

LAST MARINE SQUADRON IN IRAQ

The World Famous HMM-364 Purple Foxes

By Capt Zachary P. Jones, HMM-364 squadron pilot

The “World Famous Purple Foxes” spent nearly half of their first decade of existence deployed to Vietnam. Following in the tradition of a storied history in that last long war, in early February Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 364 completed the last of five deployments to Iraq, spanning the entire duration of the conflict from the March up to the march out. In 2003, HMM-364 flew into southern Iraq on the first day of the war. In 2010, the Purple Foxes were the last Marine squadron in Iraq, flying on the final day of the Marine mission in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

HMM-364’s recent return from OIF 09.2 marked the completion of a deployment that was, for the squadron, in many ways familiar. However, with the Marine Corps leaving Iraq the deployment proved the last of its kind. With no relief in place and the retrograde of six years of accumulated equipment and luxury items, the deployment presented some unique challenges for the squadron both operationally and logistically.

Ultimately, the squadron’s last of five OIFs would book-end another chapter in Marine aviation, as the final act served to highlight the role played by the Purple Foxes throughout this particular story of Marine Corps history.

The CH-46E *Phrogs* flown by HMM-364 have seen many a clime and place over the last half century, but none so much in the previous decade as the deserts of Iraq. The squadron first entered the region through Kuwait in 2003, supporting attacks by the 1st Marine Division’s Regimental

Combat Team 7 and the British 42nd Commando on the first night of the invasion. The squadron traveled with 1st MarDiv from Basra to Baghdad, flying Casualty Evacuation (CASEVAC), humanitarian, and logistical support missions for nine months.

Purple Foxes jumped to the sound of the CASEVAC bell again throughout OIFs III and 05-07.2 from their desert home in Al Taqaddum, Al Anbar province. The squadron answered each of several thousand calls for help with such uncompromising speed and determination that they revived their decades-old motto, “Give a Shit,” which since then has again adorned squadron patches and aircraft whenever in a combat zone.

These two deployments, in addition to a fourth to OIF 08.2, also saw the Purple Foxes providing general support and VIP movement throughout the western area of operations. All told, during their OIF missions—all sustained during high tempos of operation and many spanning volatile years of conflict—the Marines of HMM-364 proved themselves year after year in providing a substantial and invaluable amount of expert assault support to the war effort.

To that measure, the latest, and last, “Swiftly” deployment to Iraq proved no different.

The Purple Foxes began their most recent deployment in early October 2009, with the arrival in country of the main body and relief in place of HMM-268, a sister squadron from Camp Pendleton. But the preparation for this OIF 09.2



The world famous Purple Foxes launch a “six-pack.”
(Photo by Cpl Michael Haas)



“Dash last” departs the Phrog Pond for Operation Castor II. (Photo by Cpl Michael Haas)



Sgt Jess Peele reenlists aboard a Purple Fox Phrog.

deployment began nearly a year before, when the squadron conducted a detachment for desert training to Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada, in December 2008, only six weeks after returning home from OIF 08.1. The squadron then spent the first seven months of 2009 at Camp Pendleton training new aircrew and preparing for August pre-deployment training at Marine Corps Base Twentynine Palms, California.

In August 2009, the squadron flew ten aircraft to the Twentynine Palms Expeditionary Air Field to begin a month of MAGTF training at Enhanced Mojave Viper (EMV) during the Marine Corps’ first fully integrated combined arms exercise since 2001. Though encompassing many aspects of pre-deployment training, the main objective at EMV was the ground-air integration events. These culminated in four aviation and ground live-fire Clear, Hold, Build (CHB) missions, each involving extensive coordination with H-1 escorts, AV-8B Close Air Support (CAS), and Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) surveillance, while the squadron utilized six helicopters to move an entire company of Marines.

At the conclusion of a demanding month of training while living on station at Camp Wilson, “Swiftly” received rave reviews from the EMV evaluators and MAWTS-1 instructors, setting the standard for assault support squadrons to emulate during subsequent EMVs. Most importantly, the squadron completed its pre-deployment aircrew training during missions that exposed them to high temperature and high density altitude conditions, as well as dusty, low-light level night vision landings.

Once again, Purple Foxes were prepared for any contingency during OIF, and were ready to meet the challenges of operations in Iraq.

With just over a month between EMV and “boots on deck” in country, September provided one unique opportunity for squadron Marines to exhibit their legendary camaraderie. On the last weekend before

their departure, many Purple Foxes chose to travel together to Big Bear to participate in the annual Seven Stars Foundation Memorial Run, recognizing the ultimate sacrifice paid by fallen comrades: Purple Foxes killed in action over the skies of Iraq in February 2007.

So on the eve of combat, Purple Foxes new and old offered remembrance to and recognized their place in a legacy stretching from the “Super Gaggle” of Khe Sanh through “Morphine 12” and the Euphrates Valley. They then departed to write the next chapter in their history.

After the relief in place of HMM-268, the squadron held a small transfer of authority ceremony on 15 October during which the Commanding Officer, LtCol Robert Boucher, and SgtMaj Derek Leggett mounted the squadron CASEVAC bell. Tasking began, and the squadron immediately continued providing the same expert assault support as in the past, following a seamless transition.

Since HMM-364’s last deployment, coalition forces had redeployed out of the major cities. So despite the familiarity of the operating area to many aircrew who had experienced it previously, OIF 09.2 did involve a change of scene, as the Purple Foxes adjusted to their new home at the “Phrog Pond” in Al Asad. Though the majority general support and VIP missions remained similar in nature, many flights would now include longer legs, given Al Asad’s more remote location.

Another change had the squadron falling in on only 13 aircraft, two less than the previous standard. Regardless, the Purple Foxes quickly assumed a measured battle rhythm, and continued to do more with less, quickly becoming recognized throughout Anbar and beyond, with some supported units requesting “Swiftly” by name.

As the Marines of Multi-National Force-West (MNF-W) extricated themselves from the AO for retrograde, it was their own CH-46Es, as the only full Marine squadron remaining,

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Cpl Carmen Zangari calls a Swift aircraft to the deck at the completion of another successful mission. (Photo by Cpl Michael Haas)

that provided the backbone of the required aviation support. The Purple Foxes made frequent long trips to familiar but far-flung western outposts, including Trebil, Waleed, Ubaydi, Camp Korean Village, and other points along the Syrian and Jordanian borders.

“Swift” also made daily trips to Ramadi and Al Taqadum, as MNF-W consolidated the first and closed down the second. It was a strange sight for many Purple Foxes to see deserted their former home at TQ—to be making advisory calls to Iraqi Air Force helicopters near what had once been a bustling hub of Marine (and Purple Fox) activity during past deployments.

The deployment was marked by other milestones, including one momentous flight during which SSGT James McGuinness exceeded 5000 flight hours in the CH-46E. Flying the landmark mission with him was a special crew, including LtCol Boucher, Maj Greg Earnest, and Hospital Corpsman First Class Lawrence Courtney, whose total cumulative flight time exceeded 15,600 hours.

Despite the demands of its operational requirements, the squadron also continued training in conjunction with its missions, with the designation of multiple new section leads, basic instructor pilots, and seven new aircraft commanders. The continuation of training, NATOPS checks, and instrument checks while in theater not only ensured squadron readiness in the future, but produced an operational climate that maintained some focus at all times on core skills and safe aviation procedures. Ultimately, the squadron completed the deployment with its notable safety record still intact.

All told, the squadron served admirably in adhering to its inherited motto, always willing to take that extra cargo or ensure that no “space-a” soldier, sailor, airman, Marine, or civilian was left behind. In less than four complete months of flight operations from TOA to total retrograde, HMM-364 moved over 6399 passengers and 139,615 pounds of cargo while servicing 185 VIPs during 2219.7 flight hours.

Squadron operations enjoyed its fair share of trials unique to operating in a foreign desert environment and increasing coordination with Army aviation as that service moved into Anbar, but an additional set of challenges was provided by the impending logistical demands of total retrograde. Though HMM-364 continued to execute tasking until the last day of the Marine mission in Iraq, the squadron had to begin planning immediately for the redeployment CONUS.

While ensuring the Phrog Pond remained serviceable for any future tenants, there was an early emphasis on the removal of detritus that included a sizeable amount of support equipment and luxury items accumulated over six years of operations by multiple squadrons in a mature theater of operations. Of particular importance was the identification for DRMO and transfer of re-usable items, in light of the increasing logistical footprint for the Marine Corps in Afghanistan.

The December 2009 retrograde of Marine Aviation Logistics Squadron 26 (MALS-26), prior to the squadron’s end of mission, required squadron Marines to ensure that the unit would be logistically independent and able to continue to execute the same amount of tasking without the substantial in theater support to which units had previously been accustomed. The squadron’s maintenance and logistics departments prepared for this eventuality by identifying early the unit’s essential requirements in theater.

The squadron also completed in advance various required equipment and airframe inspections so that nothing would expire while HMM-364 remained in theater. The foresight and extra workload assumed to accomplish these preparations concurrent with continuing flight operations ensured the squadron’s continued success in achieving mission accomplishment.

In the face of a dwindling logistical footprint, the Purple Foxes made do with what was available.

The squadron never dropped a mission.

As the squadron determined the fate of various and sundry items in the Phrog Pond—from refrigerators to HMMWVs and everything in between—and





A six-plane flight spins up on the line at the Phrog Pond. (Photo by Cpl Michael Haas)

SSgt James McGuinness hits 5000 CH-46E flight hours during a "Swiftly" mission.

how best to recycle, re-use, retrograde, or refuse them, they were again reminded of their unique place in history as the proprietors of several objects of potential historical interest. With an eye to preserving the legacy of not only the Purple Foxes, but all *Phrog* squadrons that served in Iraq, they identified and carefully preserved several items for ultimate donation to the National Museum of the Marine Corps in Quantico, Virginia.

This experience was an invaluable reminder to many Purple Foxes that the traditions of our Corps are passed to posterity not only through things done yesterday, but also through what we continue to do as Marines today.

Finally, in January 2010, HMM-364 itself actually began the retrograde process. Maintenance broke down five aircraft, which were loaded onto C-5s for retrograde to California. An advanced party left to prepare for main body retrograde. Meanwhile, with fewer pilots and aircraft, tasking remained consistent, and the Purple Foxes continued to make mission throughout the AO.

Swiftly provided support until the very end, as the last Marines departed from a conflict whose battles have already been incorporated into our Corps' history. MNF-W shifted to USF-W; the last Marine support elements left while Swiftly remained an operational unit.

Through HMM-364, the Marine Corps honored its MAGTF doctrine to the very end—with Marines providing their own integral aviation assets through the entirety of their appointed duties. Marines moved Marines out of Iraq during the march out, and the six-rotor echoes of Purple Fox Phrogs off the wadi walls of Anbar province was an essential part of that.

Self-sufficient to the end, it was a Marine CH-46E that flew MajGen Richard Tryon on 23 January 2010, to the transfer of authority ceremony with the U.S. Army marking end of mission for the U.S. Marine Corps in the nation of Iraq.

The challenges of retrograde did not quite end with the mission, however. Squadron Marines remarkably completed the breakdown of the remaining aircraft in less than two days.

However, the combination of Russian AN-124s and U.S. Air Force C-5s available for strategic airlift home could only land the *Phrogs* at MCAS Miramar, requiring substantial administrative, logistical, and operational coordination in order for the returning Purple Foxes to truly accomplish their retrograde mission. But with the help of PKL contractors and MAG-16 tenant units, the job seemed another easy task happily completed by a proud band of warriors glad to be home.

Interestingly enough, the use of Russian contracts to airlift CH-46Es had been pioneered by the Purple Foxes themselves, when they became the first unit to deploy using AN-124s in 2002.

So it was on a crisp January day in 2010, following a jettison of all remaining ordnance, that the last three *Phrogs* landed in Iraq at Al Asad after a final successful mission over the Euphrates valley. Squadron members gathered to watch what can only be described as a bittersweet moment, knowing full well that they could be witnessing the last CH-46Es ever to land in a combat zone.

For Swiftly, it marked the end of a mission to Mesopotamia as long and full of history as that previous era, not so long ago, when the squadron motto spent years flying over the jungles and mountains of Vietnam.

As the Marine Corps ramps up its mission in Afghanistan and continues pushing toward its MV-22 transition, it seems only right for Marine aviation to conclude its decade-old commitment in Iraq with its legendary "BattlePhrog." Despite its scheduled retirement several years from now, it is notable that the CH-46E is not a legacy aircraft, but still so integral a part of the MAGTF that as the Marine Corps pared down to its essence in Iraq, a substantial element of that essence was revealed in Swiftly: the perennially-reliable, tandem-rotor, medium-lift capability provided by its HMMs.

Though the sunset may be approaching the horizon, and Swiftly likely saw the last time the *Phrog* returns from war, in one way or another, the *Phrog* will certainly see a lot more action in its remaining years.