Fulton Star

The Fulton Surface-to-Air Recovery system helped special operations forces pull cargo and people out of dicey situations. It took skill, training, and teamwork for successful pickups, though. First, an aircraft air-dropped the necessary equipment: a harness attached to high-strength line, a helium bottle, and a balloon that then raised the line about 500 feet into the air. The aircraft—here an MC-130 Combat Talon equipped with a yoke on its nose—snagged the line. A hydraulic winch pulled it in, and the crew hooked the package to pull it aboard.

In early experiments with the concept, acceleration on pickup reportedly reached 17 Gs. In one test, a sheep strangled in the harness, and in another a pig began spinning round and round as it was lifted into the air. Inventor Robert Edison Fulton Jr. worked such kinks out of the system in the 1950s, and in 1966 special operations crews began training in its use (shown at right, a 1968 demonstration at Nha Trang AB, South Vietnam). A fatality in 1982 and increased availability of long-range MH-53J Pave Low and MH-47E Chinook helicopters led to the system's demise in 1996.