

# **2157 AIR RESCUE SQUADRON**

## **MISSION**

## **LINEAGE**

2157 Air Rescue Squadron

## **STATIONS**

Seoul, South Korea

## **ASSIGNMENTS**

## **WEAPON SYSTEMS**

## **COMMANDERS**

## **HONORS**

**Service Streamers**

**Campaign Streamers**

**Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers**

**Decorations**

## **EMBLEM**

## **MOTTO**

## **NICKNAME**

## **OPERATIONS**

An H-19 helicopter from the 2157th ARS comes in for a landing on the deck of a naval hospital ship.

The last SA-16 rescues of the war occurred in June 1953, a month before the armistice was signed. Dumbos saved seven airmen, four from the crew of a 2157th ARS H-19 helicopter that had ditched into the Yellow Sea. In 1995, Retired Maj. Anthony Keffales, pilot of the SA-16, wrote of the mission: My crew and I just finished our orbiting awaiting any downed airmen to be rescued. We were on our way back to our base K-16 in Korea. It was getting dark and we were approaching a low cloud deck when I heard someone on the radio say "we are going down."

All four of the H-19 helicopters were to be stationed with the 2157th Air Rescue Squadron, also located at K-16. Their mission was identical to that of the SA-16s, with a secondary mission of air rescue of downed pilots.

The 2157th ARS commander did, succeed in having "RESCUE" removed from the sides of the black-hat H-19s. To the 581st helo pilots, it seemed the more conservative rescue squadron didn't want the North Koreans confusing them with the 581st should a helo go down in "Indian country." Considering the fate of the 581st B-29 crewmen, the air rescue concerns were not totally without merit.

The first ARCW helo pilots had a few adjustments of their own to make, beginning with the basic fact that they arrived in Korea with no helicopters and no idea of the ARCW mission. When the newly arrived pilots approached Fifth Air Force staff officers for both their aircraft and a mission, the initial response was denial that the 581st even existed! It did, of course, and by October 1952, six pilots, one NCO, and 12 airmen fresh from tech school comprised the Helicopter Flight, 581st ARC Squadron, commanded by Capt Frank Westerman. A long way from their parent wing in the Philippines, they learned early to shift for themselves.

With four brand-new H-19A helicopters in their possession, the ARCW helo pilots next learned why Fifth Air Force had been so reluctant to answer their initial questions. Their primary mission was to insert United Nations intelligence agents behind enemy lines by means of infiltration flights at night at the lowest possible altitudes to avoid enemy radar. They would soon learn that this invariably called for them to fly from US-controlled islands off Korea's west coast, skimming the freezing waters of the Yellow Sea as they flew to their blacked-out landing point on the (hopefully) deserted coast. Without the benefit of today's reliable radar altimeters, night-vision goggles, and sophisticated navigation equipment, these missions demanded superb airmanship at the rawest "stick and rudder" level.

Close calls were inevitable. Robert Sullivan, then a second lieutenant, vividly recalls the night he felt the nose of the helicopter tug and dip slightly as he flew the helo's nose wheels into the frigid ocean waters; it would happen again to others. The Helicopter Flight soon received another lesson on just how far Fifth Air Force was prepared to go to hide the flight's existence from unwanted scrutiny. Though housed with the 2157th Air Rescue Squadron at K-16 and supported by the 3d Air Rescue Group in Japan, it took its missions from B Flight, 6167th Air Base Squadron, another classified unit also based at K-16—except when Fifth Air Force Intelligence (A-2) itself chose to directly assign a mission to the flight. One can hardly fault the

Communists if questions regarding the Helicopter Flight generated blank faces and not much else.

The four H-19As assigned to the Helicopter Flight, 581st ARCW, were collocated with the 2157th Air Rescue Squadron also flying the same type aircraft at K-16. The attempt to blend black hat special operations and white hat rescue pilots together had its bumps, as when the rescue commander ordered the ARCW pilots to remove RESCUE markings from their helos.

The 2157th Air Rescue Squadron was activated 1 March 1953, at K-16 (Korea) . It moved to K-14 (Kimpo) on 2 January 1955 until 8 April 1956, at which time it was deactivated and became a detachment of the 39th ARSq.

When I arrived at K-14 in May, 1955, we had 2 H-19A's, and 8 H-19B's. One of the A's and two of the B's were destroyed in accidents. Two replacement H-19B's of the later "droop tail" version replaced two of the destroyed ones. We also had a C-47 for logistics. It made one rescue from an Island off the west coast (Chedju-Do?).

SH-19A: The upper drive shaft coupling consisted of two circular plates with a rubber bushing between. When the aircraft was assembled in Japan, workers used bolts that were too long, so that, when tightened to the proper torque, the rubber bushing wasn't compressed sufficiently. This caused the coupling to fail just as the helicopter was taking off. The drive shaft ran next to the control mixing unit (that mixed collective and cyclic controls), and as it whipped around, it wiped out the mixing unit. The helicopter rolled and crashed on its side. No injuries.

The next accident was pure pilot error. For trim and balance reasons, the aft fuel tank had to be burned off first, and the pilot forgot to shift tanks. He autorotated successfully, but upon landing, the nose wheels fell into a ditch, causing him instinctively to pull back on the stick, and the unloaded rotor blades chopped off the tail.

The third accident was mechanical failure, and it happened to me. It was a terrible example of a chain of errors, any one of which, if corrected, would have prevented the accident. The hydro-mechanical clutch was held in gear by three flyweights. This particular clutch, along with about a dozen others, was improperly overhauled at the SHOWA facility; a mechanic misread a specification and turned (on a lathe) the flyweight shafts to an insufficient thickness. All of those clutches were accidents waiting for a time and place to happen, and what we called an ALCOM TWX – a message to all commands – was sent to every unit using H-19B's. The message contained serial numbers of the defective clutches, and the instruction that, wherever found, they were to be returned to SHOWA immediately. If installed on an aircraft, the replacement was to be made wherever it was when the faulty clutch was detected. That meant even in the middle of a Korean rice paddy, if necessary.

One of those clutches was in FEALOGFOR, the logistics depot in Tachikawa, where it was missed and sent to K-14 base supply, where it was missed and sent to 2157th Squadron Supply, where it was missed and sent to Tech Supply, where it was missed and issued to maintenance. The

mechanic who installed it was OJT (on-the-job training), so he had an instructor overseeing the work – both of them missed it. Finally, an inspector signed off on the work, and missed it.

I was flying my final check ride for qualification as a Rescue Crew Commander, and the last maneuver to be performed was a maximum performance takeoff. In this maneuver, the aircraft is outside the safe airspeed/altitude combination for autorotation while between 25 feet and 425 feet altitude; and it was at about 200 feet when the clutch failed, causing an inevitable accident. The blame was divided between the commanders of FEALOGFOR, K-14, and the 2157th.

The 2157th, as an all-helicopter squadron, was completely unlike other Air Rescue Squadrons, which typically were equipped with Grumman SA-16 amphibians, with only one helicopter. This was evident by its four-digit number; whereas other Rescue squadrons had two-digit numbers. We felt like outcasts from the normal Rescue organization.

In addition to our home base at K-14, we had detachments at K-55 and K-8. These consisted of one helicopter and crew of pilots and medic, plus a mechanic, which rotated every month. Another detachment, at Tainan, Formosa, was rotated every three months. One pilot was also on duty at all times as Rescue Coordinator at the Rescue Control Center at K-55; this duty also rotated monthly.

In addition to training, we flew two types of rescue missions:

Recovery of downed pilots. Since the armistice was in effect, this was extremely rare; I know of only two instances in the 13 months I was there. In the one recovery incident that I flew, an F-86 pilot ejected through a stuck canopy; and though he successfully opened his parachute, he was dead from a broken neck when he landed. . One of our T-6 observer planes strayed across the DMZ and was shot down, its observer was killed and the pilot immediately captured; no rescue mission was flown. He was subsequently released.

Medical evacuation. We flew numerous medical evacuations to the 121st Evacuation Hospital at ASCOM City. One that I flew involved a spy from the 6006th Air Intelligence Squadron – see below.

A non-rescue mission was also assigned to us because we had the only operational USAF helicopters in Korea, support of the 6006th Air Intelligence Squadron. Under Col. Donald Nichols, that squadron trained and controlled a network of South Korean spies operating in North Korea and we were sometimes involved in insertion and extraction of them. It was interesting work.

Although the Armistice had been in effect for over two years, in 1955 there were apparently still guerillas, or maybe criminal gangs, in the area and every two weeks or so there would be gunfire directed at the K-14 base perimeter.

During the last six months or so of the squadron's existence, maintenance had a very difficult time keeping our aircraft flying due to a shortage of parts. We frequently had multiple aircraft AOC (Aircraft Out Of Commission, Parts), and occasionally we had no aircraft available for alert duty.

When I arrived in May, 1955, I was one of 11 replacement pilots. One was a first lieutenant; the rest of us were all second lieutenants less than a year out of helicopter school. We started as co-pilots but because a number of pilots were to be rotated out in a few months, we had to be trained quickly as First Pilots and Rescue Crew Commanders. There weren't enough instructor pilots in the 2157th to handle the load, so some of us were "farmed out" to Rescue squadrons in Japan. I was fortunate enough to be sent for a month to the 36th ARSq at Johnson AB, Tokyo, where I was trained by the 3rd Air Rescue Group standardization pilot. Six months later, I was so senior in the squadron that I was put on orders as an instructor pilot and maintenance test pilot.

Aircraft reliability was a major problem, and I had five incidents in addition to my accident. Two involved flight control problems, and two involved small fires. In one of those, an oil return stud came loose, spraying oil on the exhaust pipe. It was on a ferry flight to rotate crews at K-8, so there was a mechanic on board. We landed in the middle of nowhere, and there was no response to our calls on guard channel, so our mechanic set to work while the copilot, medic, and I set up an uneasy defense triangle. Numerous Korean farmers came to watch, and we were nervous that there might be bad guys among them. The mechanic made a temporary fix by wrapping string around the threads of the stud, and it held long enough to finish the flight to K-8. On the fifth incident, I had a partial engine failure – one cylinder failed – and made an emergency landing at K-14.

After the 2157th was deactivated, K-14 became a detachment of the 39th ARSq in Ashiya, and I remained there until my tour was over at the beginning of June.

I've attached a photo of the newest H-19 we had; note that the tail is drooped about 3 degrees for better blade clearance in an autorotation. Also, the fins on the tail are horizontal, not in an inverted "V" as in older H-19's. It was a better-flying machine.

The 2157th ARS kept one H-19 and crew TDY to K-8, and every month a different helicopter and crew were rotated in. An Army H-19A was also attached to the base, flown by CWO Craig Burroughs, to ferry NNIT's (Neutral Nations Inspection Team) personnel. A few days before being relieved from TDY at K-8, I learned of a missionary hospital located east of K-8; struggling with lack of supplies and primitive equipment. I scrounged everything I could from the base dispensary and the enlisted and officers messes; and we loaded it on the choppers and flew them to the hospital - creating quite a stir there, I might add. While our H-19B's had de-rated R-1300 engines, the H-19A had the less powerful R-1340; so we flew formation on Craig, allowing him to set whatever pace he could.

The NNIT's were each composed of two members from "neutral" Communist nations and two neutral Western nations. The Commies were treated as spies and allowed to see only what was necessary for their mission.

Craig flew with his windows covered when carrying them. The westerners mingled freely with the officers but the Commies, carefully watched by their political minder, stayed to themselves.

On 14 Nov. 1952, the Air Rescue Service was reorganized. Groups replaced the squadrons and the 2nd Squadron became the 2nd Group and the 3rd Squadron became the 3rd Group and so on. Detachments, such as Detachment 1 of the 3rd Air Rescue Squadron, was redesignated the 2157th Air Rescue Squadron — 3rd Rescue Group.

The giant whirly-bird that you will probably notice during one of your strolls along the main drag at K-8, is one of ten such aircraft situated on various bases throughout South Korea which make up what is known as the 2157th Air Rescue Squadron. The "chopper" attached to our base calls for an element composed of two pilots, a medic, and two engineers, who are on call twenty-four hours a day to lend assistance in case of a downed aircraft. The home base for this element is located near Seoul City, Korea, and in case our helicopter fails to perform for some reason or another, parts and able mechanics are dispatched from Seoul almost at once in order to keep the H-19 "chopper" airworthy.

This aircraft will carry a load of six litter patients, two ambulatory patients, and crew of three. These "birds" are seldom required to fly higher than five hundred feet and because of this no parachutes are worn by the crew members on board. The "chopper" crew is required to make two flights a day, so if you're ever in the area when they start to wind up the prop' and would like to go on an aerial view of the base, just pop over and see the pilot. I'm sure he'll be glad to give you a lift.

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USAF Unit Histories  
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Sources  
Air Force Historical Research Agency. U.S. Air Force. Maxwell AFB, AL.