Coast Guard Unit Award Committee  
Foundation for Coast Guard History  
Attn: Mr. John Galluzzo  
20 Evergreen Lane  
Hanover, MA 02339

Dear Sir:

On March 7, 2014, Air Station Houston celebrated the 50th Anniversary of its commissioning at Ellington Field in Houston, Texas, with a ceremony presided over by Rear Admiral Kevin S. Cook, Coast Guard District 8 Commander. Over 150 former Air Station Commanding Officers and members, local Congressman, dignitaries, and friends of the Coast Guard gathered to celebrate the history of Air Station Houston and the accomplishments of its personnel. In total, our outreach resulted in over 12,000 persons being contacted to participate, attend or contribute to the ceremony.

During much of 2013, Air Station members teamed with the Coast Guard Aviation Association to contact former Commanding Officers, pilots, and aircrew to collect Air Station history and memorabilia. Nearly 30 responses were received and the recollections, first-person accounts, and pictures (some of which are included in enclosures (1) and (2)) speak to the accomplishments of Air Station Houston’s personnel throughout the years. This endeavor yielded some truly invaluable findings.

LCDR (Ret.) John Klemm recounted the hasty commissioning of Air Station Houston on December 23, 1963 when the third Sikorsky H-52 helicopter arrived from Elizabeth City. Mr. Chris Kilgore provided a first-person account of his experience hoisting 22 survivors after the M/V Burmah Agate and M/V Mimosa collided and caught fire in Galveston Bay. CAPT (Ret.) Stephen Goldhammer proudly described his tour as Commanding Officer with the commissioning of the current hangar in June 1987 and receipt of the first HH-65A helicopter in November 1988.

Those who attended the ceremony read about these recollections and others on seven storyboards displayed on the hangar deck as a pictorial “walk down memory lane.” Additionally, the Sector Houston-Galveston Public Affairs detachment created a historical video presentation. Following the ceremony, the storyboards were hung in the passageways for future enjoyment. The video is played at the beginning of all Air Station tours. Through our efforts to research our past, we have created lasting reminders about our roots in this rich history.

To commemorate the 50th Anniversary, three current members led by AET2 James Yockey, redesigned the unit patch to include the text “Est. 1963” to capture our humble beginnings. The
patch design is included as enclosure (3). The Air Station also worked with Mr. Bryan Snuffer to commission a beautiful painting that captures Air Station Houston’s last 50 years (enclosure 4). The painting was unveiled during the ceremony.

This event allowed my crew the opportunity to explore our roots and educate ourselves and the ceremony’s attendees on an important part of Coast Guard History, the beginnings of Air Station Houston. I proudly nominate Air Station Houston for the Foundation for Coast Guard History 2014 Award.

Sincerely,

C. J. HULSER, Acting

4 Enclosures
I am forwarding 3 pictures of our commissioning ceremony. The reason we are in our working uniforms was because the Eighth District Commander was in a hurry to change our PCO to CO which would pass the full responsibility of the units ops to the CO. The reason for the long delay in commissioning the unit was that Headquarters had dictated that Houston must have 3 Operational Helo's before they could be commissioned. So it just happened that the day we got 3 Bravo Zero the Admiral was in Houston on other business when informed of our situation he ordered that the crew fall in and that he was on his way. We became a fully operational unit on that cold and rainy day in Dec 1963.

As you know Houston had a very rough beginning. The crew reported in early July. Our Hangar was still undergoing modifications/repairs. We received 3 Helo's from sikorsky via Ecity. They arrived one evening and the very next day we started training fits. The first flight had a flame out over Webster, TX the pilot did an auto to what he thought was solid ground which was actually a mud flat. On impact the main rotor chopped the tail section off. The second mishap took place in Galveston Bay. While trying to retrieve a pump dropped by a Goat out of Corpus Christi the crewmember using a boat hook snagged the parachute which immediately was sucked up by the rotor wash and rapped around the tail rotor snapping the rotor shaft. The Helo did 360's for about one hour and forty five minutes before it toppled (this was before floatation bags). The Cutter Blackthorn towed the belly up Helo to base Galveston where upon direction from HQ the Blackthorn attempted to hoist the Helo using the tail wheel tie down as the lifting point. We objected saying that the tie down was not mend for hoisting. We were ignored. The tie down gave way and the Helo fell back in to the water and hitting the Blackthorn sustaining some damage to the Helo. The third accident occurred during a training fit when the engine cowling flew off damaging all 3 main rotor blades. That's the end of the accidents. We were truly blesses that we had no injurires. The professionalism displayed by the Pilots and crew seen Houston through it's rough times and made it one of the best Air Stations in the Coast Guard.

- excerpt from LCDR (Ret.) John Klemm’s email of 31 Dec 2013
- courtesy of LCDR (Ret.) John Klemm
JUST IN TIME

01 Nov 79

"Air Station Houston, RCC." As the radio watch responded, J.C. Cobb, the Senior Duty Officer, and I were out of our racks and reaching for our flight suits. A routine alert over the SARTEL rarely merited more than a partially raised eyelid until the details came in - but there was an unusual urgency in the tone this time. As we all know, there is SAR and there is SAR; and the entire watch seemed to sense that this one was different.

JC was already on his way to ops as RCC reported a collision and a tanker on fire off the Galveston sea buoy. I ran into the hanger as the PA system announced "put the ready helo on the line," joining our crewman, AE2 Tom Wynn. I noted that the tug was already manned and the hangar doors were being pushed back. One of my particular memories of this mission was how every aspect seemed to be anticipated by those involved. Commands and requests were "pro forma," the entire mission seemed to run on autopilot - a testament to superb training and standardization.

As the helo cleared the hanger, I started the engine. When JC arrived a very short while later, the runup was complete and we were ready to go. Although datum was almost 40 miles distant, sitting on the ground we could see the glow on the horizon. However, as we lifted off, the RADALT failed! Technically, the aircraft was down for night flight. JC and I glanced at each other in a way that sought affirmation that the other was not uncomfortable with pressing on - then, without a word, we resumed our respective tasks as we headed toward the scene. It was still dark, but wouldn't be for much longer; besides, we could see that there was plenty of light on scene.

I don't recall today the time from notice to launch, but when we checked it later, it was fast, very fast, only a few minutes. And in this case, it would make a difference.

The scene was dramatic. The tanker Burmah Agate was an inferno, fully engulfed, as was much of the water around it for a considerable distance, particularly aft of the vessel. Nearby, the freighter Mimosa was afame as well. Approaching the Burmah Agate, there seemed to be little we could do - it appeared unlikely that there would be any survivors still on board. We intended to pass from the stern, along the port side (windward and least involved), searching the vessel and the water. As we neared, one of the forward tanks exploded. The fireball towered above us - and we were still at 200' or so! Suddenly, flying along the side of the vessel did not seem like such a good idea. At that moment Wynn, informed us that he had two crewmen in sight, on the aircastle.

Even as the command to rig the basket was given, we heard "basket's out the door," followed by vectors. We slid into position at the same moment the basket reached the two survivors. The heat was intense and the air turbulent. It was clear that we were not going to be able to hold a position this close to the vessel, but much to our surprise we heard "two persons in the basket, basket coming up." After only a moment in position, we were sliding off to the left, clear of the

Encl: (2)
vessel and the towering flames.

With the two survivors on board, we turned our attention to Mimosa. The fire on that vessel was spreading from the forward area aft, toward the superstructure. The crew appeared to all be crowded onto the port bridge wing. Over the next several minutes, we hoisted 10 crewmembers in three hoists. Although the fire danger was not as great, these were interesting hoists nonetheless. When the basket was lowered, the ship’s crew were all clamoring to get into it, all grabbing for the basket at once. To make it more interesting, the ship was underway, but without command of the rudder, doing 360° turns. Because of weight and wind, we could not follow the ship around. The situation was further complicated by the masts, wires, antennae and other gear above the bridge, necessitating a high hoist. We allowed the ship to turn under us and passed control of the helo back and forth, depending on who had a visual on the ship at the time.

With 12 survivors now on board, we had run out of room. We decided that we would take them to a nearby manned oil platform and return to get the others. Moving away from Mimosa, we discovered that we had been enjoying the assistance of updrafts on the windward side of the vessel as well as the rising air from the fire below. As the helo slid off to the side, the bottom fell out. A short breathless moment later, the blades bit into clean air as we gained translational lift, leveled off and flew away, albeit a bit lower than we started. (After all, what’s a rescue without a little salt spray?)

We returned to Mimosa twice more, hoisting 6, then 4, for a total of 22, before reaching a critical fuel state. A second helo rescued five others from Mimosa.

And then it got really interesting. As the circling Mimosa began to drift toward nearby oil and gas platforms, the situation on scene became even more tense. The efforts to stop Mimosa, eventually accomplished by fouling her propeller, is an exciting story by itself. The entire operation, including containment and recovery of the spilled crude, would continue for months.

We later learned that Burmah Agate, with 10.7 mil. gallons of crude aboard, had been anchored in Bolivar Roads when the outbound Mimosa, on a perfectly clear night, slammed into her at full speed. Oil from one of Burmah Agate’s breached tanks poured into the empty Mimosa through a gash in Mimosa’s bow. Even as Mimosa disengaged, a substantial fire developed on her as well. In total, 31 seamen died, most of them from Burmah Agate.

Burmah Agate continued to burn for 69 days. It was estimated that app. 7.8 mil. gallons were consumed by the fire, another 2.6 mil. gallons released. The Burmah Agate oil spill is still listed as one of the greatest oil spills of all time. (gcaptain.com)

The most interesting thing about this rescue, for us anyway, came from a subsequent hospital interview of the two crew members of Burmah Agate we had rescued. It seems they were best friends. One of them could not swim. While their shipmates jumped into the water to escape the exploding and burning ship, these two stayed put, one vowing not to leave his non-swimming friend alone. (None of those who jumped into the water survived.) Eventually, the metal deck became too hot for them to stand on, so they climbed up and stood on the wooden railing. Then, there was a huge explosion (the one we observed on approach). At that point they decided that
they would have no choice but to take their chances in the water. They were poised to jump when suddenly there was a bright light, a rush of wind and the basket appeared directly in front of them - as if from heaven.

Not quite, just the United States Coast Guard, but for them, a distinction without a difference.

Chris Kilgore

--------------------------------------------------

The Details:

0500A01Nov79

AIRSTA Houston, UCN 030
HH-52A, CG 1426

LCDR J.C. Cobb
LTJG C. Kilgore
AE2 T. Wynn

The second helo on scene was commanded by CDR (later RADM) David Ciancaglini. I don’t recall any of the other crewmembers on that aircraft. They hoisted a number of folks from Mimosa as well.

Postscript:

We wondered if anyone else had ever flown an HH-52 with 15 POB, and a half bag of fuel to boot! We contemplated doing a weight & balance after the fact, but decided it would probably constitute an admission against interest.

JC retired at AIRSTA Houston not too long after this. And not too long after that, he died unexpectedly from a heart attack. I use his initials because that’s all he ever went by. I’m not even sure I remember his real name (Jerome possibly). JC was an interesting character. He was a Mustang, with a wealth of experience. He was also the master of trivial information, particularly within the realm of helo ops and SAR. I believe he was an EMT and worked with a volunteer fire department in his spare time. When flying with JC, the "book" only provided a small percentage of the knowledge he attempted to impart to us.

CGC Valiant was launched as OSC that morning. I returned to the scene later and staged from Valiant. I had been on deployment with Valiant a number of times, the most recent just a couple

3
of months earlier - the ship and its crew were very well known to me. Arriving on the bridge, I found my favorite Captain looking a bit casually dressed. It seems they had returned from deployment the night before the collision and were just getting settled in for some well deserved rest at home when they got the urgent call to return immediately and deploy as OSC. Among the things that CDR Jim Loy forgot rushing out the door was his belt.