Chopper Becomes Flying Gun Platform

for Police Riflemen

By BILL CRIDER
Associated Press Writer

A big Marine helicopter gave police gunners a bright light and good shooting during the night as police fought with snipers holed up atop a downtown hotel.

Over and over, Lt. Col. C.H. Pitman "parked" his Sikorsky about 40 feet above the roof of the 18-story Howard Johnson Hotel, aimed his landing lights at the target and the gunners let fly.

It was bad weather for it. Misting rain. Poor visibility. The sky came down to the 30th floor and tops of taller buildings near the hotel disappeared into the cloud ceiling.

THE MARINE CREW of four didn't get into the shooting, restricting their role to providing police with a gun platform.

Thousands of bullets were fired at the target — a one-room concrete structure squatting above the hotel's emergency stair well at one end of the rectangular roof. It was like a fortress bunker.

A similar bunker stood at the other end of the roof above the elevator shaft.

Until the Marine chopper was pressed into emergency service as a makeshift gunship, the strange suicide squad of snipers — who seemed to come from nowhere with no known motive — were in a nearly impregnable position.

POLICE COULDN'T get at them up the narrow stairway, with its sharp elbow turns, without getting more men killed.

Tear gas did no good.

Police sharpshooters at windows in nearby buildings couldn't see the snipers.

Three police gunners aboard the helicopter couldn't see them either but their concentrated fire finally ripped a hole in the windowless wall of the bunker.

Then the gunners, on every pass, aimed their AR15 automatic rifles into the hole so that bullets ricocheted around inside.

ON EACH PASS, the Sikorsky hovered about two minutes while the gunners emptied clip after clip of 5.56 millimeter bullets—small but of high velocity — mixed with bright red streaks of tracers.

"I just don't see how they can survive those ricochets," marveled Frank Buras, one of the guners.

They did it, it developed, by ducking part-way down the stairs when the chopper loomed out of the mist with its dazzling spotlight and spray of bullets, then scrambling back up when it left.

AT ONE POINT one of the snipers, maddened by the shooting, darted out of the stairway opening in the bunker to get a better shot at the helicopter. The gunners zeroed in on him. He tried to run out of it, zigzagging across the roof like an infantryman racing through gunfire. They cut him down.

"He darted out and aimed that big rifle and the guys in the chopper ripped him up," said John E. Fields, a police sharpshooter who was watching with binoculars from atop the nearby City Hall. "Even after he went down and sprawled on his back, you could see little chips of concrete jumping all around him from the incoming lead."

FIELDS, armed with a borrowed .300 mangum English-make elephant gun, with a 12-power scope, said he saw two other persons at the opening to the stairway a couple of times but couldn't shoot.

"From this angle, the background is too vulnerable," he said. "The bullet might keep going and kill a cop in one of the buildings behind the target. I'm using the scope mainly for observation."

Police said the snipers were using guns that fired big .44 magnum bullets.

The helicopter was pressed into emergency service after the death toll reached seven, three of them policemen.

"MAN, it gets pretty spooky up there," said Antoine Saacks, a police gunner assigned to the Sikorsky. "I could see the muzzle flashes of somebody shooting at us — he was popping them out of there pretty quick."

Each time the Sikorsky returned to the parking lot, two crewmen went over every inch of it with flashlights. After 20 passes they had found several bullet holes but no serious damage.