

Although most of the action was happening in SEA, rescue innovators were hard at work back in the United States. The idea of refueling a helicopter in flight was being conceptualized. Air refueling was urgently needed in SEA. Straight line distances from FOLs, to many of the target areas in NVN, were approximately 150–190 miles. Helicopters rarely flew a straight line to downed airmen. Circuitous routes were flown to avoid enemy air defenses. The actual flight distance was frequently as much as three times that of a straight line. Many missions exceeded the 350-mile radius of the HH-3.

Major Harry P. Dunn had spent his entire Air Force career flying helicopters. He believed it was possible to air refuel an H-3 from a C-130. Headquarters Air Rescue Service authorized him to test the concept. He jerry-rigged a fuel probe to the front of a CH-3. While it was not plumbed to anything, it would serve the purpose of attempting a link up with an in-flight KC-130 refueler.

On 17 December 1965, Major Dunn took off to attempt an air-refueling linkup with a KC-130 owned by the US Marine Corps. Many engineers believed that the helicopter would be destroyed by the prop wash and wake turbulence, that occurred behind a KC-130. Skepticism was heightened by the fact that Major Dunn had never participated in an air refueling operation. Despite this skepticism, the test took place with results far better than expected. Major Dunn's theory was proved correct when he flew up behind the KC-130, slipped into refueling position, and on his first attempt plugged the dummy probe into the refueling basket.

At the completion of the air refueling, the following message was transmitted to HQ ARS.

SUBJECT: HELICOPTER AERIAL REFUELING

ON 15 DEC 65, AT MCAS CHERRY POINT, N.C., AN AIR FORCE CH-3 HELICOPTER SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETED A SERIES OF AERIAL REFUELING TESTS WHICH INCLUDED A FIVE-MINUTE HOOKUP WITH A MARINE CORPS KC-130F HERCULES AIRCRAFT. THIS DEMONSTRATED FOR THE FIRST TIME IN AVIATION HISTORY THE FEASIBILITY OF REFUELING A HELICOPTER IN FLIGHT USING CONVENTIONAL PROBE AND DROGE SYSTEM.

With the concept proven, Rescue Headquarters ordered an initial modification of a few HH-3C helicopters. The modified aircraft would become the HH-3E. Several HC-130Hs were in the final stages of assembly. HQ ARS ordered eleven of them to be configured as tankers. Air refueling would revolutionize helicopter SAR. It was to have a profound effect on successful SARs in SEA.

On the back of each picture was printed the following:

1365th PHOTOGRAPHIC SQUADRON

AEROSPACE AUDIO VISUAL SERVICE SQUADRON, USAF ORLANDO AFB., FLC













