

THE FIRST  
HELICOPTERS  
TO TRAVERSE  
THE ATLANTIC  
NON-STOP BATTLED  
THE ELEMENTS IN  
A CLASSIC FEAT  
THAT DESERVES TO  
BE REMEMBERED

The helicopter was an infant in the 1940s and an adolescent in the 1950s. But in the 1960s, adulthood was reached with the ability to exert full potential. This was dramatized on 31 May 1967, when two Sikorsky HH-3Es of the US Air Force lifted off from New York and swung north for the Great Circle Route across the Atlantic Ocean. Destination: Paris, France.

May 1967: The 40th anniversary of Charles Lindbergh's epic solo flight in the *Spirit of St. Louis*. The Paris Air Show was under way and its theme for the year was, fittingly, "In the Spirit of Lindbergh." Spectators waited in anticipation for the arrival of the HH-3Es and their aircrews, just as thousands of French citizens had waited for the appearance of the Lone Eagle and his silver monoplane in 1927. For this occasion, like the former, was a historic event. For the first time ever, helicopters were attempting to traverse the harsh expanse of the North Atlantic — *non-stop*.

Major Zehnder and his crew land the first HH-3E (66-1281) at Le Bourget Airport in Paris after completing the historic crossing of the Atlantic. Major Maurras and his crew in the second HH-3E (66-1280) landed minutes later. The achievement demonstrated that the helicopter had come of age. (USAF)

# IN THE SPIRIT OF LINDBERGH

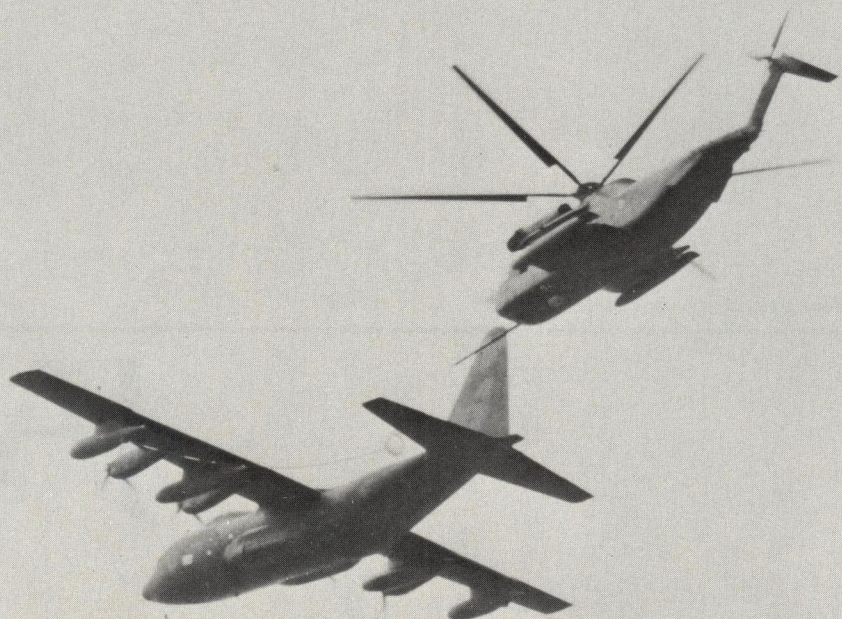
BY RICHARD K.  
SCHRADER







Here are the aircrews that flew the Sikorsky HH-3Es across the Atlantic non-stop from New York to Paris on 31 May-1 June 1967. Standing, back row: Major Herbert Zehnder, commander; Major Jim E. Hartley, pilot; Captain Gregory A.M. Etzel, copilot; Captain Clifford J. Buckley, flight surgeon; and Staff Sergeant Harold R. Schrader, flight engineer. Kneeling, front row: Major Donald B. Maurras, commander; Captain Donald E. Alford, pilot; Captain Charles R. Dunn, copilot; Technical Sergeant Mark T. Richardson; and Staff Sergeant Dennis W. Palmer, flight engineers. (Sikorsky)



In-flight refueling support made the non-stop crossing possible, and it was provided by Lockheed HC-130P tankers. The HC-130 Hercules is a long-range search and recovery transport. Twenty examples were converted to HC-130Ps by the addition of additional plumbing and refueling drogues that trailed from hoses and external fuel tanks. Ground crews from the 48th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron's planning and maintenance units also provided support for the operation. (Sikorsky)

*(Continued from page 22)*

spotted in time and circumnavigated. And at this northern latitude, they were out there — somewhere.

Eyes ahead, on instruments, ahead — with hands and feet delicately balancing controls — success and failure were separated by 50 feet and split seconds. The flight proceeded interminably.

The methodical military reports written afterward were devoid of emotion. They presented the facts about the flight — nothing more. But there were ten men aboard those aircraft, and they had their lives on the line. To dare to take on a formidable challenge and rise above adversity made them an elite breed and a credit to the United States as well as the Air Force. These helo professionals stood just as tall as the fastest and highest-flying jocks of fighter planes. Indeed, to go slow and low in harm's way required men of soaring spirit and special skill.

They crept eastward and finally the weather improved. The HH-3Es climbed to a safer altitude, carried out their fifth in-flight refueling off Iceland, and resumed their inexorable course for Europe.

Night descended upon them and strong head winds persisted to impede progress. The crossing seemed endless. Fortunately, the tankers continued to provide outstanding support, and the sixth and seventh in-flight refuelings were successfully accomplished between Iceland and Scotland.

In this environment of perpetual coldness, the specter of ditching, even in a military aircraft, was forbidding. Immersed in the freezing water, a man's life could be measured in minutes. Survival suits would help *if* assistance could find them quickly, and *if* the seas and weather cooperated with the rescue effort, which, in this region of the world, was chancy.

But mechanical problems remained absent. Hour after hour, all systems and components operated in sound fashion, and the whopping of the rotor blades continued reassuringly. What a tribute to the designer, engineers, builders, and mechanics that such complex machinery could sustain reliable flight over such a prolonged period! How far the helicopter had come in the span of less than 30 years, from its first flimsy tethered attempts to this incredible feat of endurance across the Atlantic.

They continued eastward, slowly but surely. And then, at last, landfall! The HH-3Es crossed the coast of Scotland, leaving the great hurdle of the ocean behind, now traversed non-stop by helicopters for the first time in history. Nature, as if in admiration of the great achievement, favored them with strong tail winds which boosted their ground

speed to 170 mph and allowed swift passage to final destination.

Time for more fuel. The eighth in-flight replenishment took place near the Scottish town of Stornoway. Although three hours behind schedule on account of the head winds

the city rose over the horizon, and minutes later, passed underneath.

The first HH-3E arrived over Le Bourget Airport, fittingly, in the company of an HC-130P. Together, they turned around and made a pass over the field at 1500 feet,



Close-up of the HH-3E in the process of refueling in flight (aerial replenishment procedures with tankers and helicopters were first established in 1965). This was a demanding task — even more difficult in turbulence. Much credit must be given to the pilots on the transatlantic flight for meeting the challenge no less than nine times along a route that was plagued with bad weather, including icing conditions that forced them down to 50 feet above the water. Fatigue had to be overcome as well in the later stages of the flight which totalled nearly 31 hours. (USAF)

over the North Atlantic, nothing, it seemed, could stop them now from reaching Paris. Daylight arrived for the second time on this journey.

The flight plan called for the HH-3Es to separate. The one commanded by Major Maurras headed for London and arrived over Heathrow Airport with a clocked time of 29 hours and 13 minutes out of New York City. He then turned for the course to Paris to follow Major Zehnder, who was heading directly for the French city.

The ninth and final in-flight refueling took place over the English Channel. Support provided by the HC-130P team throughout the long flight had proven invaluable, and each member was worthy of much credit for making the transatlantic venture possible, for building an aerial bridge between New York and Paris. Without them, this flight couldn't even have been contemplated.

Only 300 miles to go. Paris, the grand prize, was less than two hours away.

Soon, land appeared in the distance — France! They crossed the coast and angled for the capital. In little more than an hour,

simulating an in-flight refueling for the benefit of the crowd, on hand to witness the historic event.

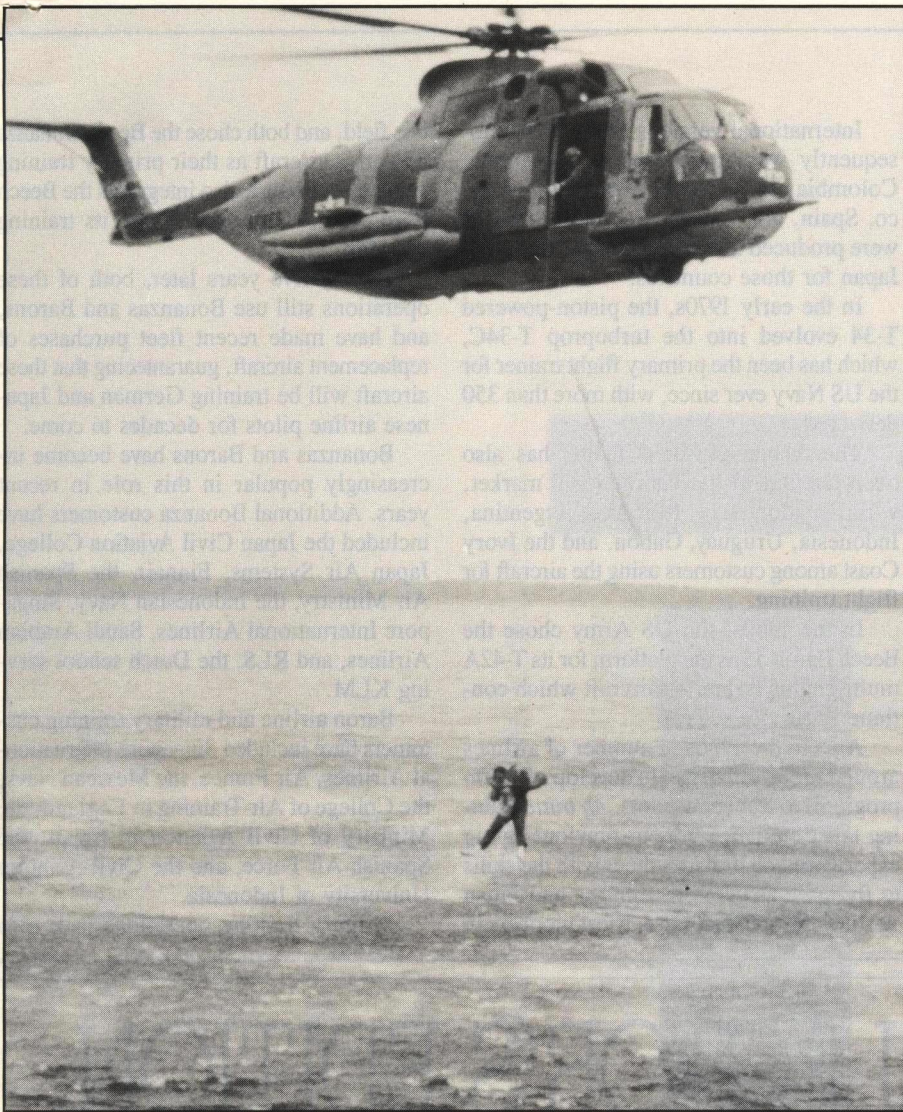
The HH-3E landed at Le Bourget after completing the demonstration. Twelve minutes later, the second Sikorsky touched down to join its companion. It was 1 June 1967, and the first non-stop transatlantic helicopter flight had been successfully completed.

The official time for the New York-to-Paris feat was 30 hours and 46 minutes, which translated into an average ground speed of 131 mph for the northerly crossing of 4270 statute miles. Six hours of instrument time had been logged to bore through the bad weather.

Major Zehnder praised the thorough support which had been provided for the helo crews: "This flight would not have been possible without the help of the people who backed us up, both on the ground and in the air."

Major Maurras lauded "the beautiful team spirit" of everybody involved in the crossing.

"The spectacular transatlantic flight of



Nicknamed the "Jolly Green Giant," the Sikorsky HH-3E served with distinction as a rescue craft. One is shown here in its natural element — saving a life. (USAF)

the HC-130P/HH-3E team to the Paris Air Show proves beyond a doubt the capability of this combination to do its practical, daily job in Vietnam and elsewhere around the world, with one objective, to save lives," said Brigadier General Allison Brooks, Commanding Officer of the USAF's Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service at the time.

Specifically, the crossing has a twofold goal: To demonstrate the Air Force's search and rescue and recovery capability throughout the world, and to illustrate the helicopter's oceanic range via in-flight refueling. Certainly, this goal was achieved.

The remarkable flight did something else, too. It highlighted the excellence of American airmanship and team spirit, as well as ingenuity, engineering, and workmanship.

It also had special meaning to a certain individual who had waited in Paris for the safe arrival of the HH-3Es: Mr. Igor Sikorsky, himself, the founder of the company that had built the aircraft. For the man who had begun experimenting with helicopters as far back as 1909, and designed and flown the pioneering VS-300 in 1939, it was a

crowning credit to a life dedicated to the field.

The two HH-3Es that traversed the Atlantic were displayed for the remainder of the Paris Air Show. On 5 June, they were flown to Rhein-Main Air Base in Frankfurt, Germany, where they were dismantled, packed aboard MAC (Military Airlift Command) transports, and delivered to Da Nang, Vietnam. Reassembled, they were utilized to save downed aircrews and ground troops wounded in combat. The fleet of HH-3Es, nicknamed "Jolly Green Giants," served with distinction and left behind an outstanding record of rescue operations in the war. It's a story in itself.

The 1967 New York-Paris non-stop flight remains a great achievement in aviation history. Without doubt, the HH-3Es and their aircrews demonstrated that the helicopter had come of age.

Acknowledgments: MSgt Bailey and Harry Fletcher of the USAF Historical Research Center, MSgt Charles D. Jones of MAC Public Affairs, and Joseph E. Dabney of Lockheed. **ACT**




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