

PROFESSIONAL READING

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Photos above and left courtesy Robert J. Cressman

Knott, Richard. *Fire from the Sky: Seawolf Gunships in the Mekong Delta*. U.S. Naval Institute, 291 Wood Rd., Annapolis, MD 21402. 2005. 261 pp. Ill. \$29.95.

Students of the air war in Vietnam know about the Navy's dedicated gunship squadron, Helicopter Attack Light Squadron Three, or HAL-3 (presented in this book as HA(L)-3). However, the exploits of the Seawolves are not as well known to the general reader, even though several articles and one book-length crewman memoir have been published in the last 30 years. This omission has now been rectified with this first-rate account written by a former editor of *Naval Aviation News*. Captain Knott is a highly experienced author and Naval Aviator, and is probably one of only a few pilots to have brought back a P-3 with damage from enemy ground fire. Having flown over much of the area he describes, he is well qualified to write this book.

HAL-3 was the only squadron of its type during the Vietnam War. Members of its active alumni association gave Knott a wealth of stories and impressions that help portray the young, dedicated crews of the squadron's war-weary UH-1s as they flew their hazardous missions in day or night, fair weather or foul, against an elusive



PHOTO: R. E. Woods

Experiences of Seawolf crews operating in the Mekong Delta during the Vietnam War are chronicled in the new book, *Fire from the Sky*. Above right, a UH-1 from HAL-3 flies over the Mekong Delta in 1968. Photo by R. E. Plouffe. Above, Seawolf aircraft conduct a mission over Can Tho in November 1967. Left, Vietnamese children clamor for candy handed out by squadron OIC LCDR. William D. Martin in September 1967.

and implacable enemy. One of the Navy's most decorated squadrons of the war, HAL-3 was composed of nine detachments that ranged up and down the intricate waterways of South Vietnam enforcing Operation Game Warden, interdicting enemy supply efforts to Communist forces in the south.

The book begins with one of the most detailed, beautifully written descriptions of a wartime setting, namely the Mekong River Delta, I have read. The narrative records the origination of the Navy organization that assumed an Army mission beginning in 1966, as

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well as many Army UH-1B helicopters. It's a little known fact that several Army aviators flew with the Navy squadron while the Navy crews were working up to full-mission capability.

When HAL-3 was officially commissioned in April 1967, it began a fantastic five-year period of incredible, often highly dangerous missions against the Communist Viet Cong, who hid in the labyrinthine maze of the Delta and usually lived in the villages along the jungle waterways.

The Seawolves' main mission was to escort and protect the "Brown Water Navy," the large fleet of 30- to 40-foot river boats manned by American and later South Vietnamese sailors which scouted the narrow rivers for Communist contraband. Later on, the Seawolves also teamed with SEAL teams, and often meant the difference between life and death for the hard-pressed Navy commandos.

Captain Knott details the complicated genesis of the Navy gunship squadron, crewed by a generous selection of highly motivated characters, including a Royal Australian Air Force baker who was anxious for more exciting work. The author also describes the often primitive living conditions and violent action experienced by Seawolf crews. Even the ground crews were sometimes involved in heavy combat when they found themselves under attack as they worked on their old helicopters.

Knott has woven the many stories he obtained into a lucid, exciting read. The Seawolves finally have had their history published—what a movie it would make!

Nicolle, David and Cooper, Tom. *Arab MiG-19 and MiG-21 Units in Combat*. Osprey Publishing, Elms Court, Chapel Way, Botley, Oxford, OX2 9LP, UK and Motorbooks International, 729 Prospect Ave., PO Box 1, Osceola, WI 54020. 2004. 96 pp. Ill. \$19.95.

Number 44 in Osprey's Combat Aircraft series, this book offers a fascinating look at an exotic, seldom-described subject. The photographs are interesting and the series' trademark profile artwork and cover illustration are excellent. Although the author sometimes struggles to maintain a balanced view, the experiences of the Egyptian MiG pilots fighting against a superior Israeli Air Force are welcome reading. The Arabs had to contend with faulty, undependable missiles; aircraft availability issues; official blunders; and the acknowledged skill of their Israeli opponents.

One revelation is that there are at least two Syrian aces, one of whom logged seven kills and died in action over Lebanon in 1982. (The author sometimes refers to a pilot as an "ace," even though he might have less than the required five victories.) Like other accounts of Third World air forces, the Arab squadrons' stories are usually made up of rare glimpses and conjecture.

Later sections describe Soviet influence in the 1970s and 1980s, and the incredibly bad showing by Iraq's MiG-21 force against Iranian F-4s and F-14s. These exotic accounts appear for the first time in the Western press. Osprey has recently published several volumes dealing with the Mideast air war, including books on Israeli Mirage and Phantom aces. This latest effort adds to the growing literature on the subject.