

The Day The Mule Died © D. S. Tyre

Back in the day when HMCS PROVIDER was one of the few west coast ships with an operational flight deck it became the home for anti-submarine helicopters operating with RCN ships in the Pacific ... but, not Canadian helicopters.

In a mutually favourable agreement, the US Navy provided the RCN west coast fleet with three SH-3 Sea Kings from one of two US Navy Reserve helicopter anti-submarine squadrons: HS-84 or HS-85. Each occasion of “flying on” the vital air asset meant that PROVIDER had to deploy south to either San Francisco or San Diego to embark and train. It was a good deal. The RCN got a great air asset on a “loaned” basis in exchange for USNR air and flight-deck crews getting a very busy training opportunity. During the trip down the coast from Esquimalt, PROVIDER invariably had an empty aircraft hangar, as was the case for the return trip home.

HMCS PROVIDER was preparing to deploy on yet another trip which would see old friends from USNR HS-84 arrive with crews and three familiar Sea King ASW helos. The plan was to pick up the squadron in San Diego and return to San Francisco after four weeks of exercising in the Pacific.

A little publicized benefit to PROVIDER’s crew was that the captain, (and the admiral ashore) had permitted members of the ship’s company to load small personal cars to be disembarked in San Diego and usually re-embarked once the exercise was completed. The deal was that the Crown would be held completely blameless if anything went wrong which might damage or destroy the vehicle. It was also understood that the owner of any vehicle would act as local transportation for groups of the ship’s company while alongside in San Diego.

This particular trip, however, was a little different. The ship would not be going back to San Diego on completion of the exercise so any cars left in the secure USN compound could not be recovered before returning to Esquimalt. So, as good a deal as it had been on previous trips the fact that the ship was embarking helos in San Diego and disembarking them in San Francisco pretty much shut down the idea of taking any personal cars.

That was until, however, the captain was having a conversation with a young leading seaman signalman about how a previous trip had turned into a great exploration of the California coast. The young killick pulled out pictures and showed the captain images of a group of happy matelots gathered around a Volkswagen Bug in a multitude of California venues from San Diego to San Mateo to San Juan Capistrano. The captain had an idea and checked with the sole air officer the ship carried to see if he might have a viable thought or if he was just being a little nuts.

The air officer said he could see nothing wrong with the captain’s idea.

The captain called the killick signalman to his cabin and let him know that, even with three Sea Kings in the hangar, there was room for two very small cars. If the young killick wanted to bring

his VW Bug, it would be permitted and, instead of being landed ashore while the ship went on exercise, it would occupy one of two forward corners in the hangar. The operations officer was bringing the other car which turned out to be a vintage Mini Minor.

So, on the day before sailing the young leading seaman's 1964 VW Bug, with a newly serviced 1.3 litre air cooled engine was hoisted aboard and lashed into the forward port corner of the hangar. Once the ship arrived in San Diego it was landed and tootled around with never less than five occupants. Fun was had by all for a week. Then it was time to head to sea for some work. The VW Bug was reloaded onboard and lashed into its seaborne niche and PROVIDER sailed out of the harbour. HS-84 arrived and the work of having a busy, three aircraft flight-deck began.

PROVIDER's only method of ranging a helicopter was a "mule". This was a boxy looking four-wheeled truck specifically-designed to tow aircraft. Unfortunately PROVIDER's "mule" had seen better days. Some say there were markings which placed its age back to HMCS WARRIOR, a carrier the RCN had acquired at the end of the 2nd World War. It was difficult to start and tough to maintain. Parts were scarce and it often broke down, sometimes for several weeks.

The "mule" died right in the middle of a critical anti-submarine search when all three helicopters were inside the hangar. The PROVIDER air detachment was effectively disabled. The ASW commander, over on one of the destroyers, was not impressed and the young signalman handed the captain a message just received by light. "LAUNCH A WEAPON CARRYING HELO. I APPRECIATE IT MAY BE DIFFICULT BUT THIS IS CRITICAL. FIND A WAY."

Surprisingly, within about 20 minutes, PROVIDER's flight deck came to life as a Sea King lifted into the air. The flight deck crew had managed to range the aircraft on deck and, for the two days remaining in the exercise, there were no other flight delays.

The flight-deck crew chief was a burly West Virginian who had done his time in the regular navy and loved helicopters. He was a jovial character who commanded undying loyalty from his entire crew and from the aircrews who flew "his" birds. Chewing on an unlit cigar he came to the tactical desk on PROVIDER's bridge, leaned against the bulkhead and gazed out the window. The young killick signalman said, "Hi Chief. How's it going back in the bird farm?"

"We're done," replied the chief petty officer. "The zoomies fly off in the morning and we get to relax."

"Great," said the killick. "It was fun having you here. Great group."

"Son," said the CPO as he looked across his unlit cigar, "You may not feel that way after what I have to tell you."

The CPO told the young LS that when the “mule” died, the flight-deck crew had to get creative. In desperation and under great pressure they had commandeered the signalman’s VW Bug and found it had enough power to successfully tow a Sea King. It wasn’t pretty, but it DID work. Sadly, however, the air-cooled engine had been overworked and it must have blown all the oil seals. All the lubrication in the engine had splattered onto the hangar deck and the VW’s engine was, as the chief put it, “Seized up tighter’n a muskrat’s ass.”

The CPO sincerely apologized as the young killick realized there was nothing he could do. Exigencies of the service and all those indemnification forms he’d signed meant his little VW was simply dead. The chief patted him on the shoulder and said he had to report to the captain.

The USN crew left the ship in San Francisco ... almost. The flight-deck CPO and one of his men returned just as the ship was getting ready to sail for Esquimalt. They had requested, and received, a few extra days of Temporary Attached Duty with PROVIDER to complete deployment administrative details. They had a load of gear brought onboard, including a box of spare parts for the disabled “mule”. The young killick signalman had last looked at his own dead vehicle and managed to find a way to get it rolling, with the help of some manpower, the day before. At least it could be unloaded from the ship on arrival in Esquimalt.

When the ship arrived home the LS went back to the hangar and was met by the CPO, still chewing an unlit cigar but with a huge grin on his face. “Boys! Start up the band!” And, with that, the sound of an air-cooled 1.6 litre VW engine coming to life echoed through the empty hangar. There was cheering, laughing and the offer of beer all around.

The chief explained that he had managed to order a new engine for the VW from the USN supply system. It was a different size, but he and his PO had managed to adapt it. The old VW was not only running but it was more powerful. And ... it had an addition to its paint-job. On both doors were brand new HS-84 markings, identical to those on the squadron Sea Kings.

As the car was being unloaded the chief nudged the killick, “Son. We’re in town for a couple of days before we head home. D’y’know where I can borrow a car?”