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1 HS propels historical tradition of excellence

Margo Turner

A UH-1N Huey Helicopter can take off at a moment's notice from the 1st Helicopter Squadron. The aircraft may be flying a critically ill patient or premature infant to a medical facility within a 300-mile radius of Washington, D.C., or the aircraft may be participating in a rescue or transporting high-level military and civilian leaders. Whatever the mission, the squadron is ready for any assignment 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

"Many people don't realize that transporting dignitaries is not our primary mission," said Lt. Col. Tracy W. Colburn, squadron commander. "For the most part, we are on alert duty for national crisis, such as the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001."

The squadron has 48 officers and 44 enlisted personnel, according to Colburn. Currently, only two of their personnel have been tapped for possible deployment.

Of the squadron's 92 members, there are 44 pilots and 24 flight engineers. The rest of the members are assigned to other areas of the squadron, such as the mission control section where day-to-day flying operations are monitored.

The Air Force members are on a four-year assignment at the unit, said Maj. David J. Impiccini, assistant director of operations.

"Some extend their stay for five to six years," Impiccini said. "They like the fact that the squadron doesn't deploy so they have more time to spend with their families."

The squadron's 19 Hueys are constantly maintained and inspected by 65 employees from DynCorp, a contractor on base. Ninety percent of the employees have previous military and helicopter maintenance experience, according to Gregg French, lead mechanic and expeditor on the flightline.

French, who retired from 1HS six years ago, worked on the same model of helicopters 19 of his 20 years in the Air Force. Although most of his colleagues had little prior experience with this particular model, they quickly acclimated themselves to the Huey.

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The mechanics provide 24-hour maintenance on the Hueys, which were built in 1969 by Bell Helicopter. The helicopters were designed to fly for 10 years or 2,000 hours, however, each of the Hueys on base averages 10,000 hours. Each Huey can seat a maximum of 13 people. Passengers usually number about 11.

The civilian mechanics take great care in maintaining the helicopters. "These are high-maintenance aircraft. They need tender loving care," said Calvin McCray, senior mechanic.

The unit holds the Department of Defense's record for helicopter safety. It has more than 210,000 hours of accident-free flying, Impiccini said.

A helicopter unit has been here since August 1955 when the 1401st Helicopter Flight, operating under the direction of the Military Air Transport Service, began providing special airlift for key government officials, air rescue coverage and support for classified government operations plans.

In October 1957, the 1401 became the 1001st Helicopter Flight. The following fall, Washington and the surrounding area were hit by a major snowfall. Using its seven CH-21 aircraft, the 1001st flew numerous medical evacuation and food transportation flights, providing critical assistance to many rural Maryland and Virginia areas.

In August 1961, the 1001st was transferred from Andrews to Bolling Air Force Base, where the unit became the 1001st Helicopter Squadron, under the control of Headquarters Command, USAF.

In September 1967, the unit returned to its original and present home, Andrews. In July 1969, the unit became the 1st Helicopter Squadron.

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