

A History of  
**HELATKLTRON THREE**

*The Seawolves*

by

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# HELATKLTRON THREE

## The Seawolves

by James D. Sprinkle

*This article is respectfully dedicated to the Seawolves of the HC-1 "Game Warden" Detachments and their successors of HA(L)-3 who gave their lives in the performance of their duties, Republic of Vietnam, July 1966-March 1972.*



This striking photo of a Det 3 gunship catches a 2.75-inch rocket over the Co Chien River in flight to a target, November 1967. (U.S. Navy)

**I**t is often said that necessity is the mother of invention. Nowhere in the annals of American aviation has this been more true than during the United States' direct participation in the defense of the Republic of Vietnam. Pitted against an adversary who went great lengths to conceal his movements and identity and who, at the same time, roamed a land of very diverse topography, the American forces in South Vietnam found themselves utilizing tactics and equipment unknown in previous conflicts. Air power has played a vital role in America's strategic and tactical military doctrine since the Second World War, but in Vietnam it was to be of special significance. Here the airplane and helicopter were the G.I.'s lifeline, providing him with fire support, food, mail, ammunition, medical assistance and virtually instant transportation across the varied and inhospitable terrain of Indo-China.

The southern quarter of what was once the Republic of Vietnam is known as the Mekong Delta. It is here that the meandering tributaries of the Mekong River empty into the South China Sea after the long journey from the Tibetan highlands. The region is characterized by broad, exceptionally fertile grasslands, marshes, mangrove swamps and rain forests punctuated by occasional mountain peaks along the Cambodian border and southwestern coast. The Mekong drains all of Indo-China and upon entering Vietnam its waters spread, fanlike, into the Mekong River Delta. During the summer monsoons, the region is completely inundated by water. What few roads that exist in the area connect only the major towns and most of the native populace must rely on the more than 2,500 miles of canals, rivers and streams for their transportation. During its existence as a sovereign country, nearly one-half of South Vietnam's total population resided within the Mekong Delta turning out the country's main cash crop—rice. It was estimated by some sources that this productive region had the potential to supply the rice needs for all of Southeast Asia.

The military, political and economic importance of the region was long recognized by both sides in the Vietnam

HA(L)-3 gunship works over a VC ambush position near a small canal, December 1967. Copilot (left) controls the side-mounted machine guns while the pilot (right) fires the rockets. (U.S. Navy)



conflict. Joint allied naval operations had begun in the Mekong Delta in March 1965 when American destroyers, augmented by SP-5 and later SP-2H and P-3A aircraft, took up patrol stations around Vietnam's southern coast to detect and track Viet Cong (VC) resupply vessels.<sup>1</sup> In the fall of that same year the Navy initiated limited river patrols in the Delta on an experimental basis using armed LCPL-4 landing craft.<sup>2</sup> Despite the fact these vessels were slow and rather cumbersome in the tight confines of the Delta's waterways, the concept proved itself valuable in disrupting the Viet Cong's lines of communications, locating supply caches and eliminating tax collection stations. Consequently, a commitment was made to continue river operations on a full-scale basis across the breadth of the Mekong Delta.<sup>3</sup>

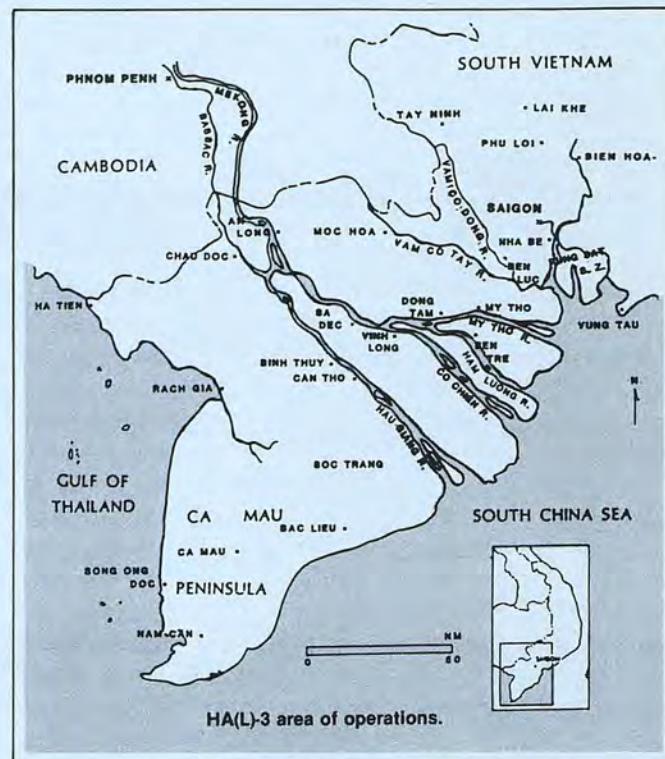
To implement this broad scheme, the LCPL-4s were abandoned in favor of an off-the-shelf pleasure boat converted for the purpose. Christened PBR, for Patrol Boat River, these 32-foot-long craft were faster and more maneuverable than the LCPL-4s they replaced. Trade-offs made for the sake of speed and agility also meant the PBRs were lightly armored and armed. Carrying as their heaviest punch three .50-caliber machine guns and later a single 40mm grenade launcher, the waterways of the Delta would be treacherous and life difficult for the PBR crews, particularly when pitted against the VC arsenal of recoilless rifles, rocket-propelled grenades and command-detonated mines.

Early on it had been recognized air support would be vital to the success and survival of the patrol boats. At first Army aviation units were tasked with this mission. On 11 March 1966 an element of the Army's 145th Combat Aviation Battalion, with some 20 support personnel, began training exercises from the USS *Belle Grove* (LSD-2) preparatory to their participation in Operation Jackstay which commenced on 26 March. During this large-scale operation, which was the first allied attempt to penetrate the Viet Cong stronghold southeast of Saigon known as the Rung Sat Special Zone, two U.S. Army helicopters operated from the *Belle Grove* providing close air support to the Navy patrol boats and landing craft navigating the Zone's swampy terrain.<sup>4</sup>

When the first 10 PBRs arrived in Vietnam on 21 March, the *Belle Grove* assumed the duty of mother ship for the new arrivals. After Operation Jackstay terminated on 4 April, the Army gunships remained aboard the *Belle Grove* to continue development of gunship/PBR tactics preparatory to the PBR's first operational mission the next week. Assigned to the Navy's newly activated Task Force 116, or operation Game Warden,<sup>5</sup> the first patrol was mounted on 10 April 1966 as two PBRs of River Squadron Five began operations along the Long Tau River. The *Belle Grove* was relieved of its duties to TF-116 on 19 April by the USS *Tortuga* (LSD-26).<sup>6</sup>

This arrangement of Army air crews flying in support of naval operations from Navy ships caused difficulties which both services were quick to discover. Even though the Army pioneered the armed helicopter concept and developed much of its tactics, they did not have experience in supporting naval riverine operations. While that experience could undoubtedly have been gained over a period of time, it was felt naval aviators trained in gunship operations would more quickly and readily adapt to the mission requirements.

Part of this was the necessity to operate at night in bad



weather from the deck of a ship. The PBRs worked around the clock in all weather conditions so it was highly desirable their air support would be available then as well. At this point in time, Army gunships were not equipped for and their pilots not skilled in all weather helicopter flying, particularly from a floating deck. In many cases, the Army would not accept missions in marginal weather, especially at night. Flying in the dark of night in bad weather or without good horizon definition is a sticky proposition and more than one Army helicopter was lost under these conditions.<sup>7</sup> It was believed Navy helicopter pilots, skilled at antisubmarine warfare and search and rescue operations which required a similar all-weather capability, would be better able to cope with this environment than their Army counterparts.

Also, a dedicated Navy air unit committed directly to the Game Warden mission could provide a relatively stable source of air support that would not require careful inter-service coordination to assure availability. Direct Naval air support for the PBRs was viewed as the solution for existing and anticipated problems of command, control and availability.

The previous experience with Army helicopter gunships had shown this type of aircraft could provide a flexible response and was adaptable to the Delta environment. Armed helicopters operating from remote and relatively unprepared locations offered at least twice the reaction time of fixed wing fighter-bombers. Logistically, U.S. Army and South Vietnamese fueling and arming points, already established across the region, would provide ready support and the very nature of the aircraft itself would alleviate the construction of large, hard surface airfields, always a problem in the water-soaked Delta. Captain John T. Shepherd, who in 1966 was the assistant chief of staff at the U.S. Navy headquarters in Saigon, is generally credited with formulating the concept of using Navy armed helicopters in support of TF 116.

The Bell UH-1B helicopter had been in Vietnam since

1962 performing its duties as a troop transport and gunship. In this latter role, the helicopter had formed the backbone of the Army's armed helicopter fleet for three years and had proven itself over all of Vietnam's varied terrain. It was the logical choice for this mission. But in 1966 there was a shortage of UH-1 types available for use by the Navy. Long-range Army requirements for the UH-1 series kept the Bell Helicopter assembly line busy and even though the UH-1E was in production for the Marines, it was committed to modernization of Marine helicopter squadrons by replacing the UH-34. Fortunately for the Navy, the Army had recently implemented plans to supplant the UH-1B gunship with the reengined and restructured UH-1C. These surplus B Models would make a ready source of aircraft for the Navy's use.

So it was that eight UH-1B helicopters were borrowed from the Army's 197th Armed Helicopter Company in the summer of 1966 to form the nucleus of a Navy armed helicopter unit. Pilots and crewmen for the new venture were initially drawn from Helicopter Combat Support Squadron 1 (HC-1) based at NAS Ream Field, Imperial Beach, Calif. The first eight pilots and enlisted crewmen of HC-1, Detachment (Det) 29, were deployed to Vietnam on 1 July 1966. This was followed on the 17th and 29th July by Detachments 27 and 25, respectively. Det 21<sup>8</sup>, last of the original HC-1 detachments, was not deployed to Vietnam until several months later, arriving during the last week of November.

Because HC-1's modus operandi was primarily search and rescue, logistical transport and supply, and vertical replenishment, the first crews were faced with a short training period provided by the Army. Under the terms of the initial agreement between the two services, Navy crews were to man the aircraft and provide maintenance at the unit level, but the Army was responsible for providing training, aircraft, spare parts and higher echelon repair. On 30 August 1966, after

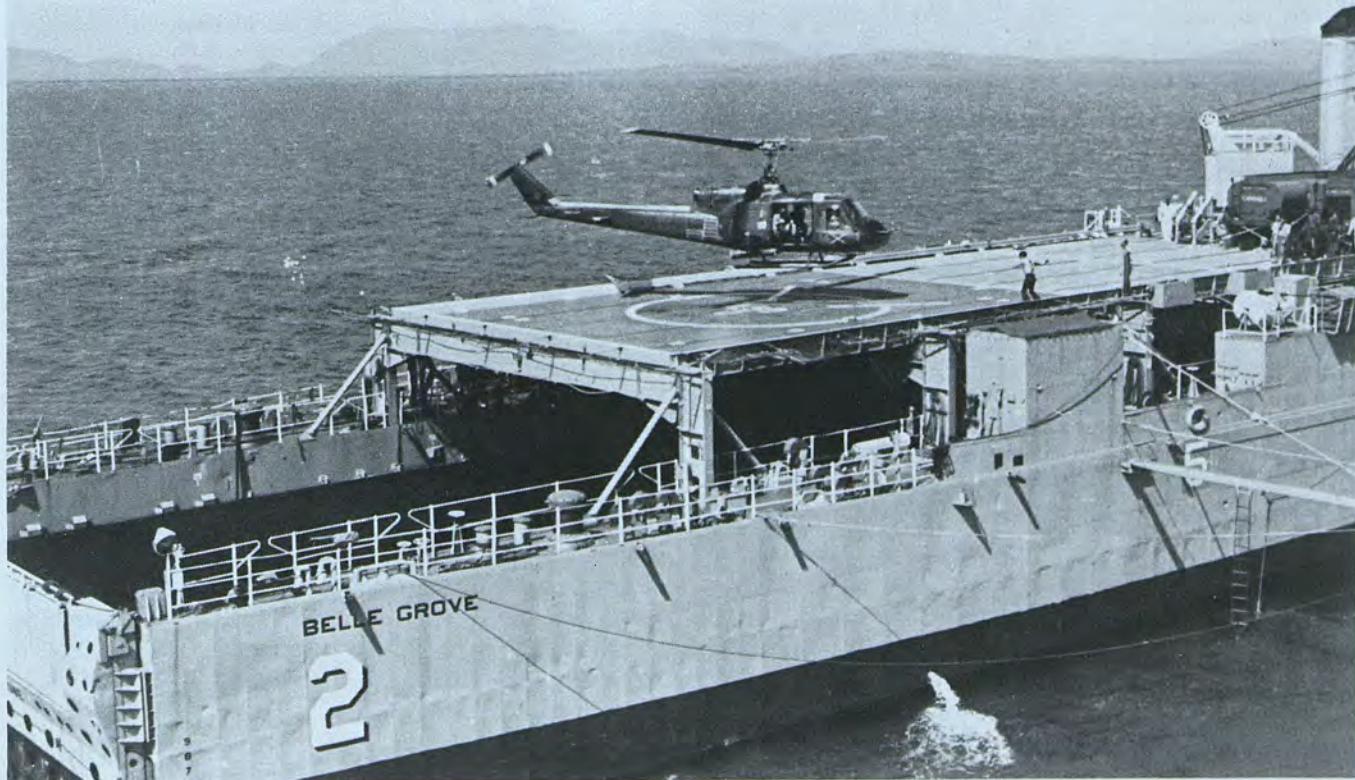
completion of their familiarization training, Detachment 29 relieved the U.S. Army helicopter fire team operating from the *Tortuga*<sup>9</sup> anchored off the mouth of the Long Tau River; and, in doing so, opened a new chapter in Naval aviation.

**The Seawolves**—Under the operational control of Commander Task Force (CTF)-116, the gunships initially would support PBR operations with fire support, recon and medevac services. But in fact the unit soon found itself called upon to assist the PCFs<sup>10</sup> of TF-115 as well as the Vietnamese Navy units operating in the Delta.

This early period was characterized by unit familiarization with their new aircraft, tactics and areas of operation. It was also a time of literal hand-to-mouth existence for these Navy flyers. Dependent on the Army supply system for their aviation assets and associated equipment, they often found their needs could be met only by imaginative begging or "borrowing" from other military units (most often Army). Attached to their parent squadron only for administrative purposes, the HC-1 "Game Warden" dets enjoyed great autonomy in their operations and this was partially responsible for instilling in the crews a strong spirit of mission accomplishment which dictated an attitude of get the job done no matter the cost or method required. A lot of official heads looked the other way during these early months. A special rapport (that would last throughout the Vietnam conflict) was quickly established with the PBR sailors who knew they could rely on the Navy gunships when a firefight started.<sup>11</sup>

As has been seen, some initial operations were staged from

UH-1B gunship of the Army's 145th Combat Aviation Battalion lands aboard the USS *Belle Grove* (LSD-2) off Vung Tau, South Vietnam, in either March or April 1966. Armed helicopter support for Navy river patrol boats was initiated by Army gunships operating off the *Belle Grove* in March 1966. This function was absorbed by Detachments of Navy Squadron HC-1 in August 1966 and led to commissioning of HA(L)-3 in April 1967. (Bell Helicopter)



LSDs<sup>12</sup> which also did double duty as PBR bases. But late in 1966 the USS *Jennings County* (LST-846), modified with helicopter landing platforms and equipped to support gunship operations, arrived in the country. This was the first of several converted LSTs which would replace the smaller LSD as support ships for Navy air and surface operations in the Delta.

The first major action for the *Seawolves*,<sup>13</sup> as the unit had nicknamed itself, occurred during the waning daylight hours of 31 October 1966. Earlier, on routine patrol in the vicinity of My Tho City, two Navy PBRs had encountered a superior Viet Cong fleet of sampans and junks numbering well over 80 vessels, intent on transferring a battalion-sized Viet Cong unit from one riverbank to the other. Attempting to follow a small sampan up the Nam Thon River, the two patrol boats came under intense fire from both the riverbank and a group of 10 boats hiding in a small inlet. Retreating back down the river and with dusk closing in, a call for air support went out. HC-1 Det 25 was scrambled and arrived over the scene some 15 minutes later. When asked by the flight leader where he wanted the air strike, the PBR commander replied simply, "I want y'all to go in there and hold field day on them guys."<sup>14</sup>

With the PBRs acting as decoys to pinpoint the enemy positions, Det 25 did just that. On their first pass, one junk disappeared in a secondary explosion as the munitions it carried detonated. On the second run they were greeted by yet another secondary explosion. The enemy troops quickly turned heel through the open rice paddies. Additional PBRs and other support craft were soon on the scene and by nine o'clock that evening the battle was over with the PBRs claiming 35 vessels sunk and the capture of six others. Det 25 claimed 16 additional junks and sampans destroyed, seven more damaged and neutralization of numerous shore positions. The combined operation stopped the river crossing and the VC were routed leaving indications of substantial casualties. Unfortunately not all the *Seawolves*' early operations were as successful as the one on 31 October. At least two aircraft were lost in operational accidents during 1966. One on 2 November involved a Detachment 29 UN-1B which ditched in water when it lost power shortly after takeoff from My Tho on a strike mission.<sup>15</sup> The second occurred 27 days later and resulted from an extremely unusual set of circumstances.

Det 25's two UH-1Bs were assigned to escort three Navy Patrol Air Cushion Vehicles (PACV) on a move from An Long to Moc Hoa. As an additional part of their mission that day, one aircraft was carrying a photographer to cover the PACVs in action. Shortly after getting airborne from An Long, the gunship with the photographer aboard maneuvered over the line of PACVs at an altitude of 60 feet to get a few close overhead photos. As the lead air cushion vehicle passed under, the UH-1B lost lift when it apparently encountered turbulence created by the PACV's lift fan and propeller. The Det 25 pilot was unable to make a power recovery and the helicopter settled into about four feet of water where the crew egressed safely.

It was evident from the outset that the original four detachments, no matter how strategically located, could not provide adequate coverage to the entire Mekong Delta. Additional detachments would be needed to fill the expanding operational demands. As necessary as this expansion was for mis-



HC-1 Det 25 escorts a Patrol Air Cushion Vehicle (PACV) in November 1966. Several days after this photo was taken, one of these helicopters (UH-1B s/n 63-12946) crashed when it lost lift after apparently encountering turbulence generated by the PACV's propeller and lift fan. (U.S. Navy)

sion accomplishment, it would create ever larger problems for command and control of the detachments involved. While HC-1 had performed well as caretaker of these units, its normal mission was so radically different from that of the "Game Warden" detachments that the Navy felt a more integrated and localized command structure was necessary to assure continuity in all aspects of the TF-116 mission.

So, late in 1966, a message was sent to all Navy helicopter squadrons requesting volunteers to form a Vietnam-based helicopter attack squadron. Approximately 80 pilots were chosen for this first group and after a brief training period provided by the Army they began reporting for duty in Vietnam during April 1967<sup>16</sup> where they would be used to help fill the slots of three new dets then in the formulating stages and provide relief for existing crews who would soon reach the end of their one-year tour. As additional UH-1B helicopters became available and as the crews completed their transition training, these new dets would be put into service. The men of HC-1's four Vietnam-based detachments became the *Seawolves* of Helicopter Attack (Light) Squadron Three, HA(L)-3, on 1 April 1967 when the squadron was officially commissioned at Vung Tau under the command of LCdr. Joseph B. Howard. HC-1 Detachments 29, 27, 25 and 21 became HA(L)-3 Detachments 1, 2, 3 and 4, respectively.<sup>17</sup>

**Training**—As previously mentioned, the original group of pilots from HC-1 underwent their initial training only upon arrival in Vietnam. Here they obtained approximately 10 hours of familiarization in the UH-1B and then another 60 hours or more as copilots aboard Army gunships under actual combat conditions. From this they graduated to flying combat missions on their own in the Navy UH-1Bs. A few of the early pilots received a limited amount of their transition at the Bell Helicopter plant in Texas prior to reporting aboard in Vietnam; and later, some training was done at NAS Imperial Beach. Eventually a special training program was established in 1967 by the Army at Fort Benning, Ga., to handle the increasing requirement for Navy UH-1B pilots. By September 1968 this program had been transferred to the Army's Aviation Center at Fort Rucker, Ala. Here the training syllabus for the prospective *Seawolves* included two weeks of UH-1B tran-



"Rat's Ass," photographed here in May 1967, was flown by the HA(L)-3 Det 4 OIC, Lt. Al Banford. It was lost late in 1967 when ground fire knocked out its engine. The nose insignia is "Rowell's Rats," adapted and used by Det 4 at least through 1967 in honor of their first OIC, LCdr. George "Rocky" Rowell. (U.S. Navy)



A Det 2 helicopter searches the shoreline for VC positions as Vietnamese Navy boats move up a canal in the Rung Sat Special Zone during a search and destroy mission in July 1967. (U.S. Navy)

sition, one and one-half weeks of active gunnery training and classroom instruction on the weapon systems as well as armed helicopter tactics and employment. In addition, they were given practical field problems in the different phases of riverine support operations in which they would have to become proficient. Such subjects as low level navigation, river convoy escort and river reconnaissance would later stand them in good stead.

Even after completion of this specialized program some of the more inexperienced pilots would often get their first taste of combat as copilots on Army helicopters, thus enabling them to gain more flight time and experience prior to beginning their Navy missions. All pilots underwent three weeks of survival training at either Little Creek, Va., or Coronado, Calif., before assignment to Vietnam.

Once their initial requirements were fulfilled, the new pilots would begin their Navy operations as copilots. After several months they could be elevated to Attack Helicopter Aircraft Commander (AHAC) which meant they moved across the cockpit to the pilot seat. Still later they could be classified as Fire Team Leader (FTL), responsible for the

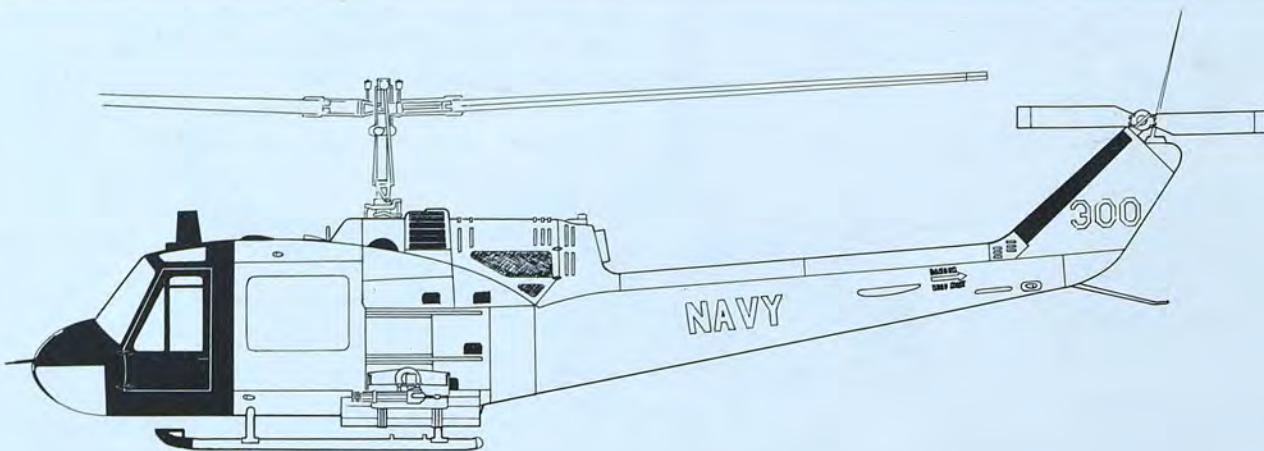
conduct and success of their det's two-helicopter element (fire team) during missions.

Training was not totally confined to flying. Several of the early HA(L)-3 pilots would also go aboard the PBRs on missions to get a better understanding of the role and working environment of these small boats. Also a few pilots are known to have accompanied SEAL teams<sup>18</sup> on some of their operations.<sup>19</sup>

Enlisted crew members could receive their training either prior to departing the States, after arrival in Vietnam or in some combination of both. Generally all would receive schooling in their occupational specialty before arriving in Vietnam. Like the officers, all would undergo survival school prior to departing.

But as the flying jobs in the squadron were voluntary, training in these areas varied. If enlisted personnel volunteered for flying duties prior to departure for Vietnam, door gunner training was sometimes provided by the Army at Fort Rucker. Here was taught the basics of UH-1B maintenance, fundamentals of helicopter armament subsystems, aerial gunnery and visual search and target detection. If, however, crewmen elected to volunteer for flying after arrival in Vietnam or had not gone to the Army school, HA(L)-3 provided gunnery training at its headquarters facility. By 1969 the enlisted crewmen training program was well established. All enlisted air crewmen took the HA(L)-3 Plane Captain (Crew Chief) course prior to assignment to a det; this allowed all gunners to become qualified Plane Captains and vice versa.<sup>20</sup>

**The Gunships**—The Bell UH-1 armed helicopters operated by HA(L)-3 were, in most respects, straight-line Army machines. Temporarily surplus from the Army inventory, these helicopters had usually already seen a lot of long and hard use. Those received directly from Army units in Vietnam most often required a good deal of repair and rejuvenation



FUSELAGE: OLIVE DRAB AND BLACK WITH WHITE LETTERING, RED WARNING ARROW.  
 SEAWOLF INSIGNIA CARRIED ON NOSE. HORIZONTAL STABILIZER TOP, TAIL SKID  
 ARE ORANGE. ROTORS: OLIVE DRAB BOTH SIDES, EXCEPT BOTTOM OF MAIN  
 ROTOR WHICH IS BLACK, WITH YELLOW TIPS.

UH-1B, SEAWOLF 300, FROM HAL-3 DETACHMENT 6, PHU LOI AAF, OCTOBER 1971

before being put into Naval service.<sup>21</sup> Others received from the Army's overhaul depot in Corpus Christi, Texas, were generally in much better condition. "Navalizing" these helicopters was relatively simple involving addition of the specialized door gun mounts and a radar altimeter. The radar altimeter was a crucial piece of equipment, for operating over the flat Delta terrain in bad weather, at night, in the absence of a good horizon reference, required precision altitude indications. This was especially true when recovering aboard the support ships at night as landing aids were very rudimentary. A shortage of radar altimeters plagued the squadron for many months so that they were rationed to those dets which operated off the boats; and even then it was not unusual to find only one helicopter in a det with this specialized instrument.<sup>22</sup>

The UH-1B, which formed the backbone of the squadron's aircraft assets, was powered by the Lycoming T53-L-11 engine and incorporated a standard Bell UH-1 rotor head. In 1970 a few UH-1Cs found their way into HA(L)-3. The UH-1C, although equipped with the same engine as the B, used a new flex-beam main rotor which provided easier maintenance and some improvement in maneuverability. But more importantly, the "Charlie" model incorporated an increase in both gross weight (+1,000 pounds) and fuel capacity (+77 gallons) which combined to expand operational capability.

Still another improvement was the UH-1M, the first examples of which were introduced into the unit on 15 June 1971. Essentially a UH-1C equipped with the Lycoming T53-L-13 powerplant, the "Mike" model's additional 300 horsepower offered some slight improvement in the squadron's performance ability. As the *Seawolf* gunships were rarely flown at anywhere less than over the maximum gross weight, any increase in engine performance was a much-needed commodity. It was planned for HA(L)-3 to equip entirely with the M model, but the heavy demand for this engine (also used on the UH-1H and AH-1G) kept the Navy on the low side of the

priority list. By December 1971 only 11 of the *Seawolves'* 31 gunships were UH-1Ms.

The external armament used by HA(L)-3 was the standard Army type. This consisted of the side-mounted M-16<sup>23</sup> weapon system which included four M-60 machine guns (one dual mount per side) and two rocket pods housing seven 2.75-inch rockets each. The machine guns, controlled by the copilot, incorporated limited flexibility in both elevation and azimuth. The rockets were normally aimed and fired by the pilot although if necessary either pilot could assume control of both guns and rockets. As the improved M-21 weapon system became available, these were installed in place of the M-16. The M-21 differed from the M-16 by replacing each dual M-60 mount with a single M-134 minigun which was capable of a 2,000 to 4,000 round-per-minute firing rate.

In addition to the external armament, door gunners were also carried. Initially they were armed with hand-held M-60B machine guns. But in early 1970, the hand-held weapons began to be replaced by pintle-mounted M-60Ds with stops when too many door gunners were found to be shooting holes in various parts of their aircraft during the heat of combat.<sup>24</sup> While this protected the airframe and provided a more stable firing position for the gunners, it also severely limited his field of fire.

In the latter stages of the squadron's operations in Vietnam, many HA(L)-3 helicopters included, in addition to the fixed M-21 system, a door-mounted (usually right) .50-caliber machine gun.<sup>25</sup> The first experiments with this weapon were probably begun sometime during 1968. Originally an aircraft .50 caliber was used, but overheating caused the unit to switch to the longer barrel ground .50 caliber.<sup>26</sup> This gun proved to be very effective when loaded with armor piercing, incendiary tracer-type ammunition although it was susceptible to jamming. With a .50-caliber door gun installed, the side-mounted minigun on that side was deleted due to the



Det 4 door gunner fires on a target, November 1967. Note how this hand-held M-60 has been modified to fire sideways. This caused the shell casings to be ejected downward, away from the helicopter's main and tail rotors.

(U.S. Navy)

need to use a portion of the minigun mount to support the .50 caliber.<sup>27</sup> This resulted in an assymetrical weapons configuration which utilized as external armament the two standard rocket pods and a single minigun on the left, while internally a .50 caliber was mounted in the right door and an M-60 in the left. Generally, the helicopter equipped with the .50 caliber was operated as the lead aircraft in a two-element flight<sup>28</sup> (fire team).

During 1970 experiments were started with a door-mounted (normally left), hand-operated minigun. This minigun, using 7.62mm rounds, was similar to the M-134 weapon used in the M-21. It suffered early problems due to the jury-rigging of the installation, but once the bugs were worked out, its high rate of fire was deadly against nearly any target.

But the extremely high output was also its chief drawback as ammunition could be expended in literally the blink of an eye. Commander David Rucker, a Det 2 pilot, vividly remembers their door-mounted minigun: "Our ordnance chief petty officer . . . designed a two-trigger operation that would take your breath away when fired inboard in a turn (the aircraft would slide sideways while the gun was firing)."<sup>29</sup> The hand-operated minigun was found to be a good complement to the .50 caliber's punch.

Det 4 in 1967 had occasionally used a UH-1B equipped with a nose turret housing an electrically fired 40mm grenade launcher.<sup>30</sup> Helicopters in this configuration usually carried two 19-round rocket pods as their only other external armament. These machines were most often used in conjunction with two other gunships equipped with the more standard armament. The 40mm turret was a low-velocity weapon with a relatively slow rate of fire. Helicopters with this system were no doubt of more value for the quantity of rockets they carried than for the 40mm. There is no evidence today to suggest Det 4 continued use of this armament system beyond 1967.

However, the *Seawolves* did experiment on several occasions with 40mm door-mounted grenade launchers. One of the earliest utilized a hand-cranked weapon similar to that used on the PBRs.<sup>31</sup> Det 1 operated one of these installations briefly in July 1968. Chuck Bagley, a Det 1 pilot, remembers: "We weren't able to do anything really effective as we had it for only a few hours<sup>32</sup>; but I do recall it was greatly affected by the slipstream. . . . I suspect once we'd used it for a while, we would have learned how to lead things properly. The 40mm's shell being launched into a 90-knot slipstream did not lend itself to real accuracy."<sup>33</sup> Later installations undoubtedly used an electrically fired mechanism. At any rate, all incurred

Seawolf 301 of Det 5 departs the USS *Harnett County* (LST-821) in November 1967. Note remaining helicopter is equipped with a dual .30-caliber door gun.





Pintle-mounted M-60 door gun also adapted to fire sideways. Early in 1970 the hand-held door guns were replaced by these mounted ones to reduce self-inflicted damage to the helicopter during combat. (ADC Rex Lang)

problems with jamming owing to the plastic belt links used.<sup>34</sup> As the weapon's firing shock and vibration resulted in considerable airframe damage and, since field operations ultimately deemed the weapon ineffective at any but exceptionally close ranges, the squadron discontinued its use as impractical.

Dual and single .30-caliber weapons were used as door guns for a period of time until it became difficult to get spare parts.<sup>35</sup> Dual pintle-mounted M-60s were also adapted by several dets for increased firepower. These dual installations offered an additional advantage in keeping one gun on line in the event the other jammed.

During early operations even hand grenades would be thrown from the helicopter by the gunners. In later years when HA(L)-3 began removing cockpit doors for missions, even the copilot would occasionally get into the door gun act by firing his personal weapon<sup>36</sup> when the necessity arose.

Because one of the door gunners' prime functions was suppression and control of enemy ground fire, HA(L)-3's continued experimentation with various door-mounted weapons was done as a response to the Viet Cong's use of increasingly higher powered antiaircraft guns. The effects of these enemy weapons could be quite devastating when encountered at the wrong altitude without effective counterfire. Thus, over the years *Seawolf* helicopters could be seen with any number of variations on the 7.62mm, .30- and .50-caliber door gun theme discussed here, often varying widely between detachments. It appears, however, that the .50-caliber/minigun combination was, more or less, adapted as a standard door gun configuration by most of the HA(L)-3 dets during the last 18 months of the squadron's mission in South Vietnam.

**Combat Ops**—From January through March 1967, the four detachments of HC-1 accumulated over 1,200<sup>37</sup> combat hours in support of the "Game Warden" river patrol force. After establishing a temporary headquarters in an old French hangar at Vung Tau, HA(L)-3 added over 9,000 additional hours from April through December 1967.

Fast reaction was a hallmark of the squadron which dated

back to the HC-1 dets. They had also quickly gained a reputation of being available anytime they were needed. This availability extended not only to Naval units but to other allied forces as well. When alerted, a *Seawolf* fire team could be airborne within two to three minutes, day or night and many dets could launch in less than 60 seconds.

An example of this willingness to undertake nearly any mission was recently recalled by Matt Gache<sup>38</sup> who, in 1967, was a Det 1 pilot operating off the USS *Garrett County* (LST-786). He and his fire team leader were monitoring the radios in the *Garrett County*'s CIC<sup>39</sup> when an urgent call for assistance was intercepted from a team of U.S. Army Special Forces' advisors trapped in a Vietnamese Army encampment under heavy attack. It was a wet and rainy night with 500-foot ceilings, the kind of weather favored by the VC.

With no other units willing to accept the mission, the two Det 1 helicopters launched into the muck and chopped their way through the rain to the scene of action, a triangular-shaped fortification on the south side of the Bassac River near its mouth. The situation was deteriorating rapidly for the camp was under heavy mortar fire and the VC had started to storm the walls. Even after arriving overhead and in spite of the severity of combat going on below them, the rain and darkness combined to prevent an effective air strike. An Air Force AC-47 ("Spooky") had also arrived overhead but couldn't fire because he was above the overcast and couldn't see either!

Ascertaining the "Spooky" had plenty of aerial flares aboard, the *Seawolves* solved this dilemma with a lot of ingenuity and a great display of interservice cooperation. Asking "Spooky" to maintain an orbit over the compound above the overcast and to start kicking out his flares, the Det 1 gunships waited below for the flares to appear. It was an eerie scene for the *Seawolf* crews, watching the night darkness gradually get lighter until the flares suddenly burst forth from the cloud base.

With the rainy darkness turned into a surrealistic day of long, contorted shadows, the Det 1 gunships rolled in on their target now visible not far below. The Viet Cong, who never expected effective air cover under the dismal conditions, broke and ran on the helicopter's first pass. Suspecting the enemy had retreated to a nearby canal, the two helicopters followed, carefully weaving their way through both ignited and burned-out flares, hanging beneath invisible parachutes, which continued to float down from the AC-47 above. As expected, a large concentration of VC was found at the canal frantically trying to escape aboard sampans. The *Seawolves* brought their guns to bear once more; and, in the words of Gache, "It was a real turkey shoot. But the hairiest part of the whole thing was recovery aboard the LST. Our night vision was shot, it was raining, dark as hell and the LSTs had no night landing aids, only a small red light forward." It was on such missions as this that the *Seawolf* reputation was built.

During 1968, HA(L)-3 continued its support of the river patrol boats and their assistance to Task Force 117<sup>40</sup> intensified. The primary mission of HA(L)-3 was fire support and armed reconnaissance; but, as Navy operations expanded, the gunships were pressed into other duties. Most often this involved insertion and extraction of Navy SEAL teams in hostile

areas. Before introduction of the UH-1Ls in 1969, this was accomplished by the gunships flying without external armament.<sup>41</sup>

The *Seawolves* and their aircraft were also active in civic action programs, part of which involved bringing medical teams ashore from the LSTs to treat Vietnamese civilians. One officer, who served during the 1968 period, was an accomplished magician and had taken his props with him to Vietnam. He would perform on such missions to help the Vietnamese overcome their fear and apprehension of both the Americans and their medical treatment.<sup>42</sup> Needless to say, he was a big hit with the children.

Medevac helicopters were always in demand but not always immediately available and on occasion HA(L)-3 gunships were hastily pressed into such duties when injured PBR sailors required immediate attention. Chuck Bagley of Det 1 performed one such operation in November 1968 when he removed a PBR crewman seriously injured in a fire fight. Hovering his gunship with one landing skid on the PBR's stern, the wounded man was placed aboard while both the helicopter and PBR were still under enemy fire from the riverbank.<sup>43</sup>

One unusual armed recon mission flown by some of the dets utilized a fire team in a nighttime hunter-killer role over known or suspected VC-controlled areas. The lead helicopter was equipped with a loudspeaker from which would blare loud recordings of the Army's old cavalry charge. Flying with all its lights on, the lead ship made a tempting target. Meanwhile, the trail helicopter, fully armed and blacked out, would be above and behind the lead waiting for the VC gunners to open fire on the offensive intruder.<sup>44</sup>

Undoubtedly the most important event of the year for HA(L)-3 was the coordinated Viet Cong TET<sup>45</sup> offensive which began during the early morning hours of 31 January 1968. From all indications today, the squadron survived TET intact. No dets are known to have suffered major loss or damage to personnel or equipment. The squadron's quick response capability literally made the difference between life and death for many allied outposts and bases which would otherwise have been overrun during the onslaught.

The HA(L)-3 headquarters element in Vung Tau set up their own defensive perimeter early during the initial attack when it was realized South Vietnamese Army units had deserted the perimeter around the airfield. Later a group of these same sailors were pressed into service as infantry to help clear VC forces from the main Buddhist temple in the city.<sup>46</sup> While all who served in Vietnam were aware that every Vietnamese could be a VC operative or sympathizer, TET '68 brought that reality painfully close; one of the VC killed during the attack on Vung Tau Army Airfield had been employed there by the HA(L)-3 headquarters. Although the main TET offensive lasted but a few days, clearing up its remnants continued for several weeks with the *Seawolves* frequently involved.

In late 1968, Operation Giant Slingshot,<sup>47</sup> designed to deny the Viet Cong use of waterways along the infiltration routes near the Cambodian border west of Saigon, was implemented with *Seawolf* Detachments 4 and 7 in full support. In response to the changing tactical situation in the Mekong Delta, Detachment 5 relocated its base of operations twice



Hit by recoilless rifle fire, a disabled PBR burns in the Ham Luong River as a Det 3 door gunner searches the riverbank for the ambush position. November 1967. (U.S. Navy)

during the year, first to Rach Gia and then in November to the YRBMs-16<sup>48</sup> on the upper Bassac River.

The ability to rapidly change their base of operations became a necessity for HA(L)-3 in order to keep up with an elusive enemy. Some detachments changed locations as often as three or four times a year. Such was the fluidity of the Delta war; and, probably never before in the history of aerial warfare was a unit required to maintain such a quick and far-reaching mobility as the *Seawolves* were.

Dennis Russell, who spent most of his 1968-69 tour moving HA(L)-3 dets from one location to another, recalls<sup>49</sup> assisting in the relocation of Det 5 at Dong Tam. Although this det was simply being relocated from one side of the airfield to the other, it is typical of the conditions faced by HA(L)-3 and the ingenuity used to overcome them:

"The task assigned was to move off the Army side to the Navy side by building a new bunker and runway within 21 days. We only had a few problems to overcome; no lumber, cement, sandbags or PSP<sup>50</sup> to start the job and no way to get any of it in time. So, the OIC [Officer-in-Charge] and 10 men, myself included, were assigned to acquire needed materials the best way we know how without getting caught.

"We first acquired three stake bed trucks full of lumber along with a forklift by borrowing them from the Army on vouchers donated, without their knowledge, by the 9th Infantry Division HQ. This only cost us three cases of beer and a fifth of rum. . . . Task two was not as easy. The Army had told us it would be five days before we could get cement for our foundation. We needed 20 yards of cement and reinforcements for a 30' by 20' slab. After locating several Army types who worked at the cement plant on the far side of the airfield, we persuaded them to help us for eight cases of beer. I and four other men spent the next afternoon locating three 2 1/2-ton dump trucks and at sunset brought them in and started mixing. By early the next morning the slab was complete and the following three days were spent erecting the bunker.

"The last task was to level a 150 by 30-yard plot beside the bunker and cover it with PSP. By this time only nine of our 21 days were left. Somehow, our OIC had gotten a pallet of beer and a half pallet of C rations. Using the pallet of beer, he had



**Seawolf** helicopter gunship sweeps low over Vietnam's Mekong Delta with its door gunners ready. HA(L)-3 operated a total of nine gunship detachments during the Vietnamese conflict. This helicopter is equipped with the M-16 armament system. (Via Bell Helicopter)

made a deal with some Seabees to level the ground. . . . The C rations were for a welder the Seabees had also been convinced to bring along. They showed up on day 13 and by the morning of day 17 had finished. . . . During this time we were busy at night procuring the PSP and its rubber under-matting from the Army who had just received a new shipment. It took two nights to get all the stuff we needed. By the end of day 17, after two 12-hour shifts, our PSP airstrip was complete and Det 5 was 100 percent mission-ready again.

"The irony of the whole thing was the 9th Infantry Division HQ, who had instigated our move off the Army side of the airfield, had no idea where we got most of the supplies. When they realized they were missing some of their PSP they did come looking for it; but, because we had tack-welded it together on the ends, they left it alone."

The base at Dong Tam could be considered typical for those HA(L)-3 dets who were co-located on existing Army airfields. The level of comfort and adequacy of facilities varied according to the size of the base and often at the whim of the local (Army) commander.

Dets operating in the far reaches of the Delta often were based at small Special Forces camps or aboard specially configured support barges of the river patrol or mobile riverine forces. The YRBM is typical of such vessels. A barge without any self-contained propulsion source, it served as a landing platform for the helicopters as well as a staging point for PBRs. The *Seawolf* crews were housed in a separate barge tied alongside. Also tied to the YRBM were additional barges housing the propulsion unit and PRB facilities. Rearming of the helicopters was done on shore, not aboard the YRBM.<sup>51</sup>

Another commonly used support vessel was the LST. During the late fifties and early sixties, the Navy had nearly decided the LST's days as a useful vessel were over. But their shallow draft, relatively large, flat deck and sizable interior bulk made them very attractive as both helicopter support platforms and PBR bases. As mentioned earlier, the first of these specially configured ships arrived late in 1966 and during their tenure in Vietnam, the *Seawolf* detachments would operate from several such ships.<sup>52</sup>

The LST concept potentially brought a very flexible, effective operating base that offered reasonable, although not in all cases complete, safety from Viet Cong attack. However, like any good theory put to actual test, LST operations were not without their problems. The high temperature and humidity characteristic of Southeast Asia cut considerably into the performance margin of the UH-1B. Night flights from the open sea, requiring launch and recovery from a relatively confined space, often rolling and pitching, without good visual acuity or reference, added still another, very dangerous, dimension to the problem. Add to this the fact that, like most armed helicopter crews, the Navy men tended to stuff their machines with as much ammunition and weapons as possible, so that their operating weights were close to the maximum gross, and the margin got even slimmer; particularly when necessity dictated a crosswind takeoff. Mix in also the subsequent low fuel capacity which was necessary to allow the increased armament payload, and which therefore sliced heavily into operating radius and response time, and the complexities of LST operations from the open sea, particularly at night, become clearer. After two takeoff crashes, in which three crewmen were killed, and several near accidents, all during the latter half of 1969, the squadron, during 1970, redeployed its detachments aboard LSTs in the Gulf of Thailand to shore bases for night staging. Thereafter, the gunships only went back to the open sea in darkness when the tactical situation demanded.

This was a radical change in lifestyle for the HA(L)-3 crews as it meant roughing it at primitive (by comparison to the LST) shore bases where cold water showers and C rations were the rule and security was often a matter of how fast the *Seawolves* themselves could get airborne once trouble started. Mike Smith, who was a Det 6 pilot early in 1970, remembers<sup>53</sup>:

"Life aboard the LST was definitely good. Officers had staterooms; there was air conditioning, fresh water, showers, laundry, movies and a close camaraderie with the ship's company. Wardroom meals were served by stewards' mates with linen, china and silverware. Compare that with the Army facilities which used paper plates, plastic flatware and paper cups. . . . Somewhere along the way it was decided that it was no longer safe to fly helos from ships at night, so we were grounded during nighttime when our support for the boats was most needed. . . . As a result, we [Det 6] moved from the ship to Song Ong Doc where, in order to prevent losing our Hueys [UH-1B] in the mud, we laid helo pads of PSP stolen from the Army at Ca Mau.<sup>54</sup> We obtained two ports-a-tents with bunk beds. Mess was provided by the boat [PBR] crews aboard their barge. We then envied the comforts enjoyed by the Army!"

The normal HA(L)-3 detachment consisted of a single fire team,<sup>55</sup> or two helicopters, and was assigned 16 personnel: eight pilots and eight gunners. This allowed two complete crews per helicopter who rotated duty on a 24-hour-on, 24-hour-off schedule. These were flight crews who performed routine maintenance on the helicopter and weapons at the det location. For heavy maintenance or repair, the helicopter, if flyable, was returned to the squadron headquarters.

Early in 1969, the squadron was called upon to support Operation Seafloat, an attempt by the Vietnamese government to open areas of the lower Ca Mau Peninsula previously

tightly held by the Viet Cong. Participation in this effort continued through the end of the year; and indeed, remained an active mission for the *Seawolves* up until their departure from Vietnam three years later. On 2 May, HA(L)-3 transferred its headquarters from Vung Tau to the Binh Thuy Naval Base, headquarters for its commanding unit, TF-116. In June, Detachment 7, in order to provide better coverage for Operation Giant Slingshot, moved to Tay Ninh northwest of Saigon where it was joined in July by the newly formed Det 8. September saw Detachment 9, last of the *Seawolf* units to be activated, begin operations from Binh Thuy but was soon moved to the YRBM-21 on the upper Mekong River.

Nineteen sixty-nine was a very active year for allied forces engaged at subduing the 9th NVA<sup>56</sup> Division and its supporting Viet Cong units in the Mekong Delta. HA(L)-3 with its full complement of detachments, or nearly so, had its share of the action. One of the most noteworthy was that which occurred on 28 April when the Det 3 fire team, consisting of the lead aircraft, Seawolf 305, and Seawolf 320, flying trail, were directed to and engaged a sizable force of sampans near the Cambodian border in the Western Delta. As the helicopters maneuvered over their target, they swept across the border and were brought under heavy Cambodian antiaircraft fire. Seawolf 320 was almost immediately shot down, crashing on the Cambodian side. Three of the four crew members perished in the wreckage while one gunner survived with grave injuries. Meanwhile, Seawolf 305, with its engine oil system damaged, made a forced landing near the remains of 320. Dismounting their weapons, its crew set up a defensive perimeter around their helicopter. One of the 305's gunners,

Maintenance crew pours over a Det 1 UH-1B in early 1968. These war-weary helicopters took a lot of TLC and Navy ingenuity to keep operational.

(Via Bell Helicopter)



ADJ1 Lloyd T. Williams, under heavy enemy fire and protected to some extent by his fellow crewmen, traversed the distance between the two aircraft and succeeded in pulling the critically wounded 320 gunner to the hastily arranged position around Seawolf 305. A short time later, responding to the initial Mayday call, an Army UH-1D from the 175th Assault Helicopter Company arrived on the scene and after several aborted attempts, managed to pick up all survivors. But as it was pulling away, a burst of gunfire laced through the Army helicopter fatally wounding the Seawolf 305 pilot picked up only moments before.

As might be expected, this particular action created an international incident, with a violent protest being lodged by the Cambodians who were still officially neutral in the Vietnam War at this time. Why it was that they had a large concentration of antiaircraft weapons at this particular location remains open to conjecture. Those who remember the incident today<sup>57</sup> suggest a helicopter trap set up specifically to lure in and knock down any helicopters which might attempt to interfere with the sampans. While the circumstances will never truly be known, at this point in time the Cambodian Army did occasionally provide direct, active aid and assistance to VC and NVA units operating in their country. ADJ1 Williams was eventually awarded the Navy Cross for his rescue that day. Almost a year later the *Seawolves* would find themselves still embroiled in the aftermath of this incident.

An appreciation of the effectiveness, and indeed the necessity, of the door gunners aboard the *Seawolf* UH-1Bs can be gleaned from an incident<sup>58</sup> that occurred to Bill Beltz, a Detachment 8 pilot operating out of Rach Gia in late 1969. Beltz and his leader were detailed to assist a Vietnamese Army Regional Force platoon attempting to dislodge a Viet Cong unit from fortifications along one of the Delta's many canals. The Vietnamese had taken several casualties and an Army medevac helicopter was requested to evacuate the wounded. . . . "As the medevac came in, we used our standard procedure of flying one on each wing. I took the eastern side and just as the medevac set down, one of the bunkers fired a B40<sup>59</sup> at it. Fortunately it hit a tree a hundred feet or so in front of the medevac. But I saw the smoke of the B40 go off in the bunker and being at about 200 feet and 50 knots or so, I rolled over and punched off three rockets; and, as luck would have it, one rocket went right into the bunker (killing eight or nine VC)! Right behind this bunker was another which opened up with a machine gun right at us. Being so low we were just sitting ducks; . . . one of my crewmen was out on the skid with his M-60 machine gunner on the ground round for round. To this day, I swear that the only thing that got us out of there was the courage of my air crewmen in the back. . . ."

Along with a new headquarters location and activation of two new detachments, 1969 brought other significant changes. On 8 October, HA(L)-3's role in the Mekong Delta was broadened when it was relieved from TF-116 and tentatively assigned to Task Group (TG) 194 for Operation Sealords (Southeast Asia Lake, Ocean, River, Delta Strategy). Operation Sealords, begun in late 1968, brought together the three separate Navy task forces<sup>60</sup> in a coordinated effort to harass, interdict and cut all Viet Cong/NVA supply lines into the Delta region from Cambodia. HA(L)-3 was permanently

assigned as a separate element of TG-194 on 25 July 1970.

This new assignment resulted in a furious shifting of detachments which ended late in 1969 and saw four units, Dets 1, 3, 6 and 8, stationed along the southwestern coast aboard LSTs; four others, Dets 4, 5, 7 and 9, covering the Cambodian border and one Det 2 at Nha Be, covering the important Saigon shipping lane (Long Tau River). On 17 December, the first four of an eventual eight UH-1L<sup>61</sup> utility helicopters were assigned to HA(L)-3. These aircraft were to be used for logistical support of outlying HA(L)-3 gunship detachments and the other Naval units operating under TG-194. Dubbing themselves the *Sealords*, this element of HA(L)-3 supported Naval operations throughout the Delta from their base at Binh Thuy and were authorized when the added responsibilities of Operation Sealords (from which the UH-1L group took its name) dictated a broadened logistical network. In addition to their supply missions, the *Sealords* also performed medevacs, were involved in psychological warfare operations, flew VIPs, served as airborne command posts and supported the Navy SEALs. In this latter role the *Sealord* helicopters, teamed with a *Seawolf* fire team for protection, would be used to insert and extract the SEALs on their recon missions into hostile areas. Generally, addition of the UH-1Ls allowed the gunships to be concentrated on their primary functions . . . fire support and armed recon.

The last four of the initial eight UH-1L aircraft were assigned to HA(L)-3 in late January 1970. The *Sealord* helicopters were the only Navy-owned aircraft within the HA(L)-3 structure. Although they operated, at one time, 11 helicopters, operational losses had pared *Sealord* assets back to eight by the end of 1971. Even though the UH-1L had been procured for the TG-194 mission as a utility helicopter, several HH-1Ks,<sup>62</sup> a search and rescue version, eventually found their way into the squadron inventory as replacements.

During 1970, some UH-1Ls were fitted with hardmounts

HA(L)-3 UH-1B lands aboard the USS *Garrett County* (LST-786) June 1968. Although initially established to support PBR patrols, the *Seawolves* were always ready to provide their services to any allied unit that needed them. Note PBRs tied alongside.

(U.S. Navy)



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to incorporate a pair of 19-round rocket pods as a means of increasing the unit's versatility, particularly in supporting the SEALs. Also, experiments were conducted with mounting two 500-pound bombs in order to clear helicopter landing zones for SEAL extractions. There is no evidence today to suggest use of these bombs proceeded much past the experimental stage.

In the early morning hours of 9 May 1970, combined United States Army and ARVN elements penetrated the Cambodian border in an operation known officially as Tran Hung Dao XI. HA(L)-3 Detachments 3, 5, 8 and 9 provided tactical air support for the Navy and Army units operating in Cambodia along the Mekong and Bassac Rivers, while Dets 4 and 7 assisted in the "Parrot's Beak" operation northwest of Saigon that had begun several days prior. Aside from the initial foray of the border crossing, the majority of opposition encountered was widely scattered. Most of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese were satisfied just to melt away and wait for another day to fight. From early May until 30 June, when the operation was terminated for American forces, HA(L)-3 aircraft logged a total of 1,709 flight hours. The *Sealords* alone contributed 961 hours to the total and thus outflew their gunship counterparts by some 200 hours during the effort in Cambodia.

After completion of their initial objectives during the first few weeks of the invasion, Detachments 4 and 7 assumed a rather unusual mission for several days during the month of June. As related earlier, in April 1969 two *Seawolf* gunships had been shot down inside Cambodia with the loss of three men. On 20 February 1970, Cambodian officials returned the remains of these crewmen to the United States; however, subsequent examination revealed that complete, positive identification of the three could not be made. During the massive U.S. presence in Cambodia, it was decided to search for the original burial ground in hope of uncovering additional remains to aid in further identification. Guided by the Cambodian officer who, a year earlier, had commanded the antiaircraft battery which engaged and shot the two *Seawolves* down, Dets 4 and 7 made extensive searches of the region in question attempting to relocate the crash site. A *Seawolf* pilot who participated in this hunt remembers<sup>63</sup> that there were considerable misgivings about having this Cambodian, responsible for the death of fellow crewmen, in their midst. But, after working with the Dets for a while, this officer came to be "well received," or at least tolerated, by most of the Americans. Although more human remains were eventually discovered in the general area, there was not sufficient evidence to indicate that they were even the right ones, much less make positive identification, and this exercise was terminated with the American withdrawal from Cambodia.

Nineteen seventy saw the beginning of HA(L)-3's participation in the United States' Vietnamization policy, the gradual turnover of the complete defense effort totally to the Vietnamese government forces. Unlike a lot of other U.S. units, HA(L)-3 would not transfer its equipment to the South Vietnamese, but would rather train and familiarize Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) and Vietnamese Navy (VNN) personnel with the tactical concepts behind armed helicopter riverine support. The first 11 VNN officers were assigned to the *Seawolves* during the year to receive training as air observers.

Later these men would fly with the HA(L)-3 gunships on missions acting as interpreters and coordinating joint *Seawolf* air and VNN surface operations. This interface between the Americans and Vietnamese became critically more important during the last quarter of the year as an increasing number of PBRs were turned over to the VNN.

In one of the more significant moves during the year, Detachment 3 relocated from Ha Tien, on the Cambodian border, to Ca Mau on 5 August. From here it supported Det 1, located at Nam Can, and Det 6, stationed at Song Ong Doc, in their missions against the 9th NVA Division operating in the southern Ca Mau Peninsula.

**Incident at "VC Lake"**—In 1962 when the gunship helicopter first went to Vietnam, its appearance initially caused a mild panic among the Viet Cong. But by 1970, that situation had long since changed and although the VC, along with their NVA comrades, still had a healthy respect for the armed helicopter, they were by no means intimidated by it. Heavy caliber weapons now were concentrated around their vital positions and they were quite willing to use them when directly threatened. Their anti-helicopter tactics had been refined over the years and they were not the least bit reluctant to use any number of creative lures to bring unwary helicopters under the sights of heavy caliber weapons. One favorite tactic was to isolate an allied ground unit, surround it with heavy weapons, allow the beleaguered unit to call for help and then lie in wait for the helicopters to arrive. Such was the case during the afternoon of 15 September 1970 when the *Seawolves* were requested to provide escort for an Army UH-1 medevac helicopter.<sup>64</sup>

Earlier in the day, elements of the South Vietnamese Army Regional Forces had unexpectedly encountered very formidable opposition during an operation southwest of Ca Mau. As the action progressed, it became obvious a major engagement was developing with a well-entrenched and disciplined enemy. Located near a shallow body of water euphemistically known as "VC Lake," one of the South Vietnamese units had taken several casualties and requested medevac of the most serious.

When it initially arrived on the scene, the medevac (call-sign DUSTOFF 86) was unable to make a pickup due to intense ground fire. The pilot called for helicopter gunship support and withdrew south to Ca Mau to perform another mission while waiting for the escorts to become available. While refueling, the medevac again requested gunship support, this time from the Navy Operations Center at Nam Can. Seawolf 306 of Det 3 and Seawolf 313 of Det 1 were assigned to escort the medevac from Nam Can to the pickup area. Det 6 was also scrambled from Son Ong Doc to provide additional coverage.

After rendezvousing over the area, both groups of helicopters took their positions for the approach to the intended landing zone (LZ). In the distance, a smoky haze created by the escalating battle could be clearly seen along with supporting U.S. Army helicopters.

The exact circumstances of the next several minutes are, today, unclear. It appears however the two Det 6 aircraft preceded Dustoff 86 to suppress ground fire during the approach. The Det 1 and Det 3 helicopters followed on the

wing of the medevac to provide support during the landing. As the helicopters swept into the pickup area, it ignited in heavy, concentrated gunfire hitting all four gunships nearly simultaneously. Two *Seawolves* were almost immediately shot down. Seawolf 312 of Det 6 went down first. Settling near the LZ, it hit a dike during the landing flare and turned what otherwise might have been a relatively successful controlled crash into a nightmare of twisted helicopter. Its wingman, heavily damaged in the tail rotor control linkage, had to retire from the area and eventually made a successful landing at Ca Mau.

Seeing the Det 6 ship go down and amid the heavy anti-aircraft fire, Dustoff 86 broke off his approach climbing to the right. Seawolf 313 of Det 1, flying on the wing of Dustoff 86, lost its engine and turning away from the medevac, auto-rotated<sup>65</sup> into the relative safety of "VC Lake," where its crew climbed to the cabin roof. The fourth helicopter, Seawolf 306, commanded by Lt. Robert Baratko of Det 3, sustained damage to its fuel cells and began leaking fuel badly. Observing the formation break up, Baratko had rolled away from the medevac and followed his wingman.

Dustoff 86 wheeled around and headed for the *Seawolf* crew down in "VC Lake." Baratko, seeing his wingman's crew wet but otherwise unharmed and in no immediate danger, turned away toward the wreckage of 312 where he orbited overhead looking for signs of survivors and attempting to keep the enemy at bay. In so doing, his helicopter took at least eight additional hits from the ground. Repeated attempts to make contact with Army gunships working nearby failed. Their original mission long forgotten, both Baratko, who was now critically low on fuel, and the medevac pilot knew time was short for anyone who may have survived the wrecked Seawolf 312. Darkness and the VC were not far off and a pickup would have to be made soon if there was to be any chance at all. Although South Vietnamese Army troops were in the vicinity, the volume and ferocity of gunfire directed at the helicopters from the tree lines and levies around Seawolf 312 left little doubt they would have a formidable task in reaching the wreckage.

With Baratko and his badly holed ship running interference, Dustoff 86, this time with Seawolf 313's crew aboard, dove again into the hail of bullets. Sweeping in next to the remains of 312, the Navy men aboard the medevac quickly recovered two critically injured crewmen, one pilot and one gunner. The other two, pinned in the wreckage and believed dead, were left behind. Only after escorting Dustoff 86 out of the LZ, did Lt. Baratko then withdraw heading toward Son Ong Doc some six kilometers away where he landed with little more than fumes in his tanks.

While Dustoff 86 was on the ground, two *Sealord* UH-1Ls, responding to the initial "Mayday" call from Det 6, had arrived overhead from Nam Can. One, *Sealord* 3, was piloted by Bill Beltz. Amid the confusion and gunfire, it had been difficult to positively determine the status of the two *Seawolves* left on the ground. Deciding it was necessary to go down to the wreckage of Seawolf 312 to fully confirm their suspicions and to make a better attempt at recovering the bodies, Beltz circled above while his wingman proceeded to Song Ong Doc for fuel and to pick up a contingent of HA(L)-3 volunteers to serve as a ground party.

After 20 minutes of trying, Beltz succeeded in contacting the Army helicopters operating nearby but was refused help because of the intensity of antiaircraft fire at the crash site. Meanwhile a third UH-1L with the HAL-3 commanding officer arrived almost simultaneously with an element of OV-10As from Navy squadron VAL-4. Denied firing clearance because of the reportedly close proximity of friendly troops, the OV-10As could do nothing but orbit the scene.

Bill Beltz picks up the story<sup>66</sup>:

"I was the only slick<sup>67</sup> that had door gunners so I decided it was worthwhile to make this effort. . . . I made a low pass . . . to see what kind of fire there was; and, boy, there was some! Coming out of tree lines on both sides! I went back up and figured I had most of the fire pinpointed."

In the meantime, two Army AH-1G attack helicopters (callsigns CRUSADER 32 and 39) of the 187th Assault Helicopter Company had arrived after being scrambled earlier at the request of Dustoff 86. They formed up with Beltz's UH-1L to cover his landing attempt. Beltz continues:

"So I went down [again] and made my approach; the aircraft had flipped over into a canal, about chest-deep water. My crewmen got out, waded over to the aircraft and confirmed both remaining [men] were dead. The pilot was jammed in so tightly his body could not be removed without major effort. The other man was floating free so my crewmen dragged him over to my aircraft while I was hovering. . . . They climbed back in and we took off.

"During the stay on the ground, my copilot was returning fire [to] the tree line with his M-16. I took off; the two guns [Cobras] followed me out and one of them [Crusader 32<sup>68</sup>] was shot down right behind me. The fire was extremely intense. I remember it being almost a solid sound . . . one solid roar. .50-caliber tracers looked like big basketballs coming up. . . . We took a number of hits but got out of there. The gun that was shot down behind me was immediately rescued by an Army medevac [callsign DUSTOFF 80] that had arrived while I was on the ground. He followed that gun right on down; as he autorotated the medevac was right beside him and the crewmen immediately jumped out of the gun and into the medevac . . . they probably weren't on the ground 20 seconds."

The following day, both downed *Seawolf* UH-1Bs were destroyed in place due to the continued close proximity of enemy activity. However, the downed Huey Cobra as well as the body of the *Seawolf* 312 pilot were successfully recovered.

Over the course of the next several days, it was determined the South Vietnamese had stumbled into the headquarters area for the NVA's 95th Regiment. Evidence later surfacing through intelligence sources indicated this combat resulted from a carefully executed helicopter trap. Unknown at the time to the Navy, Army helicopters taking in the initial assaulting force had suffered heavy damage and the local commander had ordered that no other aircraft were to penetrate the immediate area because of the intense ground fire. This somehow had not been relayed to either Dustoff 86 or the Navy Operations Center at Nam Can, and was part of the reason why the on-scene Army commander refused Beltz's request for assistance. Bitter feelings surfaced between the Army and Navy over this incident.<sup>69</sup> On the Navy side, they held the Army responsible for not properly alerting them to



With the copilot (left) in control, this *Seawolf* UH-1B is on final for the USS *Windham County* (LST-1170) in August 1968. After numerous accidents, night LST operations as a standard procedure were terminated early in 1970. (U.S. Navy)

the dangers of the area and then for not rendering immediate assistance to the downed aircrews. From the Army side, they blamed the Navy for blundering into an area they had no business being in and for further complicating an already complex situation. The pilot of *Seawolf* 313 was awarded the Bronze Star for his efforts in rescuing the injured survivors of *Seawolf* 312 while Bill Beltz received the Silver Star for his part in the "VC Lake" mission. As for Lt. Baratko, he was recommended for the Medal of Honor for his actions on 15 September 1970, but the award was subsequently downgraded to the Navy Cross.<sup>70</sup>

A little more than a month later Det 6 was again in the thick of things as the Navy base at Song Ong Doc was brought under intense bombardment on the night of 20 October. Det 6, which used the base for night staging, was scrambled after the first rounds began falling and immediately began placing strikes against the attacking positions. The detachment suffered no losses and eventually the attack was repulsed, but the base was almost totally destroyed and this, coupled with the possibility of a renewed attack, forced Det 6 to relocate to the USS *Garrett County* (LST-786) standing by offshore and continue their missions from the ship. This incident serves to illustrate at once both the hazards faced by the remotely based *Seawolf* detachments as well as their extreme mobility.

The events of history tell us that 1971 was to be the last complete year of service for the *Seawolves*, but as the new year rolled in, none in the unit could know that. In all probability most of them never contemplated the squadron's return home, but rather looked forward to their own individual departures from the war zone. Vietnam was a 12-month tour for both officers and enlisted men. If desired, a six-month extension could be granted and many in the squadron availed themselves of this opportunity. Still others returned for second complete tours.

Morale never seemed to be a major problem at least among the flight crews. Like most combat air crews, they tended to take each day as it came since each brought with it new experiences (. . . and it just didn't pay to look too far ahead). To be sure the questions and doubts about the war in general plagued them all at one time or another. Frustrations born from the political constraints imposed on the military forces



UH-1B, probably of Det 2, comes aboard River Patrol Boat Mobile Base II in the Long Tau River near Nha Be, July 1968. Note assymetrical weapon configuration typical of Seawolf helicopters equipped with the .50-caliber door gun. (U.S. Navy)

were sometimes exceedingly difficult to understand and live with, particularly when one was asked to put his life on the line. An example was the ability to engage the enemy at will. Many areas were designated free fire zones where anything moving was fair game and assumed without question to be hostile. However, outside free fire zones, permission was required before engagement even if the enemy could be clearly seen and identified. Clearance usually had to come from the local area commander, or higher, who more than likely was nowhere near the scene of contact.

From the latter months of 1970 through the most of 1971, Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces operating in South Vietnam's Mekong Delta region were, for the most part, keeping their activities at a low level. As a result, the men of HA(L)-3 enjoyed a period of lessened activity (when compared to previous years). The gunship detachments logged over 25,000 hours while the *Sealords* contributed better than 9,000 during the year indicating their operations were increasing. One major relocation occurred in May when Det 6 began operations along the upper Long Tau River from its new base at Phu Loi. In October, this unit's presence would become invaluable when fighting around and near Tay Ninh reached major offensive proportions and the infiltration threat to the area around Saigon increased accordingly. In October, Det 9 relocated to the headquarters at Binh Thuy and served as a back-up unit, supporting and assisting the other detachments.

Detachments 1 and 3 actively supported the continuing Operation Seafloat in the lower Mekong Delta. These units, along with Det 5, became heavily involved in offensive action when enemy activity in the U Minh forest, west of Ca Mau, flared briefly in late summer. Det 4 continued to be committed to Operation Giant Slingshot in the area northwest of Saigon and two other detachments, 5 and 8, were involved with interdiction of Viet Cong infiltration routes from Cambodia.

Detachment 2 was the only unit of HA(L)-3 never to change its area of operation in the nearly five years of its existence. Operating from Nha Be, Det 2 covered the little triangular area south-southeast of Saigon known as the Rung Sat<sup>71</sup> Special Zone. Some 1,000 square kilometers in size, this area was actually 12 separate islands all loosely interwoven in a

huge mangrove swamp. The area was long known as a haven for bandits and it was around 1954 that the Viet Cong began to move in and take control. This area was important not only because of the strong Viet Cong influence there, but also because the only navigable deep water channel to Saigon (the Long Tau, or Saigon, River) lay directly through it. Nha Be was first used as a base of operations for Navy helicopter gunships by one of the old HC-1 dets in August 1966.

Detachment 2's mission was to patrol the Rung Sat as well as to escort ships making the ever perilous journey along the river to and from Saigon. This unit of HA(L)-3 was also the only det to operate four gunships, or two fire teams, on a continuing basis. The additional gunship element had been assigned in June 1969 to provide more firepower and better coverage to this very vital area.

But Det 2 was notable for other reasons. Due to its larger size, it enjoyed a leadership much more senior than that of the other detachments; and probably because its mission was protecting the Vietnamese capital's shipping channel, it had first priority on replacement aircraft. Only 10 or so miles from Saigon, Nha Be was undoubtedly the best duty in the squadron. Crews could go into Saigon on their days off, the facilities, accommodations and security were much better than the other, outlying dets. They also had the advantage of a large L-shaped, although PSP covered, runway layout from which to operate. This last feature was critically important as Det 2 was where HA(L)-3 sent those pilots who were too large to fly off the LSTs and other support vessels from which the remaining dets operated. The runways allowed the Det 2 helicopters to perform a "running" takeoff when gross weight and ambient air conditions combined to make a hovering takeoff impossible. Cdr. David Rucker remembers<sup>72</sup>:

"Usually you could not hover to taxi (due to amount of ammo), so the crewmen would get out and allow the aircraft to taxi in a six-inch hover. Many times the crewmen would have to run alongside of the aircraft on takeoff, then jump in and the pilot would bounce the skids on the ground to get airborne and air flow over the rotor. I tried to see how high I could go one day around 1000 in the morning and the best I could do was 40 knots and 1,300 feet! At that altitude and airspeed I could wipe out the cockpit with the cyclic stick<sup>73</sup> with no apparent effect on the roll/pitch characteristics of the aircraft."

1 July saw the beginnings of indoctrination and familiarization training for selected VNAF flight crews, a continuation of the Vietnamization program begun the preceding year. The pilots and gunners, after two weeks of instruction in ground school and flight familiarization, were parceled out to the HA(L)-3 detachments, usually one gunner and one pilot per det. After this additional six weeks of on-the-job training, they were returned to the VNAF qualified in attack helicopter riverine operations. The purpose of this program was to provide a nucleus of personnel to the VNAF so their helicopter gunship<sup>74</sup> squadrons could assume HA(L)-3's role upon its departure from Vietnam.

This first group finished their training on 30 December, 10 days after a second class of 20 started their instruction. By 31 January 1972, HA(L)-3 had trained 20 pilots and 30 air crewmen from the VNAF. Although the *Seawolves* had laid the groundwork, it is doubtful the VNAF was able to utilize these

flight crews on as broad a base as envisioned by HA(L)-3 due to financial, logistical and equipment restraints.

One of the more interesting incidents of 1971 involved the Det 9 fire team on 28 August. Returning to their support ship, the USS *Windham County* (LST-1170) after a patrol, the flight encountered severe rainstorms and made a precautionary landing because of low fuel. Soon after shutdown both helicopters were brought under heavy hostile gunfire and began to reposition themselves. The lead aircraft, *Seawolf* 313, succeeded in landing on a sandbar, was later refueled and returned to the *Windham County*. However, the trail helicopter, *Seawolf* 316, took enemy fire and was force-landed only a short distance from its original position. The crew was later rescued by another HA(L)-3 gunship, but the downed helicopter could not be recovered due to the proximity of the enemy and their stiff resistance. OV-10As from the Navy's VAL-4, providing cover for the rescue operation, assisted in carrying out the *coup de grace* on 316 to prevent its capture.

**1972 and Home**—1972 was the beginning of the end for HA(L)-3, and it began as 1971 had finished, with a distinct lack of enemy activity. By the end of January the last of the Vietnamese undergoing indoctrination and familiarization training had completed their tasks and returned to their respective VNAF and VNN units. With this job completed, HA(L)-3 received its stand-down orders and shortly thereafter began the arduous process of closing down the outlying detachments and recalling the crews to Binh Thuy. Detachment 6, at Phu Loi, was the first, ceasing combat missions on 14 February. Concurrent with this activity was the return to Army control of some 31 UH-1B and UH-1M helicopters as well as disposition of the several Navy UH-1L and HH-1K aircraft. By 6 March all had been turned in.<sup>75</sup> With the last aircraft gone, administrative cleanup followed; the remaining personnel orders cut and issued; documents collated and transferred; loose support equipment accounted for, packaged and shipped. This took another two weeks so that it was not until 16 March that Helicopter Attack (Light) Squadron Three was formally decommissioned.<sup>76</sup>

**Epilogue**—In light of the most recent history of the late Republic of Vietnam, it would be all too easy to dismiss the efforts of Allied land, sea and air forces in that country as futile. But the *Seawolves*, for their part, both opened and closed a whole new chapter in American aviation, a chapter that in all probability we will never see again. Borrowing a technique developed by their traditional rivals, the Naval aviators of HA(L)-3 became a dominant force in the struggle for one of the most important areas of Southeast Asia. Operating war-weary UH-1B, C and M armed helicopters, the *Seawolves* did, for a time, significantly contribute to stemming the tide of enemy infiltration and activity into the rice-rich Mekong Delta; and with their participation in Operation Sea-float from 1969 on, were a key factor in opening a substantial portion of the lower Ca Mau Peninsula to free enterprise for the first time in almost 20 years. Although the seed of the idea which would eventually become HA(L)-3 germinated around the need for air support by elements of Task Force 116, the *Seawolves* very quickly became a force apart; an

aerial analog to the surface-borne PBRs, each mode complementing the other in their common mission.

However, the realities of the Vietnamese War eventually precluded the type of success that many had envisioned for the *Seawolves*. An ever-increasing influx of heavy antiaircraft weapons, as well as refinement of anti-helicopter tactics by the Viet Cong and later regular North Vietnamese forces in the Delta, exacted a heavy price from the men and machines of HA(L)-3. So much so that the Navy was forced to introduce a heavier aerial weapon system into the Delta in the form of Light Attack Squadron Four (VAL-4).

The political policies and maneuverings which charted the course of American involvement in Vietnam also obviously affected the HA(L)-3 mission and its ultimate success. The limitations imposed on American forces in prosecuting the war were a constant source of frustration and remain today, for many HA(L)-3 veterans, ones of bitterness as well.

The *Seawolves*, like the conflict in which they fought, are now history and as time works its way, the memory of both will fade. In the end, their single greatest achievement may have been that they fought a very unconventional battle in a very unconventional manner with a great deal of success. That, in the final analysis, the fruits of their labors and sacrifices ultimately went unrewarded cannot in any way be reflected on their service to either the Republic of Vietnam or the United States Navy.

**A Word on Markings**—The UH-1B, C and M gunships transferred by the Army to HA(L)-3 generally had already seen a good deal of combat. They retained, for the most part, the standard Army olive drab paint scheme although after commissioning of the squadron some helicopters were apparently repainted in a black or deep Navy blue color, either completely or partially. There is no evidence to indicate this was a squadron-wide policy, however.

Originally, the words UNITED STATES NAVY were carried in black along both sides of the tailboom. After formation of HA(L)-3 early in 1967, this was gradually replaced with the word NAVY in large white letters. Some photos, however, show the word NAVY in black; and it is believed this was a very early style marking dating from the 1967 period which was not necessarily representative of all squadron aircraft.

Also, after commissioning, a three-digit "modex" code beginning with the numeral 3 was assigned and carried on the vertical fin of all gunships. Although these machines retained their original Army serials, this code became the aircraft "tail (or side) number." Photographs exist of HA(L)-3 helicopters with a white three-digit tail code beginning with other than 3, but it is felt these numbers were simply the last three digits of the Army serial which had been highlighted in white for expediency pending assignment of a permanent squadron number.

Some HA(L)-3 detachments carried the squadron and det identification in small white letters on the tailboom aft of the horizontal stabilizer. However, this does not appear to have been a squadron-wide practice and is believed to date from the 1967-1968 time frame. After 1968, nearly all gunships carried on their nose the HA(L)-3 insignia; a fire-breathing dragon carrying a spear and shield all emblazoned on a circular field of white. The precise origin of the *Seawolf* insignia is

unknown but is thought to have been influenced by similar designs used by South Vietnamese Army units operating in the Mekong Delta.

The UH-1Ls and HH-1Ks assigned to HA(L)-3 were painted in the then-standard Navy gray with associated markings and no apparent attempt was made to repaint them in the subdued scheme carried by the gunships. The only "modex" code known to have been carried by the *Sealords* were the letters SL followed by a one- or two-digit number. This became the helicopter callsign and probably tail number as well, the SL standing for Sealord. Some sources\* have suggested SL may have been the official Navy tail code assigned HA(L)-3, but no evidence has ever surfaced to officially verify this. It is felt this was simply a local "modex" applied by the squadron to uniquely and quickly identify the *Sealord* helicopters as a separate entity from the gunship elements.

\*Duane A. Kasulka, "USN & USMC Units and Their Identification Codes, Part I," *American Aviation Historical Society Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 4, Winter 1971, pp. 294-302.  
 \*\*"USN & USMC Units and Their Identification Codes, Part II," *AAHS Journal*, Vol. 21, No. 3, Fall 1976, pp. 185-198.  
 \*\*\*"USN & USMC Units and Their Identification Codes, Part III," *AAHS Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 1, Spring 1977, pp. 62-65.

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1. Operation Market Time, otherwise known as Task Force (TF) 115, established air and sea coastal patrols to choke off seaborne Viet Cong supply lanes. It was the first of a three-prong effort to wrest control away from the Viet Cong infrastructure in the Delta.
2. LCPL: Landing Craft Personnel, Large.
3. W.C. Wells, Cpt, USN, "The Riverine Force in Action, 1966-1967," *Naval Review*, U.S. Naval Institute, 1969, pp. 46-83.
4. U.S.S. *Belle Grove* Command History for 1966, Operational Archives, Naval History Division, Washington, D.C.
5. Just as "Market Time" patrolled the coastal sea traffic and lanes, TF-116 mounted internal air- and waterborne patrols of the Delta's inland waterways to disrupt existing Viet Cong operations inside the Delta and block overland infiltration routes from Cambodia.
6. U.S.S. *Belle Grove* Command History for 1966, Operational Archives, Naval History Division, Washington, D.C.
7. Al Banford, telephone interview with the author, May 8, 1985. Also, two Army helicopters and one pilot were lost in takeoff crashes from the USS *Tortuga* during the week of 12 July 1966. Whether these accidents occurred as a result of inclement weather or darkness is not known; U.S.S. *Tortuga* Command History for 1966, Operational Archives, Naval History Division, Washington, D.C.
8. The exact identity of this last HC-1 "Game Warden" Det has not been positively established. The Det 21 designation used here is based on the memory of HA(L)-3 member Matt Gache and official Navy documents (cited elsewhere) identifying LCdr. George Rowell as the OIC of HC-1, Det 21 in Vietnam. Al Banford, who deployed to Vietnam with this last HC-1 Det has stated the Det's first OIC was LCdr. George Rowell. However, Mr. Banford recalls the designation of this unit was HC-1 Det 4. The HC-1 historical summary for 1966 cites Det 21 deploying during the last week of November. Although the summary does not specifically mention Det 21's destination, this date does correspond to Mr. Banford's memory of his arrival in Vietnam. It is believed the HC-1 Dets were locally redesignated as Dets 1, 2, 3 and 4 in the weeks just prior to the commissioning of HA(L)-3. See also Edwin J. Bulban, "Navy Using Armed Helicopters in Vietnam," *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, May 20, 1968, pp. 69-76.
9. U.S. Naval Forces Vietnam Monthly Historical Summary, August 1966 (FF5-16/08A, Ser 0491, 1 Oct 66), Operational Archives, Naval History Division, Washington, D.C.
10. PCF: Patrol Craft Coastal (Fast); otherwise known as a "Swift" boat.
11. Al Banford, telephone interview with the author, May 8, 1985.
12. In addition to the *Belle Grove* and *Tortuga*, the U.S.S. *Comstock* (LSD-19) was also assigned to TF-116. Relieving *Tortuga* on 11 September 1966, the *Comstock* was herself relieved by the USS *Jennings County* (LST-846) on 13 November 1966.
13. The exact origins of this name are unconfirmed. However, available evidence indicates it was a hold-over from the initial Army operations off of the LSDs. The 1966 *Belle Grove* Command History refers to it as "the 'Seawolf' (armed Huey) strike force" while the *Tortuga* Command History from the same year calls it "Task Force Seawolf," and to the 145th Combat Aviation Battalion (CAB) history for 1966 it was "Operation Seawolf."
14. Boatswain's Mate 1st Class J.E. Williams, in tactical command of these two PBRs, was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions during this combat.
15. HC-1 Det 29 AAR 1-66A, 2 Nov 1966, preliminary and secondary message reports, Naval Safety Center, Norfolk, VA.
16. Matt Gache letter to the author dated March 14, 1984.

17. The relationship shown here between the redesignation of the HC-1 Dets to HA(L)-3 Dets is not confirmed. It is based on information contained in official Navy documents cited elsewhere as well as correspondence with former squadron members.
18. SEAL: SEA, Air, Land. These men were specially trained in counterinsurgency warfare and clandestine intelligence gathering. Roughly, the Navy equivalent to the Army's Special Forces.
19. Matt Gache letter to the author dated March 14, 1984.
20. Eugene Joenks letter to the author dated March 1984.
21. Mike Smith letter to the author dated April 24, 1984.
22. Al Banford, telephone interview with the author, May 8, 1985.
23. This system should not be confused with the M-16 rifle.
24. Rex Lang, ADC, USN, letter to the author dated January 21, 1984. Lang further states that while these guns were sometimes dismounted to be used "free hand," most pilots preferred they remain mounted.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Eugene Joenks letter to the author dated March 1984.
27. Rex Lang, ADC, USN, letter to the author dated April 3, 1984.
28. Rex Lang, ADC, USN, letter to the author dated January 21, 1984.
29. David Rucker, Cdr., USN, letter to the author dated May 8, 1984.
30. Al Banford letter to the author dated August 28, 1984; also telephone interview with the author, May 8, 1985.
31. Matt Gache letter to the author dated March 14, 1984.
32. The Det 1 helicopter with this 40mm installation was shot down and destroyed on July 13, 1968; the day it arrived back at the Det with the new door gun. Chuck Bagley letter to the author dated April 2, 1985.
33. *Ibid.*
34. David Rucker, Cdr., USN, letter to the author dated May 8, 1984.
35. Eugene Joenks letter to the author dated March 1984.
36. David Rucker, Cdr., USN, letter to the author dated May 8, 1984.
37. Edwin J. Bulban, "Navy Using Armed Helicopters in Vietnam," *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, May 20, 1968, pp. 69-76.
38. Matt Gache, telephone interview with the author, April 28, 1985.
39. CIC: Combat Information Center.
40. Officially, TF-117 was River Assault Flotilla One; but most knew it as the Mobile Riverine Force. Composed of Navy assault boats combined with the Army's 9th Infantry Division and Vietnamese troops, TF-117 had begun operations in Vietnam during January 1967. It was one of the primary ground combat elements opposing the Viet Cong in the Delta.
41. During SEAL missions, the unarmed helicopters (i.e., no external armament) were escorted by armed ones. Introduction of the UH-1L to HA(L)-3 will be discussed later.
42. Matt Gache, telephone interview with the author, July 21, 1985.
43. Chuck Bagley letter to the author dated April 2, 1985.
44. Eugene Joenks letter to the author dated March 1984.
45. TET is the celebration honoring the Chinese New Year.
46. Eugene Joenks letter to the author dated March 1984.
47. Taking its name from the geography formed by the Vam Co Tay and Vam Co Dong Rivers which form a "slingshot" effect around that salient of Cambodian territory northwest of Saigon known as the "Parrot's Beak."
48. YRBM: Repair, Berthing and Messing Barge; reconfigured for Vietnam operations to support armed helicopters and PBRs.
49. Dennis Russell letter to the author dated April 1984.
50. PSP: Pierced Steel Planking.
51. Rex Lang, ADC, USN, letter to the author dated January 21, 1984.
52. The following LSTs served in Vietnam as operating bases for HA(L)-3: USS *Garrett County* (LST-786), USS *Harnett County* (LST-821), USS *Hunterdon*

With rotors turning, a Det 3 UH-1B rearms aboard the USS *Jennings County* (LST-846) during November 1969. When time was critical, both refueling and rearming were accomplished without shutting down the engine. Note the .50-caliber door gun mount.  
 (U.S. Navy)



County (LST-838), USS Jennings County (LST-846) and the USS Windham County (LST-1170).

53. Mike Smith letter to the author dated April 24, 1984.

54. Also shown as Quan Long on some maps.

55. Det 2, which will be discussed later, was an exception.

56. NVA: North Vietnamese Army.

57. Eugene Joenks letter to the author dated March 1984.

58. Bill Beltz cassette recording to the author August 1975.

59. Otherwise known as an RPG-2 (Rocket Propelled Grenade).

60. As previously noted these were the Coastal Surveillance Force, TF-115 ("Market Time"), the River Patrol Force, TF-116 ("Game Warden") and the Mobile Riverine Force, TF-117.

61. The Bell UH-1L was essentially a Navy version of the Marine UH-1E equipped with the Lycoming T53-L-13 engine for improved performance. A contract for eight UH-1Ls was placed in May 1968 along with a contract for 45 TH-1Ls, a training version. All eight UH-1Ls were delivered between November 7, 1969 and December 31, 1969.

62. Similar to the UH-1L except for an expanded avionics package to support the air/sea rescue role for which it was procured, 27 HH-1Ks were accepted by the Navy between May and August 1970.

63. Bill Beltz cassette recording to the author August 1975.

64. This incident has been pieced together with information from a participant, Navy documents cited elsewhere as well as the following:

a. Navy message of 151900Z Sep 70 from CTG 116.2, "Song Ong Doc Spotrep J0579."

b. Navy message of 161445Z Sep 70 from NILO Ca Mau, "NILO Ca Mau Spotrep O7-70."

c. Navy message of 161630Z Sep 70 from NILO Song Ong Doc to COMNAVFORV.

d. Navy message of 161830Z Sep 70 from CTG 116.2 to CTF 116, "Song Ong Doc Spotrep 00579; Sitrep."

e. COMNAVFORV INTSUM 221-70 dated 170944Z Sep 70.

f. Navy message of 180335Z Sep 70 from COMNAVFORV to COMUSMACV, "Helicopter Losses."

g. Navy message 190805Z Sep 70 from CTG 116.7 to CTG 116.2, "Response to Emergency Request for Assistance."

h. Navy message of 221430Z Sep 70 from CTU 116.7.3, "Seawolf Spotrep Nr 00040."

i. Navy message of 231000Z Sep 70 from NILO Ca Mau to COMNAVFORV, "NILO Ca Mau Spotrep (05-70)."

j. U.S. Naval Forces Vietnam Monthly Historical Summary for September 1970 (FF5-16/023, Ser 6518, 8 Nov 70).

References a.-j. all from the Operational Archives, Naval History Division, Washington, D.C.

65. Autorotation is the helicopter equivalent to a "dead-stick" landing (power-off descent and landing).

66. Bill Beltz cassette recording to the author, August 1975.

67. A "slick" is any non-gunship helicopter; so named because it carries no external armament and therefore has a clean, or "slick," exterior fuselage. In the vernacular of Vietnam the term almost always refers to the ubiquitous Bell UH-1.

68. Navy message of 212310Z Sep 70 from CTG 116.7 "Special Summary Spotrep of 15 Sep 70 Action Near VQ9395," Operational Archives, Naval History Division, Washington, D.C.

69. Bill Beltz cassette recording to the author, August 1975. This can also be noted in the wording and structure of Navy message "Seawolf Spotrep Nr 00040" of 160700Z Sep 70 from CTU 116.7.3, Operational Archives, Naval History Division, Washington, D.C.

70. Bill Beltz cassette recording to the author, August 1975.

71. Literally, "Forest of Assassins."

72. David Rucker, Cdr., USN, letter to the author dated May 8, 1984.

73. The helicopter's roll and pitch control.

74. The VNAF employed armed Bell UH-1H helicopters in the gunship role equipped with side-mounted 2.75-inch rocket pods and door-mounted 7.62mm miniguns.

75. Brian Buzzell, Lt., USN, letter to the author dated December 1975.

76. U.S. Naval Forces Vietnam Quarterly Historical Summary for January-March 1972 (FF5-16/023, Ser 0410, 3 May 72), Operational Archives, Naval History Division, Washington, D.C.

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d. Command History of the U.S.S. Jennings County (LST-846) for 1966. Operational Archives, Naval History Division, Washington, D.C.

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## HA(L)-3 STATISTICAL DATA 1969-1971

1969	
Total Flight Hours: UH-1B	23,527
Total Flight Hours: UH-1L	318
Enemy Killed By Action (Confirmed/Probable)	447/750
Enemy Structures (Destroyed/Damaged)	1148/1783
Enemy Sampans	971/769
Enemy Junks	44/55
1970	
Total Flight Hours: UH-1B, C, M	26,099
Total Flight Hours: UH-1L, HH-1K	7,874
Enemy Killed By Action	755/1128
Enemy Structures	1120/1210
Enemy Sampans	1641/476
Enemy Junks	7/4
1971	
Total Flight Hours: UH-1B, M	25,224
Total Flight Hours: UH-1L, HH-1K	9,599
Enemy Killed By Action	1040/990
Enemy Structures	593/1057
Enemy Sampans	1255/410
Enemy Junks	37/24

## THE AIRCRAFT OF HELATKLTRON THREE

This list of helicopters used by the *Seawolves* in Vietnam has been compiled from numerous sources including official documents, magazine articles and photographs. Although the squadron at maximum strength probably never operated more

than 40 aircraft at any one time, the actual total number of helicopters assigned to the squadron between 1966 and 1972 was considerably more.

ARMY SERNO. NAVY BUNO.	MODEL	TAIL NO. "MODEX"	NOTES	ARMY SERNO. NAVY BUNO.	MODEL	TAIL NO. "MODEX"	NOTES
62-1936	UH-1B	—	Assigned 7/26/71.				
62-1970	UH-1B	327	Assigned 12/6/70. Damaged by ground fire, two wounded 4/14/71. Det 1 c. Nov. 1971.				tion; both pilots, one gunner injured 1/25/71. Destroyed in training accident at Ca Mau, both pilots injured 4/7/71.
62-1985	UH-1B	—	Assigned 3/30/71.	64-14007	UH-1B	—	Assigned 2/4/71.
62-2025	UH-1B	309	Assigned 6/13/71.	64-14020	UH-1B	—	Assigned 4/21/70. Damaged by ground fire, 1 crewman wounded 4/29/71.
62-2031	UH-1B	—	Assigned 10/10/70.				Assigned 1/3/70.
62-2034	UH-1B	321	Assigned 4/15/69. Det 6, damaged by engine failure at Song Ong Doc 12/16/70. Assigned Det 5 c. Mar 1971. Det 7, damaged by ground fire 7/27/71. Det 2, cabin damaged by parafflare ignition 12/7/71.	64-14022	UH-1B	—	Assigned 9/13/70.
62-2038	UH-1B	316	Det 6, engine failure at Ca Mau 11/11/70. Det 3, damaged in hard landing at Nam Can 12/16/70. Det 1, damaged by ground fire 12/26/70. Windshield shattered by ground fire, pilots slightly wounded 1/8/71.	64-14081	UH-1B	—	Assigned 11/20/69. On board rocket detonated by ground fire, 1 crewman killed 4/19/71. Det 5, damaged by ground fire 8/15/71 and heavily damaged in forced landing from engine failure 8/28/71.
62-4579	UH-1B	306	Det 3, destroyed by fire from crash-landing at Ca Mau after engine failure, one crewman killed 10/3/70.	64-14087	UH-1B	—	Assigned 6/30/71.
62-4597	UH-1B	—	Assigned 8/22/71.	64-14090	UH-1B	—	Assigned 7/24/69. In service c. 1970-71.
62-4602	UH-1B	322	Assigned 10/10/70. Det 4, broke up in flight, all 4 crewmen killed including Det CO 9/20/71.	64-14091	UH-1B	—	Assigned 8/4/71.
62-4604	UH-1B	—	Assigned 11/25/70. In service ca. 1971.	64-14117	UH-1M	—	Assigned 11/3/71.
62-12515	UH-1B	321	Assigned c. 1968, Det 7.	64-14145	UH-1C	—	Assigned 11/17/70.
62-12542	UH-1B	—	Assigned 1/30/70. In service with Det 8 c. Nov. 1970.	65-9423	UH-1M	—	Assigned 9/7/71.
62-12543	UH-1B	—	Assigned 8/1/71.	65-9476	UH-1M	314	Assigned 11/15/70. Det 9, damaged by ground fire 9/17/71. Assigned Det 2 c. Nov. 1971.
63-8540	UH-1B	—	Assigned 6/22/69. In service with Det 3 c. Nov. 1970. Det 1, damaged by ground fire 5/9/71.	65-9548	UH-1M	—	Assigned 11/19/71.
63-8545	UH-1B	305	Det 1, water damage from engine failure over Bo De River 10/24/70.	66-540	UH-1C	—	Det 2, lost to engine failure over water, no casualties 3/8/71.
63-8547	UH-1B	—	Assigned 10/5/70.	66-599	UH-1M	—	Assigned 9/8/71.
63-8589	UH-1B	326	Det 1, damaged by ground fire, 3 wounded 2/21/71. Shot down 8/11/71, helicopter recovered.	66-610	UH-1C	—	Assigned 7/11/71.
63-8666	UH-1B	—	Assigned 2/14/69. In service c. 1970.	66-616	UH-1M	316	Shot down with four wounded, destroyed to prevent capture 8/28/71.
63-8679	UH-1B	—	Assigned 8/23/71.	66-655	UH-1M	—	Assigned 9/9/71.
63-8715	UH-1B	—	Assigned 10/31/70. Det 2, damaged in hard landing at Phu Hoi 11/12/70. Det 6, lost to engine failure over Gulf of Thailand 2/17/71.	66-15017	UH-1M	—	Assigned 12/18/71.
63-8738	UH-1B	—	Assigned 5/30/69.	66-15077	UH-1M	313	Assigned 7/6/71.
63-12923	UH-1B	—	Assigned 11/19/70. Det 9, damaged by 75mm recoilless rifle fire aboard YRBM-21 5/28/71.	66-15111	UH-1M	302	Assigned 9/7/71. Det 5, damaged by ground fire 9/20/71.
63-12929	UH-1B	312	Crashed inverted from unknown cause near Kien Long, all 4 crewmen killed 12/19/70.	66-15200	UH-1C	312	Det 5, shot down 20 miles N. of Chau Doc, no casualties, helicopter recovered 11/18/71.
63-12930	UH-1B	—	Assigned 11/4/70. In service c. 1971.	66-15236	UH-1M	—	Assigned 9/8/71.
63-12943	UH-1B	—	In service with HC-1 Det 25 c. 1966.	66-15977	UH-1C	—	Assigned 7/11/71.
63-12946	UH-1B	—	HC-1 Det 25, extensive water damage from accident involving PACV 11/29/66.	157187	HH-1K	SL 11	Destroyed during external hoist operation, two crewmen injured 10/18/71.
64-12934	UH-1B	—	Det 7, destroyed on impact with dike near Dong Tam due to loss of rotor rpm, no casualties 11/16/70.	157200	HH-1K	SL 1	Assigned 11/1/70. Damaged by ground fire, one crewman wounded 4/29/71.
64-13919	UH-1B	—	Assigned 11/4/70. In service c. 1971.	157202	HH-1K	—	Assigned 11/1/70. In service c. 1971.
64-13939	UH-1B	—	Assigned 7/23/70. Det 9, destroyed by 75mm recoilless rifle fire aboard YRBM-21 5/28/71.	157203	HH-1K	—	Lost over Gulf of Thailand to unknown causes, no casualties 11/26/70.
64-13943	UH-1B	328	Assigned 12/13/70. In service with Det 4 c. Oct 1971.	157851	UH-1L	—	Crashed at Binh Thuy, all 3 crewmen killed 6/1/70.
64-13948	UH-1B	332	Det 8, battle damage to cabin 10/17/71.	157852	UH-1L	—	Assigned 12/11/69. In service c. 1970-71.
64-13974	UH-1B	—	HC-1 Det 29, lost over water to engine failure, no casualties 2/11/66.	157853	UH-1L	SL 3	Assigned 12/11/69. Destroyed in landing accident, both pilots injured 12/22/71.
64-13975	UH-1B	—	Assigned 6/24/69. In service c. 1970.	157854	UH-1L	—	Assigned 12/11/69. Damaged by ground fire, one crewman wounded 1/9/71.
64-13980	UH-1B	—	Assigned 9/20/70.	157855	UH-1L	—	Assigned 1/22/70. Damaged due to engine failure near Vi Thanh 10/12/70. In service c. 1971.
64-13990	UH-1B	—	Assigned 5/18/70. Minigun malfunc-	157856	UH-1L	SL 6	Assigned 1/22/70. Crashed on takeoff at Binh Thuy, no casualties 8/13/70. In service c. 1971.
				157857	UH-1L	SL 7	Crashed at Long Phu to tail rotor control failure, one crewman injured 4/26/70.
				157858	UH-1L	SL 10	Assigned 1/22/70.

## SQUADRON AND DET IN SIGNIA

**HA(L)-3 INSIGNIA**—Its specific origins are unknown but is believed to have been heavily influenced by similar designs used by Vietnamese Army units operating in the Mekong Delta. It was first applied to the nose of squadron helicopters beginning shortly after commissioning in April 1967. At least two variations of the insignia appeared on Seawolf gunships over the years. Illustration A was probably the original version, appearing ca. 1967–1968. Illustration B dates from the 1970–1972 time frame.

**INSIGNIA A:** Light blue stylized dragon (sea serpent?) on a white circular field bordered in light blue with red eye, nose flame, hand and toe details and carrying a black trident. Shield is evenly divided red (left) and yellow (right) with black spade.

**INSIGNIA B:** Colors same as Insignia A except white field is borderless, dragon's tongue is red and trident is light blue. Framed on upper side with SEAWOLVES in blue on yellow background and on lower side by HA(L)-3 in red on yellow banner.

**HA(L)-3, DET 3**—This detachment can trace its lineage to HC-1, Det 25 which initially arrived in Vietnam on 29 July 1966. Redesignated HC-1, Det 3 just prior to the formal commissioning of HA(L)-3 in April 1967, Det 3 operated from Vinh Long Army Airfield until early 1969 when it moved to Ha Tien. The next three years saw the Det stationed at a variety of locations in the Delta with its final base of operations at Ca Mau. The insignia illustrated was used by the Det at least through the 1968 TET Offensive. It is not known to have been carried on Det's helicopters.

A dark gray wolf's head outlined in silver, superimposed over a silver sword with yellow pommel, is overlaid on a green delta (triangle) with black rivers and is emblazoned on a circular field of yellow with three horizontal red stripes. Lettering is silver.

**ROWELL'S RATS**—The insignia and nickname of HA(L)-3's Det 4 through 1967. LCDR George "Rocky" Rowell was the original OIC of HC-1 Det 21 which deployed to Vietnam in November 1966. Flying with Army gunship companies, its members did not enter combat as a Navy unit until early 1967 when it was locally redesignated HC-1 Det 4 just a short time prior to commissioning of HA(L)-3. It became HA(L)-3 Det 4 when the new squadron was officially established.

Bordered in white and separated by a diagonal white stripe with black letters, the upper portion of the insignia carries the letter A and a spade, both in black, on a dark green field. The skull is white with black and white facial details and yellow wings, all on a dark blue field.



## COMMANDING OFFICERS OF HA(L)-3, VIETNAM

LCDR Joseph B. Howard	Apr–May 1967
CDR Robert W. Spencer	May 67–May 68
CPT Arthur H. Munson	May 68–Apr 69
CPT Reynolds Beckwith	Apr 69–Apr 70
CPT Martin J. Twite	Apr 70–Apr 71
CPT Charles O. Borgstrom, Jr.	Apr 71–Feb 72
CDR William J. Mulcahy	Feb–Mar 72

## THE AUTHOR

The author is a life member of the AAHS having first joined in 1968. He served with the U.S. Army in Vietnam where he had an opportunity to observe the Seawolves first-hand. His previous work appeared in the 1975 *Journal* as the result of RP 7234 which detailed the design history and Vietnam operations of the Bell AH-1G/J attack helicopters. He currently resides in Bedford, Texas, where he is employed in the aviation industry.

