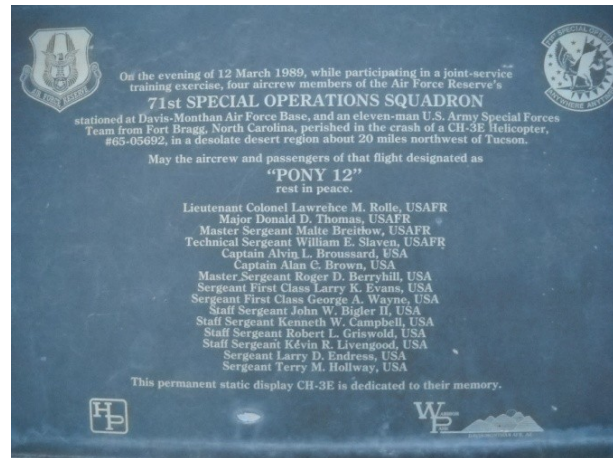


These Things I Do...That Others May be Remembered, The Tragic Crash of CH-3E, 65-05692



Static display of CH-3E helicopter and memorial at Davis-Monthan AFB

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I happen to come across the static display of a CH-3 helicopter at Davis-Monthan AFB. I had worked and flown on CH-3 helicopters when I was in the Navy and I was very interested to see the static display. Near the helicopter was a plaque that dedicated the static display as a memorial to honor a crew that had perished in a crash of a CH-3 in a desolate desert area 20 miles from Davis-Monthan. Right then and there I made up my mind to locate the crash site if it was at all possible. I ordered a copy of the accident report, researched the local newspapers, searched the internet and formulated a plan to find the desolate crash site.

The Vietnam-era CH-3E, tail number 65-05692, Jolly Green Giant Helicopter was assigned to Davis-Monthan AFB as part of the Air Force Reserve's 71st Special Operations Squadron, now known as the 943rd Rescue Group. The motto of the 943rd Rescue Group is "These Things We Do...That Others May Live."



CH-3E, 65-05692 before the accident

On Sunday, March 12, 1989, Air Force helicopter 65-05692, call sign PONY 1-2 with an Air Force Reserve crew of 4 and an 11 member Army Special Forces Team aboard from the 5th Special Forces Group assigned to Fort Bragg, N.C. was participating in a joint-service training exercise. The helicopter was number two of a two ship in trail formation on a planned night infiltration training mission. The flight began from Libby Army Airfield, Fort Huachuca Arizona, 79 miles southeast of Tucson, to the Air Force's Gila Bend Gunnery Range, 124 miles northwest of Tucson. On the way the helicopter stopped at Davis-Monthan AFB for refueling.

They departed Davis-Monthan at 7:20pm on a clear, moonless night and crashed approximately fifteen minutes later in an uninhabited desolate desert area adjacent to the Sahuaro National Monument about 20 miles northwest of Tucson. They crashed without getting any radio distress calls off and the other helicopter in the formation was unaware of what took place. The entire Air Force Reserve crew of 4 and the 11 member Army Special Forces Team were all were lost in the crash. One witness said he saw the crash from his house a few miles away. "I looked up and I saw a yellow ball, like flames, coming out of the back," he said. "Five seconds later I saw it hit the ground, and then there was a red fireball."

Air Force investigators looked at everything from weather to maintenance and weight to determine why the helicopter crashed. First they confirmed that the helicopter was flying at the prescribed altitude for the area just prior to the crash and they were not on a low-level mission. The use of controversial night vision goggles, which had been an issue in numerous military helicopter crashes at that time were also ruled out as a crash cause. The main rotor shaft nut, a fastener about a foot in diameter that holds the main rotor head to the helicopter frame, had been checked just two days before the crash. The helicopter was among more than 300 CH-3Es and similar helicopters inspected for defective nuts. The accident investigation team examined the nut and decided it "wasn't a factor in the accident." The nut was found still in place, holding what remained of the rotor blades to what remained of the helicopter's engine housing.

The mystery of why the helicopter crashed continued for some time until investigators dug deep into the maintenance records and examined the wreckage which was removed to Davis-Monthan and photographed. There wasn't much left because there was a post-crash fire that destroyed most of the evidence. It was determined that one of the main rotor blades was overhauled and replaced just before the crash. The main rotor blade that was replaced was incorrectly overhauled by the factory and had failed causing it to break off and take out the tail rotor.

It was further discovered that a number of other main rotor blades were also incorrectly overhauled. The overhaul company, United Technologies Corporation (UTC) and Sikorsky were later sued as a result of this accident. The lawsuit was filed on behalf of two Air Force Reserve crew members lost in the accident in court cases Slaven vs. UTC and Thomas vs. Sikorsky. A legal file with wreckage photographs is in the archives of a lawyer's office in Los Angeles. I contacted one of the lawyers in the case and he gave me some of the details of this story.

I traveled down to the area of the crash site south of Marana Arizona on several occasions in search of the exact crash site. The area is still desolate for the most part, but there are some areas of development. Using the original accident report I was able to narrow down my search area. I traversed the open desert in search of the exact spot. Luckily, one day as I crossed the sandy ground I spotted a small piece of melted aluminum, I knew I was close. I slowly searched the terrain for other signs. As I rounded a bush, I discovered the tell tell signs of the crash site. It was a small site, but I could tell this was the correct location. I found small bits of Plexiglas, aluminum, and other metal parts. I was able to identify some of the parts because I worked on the same model CH-3 when I was in the Navy. It was kind of spooky when I found something and then realized what it was. I was able to confirm the site by finding a part with a CH-3 Sikorsky part number on it. I believe many more small parts are buried at the site. On a sad note, I found several personal buttons which made me remember the crewmembers lost in the crash. After positively locating the site, I planned on placing a memorial at the crash site because of the great loss of life. The helicopter was packed with souls aboard.

The Air Force Reserve crew members lost in the accident were: Lt. Col. Lawrence M. Rolle, 41, of Phoenix, commander of the reserve squadron and co-pilot of the helicopter; Maj. Donald D. Thomas, 42, of Tempe, the pilot; Master Sgt. Malte Breitlow, 45, of Tucson, and Tech. Sgt. William E. Slaven, 37, also of Tucson.

The Army Special Forces Team aboard were from the 3rd Battalion, 5th Special Forces Group, Fort Bragg, N.C. They were Capt. Ivin L. Broussard, 30, of Sulphur, La.; Capt. Alan C. Brown, 32, West Plains, Mo.; Master Sgt. Roger D. Berryhill, 34, Pahokee, Fla.; Sgt. 1st Class Larry K. Evans, 30, Sparks, Nev.; Sgt. 1st Class George A. Wayne, 31, Whiteville, N.C.; Staff. Sgt. John W. Bigler II, 24, of Long Beach, Calif.; Staff Sgt. Kenneth W. Campbell, 26, Clinton, S.C.; Staff Sgt. Robert L. Griswold, Fayetteville, N.C.; Staff Sgt. Kevin R. Livengood, 29, San Antonio, Texas; Sgt. Larry D. Endress, 30, Clearwater, Fla.; and Sgt. Terry M. Holloway, 28, Los Angeles.

I had flown many times on CH-3 helicopters when I was in the military and it could have easily been me killed as a result of a defective main rotor blade. That is why I spent so much time researching, searching and remembering the tragic crash of CH-3E, 65-05692, "these things I do...that others may be remembered." I believe that it is important to remember the memory and sacrifices of those that have gone before us and paid the ultimate price to win and maintain the freedoms we all enjoy today. If we forget these sacrifices we will never truly appreciate how precious, valuable and costly these freedoms are. We must remember freedom is not free; it is paid for with the sweat from our brows, the tears of our families, and sometimes the blood of our comrades.



CH-3E, 65-05692 crash site



Remains of CH-3E, 65-05692 at the crash site with scale marker

A memorial cross was placed at the crash site on Memorial Day, May 31, 2010. Braving temperatures that were topping 100 degrees, I set out to remember forgotten heroes who died in the crash of their CH-3E helicopter. Earlier in the year, I had located the crash site and planned to return with a marker for the crash site victims due to the great loss of life that included 4 aircrew and 11 passengers. I thought they deserved something to mark the desolate desert site. I had just finished the marker and I was going to be in the area on Memorial Day, so I thought it would be a good time to place it. I planted the marker next to a small tree and just in front of the impact site. I then read off the list of the names of the fallen and then gave a final salute. My hope is that the marker will last for years. If I'm in the area again, I plan on checking on it.

They are not forgotten!

"They will live on as long as our collective memories of these brave men live on."

Sincerely, Dave Trojan



Placing the marker next to the crash site



Memorial site marker by Dave Trojan