



HITRON: One of a Kind

Story and Photography by Ted Carlson

S muggling drugs into the United States has been a problem for many years. It has evolved into a high-stakes game of cat and mouse, with each side trying to counter the other. Today, drug traffickers use high-speed boats that can easily outrun Coast Guard cutters at top speeds in excess of 75 miles per hour. Cocaine, marijuana and heroin can be found on these speed demons of the sea, dubbed “go-fasts.”

The Coast Guard’s Helicopter Interdiction Tactical

Squadron (HITRON) Jacksonville, Fla., specializes in the counternarcotics role. Based at Cecil Commerce Center, the squadron operates the newest Coast Guard helicopter, the Agusta MH-68A Stingray. HITRON is the Coast Guard’s only operational airborne use of force (AUF) squadron.

Originally known as HITRON-10—the number representing the original 10 crew members (six pilots and four gunners)—the unit formally stood up in May 2003.



Since HITRON began operations in 2001, it has been responsible for seizing 51 tons of cocaine, 8.1 tons of marijuana and 37 pounds of heroin. With a street value of more than \$3 billion dollars, the recovery put a sizable dent in the drug-smuggling business.

HITRON has a total of eight MH-68As in its inventory. The crews also call the Stingray “Little

A HITRON MH-68A Stingray flies near Northland (WMEC 904) off the Florida coast.

Buddy” because of its small size. The Stingray has a state-of-the-art cockpit with contemporary navigation aids, including a digital moving map. It has a police-like blue strobe light and a loudspeaker/siren mounted on the lower aft fuselage, which are used when stopping vessels.

The aircraft is equipped with a forward-looking infrared (FLIR) electro-optical sensor on a ball that is

mounted just beneath the radome. The aviation gunner (AG) in the back normally operates the FLIR using a hand controller, but it can be operated by the pilots as well. The system has a recording capability and uses a digital videotape.

Rated as an all-weather aircraft, the MH-68A carries an array of avionics that give the Stingray crew enhanced situational awareness. In addition, the helicopter is built with high-strength, lightweight KEVLAR® brand fiber which is also used in bullet-proof vests for the crew. It is powered by two Pratt and Whitney PW206C engines, and cruises at 140 knots for about two hours leaving 20 minutes of fuel reserve.

HITRON took custody of the first MH-68A in December 2000. The helicopter is equipped with a 7.62mm machine gun used for warning shots and suppression fire, and a .50 caliber sniper rifle employed to disable go-fast boat engines. The Stingray crew may also carry 9mm sidearms and M-16s. Smoke floats, chemical lights and infrared strobe lights are used to mark positions, including contraband thrown overboard.

The MH-68A is the first Agusta aircraft to be used by the U.S. military. Agusta is responsible for maintaining the Stingrays, and several of its maintainers deploy along with the aircraft and crews to cutters or other locations. Instead of being owned, the Stingrays are being leased on an annual basis until 2008, because they are filling an interim role until a long-term plan is solidified.

The primary mission of HITRON and the Stingray is counternarcotics, with a secondary role of maritime homeland security, which includes terror alerts, surveillance and identifying vessels. The unit routinely deploys on board high-endurance cutters for 45 to 80 days at a time, on both the East and West coasts. It is not uncommon for three or more MH-68As to be deployed simultaneously at different locations.

On counternarcotics deployments, the three-person crew consists of a mission commander, aircraft commander or copilot, and aviation gunner. An additional AG is used for homeland security sorties. While the helicopter is rated for flight with just a single pilot, two are usually on board. Cocaine and marijuana are the most common drugs intercepted, while heroin is found on occasion. Missions are commonly flown at night, and crews may black out their strobe lights in certain situations.

The counternarcotics mission is called Operation New Frontier and is based on a hunter/pouncer strategy. A maritime patrol aircraft (hunter) sights the go-fast and vectors in the cutter, while the MH-68A (pouncer) is

dispatched to stop the vessel. The cutter crew then conducts a right-of-visit boarding.

When a crew intercepts a suspicious go-fast, they first try to identify the nationality of the vessel. Once a decision is made to stop the boat, the blue strobe light is turned on and the go-fast is told to halt using a marine radio and/or loudspeakers. If the vessel ignores the request, a series of warning shots are laid down in front of the vessel's bow. Should it continue, the .50 caliber rifle is used to disable the engine and bring the boat to a stop. The cutter crew members arrive to conduct the boarding, and if any laws are violated they detain the go-fast crew and seize the vessel.

HITRON air operations officer Commander Ed Cubanski III has more than 2,500 total flight hours in the



Above, aviation gunner AMT2 Saul Estupinian mans his station aboard a HITRON MH-68A. Facing page, a Stingray flies over HITRON's home base at Cecil Commerce Center, Jacksonville, Fla.

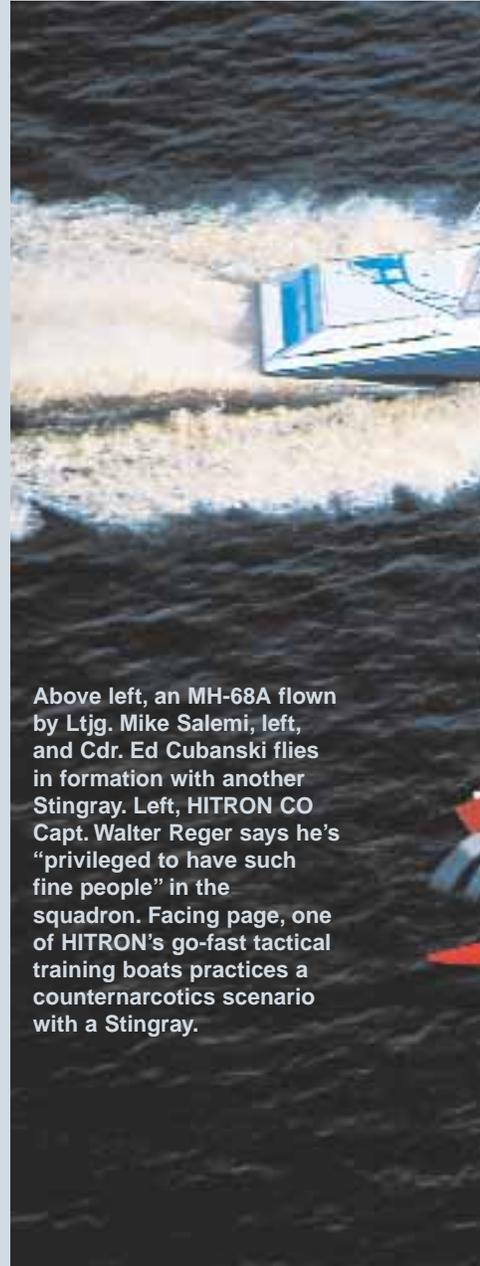
T-34C Turbo-Mentor, TH-57 Sea Ranger, HH-65A Dolphin and the MH-68A. He said, "The MH-68A is the only helicopter in the Coast Guard inventory that has a single-engine fly-off capability at maximum gross weight. It is very maneuverable and has a multimission capability. As part of Operation New Frontier, HITRON interdicted 41 percent of the cocaine netted by the Coast Guard last year.

"While the aircraft is small and a commercial off-the-shelf helicopter, it is well-suited for our needs and is reliable," he continued. "It has a 95-percent availability rate for deployments. Agusta has bent over backward for us and we are pleased with the aircraft. I enjoy flying the aircraft; it fits me like a glove. It has good communication and sensor suites and is responsive. Its power and engines perform as advertised."

HITRON training officer Lieutenant Commander Marcus Lopez recalled, "During a deployment we did a

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Above left, an MH-68A flown by Ltjg. Mike Salemi, left, and Cdr. Ed Cubanski flies in formation with another Stingray. Left, HITRON CO Capt. Walter Reger says he's "privileged to have such fine people" in the squadron. Facing page, one of HITRON's go-fast tactical training boats practices a counternarcotics scenario with a Stingray.

daytime launch, the alarm on the boat went off and we intercepted a go-fast. A P-3 spotted it and we fired warning shots across the bow. The go-fast ignored the shots and ran, so we disabled the engine with a single .50 caliber round. Then a small boat was dispatched from the cutter and picked up the go-fast crew. They found about 5,000 pounds of cocaine on the go-fast.

"The MH-68 has been very reliable and is an effective platform for what we do," he said. "We have been able to stop every go-fast boat we've encountered. The biggest threat is probably small arms fire. Our unit has the ability to get an aircraft and crew deployed quickly and far away within a day. That is quite an achievement since we are so small. HITRON and its personnel are up to any challenges that arise."

When HITRON commanding officer Captain Walter Reger was asked about his job, he responded, "HITRON Jacksonville started out as an experiment about three and a half years ago as a means to be more effective in counternarcotics on the high seas, a Coast Guard responsibility. In the past when a cutter came upon a go-fast vessel, the boat simply outran it. Using force from a helicopter was employed as a test, and the concept proved to be viable and successful so the role evolved into an official unit.

"Not one go-fast vessel that we have intercepted with this system has escaped," he said. "We are part of a team and the interdictions are a product of combined synergies of maritime patrol aircraft, Coast Guard cutters and helicopters. The interdiction of narcotics is currently much more effective, and for us the airborne use of force as a mission is here to stay."

Cdr. Cubanski added, "From pilots to gunners to support personnel, we have an extremely dedicated group of individuals. Everyone is focused on making HITRON



succeed, so we have great morale. The CO takes good care of his people, and everyone here is willing to help meet the commandant's goals."

"Subsequent to the events of 9-11, HITRON was also identified as a resource for the homeland security role," Capt. Reger said. "We began performing the mission in spring 2003 as part of the Department of Homeland Security. This responsibility includes providing security for our ports and waterways and helping counter terrorism. We are specialized, and as a result we do not perform traditional Coast Guard unit missions. Our main focus is law enforcement and homeland security."

Due to its demanding role, HITRON does not train for search and rescue missions and the AGs are not required to have a rescue swimmer hoist qualification. The aircraft do carry extra life rafts and can provide a limited search-and-rescue capability if a situation arises. For



counternarcotics training, HITRON has a pair of its own go-fast boats called tactical training boats. The drivers emulate scenarios that crews are likely to encounter when deployed on cutters.

“There are some ongoing long-term studies to determine what the future will bring to the Coast Guard,” Capt. Reger explained. “The Deepwater project is a plan to make all of our vessels, aircraft and communications compatible. I feel AUF and its concept is here to stay and HITRON will have a role for years to come. It could be that the rest of the fleet will be given an AUF capability as well. The commandant will make the ultimate decision and determine how it is employed.”

HITRON has proved to be an invaluable service and has been instrumental in its primary role of counter-narcotics. Within a couple of years HITRON has brought 19 go-fasts to a stop using disabling gunfire, halted 18

boats via officer presence, and stopped 21 with warning shots and two for other reasons. This includes some 150 drug-trafficking arrests.

Capt. Reger summarized, “With the homeland defense mission, people have a greater sense of our purpose, and it has transformed the Coast Guard for the better. We have always given taxpayers a lot for their money, ‘doing more with less.’ I am very proud of the high motivation and can-do attitude of our people. We deploy more than most Coast Guard aviation units do and HITRON personnel are positive, have good morale and enjoy the work. They find a way to do the job and safely get it done regardless of the circumstances. I am privileged to have such fine people.” 

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