

Maj Fleek and Crew



GOOD SHOW

Left to right: TSgt Emory L. Craig, pole operator; SSgt Sidney N. Green, winch operator; Sgt Dan Adams, photographer; Maj Thomas R. Gainer, copilot; and Maj Bluford B. Fleek, pilot. Not pictured: Thomas E. Grey, civilian tech rep.

What began as a routine Mid-air Retrieval System (MARS) mission on March 14 turned into a harrowing experience for Maj Bluford B. Fleek and his CH-3 crew.

Maj Fleek's helicopter was descending at 1,000 feet per minute, positioning for a hookup with a drone 15 miles from shore over the Gulf of Mexico. Normally, the Jolly Green hooks the drone at about 10,000 feet after the drone's main chute has fully blossomed. The hookup is accomplished through the use of two poles rigged to the back of the helicopter. A rope and cable rig is attached in a manner which allows it to catch an engagement chute. The tug on the line releases the main chute and deploys a stabilization chute which starts the cable reeling out of the preprogrammed winch.

In this instance, however, the Jolly Green caught the drone but the stabilization chute failed to open. The drone, without a stabilization chute to steady it, began oscillating below the helicopter. At one point it swung up ahead of the chopper.

Quickly implementing emergency procedures, the crew pulled the drone to within 75 feet of the aircraft with the winch. Here it began gyrating in a wild series of figure eights, swinging from side to side. Deciding not to jettison the half million dollar drone, Maj Fleek radioed Tyndall AFB to have the aerodrome officer (AO) position himself and his radio controlled truck near a grassy recovery area between two runways.

After bringing his helicopter and its load back to the field, Maj Fleek established a hover at an altitude of 500 feet. Slowly descending the helicopter, he lowered the drone to the ground, using the AO's transmissions as guidance. What had been a tense flight once again became routine after the drone settled softly to the ground.

The quick analysis and skillful actions by Maj Fleek and his crew prevented possible aircraft damage and saved a valuable aerospace drone.

For your professional action, THE MAC FLYER says "Good Show," Maj Fleek and crew.