

## **Coast Guard Helicopter Interdiction Tactical Squadron (HITRON-Jacksonville)**

by

LT Craig Neubecker, USCG



**Agusta MH-68A**

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***NOTE:** This article was first published in 2004. It was written by a plank-owner of HITRON and therefore is an important look at the early origins of the squadron which is why it is included on the Historian's Office website as it was first published--verbatim.*

*Please note that the squadron, its equipment and its operations have evolved considerably since the article was published and the facts stated here may not apply to current operations or conditions.*

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*HITRON Mission Statement: To provide the personnel, training, and resources necessary to employ Airborne Use of Force tactics in support of counter drug operations and Homeland Security to protect the United States against possible terrorist attacks.*

**HITRON Motto: Force From Above**

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The United States Coast Guard's Helicopter Interdiction Tactical Squadron (HITRON) Jacksonville, Florida is America's first and only airborne law enforcement unit trained and authorized to employ Airborne Use of Force or AUF. Initially tasked with interdicting and stopping suspected drug-laden, high-speed vessels known as 'go-fasts,' HITRON has expanded their mission to include Homeland Security, and now staunchly patrols the front lines of America's war on drugs and terrorism, flying specially equipped MH-68A **(previous photo, above)** helicopters. These aircraft employ the latest radar and Forward Looking Infrared sensors as well as state of the art Night Vision Goggles to pierce the night. HITRON arms these helicopters with M-16 5.56mm rifles and M240 7.62mm machine guns for warning shots and self-protection, and the RC50 laser-sighted .50 caliber precision rifle to disable the engines of non-compliant suspect vessels. The MH-68A's are the newest helicopters in the U.S. military, and are capable of cruise speeds of 140 knots. The MH-68A does not yet have an official nickname, but is referred to as the "Shark" by HITRON aircrews.



**MD900**

In 1998, the Coast Guard estimated that it was stopping less than ten percent of the drugs entering the United States via the sea. Spurred by these estimates, Admiral James Loy, the then Commandant, directed the Coast Guard to develop a plan to counter the go-fast threat. This gave rise to the Helicopter Interdiction Tactical Squadron, which was led by Commander Mark 'Roscoe' Torres. Starting in late 1998, he molded a group of ten original volunteers into a cohesive and effective team, and in just seven short months took ideas to reality as the squadron pioneered novel operating tactics and procedures and implemented the Commandant's decision to stop the drug laden go-fasts. The team flew leased MD900 helicopters (above).

During this early proof of concept phase, HITRON intercepted and stopped all five go-fasts they encountered, stopping 2,640 pounds of cocaine, and 7,000 pounds of marijuana with a street value of over \$100 million, with all 17 suspects arrested. This five for five success rate represented a dramatic increase in go-fast seizures, and resulted in a cultural change for Coast Guard aviation and set the stage for enhanced future maritime drug interdiction efforts. Due to their success during the test and evaluation stage, the HITRON

program was validated and designated a permanent Coast Guard unit.



HITRON grew to 40 personnel to halt the rising tide of go-fast drug smugglers, and a requirement for eight helicopters was determined necessary to meet the cutter deployment cycles. Due to Federal contracting laws, a competitive bid was necessary to choose a permanent aircraft for the mission, and the proposal from Agusta Aircraft Corporation was selected as it represented the best value. Therefore, in March 2000, Agusta was awarded the contract to provide eight A109E Power helicopters to replace the MD900 Enforcer helicopters that HITRON had been successfully flying. The Agusta A109E Power (**photo, above left**) was given the military designation MH-68A. Selection

of this new helicopter, forced HITRON to face many new challenges as they transformed another untested civilian helicopter into a proven, armed shipboard deployable aircraft.

To make the aircraft shipboard compatible, several joint Coast Guard and U.S. Navy efforts were required. Initial delivery of all eight aircraft was delayed by the manufacturer, but once delivered, the U.S. Navy completed electromagnetic interference certification testing, and U.S. Navy test pilots established shipboard pitch and roll limitations. In addition, the M240 7.62mm machine gun weapon system, and the RC50 .50 caliber laser-sighted rifle was field fired and certified for aerial use by the U.S. Navy Surface Warfare Center. HITRON pilots then quickly validated day and night mission tactics, formation flying, performed takeoffs and landings from the cutter and created initial flight training and aerial gunnery training syllabi to qualify the pilots and

aircrew in the MH-68A. Other shipboard related procedures such as removing the blades, traversing the aircraft into the cutter's hangar bay, and maintaining the aircraft in a salt-water environment were also addressed and successfully accomplished.



**Petty Officer 1st Class Mike Stenberg aims a .50 caliber precision rifle at the 42-tactical training boat. The precision rifle is used by the aviation gunner to disable a go-fast's engines; 11 June 2002; photo by PA1 Scott Carr.**

The squadron also pioneered the use of Night Vision Goggles (NVGs) for night shipboard landings; a first for the Coast Guard, a standard now being adopted Coast Guard wide. The unit also assisted in the evaluation of the latest generation of the ANVIS-9 Night Vision Goggles integrated with the ANVIS-7 heads-up display (HUD) system, and were the first users in the world to operate the latest generation of these night vision devices.



**LT Craig Neubecker, HITRON-10 [HITRON-Jacksonville] Aviation Mission Commander, meets with President George H.W. Bush and former First Lady Barbara Bush. President Bush wanted to thank the Coast Guard crew for their help in the homeland defense of the country and their efforts to fight the war on drugs; 29 December 2002.**

For counter drug operations, HITRON aircrews forward deploy aboard Coast Guard cutters for 30-60 day deployments, and aircrews are typically deployed about 120 days a year total. While on deployment, the go-fasts are hunted not only by the MH-68A but also by maritime patrol aircraft (MPA) such as the Coast Guard HC-130H Hercules. If an MPA locates a go-fast, the HITRON crew launches from the cutter and proceeds to the go-fast intercept location. The crew then approaches the suspect vessel with weapons trained on the vessel solely for self-protection. Once over the suspect vessel, the helicopter crew confirms the nationality or lack of nation status and whether the vessel is in fact a suspect smuggling vessel. The aircrew will then attempt to convince the boat crew to stop through the use of sirens, loud speakers, visual hand signals, and radio communications in both English and Spanish. If the vessel stops during this phase, it is boarded and searched by the cutter's boat crew who accompany the chase in an Over-the-Horizon pursuit boat.



If the vessel is found to be carrying drugs, the cutter crew will take appropriate law enforcement actions. If the suspect vessel fails to stop after these numerous visual and verbal warnings, the helicopter crew will take up a firing position alongside the go-fast and fire warning shots across their bow to further compel them to stop. If the warning shots do not convince the suspects to stop, the helicopter crew prepares to disable the vessel by shooting out the go-fast's engines. Using precision, laser-sighted .50 caliber rifles, the helicopter crew positions themselves alongside the fleeing go-fast for disabling shots. Most of the go-fasts have multiple engines, and the helo crew will continue to fire into these engines until the suspects stop or they are forced to stop. Once stopped, the vessel will be boarded by the Coast Guard pursuit boat crew and the smugglers taken into custody.



**The cutter *Mohawk* participates in routine training along the Atlantic coastline with HITRON-10's [now HITRON-Jacksonville] MH-68 Shark helicopter. During the test and evaluation stage of this program, HITRON-10 intercepted and stopped every go-fast encountered; 2 July 2002; photo by PA3 Dana Warr.**

Since switching to the MH-68A, HITRON has interdicted additional go-fasts carrying over a billion and a half dollars in illegal drugs. HITRON is based at Cecil Field in Jacksonville, Florida, and is the only unit of its kind in the United States military flying armed helicopters to fight the war on drugs. HITRON grew to over 70 personnel to meet the growing threat to our country. The war on drugs has become even more important since September 11, 2001 as the sale of illegal drugs has been shown to be a major funding source employed by many terrorist organizations. Therefore stopping illegal drugs not only protects our country directly by preventing the drugs from making it to our streets, but also protects our country indirectly by removing a source of income from terrorists. To date, HITRON has successfully stopped every go-fast boat they have engaged since employing armed helicopters.



**An MH-68A HITRON helicopter patrols over the skyline of the city of New Orleans and the cutter *Dauntless*, all part of the evolving mission of the HITRON squadron, which is an integral part of the nation's war against terrorism; 25 April 2003; photo by PA3 Kyle Niemi.**

Due to HITRON's unique capabilities and training, the unit was tasked to develop Airborne Use of Force tactics to counter possible terrorist threats to the United States-another first for the Coast Guard. HITRON now stands poised to defend our shores and fulfill the Coast Guard's motto of *Semper Paratus*-"Always Ready." HITRON's actions have stopped tons and tons of illegal drugs worth over a billion dollars from reaching America's neighborhoods and in doing so, contributed greatly to the Homeland security of the United States. Since September 11, 2001 the war on drugs has taken on new importance, and HITRON will continue to be at the forefront of our Nation's war on drugs and with the new Homeland Security mission, will also fight the war on terrorism to protect our great country's shores.



**The Agusta MH-68A.**

