

The Black Mariah Story

by
Jack Mecham

Visitors to the Air Force Museum have viewed the "Black Mariah" helicopter with wonderment. Many believe it to be a rescue helicopter. Those who carefully read the placard know that it flew highly classified missions, but can only speculate as to the nature of those missions. Now the story can be told.

The 20th Helicopter Squadron (HS) was formed in 1956 to perform traditional Tactical Air Command missions using Vertol H-21 helicopters. In 1965, the unit's Sikorsky CH-3 helicopters' engines were upgraded to enable them to lift greater payloads. All nonessential equipment was removed to reduce weight, and the aircraft were sanitized by removing equipment nomenclature and serial number data as well as all national markings. They were then transferred to Southeast Asia and the squadron began unconventional special operations under the codename "Pony Express."

Initially the Pony Express mission was assigned to the 14th Air Commando Wing based at Nha Trang Air Base in South Vietnam. The mission was to support the "Secret War in Laos," orchestrated by the CIA. While the primary theater of operations was Laos, missions were also flown in North Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand as required. Although it would have been more efficient to operate from Thailand, that option was not politically acceptable in 1965. However, late in 1966 the Pony Express operation was relocated, on a temporary duty (TDY) basis, to Udorn Air Base in northern Thailand; home of the CIA command center. While the 20th HS experi-



Sikorsky CH-3 "Black Mariah" (USAFM)

enced a number of organizational and mission changes during the course of the Vietnam conflict, I will limit this article to those operations conducted through 1967, the period of my involvement.

Mission planning for the Pony Express was accomplished within the 7/13th Air Force Headquarters located at Udorn Air Base. A Pony Express pilot, designated as the single point of contact with the CIA was responsible for all mission planning and the issuance of fragmentation (frag) orders to effect the assignment of fighter escort. During a significant portion of 1967, I was the designated mission planner. While normal frag orders contained target coordinates and time over target as well as other pertinent details, Pony Express frags contained only time and coordinates for fighter escort rendezvous, and fuel and armament requirements. The fighter escort had no knowledge of the destination or nature of the mission. While Major General Bond, commander of the 7/13th Air Force, had a general knowledge of the type missions accomplished by the Pony Express, he did not have access to CIA mission requirements or planning data. Pilots assigned to fly the mission were briefed by the mission planner immediately

prior to departure. This level of security was essential to mission success and crew survival. Certain ancillary requirements were so sensitive that even the mission pilots could not be told. During one three-week period, on all missions to landing zones (LZs) located near the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the crew chief was required to exit the aircraft, take photos of the surrounding terrain, and collect soil samples. In some instances, these actions had to be taken while under enemy fire. Needless to say, there were some irate crew members. These soil samples and photos were used in the final development of a chemical compound which rendered the trail a quagmire.

Pony Express missions primarily entailed the infiltration of indigenous teams or individuals into specified LZs near the Ho Chi Minh Trail for reconnaissance or penetration purposes and the ultimate exfiltration (removing) of these resources. Normally, our activities were planned to use the strike missions as a diversion. On occasion, emergency exfiltration was necessary because the team had been discovered and was being pursued by the enemy. Other missions included support for the construction and maintenance of the TACAN/radar site (channel 98)



located on top of a 5600-foot mountain in northeast Laos. This site was essential to precision strike missions in the Hanoi area. Missions were also flown in support of the Thai government. There were two occasions when the Pony Express led covert operations to destroy large pockets of communist terrorist (CT) forces located in northeast Thailand. These missions utilized Thai armed forces and were very successful in containing and eliminating the CT pockets. At night we maintained one aircraft on alert, with a designated crew, to perform emergency medical evacuation of Thai civilians that were in critical shape. I flew two such missions where young girls in remote villages had sustained life threatening injuries and would have died had they been transported to the hospital using the primitive roads.

Under normal conditions, the fighter escorts were A-1Es out of South Vietnam. I cannot say enough about the dedication and professional skills demonstrated by these pilots. On rare occasions, when operating in central Laos, we were assigned T-28s based at Nakhon Phanom (NKP) Air Base in northeast Thailand on the border of Laos.

Emergency exfiltrations were another story when it came to

fighter escort. Due to very short notice, the A-1E resources were usually committed and it was necessary to utilize F-4 or F-105 aircraft. There were two basic problems with this scenario. The jets were too fast, and their fuel was very limited. More times than not they were released to return to base and the Pony Express used the weapons on board to engage the enemy as a delaying tactic while locating a suitable LZ for extraction of the team.

On one occasion, it was necessary to evacuate the population of a small village in Laos that was under siege by communist forces. As the pilot of one of the helicopters, I instructed the crew chief to load 35 villagers on board. This number could be accommodated in the portable web seating and would take into account the weight of the belongings they carried. Since survival was their primary concern, I was not surprised when the crew chief was unable to stop them from loading until the aircraft was packed with standing personnel. It was extremely hot that day, resulting in a high-density altitude, which drastically limited the aircraft's ability to hover. Consequently, it was necessary to leap frog through the dry rice paddies to obtain

sufficient airspeed to transition from a hover to forward flight (approximately 30 knots). Upon off-loading the aircraft, it was discovered that we had 78 passengers in addition to the crew of 3.

There has been much speculation as to the origin of the "Black Mariah" nickname. The most prevalent suspicion is that it was painted black because it flew night covert missions, however that is not the real reason for its black color. Since night vision devices were not available at that time, night missions would require illumination of the LZ as well as the low-level portions of the route because missions were routinely flown at treetop level and in many cases over mountainous terrain. The use of aircraft searchlights would have made us "sitting ducks." Therefore, there were no night combat missions flown.

Originally, all eight of the CH-3Es assigned to the Pony Express were painted in a camouflaged scheme. When it came time to repaint tail number 39676, the only paint available was a flat black. The aircraft was painted black and dubbed the "Black Mariah." Throughout the conflict in Southeast Asia it retained the black color and the nickname. Quite by coincidence the Black Mariah became involved in some of the operation's more clandestine missions. As a result, it had an aura of mystique about it and a reputation among the enemy. ☼

Douglas A-1E Skyraiders often flew escort on "Pony Express" missions (USAFM)



[Upon graduation from pilot training in 1955, Jack Meham taught basic flying training in B-25s eventually accruing over 3,000 hours in that aircraft. During his career Jack flew more than 20 different Air Force aircraft including helicopters such as the CH-3E, the subject of this article. Jack currently is a volunteer at the AF Museum working in aircraft restoration and main museum galleries.]