

A DAY WITH THE DRAGON WHALES



STORY AND PHOTOS BY WENDY LELAND

When I first joined the magazine staff six years ago, I realized that as a civilian reporting on the military there were several aspects of Naval Aviation that I needed to experience for myself in order to do my job effectively. After visiting a carrier (and logging a trap and a cat in a C-2 Greyhound in the process), I still wanted to experience flying in both helicopters and jets. As a former motorcycle racer, I appreciate the sensation of speed associated with jets, but I have always had a soft spot for helos. There's just something about the visibly operating mechanical components of a helicopter



that appeals to my “gearhead” interests. So when the opportunity came up to accompany Helicopter Combat Support Squadron 8, NS Norfolk, Va., I jumped at the chance to both log my first helo flight and observe firsthand the real-world operations of a Navy squadron.

On a cold February day, I joined pilots Lieutenant James Mason and Lieutenant (jg) Chris Claybrook, aircrewmembers AD2 Ryan Tennyson and AMCS Pete Durant and five search and rescue (SAR) swimmers on board a CH-46 *Sea Knight* for a



Opposite, training search and rescue swimmers is just one of the many missions HC-8 performs. This page, clockwise from left: *NANews's* Acting Managing Editor prepares for her first helicopter flight; the aircrewmembers preflight the CH-46 *Sea Knight*; pilot Ltjg. Chris Claybrook heads out to the waiting helo; the SAR swimmers prepare to board under the watchful eye of aircrewman AMCS Pete Durant.



Photo by Mike Wilson

late afternoon training hop to maintain the swimmers' currency. Hours of preparation led up to the flight—from maintenance to flight planning, preflight inspection and briefing—but for this experienced and professional aircrew the only unusual aspect was finding flight gear to fit me. Soon we were strapped into the jump seats and in the air en route to the nearby operations area over Willoughby Bay.

The swimmers were out the back more quickly than I would have thought possible, churning up five splashes of white wake in the midst of the CH-46's rotor wash. As the helo began a grand sweeping turn to recover them, all that was visible above the water line were five black, wetsuited heads. In the short time it took to reach them, they had grouped together as briefed for recovery—two sets of two, and one by himself. The hoist operator dropped the sling and began the tricky business of directing the pilots into proper position. After securing themselves in the "horse collar," the SAR swimmers were pulled from the water, huge droplets streaming off their bodies and blowing away as they twisted and swayed on the hoist line. As they reached the *Sea Knight's* door, the hoist operator leaned out and physically hauled them into the aircraft, forming a momentary jumble of wetsuits, swim fins, aircrewmembers' boots and cables on the floor. Untangled, the dripping wet swimmers returned to their seats, their faces red from the cold, to await the helo's return to the drop zone for the next evolution. After four drop cycles the *Sea Knight* landed to refuel, I bid the crew goodbye, and they once again took to the air for a series of night jumps.

When I returned to my room at the end of the day, I realized that, as cold and tired as I was, it was nothing compared to what the men and women who fly daily, in any weather, experience. The people I met at HC-8 that day represent the professionalism and dedication that are the embodiment of Naval Aviation. ✈️



Above, a SAR swimmer jumps into the frigid waters of Willoughby Bay. Left, after being hoisted from the water by AMCS Pete Durant, AT3 Cory Halt (below left) and AT2 Jeffery Phillips grab a brief moment to catch their breath and prepare for their next jump. Opposite, as the sun sets over NS Norfolk, the last of the rescue swimmers is retrieved, concluding their daylight operations.



