

Wednesday, August 8, 2018

Naval Station Norfolk's Silent Sea Stallion

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Weighing in at 11.5 tons, the RH-53D, shown here with the memorial to the men killed aboard a similar aircraft on June 19, 1992, is the heaviest aircraft at Ely Memorial Park. (M.C. Farrington)

Ely Memorial Park, close by Gate Four of Naval Station Norfolk, on the part of the facility formerly known as Naval Air Station (NAS) Norfolk, features static displays of various aircraft. One in particular, an RH-53D Sea Stallion, serves in part as a memorial to the "Norsemen" of Helicopter Mine Countermeasures Squadron 18 who were lost in the most deadly peacetime aviation mishap of its kind in the Tidewater, Virginia area.^[1] It is a poignant reminder of the risks inherent in all aviation operations and the selfless devotion of those who fly

U.S. Navy aircraft. It also reminds us of an event that, although tragic, was one from which those who remain can find strength to prevail over adversity.



An RH-43D flies over Chesapeake Bay in December 1981.

(Photographer's Mate 1st Class Gregory D. Toon/ RG330, National Archives)

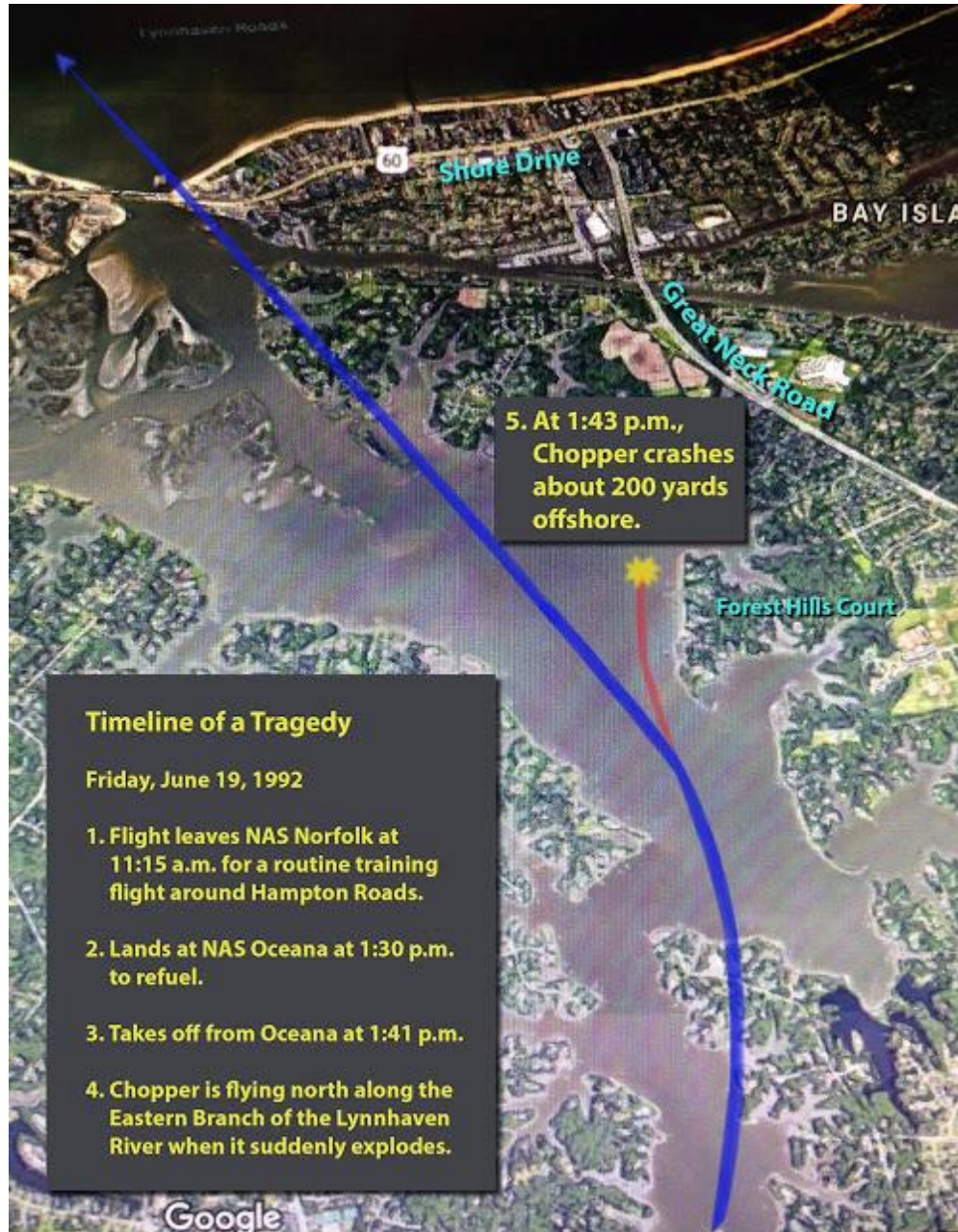
In the early afternoon of Friday, June 19, 1992, an RH-53D (Bureau Number 158687) of Helicopter Mine Countermeasures

Squadron Eighteen (HM-18), assigned administratively to Naval Air Reserve Norfolk, refueled at Naval Air Station Oceana and departed, enroute along a charted waterway to its home station at NAS Norfolk. About five minutes into the flight, it exploded in midair and crashed into the Lynnhaven River, not far from the Broad Bay Country Club Golf Course.

Bob Dagenhart and his friend Earl Wallace were on the 11th green and had observed the aircraft which was travelling at 170 knots for about 10 seconds before the crash. As Dagenhart recalled it at the time, his first concern was for the welfare of the crew. "It was an awful tragic event that made me sick to see it." A club groundskeeper, John McConnell stated that he saw two clouds of smoke and two large parts, "fly to the right and to the left." ii[2]

1Some who looked on, horrified, stated that the eleven-ton aircraft was in straight and level flight, while others felt that it flew in a somewhat "banked attitude." All recall that it was suddenly engulfed by two bursts of smoke, and a core of orange fire. It fell slowly and inexorably into the shallow Lynnhaven River with seven men trapped inside. It was a horrifying spectacle, even though residents of the affluent Forest Hills neighborhood of the Great Neck area of Virginia Beach and others in Hampton Roads for the most part accepted the hazards of living in the vicinity of aviation operations. For example, Paul C. Lynch, who lived close by the end of the runway at Naval Air Station Norfolk, "never even gave it a thought." Others were not as certain. Linda De Laura who lived on River Road about a quarter mile from the crash site, opined that she always had a feeling that something like that loss was going to happen. Don F. Price, who lived on East Evans Road in Virginia Beach near

11 Naval Air Station Oceana, noted that “it crosses everyone’s mind, but until something happens, you don’t realize the potential impact.”iii[3]



The area where a Sikorsky RH-53D Sea Stallion belonging to Helicopter Mine Countermeasures Squadron 18, based at Naval Air Station Norfolk, crashed on June 19, 1992. (Google Maps)

In the moments after the mishap, efforts focused on the most important task at hand: rescuing the crew trapped in the aircraft,

a task that quickly and unhappily became a recovery effort. A nearby resident had called 911 as she saw the magnitude of the event and within a short time, a Virginia Beach Police Department rescue boat was on scene, as were volunteer divers. Rescue/recovery efforts were hindered by the murky waters. One diver, Steven Kennedy, reported that he “searched for bodies by feel,” while another, Robert Helfant, reported that he did not look at the corpses but steeled himself for completing the task at hand, as he had done in other similar situations. By 5:30 that afternoon, five bodies had been recovered, examined by the local medical examiner and taken to the Portsmouth Naval Hospital. They were subsequently identified as Lieutenant Commander Greg Bingeman, Lieutenant Ken Steen, Chief Aviation Structural Mechanic (Equipment) David Romesburg, Chief Aviation Administrationman Randy Vandiver, and Aviation Structural Mechanic (Hydraulic) Stacey Mills. Meanwhile, members of Mobile Diving and Salvage Unit Two (MDSU TWO) from Amphibious Base Little Creek had begun to raise one portion of the lost aircraft.^{iv}[4] The body of Aviation Structural Mechanic (Structural) 1st Class David J. Redland was located on June 21 and the last victim recovered, Airman Randy J. Hopkins of Virginia Beach, was located and identified the following day.

After the loss of the aircraft, various opinions emerged about the cause of the sudden explosion. In one article, the author stated that the H-53 series aircraft had a poor safety record and had been intermittently grounded since its introduction to the fleet in 1964. However, he stated “there has not been a specific problem with the RH-53D aircraft involved in the June 19, 1992 crash.” Furthermore, though pilots in the Norfolk area were urged not to

fly the H-53 during the weekend of the 20th and 21st of June, the entire fleet of RH-53D aircraft *was not immediately grounded*. (emphasis added). The article was inconclusive with respect to the cause of the accident and raised extraneous matters that might or might not have been related to it. Among these were rotor and transmission failures in the H-53E model. Other matters such as hydraulic failures in some of the H-53D aircraft involved in the April 1980 failed attempt to rescue hostages taken at the American Embassy in Tehran and the 1987 Navy direction to the manufacturer to review the H-53E model for design flaws were noted.v[5] That direction was given to mollify congressional critics who had demanded that the entire H-53 fleet be grounded. The article was, as noted, uncertain and recited statements of unnamed U.S. Navy officers that midair explosions of this kind were “rare.”vi[6]



In April 1980, crewmen aboard USS *Nimitz* (CVN 68) watch as two unmarked RH-53 Sea Stallions are brought up from the hangar deck in preparation for Operation Evening Light, a mission to rescue American embassy personnel being held hostage in Tehran, Iran. (RG 330/*National Archives and Records Administration*)

Shortly after the accident, Commander Steve Honda, a spokesman for Commander Naval Air Force Atlantic Fleet briefed the press. Among other things, he declined to speculate on the cause of the accident. He maintained that there were no indications of what had caused it. Two and a half large cardboard boxes of debris had been recovered and that teams from MDSU TWO, squadron personnel and staff at the Naval Safety Center would continue to collect data for another four to five days. He predicted that it would take several months to determine the cause of the accident and noted that it would focus on the helicopter's "rotor blades, transmission assembly and other key parts."^{vii}[7] As Commander Honda noted, an

investigation which itself generated controversy, was conducted. By April 2, 1993, 285 days after the accident, no report had been issued.

By that time, relatives and friends of those lost began the planning effort to erect a monument to them. Periodically, survivors had visited a wooded area near the crash site on significant dates such as wedding anniversaries and anniversaries of the crash. A kind neighbor had let them use a back deck nearby to look out over the area where the aircraft had gone down. It was, according to Fay Romesburg, widow of Chief Petty Officer David Romesburg, “a serene place.” It is now the site of a lovely monument that supplements the static display in Ely Memorial Parkviii[8] A gift from a retired World War Two Naval Aviator helped pay for the monument and the widows of Lieutenant Ken Steen and Chief Romesburg were key figures in the fundraising effort.



(Photo by Alexander Monroe)

Nearly two years elapsed while relatives of the victims awaited a report of the cause of the accident, fomenting frustration. On March 14, 1994, Fay Romesburg sought the assistance of Congressman Owen Pickett in securing a Congressional investigation of all aspects of the accident. She stated then and later among other things that materials generated by the crash

had been lost, making it difficult if not impossible to determine the exact cause of the mishap. She also alleged that the delay was related to the fact that it was only two months from the date at which the two-year statute of limitations would preclude legal action to recover compensation for the losses sustained by relatives of the crash victims. A related aspect was that, because of the Doctrine of Sovereign Immunity, only the manufacturer of the Sea Stallion could be successfully sued. Most importantly, Romesburg said that “there is no healing until you have answers.”



A monument to the seven men killed in the crash of their RH-43D helicopter in the Eastern Branch of the Lynnhaven River on June 19, 1992. *(Photo by Alexander Monroe)*

The Navy released its report of the crash on May 18, 1994.ix[9] It attributed it to the cracking of a pitch control horn in the main overhead rotor and that and a defective “unsilvered” nut might have played a role in the mishap. The report did not specify where the nut had been manufactured, stating that it could have been at naval depots at North Island, California, or Pensacola, Florida. Other matters reflecting a lack of attention to administrative detail emerged. For example, parts of the investigative report completed in November, 1992, were lost in April, 1993 in transmittal to the Office of the Judge Advocate General of the Navy for final endorsement. It was also reported that a month after the crash that the entire H-53 Fleet was grounded. During this stand down, 40 of 200 “spindle” nuts used in an associated part of the rotor assembly were found to lack silver plating, which could cause them to slip under the stresses of flight. In addition, two other aircraft were discovered to have cracked pitch control horns.



CH-53 Sea Stallion helicopters undergo sheet metal maintenance and repair at the Naval Aviation Depot, NAS Pensacola, Florida, in 1989. (*Jerry Antone/ RG 330, National Archives*)

The final report was critical of the Navy's inability to track flight hours prior to 1985. The upshot of that lack of data may have meant that the control horn had exceeded its service life by as much as 161 hours. Romesburg and others were incensed not merely at the delay in reporting findings but that any part of the report had been lost. She vowed legal action even if it were fruitless. She sadly noted that, "I can't replace my son's father for the rest of his life because they had a defective part. I couldn't live with myself if I left that unaddressed. Someone is going to acknowledge that these are valuable people..."x[10]



The HM-18 "Norseman" logo affixed to to the port drop tank of the display RH-53D located at Ely Park on Naval Station Norfolk. (*M.C. Farrington*)

The static display is silent, yet in its silence, it reminds us of admirable vocations such as national service. Moreover, it reinforces the notion that a part of such service is sacrifice. One officer, Commander Charles Ress, held that those killed were “very fine individuals ...dedicated...motivated.”^{xi}[11] During a July 11, 1992, memorial service, Captain Johannes Wytsma, Commanding Officer of Naval Air Reserve Norfolk, observed that the inherent dangers of operations such as Desert Shield and Desert Storm are understood but that it is easy to forget dangers at home because “things don’t routinely go wrong.” He noted that those lost were husbands, fathers, brothers and sons. Captain R.J. Thomas, Commodore of Helicopter Wing Reserve,

the Operational Commander of HM-18, stated that the men were “heroes who dedicated their lives to their country.” He made a final perhaps more important point: that it was his hope that the courage and skill shown by those aviators would strengthen their survivors as they met the challenges of going forward after the tragic loss.xii[12] It is the abiding lesson and meaning to be drawn from this tragic mishap.



†The display RH-53D located at Ely Park on Naval Station Norfolk during a recent summer downpour. (M.C. Farrington)

About the author: Captain Alexander "Sandy" G. Monroe, a retired surface warfare officer, is the author of *In Service to Their Country: Christchurch School and the American Uniformed Services* (2014) as well as official histories on U.S. Atlantic Command counternarcotic operational assistance to civilian law enforcement agencies and the treatment of Haitian asylum seekers at Naval Station Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. He was also dispatched to the Arabian Gulf on assignment for the director of naval history during Operation Earnest Will.

1. "Crash is area's deadliest military aircraft accident," *Norfolk Virginian Pilot and Ledger Star*, Thomas Huang, June 20th 1992, A8.

ii[2] "Navy copter explodes; 7 die," *Norfolk Virginian Pilot and Ledger Star*, Tony Germotta and Sonsynea Tate, June 20, 1992, p.A1; See also "Navy 'Copter crashes; 7 feared dead, United Press International Archives, June 19,1992.

iii[3] "Life in the flight path, noisy, unnerving," *Norfolk Virginian Pilot and Ledger Star*, Alec Klein, Sherrill Evans and Angelita Plummer, June 20, 1992, p.A9.

iv[4] See again endnote iii, above. See also "Murky waters hamper recovery effort," *Norfolk Virginian Pilot and Ledger Star*, Jack Dorsey, June 21, 1992, p.A1.

v[5] That review would endeavor to account for 7 crashes between 1984 and 1987.

vi[6] "H53 Helicopter has spotty record for safety," *Norfolk Virginian Pilot and Ledger Star*, Jack Dorsey, June 20th, 1992, p.A8.

vii[7] "Muddy waters hamper recovery effort," *Norfolk Virginian Pilot and Ledger Star*, Jack Dorsey, June 21, 1992, p.A1.

viii[8] "Memorial to Honor Navy Aviators," *Newport News Daily Press and Times Herald*, William McMichael, April 2, 1993.

ix[9] "Navy: Faulty Nut Caused Copter Crash," *Norfolk Virginian Pilot and Ledger Star*, Jack Dorsey, May 18, 1994, p.A1.

x[10] "Navy Reports on Copter Crash," *Newport News Daily Press and Times Herald*, A.J. Plunkett, May 18, 1994.

xi[11] "Copter Victims local men," *Norfolk Virginian Pilot and Ledger Star*, Jack Dorsey and Angelita Plemmer, June 21, 1992, p.A1.

xii[12] "Memorial Service Honors Copter Victims," *Norfolk Virginian Pilot and Ledger Star*, Denise Watson, July 12, 1992, p.B1.