

The Coast Guard Helicopter Interdiction Tactical Squadron (HITRON)

Drug Smugglers began using high speed ocean capable speedboats known as “Go-Fasts.” Despite intelligence cueing, surface assets could not match their speed. Helicopters on board the larger cutters could keep up with the “go-fasts” and keep them under surveillance until they required refueling but they had no means of forcing them to stop. Any serious attempt to stop the “go-fasts” would require a drastic change in capabilities.

Admiral James M. Loy, Commandant of the Coast Guard and U.S. Interdiction Coordinator for counterdrug operations, wished to evaluate the possible use of force by Coast Guard helicopters for interdiction purposes. Within a drug interdiction operation named Operation NEW FRONTIER, a mostly secret was conducted. He had considerable support from the ONDCP, a number of Congressional officials, and after extensive discussion between legal and operational staffs, the Attorney General signed off on the proposal. Within the Coast Guard, however, there were almost as many critics as supporters. There were those that felt that to arm ourselves would place the helicopter crews in danger and undermine our lifesaving and humanitarian image. Those in favor of airborne use of force recognized that the Coast Guard was charged with a law enforcement mission and that the proposed policy change was an operational necessity. Special training and safety procedures were advocated.

The Commandant directed that a proof of concept operation using armed Coast Guard helicopters to interdict and apprehend “go-fasts” be conducted. Two concepts were tested:

- The use of armed helicopters;
- The use of high speed over-the-horizon pursuit boats which worked in concert with the armed helicopters. These boats were “souped-up” versions of the Coast Guard’s standard rigid-hull inflatable boats. The OTH boats differed in that they are equipped with twin inboard/outboard turbocharged diesel engines, on board radar and navigational systems for over the horizon operations. The OTH’s were capable of 57 knots.

This gave rise to the beginnings of a helicopter interdiction force. Commander Mark Torres molded an initial group of ten volunteers into a cohesive and effective team. The group, named HITRON-10, pioneered novel and effective operating tactics and procedures. HITRON was the acronym for Helicopter Interdiction Tactical Squadron and 10 represented the number of crewmembers assigned. The team flew leased MH-90 enforcer helicopters. The MH-90, a militarized version of the MD 900 helicopters built by MD Helicopters Incorporated, was an all weather, short range, single rotor, shipboard helicopter. It was powered by a Pratt & Whitney 206D turboshaft engine and designed without a tail rotor. It could cruise at 120 knots for 2.5 hours. The 6,500-pound helicopter was equipped with weather radar, an Mk III forward-looking infrared system (with video-recording capability), night-vision devices, an external sling capable of lifting 1,500 pounds, and a rescue hoist capable of lifting 600 pounds. The crew consisted of two pilots and one crewman. The crewman's principal duties included firing an M240G 7.62mm machine gun (swivel-mounted at the portside cabin door) and/or a hand-held laser-sighted .50-caliber rifle. He also operated hand-held video and photographic equipment. MD Helicopters Incorporated provided logistic support for the Enforcers.



Rigid Hull Over The Horizon Boat



MH-90

Before Operation NEW FRONTIER, according to the service's own statistics, the Coast Guard had about a one-in-ten chance of stopping a "go-fast." During the evaluation operations, the Coast Guard scored a perfect "six of six" in pursuits and apprehensions.

As a follow-up to Operation NEW FRONTIER, and to bring HITRON-10 to full operational capability, the Coast Guard formed a strategic alliance with Agusta Aerospace Corporation in April 2000 and in March 2001 announced that it would lease up to eight Agusta A109E "Power" aircraft to serve as follow-on aircraft for the proof-of-concept MH-90.

Due to the 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 cutter deployment cycles. Competitive bids were solicited and in March 2001, an agreement with Agusta Aerospace



MH-68A Stingrays

Corporation was made to lease eight A109E Power helicopters. HITRON Jacksonville faced many new challenges as they converted a civilian corporate helicopter into an armed shipboard deployable aircraft. These aircraft were equipped with the latest radar and Forward Looking Infrared sensor system capable of recording activities on tape to facilitate prosecution. HITRON armed 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. They were given the military designation of MH-68A.

Initial flight training and aerial gunnery were established and validated by HITRON pilots and gunners. Night shipboard landings, a first for the Coast Guard and now operational procedure Coast Guard wide, were initiated using 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.

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 helicopter 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.

Due to HITRON's unique capabilities, the unit was directed to develop tactics to meet the terrorist threats facing the United States. Aircrews now deploy where needed, working with surface assets, to provide a layered defense to the maritime domain.

On 27 January 2008 the last MH-68A was formally transferred back to Agusta, ending a partnership which resulted in the interdiction of 126 vessels, 159 tons of cocaine valued at 8.7 billion dollars and the apprehension of 465 narco-smugglers. The MH-68A Stingray was replaced by the MH-65C Dolphin helicopter as the HITRON interdiction and security aircraft.



MH-65C

It had been planned to use the HH-65 in an airborne use of force role but implementation was delayed until the aircraft was retrofitted with more powerful and reliable Arriel 2C2-CG engines to handle the flight profile and increased operational weight. By September of 2007 all HH-65Cs had been re-engined and the Coast Guard began upgrading the HH65C adding sensors and equipment required for this complicated mission. The decision to selectively upgrade the HH-65C into a weaponized MH-65C significantly enhanced HITRON's multi-mission capabilities while utilizing a standard Coast Guard aircraft has greatly improved maintenance and logistic support.



MH-65C with gunner in position

HITRON has assisted many foreign military organizations including the British and Dutch Royal Navies in developing AUF programs of their own to assist in the War on Drugs. The US Navy has also solicited HITRON to assist with developing their AUF program along with Coast Guard Law Enforcement Detachments (LEDET) to

expand the US's counter drug assets in the Caribbean Sea and the Eastern Pacific Ocean.