

920th Rescue Group —



U.S. Air Force

By Ann Lucius

The rockets' red glare is more than a line in America's national anthem to the men and women of the 920th Rescue Group. It's what the reservists of the Air Force Reserve's 920th Rescue Group (RQG) see firsthand when they assist in space shuttle launches from Florida's Kennedy Space Center and unmanned launches from Cape Canaveral Air Force Station.

The rescue group, located on Patrick Air Force Base, Fla., prepares for a shuttle launch by positioning crews on six rubber zodiac boats 200 miles offshore and one boat waiting at Patrick AFB as a backup. In addition, four two-man HH-60 helicopter crews stand alert at the Shuttle Landing Facility at KSC, space shuttle runway landing, ready to respond to emergencies on land or at sea.

"Before each launch, we enhance safety by patrolling a predetermined Launch Hazard Area in the Atlantic Ocean to ensure it's clear of maritime traffic," said Lt. Col. Ken Warren, public affairs officer. "We make sure no one is in a potentially dangerous location during a launch. We patrol the ocean so that boats or ships are out of harm's way and won't get hit by rocket components falling back to earth."

"We are on alert on both [water and land]," explained Master Sgt. Alex Abbey, a pararescue man (PJ) who specializes in combat rescue. "We respond to both civilian/humanitarian and NASA contingencies. Luckily, we've never had to rescue anyone [during launches]. Launches have gone well. But we get called on for about one humanitarian rescue effort a month."

Still, the chance a launch-related rescue will always be there. Therefore, Abbey said, "We train all the time. Our daily routine [consists of] running, swimming, boating exercises. Everybody is in good shape."

Even before September 11, 2001, the 900 men and women of the 920th have rigorously prepared for their primary mission — the search and rescue of downed aircrew members or friendly forces trapped in hostile territory.

"The team has supported Operation Southern Watch and Operation Enduring Freedom," Abbey said, adding that combat rescue is the squadron's number one mission, shuttle space support and humanitarian missions are secondary.

"We go into the theater; we go behind enemy lines to rescue our troops and those of our allies soldiers," Warren added.

During a typical rescue, Lt. Col. Alan Daniel, commander of the 39th Rescue Squadron described what happens when someone needs help.

"We determine if saving them is a doable mission," he said. "If it is, we typically launch an HC-130, HH-60 and PJs toward the downed person. If he is behind enemy lines, we send a Sandy (an SA-10 or SA-16) to protect the HC-130 and HH-60 aircraft. The HC-130's main purpose is to refuel the HH-60s to extend their range in order to get the PJs and rescue packages where they need to be so we can pick up the survivor."

NASA

Behind Enemy Lines



Photo by Staff Sgt. Sean P. Houlihan

Sometimes, however, the HC-130 drops the PJs to rescue someone in need of medical attention. Or, the HH-60s may go at it alone if they are close enough to the downed service member and don't need refueling.

"The combat person usually has a beacon to identify him," Daniel said. "The challenge is to get to him before the enemy does."

"We parachute out of fixed-wing HC-130s and HH-60s over land, desert, wherever, day or night, to save aircrew members," Abbey added.

Since deployments related to America's war on terror began for the 920th last November more than 200 members of the group 920th have been deployed to Southwest Asia, according to Warren. Each was told they'd be on active duty for up to two years.

"We've had ongoing deployments, re-deployments, and homecomings," Warren explained. "It's been a very busy period for us."

"We are keeping 100 people men [half the squadron] overseas for 60 to 90 days at a time to provide combat rescue capability for the theater commanders," added Lt. Col. Alan Daniel, leader of the 200-member HC-130 unit.

This specialized unit, along with all the organizations in the 920th, is composed of elite reservists, a small cadre of active duty members and several civil servants — all dedicated to the combat rescue motto: "We do these things that others may live."

On average, Daniel said that the HC-130 unit sees about 20 people each year who walk in from off the street and 20 to 30 from other units who want to transfer in.

"I look for an HC-130 background and prefer people who live locally," Daniel said. "You must have a positive attitude and really want to be part of combat rescue — one of the Air Force's most unique, challenging and rewarding missions."

Those who meet the required criteria go through pretty intense training. Although not many females apply, according to Daniel, he is proud to have 10 in his squadron.

Being in good shape is just one of many requirements for joining the 920th — especially if you want to be a PJ. To prepare, said Abbey, one must pass the physical test, which includes running, swimming, and calisthenics. A candidate must also pass a standard flight test.

If he or she passes the physical and flight tests, they must endure one to two years of rigorous training. The first step is indoctrination training, which lasts two months.

"This is basically the physical aspect," Abbey said. "If they say, 'Drop and give me 20.' You drop and give them 20. Every week the number increases. It's very physically demanding."

So demanding, in fact, Abbey estimates that for every 200 candidates, only eight will make it through the first round of training.

Those who pass the first round move on to three to four weeks of scuba school. Here, recruits learn dive physics and scuba diving and spend the rest of their time running and swimming.



Next comes three weeks of Army jump school at Fort Benning, Ga. The fourth part of PJ training requires attending Army Halo training in Arizona for four to six weeks. Recruits receive get high-altitude, low-opening training.

The fifth phase is three to four months of medical training at Ft. Bragg, N.C. Next it's off to Fairchild AFB, Wash., for Aircrew survival training. The last phase is pararescue training at Kirtland AFB in Albuquerque, NM.

Because this is the last part of PJ training, "They combine everything [from the other phases]," said Abbey, "and they add land navigation, jumping, mountaineering, and rescue."

After passing all seven phases of training, the recruits are awarded a maroon beret at graduation. According to Abbey, only about five percent of all the initial candidates get to wear the coveted beret. Patrick AFB has 22 full-time members and nine reservists who have earned that honor. Several of these PJs have been deployed to Southwest Asia.

The group is also highly involved in civilian rescue missions.

"We are a high-demand, low-density (HDLD) unit," Warren said. "When things happen, we get involved."

In August 1992, for instance, the squadron came to the rescue of 137 southern Florida residents during the 18-day humanitarian operation in the wake of Hurricane Andrew. And on one day in March 1993, it saved 93 elderly residents from rising flood waters in Tampa, Fla.

In 1999, when Hurricane Floyd hit, the 920th squadron was sent to North Carolina on a civilian rescue mission. They saved 200 lives.

In December 1997, airmen of the 920th Rescue Group, with aid from the U.S. Coast Guard, made a daring rescue of 28 British sailors seamen from their sinking merchant vessel, 270 miles off the east coast of Florida.

"It's a good feeling," said Abbey, who's been a PJ for 20 years.

Regardless of the type of rescue, Daniel said he is sure of one thing: "I feel secure that these men and women know what they're doing. They can get the job done."



Above: Master Sgt. Alex Abbey prepares to board an HC-130 aircraft in scuba gear. Later, he'll jump into the Atlantic Ocean while participating in a joint NASA/DoD exercise designed to test the 920th's ability to recover astronauts who have bailed out of during a Space Shuttle Mission. U.S. Air Force photo.



A Brief History of the 920th

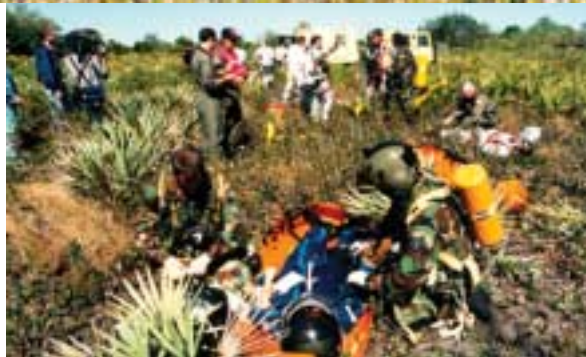
The 920th Rescue Group began as the 301st Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron, which was the Air Force Reserve Command's first search and rescue unit. The unit became active in August of 1956 at the Miami International Airport and recorded its first "save" the following January. Expanding mission requirements prompted the move to Homestead AFB, Fla. Since the first Mercury launch in 1961, the group has taken part in NASA's contingency operations and has continually been involved in the space program.

On Aug. 24, 1992, Hurricane Andrew hit South Dade County. The destruction forced the 301st to temporary digs at Miami's Tamiami Airport. During the next 18 days, the squadron provided the only air evacuation and rescue capability and remained at Tamiami Airport until receiving a temporary assignment at Patrick AFB, Fla., in 1993. That November, the 301st made Patrick its permanent home.

The 920th Rescue Group was activated on April 15, 1997. Collectively, the unit has been credited with saving more than 600 lives.

Awards bestowed on the 920th Rescue group include:

- Seven Air Force Outstanding Unit Awards
- 10 Albert P. Loening Trophies for best rescue unit in the Air Force Reserve Command
- The Air Force Association's Citation of Honor
- The Maj. Gen. Tom Marchbanks Award for Heroism
- The 1988 Aviation Week and Space Technology Magazine's Top Aerospace Laureate Award for Operations for joining with the Coast Guard to rescue 28 crewmembers from a sinking freighter off Florida's coast.



Pararescue specialists from the 920th Rescue Group and astronauts participate in a recent exercise at Kennedy Space Center practicing techniques involved in the unlikely scenario of a Space Shuttle mishap. Members of the response team stabilize and treat astronauts, then transport them to a local hospital on an Air Force HH-60 helicopter. Photos provided by NASA.