The Mohawks in Oregon: A Unit History Overview

Prepared by

Charles Rosenfeld, Oregon Army National Guard, Maj. Gen. Ret

Mohawk #926 at the Salem AASF circa 1980

In October 1972, a lone Mohawk departed Fort Rucker, Alabama en route to the Army Aviation Support Facility (AASF) in Salem, Oregon. The pilot, Stephen F. Hammons and OV-1C #648 would become the first members of the 1042 Military Intelligence Co. (Aerial Surveillance) of the Oregon Army National Guard. The 1042d would become one of only six aerial intelligence units in the US Army (four active, two National Guard units) focused on detecting the strength,

disposition and activity of enemy forces day or night, regardless of weather. The OV-1C was an infrared (heat) mapper, while the OV-1B was a specialized RADAR mapper… both types were equipped with camera systems.

Rapidly growing to 245 personnel and 18 Mohawks, representing 28 different specialized skills…the unit benefited from experienced veterans of Vietnam serving alongside motivated men and women new to military service. MAJ George Baena, our Army Advisor, and Curt Degner arrived from Ft Lewis, while Phil Fogg and Stan Rolfness became OV-1 rated in early 1973.

While optimized for battlefield surveillance, the 'weekend warriors', drawn from state agencies, engineering firms, local government and universities, recognized that the capabilities of the OV-1 had numerous applications in public safety, disaster reduction, transportation planning, and environmental monitoring… the utility of the Mohawk was getting greatly expanded. Even as initial training progressed, the Oregon Department of Forestry credited the infrared mapping capability of the 1042d with greatly improving forest fire fighting, saving thousands of man hours at Mt. Hood,

Mitchell, and LaGrande fires, potentially saving many residences in 1973 alone. Agriculture and Water Resources used infrared imagery detected leakage areas in irrigation canals, the Department of Energy mapped heat loss from campuses and government buildings, and DEQ detected sources of industrial pollution in rivers and streams.

In 1975, Mt. Baker in northern Washington showed signs of increased volcanic activity… the Mohawks mapped these changes in hot gas vents (fumaroles) and subsequently mapped the heat output of volcanoes throughout the Cascade Range, south through Mt. Lassen, California. The Side Looking Airborne RADAR (SLAR) capability enabled geologists to locate numerous faults throughout the northwest, and infrared missions along fault lines located numerous sources of geothermal energy. This expertise attracted global attention as Mt. St. Helens progressed toward a major eruption on May 18, 1980. The big eruption occurred on a Drill Weekend, and two Mohawks were airborne as the eruption started, followed by over a dozen missions that covered the volcanic activity and its effects that day. Largely due to this surveillance, St. Helens became the best documented eruption in history…. photos and SLAR

imagery from the Mohawks were shown on national news, and unit members briefed President Carter and the affected State Governors.

Battlefield surveillance training took the Mohawks to numerous joint forces exercises such as Gallant Eagle and Brave Shield. A computer assisted system developed by the Imagery Interpretation section, in cooperation with OSU, quickly located the position of every vehicle in a battle area. This system was adopted by the Army and members of this section delivered and trained intelligence units around the world. Leroy Lofdahl led efforts to adapt advanced camera and photo-processing systems into our unit. The 1042d's reputation led to its expansion to become the 641st MI Battalion (Aerial Surveillance), and the only reserve component unit ever to receive the advanced OV-1D model. Mohawk 926 was among the unit's aircraft that was returned to the Grumman factory and upgraded to the D-model.

The 'D' model carried the advanced APS-94E SLAR system which was used to map the dangerous ocean wave conditions at the mouth of the Columbia River, and led to the establishment of a permanent RADAR installation to assist large ships to safely transit the river bar

and sustain the Port of Portland. The unit conducted numerous counter-drug and border patrol missions along the southern border, and photographed desert landscapes for a terrain analysis guide used during Desert Storm. Additionally, unit crews delivered new Mohawks to South Korea from the factory in Florida… taking the planes across the Atlantic, through Europe and south Asia to Korea.

When the Army retired the OV-1 Mohawk in October, 1992 the 20-year history of the Oregon Mohawks came to a close, but the reputation and legacy of these units live on. Mohawk 926, after nearly 15 years in Oregon, was used to watch movement of Iraqi armored vehicles during Desert Storm when the USAF replacement aircraft wasn't fully operational. It is fitting that 926 has returned to Salem, where it stands as a tribute to the men and women whose innovation and dedication carried forth the tradition of excellence of Oregon Army Aviation.