

The last of an old warrior

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The MH-6 Little Bird helicopter has been employed in the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (Airborne) for more than 20 years supporting Special Operations ground forces during numerous campaigns and battles. However, the helicopter's long lineage of mission success started well before the Night Stalkers began utilizing it. Now that the Regiment is complete with its MH-6 modernization efforts, and with the retirement of the last legacy MH-6C model in October, it's worth looking at not only a brief history of its predecessor, the OH-6 Cayuse, but also the history of one of the Regiment's legacy MH-6C helicopters: tail #68-17332.

History of the OH-6 helicopter

In 1960, the Department of Defense saw a need for a light observation helicopter capable of fulfilling various roles, including personnel transport, escort and attack missions, casualty evacuation and observation. Twelve companies took part in the ensuing competition. Hughes submitted the Model 369, nicknamed the "flying egg" because of its shape. Two other aircraft designs, one by Hiller and one by Bell, were selected as finalists, but the Army later included the Hughes helicopter. The Bell design was eventually eliminated from the contest, and the Hughes 369 was redesignated as the OH-6A Cayuse. The first of the five prototypes ordered by the Army flew Feb. 27, 1963, and was delivered to Fort Rucker, Ala., the following November to begin trial testing. The Cayuse quickly became distinguished for its high performance and low noise due to its four-bladed rotor and small size. The compactness of the fuselage made the helicopter light and sturdy with low drag, while still offering the occupants good protection even in hard landings. Following the trials, the OH-6A was announced as the winner in May 1965, and large-scale production began with an initial order for 714. The order was later increased to 1,300. In total, 1,434 helicopters were built, the last of which was delivered in August 1970. Between March and April 1966, the Cayuse established no fewer than 23 world records, including speed, distance and altitude records. It also broke the speed record for helicopters of its class by reaching speeds of more than 277 kilometers per hour. All of the MH6-Cs in the 160th SOAR(A) began their tactical employments during the Vietnam War era, including MH-6C #332. Nearly 39 years after purchase, its final resting place is as a combat mission simulator in one of several Night Stalker training areas at Fort Campbell, Ky.

The History of helicopter OH-6

Tail #68-17332 (MH-6C)

According to military records, the OH-6A tail # 68-17332, was purchased in October 1969. It was shipped to the Republic of Vietnam in December 1969 to the Division Artillery of the 23rd Infantry Division at Chu Lai. The first incident recorded took place Oct. 11, 1970. By this time, #332 had seen more than 600 flight hours. The aircraft was on a resupply mission, flying at 2,500 feet above ground level when the metal cover of a water cooler flew out of the cargo door, slamming into the tail rotor system. Fortunately, the pilot was able to land at Duc Pho with no further damage. After a second incident in July 1971, the aircraft returned to the United States. It later redeployed to Vietnam in May 1972 with the 388th Transportation Company. Once arriving in theater, it was then transferred to F Troop, 4th Cavalry Regiment, in Tan My.

The final incident recorded in Vietnam happened Dec. 21, 1972. Since its first incident more than two years prior, #332 had booked 1,476 flight hours. The aircraft was flying at 150 feet with an airspeed of 80 knots. The pilot noticed a change in engine noise signifying engine failure, and the engine out warning lit as the helicopter began an autorotation. The helicopter made a hard landing on a narrow dirt road and sustained some damage on touchdown.

In February 1973, OH-6A #332 returned to the United States at the close of the Vietnam War. It remained in storage until March 1974 when the Oklahoma National Guard received the aircraft. It remained there until assigned to the Task Force-160. It was transferred to Fort Campbell, Ky., where it remained in the Special Operations Aviation Training Company until its last flight on Jan. 9, 1998, at which time it was decommissioned from active military service.

During the time it served in SOATC, it had an engine failure while returning from a basic skills evaluation flight south of Nashville, Tenn., on the night of Feb. 6, 1996. Retired Maj. Cortney Stratman, a combat mission instructor, and rated student pilot Chief Warrant Officer Peter Schuessler accomplished a successful autorotation to an open snow-covered field, landing with no damage to the aircraft.

In 2006, MH-6C tail #68-17332 was transformed into the Regiment's current LASAR (Little Bird) combat mission simulator at Fort Campbell, Ky. Not only will #332 be used to continue training Night Stalkers, but as of Oct. 1, #332 is the last remnant of an MH-6C in the 160th SOAR(A).

The Regiment has been modernizing its fleet of MH-6s for the past seven years. The modernization was completed in October 2008 when the 160th received its 51st MH-6M helicopter and turned in its last legacy MH-6C.

The upgrades of the MH-6M are significant, including increases in the maximum gross weight from almost 4,000 to nearly 4,700 pounds; increases in the aircraft power margin with six main rotor blades instead of five, and a four-bladed tail rotor instead of two. A digital cockpit provides single point entry for navigation, communications and weapons management. There's increased commonality with similar avionics architecture to other airframes, an enlarged aft cargo opening, improved tail stinger and improved tail rotor drive shaft system.

Although the MH-6M will carry the Regiment far into the future supporting Special Operations ground forces, the MH-6C contributed directly to the success of this Regiment by flying in excess of 60,000 hours in support of operations and training. So, when the final MH-6C, tail #68-17249, flew away Oct. 1, it truly represented the last of an old warrior.