

Warbird Spotlight - M.H.S. 361 Veterans Association's UH-34D Seahorse

by

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Two of my friends served in Vietnam. Both were Marines. One came home in a flag-draped coffin. The other came home walking, with all his limbs and lots of ribbons on his chest. Chet and Ricky should both be remembered in some way, yet only Chet is immortalized because his name is carved into the 'black wall' in Washington. The Marine Helicopter Squadron 361 Veterans Association (M.H.S. 361 Vets) has a living memorial to all those who served in Vietnam in the form of a UH-34D Seahorse (150570, N19YN) helicopter. It should be appreciated for what it symbolizes.

When we went to the Grand Old Air Show at Brookhaven Calabro Airport, we had no idea there would be such a rare aircraft there, not only on display, but in the air as well. It performed a rescue mission at the show giving spectators a glimpse into what it was like to rescue an injured soldier or downed flyer in Vietnam. Before we expand on the particulars of this beautifully restored aircraft, some background material is in order.



YN19 on display at the Grand Old Air Show, with its engine compartment doors open showing off its Wright R-1280-84 radial engine and massive cooling system.

Squadron Designations:

It is important to recognize the designations for US Marine Helicopter Squadrons. HMM-361 stands for Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 361, whereas HMH-361 stands for Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 361. When HMM-361 transitioned from the UH-34 to the H-53 it became HMH-361.



HMH-361 History:

HMH-361 began life as Marine Transport Squadron 361 on February 25, 1952 at what was then Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Santa Ana, CA. The ‘Flying Tigers’, as they were known, were attached to the only helicopter group in the Marine Corps - Marine Air Group (HR) 16. At that time, the squadron consisted of only three OY-2 and one HRS-2 helicopters located at MCAS El Toro. The original mission of the squadron was to train for and improve upon amphibious ship-to-shore tactics. An additional mission was training replacement pilots for duty in the Korean War.

Shortly thereafter, the squadron undertook its first major operation, to provide support for the atomic test exercise at Desert Rock, Nevada which is still the largest helicopter operation in history. Upon their return, HMR-361 was transferred to the newly established MAG (HR) 36 at MCAF Santa Ana in 1953. On December 31, 1956, the squadron was redesignated HMR(1)-361 and was now flying the HRS-3 helicopter. The Flying Tigers participated in two more atomic bomb testing exercises, beginning in June 1957 and February 1958.

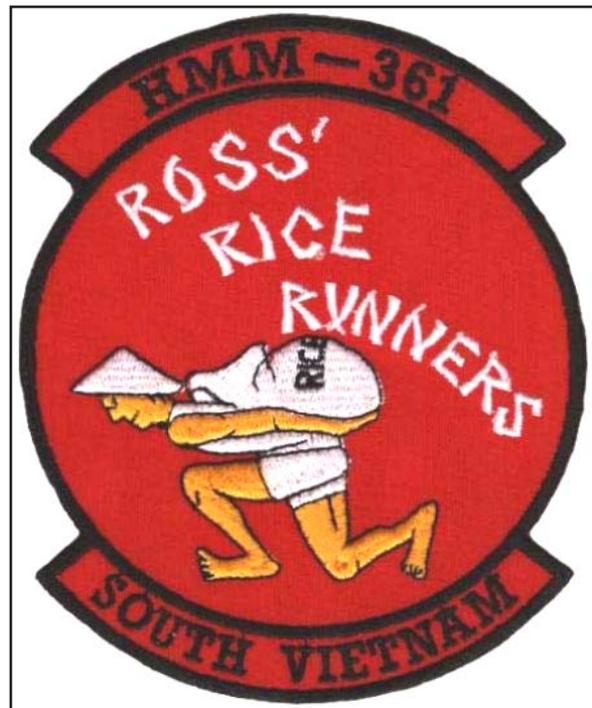


In September 1958, the squadron began flying the H-34 helicopter and in 1960 performed the first West Coast parachute drop for Marine Pathfinders from the H-34. On February 1, 1962, the Flying Tigers were redesignated HMM-361 and deployed for the Cuban Missile Crisis on October 27, 1962 in support of the 5th Marine Expeditionary Force onboard the USS Iwo Jima (LPH-2).



In 1963, the Flying Tigers were deployed to the Philippines, then to Da Nang, Republic of Vietnam, as one of the first units in the country to participate in Operation Shufly, which supported South Vietnamese troops in engaging the Viet Cong. It was there that HMM-361 earned the nickname "Ross' Rice Runners", after their Commanding Officer, LtCol Tom Ross, who became the third Marine Aviator of the Year. HMM-361 was rotated through Futenma, Okinawa and back to MCAS Santa Ana, CA. They returned to Vietnam in 1965, serving there until being deactivated on May 18, 1968.

The Flying Tigers were reactivated on June 3, 1968 at MCAS New River, NC, and transitioned to the CH-53A Sea Stallion. At New River they were attached to Marine Aircraft Group 26 and redesignated Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 361 (HMH-361). They were again ordered to Vietnam with Marine Aircraft Group 36 at Phu Bai in 1969 and remained there until their return to Santa Ana, CA in 1970 as part of Marine Aircraft Group 56.



HMH-361 received their first CH-53D Sea Stallion helicopter in 1977 and began conversion to the CH-53E Super Stallion on August 23, 1990. On November 5, 1992, the Flying Tigers deployed to Okinawa as the Aviation Combat Element (ACE) of the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit, the first MEU to utilize a CH-53E squadron as the nucleus. Here they were joined by detachments of CH-46E's from HMM-262, AH-1W's, and UH-1N's from HMLA-267, and AV-8B Harriers from VMA-311 to become HMH-361 (Reinforced), the first CH-53E composite squadron in history.

After returning from Okinawa and reintegrating its MEU detachments in May of 1997, HMH-361 assumed the Alert Contingency Marine air-ground task force (ACM) status. Today, the squadron is based at MCAS Miramar, CA, under the command of Marine Aircraft Group Sixteen (MAG-16), 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing (3rd MAW), and still flies the CH-53E Super Stallion.



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UH-34 Seahorse History:

Based on the Sikorsky S-58, the UH-34 was a workhorse for the US military and civilian operators, as well as many foreign nations. Historically, it was the last of the large piston engine helicopters, having been supplanted by turbine power.

Using its own money for development, Sikorsky entered the S-58 into competition for a new US Navy anti-submarine helicopter, and into US Army and Air Force competition as a utility helicopter. None of the three services bought it, and the US Marines, who did not hold a competition, also chose against the S-58. Fortunately for Sikorsky, all of the helicopters chosen by the military had shortcomings, so the Navy, Army, and Marines selected the S-58 as a viable alternative. Even the Air Force, eventually, used ex-Navy S-58s (H-34 Seabats) for search and rescue.

In 1962, the Department of Defense standardized aircraft designations, so the Navy's HSS-1 (Seabat), the Marine's HUS-1 (Seahorse), and the Army's H-34 (Choctaw) were all redesignated the UH-34. Of the 1,825 S-58/UH-34s produced in the USA, the UH-34D was the most popular. France and the UK also produced the S-58 under license from Sikorsky as the Pirate and Wessex respectively. In fact, it was France who first used the S-58 (Pirate) in combat during the Algerian War from 1956-1962.

The Seahorse was the mainstay of Marine helicopter units from the late 1950s until the late 1960s. They took delivery of their first UH-34D in 1955. By the time they retired from service, 515 units would be delivered to the Marines. Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 362 (HMM-362) was the first US outfit to use the UH-34D in combat, being assigned to the Mekong Delta region of South Vietnam.



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Though its high cockpit allowed for good visibility, it also made a great target for enemy fire, and because of its compartmentalized cockpit, it made it difficult for crew chiefs to come to the aid of injured cockpit crew. The UH-34's magnesium skin resulted in intense fires, and contributed to corrosion problems. And its airframe was considered too weak to support the sort of armament that was used on the UH-1 Iroquois (Huey) gunships. Despite these misgivings, the US Marines in Vietnam made the best of the Seahorse in combat. They discovered that the helicopter could take substantial damage and still make it back to base.

Though the Seahorse was developed for use as a cargo and personnel transport, by August 1962 it was decided to equip the UH-34Ds with two M-60 machine guns, one inside the door as shown above, and one inside a rear window on the opposite side of the aircraft. This was certainly justified since there were limited UH-1 gunships available at the beginning of the conflict, and these were assigned to the Army. The Marines went one step further and converted four UH-34s into gunships called Stingers, with the addition of a Temporary Kit-1 (TK-1). The TK-1 conversion kit included four M-60C machine guns and two 19-shot 2.75 inch rocket launch pods. Though the Stinger was met with mixed results, the TK-1 kit became the basis for the TK-2, which would be used on the Marine version of the Huey.

Labor of Love:

This brings us back to our friends at the Marine Helicopter Squadron 361 Veterans Association (M.H.S. 361 Vets). To think they took a pile of Rustoleum test parts from a salvage yard in Arizona, and five+ years later turned it into this stunning UH-34D Seahorse helicopter is truly a labor of love. And about \$350,000 in cash. It also helps to have good sponsors like the Marine Corps League, Vietnam Veterans Association, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the American Legion. Other manufacturing companies were more generous, contributing rotor blades, a transmission, an engine, and even an extra UH-34D for use as spare parts. Our hats off to them.

According to the M.H.S. 361 Vets website, their Seahorse entered service with HMM-163 in November 1963. It had three different stints with HMM-361, in whose markings it is now painted, before being retired on January 3, 1972, at the AMARC facility (the bone yard) at Davis-Monthan AFB, AZ. While attached to HMM-361, it was assigned the number YN-19 as it carries on its side today. At one point in Vietnam, it was fitted with a TK-1 retrofit kit which turned it into a Stinger gunship while assigned to HMM-162.

In my mind, the heroes of any war are the ones who died serving their country. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, we pay homage to the Vietnam heroes at the Vietnam Memorial in Washington. What we don't do enough of in this country is say thanks to the ones who came home. This UH-34D Seahorse helicopter is a flying tribute to all those who served in Vietnam. All the Rickys. And all the Chets. And to all those still serving.

If you would like ~~more information on the Marine Helicopter Squadron 361 Veterans Association's~~ UH-34D Seahorse, please check out their website at either www.freedomsflyingmemorial.org or www.34restoration.org, or call Alan Weiss at (631) 827-5526. To contribute, mail donations to:

Marine Helicopter Squadron 361 Veterans Association
PO Box 429
Cutchogue, NY 11935

We want to thank Al Weiss and all the members of the M.H.S. Vets for their help and contributions to this article. It is our sincere hope that more attention is paid to this wonderful organization. We want to see Bureau Number 150570 continue to fly. If this 'Gorgeous Lady' comes to an air show near you, go check it out. Tell them Airshow Traveler sent you.



The sequence of photos on this page shows a typical combat rescue performed by the HMM-361 Veterans Association. You can't go wrong if you book this group at your air show. This is good stuff.