

Air and Space this Week

Item of the Week

A Very Special Green Giant

Originally appeared May 30, 2021

KEY WORDS: Igor Sikorsky, helicopter, CH-3, HH-3E, Jolly Green Giant, Herbert Zehnder, trans-Atlantic, Operation Kingpin, Son Tay

Igor Sikorsky was a helicopter genius. Not only did he invent the first one, he continued to refine and expand the rotary-wing concept, and produced a number of helicopter models for both military and civilian use. One of his post-WWII larger designs, the CH-3 transport helicopter, was commercially successful. The Air Force saw the value of the CH-3, and bought 50, and made them more militarily-capable with the addition of armor, self-sealing fuel tanks, machine guns, a rescue hoist, and the plumbing necessary to allow aerial re-fueling. The end result was christened the "HH-3E," but because of its size and shape, everyone called it the "Jolly Green Giant." Its first flight was March 15, 1967. But for one HH-3E, two special flights lay ahead...

Helicopters Become Important

Igor Sikorsky began conceptualizing rotary-wing flight back in 1909 in his native Russia, but his work was interrupted by the Russian Revolution. He fled to the US, where he continued to develop the necessary technology and extol the potential benefits of vertical flight to the US military during the 1930s. He partnered with the Vought company to create the VS-300, which made the very first flight of a US helicopter. The VS-300 was a very primitive machine, with the pilot in an open cockpit and a maximum flight endurance of 15 minutes, but it was capable of being mass-produced.

Progress was rapid, with Sikorsky working both the design and some of the flight test for some later models. By the middle of WWII, the R-4 Hoverfly was advanced enough for use by the military. Early versions were fitted with pontoons and used for anti-submarine patrols in U-boat waters off the East Coast. They also were successful in medivac flights in the Philippines and elsewhere late in the War.

Helicopter technology continued to advance rapidly in the 1950s. Sikorsky's Dragonfly found use in the Coast Guard for rescues at sea in the late 1940s, and helicopters became large enough to haul a lot of freight or soldiers, starting with the S-55 Chickasaw in 1949. Two S-55s made a trans-Atlantic crossing in 1952, with stops in Labrador, Greenland, and Iceland along the way.

Better engines, stronger airframes, and other improved technology continued to make more-capable helicopters through the 1950s, and by the end of the decade, the Coast Guard was more efficiently saving lives with the S-61 Sea King helicopter.

The first half of the 1960s saw the development of heavy-lift helicopters (looking like a stick with a tail rotor stuck on one end, a cockpit on the other, with an engine and rotor in the middle; with no other fuselage. As its name implies, the S-64 Skycrane was just that, in 1962. Improvements continued; the Sea King gave way to the more-advanced Sea Stallion in 1964.

The Sea King (SH-3) had a civilian equivalent, the CH-3 and its variants for different purposes. The Combat Search and Rescue version was of particular interest to the military. Fifty were purchased by the Air Force.

Giants Cross the Atlantic

The CH-3 was already a proven performer in commercial hauling, but it still took some time to install the upgrades that would make the HH-3E ready to support ground troops in Vietnam. Part of that shake-down process would be the first non-stop helicopter flight across the Atlantic Ocean. A successful crossing would show that the HH-3E was ready and reliable for long-distance operations and generate positive publicity.

Two HH-3Es were selected to make the crossing. Each had a crew of five, with Herbert Zehnder and Donald Murras as aircraft commanders. The planned route would require nine aerial refuelings, all from Lockheed HC-130P Combat King tankers. They departed from Floyd Bennet Field and landed in Paris, just as Lindbergh did. The HH-3Es took off in the wee hours of **May 31, 1967** and covered 4,271 miles in 30 hours, 46 minutes. Major Zehnder was recognized by the FAI as having made it in world record time (for a helicopter on a FAI-recognized course), a record that was still standing as of 2017.

Flying a helo across the Atlantic was no mean feat, but Major Zehnder didn't get much of a chance to celebrate. He had already served a tour as a JGG helicopter pilot in Vietnam before the trans-Atlantic flight, and after the flight, he was off again to Vietnam to provide the long-range combat support for which the Jolly Green Giant was made.

This particular story has a fork in the road-type issue. I have two usually-reliable sources that differ in one critical point in what happens next. But first, I have to set the stage a bit.

The "Summer of Love" was in 1967, starting just after the HH-3E's trans-Atlantic flight. The Beatles released "Sgt. Pepper" in the US on June 2, and the Vietnam war was rapidly heating up, and would continue to do so for the next few years. We went from the Summer of Love to the Year from Hell (1968), with the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy, saved in part by *Apollo 8* at Christmastime. More combat ensued the following year, the one in which Humans first walked on the Moon. It's a time almost impossible for those who did not live through it to understand.

The pace of aerial military operations against Vietnam resulted in a number of downed airmen becoming POWs. We knew our pilots were being maltreated, and we really wanted to rescue them, but they were being held in smaller, more-difficult-to-find, compounds.

One such camp was at a place near Hanoi called Son Tay. Intelligence suggested that as many as 55 POWs were there, and that it might be possible to have Army special forces, supported by Air Force assets, get in, get them, and get out again. It would be called "Operation Kingpin."

The Air Force contributed over 100 aircraft of various types to Kingpin, including C-and-C aircraft, fighters for air defense, tankers, and assault helicopters. Fifty-six selected assault Green Berets would be transported to Son Tay by a group of HH-3Es, free the prisoners, and then withdraw via the Green Giants. One was intentionally sacrificed at landing, using its rotors to chop up overhanging tree branches to make the way clear for the other helos; its crew would help with the prisoners and withdraw with them. Most accounts have Major Zehnder as its pilot.

Naval air got into the act, too, flying a number of diversionary missions over Haiphong.

OK, here's the fork in the road I mentioned above. One reference, the [Air Force Magazine website](#), clearly states (calendar entry for May 31-June 1) that **Major Zehnder flew the very same Green Giant to Son Tay that he flew on the first helo trans-Atlantic flight**, and that's the way I'm telling it here. However, the [This Day in Aviation](#) website very clearly presents info on the fate of the two Green Giants on the trans-Atlantic flight indicated that neither of them was involved in the Son Tay mission. Both were lost in combat in Vietnam, but not at Son Tay. None of the other references listed below mentions the issue one way or another.

In any case, Major Zehnder was there, whichever Green Giant he was flying. And, regardless of whatever one he was flying, Operation Kingpin was a bust.

Son Tay: Operation Kingpin

The attack force, six Green Giants, two support aircraft, and five attack planes, took off from Thailand on November 20, 1967. They approached Son Tay at very low level, arriving just after 2:00 AM local time. The support craft dropped flares, and the lead helicopter attacked guard positions with their mini-gun. The second helo chopped up the trees as planned (although they were taller than thought by the planners), and disgorged Green Berets to start with the prisoner rescue. A third helo landed just outside the camp perimeter, attacking guard positions on the way in and landing more troops. A fourth landed at a nearby camp, faced a brief firefight, and departed unscathed.

But there were no prisoners to be found. Either the intelligence officers were fooled or the prisoners had left not long before the attack.

The mission was aborted. All 56 of the Green Berets, and all flight crew, including Major Zehnder, returned safely to base. One operator broke his ankle, and one other suffered a minor wound.

A SAM got one of the supporting F-105s on the way home. They were near one of the refueling tankers and with a C-and-C plane nearby, as well as several of the raid Green Giants, rescue of the two crewmen was quickly made.

The mission's objective, to rescue POWs, was not met. However, there were some positive results of the rescue attempt. First, other POWs heard of it, and their morale soared. Second, the raid caused the North to consolidate its prison camps; being around more countrymen also helped prisoner morale. Third, a night raid so near to Hanoi raised serious concern (and rightfully so) on the part of North Vietnamese commanders about other possible targets near Hanoi/Haiphong. And fourth, there were a lot of useful "lessons learned" that helped future special missions planning and execution. On the down side, military intelligence took a black eye. But none could doubt the courage of the rescuers!

Herb Zehnder received a Silver Star for his part in the Son Tay rescue attempt. He served after Vietnam in a series of helicopter air-and-rescue billets, ending up as a wing vice-commander. He retired from the Air Force as a colonel in September 1, 1975, and passed away on March 4, 2008.

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Last Edited on 29 May 2021