

## 21<sup>st</sup> SPECIAL OPERATIONS SQUADRON



### LINEAGE

21<sup>st</sup> Pursuit Squadron (Interceptor) constituted, 22 Dec 1939

Activated, 1 Feb 1940

Inactivated, 2 Apr 1946

21<sup>st</sup> Helicopter Squadron constituted, 24 Feb 1956

Activated, 9 Jul 1956

Inactivated, 15 Oct 1957

Activated, 30 Jun 1967

Organized, 15 Jul 1967

Redesignated 21<sup>st</sup> Special Operations Squadron, 1 Aug 1968

Inactivated, 22 Sep 1975

21<sup>st</sup> Pursuit Squadron (Interceptor) and 21<sup>st</sup> Special Operations Squadron consolidated, 19 Sep 1985

Activated on 1 May 1988

21st Pursuit Squadron (35th Pursuit Group)

HQ-Not organized 1939-40; Moffett Field, CA, 1940-41; Hamilton Field, CA, 1941; Nichols Field, PI, 1941

Constituted in the Regular Army on 22 December 1939 and assigned to the 35th Pursuit Group.

Activated on 1 February 1940 at Moffett Field, CA. Transferred on 10 September 1940 to

Hamilton Field, CA. Relieved from the 35th Pursuit Group on 1 October 1941 and assigned to the 24th Pursuit Group. Departed from the port of San Francisco on the U.S.A.T. President Coolidge

and arrived 20 November 1941 at Manila, PI. Transferred to Nichols Field, PI, on the same day.

Location 7 December 1941—Nichols Field, PI.

Status: Active in the U. S. Air Force as the 21st Special Operations Squadron at RAF Mildenhall,

UK.

1388

Commanders, 21st Pursuit Squadron

Capt. Glenn O. Barcus 1 Feb 40-Sep 40 Maj. William E. Dyess Sep 40-9 Apr 42

## **STATIONS**

Moffett Field, CA, 1 Feb 1940

Hamilton Field, CA, 10 Sep–Oct 1941

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

Lubao, Luzon, c. 25 Dec 1941

Bataan, Luzon, c. 4 Jan–Apr 1942 (a portion of the air echelon operated from Mindanao, c. 9 Apr–c. 1 May 1942)

Donaldson AFB, SC, 9 Jul 1956–15 Oct 1957

Shaw AFB, SC, 15 Jul–27 Nov 1967

Nakhon Phanom RTAFB, Thailand, 27 Nov 1967–22 Sep 1975 (air echelon operated from Ubon RTAFB, Thailand, 11–13 Apr 1975; the *USS Midway*, 20 Apr–2 May 1975; U–Tapao RTNAF, Thailand, 2–5 May and 14–16 May 1975)

RAF Woodbridge, England, 1 May 1988

RAF Alconbury, England, 1 Apr 1992

## **DEPLOYED STATIONS**

Batman AB, Turkey, 13 Jan–18 Mar 1991

Diyarbakir AB, Turkey, 6 Apr–10 Jun 1991

Brindisi AB, Italy and Incirlik AB, Turkey, 2 Mar–12 Jul 1993

## **ASSIGNMENTS**

35<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Group, 1 Feb 1940–15 Jan 1942

Eighteenth Air Force, 9 Jul 1956

Ninth Air Force, 1 Sep–15 Oct 1957

Tactical Air Command, 30 Jun 1967

507<sup>th</sup> Tactical Control Group, 15 Jul 1967

56<sup>th</sup> Air Commando (later, 56<sup>th</sup> Special Operations) Wing, 27 Nov 1967

Thirteenth Air Force, 30 Jun–22 Sep 1975

39<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Wing, 1 May 1988

352<sup>nd</sup> Special Operations Group, 1 Dec 1992

## **ATTACHMENTS**

24<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Group, c. 20 Nov 1941–2 Apr 1946

63<sup>rd</sup> Troop Carrier Wing, 9 Jul 1956–30 Jun 1957

314<sup>th</sup> Troop Carrier Wing, 30 Jun 1957– c. 8 Oct 1957

656<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Wing, 30 Jun–22 Sep 1975

Joint Special Operations Task force, 13 Jan–18 Mar 1991 and 6 Apr–10 Jun 1991

Joint Special Operations Task Force 2 Mar–12 Jul 1993

## **WEAPON SYSTEMS**

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

## **ASSIGNED AIRCRAFT SERIAL NUMBERS**

MH-53M  
67-14994  
69-5784  
69-5795  
69-5796  
70-1630

## **ASSIGNED AIRCRAFT TAIL/BASE CODES**

## **UNIT COLORS**

### **COMMANDERS**

LTC Kirk Smith

### **HONORS**

#### **Service Streamers**

None

#### **Campaign Streamers**

World War II  
Philippine Islands

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

Vietnam Ceasefire

Southwest Asia

Defense of Saudi Arabia

Liberation and Defense of Kuwait

### **Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers**

None

### **Decorations**

Distinguished Unit Citations (Philippine Islands)

7 Dec 1941–10 May 1942

8–22 Dec 1941

6 Jan–8 Mar 1942

Presidential Unit Citations (Southeast Asia)

1 Nov 1968–1 May 1969

1 Oct 1969–30 Apr 1970

1 Apr 1972–22 Feb 1973

Air Force Outstanding Unit Awards with Combat "V" Device

1 Sep 1970–30 Apr 1971

1 Dec 1971–29 Feb 1972

23 Feb 1973–28 Feb 1974

24 Jan–2 May 1975

14 Jan–23 Mar 1991

Air Force Outstanding Unit Awards

24 Mar 1991–31 Jul 1992

1 Aug 1992–31 Jul 1993

Philippine Presidential Unit Citation (WWII)

Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross with Palm

[27] Nov 1967–28 Jan 1973

### **EMBLEM**

Gules, a funnel cloud bendwise Or shaded Sable detailed Brown supporting a devil's face Buff shaded Brown, highlighted White, detailed Sable; all within a diminished bordure Azure. Approved on 18 Oct 1967 and reinstated in 1996; replaced emblems approved on 5 Jun 1995 and 20 Dec 1941 Approved on 18 Oct 1967.

### **EMBLEM SIGNIFICANCE**

The emblem of the 21<sup>st</sup> PS was officially approved on 20 Dec 1941 while the squadron was fighting for its survival during the dark days of the Japanese invasion of the Philippines. By the time the Philippines was surrendered in April 1942 the squadron had been decimated and its

surviving members were reassigned. Upon the activation of the 352<sup>nd</sup> FG the 21<sup>st</sup> PS was reformed as part of this new group and many of the original pilots wore this patch on their flying jackets. When the 486<sup>th</sup> replaced the 21 PS in May 1943, many of the 21<sup>st</sup> PS members were dismayed about the loss of their heroic lineage.

## **MOTTO**

**NICKNAME**  
DUSTDEVILS

## **OPERATIONS**

Combat in the Philippine Islands, 8 Dec 1941–c. 1 May 1942; ground echelon fought as infantry unit in Bataan, 18 Jan–c. 8 Apr 1942. Carried as an active unit but was not operational from the fall of the Philippines until inactivation. Combat in Southeast Asia, Nov 1967–Aug 1973. Airlifted personnel from Saigon, Apr 1975 and airlifted US Marines in rescue of the *SS Mayaguez*, May 1975. Provided support to coalition forces during Southwest Asia conflict, Jan–Mar 1991 and later.

Nakhon Phanom (NKP) CH-53 Crash Victims – May 13, 1975

The names of the 18 Security Policemen and four crew members killed when their CH-53 crashed during the Mayaguez rescue attempt:

On May 13, at 2030 local time, 16 Sikorsky CH-53Cs took off from RTAFB Nakhon Phanom. Shortly after take off, one of the helicopters, Serial Number 68-10933 from the 21st SOS, 56th SPS, fell out of formation, crashed and exploded on impact. All 22 aboard, including four crew, 18 USAF security police and one linguist, were killed in the crash. Other CH-53s landed nearby, but exploding ammunition and burning fuel hindered all rescue attempts. The CH-53 crashed in the Phannanikhom District, 35 miles west of Nakhon Phanom. Officially, the CH-53C was on a routine training mission, but all 22 killed in the crash were awarded the Bronze Star posthumously.

A Note from the Virtual Wall

The 56th Security Police Squadron, part of the 56th Special Operations Wing at Nakhon Phanom RTAFB, Thailand, was tasked with providing support during the MAYAGUEZ incident in 1975. The Security Police were to be flown from Nakhon Phanom to U-Tapao RTAFB, Thailand, aboard a CH-53 helicopter (hull number 68-1033) belonging to the 21st Special Operations Squadron. However, the helicopter crashed approximately 330 miles NE of Bangkok on the Thai-Laotian border, and all aboard were killed.

### • 21st SOS aircrew:

Capt James G. Kays, Atlanta, GA  
1stLt Laurence E. Froehlich, Sodus, MI  
TSgt George E. McMullen, Oxford, CA  
Sgt Robert P. Weldon, Kansas City, KS

### • 56th Security Police Squadron:

Sgt Jimmy P. Black, Daphne, AL  
Sgt Bobby G. Collums, Helena, AZ  
SSgt Gerald A. Coyle, Bentleyville, PA  
Sgt Thomas D. Dwyer, Middlebury, CT  
Sgt Bob W. Ford, Seminole, TX

Sgt Gerald W. Fritz, Junction, TX (K-9) (\*)  
TSgt Jackie D. Glenn, Seymour, MO  
Sgt Darrell L. Hamlin, Iowa City, IA  
Sgt Gregory L. Hankamer, San Pedro, CA  
Sgt David A. Higgs, Spokane, WA  
SSgt Faleagafula Ilaoa, San Francisco, CA (K-9)  
Sgt Michael D. Lane, Jacksonville, FL  
Sgt Dennis W. London, Sparks, NV (K-9)  
Sgt Robert P. Mathias, Granada Hills, CA  
Sgt William R. McKelvey, Philadelphia, PA  
Amn Edgar C. Moran II, Pittsburgh, PA  
Sgt Tommy R. Nealis, Mount Sterling, KY  
Sgt Robert W. Ross, Cypress, CA

Malmstrom AFB MWD kennels named in honor of Sergeant Gerald W. Fritz who lost his life in that helicopter crash

The 21st Special Operations Squadron traces its lineage to the 21st Pursuit Squadron (Interceptor) which was constituted on 22 December 1939. Activated on 1 February 1940 at Moffett Field, CA, it was assigned to the 35th Pursuit Group until 15 Jan 1942 (but attached to the 24th Pursuit Group, 20 Nov 1941–2 Apr 1946). The squadron saw combat in the Philippine Islands, from 8 December 1941–1 May 1942 and a ground echelon fought as an infantry unit in Bataan, from 18 January–8 April 1942. It carried on as an active unit but was not operational from the fall of the Philippines until its inactivation on 2 April 1946. Aircraft flown by the squadron during that period were probably the P-36, (1940–1941) and the P-40 (1941–1942).

The 21st Helicopter Squadron was activated on 9 Jul 1956, for the purpose of providing the U.S. Army with air support in a fashion similar to the TAC Troop Carrier Squadrons. Authorized 38 officers and 91 airmen to fly and support the H-21 "Flying Banana", the unit was assigned 29 officers and 89 airmen and attached to the 63rd Troop Carrier Wing, Donaldson AFB, South Carolina.

The Army, however, declined all support from the Air Force helicopters, and the 21st Helicopter Squadron turned to fly airlift support, search and recovery missions, and also cooperated with a communications group in an experiment to lay communications lines by helicopter. The unit flew photo, airlift, and radiological survey missions during atomic testing at the Nevada Test Site prior to inactivation on 15 Oct 1957.

20th Helicopter Squadron "Pony Express" CH-3's had been flying many classified counter-insurgency missions in Laos and North Vietnam since 1966 but the AF needed an additional helicopter squadron to handle a few chores in Laos. The 20th Helicopter Squadron, D Flight, "Green Hornets", flying UH-1's assigned to Nha Trang, SVN, were working overtime on cross-border operations in Cambodia with MACV-SOG Special Forces in CCC and CCS. They flew for some time out of Ban Me Thout, East Field, South VietNam. Their SOG teams were being hit increasingly hard by the VC upon every insertion.

Someone, somewhere in the depths of the Pentagon decided that it was time to reactivate the 21st Helicopter Squadron.

As the new commanding officer, Lt. Col. Harry F. Hauser was the man who was handed the task of creating a unit out of the men sent to him. Pilots and aircrews were assigned, helicopter mechanics, weapons mechanics, support personnel, admin staff, training, everyone and everything it takes to make a flying unit functional arrived and were fitted into the scheme of things at Shaw AFB.

“On 1 July 1967, the unit was reactivated and assigned to Shaw AFB, South Carolina, on 15 July 1967 to organize, train, and equip, in preparation for immediate overseas movement. Upon arrival in early 1968 at its SEA destination, the 56th Air Commando Wing, Nakhon Phanom RTAFB (NKP), Thailand, the unit completed additional training and in-theater testing, the 21st Special Operations Squadron demonstrated operational capability in its primary mission. The virtually unlimited capabilities of the helicopter also provide NKP with a base defense and flare drop capability, civic action support, SAR availability, COIN support, EOD Alert, and regular airlift capability.”

That's the "official version" printed in 1968. There was so much more behind those words that could not be printed in those years. The mission of the 21st, the missions of the units assigned to Thailand, and what came to be known as "THE BIG PICTURE" that we would be years in discovering.

The helicopter selected for the squadron was the Sikorsky CH-3E. Basically the rescue (Jolly Green) version without the Air-Refueling boom but much the same in overall appearance, the 21st CH-3's had a permanently mounted rescue hoist, titanium armor, external fuel tank hard mounts and FOD/Ice Shields.

In addition to the 21st SOS assigned aircraft and crews, in early 1968 several flight crews and aircraft were taken from the 20th Helicopter Squadron, "Pony Express", at Udorn to begin the 21st mission. The former 20th aircrews were experienced in classified operations in Laos and North Vietnam and would add to the capabilities in missions that the 21st would eventually become involved.

The likeliest method of improving intelligence coverage seemed to be a system originally designed to ferret out trucks entering South Vietnam by way of Laos and the Ho Chi Minh trail. This surveillance system involved the use of electronic sensors, seismic and acoustic, accurately implanted along known or suspected routes of North Vietnamese infiltration. These devices broadcast to an orbiting airplane, in this case a specially equipped Lockheed EC-121 which relayed the signal to an infiltration surveillance center at Nakhon Phanom in Thailand.

Those highly advanced (for those days) computers would correlate the data coming in "real-time" from thousands of sensors we would drop on and around the Ho Chi Minh Trail in an effort to stop the infiltration of both supplies and troops into South Vietnam.

Prior to the arrival of the 21st Helicopter Squadron, a Navy squadron, using OP-2E Neptune aircraft delivered sensors over the trail. The Navy lost several aircraft in just a few weeks after having worked successfully for some time and the decision was made to withdraw them from their perilous mission. This would be the 21st SOS new primary mission. (Give the VC something even slower to shoot at.)

The last 21st SOS CH-3 shot down on a sensor drop mission was in Feb 1969. After several such losses, the AF decided that placing sensors with helicopters wasn't viable, and transferred the mission to the F-4s. Since 7th AF didn't want us to be bored, they replaced the sensor drop mission with MACSOG "Prairie Fire". The "Heavy Hook" SF guys were far more interesting than sensors. The only catch was that, unlike the sensors, you had to go retrieve them after they had done their job!

The 21st Special Operations Squadron (SOS), assigned to NKP Thailand was heavily involved in many aspects of the "Secret War", the war in Laos. One of the former members, Bob Arnau, has compiled what he calls "Knife Tales" in which he has documented numerous "first hand" experiences of many of the former members of the Squadron. He continually adds "stories" as he receives them and forwards a copy to the former members of the 21st SOS. The "Knife Tales" is the history of many of those that served honorably during their tour(s) with the 21st SOS.

In September 1970, the 21st SOS flew eleven CH-3E helicopters and one new CH-53 helicopter which had arrived at NKP on 8 August. The squadron gradually replaced its CH-3's with CH-53's.

The 21st continued to see combat in Southeast Asia until 1973. It airlifted personnel from Saigon in April 1975 and airlifted US Marines in rescue of the SS Mayaquez in May of 1975.

The 21st was reassigned to the Thirteenth Air Force on June 30, 1975 before deactivating on 22 September 1975 at U-Tapao RTNAF, Thailand.

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

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

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

In 1993, the 352nd Special Operations Group, RAF Mildenhall, England, and the 16th Special Operations Wing, Hurlburt Field, Fla., initially deployed people and to San Vito while supporting

Operation Provide Promise, a humanitarian airlift that sustained thousands of sick and starving civilians trapped by Bosnia's civil war.

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

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

As the only Air Force special operations unit permanently aligned under U.S. European Command, the 352nd SOG works a variety of theater contingencies, such as evacuating civilians during African coup attempts or supporting Operations Southern and Northern Watch in Saudi Arabia and Turkey. It also rushed troops to Dubrovnik, Croatia, when an Air Force CT-43 carrying Commerce Secretary Ron Brown crashed into a mountain.

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

In early 1997 members of the 352nd Special Operations Group, 100th Air Refueling Wing and 3rd Air Force departed for areas around Zaire as part of the enabling force to support Joint Task Force Guardian Retrieval.

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

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

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

Based at RAF Mildenhall, in the UK, the 21st Special Operations Squadron (SOS) with its 250 personnel, as part of the 352nd Special Operations Group (SOG) was officially deactivated on October 9, 2007. The 21st SOS, known as the 'Dust Devils', flew the Sikorsky MH-53M Pave Low IV helicopter until the last flight from their home base on September 13. All five Pave Lows

in the fleet took the air for the final flight, which included aerial refuelling with their 67th SOS stable mates flying a MC-130P Combat Shadow. Up until deactivation, the 21st SOS were the USAF Special Operations European Command's only vertical lift unit, their tasks are to be taken over by the US Army. Held on continuous stand-by they could be tasked at a moments notice with a broad range of operations, from Combat Search and Rescue (CSAR) to humanitarian relief.

Wednesday, September 19, 2007

RAF MILDENHALL — It was sort of a tourist helicopter ride, the type that hovers above popular attractions giving sightseers a bird's-eye view. Except this four-hour flight on Thursday came with bursts of gunfire. To make it clear, the gunners were not shooting at tourist sites. That happened much later at a firing range in the North Sea. But before reaching the range, a formation of five MH-53M Pave Low helicopters and their crews from the 21st Special Operations Squadron did some sightseeing — a perfect way to bid farewell to the aging helicopter and unit that will officially inactivate on Oct 9.

The squadron's fleet of Pave Lows, built for low-level, undetected flights into enemy territory, is scheduled to be transported to a disposal yard in Arizona by the end of the year. But before they are retired, the crew took them out on one final trip. After taking off from RAF Mildenhall, the formation skimmed across the English countryside — at a height of only a couple hundred feet — passing airfields and farms with startled livestock. Then, the helicopters gained elevation to cross over the tranquil American Military Cemetery near Madingley and the outskirts of Cambridge before closing in on Duxford Airfield.

Then they picked up the River Thames and followed it all the way into central London. Photo opportunities for those riding in the copters and on the ground were aplenty as the formation made two sweeps over Tower Bridge.

Perhaps one of the highlights of the flight was when the helicopters descended over the English Channel and rode parallel to the cliffs of Dover. The rocky sea cliffs gave off a bright white glow against the channel's azure water, making this part of the flight even more special.

An MC-130P Combat Shadow, assigned to the 67th Special Operations Squadron, then arrived to refuel the helicopters. The aircraft had a couple of refueling nozzles hanging from its rear, which made it possible to pump fuel to two Pave Lows at once. Once filled up, the helicopters headed to the firing range in the North Sea.

In the lead helicopter, Staff Sgt. Jordan Zirola, a Pave Low aerial gunner, loaded rounds into a .50 caliber machine gun planted on the rear ramp and lit up a smoke signal floating out in the sea. At the same time, a pair of 7.62 mm mini guns attached to the sides of the

Pave Low unloaded fire at similar targets in rapid succession, causing white-water explosions as the bullets peppered the water.

“It was recreational fun today. We went out there and had a good time,”

Zirola said after the flight. Zirola is sentimental about the Pave Lows, which he has been working with for four years. Still after four years, it's kind of sad. These aircraft have been around for a while. It really is the end of a [era]," he said. One of his most memorable times with the Pave Lows was in Iraq. He was in another five-ship formation, but unlike Thursday's, the flight was in hostile terrain over Baghdad at night, he said.

Capt. Matt Richter has been flying Pave Lows for about five years and said it

is bittersweet to see the helicopter go. "We all love to fly it. We've done a lot of missions for the war on terrorism. It's very satisfying work and we're proud to do it, but there's other things out there for us," Richter said.

An Air Force spokesman said earlier this year that the chopper is being deactivated throughout the Air Force special operations force and is slated to be replaced by the CV-22 Osprey vertical-lift, fixed-wing aircraft in the next few years.

He said that the age of the Pave Low — built for 5,000 hours, with most surpassing 10,000 and pushing 15,000 hours — led to the decision to deactivate it.

Senior Airman Patrick Soles, a Pave Low crew chief, is sad to see the copters go. He and fellow maintainers have put many hours into keeping them up and running. "I'm going to miss it. I went through tech school in 2000 for it," he said about the helicopter.

When the squadron inactivates in October, it will go into a holding status until the Special Operations Command stands it up again, possibly for the Osprey, squadron commander Lt. Col. Kirk Smith said. "At some point, the 21st might be reactivated as a V-22 squadron," he said.

I thought the guys would like to see these. The 21 SOS ended its legacy as a helicopter special operations unit this week (Sept 20, 2007). Who knows when, how, or if ever again, to be resurrected as an AF unit. In either event, on a note of sadness but with a heck of a lot of pride, here are the last 5 Pave Lows of the 21st SOS flying with the White Cliffs of Dover as a back drop, and also in fingertip formation behind a 352 SOG tanker.

I was fortunate to be among the first crews to fly the CH-53s at NKP with the 21 SOS, along with Bob Arnau, Roger Veillion, Hank Fannin, Toy Markham, Harvey Meltzer and others on our list.

21st. Special Operations Squadron (Dust Devils)- The 21st. was initially tasked to support Task Force Alpha on the Igloo White program to place sensors along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Later the squadron supported MACV-SOG by inserting and extracting special operations teams in Laos. They also supported the CIA counter insurgency operations in Laos. Back home at NKP the unit supported civic action programs, local area reconnaissance and logistical support.

The 21st Pursuit Squadron was activated with the 35th Pursuit Group at Moffett Field, California, February 1, 1940, moving to Hamilton Field September 9, 1940, with the group. While under the command of Major P. K. Morrill, Jr., the Squadron won a permanent trophy for athletics. Present Commander of the Squadron is First Lieutenant William E. Dyess.

62-12579 CH-3C 6 Oct 69 21st SOS, 56th SOW, NKP Laos Knife 62 P.J. Conran P.L. Costa Franklin H.L. Ramsey (FE) Muang Phine Airport, with 52 indigenous personnel aboard both aircraft, all rescued. Along with 64-14222

63-09681 CH-3E 13 Aug 70 21st SOS, 56th SOW, NKP Thailand Skycap 36 Alan B. Cheeseman George D. Henry Terry D. Reams William L. Ripley W. L. Genez (Pilot) Hit by a 12.7mm round which blew up the hydraulic accumulators and knocked out both engines. They were on a training mission for a new pilot and instructor. Also delivering parts from NKP to Ubon. Crashed near Ubon Thailand.

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

64-14222 CH-3E 6 Oct 69 21st SOS, 56th SOW, NKP Laos Knife 61 C.D. Taylor T.D. Silva Cossiboom Reynolds (FE) Muang Phine Airport, with 52 indigenous personnel aboard both aircraft, all rescued. Along with 62-12579

64-14237 CH-3E 26 Feb 69 21st SOS, 56th SOW, NKP Laos Knife 51 John Holt J.W. Hughs C.F. Hill W.J. Smith (FE) B. Copelin (ACM) IGLOO WHITE mission, hit by ground fire, helo later destroyed by friendly aircraft.

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5-15691 CH-3E 27 Jun 69 21st SOS, 56th SOW, NKP Laos Knife 22 Gerald T. Henery F. L. Mattos J.D. Adams Hernand E. Wilson (FE) picking up team involved in firefight.

66-13287 CH-3E 24 Oct 70 21st SOS, 56th SOW, NKP Laos Knife 33 Craig B. Schiele Ronald R. Kunz Thomas E. Heideman Wallace (NMI) Spivey The helo was in a flight of two extracting indigenous personnel from a hill top LZ. The helo picked up 11 personnel and as the aircraft lifted off, it turned and fell into trees 200 meters from the LZ. A short time later, the other helo picked up 8 indigenous personnel who said the entire crew of the helicopter was dead; however, 20 minutes later, radio contact was made with the survivors and they, along with the body of the pilot were recovered.

66-13288 CH-3E 3 Feb 70 21st SOS, 56th SOW, NKP Laos Knife 51 J. C. Hughes J. P. Stuart H.L. Ramsey B.A. Smith Aircraft was hit by ground fire, lost power, crashed, and burned.

Aircraft was destroyed by friendly aircraft.

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

66-13295 CH-3E 23 May 68 21st SOS, 56th ACW, NKP SVN Dusty 51 James P. McCollum William H. Taylor John L. Coon John E. Albanese Robert A. Fink helo was lost to unknown causes while flying a sensor delivery mission, crash site could not be reached due to heavy enemy activity. Note: Crew remains were eventually recovered.

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

CH53 68-10925 15 May 75 21st SOS Cambodia Knife 31 Howard A. Carson Jr. Richard Vandegear Jon D. Harston Randy L. Hoffmaster Assault on Koh Tang Island. The aircraft with 20 Marines and 2 Navy medics on board was hit by ground fire as it approached the Eastern Beach of Koh Tang Island. The pilot attempted to pull back to deeper water, but a direct hit to the cockpit brought the aircraft down in waste deep water, near the surf line, where it burst into flames. Thirteen onboard the helicopter survived the crash and swam out to sea where they were rescued, the copilot and 12 of the passengers were not recovered.

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

CH53

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

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

CH53 68-10931 1 Mar 71 21st SOS Laos Knife 34 Milton H. Ramsey Albert Tijerina, Jr. G.

Pearson F. Deck at Lima Site 20, crashed on landing, hit ground, spun right, rolled down hill, flipped, burst into flames. Two flight engineers survived.

CH53 68-10933 14 May 75 21st SOS Thailand Knife James G. Kayes Laurence E. Froehlich Robert P. Weldon George E. McMullen The helicopter departed launched from Nakhom Phanom airfield at 2030 on 13 May 1975 with a crew of five and 18 USAF Security Police onboard to assist in the recovery operation for the USS Mayaquez. The helicopter disappeared from the airfield's departure radar 40 miles west of the airfield. All onboard were killed.

CH53 70-1627 15 May 75 21st SOS Cambodia Knife 22 Terry D. Ohlemeier David W. Greer Michael C. Wilson Norman A. Paul KNIFE 22, along with KNIFE 21, was attempting to insert Marines into the western beach of Koh Tang Island. On the run into the beach. the aircraft received heavy damage, which caused a fuel lead. Unable to off load the Marines, the aircraft attempted to return to its staging base, but ran out of fuel and was forced to make an emergency landing on the mainland.

CH53 70-1628 24 Jan 75 21st SOS Knife Gary C. Hall Bryan A. Rye James K. Hurley Garry W. Hermanson

CH-3C helicopters 63-09689: Assigned to the 21st SOS at NKP, "Dusty 689" crashed off-base, at the scene of a fire started when an A-26 jettisoned its bomb load. The pilot suffered vertigo and the helicopter settled into the trees. 19Jan69

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

CH-3C helicopters 64-14222: Assigned to the 21st SOS at NKP, call sign "Knife61"

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

CH-3C helicopters 63-09681: Assigned to the 21st SOS at NKP, "Skycap 36" was on a training mission, and delivering parts to Ubon. It was hit by a 12.7mm round near Ubon, knocking out both engines and hyd accumulators. Four crewmembers were lost and one survived. 13Aug70

HH-53C 67-14993: Currently in service with the 21st SOS at RAF Mildenhall, UK.

HH-53C 69-5784: Currently in service with the 21st SOS at RAF Mildenhall, UK.

HH-53C 69-5790\*: Currently in service with the 21st SOS at RAF Mildenhall, UK.

HH-53C 69-5796: Yarrowonga rescue off coast of Ireland; Currently in service with the 21st SOS at RAF Mildenhall, UK.

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

CH-53C 68-10924: Currently in service with the 21st SOS at RAF Mildenhall, UK.

CH-53C 68-10925: Combat, May 1975, 21 SOS, Nakom Phenom RTAB, 1 killed (2Lt Richard Vandegeer - last name inscribed on Vietnam Memorial); Destroyed by ground fire on beach of Koh Tang Island during Mayaguez rescue (Knife 31).

CH-53C 68-10926: Combat, May 1975, 21 SOS, Nakom Phenom RTAB, 1 killed; Crippled by ground fire on beach of Koh Tang Island during Mayaguez rescue, took off, limped off shore, and crashed (Knife 21).

CH-53C 68-10929: Combat, 18 Feb 1971, 21 SOS, Nakhon Phanom RTAB, no fatalities; Lost tail rotor due to ground fire during infil, crashed in LZ.

CH-53C 68-10931: Combat, 1 Mar 1971, 21 SOS, Nakhon Phanom RTAB, 2/4 killed; Took severe ground fire on infil as lead of a three ship inserting Laotian soldiers. Lost one engine and attempted to egress, bypassing enemy troops before crashing into trees near friendly troops. Cockpit destroyed in crash, killing pilots. Cabin occupants escaped while aircraft burned.

CH-53C 68-10933: Logistics, May 1975, 21 SOS, Nakom Phenom RTAB, all killed; MRB separated from head in flight. Enroute to USS Mayaguez operation (Koh Tang Island) – 18 USAF security policemen on board.

CH-53C 70-1626: Assault on Koh Tang Island (Knife 52), May 1975; DESERT STORM - Corvette 01 rescue attempt in Northern Iraq (21st SOS); Currently in service with the 21st SOS at RAF Mildenhall, UK.

CH-53C 70-1627: Combat, May 1975, 21 SOS, Nakom Phenom RTAB, no fatalities; Disabled by ground fire on beach of Koh Tang Island during Mayaguez rescue (Knife 23).

CH-53C 70-1628: Logistics, Jan, 1975, 21 SOS, Nakom Phenom RTAB, loss circumstances and details unknown.

In late 1965, the 20th Helicopter Squadron, was changed to the 20th Special Operations Squadron and became the first dedicated special operations helicopter unit in the Vietnam War. The 20th initially flew the CH-3C “Charlies”, a blacked out version of the Jolly Green Giant, supporting the covert wars of Military Assistance Command Vietnam – Studies and Observations Group, or MACV-SOG. The 20th operated primarily at night, behind enemy lines with Army Special Forces

“Green Berets”, and indigenous Montagnard guerillas. Another SOF helicopter unit, the 21st Special Operations Squadron was established in Thailand, and along with the 20th, flying the UH-1F/P Huey, established the foundation of special operations helicopter tactics and doctrine which was used well beyond the jungles of Southeast Asia, in the myriad of special operations actions which plagued the mid-1970s and early 1980s.

Tail No.: 66-13295 Model: CH-3E Date of Loss: 23 May 68 Unit: 21st Helicopter Sq., 56th ACW

Country of Loss: SVN Call Sign: Dusty 51

Pilot: James P. McCollum (66E-12)

Co-Pilot: William H. Taylor (67E-03)

Flight Engineer: John L. Coon (66E-05)

Flight Engineer: John E. Albanese (66E-07)

Crew Chief: Robert A. Fink (66E-09)

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

Additional Note: Crew remains were eventually recovered.

Tail No: 63-09681 Model: CH-3E Date of Loss: 13 Aug 70 Unit: 21st SOS, 56th SOW

Country of Loss: Thailand Call Sign: Skycap 36

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

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

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

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

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

Additional Notes:

(Added 12/20/07) There was one surviving crew member - a 21st SOS pilot named (Captain) Vic Genez. Vick was the copilot seat (left seat) when the helicopter was hit by ground fire (12.7 mm machine gun) and made the dramatic descent - on fire.

After they hit the ground, Vic knocked out the left side window and went out of the helicopter. He ran around the aircraft and saw one of the FEs - William Ripley - come running out through the sliding door on the right side. Sgt Ripley was on fire and Vic extinguished the flames with his hands. Sgt Ripley, unfortunately, died later of his burns. No one else got out of the aircraft. Vic Genez was med-evac'd immediately and was treated for burns, but survived. I heard that he was decorated for his efforts to save Sgt Ripley.

George Henry was, I believe, a brand new (in the 21st SOS) CH-53 pilot who was (as I was told) in the jump seat for an area familiarization flight while Cheeseman and Genez were in the pilot seats. They were both trying to build time in the CH-3. I believe Cheeseman, who had already past the date of his last required mission, had an assignment to be an instructor at Sheppard. Henry was so new to the unit, I did not even know he had arrived, and had never even met him. The mission had another task - taking some parts or whatever to Ubon.

The aircraft, when hit, was flying south and was approximately 20 nautical miles north of Ubon Air Base at about 1000 feet.

This is what I knew about that event. I was not assigned to a mission that day and first heard about the whole thing back at the officer's hootch. What a bombshell. We were all very depressed for a long time after that.

Tail No: 66-13287 Model: CH-3E Date of Loss: 24 Oct 70 Unit: 21st SOS, 56th SOW

Country of Loss: Laos Call Sign: Knife 33

Pilot: Craig B. Schiele (06W-19)

Flight Engineer: Thomas E. Heideman (06W-19)

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

Tail No.: 68-10931 Model: CH-53 Date of Loss: 1 Mar 71 Unit: 21st SOS, 56th SOW

Country of Loss: Laos Call Sign: Knife 34

Pilot: Milton H. Ramsey (04W-014)

Co-Pilot: Albert Tijerina, Jr. (04W-15)

Notes: at Lima Site 20, crashed on landing, hit ground, spun right, rolled down hill, flipped, burst into flames. Two flight engineers survived.

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

Country of Loss: Thailand Call Sign: Dusty ??

Pilot: Gary C. Hall (01W-121)

Co-Pilot: Bryan A. Rye (01W-121)

Flight Engineer: James K. Hurley (01W-122)

56th CAMS: Garry W. Hermanson (01W-121)

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

Additional Information:

From David (Dave) Wharton, 56th CAMS, Jet Engine Shop:

This is how I remember 1-23 and 1-24-75. I have been blessed with excellent long term memory. It amazes me. At about 11pm on 1-23 Jim Werder and I started a fuel control/throttle rigging job. The control removal and replacement went well, but we had hell rigging the throttles. Jim was so pissed off he kicked all of his tools and bag off the right engine (looking from the front of the Jolly) area and I came out of the cockpit area to see his tools spread out on the PSP. I signed off our work in the log book and was sure our work was complete and done to our satisfaction. We finished about 0330 on 1-24. The crew did not come out before our shift finished at 0700 for the engine run and check. Jim and I did not know that the Jolly was going up for a complete Flight check on 1-24. Jim and I came in at 7pm for our night shift on 1-24 and as we entered the north end of our 56CAMS jet engine shop, our flight line boss – Lupe Cardena – told Jim and I that the CH53 was missing. Our hearts sank and we both had a few tears from this shocking information.

To this day, Jim, I remember that moment like it was yesterday. Lupe suggested that Jim and I lay low and await the news.

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

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

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

Jim, I never knew till I read your account that it was a rotorhead failure. Another engine buddy of mine (Clarence Jolley) who I keep in touch with has told me it was shot down over Thailand. I also keep in touch with Jim Werder. Both reside in Arizona. As the days went by we were told Jim and my engine work was checked out and all was ok. But I believe this but have no proof except word of mouth from Jan 75. I agree that our work was not the cause of the crash, but would really like to know what really happened. To be able to contact the rescue HH53 crew would be very rewarding to me to find out what they discovered when they found our CH53. But I think I will go to my grave and not really know the why and how and what of the crash. I will accept the fact that it was a rotorhead failure. I don't dwell on the crash as there is no future in the past.

But I do think about our CH53 every time I hear a chopper's rotor blades.

Tail No.: 68-10933 Model: CH-53 Date of Loss: 14 May 75 Unit: 21st SOS, 56th SOW

Country of Loss: Thailand Call Sign: Knife 13

Pilot: James G. Kays (01W-127)

Co-Pilot: Laurence E. Froehlich (01W-126)

Flight Engineer: Robert P. Weldon (01W-129)

Flight Engineer: George E. McMullen (01W-126)

Crew Chief: Paul J. Raber (01W-128)

Notes: The helicopter departed launched from Nakhon Phanom airfield at 2030 on 13 May 1975 with a crew of five and 18 USAF Security Police onboard to assist in the recovery operation for the USS Mayaguez. The helicopter disappeared from the airfield's departure radar 40 miles west of the airfield. All onboard were killed. The helicopter had suffered a main rotor blade separation in flight.

Tail No.: 68-10925 Model: CH-53 Date of Loss: 15 May 75 Unit: 21st SOS, 56th SOW

Country of Loss: Cambodia Call Sign: Knife 31

Co-Pilot: Richard Vandegeer (01W-135)

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

Additional Notes: 21 SOS was a US Air Force unit

40 ARRS was a US Air Force unit

4 MARINES was a US Marine Corps unit

9 MARINES was a US Marine Corps unit

Operation MAYAGUEZ INCIDENT

Cambodia

Location, Koh Tang Island

Description: Shortly after dawn, a trawler with the Mayaguez crew and gunboat escorts sailed for Kompong Som, a mainland port. In spite of an impressive fire-power demonstration by USAF F-4's and a AC-130 which sank three boats and fired within ten yards of the trawler, the trawler made it to Kompong Som. Near midday the US forces received orders to prevent any gunboats from approaching either Koh Tang or the Mayaguez, so the tactical aircraft continued to attack and kill Cambodian gunboats. It was during this period that the SS Hirado, a Swedish ship, was fired upon by a Cambodian gunboat about 50 miles SW of Koh Tang but nothing more developed from this incident. At 0505, USAF C-141s landed the 1/4th Marines at Utapao. The leadership was briefed and then began their wait as the launch time was moved from 0910 several times during the day. Since nautical twilight would be at 1915, they had to launch by 1415. During this period they rehearsed scenarios for helicopter landings at two points on the Mayaguez. At 2200 the plan to helicopter assault the Mayaguez was abandoned.

Instead three 53s would take a smaller force to the USS Holt. At 0615, USAF C-141s and C-5As began lifting Battalion Landing Team (BLT) 2/9 from Kadena to Utapao. By late afternoon, the BLT was encamped at Utapao. Several BLT officers took off in a borrowed U.S. Army twin-engine aircraft for a reconnaissance flight over Koh Tang. By 2130 their assault plan was completed. It called for G/2/9 to make the initial assault from eight USAF 53s. The helicopters would return in about four and one-half hours with the second wave from E/2/9. The USAF had two long range helicopter units still in SEA. The 40th ARRS had HH-53s that could carry 20 to 27 Marines on the 270 mile flight from Utapao to the Mayaguez. These Jolly Green Giants were constructed for SAR operations, were equipped with three 7.62mm miniguns, had 4,000 pounds of armor plate,

and aerial refueling capability. The 21st SOS flew CH-53Cs equipped with external fuel tanks for extended range. During the night of the 14th, the USAF continued its battle with gunboats around Koh Tang and the first surface units of the U.S. Seventh Fleet entered the Gulf of Siam. This force included the destroyer escort USS Harold E. Holt, the guided-missile destroyer USS Henry B. Wilson, and the attack carrier USS Coral Sea. All were coming from different points and arrived separately. Late on the 14th, the Holt was told that a detachment of Marines, some Military Sealift Command (MSC) civilian personnel to crew the Mayaguez, some Navy personnel and an USAF

EOD team for booby traps were to be flown out to them and that they would serve as the boarding party. They were also to prevent the Mayaguez from reaching the mainland if she got underway.

The source for this information was *The Marines in Vietnam Anthology* P:240+

Continuing: Shortly after dawn on the 15th, a coordinated attack to secure Koh Tang and the Mayaguez commenced. Concurrently, air strikes from the USS Coral Sea began on the mainland harbor facilities and airbase that could be used to oppose the American operations. At 0400, three USAF HH-53s launched from Utapao and at 0600 offloaded 59 Marines, six MSC plus the EOD team on the Holt. The Holt's helicopter pad was too small for the 53 which could only set down one set of wheels. The debarkation was through a doorway and took several minutes. With the boarding party in place, the Holt immediately started for the Mayaguez which was 15 miles away. The plan included having Air Force A-7s air-drop tear gas just before the Holt came along side the Mayaguez. Wearing gas masks, the Marines embarked on the Mayaguez and the sailors passed mooring lines to the Marines. The well-organized search was completed in an hour and the deserted Mayaguez was secured. Since the Mayaguez's engines were completely cold, the Holt assisted with the MSC crew prepared and towed the Mayaguez. The two ships were about 3,000 yards off Koh Tang, well within range of heavy weapons.

Also at 0400, the initial assault wave of eight 53s launched from Utapao. At 0607 the assault commenced with simultaneous insertions at two LZs. The eastern LZ was on the cove side where the Cambodian compound was located. The western LZ was a narrow spit of beach about 500 feet behind the compound on the other side of the island. The Marines hoped to surround the compound. There were no pre-assault air strikes for fear of injuring any of the crew thought to be on the island. Six 53s were assigned to the eastern LZ. The accounts suggest there would be three waves of two ships. The sequence of events described next may not be correct. 1LT John Shramm's helicopter tore apart and crashed into the surf after the rotor system was hit by hostile fire. All aboard made a dash for nearby rocks and trees on the beach. As MAJ Howard Corson and 2LT Richard VandeGeer's helicopter approached the island, it was caught in a cross fire and hit by a rocket. The severely damaged helicopter crashed into the sea just off the coast of the island and exploded. To avoid enemy fire, survivors were forced to swim out to sea for rescue. At this point, the remaining waves were told to use the western LZ. The Wilson arrived off Koh Tang at 0700 from a different direction than where the Holt was. They slowed to 5 knots, watched the air strikes going in and could see the plumes of oily black smoke rising from the two downed 53s in the cove. As they moved to within 1,000 yards of the island, lookouts shouted there were people in the water. Soon they located three groups of men still within AW fire range from the island.

Twelve from MAJ Corson's helicopter were rescued; thirteen, including the pilot, 2LT VandeGeer, were missing. Sporadic fire was taken by the first two 53s in the western LZ. Another inserted part of its load after repeated aborted approaches and two more could not even get in because of the rapidly increasing intensity of SA and mortar fire into the zone. SSGT Rumbaugh's aircraft was shot down near the coastline. Rumbaugh is the only missing man from this aircraft. The helicopter carrying the command and fire support group made it into an alternate LZ. One last attempt to insert a troop transport was not successful. At this point, all the forces going ashore for the next five-and-a-half hours were on the ground. Three helicopters had been lost. Two had been shot up so badly that they would make emergency landings far from Utapao with their troops still aboard. Three more returned to Thailand or assumed SAR duties after discharging all or part of their troops. About two hours after the assault began, a P-3 picked up a small target exiting Kompong Som harbor. Visual identification determined the Mayaguez crew was on this Thai fishing boat waving white flags. The Wilson retrieved the crew from the Thai boat and joined the Holt towing

the Mayaguez. Within a few hours the Mayaguez was underway with her own crew under her own power.

First the Wilson and then Holt returned to Koh Tang to help with the extraction. They needed more helicopter landing platforms and more fire support. It would be late in the evening before helicopters retrieved the boarding party from the Mayaguez. Details concerning the second assault wave are sketchy but it did go in. The Marines were able to consolidate their positions. Save for one KIA, not enough water or ammo, and rather steady sniper fire, the ground force was OK. The Marines, Navy, or Air Force had no grid maps of this area. The airborne tactical air control center, the force on the ground, and the Wilson's guns had to work out how to bring supporting fires to the targets. The Cambodians were aggressive and even fired on the Wilson from the island and from a former USN Swift boat! The Wilson armed its gig and put it nearer the island for fire support and immediate rescue missions. A C-130 dropped a 15,000 lb. 'daisy-cutter.' With the Wilson's five-inch guns providing cover, the helicopter operations resumed. At last light, the extraction began.

The ground commander described the events as follows: 'As he (the first 53) settled into the shallow water at the edge of the beach he was greeted by an almost unbelievable hail of SA and AW fire from the ridge to our south and east. Tracers streamed into the perimeter and bounced around like flaming popcorn. The pilot set his aircraft down and took his share of the fire without flinching. As he lifted off, the next aircraft, whose reception by the Khmer Rouge was just as warm, moved into the zone. The troops on the perimeter zeroed in on the source of fire. The minigunmen on the helicopters poured streams of fire over the heads of the Marines and into the ridgeline. Enemy pressure remained strong right up until the last helicopter pulled out. At approximately 2030, the last helicopter recovered to the Coral Sea.'

The ground force had been delivered to all three ships. Sadly there were three USMC MIAs from a machine-gun position on the perimeter. The entire Marine phase of the operation lasted some 56 hours, but the last 14 were the longest! This Mayaguez incident narrative was written mostly from USMC and USN sources. What the VHPA desperately needs is better USAF information. The brief ARS material we have suggests the 40th ARRS was the primary player in the show, that they sustained two WIAs but no KIAs and that their aircraft had battle damage but no losses were mentioned. Other sources indicate that the two USAF KIAs were from the 21st SOS. Please contact the VHPA Records Committee if you can provide any more information.

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

Country of Loss: Cambodia Call Sign: Knife 21

Flight Engineer: Elwood E. Rumbaugh (01W-135)

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

Cross-border helicopter activity reached a maximum in 1969 and early 1970. The number of transport and gunship choppers used in infiltration work daily averaged forty-eight: eleven Vietnamese Air Force, seven The missions from Thailand were secondary responsibilities of a detachment of the 20th Squadron at Udorn and the 21st Special Operations Squadron based at Nakhon Phanom. The 21st flew CH-3 helicopters until 1970 and thereafter the larger CH-53s. Distances to the Prairie Fire and Cambodian operating areas were great, and each Thai-launched mission meant two crossings of the enemy's main panhandle infiltration corridors. The high altitudes needed to assure safety from ground fire during these crossings were hard on engines, so crewmen often criticized Prairie Fire missions from Thailand, except when weather obviously prevented takeoff from Vietnam. The CH 53s generally operated in pairs with one staying high at the landing zone ready for emergency rescue. Crews used steep approaches and relatively high speeds for the final approach. Forward air controllers often coordinated fire suppression and helped to find the landing zone. Escort fighters accompanied most missions, with propeller-driven A-1Es preferred to jet fighters because of their slower speed, superior maneuverability, and greater endurance. Some CH-53s had miniguns for self-protection. Precautionary tactics held CH-53 losses in the Prairie Fire region to a single ship downed in February 1971

A second CH-3 unit arrived in north Thailand in December 1967. 21st Helicopter Squadron had been activated the previous summer at Shaw Air Force Base, S.C., and had completed unit training prior to moving overseas. The squadron arrived at Nakhon Phanom with CH-3Es (improved craft, with improved engines over the earlier CH-3Cs). Early missions placed seismic sensor devices in the panhandle trails and did some roadwatch infiltration. The 21st began Prairie Fire missions in late 1968, inserting and withdrawing teams in the panhandle on behalf of Military Assistance Command Studies and Observations Group. In a reorganization in the summer of 1969, the 21st Helicopter Squadron absorbed the remaining CH-3s of Pony Express, while the UH-1s of the 20th returned to Vietnam. The change permitted a small savings in manpower and left the 21st Squadron with an authorized strength of fifteen CH-3s. The 21st also inherited all the old Pony Express roles including tacan site support, night reconnaissance of the base perimeter, and the insertion and withdrawal of special teams seeking information on downed aircrews.

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

Both the 20th and the 21st Helicopter Squadrons had maintenance troubles. Excessive use regularly pushed the CH-3s to the limits of air-frame, engine, and transmission tolerance. Sand and grit got into critical parts, engines were damaged by foreign objects when operating at forward points, and metal fatigue cracks appeared. The new CH-53s increased spare parts difficulties and, despite frequent cannibalization, parts shortages regularly kept ten to twenty percent of these craft on the ground. Pilots warmly praised the efforts of inexperienced maintenance men and supervisors, but several pilots stated they were more concerned by the danger of mechanical failure than by the threat of hostile fire.

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

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

Allied defeats continued into early summer of 1969 and were climaxed with the evacuation and loss of Muong Soui. A helicopter task force assembled at Long Tieng on June 27 for the Muong Soui evacuation: ten from 20th and 21st Squadrons, three HH-53s from the Air Force air rescue unit in north Thailand, and eleven Air America H-34s. Withdrawal of a 350-man Thai unit began that afternoon and was completed in two hours, after which evacuation of Laotian troops and families began. One 21st Squadron CH-3 was shot down, but crews and passengers stood off enemy troops with rifles and grenades until picked up by an Air America H-34. The evacuation continued the next day, at all times plagued by difficult weather. Air attaché officers praised the aircrews of the unarmed and vulnerable helicopters who time and time again descended into the enemy-controlled area at minimum altitude and airspeed, crammed their burdens into the overgrossed machines, and staggered out of the area to the Long Tieng sanctuary. These deeds should

not go unnoted to the men of the Air Force helicopter units and their comrades of Air America, Inc.

The success of Operation About Face seemed to verify this airlift effectiveness. About Face was Vang Pao's late summer 1969 offensive which recovered Muong Soui and the Plain of Jars and captured much enemy materiel. Supplied by air, some Meo forces advanced nearly to the border of North Vietnam. Unfortunately the gains of About Face proved temporary. The communist dry season offensive began in December 1969 and soon swept into the Plain of Jars, threatening thousands of civilians in encircled positions immediately northwest of the plain. Again Air Force helicopters joined with Air America in massive evacuations in horrid weather. Ten planes and crews of the 21st Helicopter Squadron flew to Long Tieng on January 4, 1970, for daily operations about Muong Soui. Upon completion of the effort on January 15, the 21st Squadron had lifted over four thousand refugees, along with livestock and personal possessions, from their encircled locations to temporary safety at Muong Soui.

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

**Information on U.S. Air Force helicopter CH-53A tail number 68-10925** Date: 05/15/1975 MIA-POW file reference number: 2003 Incident number: 75051555.TXT Unit: 21st SOS Cambodia - UTM grid coordinates: TS965400 Casualties = 13 BNR Original source(s) and document(s) from which the incident was created or updated: Defense Intelligence Agency Reference Notes. Defense Intelligence Agency Helicopter Loss database. Survivability/Vulnerability Information Analysis Center Helicopter database. Also: 2003, US Marines in Vietnam Anthology () Loss to Inventory **Crew Members:** P 2LT VANDEGEER RICHARD BNR AC MAJ HA CORSON **Passengers and/or other participants:** PFC BENEDETT DANIEL ANDREW, MC, PX, BNR PFC BLESSING LYNN, MC, PX, BNR PFC BOYD WALTER, MC, PX, BNR LCP COPENHAVER GREGORY SCOTT, MC, PX, BNR LCP GARCIA ANDRES, MC, PX, BNR HM1 GAUSE BERNARD JR, NA, PX, BNR PFC JACQUES

JAMES JOSEPH, MC, PX, BNR HN MANNING RONALD JAMES, NA, PX, BNR PFC  
MAXWELL JAMES RICKEY, MC, PX, BNR PFC RIVENBURGH RICHARD WILLIA, MC, PX,  
BNR PFC SANDOVALL ANTONIO RAMOS, MC, PX, BNR PFC TURNER KELTON RENA, MC,  
PX, BNR

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

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

On 2 Aug 00, at 1:15 a.m. local Mildenhall lime, an MII-53M Helicopter. Tail #69-5784, crashed on Stanford Range, a Ministry of Defence training area, 13.9 miles northeast of RAF Mildenhall (RAF.M), United Kingdom (UK), at coordinates N5226.84 and E00049.06. The helicopter was assigned to the 21st Special Operations Squadron, 3521UI Special Operations Group, RAFM, UK. The mishap aircraft was the number two of a three-ship formation training flight. When the mishap occurred, the mishap aircraft was leading the formation in night formation landings using night vision goggles. The mishap aircraft crashed in its designated landing zone (LZ). All crewmembers received only minor injuries. There was significant damage to the aircraft. No damage to private property was reported. The LZ was a large, level, open field, surrounded by trees. The LZ surface was covered with grass and ferns, approximately two to three feet high. According to crew

testimony, the pilot flew a normal approach, brought the aircraft to a hover, approximately 30 feet above the ground, and then began to tower the aircraft. Having received “cleared to land” signals from the right, left and tail crew positions, the pilot continued the descent. The aircraft landed in a depression that was eight feet deep and eighty-three feet wide, and the tail rotor impacted the ground. The Board President determined that the mishap resulted from the aircrew’s inability to observe the previously unmarked depression as the aircraft made its descent.

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

1975 13 May

Sikorsky CH-53C, 68-10933, c/n 65-231, *Knife 13*,<sup>[15]</sup> of the 21st Special Operations Squadron, departs from Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base with a crew of five and 18 USAF Security Police on board to assist in the recovery operation of the SS *Mayaguez*. The helicopter disappears from the airfield’s departure radar 40 miles W of the airfield. All on board are KWF. The Air Force issues a "temporary flight restriction" order, service parlance for a grounding order, on 22 May 1975, for 40 HH-53 and 12 CH-53, following an inspection crew reaching the jungle crash site. A main rotor blade separated from the head in flight.

400417	P-36A	38-29	21PS	35PG	Moffett Field, Mountain View, CA	MAC	Dunn, Frank L.	Moffett Field, CA
400417	P-36A	38-24	21PS	35PG	Moffett Field, Mountain View, CA	MAC	Stetson, Loring F.	Moffett Field, CA
400725	P-36A	38-83	21PS	35PG	Moffett Field, Mountain View, CA	LAC	Aynesworth, Horace D	Albuquerque Muni Apt, Albuquerque, NM
410902	P-40	40-316	21PS	35PG	Hamilton Field, CA	TOAGL	Mehlert, Charles	Hamilton Field, CA
410909	P-40	39-266	21PS	35PG	Hamilton Field, CA	TOAMF	Grashio, Samuel C	Hamilton Field, CA
410910	RP-40G	39-276	21PS	35PG	Hamilton Field, CA	LACGL	Cole, Joseph P	Hamilton Field, CA
410912	AT-6	40-2150	21PS	35PG	Hamilton Field, CA	LACGL	Williams, Augustus F	Hamilton Field, CA
410922	RP-40G	40-299	21PS	35PG	Hamilton Field, CA	LACGL	May, James E	Hamilton Field, CA
410924	RP-40	39-236	21PS	35PG	Hamilton Field, CA	LACGL	Childress, Peter M	Hamilton Field, CA

410808	P-36A	38-91	21PG	35PG	Hamilton Field, CA	LACGL	Thompson, Thomas E	Hamilton Field, CA
410813	P-36A	38-23	21PG	35PG	Hamilton Field, CA	LACMF	Clark, Robert D	Hamilton Field, CA
410726	P-40	40-298	21PI	35PI	Hamilton Field, CA	GL	Cole, J. P.	McClellan Field, CA





THE ORIGINAL SHOULDER PATCH  
21st SP. OPS. SQ. 1970



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Air Force Order of Battle  
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Sources

Unit History. 10<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Wing and 45<sup>th</sup> Air Base. USAAC Hamilton Field, CA. 1941