



From the collection of R.J. Copin

An Historical Transition

Until the moment recorded in this image, Coast Guard property at Albert Whitted Airfield in St. Petersburg, Florida had been the home of a Coast Guard air station for more than four decades. CG Air Station St. Petersburg was established at this site on March 1, 1935. This photograph, taken on September 14, 1976 records the transition of responsibility for the property from Captain Raymond J. Copin, USCG, Aviator 744, Commanding Officer, CGAS St. Petersburg, (orange flight suit) to Lieutenant Commander Joseph Finelli, USCG, Commander, Group St. Petersburg. This exchange occurred a few minutes past 0800 local time following morning colors. The circumstances were as follows.

Over the years, many different airframes, fixed and rotary wing, had been assigned to the air station, and in 1976 the unit operated exclusively four Sikorsky HH-3F "Pelican" helicopters. The Coast Guard, wishing to assign Lockheed HC-130B "Hercules" aircraft in the area and to the air station, had acquired and begun improvements to a facility at St. Petersburg-Clearwater Airport, a few miles distant where both rotary wing and long range fixed wing aircraft could be operated. The existing air station and airfield were not adequate. By the summer of 1976, with the new facility nearing sufficient development, orders were issued to relocate the air station when the air station command determined a Bravo Zero status could be maintained without interruption. In preparation for the move, equipment, parts, tools, supplies, etc. were transported to the new unit according to plan. The four helicopters, HH-3F's 1469, 1476, 1484 and 1487 were preflighted early on the morning of September 14 to be flown together to their new base.

Prior to traditional morning colors, four HH-3F crews led by Captain Copin mustered near the air station flag pole along with a Group contingent led by LCDR Finelli. Immediately following colors, the National Ensign was replaced, and the first flag was folded and presented to Captain Copin. The Captain and LCDR then exchanged salutes, and LCDR Finelli verbally accepted custody of the property which became Group headquarters.

Captain Copin and the four crews then marched to their assigned helicopters. Coordinating by radio, engines were started and rotors were engaged simultaneously. 1469, piloted by Captain Copin, led the flight of four to a runway where all lifted simultaneously, joined up in the climb, and flew toward the new unit after a pass around and over the city. As the formation approached the new facility, a few seconds before passing overhead for landing, a SAR call was received by radio. The first three helicopters broke right for landing as "tail end Charlie," ready helo, broke left to assist a distressed fishing vessel. Thus, the first Search and Rescue response was recorded by CGAS Clearwater (which for a time was known as CGAS St. Petersburg-Clearwater). Meanwhile, after the other three HH-3F's landed, the flag earlier raised, struck and folded, was hoisted on a new flag pole at the newly established CG air station. Formal commissioning ceremonies were conducted on October 29, 1976 with the Commandant of the Coast Guard, Admiral Owen Siler, and Congressman C.W. Bill Young participants.