

HMM-262: From RVN to Iraq

By Capt Benjamin T. Taggart, HMM-262

The HMM-262 Vietnam Veterans Association adopted the Flying Tigers of Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 262 as they embarked on their first combat deployment since the Vietnam War.

You know what they say about being a Marine: *Once a Marine always a Marine*. The HMM-262 Vietnam Veterans Association (HMM-262 VVA) exemplifies this statement. They flew in CH-46 helicopters in Vietnam, going from place to place with pin-point accuracy using a map and a compass, dead reckoning, and seat-of-the-pants flying. They maintained CH-46s in the humid heat of the jungle, and they manned their door guns as the enemy peppered their aircraft with automatic fire. Some of these Marines never came home from Vietnam, but those that did created an association to remember their lost comrades and to celebrate the memories of a time long ago, in a place far away. The HMM-262 VVA is made up of former members of the world famous Flying Tigers of HMM-262 who served in Vietnam. The members of this storied organization feel as much a

part of the Flying Tigers today, as they did 40 years ago.

The HMM-262 VVA started as a small group in the early 1990s under the USMC Vietnam Helicopter Association and was founded by James "Jaw" White and G.L. "Red" Logan. As the USMC Vietnam Helicopter Association grew and eventually became the USMC Combat Helicopter Association, a concerted effort was made to track down veterans of the squadron and bring them out to reunions. Leading this effort was Joseph "Jake" Jacobs, a former sergeant and door gunner/crew chief who flew over 450 missions with HMM-262 in Vietnam.

The first HMM-262 VVA reunion was in Las Vegas. Only 13 of the "Old Tigers" attended and most of them hadn't seen each other in 30 years. In July 2001, Jake Jacobs organized a reunion of former squadron mates and family members in Washington, D. C. One hundred and fifty former members

of HMM-262 attended the reunion as well as 70 surviving family members of those Flying Tigers killed in action in Vietnam. Jake also raised money for "Operation Rose" in which rose jewelry broaches were presented to the surviving family members in memory of their lost loved ones. The reunion included a parade at the 8th and I Marine Barracks with Gen Joe Foss in attendance as the guest of honor and a wreath laying ceremony at the Vietnam Memorial. At the end of the wreath laying ceremony, a flight of CH-46E helicopters flew over the Washington, D.C. Mall, and Taps was played as a final tribute to the lost Flying Tigers.

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LtGen Fred "Assassin" McCorkle wrote, "While Jake had a lot of help from many of his fellow Old Tigers, it is my opinion that most of the growth and accomplishments [of the HMM-262 VVA] would not have happened without him." After seven years as the commanding officer of the HMM-262 VVA, he relinquished command to David "Butch" Powell, a former sergeant and door gunner who served with the Flying Tigers in Vietnam. Today, Jake Jacobs is a member of the HMM-262 VVA Board of Directors and resides in El Paso, Texas, with his wife Jenny.

For years, there was no contact between HMM-262 and the HMM-262 Vietnam Veterans Association. Many squadron members weren't aware that such an organization existed. At the end of October, 2006, HMM-262 was given short notice orders to deploy to Iraq.



HMM-262 CH-46 taxis out for the first mission in Iraq.

LtCol Michael Farrell, the squadron commander, had heard of an organization on the internet called *Popasmoke.com*. This organization, run by the USMC Combat Helicopter Association, adopts Marine helicopter squadron "shops" while they are deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan and provides them with a constant stream of supplies, ranging from toiletries to snacks.

HMM-262 registered with *Popasmoke.com*, shop by shop, for sponsorship. Within a week, the squadron S-1 was contacted by Jake Jacobs and informed that HMM-262 VVA had unanimously voted to adopt the entire squadron. All Jake needed was a wish list of items that the squadron could use in Iraq. In addition, Jake wanted to know how many women were serving in the squadron, and if there was some-



From the HMM-262 VVA website.

We Got Your Back!

one who could be the female point of contact, so that the needs of the female Marines and sailors could be supported as well. LT Meg Moore, USN, the squadron flight surgeon, volunteered. With the squadron points of contact for the Old Tiger's Iraq Project (OTIP) established, Jake began coordinating the collection of money from various sources. An OTIP committee was established, and within a few weeks of the OTIP kick-off, several thousand dollars had been raised.

During correspondence with Jake over the weeks leading up to our deployment, Jake sent the squadron S-1 tidbits of history about the Flying Tigers in Vietnam. He sent lists of bureau numbers of aircraft that had been flown in Vietnam by HMM-262, and amazingly, some of those same aircraft were still flying with the squadron. The Flying Tigers of old did not have the same kind of support in Vietnam that HMM-262 was going to receive while in Iraq. Some Squadron members felt a little guilty about sending a wish list of goodies to Jake that included things like magazines and beef jerky. The HMM-262 VVA is not your run-of-the-mill troop-supporting organization. They experienced the weight of the elephant sitting on their chest, and they know the pain associated with leaving loved ones behind for months at a time. They knew what awaited us in Iraq. Jake said on many occasions that most of the Old Tigers would give anything to trade places with us. The OTIP was their way of showing us that they supported us beyond bumper stickers and ribbons.

Today, for the first time since the Vietnam War, HMM-262 is again flying combat missions. Stationed at Al Taqaddum Airbase, the Flying Tigers are flying in support of operations in the Al Anbar province of Iraq. HMM-262 has not had the chance to prove its mettle in Iraq until now. The squadron has deployed twice with the 31st MEU; and participated in Exercises Talon Vision and Balakatan in the Philippines; Cobra Gold in Thailand, and Fowl Eagle in Korea. HMM-262

also assisted in numerous Humanitarian Aid / Disaster Relief Operations in South East Asia to include two mudslides in the Republic of the Philippines and the December 2004 tsunami recovery efforts in Indonesia. HMM-262 is the last fleet Marine Medium Helicopter squadron to deploy to Iraq or Afghanistan, but has nevertheless proved its worth as an asset to the security of the United States of America.

At Al Taqaddum Air Base on February 6, 2007, LtCol Farrell presented a challenge coin to each and every Marine and sailor in the squadron during a formation to kick off the squadron's first day assuming the mission in Iraq. The coins were given to the squadron as a gift and a token of support from the HMM-262 Vietnam Veterans Association. The coin had the squadron patch on one side; and on the other side was written "From RVN to Iraq, We've got your back!" This has since become the squadron's motto in Iraq.

The next day, an HMM-364 CH-46E of the Purple Foxes was shot down north east of Baghdad. All seven aircrew on board were lost, including Cpl Thomas E. Saba of HMM-262. Cpl Saba had extended his orders with the squadron in order to deploy to Iraq with the Marines and sailors he knew best. A delegation of the HMM-262 Vietnam Veterans Association attended Cpl Saba's funeral in Tom's River, New Jersey, to honor one of their own.

In the three months that HMM-262 has been in Iraq, the squadron has



LtCol Mike Farrell, CO of HMM-262 addresses the squadron in Iraq.

flown 1,574 sorties and a total of 2,352 flight hours. Operating 24 hours a day, seven days a week, the Marines and sailors of HMM-262 are putting their all into accomplishing the mission. Thanks to the efforts of the HMM-262 VVA, these hardworking Marines and sailors have a place to pick up a snack during a break in their busy work schedule. The Morale Locker has been stocked continuously by the OTIP. The effort that HMM-262 VVA has put into raising money, buying and collecting goods, and shipping them to the squadron in Iraq has taken a lot of coordination between people living in all parts of the United States. The HMM-262 VVA has also solicited the help of many national brand companies to further their efforts.

The Old Tigers' Iraq Project has not been taken lightly by the members of the HMM-262 VVA. Right now, HMM-262 VVA's focus of effort is to support the Flying Tigers of this generation as we continue the tradition of excellence they established in the skies over Vietnam during their generation.

We, the members of HMM-262, are profoundly grateful for the support we have received from the Old Tigers, and it is an honor to fly in the same CH-46s they flew during the Vietnam War. It may never be known who coined the phrase "Once a Marine, always a Marine," but most assuredly, he knew members of the HMM-262 Vietnam Veteran's Association.



The challenge coin, a token of support from HMM-262 VVA.