

"AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING..."

I guess that most of the Seawolves out there know that the first HC-1 detachment (Det 29) was deployed to Vietnam in July 1966. Also well known is the fact that Dets 27 and 25 followed Det 29 in the same month, with the last Det, (21) not arriving in-country until November, 1966.

What, I am quite sure, is not so well known is how our beloved squadron actually got started as a squadron and not just as a group of squadron dets. I've been asked to describe briefly just how this all came about, and am glad to comply. But to do that, I'm forced to start with a bit of personal history.

While stationed at NavSta Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico, in early 1966, I was fortunate enough to be selected to the rank of CDR. Next, an old fighter squadron mate came through Roos.Rds. and told me that he had heard that they were going to take fresh caught Cdrs. and send them to Vietnam in charge of Huey gunship detachments. Sounded good to me, so on 4/27/66 I sent a letter to Bupers requesting that I be short-toured and sent to Vietnam. Lo and behold, about the time I actually put on the third stripe, I also received orders to HC-1 NAS Ream Field. So I packed up family and self, and moved to San Diego. After finding a house and getting the family situated, I happily checked aboard HC-1 on 9/8/66 ready to become an instant warrior. I was taken in to meet the C.O. who shook my hand and then proceeded to inform me that: 1. he didn't know why the hell I was there, because, 2. he hadn't asked for, nor did he need another boot CDR and 3. there was no way I was going to go to Vietnam because 4. he wasn't so damn sure they weren't going to cancel the planned 4th Det. anyway. So, 5. I had better plan on being an H-2 det O-in C on some bird farm to be announced.

After I calmed down, and decided not to turn in my wings, I began my assigned duties as Asst. Ops Off. and started learning to fly the H-2, which I hated. But I never gave up hope of someday being a Huey driver.

At about this same time, there was a senior LCDR named Lee Levenson holding down the HC/HS/VS/VAW placement desk in Washington.

During this mid 1966 time period, Lee was directed by the folks in Opnav via memos to start drawing down the HC and HS squadrons to make up a list of well qualified 2nd and 1st tour helo pilots to form the nucleus of what was later to become the squadron HA(L)-3. Confidential messages were sent to all east and west coast squadrons seeking pilot volunteers for duty in Vietnam. Incidentally, training squadrons were also included, and a number of our pilots ultimately came from instructor duty, and later on directly as newly designated helicopter pilots from the helicopter training squadron in Pensacola.

Incidentally, a slight digression/clarification may be in order at this point, LCDR Levenson worked at what was called Pers B1 (officer detailing & placement) as a placement officer, as opposed to Pers B2 which was enlisted placement, so he had only to do with pilot volunteers.

My guess, however, for what it is worth is that aircrew acquisition worked pretty much the same as that of pilots. But I really don't know for sure, and anyone out there who does know, please enlighten us as it would make an interesting subject for a Wolfgram article.

Anyway the messages, possibly not confidential, maybe unclass, went out from the type commanders(CNAL,CNAP) to the squadron commanders to seek volunteers from within their units. It is a fact that some squadron C.O.'s counseled against volunteering, saying it would be a poor career move(WRONG!!) but the warrior blood in our Seawolves said volunteer anyway. The list of volunteers ultimately ended up in the hands of LCDR Levenson who had to make sure that the volunteers were, in fact, suitable and that the numbers did not completely decimate one squadron and leave another untouched. The long term goal, in any event, was to spread out HAL-3 rotation, and to maintain a 1-to-1 ratio of experienced pilots to nuggets. It should also be noted here that although all the first Seawolves were volunteers, subsequently non-volunteers were assigned to the squadron.

By this time, due to a change of command shuffle, I was Ops. Officer of HC-1, and since there was no actual HAL-3, only HC-1 Dets, Lee kept me advised, by phone and message, of the status of the volunteer list. Here was my chance. I had failed to screen for command the first time around, and since a non-screened officer was needed for the X.O. slot, I made damn sure that Lee had my name at the top of every list as the X.O. nominee.

In November, Det. 21, led by LCDR George (Rock) Rowell, became the last HC-1 Det to become operational in Vietnam, and the rest of us volunteers just had to wait and see.

And wait we did. All of us wannabee war heroes sat through the beginning of 1967 wondering if anything was going to come of all this, or if we had volunteered in vain.

Then it happened. Or

at least it happened for me and 14 other lucky pilots. In Bupers orders 172307Z dated 27 Feb. 1967, I/ we were told to go to Ft. Benning Ga. for about 3 weeks transition to the Huey. From there, we were to go to ComPhibTraPac for a couple of weeks of having the crap beaten out of us at SERE school. and then finally we were off to Vietnam.

Things were a little confused around this period. For example, my original orders read to report to HC-1 Det Vung Tau. Then later,

on 27 March I received a modification to my orders saying to report to COMNAVSUPPACT, Saigon and then to CO HELATKLTRON THREE Vung Tau RVN. Anyway, we finally sorted it all out, reported to Travis AFB, and at noon on 7 May arrived in Saigon.

Since the new skipper, CDR Bob Spencer, had been in-country for a short time before, he knew that if we were caught in the clutches of the staff types in Saigon we might never escape. So we simply evaded them and caught the first Air Cofat flight to Vung Tau. When we arrived at the airfield, we were greeted by LTJG "Pistol" Boswell and no one else. We found one beat up building, a desk and two chairs, and decided to call it home. Since there didn't appear to be anyone in the Vung Tau area to deal with except Pistol, Bob Spencer looked around, pinned his command badge on his shirt and said, "Let's go to work." So we did. A few days later, CDR Spencer formally took the helm from the acting C.O., LCDR Joe Howard, and that, my dear friends and shipmates is more or less how the squadron came to be.

Con Jaburg
Seawolf 5

To: Tom Olby

My thanks to Bob Spencer and Lee Levenson for helping me with their recollections. Incidentally Lee Levenson is a retired RADM living in La Jolla and by the time you get this should be a member of the Seawolf Association.

Con.