


[News](#)
[Sports](#)
[Commander](#)
[Announcements](#)
[Around Andrews](#)
[Commentary](#)
[Chapel Services](#)
[Weather](#)
[Search Stories](#)

1 HS celebrates 50 years of AF operations in D.C. area

Margo Turner

A helicopter unit has been located on Andrews since August 1955, although the name of the unit has changed three times. The mission has remained the same: providing special airlift to key government officials and medical evacuation as well as supporting classified operations.

First known as the 1401st Flight and later the 1001st Helicopter Flight during the mid-1950s, the unit became the 1st Helicopter Squadron in 1969 and is the only helicopter squadron in the Air Mobility Command.

Members of the 1 HS are celebrating 50 years of Air Force helicopter operations in the National Capital region today. An open house will be held from noon to 4:30 p.m. in Hangar 1.

The utility of the helicopter to land in austere locations throughout Washington metropolitan area makes the 1 HS's capability vital today, said Lt. Col. Timothy J. O'Brien, 1 HS commander.

"We are the largest operational helicopter squadron in terms of the number of helicopters assigned," said Colonel O'Brien. "We are quite small as far as the number of personnel assigned. This is because a normal aircrew consists of only two personnel."

Colonel O'Brien said Space Command has the majority of the 61 UH-1Ns in the Air Force. Most Air Force helicopters are assigned to Special Operations Command and support special operations or combat rescue missions worldwide.

Flying exclusively in the Washington, D.C., area, and flying the vast majority of its missions during daylight hours have contributed to the 1 HS' 217,000 hour-accident-free record, said Colonel O'Brien.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF 1ST HELICOPTER SQUADRON

The 1st Helicopter Squadron used the Sikorsky CH-3E "Jolly Green Giant" aircraft from 1970 to 1988 for its airlift missions, such as transporting the nation's dignitaries.

"We have not had a major mishap with a squadron aircraft since 1957," he said. "The tremendous operations/maintenance team relationship is directly responsible for this achievement. Though we now have DynCorp contract maintenance personnel, the esprit de corps and 'can-do' attitude is the same."

The squadron has a mission capable rate near 87 percent - the standard is 79.7 percent. Last month, it received a 93 percent rate. This is an amazing feat considering the aircraft are 36 years old, said Colonel O'Brien.

The 1 HS continues what the 1401st Helicopter Flight started: providing safe, reliable transportation for the nation's dignitaries.

The 1401st Helicopter Flight was established Aug. 5, 1955, here. The unit operated under the direction of the Military Air Transport Service and was manned by 12 officers and 18 Airmen. It was equipped with two Piaseki/Boeing-Vertol CH-21s and four Sikorsky H-19 aircraft.

Washington, D.C., officials decided in 1957 the President needed the same type of specialized care. Under the 1254th Air Transport Group, MATS established a new helicopter operation at Washington National Airport. Two Bell UH-13J aircraft and the four Sikorsky H-19 aircraft from the 1401st were assigned to the MATS unit. On July 12, 1957, two Bell UH-13Js landed on the White House lawn. President Dwight D. Eisenhower and his staff boarded the helicopter. This marked the first helicopter flight by a President of the United States. The UH-13J carried out this mission until 1962.

Meanwhile, the 1401st Air Base Wing was reorganizing. The 1401st became the 1001st Helicopter Flight and became a part of Washington, D.C., aviation history.

In the fall of 1958, a major snowfall blanketed Washington, D.C., and the surrounding area. The 1001st used its seven CH-21 aircraft for numerous medical evacuation and food transportation flights. The unit provided critical assistance to many rural areas of Maryland and Virginia.

The 1001st was transferred from Andrews to Bolling Air Force Base, Washington, D.C., in August 1961. The unit was assigned four additional CH-21s in March 1962 and integrated the two presidential UH-13Js into its fleet following deactivation of the Presidential Helicopter Flight. The 1001st personnel grew to 20 officers and 77 Airmen, and the unit became the 1001st Helicopter Squadron under the control of Headquarters Command USAF. The following spring, the unit received the first of many accolades: the Air Force Flying Safety Award for 10,000 accident-free flying hours.

The 1001st HS received its first turbine-powered aircraft, the Bell UH-1F "Huey," in February 1967. The Secretary of the Air Force, Dr. Harold Brown, was the first passenger carried in this aircraft. Later that year, the unit received its first Outstanding Unit Award. Two of the unit's UH-13Js were retired. One was sent to the Air Force Museum at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, while the other was donated to the Smithsonian in Washington,

D.C.

On July 1, 1969, the 1001st became the 1st Helicopter Squadron. In August 1970, the 1402 Test Squadron from Dover Air Force Base, Del., was integrated into the 1 HS and brought along its Sikorsky CH-3E "Jolly Green Giant" aircraft. Numerous changes continued over the next year. The UH-1Fs were transferred. The CH-21s were retired. The unit received six more Bell UH-1N "Twin Huey" helicopters in April 1971.

The 1 HS earned its fourth Flying Safety Award in September 1975. The following summer, the unit moved under the control of the 89th Military Airlift Wing.

During the 1980s, the 1 HS' personnel increased to 34 officers and 116 enlisted Airmen while the unit continued to maintain one of the safest and most professional flying operations in the world. On Sept. 30, 1980, the 1 HS surpassed the 100,000 accident-free flying hours mark. It received the Military Aircraft Command's 25-Year Flying Safety Award in June 1983.

The 1 HS entered the 1990s originally equipped with 21 UH-1N helicopters. In 1991, the unit reached its 150,000th accident-free flying hour. Four years later, it won the AMC Maintenance Effectiveness Award. The unit reached another milestone in March 2001--its 200,000th accident-free flying hour.

The men and women of the 1st Helicopter Squadron always strive to remain "First and Foremost," the unit's motto.

"We stand ready to support the National Capital Region 'any time, any place,'" said Colonel O'Brien.

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