

Chronological History of U.S.A.F. H-53 Helicopters

Excerpts from:

Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service 1946-1981: An Illustrated Chronology

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10 Mar - 24 May 71 – Operational Transpacific Ferrying of helicopters.

In a mass transpacific ferrying deployment and redeployment of HH-53 helicopters between the United States and Southeast, Asia, ARRS personnel flew five HH-53Cs from Eglin AFB, Fl. to Udorn Airfield, Thailand, and redeployed two HH-53Bs from Da Nang AB, Vietnam, to Hamilton AB, California. This movement was planned in four separate flights, two westbound and two eastbound. However, the fourth (eastbound) flight did not take place due to the war-weary condition of the older HH-53s. Intermediate stops along the transpacific route were: McChord AFB, Washington; Elmendorf AFB, Alaska; Shemya AFB, AK; Misawa AB, Japan; Kadena AB, Okinawa; and Clark AB, Republic of the Philippines. All flights received en route refueling from ARRS HC-130P/Ns.

2 Nov - 5 Nov 71 – Another Transatlantic Helicopter Flight.

ARRS ferried two HH-53s from Goose AB, Canada, to Woodbridge RAF Base, United Kingdom, with an intermediate stop at Keflavik, Iceland. The flight left Goose AB on 2 November and landed at RAF Woodbridge on 5 November. When the cost was tallied, it was determined that shipment by airlift or sealift would have been less expensive. However, ferrying was a viable option, and airlift or sealift might not be available.

30 – 31 Mar 72

An AC-130, 'Spectre 22,' with 15 crewmen aboard was hit by enemy antiaircraft fire near Paksong, Laos, but all crewmen were able to bail out. On the following day the 40th ARR Squadron sent out five HH-53s and brought back all 15 crewmen.

13 Apr 72

Captain Bennie D. Orrell won the Air Force Cross as a result of a rescue mission in Southeast Asia. Following the enemy spring offensive through the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) on 30 March, rescue activity increased dramatically. On 13 April the 40th ARRS was tasked to find U.S. Marine Corps Major Clyde D. Smith who was down between Tchepone, Laos, and the DMZ. Captain Orrell, piloting an HH-53, approached the search area, and Major Smith "popped his smoke" to show his location. The smoke drifted uphill before it emerged from the trees. When Captain Orrell hovered at that spot, Major Smith made a "max effort" run uphill to the hoist. He grabbed it, but Captain Orrell encountered enemy fire and was forced to retract the hoist and didn't know Major Smith was there until the hoist cleared the trees.

20 - 21 Nov 70 – Raid on Son Tay Prison.

Forty-two men assigned to ARRS, manning one HH-3, five HH-53s, and two HC-130Ps, participated in the daring raid on the POW compound at Son Tay, about 23 miles west of Hanoi, Vietnam. These men trained intensively with other Army and Air Force personnel at Eglin AFB, Florida, between August and November 1970. On 20 and 21 November 1970 the raid was carried out as planned, but no POWs were found. One HH-3 was lost due to impact with a tree at the prison, and Technical Sergeant Leroy Wright broke his foot. All personnel returned safely to Udorn AB, Thailand. However, the HH-53s stopped briefly in Laos to pick up two F-105 crewmen whose plane had been shot down by the enemy. Later, five of the ARRS participants received the Air Force Cross: Lieutenant Colonels Warner A. Britton and John V. Allison, Majors Herbert D. Kalen and Frederic M. Donohue, and Technical Sergeant Leroy M. Wright. The other 23 helicopter crewmen received the Silver Star.

1 May 72 – Evacuation of Quang Tri

The 3d ARR Group evacuated 132 persons from the citadel in the besieged city of Quang Tri to Da Nang, Vietnam. Five HH-53s of the 37th ARRS were used for this mission. No one was injured, despite the nearby presence of enemy forces. Staff Sergeant Robert L. LaPointe, a pararescueman in the first HH-53, silenced enemy snipers with a mini-gun. When the plane landed, Sergeant LaPointe organized the evacuees and maintained ground control until the second HH-53 departed.

1 - 2 Jun 72

The 3d ARR Group, augmented by A-1s and other forces, rescued Captain Roger C. Locher, who had lost his F-4 over North Vietnam on 10 May and had evaded capture for 23 days. Captain Dale E. Stovall, 40th ARRS, and his HH-53 crew successfully evacuated Captain Locher on 2 June. New electronic locator finder (ELF) equipment aided in the success of this operation.

27 Jun 72

Captain Stovall, 40th ARRS, again flew deep into North Vietnam to rescue two downed airmen. After another HH-53 was forced to withdraw from the rescue site due to enemy fire, Captain Stovall's crew descended and retrieved the two survivors. The second HH-53 received more than 16 hits during the engagement, and several personnel aboard both HH-53s were wounded. Later, Captain Dale E. Stovall and Staff Sergeant Charles D. McGrath (PJ) were awarded the Air Force Cross.

21 Dec 72

The 40th ARRS performed its first night combat recovery in Southeast Asia by an HH-53 using a new Night Recovery System.

12 Apr 75 – Operation “EAGLE PULL”

Eight HH-53s and three HC-130s from the 40th and 56th ARRS, respectively, participated in EAGLE PULL, the evacuation of United States personnel from Phnom Penh, Cambodia. One HH-53 inserted a combat control team prior to the evacuation and two HH-53s removed the last 15 military personnel from Phnom Penh following the completion of the evacuation. The Joint Rescue Coordination Center (JRCC) operated by the 3d ARR Group at Nakhon Phanom, exercised operational control of rescue forces. There were no ARRS injuries or casualties although two HH-53s incurred hits from small caliber ground fire.

29 Apr 75 – Operation “FREQUENT WIND”

Eight HH-53s and three HC-130s of the 40th and 56th ARRS, respectively, participated in Frequent Wind, the evacuation of United States personnel from Saigon, Vietnam. Two of the HH-53s airlifted 362 evacuees from Saigon to the USS Midway. Both aircraft returned enemy ground fire. The HC-130s provided command and control communications and aerial refueling. The 3d AAR Group coordinated rescue operations. No ARRS personnel were injured.

13 - 15 May 75 – Mayaguez Incident and Assault on Koh Tang Island

In response to the capture of the SS Mayaguez and her crew at sea on 13 May, and after diplomatic measures had been ineffective, President Ford initiated military action. ARRS provided seven HH-53s and four HC-130s in concert with other United States Forces, notably the United States Marine Corps. During operations which lasted 18 hours and 28 minutes, ARRS flew 19 sorties and a total of 70.2 hours. The HH-53s inserted 69 Marines on the USS Holt and 184 on Koh Tang Island. The HH-53s extracted 145 Marines and five downed United States Air Force crewmen from Koh Tang. Two ARRS personnel were wounded-in-action, but no ARRS personnel were killed-in-action. Six of the seven HH-53s sustained battle damage. Later, both Captains Roland W. Purser and Donald R. Backlund were awarded the Air Force Cross.

7 Jun - 9 Aug 76

HH-53 #66-14433, which had been extensively modified as a prototype with PAVE LOW III equipment, underwent an Operational Test and Evaluation (OT&E) conducted by the Air Force Systems Command (AFSC). All test objectives were accomplished.

10 Jun – 2 Jul 76

The 67th ARRS participated in the evacuation of United States and friendly foreign nationals from Beirut, Lebanon. HC-130s flew 121.3 hours and HH-53s flew 163.9 hours during this contingency.

14 Jun 77

An HH-53 aircrew from the 55th ARRS and an H-3 aircrew from Detachment 5, 39th ARR Wing, saved 32 United States Army Rangers who were unexpectedly caught in cold rainy swamps during an exercise near Eglin AFB, Florida.

11 - 18 Jun 78 – “Volant Vault”

Three HH-53s flew from Eglin AFB, Florida, across the North Atlantic route to RAF Woodbridge, United Kingdom, touching down at Keflavik. Aerial Refueling was provided by ARRS HC-130s.

20 - 29 Nov 78 Guyana Contingency

Three HH-53s, one WC-130 and two HC-130s, deployed to Guyana following the mass death of 914 persons associated with the Peoples Temple religious sect. ARRS flew 30 sorties between Jonestown and Georgetown and evacuated 903 human remains. MAC C-141s airlifted 911 bodies back to Dover AFB, Delaware.

13 Mar 1979 – First PAVE LOW III Production Model

HH-53H # 69-5791 was “rolled out” at the naval Air Rework Facility, Pensacola NAS, Florida.

18 Jun – 3 Aug 79 – Nicaraguan Contingency

ARRS forces participated in a contingency deployment to Central America in support of possible rescue evacuation mission into Nicaragua. After tension eased, the rescue forces redeployed. A total of 233 ARRS personnel were involved, and 636 flying hours were expended. (ARRS helicopters on the USS Saipan)

14 – 17 May 80

In the wake of the unsuccessful United States attempt to rescue the hostages in Iran on 24-25 April 1980, the nation's leaders searched for replacement helicopters for use in another joint rapid deployment force in case of future contingency actions. The ARRS HH-53Hs [PAVE LOW aircraft] were just becoming operational after a lengthy period of operational testing and evaluation. These aircraft possessed capabilities to fly in adverse weather, at low level, and at night. Therefore, on

14 May 1980, the USAF Vice Chief of Staff ordered the reassignment of the nine HH-53Hs from MAC/ARRS inventory to the 1st Special operations wing (sow) of TAC at Hurlburt Field, Florida.

Compliance by ARRS was immediate. On 17 May eight of these aircraft were flown from Kirtland AFB, New Mexico, to Hurlburt Field, Florida. The ninth HH-53H was under modification at Pensacola NAS, Florida.

May 80 – Jan 81 Support for Project Honey Badger

Significant ARRS resources were allocated to Honey Badger, a joint readiness testing project centering at Hurlburt Field, Florida. In addition to the reassignment of the nine HH-53Hs, six HH-53B/C aircraft were on temporary duty (TDY) with this project and eight HC-130s were modified for special mission activities. More than 300 ARRS personnel were on extended TDY causing significant Military Airlift Command (MAC) funding impacts, and curtailing other important ARRS missions. Supplies and equipment were generously loaned. ARRS expended more than 23,000 man-days on Honey Badger. Colonel Lewis Harrington served as ARRS mission coordinator for this project.

ARRS/ARRS ASSIGNED AIRCRAFT																
As of 31 December (1946-1981)																
Year	'66	'67	'68	'69	'70	'71	'72	'73	'74	'75	'76	'77	'78	'79	'80	'81
HH-53H														5		
CH/HH-53 B/C	2	8	10	13	31	43	39	34	33	33	32	32	32	27	22	22