



## A valley ruled by Giants; looking back 20 years at unit history

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3/9/2009 - **DAVIS-MONTHAN AIR FORCE BASE, Ariz.** -- Twenty years ago at the 943rd Rescue Group's reservists worked in the "Valley of the Giants." Here on the flight line, six Jolly Green Giant helicopters call-sign Pony resided on the flight line. These giants, towered more than 18 feet tall, stretched 73 feet, and more than 15 feet wide awaited the call of the 71st Special Operations Squadron.

When called, these Ponies, two CH-3Es and four HH-3Es helicopters, weighed more than 22,000 (max) pounds equipped with hoist (HH-3Es) and two 50 cal machine guns used two General Electric T58-GE5 turbo shaft engines to soar to altitudes of up to 21,000 feet to traverse terrain where angels feared to tread.

Most of these helicopters were Vietnam Veterans many flying with the 20th Helicopter Squadron and the 21st Special Operations Squadron in Southeast Asia supporting Operation Pony Express before entering the Air Force Reserve fleet. According to Senior Master Sgt. Henry Shaw, 943rd Maintenance Squadron, supporting this operation is how they got their call sign that is still used today with our HH-60 Pavehawk helicopters.

We didn't know it then, but soon four of the unit's Ponies (HH-3Es) would soon become Operation Desert Storm Veterans too when the unit deployed to support Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm in Southwest Asia in 1990 to 1991.

The most famous Pony and Vietnam Vet was the "Black Maria" (pronounced muh-Rye-uh) Identified in official documents by its tail number 63-09676, she was built by Sikorsky Aircraft in 1963. She led a charmed life surviving 107 bullet hits and remaining ready for duty.

In 1989, the Tucson Citizen wrote an article about the "Black Maria" where Lt. Col. Lester E. "Ed" Smith, Air Force Reserve pilot from the 302nd Special Operations Squadron, Luke Air Force Base Ariz. recalled flying the Black Maria with the 20th Helicopter Squadron in Southeast Asia from 1966 to 1967.

"I was one of the extremely fortunate ones," Lt. Col. Smith said. "I got shot at, but was never in an aircraft that actually took a round through it."

"One mission, I was sitting in another helicopter on the ground as backup while 676 was delivering troops to a battle zone. We were listening to the whole thing on the radio," he said.

"Black Maria" took at least three hits on that mission. One of the rounds went through the structural mount of the 'green house' (referring to the plastic canopy that covers the pilots' compartment. It blew the "green house" out. Had the pilot been taller, he would have been hit.

"A second bullet severed an electric cable that parallels the shaft controlling the tail rotor, Lt. Col. Smith added. "It was within an inch or so of taking out the whole tail rotor system--and that would have put them in an uncontrollable situation. It was just one of those fluke situations."

"Yes another round penetrated one of the main rotor blades," he continued. "Punching a 2-inch hole through it, it missed the spar (a critical area of the blade) by three inches."

"When that thing came back over, you could hear it coming from about 10 miles away. It sounded like a shotgun going off every time that blade went around--Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!" he laughed at the memory.

Lt. Col. Smith said, "The overall mission was pretty much like the current Special Operations mission--getting guys in to wherever--infiltration and getting them back out." Although she was charmed, the Black Maria could not have continued her duty without the help of skilled



A 71st SOS HH-3E Jolly Green Giant helicopter hoists a reservist during a training mission in the Southern Arizona desert in the late 1980s. (Courtesy photo)

aircraft mechanics. Tech Sgt Henry Shaw, 943 rd MXS, now Senior Master Sgt., and Tech. Sgt. Doug Lesho now retired Senior Master Sgt. working for NASA as an Occupational Safety and Health Specialist, after working Quality Assurance on the space shuttle Orbiter, were the last crew chiefs for the Black Maria's before she was delivered to the U.S. Air Force Museum at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio in 1991. Sergeant Lesho believed the Black Maria to be one of the most reliable CH-3E helicopters as her record shows.

"Being her crew chief was one of the greatest honors of my Air Force days, said SMSgt Lesho. "Of the handful of helicopters I had the pleasure to crew, 676 was the most special to me. I was assigned as crew chief following then-TSgt Henry Shaw. To be promoted, and assigned as crew chief to the Black Maria, was really a dream come true. I treated her like she was my own."

"The CH-3E has a very special place in my heart, as does the 71st SOS and 305th RQS," he added. "Basically, I feel like I grew up with the CH-3E and the unit. I know I always thought the grass would be greener somewhere else, and complained at times... but looking back I have a very fond nostalgic feelings."

SMSgt Lesho was with the unit for 10 years. He was the crew chief for the Black Maria, and the HH-3E 67-14724 that was transferred to the Tunisian Air Force along with the three other unit HH-3Es helicopters. MSgt Chuck Ruth was main person for the Peace Jolly Project that transferred these helicopters to Tunisia from 1992 to 1995. When the unit transitioned to Rescue and the HH-60 Pavehawk in 1994, he briefly crewed 229 before being promoted to QA Chief. Also while assigned to the unit he participated in Operations Desert Shield, Desert Storm, Provide Comfort, Northern Watch, Patriot Amigo, and Patriot Cabillito as well as many TDYs to San Diego for water work.

For the unit, the saddest day with the Jolly Green Giants was March 12, 1989 when a Giant fell from a clear moonless sky during a nighttime joint training mission. Fifteen souls were lost that Sunday night. Four aircrew from the 71st Special Operations to include the unit's commander and 11 Special Forces soldiers from 5th Special Operations Group, Fort Bragg, NC perished when Pony 1-2 CH-3E 65-15692 helicopter went down in the an uninhabited desert 20 miles Northwest of Tucson.

To honor these men who "gave all" in the service of their country, CH-3E 65-12799 Jolly Green Giant helicopter was sent to the unit from the 33rd Air Rescue and Recovery Squadron, Kadena Air Force Base, Okinawa in pieces by the truck loads and reassembled by reservists who volunteered their time to construct the Pony 1-2 memorial static display at the Davis-Monthan Heritage Park. The memorial is a replica of 692 and stands to memorialize these 15 brave men's service and sacrifice for our nation's defense

The unit held a dedication service and has held memorial services every five years since then.

The group will assemble March 8, 2009 in front of this Jolly Green Giant static display to honor the crew and passengers of Pony 1-2, to instill our unit heritage and uphold our promise to never forget.

There are still unit members who were here 20 years ago. Mr. Dan Stutsman, Maj. Michael Williams Senior Master Sgt Henry Shaw, Master Sgt. Chuck Ruth, Master Sgt. Tom Morris, Master Sgt. Howard Smith, MSgt Lori Milner, and Tech. Sgt. Joy Hall, just to name a few. They can tell you what it was like to walk through the "Valley of the Giants."