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The Loneliest Post

HM-14, DET 1 - Pohang, South Korea



Written by: [Jan Tegler](#) on April 1, 2011

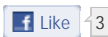
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An MH-53E Sea Dragon helicopter assigned to Mine Countermeasures Squadron (HM) 14 Det-1 lands aboard the amphibious dock landing ship USS Tortuga (LSD 46) as the ship anchors off Pohang, Republic of Korea. With their Sea Dragon chocked and chained, the crew of the first helo watch their fellow DET 1 helo come aboard. Tortuga took on the two Det-1 heavy-lift MH-53E Sea Dragon helicopters to ensure the crew was ready to support humanitarian assistance and tsunami relief operations in Japan as directed. U.S. Navy Photo by Lt. K. Madison Carter

Nearly 7,000 miles separate Helicopter Mine Countermeasures Squadron Fourteen's Detachment One (HM-14, DET 1) from its home base at Naval Station Norfolk, Va. Operating from Pohang Air Base/Pohang International Airport in the southeastern part of the country on the Sea of Japan, HM-14 is the sole U.S. Navy aviation unit on the Korean peninsula.

*The nearest commissary and PX are 100 miles distant.

*Squadron members live in quarters located on an ROK Marine Corps base.

*Visits from other U.S. military units are infrequent.

*When asked by other naval aviators what kind of work they do and where they do it, DET-1 members' responses are frequently met with blank stares and the words, "You do what, where?"

The unit is an island of naval aviation in an area of the world remote from most of the rest of the U.S. Navy, performing a mission flown by only two other squadrons on the planet. As such, DET-1 HM-14 makes a perfect starting point for a series of stories we're calling "The Loneliest Post."

The series aims to highlight operational U.S. military units that don't receive much attention – the kind of organizations that have existed for centuries it seems, doing important work in far-flung corners of the globe or even here in CONUS – quietly.

HM-14 and its sister squadron, HM-15, are the only U.S. Navy units performing the airborne mine countermeasures (AMCM) mission. Likewise, the MH-53E Sea Dragons they fly are the only examples of the type in the Navy. The aging heavy-lift helicopters are operated by just one other unit, HM-111, a Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force (JMSDF) AMCM squadron.

First deployed in 2006 to Pohang – an industrial/port city of just over 500,000 in Gyeongsang Province 250 miles southeast of Seoul – DET 1's primary mission mirrors that of its stateside core or "home guard,"

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according to HM-14 pilot Lt. (j.g.) Chris "Diva" Sedlak.

"Our main mission is to keep the area's waterways clear from mine threats," Sedlak notes. "We clear shipping lanes so that commercial shipping can move freely or so that warships [MEUs] can approach the coast for amphibious assaults. Day to day, we do training to keep our currency up and showcase what we can do."

Beyond the AMCM role, HM-14 also flies heavy vertical lift missions, transporting everything from equipment to VIPs (including occasional presidential support missions), and humanitarian aid/disaster relief missions.

With more than 700 personnel, HM-14 is one of the Navy's largest aviation units. Known as the "Vanguard," the squadron is further distinguished by its integrated active duty, TAR and selected reservist personnel. They endow the unit with an impressive range of skills and experience. Interestingly, there are only 34 Vanguard pilots.



"It's just about the largest squadron in the fleet, but we have very few aircrew," says Sedlak. "That's because of the breadth of our mission, how much gear we have and have to maintain, and the maintenance demands of these unique aircraft."

DET 1 is composed of only 90 personnel, including just six pilots and 14 aircrew. The balance of the unit includes maintainers who keep DET 1's two MH-53Es flying, maintainers who fix minesweeping sleds and avionics gear, RHIB (rigid-hull inflatable boat) crews who tend the sleds and HM-14 Seabees. Officers and enlisted personnel make six month deployments to Pohang in a phased rotation. "Diva" joined HM-14 just over one year ago and has been stationed at Pohang since September 2010.

A U.S. Navy MH-53E Sea Dragon helicopter assigned to Helicopter Mine Countermeasures Squadron (HM) 14 DET 1 prepares to take off from Naval Air Facility Misawa, Japan, March 18, 2011, to deliver food and water to people affected by the earthquake and tsunami on Japan's east coast. U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Matthew Bradley

Tasked by Mine Countermeasures Squadron 7 and CTF-76 (Commander, Amphibious Force, U.S. 7th Fleet, Okinawa, Japan), the squadron shares the base/airport with commercial airline traffic and several ROK Navy units, including P-3C, SH-60 and UH-1 squadrons. Visits by U.S. Navy units are rare – more like "drive-bys." HM-14 takes advantage whenever possible, flying out to amphibious ships like Japan-based *USS Denver* (LPD 9) to practice airborne and surface mine countermeasures.

Elements of the USMC's 1st MAW drop in once a year to practice operating from an expeditionary airfield, but otherwise DET 1 fliers see only ROK aviation units.

"The biggest ROK Navy use of the airfield is by the P-3 squadron," Diva says. "We don't interact with them too often besides showing them our capabilities and doing a small amount of cross-training."

HM-14 does engage other ROK Navy elements, however, participating in exercises with select South Korean units on a bi-monthly basis and with a larger force during the annual combined U.S./ROK field training exercises known as Foal Eagle.

"We'll fly down to Chinhae [navy base/port, southwest of Pohang] and do towing exercises, sharing information about how we do that with the ROK Navy," Sedlak reveals. "The Koreans are getting very interested in MCM. Most of their capability is in the form of surface assets, but now they're trying to learn AMCM like Japan is with HM-111."

Interaction with ROK Marines is surprisingly limited, given that DET 1 personnel live in quarters at Camp Mu Juk, home to the ROK's 1st Marine Division.

"We live on their base but we basically go about our own business," Sedlak affirms.

DET 1 may be the only naval aviation unit on the peninsula, but there are large U.S. Army and U.S. Air Force bases spread throughout the ROK. While the squadron doesn't operate with them frequently, they do rely on the Army and Air Force for a variety of support.

"We definitely couldn't do what we do without them," Sedlak stresses. "We'll call over to Osan [Air Base; USAF 51st Fighter Wing] and ask if we can use their external field to practice certain things or if we can use their night-vision device (NVG) pattern or training areas. Yesterday we flew to Kunsan Air Base [USAF 8th Fighter Wing] to pick up some gear. I'd say once a week we do a mission to one of the Air Force or Army bases to utilize their facilities."

So what's a typical day like at Pohang?

"Long," Sedlak answers.

As one of the DET's six officers, he wears many hats. In addition to his piloting duties, Diva serves as the unit's tactics officer, maintenance division officer, anti-terrorism and force protection officer and communications security officer.



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Aviation Warfare Systems Operator 2nd Class Sean Gilroy, left, and Aviation Warfare Systems Operator 3rd Class Jason Keller, members of the flight crew aboard an MH-53E Sea Dragon helicopter from the Vanguard of Helicopter Mine Countermeasure Squadron (HM 14) DET 1, embarked aboard the amphibious transport dock ship USS Tortuga (LSD 46), watch the sea as the helicopter departs Tortuga en route to transport personnel to Misawa Naval Air Facility. Tortuga was operating in the U.S. 7th Fleet area of responsibility supporting Operation Tomodachi. U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Josh Huebner

"Usually we have a two to three sortie flight schedule per day," Sedlak says. "We'll do our briefings and flight planning between 6:00 and 7:00 AM, sometimes earlier if we have to make a long flight. Then we launch on missions that usually last four hours, either towing our gear in a field or doing FAM [familiarization] work. When we come back we really get into our maintenance day."

Significantly, DET 1 junior officers take on leadership roles earlier than other naval aviators. As squadron tactics officer, Sedlak's duties reach further than one might imagine. In preparation for Foad Eagle, Sedlak is coordinating with Pohang officials to make sure the exercise has minimal impact on the community and local fisheries.

"Those are the kinds of things I never anticipated having to do," Diva admits. "Communicating with City Hall and getting translators to help complete the correspondence we need is a challenge."

Keeping the MH-53Es in the air is another challenge. Sedlak praises DET 1's maintainers.

"The newest helicopter in the squadron came off the production line in 1988. Our maintainers do amazing work every day keeping our aircraft flying. I think

'creative' is the best way to put it. They have to come up with a patch on the fly sometimes in order to make sure the helicopters are good to go because the availability of expertise and equipment to fix certain problems is limited all the way over here."

Vanguard Sea Dragons also take a beating while executing the demanding AMCM mission.

"On almost every flight there's an issue that we have to figure out," says the MH-53E copilot. "Flying that close to the water produces a lot of airframe stress and corrosion from salt spray. The 53 shakes quite a bit when we tow the gear because of the forces involved. Things happen and we deal with them."

As such, crew coordination is paramount. So is nuanced flying.

"It shocked me when I came into the community," Diva continues. "Everything you learn in flight school is thrown out the window. That's particularly true in terms of flight techniques. When you're towing mine countermeasures gear you're never in balanced flight. You're always in awkward positions that can very easily induce vertigo. In order to correctly tow the gear you're clearing a field with and keep it on a specific track, within just five feet of the track, you sometimes have to cock the aircraft at odd attitudes."

The combination of challenging flying and intensive work on base keeps DET 1 personnel busy, but they do venture into Pohang on weekends and to other ROK metropolis' when the opportunity arises.

"Everyone in town knows we're here and they're very receptive to us," Sedlak reports. "A lot of the local children love to speak English and they'll grab your arm and say things in English to you."

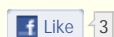
DET 1 personnel visit local elementary schools once a week to teach English and take in "Steelers" games (Pohang's professional soccer team) whenever possible.

Sedlak says he has enjoyed the flying at Pohang and the leadership role that accompanies the DET 1 deployment. He looks forward to returning to this off-the-beaten-path station. Nevertheless he's eager to get back to Norfolk when his rotation ends this March.

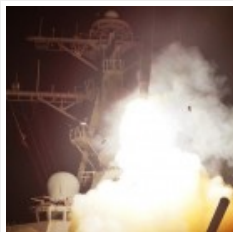
"Camp Walker in Daegu, about 100 miles from us, is the closest commissary and PX. We take vans and make food and supply runs once a week. I haven't been in two weeks and I'm starting to hurt for toothpaste."

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