

Fish or Cut Bait

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If the Navy is to be a full partner in special operations, it needs a dedicated organic helicopter unit.

Today, the U.S. Navy faces a limited traditional naval threat. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the Navy's focus has drifted from the traditional responsibilities of a blue-water navy.¹ It is not among the service's base responsibilities to conduct interdiction operations thousands of miles inland, yet it continues to do so in combating terrorism. With operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Navy must adapt to support the operations of its service counterparts and the mission at hand. With Navy special operations identified as an issue of concern, these forces would benefit tremendously from an aviation unit dedicated to their mission. Their requirements demand a special operations helicopter unit.

This proposed unit's focus would be to work solely with special operations, enabling highly qualified pilots to train with the teams and become proficient in mission-specific qualifications. Similar to the reserve Helicopter Sea Combat Squadron (HSC) -84 with extensive service in Iraq, the dedicated unit would be an active-duty expeditionary squadron.² With Helicopter Combat Support Squadron (HCS) -5 being dissolved, the reservists of HSC-84 now carry the full burden of supporting the Navy special ops mission.

The Need

Because of the increased level of helicopter casualties in combat operations, helicopter pilot training must re-

U.S. AIR FORCE (JACQUELINE KABLUYEN)

AN EMERGENT PLAYER Navy helo air dedicated to special operations is a force whose time has come. Will the Navy be a strong advocate?



semble combat operating conditions.³ Despite stringent qualification requirements for combat and special operations, Navy helicopter pilots need to be better prepared to deal with combat conditions outside typical mission responsibilities. As important as antisubmarine warfare and vertical replenishment operations are to overall Fleet support, special operations helicopter crews need specific training to address conditions found in their missions that allow little to no margin for error.

The Navy helicopter community is currently not structured to develop and maintain proficiency in low-level special operations missions requiring the use of night-vision goggles (NVG) over land. It takes several years of training to become skilled and proficient in this, and by the time a Navy pilot becomes qualified, he leaves the squadron. Army helicopter pilots are primarily warrant officers who fly in the same squadron for years. Many have more flight time with night vision devices than Navy helicopter pilots have total flight time.⁴ This further supports the Navy's need for such a dedicated unit.

While the likelihood of global conflict is greatly reduced, there is an increasing chance of regional conflict. The Navy's composition and operational posture reflects this, having changed from a blue-water to a littoral emphasis, and "Helo-air is helping to lead the Navy's transformation."⁵ Much of the fighting that the U.S. military will have to do in the foreseeable future will require special operations skills: quick reaction, night-vision capability, and low-level over-land flying. To accommodate this, the Navy must examine how to best employ and deploy its Sailors and equipment. Just as the submarine community adapted its traditional mission to include special operations support, the aviation community must shift as well, reflecting the changing needs of today's missions.

The Missing Link

Special operations missions demand close-knit units with the individuals working as one, each knowing what and when the others are doing their assignments. The assigned helicopter unit should be no less a full partner. An organic helicopter detachment trained and interoperable with SEALs and Special Warfare Combatant-Craft (SWCC) is the missing link in naval special warfare op-

erations.⁶ Just as traditional surface warfare officers do not drive the combatant craft, aviation crews working with special operations would be trained solely to support those teams.

To qualify, pilots should be at least level-three strike warfare qualified. Regardless if they are combat search-and-rescue or naval special warfare support, they must have at least experience as an aircraft commander. Selection for the proposed squadron should fall on a pilot's dissociated tour. Following selection, pilots would undergo a three- to four-month course modeled on the Army's 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment Green Platoon train-up program.⁷ Pilots would then report to the squadron and begin working with SEALs and combatant craft. Not only will helicopter crews add to their experience with mission critical hardware—especially the much needed low-level over-land NVG operations—but also with the teams. Knowledge and trust in each other's abilities that is built on this interaction contributes to overall mission readiness, morale, and effectiveness.

The squadron would support a wide range of aircraft but consist primarily of SH-60s and MH-53s, which by themselves provide a significant range of lift capability. The Air Force has proven the performance of the MH-53 through its extensive use of the Pave Low J/M versions in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁸

The SH-60 component should have the most capable airframes for their mission. The MH-60S combines the best of the proven design features of the Army's UH-60L Black Hawk and the naval variant SH-60B Seahawk. It merges the basic structure of the Black Hawk—which provides larger cabin volume and double-doors needed for cargo and passenger transport, enabling troops to embark and disembark quickly—with the Seahawk's T-700-GE-401C engines and hover-in-flight refueling and fuel dumping abilities.⁹ Its forward-looking infrared capability is one the Army doesn't have. With the added weapons capability of the S version, the Navy will have the ideal helicopter to fit the special warfare role.

A Question of Ownership

Significant concern swirls around the word "authority." Who would "own" the Navy's special operations helicopter detachment? Who would have the authority to commit them? The SEALs are controlled by the Special Operations Command (SOC) and the Navy helicopters in a theater are controlled by the Fleet. If the SEALs are working a SOC exercise or mission with a need for the Navy helicopters, but the Fleet commander also needs them—and they "belong" to him—they would be assigned to the Fleet mission. It wouldn't take too many occurrences such as this before the special ops commander uses only those assets he controls. The combat commanders in a theater, in this case a two-star in special ops and a three-star in the Fleet, normally request assets from each other only if absolutely necessary because such support is conditional.¹⁰

Operationally, the proposed unit would be under the control of the Navy Special Warfare Command with the air units detached to the teams and their missions as required. When working up and deploying, they would receive team assignments just as the SEAL Delivery Vehicle teams and Mark Vs are assigned with the SWCC teams.

help maintain the skeleton of the squadron while the unit is detached. Maintenance requires a fully staffed crew, also a part of the primary reserve backbone of the squadron. While reserve crewmembers and pilots could detach with active duty members as individual augmentees, their primary purpose is to provide the squadron's structure.

Pilots would fill the training roles when the squadron is detached, and instructor roles for incoming active duty pilots rotating in. The proposed squadron would be modeled after a Helicopter Sea Combat expeditionary squadron with a very large home guard. A ten-helicopter pool would enable a detachment of four and two aircraft each to be out simultaneously while the remaining four would be available for training. Detachments would be deployed as needed by the special operations commander.

Hand-in-hand with command and control over the proposed unit are funding issues. Special operations missions are SOCOM's responsibility, and it is funded to take charge of all logistics involved with



U.S. NAVY (DAVIS J. ANDERSON)

SUBSURFACE INTEGRATION Navy helicopter units work well with both surface and subsurface assets. Where Navy aircrews are deficient is in over-land operations. Here, an MH-60S Seahawk lowers a SEAL delivery vehicle team to the USS *Toledo* (SSN-769) during a training exercise.

This squadron would not be responsible for any traditional Fleet roles, and would report to the authority in charge of the special operations units in a region. Once in theater, the squadron would be responsible to the theater special operations commander and no one else, ensuring air support for the SOC teams on the ground.

The Navy needs to adapt to its changing mission role and dedicate the needed funds for this unit. The ideal location for the squadron's base is North Island in San Diego, allowing them to closely work with the SEAL and SWCC teams in Coronado.

The Navy would benefit from more SEAL and Marine Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC) support by having the organic tactical mobility rather being required to ask SOCOM for air assets or use helicopter squadrons that are not trained for special operations.

One Possible Solution

An ideal funding and unit reallocation would be to remove HCS-5 from its reserve role, reassign it as an active-duty unit, and commit it to serve as the dedicated squadron.¹¹ As such, HCS-5 would use individual augmentees, thus having the benefit of the experienced reservists to

their operations. Would the command help with funding the establishment of a naval special operations helicopter unit?

The answer is predictably no, as they most likely do not have extra money to dedicate to a support unit, especially with the Navy trying to streamline its expenses. Both SOCOM and the Navy must come to realize that the Navy's change in mission focus and the ever growing dependence on special operations, the proposed unit will benefit both. Some options to counter funding criticism include:

- Realize the need for change, and allocate the appropriate funds.
- Convert HCS-5 from its reserve role back to an active role as the dedicated squadron, following the expeditionary squadron model.
- Allow individual augmentees along with a corps of reservists to provide the skeleton staff in an active HCS-5.

Career Progression

Career track concerns cannot be taken lightly. Stepping off the track to pursue a specialized field raises the question as to whether or not it would hurt an in-

dividual's chance for promotion. Commitment to this specialized squadron cannot be lightly regarded as they will be flying critical air support missions for the Navy's special forces.

This squadron would have to be its own specialized community under Navy Special Warfare Command. Those assigned would receive a special warfare aviation designation rated as Special Warfare Air Operators. This would eliminate concerns about being a promotable junior officer against pilot peers, the exact dilemma that SEALs and combatant craft crewman once had to deal with before receiving their own ratings, Special Warfare Boat Operator and Special Warfare Operator.¹²

Options for personnel concerns include allowing crews to rotate in and out of the squadron on extended tours—two to three times as long as a traditional tour. On completion of their tour they can return to traditional missions or request an extension.

Mission Capacity

To validate the Navy special operations helicopter unit, their mission capacity must be defined taking into account the Navy's traditional blue-water mission, its green- and brown-water littoral missions, and over-land responsibilities. How will Navy units operating with special operations forces, primarily over land, continue to uphold the Navy's mission? How is this not the Army's responsibility? The bottom line is that the Navy must be capable of successfully supporting its own special operations units over both land and water.

There are only two options for mission capacity. The Navy can either adapt to the shift in mission focus, create the dedicated squadron, and enable them to fully benefit the Navy's special warfare community, or it can't and, therefore, fail to fully support its units and combat operations. (A command structure is in place to create this unit. Bases with the logistics capabilities to make this a reality exist on both coasts, at Norfolk and San Diego.)

Why Not the 160th?

The Night Stalkers, the Army's 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, provide aviation support for special operations teams.¹³ If SOCOM received additional aviation funding, an argument could be made to create additional units within the 160th. Why not the Navy? The service needs to demonstrate what it can bring to the table to earn inclusion.

Naval aviators have shipboard capabilities and flight over water time that are reason enough for the Navy to take care of their own business. Navy pilots rotating from a dedicated squadron back to traditional squadrons will be able to infuse some of their special operations flight knowledge and experience into the overall cadre. Eventually, this would create the potential for an air wing to have enough pilots with SOF specialization that it could take charge of an operation.

The proposed Navy helicopter unit would be dedicated to both black—top-secret level with extremely high profile missions—and white, secret-level teams. In addition to handling special operations assignments, the Navy pilots would maintain their search and rescue capabilities and qualifications.

Deployment is a major obstacle that has helped stymie the formation of such a unit. Mobile Navy helicopter special operations detachments with maintenance and support teams may be able to participate in SOF exercises throughout the theater during a deployment, but that would be expensive and require an agreement between SOCOM and the Navy. Without regular training during a deployment in theater, interoperability deteriorates as does readiness.

Some options for operational deployment include:

- Provide the assets necessary to deploy the aircraft and crews with the SEAL teams. If on a scheduled deployment, they would be able to have ample time to get the units and support crews overseas. If on a time-critical assignment, the available helicopters for rapid deployment would be limited, and the next option should be taken into consideration.

- Depending on the mission at hand and the teams' requirements, only aircrews on call (both pilots and crew members) and some of their maintenance support staff



BIG ROTORS The Air Force has proven the capabilities of the heavy-lift MH-53 Pave Low helicopter in combat operations. Here SEALs fast-rope from the large chopper during an exercise.

would be deployed with the team to the area of operation. They would claim the responsibility of the aircraft necessary for the mission from a helicopter unit already forward deployed in the region. While obvious tension lies with taking command of another unit's aircraft, the order must be passed down to the "lending" squadrons from the Fleet or type commander. This situation would only be executed in high profile/no existing alternative critical missions.



NOT ENOUGH PRACTICE Current Navy training requirements in the use of night-vision goggles are adequate for over-water flying but not for the intense low-level over-land demands of special operations.

- A variant of this is that assuming that the "lending" unit will more than likely select their least maintained/ready aircraft to loan, there should be a Fleet-wide order requiring that every squadron maintain one aircraft to a certain level of readiness for a possible operational assignment.

Negate the Negative

Much criticism—based on mission capacity, funding, the Navy helicopter community's ability to maintain proficiency in NVG over-land special operations missions, interoperability, ownership of the detachment, and operational deployment—is directed at the proposal of a dedicated helicopter squadron for Navy special operations. All this can be positively addressed.

In the interim, the Navy should take steps to provide its helicopter crews the opportunity to train with naval special warfare. While it may not require a full helicopter squadron to deploy with NSW, a detachment (two helicopters, three crews) within a squadron for each theater could be so designated. The special operations detachment would be given work-up and readiness requirements to train with deploying NSW squadrons. It would conduct special operations training instead of logistics, ASW, ASUW, or other standard helicopter war fighting skills during work-up. Squadrons that have taken the initiative to detach themselves from the air wing to go ashore have already carried out this practice and support operations on the ground.¹⁴ The main requirement would be NVG over-land time, in addition to the helicopter being outfitted with specialized equipment. The helicopters and the crews of the dedicated squadron would be available to augment traditional Navy missions, although they may not be fully trained in them. The authority would be under SOCOM best suiting the needs of the Navy.

The U.S. military will continue to require strong special operations support and the Navy must adapt to this combat environment. A dedicated Navy helicopter squadron will enable both SOCOM and the Navy to successfully fulfill their mission roles and overcome the challenges they may face in the future. ✪

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