

Pararescue History

The history of Pararescue began in August of 1943, when 21 persons bailed out of a disabled C-46 over an uncharted jungle near the China-Burma border. So remote was the crash site that the only means of getting help to the survivors was by paratroop. Lieutenant Colonel Don Fleckinger and two medical corpsmen volunteered for the assignment. This paratroop of medical corpsmen was the seed from which the concept of Pararescue was born. For a month these men, aided by natives, cared for the injured until the party was brought to safety. News commentator Eric Sevareid was one of the men to survive this ordeal. He later wrote of the men who risked their lives to save his: "Gallant is a precious word; they deserve it".

From this event the need for a highly trained rescue force was found; thus, Pararescueman was brought into being. Rescues since then have occurred in virtually every corner of the world. Since that first rescue, many airmen, soldiers, sailors, and civilians have had first hand experience that when trouble strikes, Pararescuemen are ready to come to their aid.

Some of the most inspiring stories originate from the conflict in Southeast Asia involved heroic deeds performed by Pararescuemen. They risked their lives flying over hostile territory to find friendly forces needing aid. Daily, Pararescuemen volunteered to ride a rescue hoist cable into the Vietnamese jungle to aid wounded infantrymen and injured pilots, whose aircraft had been shot down. The Air Force awarded nineteen Air Force Crosses to enlisted personnel during the South East Asian conflict; ten of the nineteen were awarded to Pararescuemen.

Pararescuemen provided medical treatment for injured and wounded men picked up from the jungles. These deeds are still performed daily, even in time of peace. Distinctive recognition came to Pararescuemen in early 1966. General John P. McConnell, then Air Force Chief of Staff, approved the wearing of the maroon beret. The beret symbolizes the blood sacrificed by Pararescuemen and their devotion to duty by aiding others in distress. To Pararescuemen living up to their motto, "That Others May Live", is a daily reality.

The formal training of a Pararescueman is a never ending program. They continually strive to perfect procedures while constantly searching for new techniques. A major development in Pararescue was the combination of parachuting with scuba techniques. When ready to jump, the scuba equipped pararescueman carries as much as 170 pounds of equipment.

One of the most dramatic events involving Pararescue scuba action was at the termination of the Gemini 8 space flight. When the decision was made to halt the mission due to difficulties encountered by Astronauts David Scott and Neil Armstrong, rescue forces on alert at stations in the far east went into action. A rescue crew from Naha Air Base, Okinawa, flew to the predicted splashdown area and arrived in time to see the spacecraft hit the water. Three Pararescuemen parachuted into the ocean and had flotation equipment attached within 20 minutes. The Pararescuemen stayed with the astronauts until a Navy destroyer arrived three hours later to take the mall aboard.

Pararescuemen provided continued support to the National Aeronautics and space Administration's (NASA) Skylab missions. Presently, Pararescuemen are providing rescue support to the space shuttle program. Pararescuemen have constantly trained to remain responsive to NASA's needs.

The primary purpose of Pararescue is to save lives. The work of the Pararescuemen is an important phase of the rescue concept. For example, in a two work period, Pararescuemen were called upon to aid two Russian transport merchant seamen in two different areas. The first mission involved a badly burned sailor on a Russian transport vessel in the Atlantic, 700 miles from the nearest land. Two Pararescuemen, stationed in the Azores were flown to the Russian ship. They parachuted near the ship and treated the sailor until the ship reached port days later saving his life. Two weeks later another distress call from a Russian ship was relayed. This time the ship was a fishing vessel in the Pacific Ocean off the Oregon Coast. A team of three Pararescuemen from Portland parachuted into the Pacific. They treated the Russian sailor for serious back and head injuries caused by the fall. When the ship was close enough, a Coast Guard vessel picked up the sailor and took him ashore to a hospital.