RECOVERY HELICOPTERS
By John Stonesifer

The planning throughout the Mercury, Gemini, Apollo, Skylab, and Apollo-Soyuz Test Project (ASTP) programs to recover astronauts from a water landing after returning from space was to use helicopters operating from a carrier-type ship positioned in the Planned Landing Area.

Early Mercury flights (Shepard, Freedom 7; Grissom, Liberty Bell 7; Glenn, Friendship 7) were supported by Marine squadrons using UH34D helicopters (Photo #1) operating from carrier-type ships for the Atlantic ocean recoveries. Carpenter's flight, Aurora 7 following Glenn's orbital flight, was again planned to land in the Atlantic and be supported by the Marine helicopters aboard the USS Intrepid.

Recovery support for Carpenter's landing rapidly changed when it was learned the spacecraft landed approximately 250 miles downrange from the Planed Landing Area. The landing was beyond the range for the Marine helicopters to immediately depart for the landing area. Aboard the Intrepid was a squadron of the larger, faster, greater-range SH-3A Sea King helicopters (Photo #2) that were just recently introduced to the fleet. Their mission during this deployment was primarily to practice their role of anti-submarine warfare while at sea en route to the assigned recovery station. However, when information became available that Carpenter was a considerable range downrange, decisions were made to utilize the SH-3A helicopters rather than the UH34D helicopters to fly to the landing. The swim teams and photographers quickly transferred their gear to the SH-3As and they sped to the scene.

At the scene, pararescue jumpers had already parachuted from an Air Force plane to install the flotation collar and render assistance to Carpenter in his raft. The SH-3As arrived shortly afterwards and brought Carpenter back to the Intrepid (Photo #3). The USS Pierce, one of the recovery destroyers, assigned to a position downrange of the Intrepid, retrieved the spacecraft. This flight, Carpenter's Aurora 7, marks the first time the SH-3A Sea Kings were used in the water landing programs and continued to support the later flights. A typical pattern of the helicopters over the carrier was made up of helicopters with assigned personnel for specific tasks. The Swim helicopters had the UDT swimmers aboard, Photo units had NASA and Navy photographers, and the Recovery helicopter had the NASA Flight surgeon aboard. Several of the helicopters had SARAH gear installed to assist in location of the spacecraft.

Following the Aurora 7 flight, the SH-3A type helicopters were embarked on the CVS type carriers, and the LPH type ships assigned to the recovery forces for the remainder of the water landing programs. Navy helicopter squadrons, either from Atlantic or Pacific units, supported the missions dependent on location of the planned spacecraft landing area.

Amongst the hundreds of helicopters that supported the manned spacecraft flights and several of the unmanned Apollo flights, one helicopter achieved a place in aviation history by recovering the Apollo 11 astronauts following their return from the moon. This helicopter and its squadron personnel had accumulated repeated experience from its previous support through many simulations and the recovery of the Apollo 8 (Photo #4) and 10 (Photos #5 & #6) astronauts. Based on this experience, the squadron's personnel and helicopters were chosen to support the historic Apollo 11 (Photo #7) recovery operating from the USS Hornet. The Recovery helicopter with its large side number "66" has appeared in the famous photos recording the return of the astronauts from the moon. With pride in their accomplishments squadron personal again piloted "66" helicopter to recover the astronauts following the Apollo 12 and 13 (Photo #8) missions.

It should be noted that shortly after Apollo 11 the Navy changed the numbering system on their helicopters and went to a three number system. The real "66" became 740, however, for public relations photo opportunities and historic purposes, the 66 was again painted on its sides for Apollo 12 and 13. Following the Apollo mission 13, the Navy continued supporting the Apollo, Skylab and ASTP landings with SH-3A helicopters operating from either CVS or LPH type carriers.

Now, if one visits the USS Hornet Museum you will see a SH-3A Sea King (Photo #9) painted in all its splendor representing the famous number "66" Recovery helicopter. However, a footnote to history is necessary - the real "66" crashed and sank at sea during a night operation in 1975.

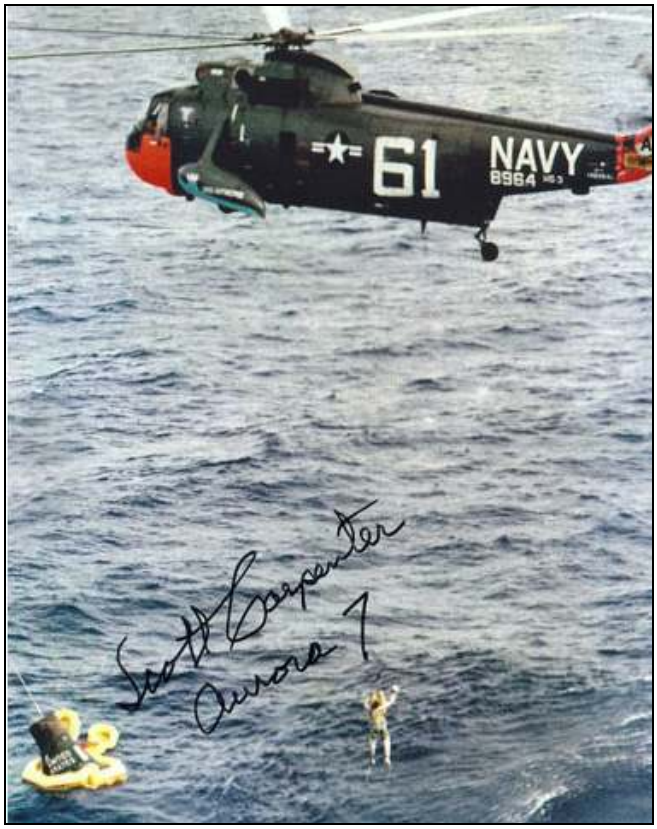
Detective work was done by former SH-3A helicopter pilots who believed that the helicopter now on display on the Hornet may have been associated with a previous recovery operation. Comparing photographs from past missions, including Gemini missions, and checking Navy Bureau numbers (like serial numbers) on helicopters they have determined the museum helicopter was the Recovery helicopter on Gemini 4. Additionally, that conclusion leads to other records indicating that same helicopter was the one used in the Apollo 13 movie as Recovery helicopter 66.

Throughout the history of the NASA manned spacecraft programs, the support provided by the Navy and Marine units in support of the spacecraft water landings in the planned landing areas was outstanding and contributed greatly to the success of this era of space history.

Photos:

1. Marine helicopter UH34D recovering Shepard after his Freedom 7 flight. (Photo Credit: NASA)

2. SH-3A Sea King introduced to the fleet in 1961. (Photo Credit: Sikorsky Co.)



3. Carpenter recovered from Aurora 7. The first use of the SH-3A in a recovery operation. (Photo Credit: NASA)

4. Nr. 66 with Apollo 8 astronauts welcomed aboard the USS Yorktown. (Photo Credit: NASA)

5. NR. 66 aboard the USS Princeton rigged for recovery of Apollo 10. (Photo Credit: Navy)

6. Nr. 66 recovers Apollo 10 astronauts. (Photo Credit: NASA)

7. Nr.66 from the USS Hornet prepares to recover the Apollo 11 astronauts from their lunar return. (Photo Credit: NASA)

8. NR. 66 completes its role in the history of astronaut recovery aboard the USS Iwo Jima following the flight of Apollo 13. (Photo Credit: NASA)

9. Converted Nr. 66 as now located aboard the USS Hornet Museum. (Photo Credit: Hornet Museum)