

HISTORY OF HELICOPTER ATTACK (LIGHT) SQUADRON THREE

Helicopter Attack (Light) Squadron THREE, or HA(L)-3 is the only helicopter attack squadron in the Navy. HA(L)-3 arose from the peculiar nature of guerilla warfare in Vietnam and has played a major role in the allied campaign to deny the Viet Cong use of the all-important waterways of the Delta.

Developments in early 1966 led to the establishment of HA(L)-3. On April 10, the first River Patrol Boats (PBR's) went into action on the treacherous Delta waterways, and it soon became apparent that quick-reaction close air support would be indispensable for such river operations. At first Army gunships provided the necessary assistance, but later the need for precise communications and unity of command led to the decision to form a Navy helicopter unit responsible to the River Patrol Force.

Subsequently, eight UH-1B's were borrowed from the Army in the summer of 1966 with Naval personnel manning the aircraft and the Army providing the pilot and crew training, ordnance, and maintenance. Four detachments, each containing eight aviators and eight crewmen from Helicopter Support Squadron ONE (HC-1) at Imperial Beach, California, went into operation on September 19, 1966. Detachments were based at Tan Son Nhut, Bien Hoa, and Soc Trang.

The first major battles involving HA(L)-3, or the "Seawolves", took place on October 31, 1966. In a coordinated attack by PBR's and Hueys near My Tho, over 50 of 75 enemy sampans were sunk, and the enemy

suffered heavy casualties. The first of specially configured Tank Landing Ships (LST's) - The USS JENNINGS COUNTY - arrived at Vung Tau, a city, soon to become the Seawolf's headquarters. HA(L)-3 was to utilize many LST's as landing platform bases in order to insure both mobility and proximity to their own operational areas, and to decrease the chances of enemy attack.

By the end of 1966, the helicopter unit still depended on the Army for maintenance as well as training. In January 1967, the River Patrol Force, through their Operation Game Warden, announced that 22 aircraft, 94 officers, and 240 enlisted personnel would be provided in order to establish a completely new squadron to replace the detachments from HC-1. Seven detachments were envisioned, and eventually a central Naval maintenance facility would be created at Binh Thuy, where Game Warden headquarters was located. Meanwhile, the squadron would be based at Vung Tau, where Navy and Army maintenance personnel could work together in maintaining aircraft.

On April 1, 1967, HA(L)-3 was formally commissioned with Commander Robert W. Spencer assuming command of the squadron in May. For the first 18 months of the Squadron's existence, the heaviest concentration of detachments was in the heart of the lower Delta from Binh Thuy to Vinh Long and Dong Tam. There are four major rivers which run through the Delta, all of which are branches of the Mekong - The Bassac, Co Chien, Ham Long, and

My Tho. To cover these waterways and their tributaries, six detachments deployed from various nearby bases throughout 1967 and most of 1968. From Binh Thuy, Det Seven covered the lower Bassac, where Det One was also deployed from an LST. Det Three guarded the Co Chien from its base in Vinh Long. Det Four was based aboard an LST in the Ham Long until moving to Dong Tam in early 1969, and Det Six covered the My Tho, also from Dong Tam. Det Five at one time or another covered each of these rivers, according to the changing demands of the war.

Detachment Two has been at Nha Be since the days of HC-1. Their job is to support operations in the Rung Sat Special Zone, the treacherous maze of swamp and canals leading from Saigon to the Sea that have long been the target of the Viet Cong ambush and mine activities. Det Two became a "double det" with four aircraft and a double contingent of pilots and crewman in June of 1969.

Captain Robert Munson succeeded Commander Spencer in May 1968, as Commanding Officer of HA(L)-3, and during his tour, the squadron continued to fulfill its basic mission. They also began the expansion and transition that has carried over through the summer of 1969. As a result, all parts of the Delta are now easily accessible to Seawolf operations.

Toward the end of 1968 the need for concentration of detachments in the lower Delta began to dissolve, thanks to increased pacification of the area. In early fall, Det Five moved to Rach Gia on the Gulf of Thailand, and in November the detachment moved aboard the YRBM-16 stationed near Chau Doc on

the upper Bassac only a few miles from the Cambodian border. Det Five's move signaled the beginning of a new phase in River Patrol Force operations: the interdiction of enemy troops and supply units into the Delta from the north. In early 1969 Det Three moved to the far northwest corner of the Delta - Ha Tien on the Gulf of Thailand - while Det Six replaced Det Three in the area of Vinh Long, taking up station aboard an LST. Later Det Three moved to Muc Hoa and then to a ship in the upper Mekong not far from Det Five.

The task of shutting off infiltration routes between the Vam Co Tay and Vam Co Dong rivers was code named Operation Slingshot, and HA(L)-3 played a major role in its success. Det Three took part in this operation while at Moc Hoa, and Dets Four and Seven played an even larger part because of their respective locations. Det Four had been participating in Operation Slingshot since November 1968, from a location at Dong Tam, and in early 1969 they moved to Duc Hoa to be closer to their ops area. They moved again in June to Ben Luc, on the Vam Co Dong River, and at present are still participating in Operation Slingshot, which has developed into one of the most successful campaigns in which the Squadron has participated.

Det Seven also operates in the Giant Slingshot area, having moved from Binh Thuy to Tay Ninh in June, 1969. For some time intelligence reports had mentioned Tay Ninh as a prime enemy objective for use as a possible provisional capital. Near the border northwest of Saigon, Tay Ninh was considered highly vulnerable until allied forces moved into the area.

Under Captain Reynolds Beckwith, who succeeded Captain Munson as Commanding Officer in April of 1969, the transition and expansion of the the Squadron continued. The redeployment of detachments from the lower Delta was nearly complete, and the Squadron headquarters was moved from Vung Tau to more centrally located Binh Thuy in May. In early July the first new detachment since the Squadron's commissioning was created - Detachment Eight. It was sent to assist Det Seven at Tay Ninh. The creation of Det Eight was made possible by the acquisition of 11 new aircraft in June and July, and further expansion followed in September, with the creation of Det Nine. Even more is planned for the future in anticipation of further new aircraft to arrive later this year.

Captain Beckwith's first months saw a new center of operations develop in far western Vietnam. Det One had been deployed from the lower Bassac until early 1969 when it was sent to the southern most corner of Vietnam - the so-called Ca Mau peninsula - to provide support for Operation Sea Float. The crux of this operation was to contest the Viet Cong's long-standing control over the southern Delta by moving a string of barges into one of the canals. The barges would act as a sphere of influence for the national government and serve as a market for local farmers who otherwise would be forced to sell their crops to the Viet Cong at enemy-dictated prices.

Operation Sea Float marked the start of a campaign to drive the enemy from his previously secure strongholds in western Vietnam, which gathered

momentum after Captain Beckwith assumed command. Soon after its formation Det Eight moved to an LST off the coast at Rach Gia from Tay Ninh. Early in September, Det Six, the last of the lower Delta detachments, joined Det Eight at Rach Gia on another "T". Later that same month, the detachment's mobile base steamed southward to the mouth of the Song Ong Doc, placing Det Six midway along the coast between Dets Eight and One. Finally in early September, Det Three moved to a point off Ha Tien in the Gulf of Thailand. Thus a total of four detachments now guard the western coast of South Vietnam.

Upon its formation, Det Nine moved to the same station (aboard a YRBM) in the upper Mekong that Det Three had once occupied. This left four detachments still guarding against border infiltration, with Det Two continuing operations in the Rung Sat Special Zone. Wherever the River Patrol Force has gone to seek out the enemy, the Seawolves have been standing by to provide aerial protection. From four detachments located in large urban centers along the coast or on larger rivers, the squadron has grown to nine detachments which can fan out over the entire Delta to allow the enemy no refuge.