

History of the First HS-6 SAR Detachment

HS-6 loaded aboard the USS Kearsarge (CVS-33) in early June, 1966 and departed on a WESTPAC Cruise which lasted until our return on 17 December, 1966. The Squadron Skipper was [Cdr Bob Vermilya](#). During our pre-Cruise work-ups he had announced that he would remain in command of the main part of the Squadron, and that [Cdr Warren Lockwood](#), our X.O., would lead the first SAR Detachment.

About a month prior to sailing out of San Diego, Cdr Lockwood picked the crews and the enlisted personnel that would comprise the squadron's first SAR Detachment, SAR Det A. After departing San Diego, the entire Squadron participated in about a two week Operational Readiness Inspection en-route to Hawaii.

Upon arrival in Hawaii, the personnel picked to make up SAR Detachment A received three (3) days off with no duties. Our orders were to be at the [Barbers Point Naval Air Station](#) at the appointed time for our departure to [Yankee Station](#). We had been advised we could expect to operate without any direct squadron support for a period of at least 45 days, and to plan and pack accordingly. To this end, we each had everything packed and ready for transfer to Barbers Point prior to the Kearsarge arriving in Hawaii.

The Det consisted of 10 Officers and 30 Enlisted. I believe our initial flight crews were:

- [Cdr Warren Lockwood/Lt\(jg\) Ollie Donelan/AX1 Goen/ADJ1 Vacari](#)
- [Lt Don Nichols/Lt\(jg\) Rick Grant/AX3 Smith/AMH2 Roberts](#)
- [Lt Ron Clarke/Lt\(jg\) Jerry Smith/AX3 Conrad/ADJ2 Armstrong](#)
- [Lt Bill Waechter/Lt\(jg\) Bob Wildman/ADJ2 Olsen/AX1 Brantley](#)
- [Lt Jim Petrovich/Gene Eagan](#) and crewmen

In addition, we took what seemed like tons of "cruise boxes" loaded with everything people could think of that we might need to keep four armored SH-3 SAR helicopters flying for the duration we were away from the main Squadron. The plan, and it worked, was for SAR Det A to proceed to Yankee Station in the Gulf of Tonkin, take possession of four armored SH-3 SAR aircraft from HS-8, and provide Search and Rescue while the main body of HS-6 continued to Yankee Station via the Sea of Japan, and other Ports of Call. When the main body did arrive in the Gulf, the SAR duties would become a Squadron-wide endeavor with all pilots and aircrewmen involved.

Our SAR Det transportation was by air from Hawaii to the Philippines via one OLD, four-engined (four recip! Remember what they were?) [DC-7](#). At the appointed time we all met at the Barbers Point Terminal and loaded aboard the airplane. There were 40 of us, plus an unknown (to me) amount of baggage, spare parts, etc., (not to mention the dozens of box lunches for our dining pleasure) and when the pilot taxied out onto the runway he taxied as close to the end as he could. As he swung into position for take off, the tail was probably hanging over the water. He brought the power up, popped the brakes, and we started our take off roll. We were so heavy it seemed like we were just creeping down the runway, then we started to pick up speed. About 50 feet from the end of the runway, he rotated, and lifted

off the ground just as we passed over the water. As I said, we were really, really heavy.

Our first stop was [Wake Island](#) (after a few box lunches). We were able to get off the plane and walk around the island – literally walk around the entire island. Then it was on to [Guam](#), where we arrived about midnight, their time. Here they had the Mess Hall open for us, so we ate, and then, back on the plane. More box lunches, then we arrived at [NAS Cubi Point](#), Philippine Islands.

As we were clearing the runway after landing at Cubi, Cdr Lockwood walked to where Don Nichols and I were seated. He told us there would be a car waiting when the doors opened and that the three of us were headed to Base Operations – it seemed like no time at all until we were standing at the counter in Ops and Cdr Lockwood was asking when the next COD was leaving for Yankee Station. The First Class behind the counter said it was leaving in about one hour, but that it was full, and that we would have to wait until the next day. The X.O. handed him a copy of our orders and told him he would have to bump people, that we had a number 1 priority. As a result, we grabbed our bags, and were aboard the duty carrier at Yankee Station within 3 hours of landing at Cubi. The rest of the Det was transported by ship to Yankee Station the next day.

As the Maintenance Officer for the detachment, it was my responsibility to test each of the SAR birds and make sure we had HS-8 repair as many items as possible before accepting them. The reason was, HS-8 aboard the [USS Yorktown](#) had a full squadron of personnel and parts, and we would be operating for the next 45 or so days, with only 30 Enlisted and limited parts support. Flights and repairs took two or three days, and when I accepted the last aircraft, the four SAR aircraft departed that carrier and proceeded to the Connie. During this time the HS-6 pilots flew as copilots with HS-8 pilots, so we could become acquainted with the area and operations.

During our time on station, we would typically have one chopper depart prior to the first fixed wing launch, then the second would depart about 1300, to go on station. The usual destination was the North SAR destroyer, located just off the coast of Hanoi, though we would also go to the South SAR destroyer, and/or the Cruiser that was located in between. Upon arriving on station, we would go into a holding pattern and circle for hours on end, awaiting a call to go inland. About every two hours we would contact the ship we were working with, and drop down for a "High Drink" aircraft refueling. This was affected by making an approach over the fantail of the ship, hovering (flying formation with the ship's mast), lowering the rescue hoist, picking up the fuel hose, receiving fuel, then lowering the fuel hose and departing to returning to our holding pattern. It should be noted we would drop a bag down when the hoist was first lowered, and a sailor would grab that, and run to the Galley. Just prior to refuel completion, you would see the sailor running with our bag of goodies, which he would attach to the rescue hoist as soon as the fuel hose was disconnected. This way we got sandwiches and drinks to sustain us, on what became very long flights. If there were additional raids going on, our flights would be extended. For me, personally, the longest non-stop flight, entered in my log book, is 13 1/2 hours. Not bad for an aircraft with a 4 to 4 1/2 hour fuel supply!

The weather and flight conditions varied from VFR to IFR, extremely dark, two typhoons, and extremely hot conditions. We were wearing Nomex flight suits, a survival vest and a Mae West, plus a flak vest at times. The OAT ran around 40 C many of the days, and that, plus the sun shining in through the top, side and front windows left comfort to be

desired.

As the main North Vietnam Search and Rescue unit, our SAR Det recovered many air-crewmembers. Unfortunately, we also had numerous cases where we would start to go inland, only to have to abort the mission because the pilot had been captured. The latter was the worst part of the entire operation.

It should be mentioned that we only remained on one carrier for 5-7 days at a time. Many times we would take off from the carrier we were living on and operating from, then upon return, land on a different carrier. This became our new home for another 5-7 days. The Det personnel would have to transfer everything we owned each time we changed carriers, and, in one case, when the USS Roosevelt lost a prop the same day we moved aboard, we moved twice in one day.

All of the discomfort and inconvenience aside, this was a very rewarding experience which resulted in many rescues and other services rendered, (Mail drops/personnel transfers/cargo transfers, etc.) and a lot of very well deserved decorations awarded to our crews. In my own case, my crew which consisted of me as HAC/Lt(jg) Jerry Smith/ AX3 Conrad/ ADJ2 Armstrong had the distinction of performing the first night rescue in North Vietnam. We were operating off the USS Ranger when, about 3 in the morning on [July 27, 1966](#), we were scrambled, and departed the carrier in a driving rain storm. Did I mention it was pitch black also? We entered North Viet Nam about 5 miles North of the DMZ and proceeded to rescue an Air Force F-4 pilot who had been shot down. The only air cover we had were three twin-engine USAF bombers and the enemy ground fire was extremely heavy. Our "gunners" expended over 3,000 rounds of M-60 ammunition during the 27 minutes we were inland and under fire. I received the Silver Star, and my crew each received very well deserved Distinguished Flying Crosses. It was a good night – we got our man!

Twenty days prior to the night rescue, we had entered Haiphong Harbor and [picked up a Navy A-4 driver](#) who had ejected because his aircraft was on fire. By the time we arrived at his position, in the middle of the Bay, North Vietnamese "junks" were closing in on him, and they closed to within 1000 yards or less. They were still heading our way when we got the pilot in the "Horse Collar." As soon as he was out of the water, we departed, with much haste, and he entered the aircraft almost dry. We were probably doing 100 knots by the time he was pulled in the door. With this rescue, we had numerous fighter and attack aircraft overhead, but they were all out of ordnance since they were returning from a raid. I still recall the rescued pilot's comment after we cleared the coastline. He came on the intercom and said, "**You helicopter pilots aren't so bad, after all!**" His name was Lcdr Eisenhower.

When the main squadron arrived on Yankee Station aboard the Kearsarge, the SAR duties were taken over by the rest of the unit. They also did a marvelous job!!! As I recall, HS-6 rescued 16 pilots during our time on Yankee Station.

BY: RON CLARKE

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ron Clarke". The signature is written in a cursive style and is contained within a rectangular box.