 Jul 1956–30 Jun 1957
314th Troop Carrier Wing, 30 Jun 1957– c. 8 Oct 1957
656th Special Operations Wing, 30 Jun–22 Sep 1975
Joint Special Operations Task force, 13 Jan–18 Mar 1991 and 6 Apr–10 Jun 1991
Joint Special Operations Task Force 2 Mar–12 Jul 1993

WEAPON SYSTEMS

P–36A, 1940–1941
P–40, 1941–1942
H–21, 1956–1957
CH–3, 1967–1971
CH–53, 1970–1975
MH–53, 1988
MH-53J

MH-53M
CH-3C
CH-53C
HH-53C
MH-53M

COMMANDERS

Cpt Glenn O. Barcus, 1 Feb 1940
Maj William E. Dyess, Sep 1940-9 Apr 1942
LTC Kirk Smith

HONORS

Service Streamers

None

Campaign Streamers

World War II
Philippine Islands

Vietnam
Vietnam Air Offensive, Phase II
Vietnam Air Offensive, Phase III
Vietnam Air/Ground
Vietnam Air Offensive, Phase IV
TET 69/Counteroffensive
Vietnam Summer-Fall, 1969
Vietnam Winter-Spring, 1970
Sanctuary Counteroffensive
Southwest Monsoon
Commando Hunt V
Commando Hunt VI
Commando Hunt VII
Vietnam Ceasefire

Southwest Asia
Defense of Saudi Arabia
Liberation and Defense of Kuwait

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

None

Decorations

Distinguished Unit Citations (Philippine Islands)

7 Dec 1941–10 May 1942
8–22 Dec 1941
6 Jan–8 Mar 1942

Presidential Unit Citations (Southeast Asia)

1 Nov 1968–1 May 1969
1 Oct 1969–30 Apr 1970
1 Apr 1972–22 Feb 1973

Air Force Outstanding Unit Awards with Combat "V" Device

1 Sep 1970–30 Apr 1971
1 Dec 1971–29 Feb 1972
23 Feb 1973–28 Feb 1974
24 Jan–2 May 1975
14 Jan–23 Mar 1991

Air Force Outstanding Unit Awards

24 Mar 1991–31 Jul 1992
1 Aug 1992–31 Jul 1993

Philippine Presidential Unit Citation (WWII)

Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross with Palm
[27] Nov 1967–28 Jan 1973

EMBLEM





Gules, a funnel cloud bendwise Or shaded Sable detailed Brown supporting a devil's face Buff shaded Brown, highlighted White, detailed Sable; all within a diminished bordure Azure. The

emblem of the 21st PS was officially approved on 20 Dec 1941 while the squadron was fighting for its survival during the dark days of the Japanese invasion of the Philippines. By the time the Philippines was surrendered in April 1942 the squadron had been decimated. (Approved, 18 Oct 1967 and reinstated in 1996; replaced emblems approved, 5 Jun 1995 and 20 Dec 1941)

MOTTO

NICKNAME

DUSTDEVILS

OPERATIONS

Combat in the Philippine Islands, 8 Dec 1941–1 May 1942; ground echelon fought as infantry in Bataan, 18 Jan–8 Apr 1942. Carried as an active unit but was not operational from the fall of the Philippines until inactivation.

The 21st Helicopter Squadron was activated on 9 Jul 1956, to provide the U.S. Army with air support in a fashion similar to the TAC Troop Carrier Squadrons. Authorized 38 officers and 91 airmen to fly and support the H-21, the unit was assigned 29 officers and 89 airmen and attached to the 63rd Troop Carrier Wing, Donaldson AFB, South Carolina. The Army, declined all support from the Air Force helicopters, and the 21st Helicopter Squadron turned to fly airlift support, search and recovery missions, and cooperated with a communications group in an experiment to lay communications lines by helicopter. The unit flew photo, airlift, and radiological survey missions during atomic testing at the Nevada Test Site prior to inactivation on 15 Oct 1957.

The need for heavy-lift capability beyond that of the CH-3 became increasingly evident. During 1967 U.S. Army Chinooks and Marine CH-53s were sent to north Thailand from Vietnam on ten occasions for a total of ninety-six days. CH-54s were flown from Da Nang on several subsequent occasions to lift artillery, damaged aircraft, generators, and other items in Laos. To meet such needs, the Seventh/Thirteenth Air Force in early 1968 requested that several heavy-lift choppers be permanently based at Udorn. MACV was unwilling to spare these craft from Vietnam and instead recommended that the Air Force procure its own CH-53s. The Secretary of Defense on April 20, 1968, approved the procurement of twelve CH-53s for this purpose. The first CH-53C joined the 21st Helicopter Squadron in August 1970, beginning a changeover period not completed until December 1971. The CH-53s thus became the Air Force's first heavy-cargo helicopter, with twice the power of the CH 3E and three times the latter's load-carrying capacity.

The 21st Helicopter Squadron had maintenance troubles. Excessive use regularly pushed the CH-3s to the limits of air-frame, engine, and transmission tolerance. Sand and grit got into critical parts, engines were damaged by foreign objects when operating at forward points, and metal fatigue cracks appeared. The new CH-53s increased spare parts difficulties and, despite frequent cannibalization, parts shortages regularly kept ten to twenty percent of these craft on the ground. Pilots warmly praised the efforts of inexperienced maintenance men and supervisors, but several pilots stated they were more concerned by the danger of mechanical failure than by the threat of hostile fire.

The necessity of replacing all Southeast Asia personnel every twelve months strained the Air Force's thin reservoir of experienced helicopter pilots, especially in the later years of the war. One expedient was to train experienced fixed-wing pilots in rotary-wing flying, in many cases selecting older officers who had not flown in recent years. Such individuals, after graduating from the helicopter school at Sheppard Air Force Base, Tex., went through tactical training in the CH-53 at Shaw. After reaching Nakhon Phanom, everyone received further checkout and upgrade training under squadron instructors. Of thirty-nine pilots assigned to the 21st Helicopter Squadron in mid-1970, only ten had previous rotary-wing experience. Twelve were lieutenant colonels although only one lieutenant colonel was authorized. To balance these personnel deficiencies were the excellent flying characteristics of the CH-53 and the craft's large margin of engine power. In another measure, taken largely in response to congressional pressure, the Air Force abandoned its policy that helicopter pilots should first be rated in fixed-wing aircraft. Beginning in late 1970, candidates without fixed-wing ratings entered a 190-flying hour helicopter training program conducted by U.S. Army.

In early 1968 several flight crews and aircraft were taken from the 20th Helicopter Squadron, "Pony Express", at Udorn to begin the 21st mission. The former 20th aircrews were experienced in classified operations in Laos and North Vietnam and would add to the capabilities in missions that the 21st would eventually become involved. The likeliest method of improving intelligence coverage seemed to be a system originally designed to ferret out trucks entering South Vietnam by way of Laos and the Ho Chi Minh trail. This surveillance system involved the use of electronic sensors, seismic and acoustic, accurately implanted along known or suspected routes of North Vietnamese infiltration. These devices broadcast to an orbiting airplane, in this case a specially equipped Lockheed EC-121 which relayed the signal to an infiltration surveillance center at Nakhon Phanom in Thailand. Those highly advanced computers would correlate the data coming in "real-time" from thousands of sensors we would dropped on and around the Ho Chi Minh Trail to stop the infiltration of both supplies and troops into South Vietnam. Prior to the arrival of the 21st Helicopter Squadron, a Navy squadron, using OP-2E aircraft delivered sensors over the trail. The Navy lost several aircraft in just a few weeks after having worked successfully for some time and the decision was made to withdraw them from their perilous mission. This would be the 21st SOS new primary mission.

Tail No.: 66-13295 Model: CH-3E Date of Loss: 23 May 68 Unit: 21st Helicopter Sq.

Country of Loss: SVN Call Sign: Dusty 51

Pilot: James P. McCollum

Co-Pilot: William H. Taylor

Flight Engineer: John L. Coon

Flight Engineer: John E. Albanese

Crew Chief: Robert A. Fink

Helicopter was lost to unknown causes while flying a sensor delivery mission, crash site could not be reached due to heavy enemy activity. This was the first combat loss for the 21st SOS. Crew remains were eventually recovered.

The last 21st SOS CH-3 shot down on a sensor drop mission was in Feb 1969. After several such losses, the AF decided that placing sensors with helicopters wasn't viable, and transferred the mission to the F-4s.

Cross-border helicopter activity reached a maximum in 1969 and early 1970. The missions from Thailand were secondary responsibilities of a detachment of the 20th Squadron at Udorn and the 21st Special Operations Squadron based at Nakhon Phanom. Distances to the Prairie Fire and Cambodian operating areas were great, and each Thai-launched mission meant two crossings of the enemy's main panhandle infiltration corridors. The high altitudes needed to assure safety from ground fire during these crossings were hard on engines, so crewmen often criticized Prairie Fire missions from Thailand, except when weather obviously prevented takeoff from Vietnam. The CH-53s generally operated in pairs with one staying high at the landing zone ready for emergency rescue. Crews used steep approaches and relatively high speeds for the final approach. Forward air controllers often coordinated fire suppression and helped to find the landing zone. Escort fighters accompanied most missions, with propeller-driven A-1Es preferred to jet fighters because of their slower speed, superior maneuverability, and greater endurance. Some CH-53s had miniguns for self-protection. Precautionary tactics held CH-53 losses in the Prairie Fire region to a single ship downed in February 1971

Along with its many other responsibilities the 21st Squadron increasingly made tactical troop lifts, hauling Meo and Laotian battalions in airmobile assault and reinforcement operations. In the later years of the war, the history of the whole allied airlift effort in Laos, including contract, Royal Laotian Air Force, and U.S. Air Force helicopter and fixed-wing arms, became increasingly involved in the campaigns on the ground.

Allied defeats continued into early summer of 1969 and were climaxed with the evacuation and loss of Muong Soui. A helicopter task force assembled at Long Tieng on June 27 for the Muong Soui evacuation ten from 20th and 21st Squadrons, three HH-53s from the Air Force air rescue unit in north Thailand, and eleven Air America H-34s. Withdrawal of a 350-man Thai unit began that afternoon and was completed in two hours, after which evacuation of Laotian troops and families began. One 21st Squadron CH-3 was shot down, but crews and passengers stood off enemy troops with rifles and grenades until picked up by an Air America H-34. The evacuation continued the next day, always plagued by difficult weather. Air attaché officers praised the aircrews of the unarmed and vulnerable helicopters who time and time again descended into the enemy-controlled area at minimum altitude and airspeed, crammed their burdens into the overgrossed machines, and staggered out of the area to the Long Tieng sanctuary. These deeds should not go unnoted to the men of the Air Force helicopter units and their comrades of Air America, Inc.

66-13294 CH-3E 30 Mar 68 21st SOS, 56th ACW, NKP Laos Dusty 51 Richard D. Bryant Schermerhorn Jeffery Zinn Thomas Bullington (FE) Johnnie Garrett (FE) Aircraft was delivering sensors when hit by ground fire and was forced to land.

66-13295 CH-3E 23 May 68 21st SOS, 56th ACW, NKP SVN Dusty 51 James P. McCollum William H.

Taylor John L. Coon John E. Albanese Robert A. Fink helo was lost to unknown causes while flying a sensor delivery mission, crash site could not be reached due to heavy enemy activity. Crew remains were eventually recovered.

67-14702 CH-3E 15 Jan 69 21st SOS, 56th SOW, NKP Laos Knife 54 Gerald T. Henery Adams Gerard Bucknall Hernand E. Wilson see 65-15691 above, same crew except for Bucknall and Mattos. Acft was on Prairie Fire emergency extraction, was hit by ground fire, crash landed, later destroyed by friendly aircraft.

63-09689 CH-3E 19 Jan 69 21st SOS, 56th SOW, NKP Thailand Dusty 689 Troy Lindabury Phil Conran James J Clouse Bill Sawyer During a landing off base at night at the scene of fires started when a A-26 jettisoned their bomb load - pilot experienced vertigo and the helicopter settled into the trees. One Thai Guard was killed in the crash. Helicopter was destroyed.

CH-3C helicopters 64-14237: Assigned to the 21st SOS at NKP, "Knife 51" was on an "Igloo White" mission near the DMZ in Laos, when an engine was knocked out by anti aircraft fire. Unable to climb, they circled, finally making a wheels up landing atop a hill. The crew was picked up by another CH-3C and the helicopter was later destroyed by friendly fire. 26Feb69

65-15691 CH-3E 27 Jun 69 21st SOS, NKP Laos Knife 22 Gerald T. Henery F. L. Mattos J.D. Adams Hernand E. Wilson (FE) picking up team involved in firefight.

CH-3C helicopters 62-12579 and 64-14222 Assigned to the 21st SOS at NKP, call sign "Knife 62" The mission was to fly about 200 indigenous personnel to a landing strip at Maung Phine, Laos with a group of 10 helicopters. The first in was Knife 61 (222), which took ground fire, knocking out one engine, forcing it to land. Second in was Knife 62 (579), which also took ground fire, forcing it down. A Jolly HH-3E called in to rescue the downed crews, was hit by ground fire, and limped back to NKP. Two Jolly H-53s eventually rescued the crews before nightfall. 6Oct69

66-13288 CH-3E 3 Feb 70 21st SOS, NKP Laos Knife 51 J. C. Hughes J. P. Stuart H.L. Ramsey B.A. Smith Aircraft was hit by ground fire, lost power, crashed, and burned. Aircraft was destroyed by friendly aircraft.

Tail No: 66-13287 Model: CH-3E Date of Loss: 24 Oct 70 Unit: 21st SOS

Country of Loss: Laos Call Sign: Knife 33

Pilot: Craig B. Schiele

Flight Engineer: Thomas E. Heideman

The helicopter was in a flight of two extracting indigenous personnel from a hill top LZ. The helicopter picked up 11 personnel and as the aircraft lifted off, it turned and fell into trees 200 meters from the LZ. A short time later, the other helicopter picked up 8 indigenous personnel who said the entire crew of the helicopter was dead; 20 minutes later, radio contact was made with the survivors and they, along with the body of the pilot were recovered.

Tail No: 63-09681 Model: CH-3E Date of Loss: 13 Aug 70 Unit: 21st SOS

Country of Loss: Thailand Call Sign: Skycap 36

Pilot: Alan B. Cheeseman (8W-106)

Co-Pilot: George D. Henry (8W-108)

Flight Engineer: Terry D. Reams (8W-112)

Gunner/Other: William L. Ripley (8W-109)

\Hit by a 12.7mm round which blew up the hydraulic accumulators and knocked out both engines. They were on a training mission for a new pilot and instructor. Also delivering parts from NKP to Ubon. Crashed near Ubon Thailand.

There was one surviving crew member - a 21st SOS pilot named (Captain) Vic Genez. Vick was the copilot seat (left seat) when the helicopter was hit by ground fire (12.7 mm machine gun) and made the dramatic descent - on fire. After they hit the ground, Vic knocked out the left side window and went out of the helicopter. He ran around the aircraft and saw one of the FEs - William Ripley - come running out through the sliding door on the right side. Sgt Ripley was on fire and Vic extinguished the flames with his hands. Sgt Ripley, unfortunately, died later of his burns. No one else got out of the aircraft. Vic Genez was med-evac'd immediately and was treated for burns, but survived. I heard that he was decorated for his efforts to save Sgt Ripley. George Henry was, I believe, a brand new CH-53 pilot who was in the jump seat for an area familiarization flight while Cheeseman and Genez were in the pilot seats. They were both trying to build time in the CH-3. I believe Cheeseman, who had already past the date of his last required mission, had an assignment to be an instructor at Sheppard. Henry was so new to the unit, I did not even know he had arrived, and had never even met him. The mission had another task - taking some parts to Ubon. The aircraft, when hit, was flying south and was approximately 20 nautical miles north of Ubon Air Base at about 1000 feet.

Allied helicopters again were in the forefront of Pao's counteroffensive, Operation Leapfrog. Leapfrog began August 18, 1970, with the insertion of five hundred government troops at the rim of the Plain of Jars by Air Force and contract helicopters. A climax for the 21st Squadron occurred in the last week of November with the unit lifting nearly two thousand troops and equipment from Long Tieng to a landing zone near Ban Ban, well east of the plain. Compared with the successes of About Face, those of Leapfrog were small and no more permanent. The enemy reclaimed the initiative in early-year pushes against Long Tieng in 1971 and 1972. In both campaigns, allied helicopter and fixed-wing transport forces again provided Long Tieng's only transportation link to the outside.

CH53 68-10929 18 Feb 71 21st SOS Laos Knife 47 Roger Korenberg Lyle Horner Carl DeMattos Augie Lawson Laos, 11 people on board. The official accident investigation report listed the aircraft as a combat loss due to groundfire. All rescued by KNIFE 33.

CH-53C 68-10931: Combat, 1 Mar 1971, 21 SOS, Nakhon Phanom RTAB,; Took severe ground fire on infil as lead of a three ship inserting Laotian soldiers. Lost one engine and attempted to egress, bypassing enemy troops before crashing into trees near friendly troops. Cockpit destroyed in crash, killing pilots. Two flight engineers survived.

Pilot: Milton H. Ramsey

Co-Pilot: Albert Tijerina, Jr.

Tail No.: 70-1628 Model: CH-53C Date of Loss: 24 Jan 75 Unit: 21st SOS, 56th SOW

Country of Loss: Thailand Call Sign: Dusty ??

Pilot: Gary C. Hall

Co-Pilot: Bryan A. Rye

Flight Engineer: James K. Hurley

56th CAMS: Garry W. Hermanson

This loss occurred due to a rotorhead failure while on a routine FCF (Flight Control Flight) after maintenance work had been completed. Loss occurred near Ban Nakhon, Thailand.

From David Wharton, 56th CAMS, Jet Engine Shop:

At about 11pm on 1-23 Jim Werder and I started a fuel control/throttle rigging job. The control removal and replacement went well, but we had hell rigging the throttles. Jim was so pissed off he kicked all of his tools and bag off the right engine (looking from the front of the Jolly) area and I came out of the cockpit area to see his tools spread out on the PSP. I signed off our work in the log book and was sure our work was complete and done to our satisfaction. We finished about 0330 on 1-24. The crew did not come out before our shift finished at 0700 for the engine run and check. Jim and I did not know that the Jolly was going up for a complete Flight check on 1-24. Jim and I came in at 7pm for our night shift on 1-24 and as we entered the north end of our 56CAMS jet engine shop, our flight line boss – Lupe Cardena – told Jim and I that the CH53 was missing. Our hearts sank and we both had a few tears from this shocking information.

Jim and I took our dispatch truck with our co-workers and went about with our night's engine jobs. Jim and I watched an HH53 from I believe the 40th ARRS lift off from its parking place on the line. We discussed our work on the fuel control and the rigging from the night before and were 100% sure our work was well done, but we still were worried. The Jollys always took off on the main runway so we knew it was the rescue chopper.

At about dark the HH came back and we watched body bags being removed from the Jolly. Neither of us spoke for awhile. Then Jim exploded and told me that we should get in an OV10 (we had engine run and taxiing qualifications) and fire the M60 and rockets somewhere over Laos. I calmed him down and we both wept as we knew our buddy Garry Hermanson was on our CH53. Lupe had told us this before we went out on the flight line. Jim and I regained our composure and went about the night's engine work, but it was a very sad night.

We got off at 7am 1-25 and I remembering heading downtown NKP to crash at my bungalow by myself and not sleeping wink. Jim went to his teerak's place and did not sleep either. Went into work at 7pm and heard all kinds of rumors. The CH-53 crashed due to auto gyro problems (which I believed) – it was located upside down deep in a rice paddy – was brought down by enemy fire over Thailand – enemy fire over Laos. About 3 days later we heard the engines were taken to NKP town and parts were missing. Crazy rumors. I have the small article from the Houston Post that my Dad saved for me. It says the crash was due to a mechanical failure.

Jim, I never knew till I read your account that it was a rotorhead failure. Another engine buddy of mine (Clarence Jolley) who I keep in touch with has told me it was shot down over Thailand. I also keep in touch with Jim Werder. Both reside in Arizona. As the days went by we were told Jim and my engine work was checked out and all was ok. But I believe this but have no proof except word of mouth from Jan 75. I agree that our work was not the cause of the crash, but would really like to know what really happened.

On May 13 1975, at 2030 local time, 16 Sikorsky CH-53Cs took off from RTAFB Nakhon Phanom. Shortly after take off, one of the helicopters, Serial Number 68-10933 from the 21st SOS fell out of formation, crashed and exploded on impact. All 22 aboard, including four crew, 18 USAF security police and one linguist, were killed in the crash. Other CH-53s landed nearby, but exploding ammunition and burning fuel hindered all rescue attempts. The CH-53 crashed in the Phannanikhom District, 35 miles west of Nakhon Phanom. Officially, the CH-53C was on a routine training mission, but all 22 killed in the crash were awarded the Bronze Star posthumously.

21st SOS aircrew:

Capt James G. Kays, Atlanta, GA

1stLt Laurence E. Froehlich, Sodus, MI

TSgt George E. McMullen, Oxford, CA

Sgt Robert P. Weldon, Kansas City, KS

56th Security Police Squadron:

Sgt Jimmy P. Black, Daphne, AL

Sgt Bobby G. Collums, Helena, AZ

SSgt Gerald A. Coyle, Bentleyville, PA

Sgt Thomas D. Dwyer, Middlebury, CT

Sgt Bob W. Ford, Seminole, TX

Sgt Gerald W. Fritz, Junction, TX

TSgt Jackie D. Glenn, Seymour, MO

Sgt Darrell L. Hamlin, Iowa City, IA

Sgt Gregory L. Hankamer, San Pedro, CA

Sgt David A. Higgs, Spokane, WA

SSgt Faleagafula Ilaoa, San Francisco, CA

Sgt Michael D. Lane, Jacksonville, FL

Sgt Dennis W. London, Sparks, NV

Sgt Robert P. Mathias, Granada Hills, CA

Sgt William R. McKelvey, Philadelphia, PA

Amn Edgar C. Moran II, Pittsburgh, PA

Sgt Tommy R. Nealis, Mount Sterling, KY

Sgt Robert W. Ross, Cypress, CA

CH-53A tail number 68-10925 Date: 05/15/1975 Unit: 21st SOS Crew Members: P 2LT Vandeguer Richard Bnr Ac Maj Ha Corson Passengers And/Or Other Participants: Pfc Benedett Daniel Andrew, Mc, Px, Bnr Pfc Blessing Lynn, Mc, Px, Bnr Pfc Boyd Walter, Mc, Px, Bnr Lcp Copenhaver Gregory Scott, Mc, Px, Bnr Lcp Garcia Andres, Mc, Px, Bnr Hm1 Gause Bernard Jr, Na, Px, Bnr Pfc Jacques James Joseph, Mc, Px, Bnr Hn Manning Ronald James, Na, Px, Bnr Pfc Maxwell James Rickey, Mc, Px, Bnr Pfc Rivenburgh Richard Willia, Mc, Px, Bnr Pfc Sandoval Antonio Ramos, Mc, Px, Bnr Pfc Turner Kelton Rena, Mc, Px, Bnr

REFNO Synopsis: What follows is an edited version of the SYNOPSIS record for RUMBAUGH, ELWOOD EUGENE and RICHARD VAN DE GEER, US Air Force, Unit (probably) 21st Special Operations Squadron - Nakhon Phanom, Thailand. The full narrative included a lengthy recount of the MAYAGUEZ Incident.

SYNOPSIS: 2LT Richard Van de Geer, assigned to the 21st Special Ops Squadron at NKP, had participated in the evacuation of Saigon, where helicopter pilots were required to fly from the decks of the 7th Fleet carriers stationed some 500 miles offshore, fly over armed enemy-held territory, collect American and allied personnel and return to the carriers via the same hazardous route, heavily loaded with passengers. Van de Geer wrote to a friend, "We pulled out close to 2,000 people. We couldn't pull out any more because it was beyond human endurance to go any more..." On May 15, the first wave of 179 Marines headed for the island aboard eight Air Force "Jolly Green Giant" helicopters. Marines of the 2/9 made landings on two areas on Koh Tang Island. The eastern landing zone was on the cove side where the Cambodian compound was located. The western landing zone was a narrow spit of beach about 500 feet behind the compound on the other side of the island. The Marines hoped to surround the compound. At the eastern landing zone, the first two helicopters landing were met by enemy fire. Ground commander, (now) Col. Randall W. Austin had been told to expect between 20 and 40 Khmer Rouge soldiers on the island. Instead, between 150 and 200 were encountered. 1LT John Schramm's helicopter tore apart and crashed into the surf after the rotor system was hit. All aboard made a dash for the tree line on the beach. One CH-53A helicopter was flown by U.S. Air Force Major Howard Corson and 2LT Richard Van de Geer and carrying 23 U.S. Marines and 2 U.S. Navy corpsmen, all from the 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines. As the helicopter approached the island, it was caught in a cross fire and hit by a rocket. The severely damaged helicopter crashed into the sea just off the coast of the island and exploded. To avoid enemy fire, survivors were forced to swim out to sea for rescue. Twelve aboard, including Maj. Corson, were rescued. Those missing from the helicopter were 2LT. Richard Van de Geer, PFC Daniel A. Benedett, PFC Lynn Blessing, PFC Walter Boyd, Lcpl. Gregory S. Copenhagen, Lcpl. Andres Garcia, PFC James J. Jacques, PFC James R. Maxwell, PFC Richard W. Rivenburgh, PFC, Antonio R. Sandoval, PFC Kelton R. Turner, all U.S. Marines. Also missing were HM1 Bernard Gause, Jr. and HM Ronald J. Manning, the two corpsmen. Other helicopters were more successful in landing their passengers. One CH-53A, was not. SSGT Elwood E. Rumbaugh's aircraft was near the coastline when it was shot down. Rumbaugh is the only missing man from the aircraft. The passengers were safely extracted.

CH53 68-10926 15 May 75 21st SOS Cambodia Knife 21 John H. Denham Karl W. Poulsen Robert A. Boissonnault Elwood E. Rumbaugh Assault on Koh Tang Island. While off-loading Marines on the Western Beach of Koh Tang Island, the helicopter was hit by ground fire. The pilot managed a single engine takeoff and headed out to sea, skipping along the water, and taking on water each time it hit the surface. The aircraft made it nearly a mile off shore when it crashed. The aircraft rolled on it left side and all of the crew managed to exit the aircraft; SSgt Rumbaugh disappeared a short time later and it is believed he drowned.

CH53 68-10927 15 May 75 21st SOS Cambodia Knife 23 John H. Schramm John P. Lucas Ronald A. Gross Eduardo E. Arrieta James M. Barschow, (Photog) KNIFE 23 was alongside KNIFE 31 during the initial attempt to insert Marines onto the Eastern Beach of Koh Tang Island. As they approached the beach, the two aircraft came under intense ground fire. Just after KNIFE 31 exploded in flames, Knife 23 lost an engine and made a hard landing on the beach, losing its entire tail section. The crew and the 20 Marines onboard exited the aircraft and made it to the treeline and were later rescued.

Tail No.: 68-10925 Model: CH-53 Date of Loss: 15 May 75 Unit: 21st SOS

Country of Loss: Cambodia Call Sign: Knife 31

Co-Pilot: Richard Vandegeer

Assault on Koh Tang Island. The aircraft with 20 Marines and 2 Navy medics on board was hit by ground fire as it approached the Eastern Beach of Koh Tang Island. The pilot attempted to pull back to deeper water, but a direct hit to the cockpit brought the aircraft down in waste deep water, near the surf line, where it burst into flames. Thirteen onboard the helicopter survived the crash and swam out to sea where they were rescued, the copilot and 12 of the passengers were not recovered.

Tail No.: 68-10926 Model CH-53 Date of Loss: 15 May 75 Unit: 21st SOS, 56th SOW

Country of Loss: Cambodia Call Sign: Knife 21

Flight Engineer: Elwood E. Rumbaugh

Assault on Koh Tang Island. While off-loading Marines on the Western Beach of Koh Tang Island, the helicopter was hit by ground fire. The pilot managed a single engine takeoff and headed out to sea, skipping along the water, and taking on water each time it hit the surface. The aircraft made it nearly a mile off shore when it crashed. The aircraft rolled on its left side and all of the crew managed to exit the aircraft. SSgt Rumbaugh disappeared a short time later and it is believed he drowned.

HH-53C 73-1648: 1st fully SLEPed MH-53J; Crashed during a CAPEX in Sep 1987, killing 1 Ranger; Currently in service with the 21st SOS at RAF Mildenhall, UK.

Provided support to coalition forces during Southwest Asia conflict, Jan–Mar 1991 and later.

The squadron was reactivated 1 May 1988 at RAF Woodbridge, England flying the MH-53 and assigned to the 39th Special Operations Wing. The 21st provided support to coalition forces during Southwest Asia conflict from January to March 1991 and later.

The 21st relocated to RAF Alconbury, England, and was reassigned to the 352nd Special Operations Group (352nd SOG) on December 1, 1992. The mission of the 352nd SOG is to serve as the focal point for all U.S. Air Force special operations activities throughout the European theater, including Africa and the Middle East.

Joint Task Force Provide Comfort deployed to Incirlik Air Base at Adana, Turkey, on 6 April 1991.

In 1993, the 352nd Special Operations Group, RAF Mildenhall, England, and the 16th Special Operations Wing, Hurlburt Field, Fla., initially deployed people and to San Vito while supporting Operation Provide Promise, a humanitarian airlift that sustained thousands of sick and starving civilians trapped by Bosnia's civil war.

Mildenhall's 21st and 7th SOS, using MH-53s and MC-130H Combat Talon IIs, also ferried troops into Sarajevo and Tuzla, and played a key role in Bosnia's 1996 elections by flying 54 U.S. delegates to eight polling sites scattered throughout the war-scarred country.

The 21st Special Operations Squadron participated in a combat search and rescue mission for the pilot of a downed F-117A stealth fighter during the air campaign against Serbia and the forces of Yugoslavian President Slobodan Milosevic.

In mid-1996 Air Force Special Operations Command helicopters passed the 5,000 flying-hour milestone supporting NATO's Bosnian operations. MH-53J Pave Low III crews from both the 21st Special Operations Squadron, RAF Mildenhall, U.K., and the 20th SOS, Hurlburt Field, Fla., provided combat search and rescue capability for more than three years and continue flying missions supporting Operation Joint Endeavor

In 1998 an Air Force MH-53 Pave Low from the 21st Special Operations Squadron, RAF Mildenhall, England flew out of San Vito, Italy in support of the Bosnian peacekeeping mission.

In March 2000 a MH-53M Pave Low IV helicopter from the 21st Special Operations Squadron, UK refueled over South Africa from an MC-130P from the 67th Special Operations Squadron. Both Squadrons are from RAF Mildenhall, and deployed to Air Force Base Hoedspruit, South Africa, to support Operation Atlas Response. The Pave Lows operated from Air Force Base Hoedspruit where they are deployed in support of Operation Atlas Response, a multi-national humanitarian relief mission helping displaced people in central and southern Mozambique that have been devastated by recent floods.

Special Operations Forces and rescue forces were in high demand during Operation Iraqi Freedom. The MH-53Ms from the 21st SOS conducted missions over Iraq.

On 2 Aug 2000, at 1:15 a.m. local Mildenhall time, an MH-53M Helicopter. Tail #69-5784, crashed on Stanford Range, a Ministry of Defence training area, 13.9 miles northeast of RAF Mildenhall (RAF.M), United Kingdom (UK), at coordinates N5226.84 and E00049.06. The helicopter was assigned to the 21st Special Operations Squadron,. The mishap aircraft was the number two of a three-ship formation training flight. When the mishap occurred, the mishap aircraft was leading the formation in night formation landings using night vision goggles. The mishap aircraft crashed in its designated landing zone (LZ). All crewmembers received only minor injuries. There was significant damage to the aircraft. No damage to private property was reported. The LZ was a large, level, open field, surrounded by trees. The LZ surface was covered with grass and ferns, approximately two to three feet high. According to crew testimony, the pilot flew a normal approach, brought the aircraft to a hover, approximately 30 feet above the ground, and then began to tower the aircraft. Having received "cleared to land" signals from the right, left and tail crew positions, the pilot continued the descent. The aircraft landed in a depression that was eight feet deep and eighty-three feet wide, and the tail rotor impacted the ground. The Board President determined that the mishap resulted from the aircrew's inability to observe the previously unmarked depression as the aircraft made its descent.

On 24 January 2002, at 4:47 a.m. Central European Time (CET), a MH-53M Helicopter, Tail Number 67-4994, struck the USNS Kanawha in the western Mediterranean Sea, coordinates N3708.46 E01550.17. The MH-53 Helicopter was assigned to the 21st Special Operations Squadron, 352nd Special Operations Group, Royal Air Force Base Mildenhall, United Kingdom. The mishap aircraft was planned to insert forces onto a shipboard landing zone (LZ). The designated LZ was the ship's one-spot helicopter flight deck. The mishap aircrew was performing a night vertical board search and seizure (VBSS) insertion using night vision goggles. While maneuvering above the deck, the mishap aircraft struck an antenna mounted atop the ship's superstructure. There were no fatalities or injuries to any crewmembers in the mishap. There was extensive damage to the rotor system of the helicopter. There were no injuries to anyone on the ship. The LZ was located on the stem of the USNS Kanawha in close proximity to the six-story superstructure upon which the impacted antenna was mounted. The approach to the LZ was controlled and there was no awareness of impending danger until impact. It was identified through aircrew testimony that each crewmember had a different understanding of the rotor clearance available at their selected hover position, which was the painted center of the flight deck's painted landing circle. It was also identified through aircrew testimony that, with one exception, the crewmembers believed the forward limit providing safe clearance within the landing circle was the vertical replenishment line (T-line). The right scanner, believed the aircraft to be safe when positioned anywhere inside the flight deck's painted landing circle. Keeping the aircraft's transmission aft of the T-line provided between 11 feet and 15 feet of rotor clearance. Moving forward of the T-line to the forward limit of the landing circle provided between 3 feet and 7 feet of rotor clearance. The right scanner's belief of having more clearance than was actually present led to position calls that were neither timely nor adequately directive. The pilot's belief that the aircraft's position was further from the superstructure than it actually was led to inadequate control inputs to effect immediate reversal of the approach's right drifting vector into the ship's superstructure. The board president determined the crew was unaware of the actual rotor clearance available and did not adequately communicate a coordinated forward rotor clearance reference during the planning process. The ensuing lack of situational awareness was the primary cause of the accident.

Based at RAF Mildenhall, in the UK, the 21st Special Operations Squadron (SOS) with its 250 personnel, was officially inactivated on October 9, 2007. The 21st SOS, known as the 'Dust Devils', flew the Sikorsky MH-53M Pave Low IV helicopter until the last flight from their home base on September 13. All five Pave Lows in the fleet took the air for the final flight, which included aerial refueling with their 67th SOS stable mates flying a MC-130P. Up until inactivation, the 21st SOS were the USAF Special Operations European Command's only vertical lift unit, their tasks are to be taken over by the US Army. Held on continuous stand-by they could be tasked at a moment's notice with a broad range of operations, from Combat Search and Rescue (CSAR) to humanitarian relief.

The squadron's fleet of Pave Lows, built for low-level, undetected flights into enemy territory, is scheduled to be transported to a disposal yard in Arizona by the end of the year. But before they are retired, the crew took them out on one final trip. After taking off from RAF Mildenhall, the

formation skimmed across the English countryside at a height of only a couple hundred feet passing airfields and farms with startled livestock. Then, the helicopters gained elevation to cross over the tranquil American Military Cemetery near Madingley and the outskirts of Cambridge before closing in on Duxford Airfield. Then they picked up the River Thames and followed it all the way into central London. Photo opportunities for those riding in the copters and on the ground were aplenty as the formation made two sweeps over Tower Bridge. Perhaps one of the highlights of the flight was when the helicopters descended over the English Channel and rode parallel to the cliffs of Dover. The rocky sea cliffs gave off a bright white glow against the channel's blue water, making this part of the flight even more special.

An MC-130P Combat Shadow, assigned to the 67th Special Operations Squadron, then arrived to refuel the helicopters. The aircraft had a couple of refueling nozzles hanging from its rear, which made it possible to pump fuel to two Pave Lows at once. Once filled up, the helicopters headed to the firing range in the North Sea. In the lead helicopter, Staff Sgt. Jordan Zirola, a Pave Low aerial gunner, loaded rounds into a .50 caliber machine gun planted on the rear ramp and lit up a smoke signal floating out in the sea. At the same time, a pair of 7.62 mm mini guns attached to the sides of the Pave Low unloaded fire at similar targets in rapid succession, causing white-water explosions as the bullets peppered the water. "It was recreational fun today. We went out there and had a good time," Zirola said after the flight. Zirola is sentimental about the Pave Lows, which he has been working with for four years. Still after four years, it's kind of sad. These aircraft have been around for a while. It really is the end of an era," he said. One of his most memorable times with the Pave Lows was in Iraq. He was in another five-ship formation, but unlike Thursday's, the flight was in hostile terrain over Baghdad at night, he said. Capt. Matt Richter has been flying Pave Lows for about five years and said it is bittersweet to see the helicopter go. "We all love to fly it. We've done a lot of missions for the war on terrorism. It's very satisfying work and we're proud to do it, but there's other things out there for us," Richter said.

An Air Force spokesman said earlier this year that the chopper is being deactivated throughout the Air Force special operations force and is slated to be replaced by the CV-22 Osprey vertical-lift, fixed-wing aircraft in the next few years. He said that the age of the Pave Low — built for 5,000 hours, with most surpassing 10,000 and pushing 15,000 hours — led to the decision to deactivate it. Senior Airman Patrick Soles, a Pave Low crew chief, is sad to see the copters go. He and fellow maintainers have put many hours into keeping them up and running. "I'm going to miss it. I went through tech school in 2000 for it," he said about the helicopter. When the squadron inactivates in October, it will go into a holding status until the Special Operations Command stands it up again, possibly for the Osprey, squadron commander Lt. Col. Kirk Smith said. "At some point, the 21st might be reactivated as a V-22 squadron," he said.

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