

ANGEL'S WINGS

VOL. 5 NO. 8

920TH RESCUE WING • PATRICK AIR FORCE BASE, FLA. • AIR FORCE RESERVE COMMAND

OCTOBER 2007

The Heart of Freedom

Four weeks after deploying to Iraq, a member of the 920th Rescue Wing becomes only the fifth woman in the history of the Air Force Reserve to be wounded in combat



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VOL.5 NO.8 OCTOBER 2007

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cover graphic / STAFF SGT. PAUL FLIPSE



THE INSIDE SCOOP

news&features



THE HEART OF FREEDOM pp.6-7

During the 60 years since the Air Force was born, only 38 female Airmen have received a Purple Heart. Until September, when a member of the 920th Rescue Squadron became number 39.



THE BLINK OF AN EYE pg.10

In the search-and-rescue business, a fraction of a second can mean the difference between life and death. Find out how a 920th crew recently beat the odds and saved a life.



AIR MEDALS FOR KATRINA pg.9

In late 2005, thirty-two rescue wing reservists flew to New Orleans to provide much-needed hurricane relief. During the September commander's call, their heroism was recognized.

pointsofinterest

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timemanagement

UTA SCHEDULE

November 3-4
December 1-2
January 12-13
February 2-3
March 1-2
April 5-6
May 3-4
June 7-8

DINING FACILITY

Br. 6 - 8 a.m. (weekdays)
Br. 7 - 9 a.m. (weekends)
Ln. 11 a.m. - 1 p.m.
Dn. 4:30 - 6:30 p.m.

FITNESS CENTER

Mon/Fri 5 a.m. - 11 p.m.
Sat/Sun 8 a.m. - 7 p.m.

BARBER SHOP

Mon/Fri 8 a.m. - 6 p.m.
Sat 8 a.m. - 4 p.m.
Sun 10 a.m. - 4 p.m.

CLASS VI / SHOPETTE / GAS STATION

Mon/Sat 6 a.m. - 10 p.m.
Sun 8 a.m. - 10 p.m.



COL. GEORGE PIERCE

Commander, 920th Maintenance Group

New man on the (engine) block

I'm Col. George Pierce, the new maintenance group commander. First, let me say what an honor and privilege it is to be part of the 920th Rescue Wing.

In my 28-plus years of commissioned service, 18 of them were in combat rescue and special operations. I never thought I'd get the chance to return, and I'm excited about being back.

My family and I have also received a warm welcome from all of you. Thank you.

We have many challenges in the next few months. Now that our 10th Air Force staff-assistance visit is completed, we have a road map of those areas which still need improvement. Certainly, there are some important things that need to be addressed.

That said, there should be no difference in the day-to-day operations and when an inspector is watching and evaluating us. That goes for everyone. It's simple—there's a right way of doing things, and there's plenty of guidance if something's unclear. Our job is to make sure we do things right.

The advantage we have is our attitudes. We have the best people in the command, a great mission and we live in a great place. I have no doubt we can blow their socks off in February, but it'll take our best efforts.

Speaking of effort, I've noticed quite a bit of it being put forth here. In fact, no wing in Air Force Reserve Command is busier than the 920th. I didn't know it when I first got here, but it only took a few weeks to realize—I've never been busier than I am here.

We serve our great nation, and my hat is off to all who continue to volunteer to go and do. The total force concept is actualized no better than in the combat-rescue community. The participation and volunteerism is a reflection of the right attitude—an attitude of service. Awesome!

We are a small community of professionals, more like a family than almost any other type of unit. That family is what makes the combat-rescue business so special, and I'm honored, and certainly proud, to be part of that family again. I'm looking forward to working with each of you.

Saving our warriors



BY MASTER SGT. CHANCE C. BABIN
920th Rescue Wing Public Affairs

Combat rescue professionals from the 920th Rescue Wing are accustomed to saving lives, quite often behind enemy lines. But once the rescue is made, those who are rescued are often in dire need of medical attention.

For 21 medical specialists from the 920th Aeromedical Staging Squadron, this is where they joined the battle to save lives, from May 9 to Oct. 9 as part of the 435th Contingency Aeromedical Staging Facility (CASF) at Ramstein Air Base, Germany.

During their five-month deployment, the group saw more than 6,000 patients and performed more than 300 missions, getting critical care, urgent and priority patients stabilized and ready for the roughly 10-mile trek from Ramstein AB to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, the largest American hospital outside the United States.

The role of the CASF is a 24/7 operation, which supports all scheduled and unscheduled aeromedical evacuations at Ramstein AB. The duties include urgent/priority recoveries, receiving patients from inbound aircraft from European

920th Aeromedical Staging Squadron helps guide wounded troops from the battlefield down the road to recovery

Command and Central Command area's of operation, transporting them to Landstuhl or the CASF and preparing patients for flights back to the U.S.

"We are responsible for transportation of all patients that come in and out from (Central Command) and (European Command)," said Maj. Laurie Turner, 920th ASTS, medical services corps officer. "Our goal is to get them back to duty or (home) as safely and quickly as possible."

She said patients typically don't stay in the CASF more than a day-and-a-half, and patients generally don't stay at Landstuhl more than three days before being sent home.

"It's been very busy," said Master Sgt. James Martinez-Ruiz, 920th ASTS medical technician. "It's the busiest CASF in the Air Force. We support everyone who's serving from Iraq to Afghanistan to the Horn of Africa."

Sergeant Martinez-Ruiz said they average about 80 patients a day and two to three missions. Patients received from the area of operation are assessed and the most critical are the first ones sent to Landstuhl via Ambulance or bus. The patients are accompanied by two drivers and a nurse to the hospital.

For Sergeant Martinez-Ruiz the toughest part of his job is seeing our young

injured warriors coming in from the front.

"When you see kids younger than you in tough shape it's really hard to take," he said. "You don't always have time to think about things though because there's always more coming behind them. People don't realize the price we pay for freedom."

For Staff Sgt. Nicole King, 920th ASTS medical technician, this was her first deployment and an eye-opening experience.

"My whole experience has been wonderful," she said. "It's been a great chance to see our job first hand. At (Unit Training Assemblies) we train and here we get to do what we're trained to do."

Part of that training is being up close and personal with seriously wounded patients coming in from the front lines.

"The extent of injuries is what's most shocking," Sergeant King said. "Until you see it and put your hands on the injured shoulders, you'll never know what it's like."

But on the brighter side, CASF members also get to be part of sending warriors back to the United States, although many are still seriously injured.

"It's a mixed feeling," said Capt. Margaret Poole, 920th ASTS nurse. "It's a nice feeling knowing they're going home. Many express they wish they were going back [to the AOR]."

She said one young Soldier told her he wanted to go back to Iraq because they need him. "It brought me to tears," she said, "tears of joy."

During the end of the tour Col. Philip Manning, 920th vice commander, paid the group a visit.

"They are very organized and prepared to handle the many missions they have," said Colonel Manning.

"I think they are doing outstanding; they are well trained and motivated. They've meshed seamlessly like a well-oiled machine."

PJs featured at Devil Rays game

The Tampa Bay Devil Rays baseball team honored the Air Force Reserve Sept. 9, highlighted by 920th Rescue Wing pararescueman (PJ), Senior Airman Kacee Holmes, who

threw out the ceremonial first pitch.

Three other PJs, along with their 40-foot trailer, set up a display outside the stadium to help promote the pararescue

mission and provide a venue for potential recruits.

Members of the 622nd Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron were also at the game and provided the honor guard.



NEWS BRIEFS

Air Force officials recently announced **FITNESS TEST RESULTS WILL BE DOCUMENTED ON NEW EPR FORMS.**

Scores will be based on a 'does not meet,' (score less than 75), 'meets,' (score equal to or greater than 75) and 'exempt,' (exempt from



all components of physical assessment).

In addition, the "marginal" category has been eliminated from Air Force Physical Fitness testing. The test will now be either pass or fail. Previously, Airmen who scored below 70 on the fitness test failed, and those who scored between 70 and 74.9 received a

marginal rating, while Airmen who scored 75 or above passed.

With the change, a score below 75 is considered failing, and Airmen will have to retest within 90 days.

"The change was made to support a defined standard for fitness testing," said Maj. Dana Whelan, the chief of health promotion operations at Bolling Air Force Base in the District of Columbia.

"With the implementation of the new officer and enlisted performance reports, we needed to define a score that qualifies as meeting standards. Furthermore, Airmen who scored in the (marginal) range were not where the Air Force needed them to be (physically), and were still required to attend a healthy living workshop and retake the test to score 75 or above."

The fitness test change comes just weeks after the implementation of the new performance reports.

ON THE RECORD

A hero is someone who understands the responsibility that comes with his freedom.

- Bob Dylan

A **STAFF ASSISTANCE VISIT (SAV)** from 10th Air Force officials took place here Oct. 10 - 14. Rescue-Wing leadership requested visit to help prepare for its upcoming Unit Compliance Inspection (UCI), scheduled for February.

After the visit, SAV team chief Col. Joseph McCourt, wrote:

"The 920th Rescue Wing is commended for its professionalism, positive attitude and support to the SAV team."

In celebration of the Air Force's 60th anniversary and 50 years of support to NASA and its space program, Kennedy Space Center will host the **NASA WORLD SPACE EXPO** Nov. 1 - 4.



Military and civilian personnel with a Common Access Card (CAC) and an entrance placard will be admitted into the event free of charge Friday Nov. 2 only. Discounted tickets are available for Saturday and Sunday.

The 920th Rescue Wing will conduct an astronaut-recovery demonstration during the show. Also scheduled to perform are the U.S. Air Force Thunderbirds and the U.S. Army Golden Knights parachute team.

Several aircraft will also be featured in solo performances, including the F-15 Eagle, F-18 Hornet and the truly amazing F-22 Raptor.

To obtain an event placard, contact the 920th Public Affairs office at 321-494-0535/6. For more information about the event, log on to the official Web site: www.worldspaceexpo.com.



The **2007 COMBINED FEDERAL CAMPAIGN**

began Sept. 1 and will run six consecutive weeks through Dec. 15. The overseas campaign runs from Oct. 1 through Dec. 15. Exact dates and campaign goals are established in each geographic area by the local federal coordinating committee and are available through the installation CFC project officer.

Contributions can be cash, check or by payroll deduction. On average, one in four federal employees or their dependents will benefit from the campaign charities this year, CFC officials said.

Last year, servicemembers, along with federal and postal employees, donated a record-setting \$271.6 million to the campaign.

Donors may designate which charity, or charities, receives their money by filling out a pledge card.

The CFC was established in 1961 and is the largest workplace charity campaign in the country.

For more information, people can contact their local campaign project officers or visit the CFC Web site at www.opm.gov/cfc.

The Heart of Freedom

A rescue wing Airman, deployed far from home, finds a well of strength in her moment of greatest fear

BY STAFF SGT. PAUL FLIPSE

920th Rescue Wing Public Affairs

IT WASN'T UNTIL SHE TASTED BLOOD in her mouth that she realized she'd been bombed.

Moments earlier, Senior Airman Diane Lopes, an Air Force Reserve security forces specialist with the 920th Rescue Wing here, had been walking quietly through the evening darkness at Kirkuk Air Base, Iraq.

She'd been at the base only a short time—barely a month into a six-month deployment—and was on her way to the dining hall after finishing her shift.

Then it happened.

An 80 mm rocket tore through the darkness, hurtled over the perimeter fence and slammed into the earth just 25 feet from Airman Lopes.

"I can picture it like it was yesterday," she said. "I remember, I started to turn, then I heard the blast on my right side—it was the loudest thing I've ever heard. All I saw were sparks and a flash,"

"The flash went through me—I thought I was on fire," she said.

The 'flash' she saw was a blast wave, a wall of high pressure that radiates outward at high speed from a powerful explosion. In Airman Lopes case, the wave that passed through her contained a hail of razor-sharp shrapnel. Yet for the first few moments, she didn't know she was hurt.

Not until she tasted the blood.

"I didn't feel the shrapnel go in, I didn't feel anything cut me," she said. I didn't feel anything until I came to on the ground and spit the blood out of my mouth—

and kept spitting it out because it kept bleeding.

"Within a second, it hit me—I've just been bombed."

Though Airman Lopes initially felt no pain, her wounds were substantial. The massive explosion and resulting shrapnel snapped the tibia and fibula of her left leg, slashed through 80 percent of the tendons in her right wrist, collapsed one of her lungs, burned the backs of her legs, perforated her right eardrum and peppered her body with shrapnel.

When the numbness began to fade and the first shock of pain took hold of her, so did a cold, deep fear that she may not make it home alive.

At that moment, Airmen Lopes said, she felt something within her push back—*defiantly*—against the fear. As she described how her instincts took over, her clear, firm voice began to tremble and crack under the weight of her emotion.

"I said, 'Hell no, I'm not dying here today. No way,'" she said.

And so, resolved not to die, Airman Lopes fought to sway the odds of survival in her favor.

Knowing she was hidden by the darkness and low clouds of smoke from the blast, she screamed for help until someone found her.

When base medical personnel arrived, she latched onto the stretcher and drug herself on before the medics could take hold of her.

"I remember them saying, 'get ready to lift,' and I said, 'no, I got it,' and I pulled

(cont. next page)



In good company

Senior Airman Diane Lopes, a security forces specialist with the 920th Rescue Wing, recuperates at Walter Reed Medical Center, Md., after receiving shrapnel wounds to her leg and arm.



'FREEDOM' cont.

myself on the litter because I wanted to get out of there," she said.

Next, she focused on lowering her heart rate by slowing down her breathing. By slowing her heart rate, she reasoned, she would lose less blood from her numerous wounds.

Then, once inside the medical center, she began chanting her blood type to one of the technicians, saying "I'm O positive, I'm O positive" again and again to ensure she would get the right stuff. In all, the act of helping herself survive was an exercise in utility.

"I wasn't going to sit there and die," she said.

Airman Lopes had done everything in her ability to keep herself alive. But she'd lost a lot of blood and needed surgery, which could only happen at the other end of a 100-mile helicopter ride to Balad Air Base. While the smoke from the explosion

Greek temple.

Named after a former Walter Reed commander, the Mologne House was intended to provide short-term lodging for servicemembers and families visiting Walter Reed, and serve as a first-class hotel for active and retired military travelers.

Now, it's home to 300 battle-wounded troops convalescing and rehabilitating a myriad of injuries—amputations, post-traumatic stress, severe head trauma, third-degree burns ... the list goes on.

And in room 257, an Airman with a cast on her broken left leg, stitches on the reattached tendons in her right wrist, bandages covering a constellation of shrapnel wounds, breathing with her re-expanded lung says five little words.

"I'm lucky to be alive," she said.

Originally from Connecticut, the 37-year-old now calls Tampa home. Her easy smile and genial nature belie an

straining to teach the damaged parts of her body to work again.

"It's painful," said Airman Lopes. "But I have to do it if I want to get better. I know it's only temporary, so I just deal with it."

Most days, her mind wanders back to that night at Kirkuk, and she still can't speak for long about it without shedding tears. Understanding, she said, is her key to handling the stress.

"I know I'm going to have good days and bad days," she said. "I knew I was going to have nightmares. I knew I was going to get depressed. If you know what you're going to go through, it's easier to deal with."

One way she deals with things is through a rather blunt sense of humor, which she displays on personalized T-shirts. One proclaims, "I went to Iraq and all I got was blown up," while another asks wryly, "got shrapnel?"

"Hell no, I'm not dying here today... no way."

SENIOR AIRMAN DIANE LOPES

920th Rescue Wing security forces specialist, explaining what went through her mind while lying on the ground with a broken leg, collapsed lung, multiple shrapnel wounds and spitting blood moments after a rocket exploded 25 feet from her at Kirkuk Air Base, Iraq.



dissipated in the evening air, the medical team at Kirkuk Air Base worked frantically to stabilize Airman Lopes...

As Autumn begins to descend on Washington D.C., the city's abundance of trees become resplendent in jackets of fall color.

Red oaks, American elms, sugar maples and honey locusts spend the days shedding their gaudy leaves into the brisk October wind, and the grounds of Walter Reed Army Medical Center are covered daily by a fresh blanket of vivid reds, fiery oranges and bright yellows.

On the southeast edge of the medical center's expansive lot sits a gabled, red-brick building with a facade resembling a

underlying toughness. Once a corrections officer, she had just completed training to become a Tampa police officer before leaving for Kirkuk. She joined the 920th two years ago and wants to stay in spite of her experience at Kirkuk. The attack, she said, won't chase her away.

"It's not going to keep me from doing this," she said of her job as a reservist.

After being airlifted to Balad for the first of two surgeries, she stopped at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, Germany, before coming to Walter Reed, where her doctors have given her a sunny forecast.

"They said I should make a full recovery," she said. "But I have a lot of physical therapy ahead of me."

Ten weeks to be exact, during which time she'll spend countless grueling hours

She's also comforted by her many visitors—family, friends, fellow wounded and hospital staff. She has also met a handful of generals ("all really funny, down-to-earth people"), a celebrity (Gary Sinise, aka Lieutenant Dan from *Forest Gump*) and countless others.

"Everywhere I've been people have been coming to see me ... people I don't even know. It's so nice to have so many people care," she said.

Through her actions and instincts, Airman Lopes is a survivor. She's also a realist, clearly evident in her reaction after Air Force Reserve commander Lt. Gen. John Bradley pinned a Purple Heart Medal to her shirt, making her just the fifth woman in Air Force Reserve history to earn one.

"I'm just happy I was present for that ceremony," she said.



Rescue Wing awards 32 Air Medals for Katrina relief

BY STAFF SGT. HEATHER L. KELLY

920th Rescue Wing Public Affairs

Thirty-two Air Force Reservists from the 920th Rescue Wing were awarded the Air Medal for their outstanding performance during Hurricane Katrina rescue operations at a ceremony held in the base theater during the September drill weekend.

The Air Medal is awarded to servicemembers who have distinguished themselves by meritorious achievement while participating in aerial flight. Awards recognize single acts of merit, heroism or meritorious service.

"We train to be ready at a moment's notice," said Master Sgt. Carlos Gonzalez, medal recipient and flight engineer with the 301st Rescue Squadron. "Being able to help was its own reward, it's what we live for," he said.

Within 34 hours of Hurricane Katrina's landfall, crews from the 920th deployed to the Gulf Coast region. The rescue crews were the first Air Force responders on the scene. Once in place, the unit's rescue professionals sustained 21 days of around-the-clock operations involving 200 wing personnel.

The wing was credited with saving 1,043 lives in the aftermath of the storm. In one day alone on Sept. 1, 920th crewmembers rescued 475 people.

Notable past recipients of the Air Medal include aerial legends Henry "Hap" Arnold, Buzz Aldrin, Jimmy Doolittle and Chuck Yeager.

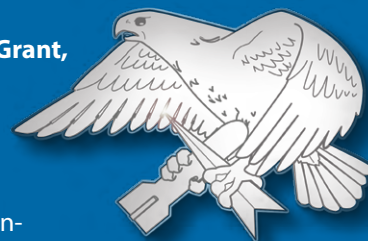
While the awardees may not consider themselves aerial legends, they are truly heroes said wing commander, Col. Steven Kirkpatrick.

"The men and women of the 920th are search and rescue's finest. This medal acknowledges that, and today, so do we," he said.

920TH MAINTENANCE GROUP SAVE OF THE MONTH

Master Sgt. Dennis Grant,
Master Sgt. Dave
Thomas, Tech. Sgt.
Greg McNaughton,
and

Staff Sgt. Kyle Cole distinguished themselves in the performance of outstanding service to the 920th Maintenance Group, Patrick Air Force Base, Fla.



On Sept. 27 at approximately 12 p.m., the fire alarm activated in Hangar 313. Inside the avionics section, which is located in the northwest corner of the hangar, were Sergeants Grant, Tomes, McNaughton and Cole.

These individuals evacuated the avionics section and, once outside, were advised the contractor remodeling the building had accidentally cut a sprinkler line. They were further advised to check their work area for potential flooding.

When they entered their work area, they noticed water running down the wall next to the tool accountability program computer and monitor. With no delay, Sergeant Tomes and Sergeant McNaughton moved the equipment. At that time, Sergeants Grant and Cole came back to the area and noticed water beginning to run through the ceiling tiles onto equipment below.

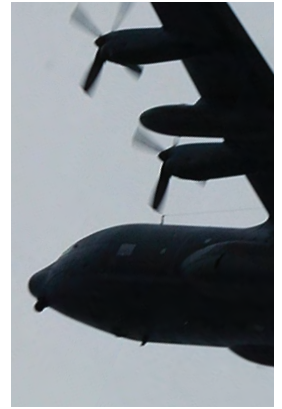
The overhead lights were also beginning to fill up with water and they were subsequently powered down. Grabbing pallet bags which were located in the storage room, they began cutting the ends to allow for more coverage.

The bags were then used to cover the equipment racks in the shop as well as the test equipment. They then moved to the various powered benches in the shop and began removing power and covering delicate test equipment and mock-up aircraft parts. One of the areas hardest hit in the flood was the ECM shop.

These individuals moved quickly to cover four different computers and monitors, as well as many shelves of technical publications that would have surely been destroyed if not for their actions. Their efforts resulted in the complete coverage of all equipment thus saving the tax payers and the 920th Rescue Wing thousands of dollars in ruined test equipment and parts.

Based on their actions as well as their dedication to duty, the above mentioned are hereby awarded the "Save of the Month" for August 2007.

The Blink of an Eye



In the search-and-rescue business, the difference between life and death is sometimes measured in milliseconds

BY MASTER SGT. CHANCE BABIN & STAFF SGT. PAUL FLIPSE
920th Rescue Wing Public Affairs

IF STAFF SGT. BRUCE SLAMIN HAD BLINKED at the wrong time, John Burkhalter might not be alive today. That was the consensus from Air Force Reservists at the 920th Rescue Wing after Mr. Burkhalter was rescued Sept. 20 from his disabled boat, adrift two days in the Gulf of Mexico.

John Burkhalter, 54, and his 37-year-old nephew Chris, set out Sept. 18 from a marina in Steinhatchee, Fla. The boat's engine failed while the two were still close to shore, but a strong current and steady wind took the craft out to sea.

Chris Burkhalter's spouse phoned the Coast Guard the next day around midnight to report the men missing, and an official search-and-rescue began the following morning.

However, as often happens during ocean rescues, the weather was threatening to become a factor. A tropical depression was nearing the search area, and Coast Guard officials decided to bring in reinforcements. They placed a call for help to the 920th Rescue Wing, and at approximately 12:15 p.m., one of the unit's HC-130P/N Hercules aircraft—referred to as a 'King' in rescue lingo—lifted off the runway at Patrick Air Force Base en route to the Gulf.

Once there, the aircrew began a standard search-and-rescue pattern—the pilots held the King at an altitude of 750 feet and airspeed of 120 knots (roughly 140 mph) while six crewmembers scanned the waters—three from the left side of the aircraft, two from the cockpit and one from the back. But the rough seas from the impending storm made for a difficult search.

"We knew we were looking for a blue-and-white, 19-foot boat, but there were so many whitecaps that everything began to look like a boat," said Staff Sgt. Jennifer Drake, the aircraft's radio operator.

Hours later, there was still no sign of the boat, and the crew was fighting the inevitable fatigue that sets in after staring for long stretches into an endless sea.

"Your eyes get tired," said Staff Sgt. Bruce Slamin, loadmaster on the flight. "You try not to look at one spot. I was tired but stayed positive—I never gave up hope."

With the storm closing in, there wasn't much time remaining, and the aircraft would soon have to break off the search. That's when something caught Sergeant Slamin's eye.

He'd been scanning the choppy water through a window in one of the aircraft's rear doors when he thought he saw a small boat amid the waves.

At first he did nothing—sure that someone up front had seen the boat. From his position in the back of the aircraft, he would be the last to see anything that passed below. But after a few moments passed with no chatter on the intercom, Sergeant Slamin began shouting excitedly into his radio.

"Boat ... mark, mark, mark" he yelled, prompting another crewmember to release a flare from the aircraft that pinpointed the boat's location.

The Hercules immediately circled back—flying just 200 feet above the choppy waters below ... and there he was.

Standing in the small, blue-and-white boat, holding an oar and waving his arms, was John Burkhalter.

"I was ecstatic," said Sergeant Drake. "It was a miraculous find ... a needle in a haystack."

More like a needle in a needlestack. To illustrate how easy it would've been to **not** see the tiny ship, imagine standing on the roof of a seven-story building while trying to spot a dime on the gray sidewalk below. Now imagine the sidewalk moving past at 100 mph.

If Sergeant Slamin had simply blinked, yawned, rubbed his eyes, even shifted his weight at the moment the aircraft overflew the tiny, blue-and-white boat, John Burkhalter would likely never have been found.

"I was lucky to catch him," said Sergeant Slamin. "I said a prayer about 30 minutes prior. I said, 'God, this guy has a family.' I even made a little ditty out of my prayer to stay focused. About a half hour later I spotted him."

"Sergeant Slamin was (Mr. Burkhalter's) last hope," said Sergeant Drake. "We were going to be the last aircraft in that search area, and the storm was about 20 minutes away."

In order to make sure they stayed clear of that storm, the crew quickly radioed the 347th Rescue Group at nearby Moody Air Force Base, Ga. for helicopter support to complete the rescue. Twenty minutes later, three HH-60G Pave Hawks arrived and two pararescuemen (PJs) leapt into the rolling sea.

But the same vicious current that pulled the Burkhalter's boat so far from shore now took hold of the PJs. After 10 minutes of thrashing against the relentless waves, they had made little progress and had to be hoisted back into the helicopter.

In order to execute the rescue, they would have to lower a PJ directly into the boat—no small feat considering the conditions. Wind, waves and rotor wash—the immense cyclone of

sea water sent airborne by the furious downdraft of the Pave Hawk's rotors—made the maneuver exceedingly difficult.

Carefully, the pilot held the 11-ton helicopter in a hover while a PJ rode the hoist down to the little ship, which was bobbing like a cork in the rough surf.

"(It) was amazing to witness," said Sergeant Drake. "It took incredible finesse and precision—it was really windy, and it was a small space to get into."

But any elation from executing such a difficult rescue was overshadowed when it became clear there was only one man on the boat.

"When we realized the nephew wasn't onboard, we were a bit stricken," Sergeant Drake said.

According to John Burkhalter, his nephew Chris decided to swim to a buoy approximately 24 hours into the ordeal—while the boat was still near land. He took a GPS and jumped overboard wearing two life jackets and using a cooler top as a flotation device.

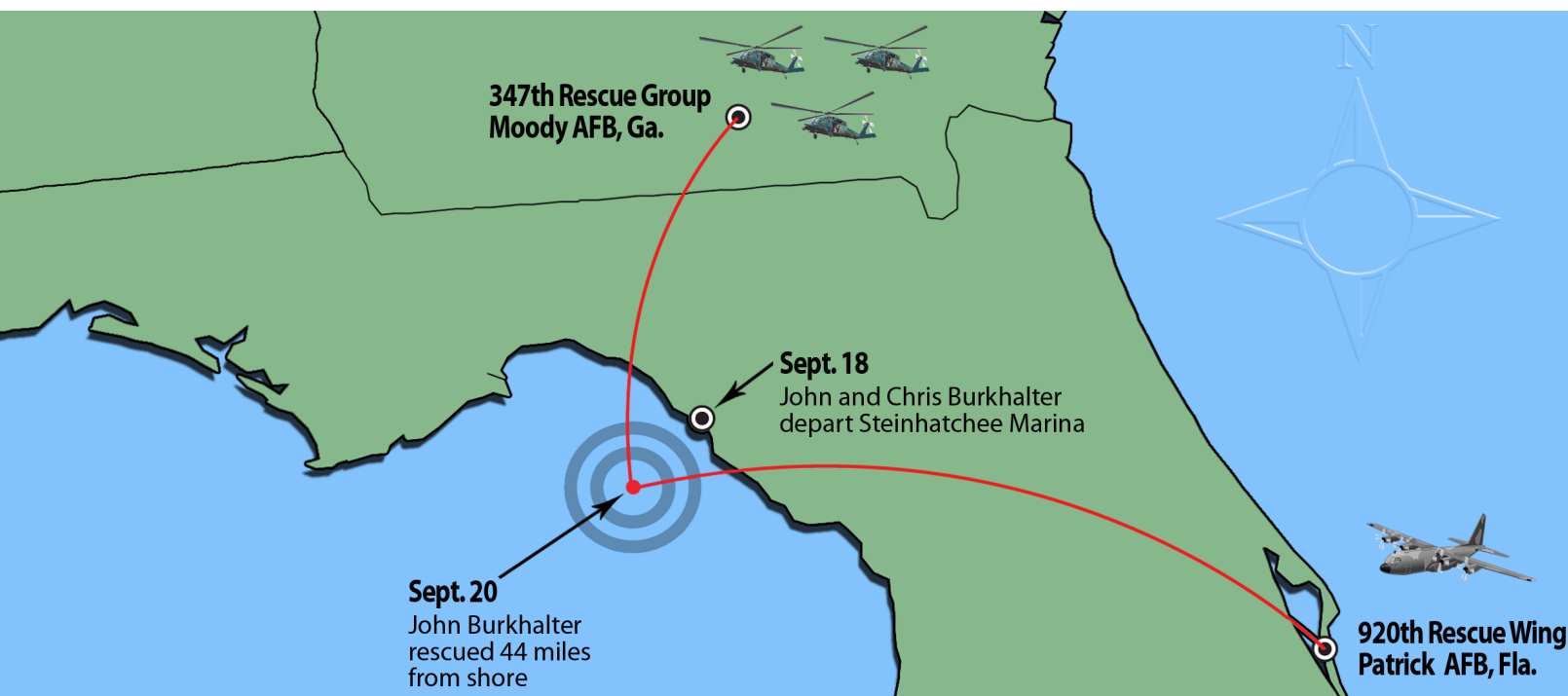
Tragically, Chris Burkhalter was never found. The Coast Guard suspended their search for him three days later.

After being pulled safely onboard the helicopter, John Burkhalter was airlifted to Shands Hospital in Gainesville, Fla., where he was treated for dehydration and mild hypothermia.

Incredibly, the Airman who spotted him that day was the one with the least experience in the rescue business—it was Sergeant Slamin's first official rescue mission.

But afterward, the 920th loadmaster's attention wasn't so much on himself as it was the man he saved.

"I'm glad he was able to get back to his family," he said. 🚁



TIMELINE OF A RESCUE

*All times approximate

Graphic by Staff Sgt. Paul Flipse

3:30 P.M. SEPT. 18
John and Chris Burkhalter depart Steinatchee Marina. Soon, their engine fails, and the current pulls them out to sea.

6 P.M. SEPT. 19
Chris Burkhalter decides to swim to a nearby buoy and jumps overboard with a GPS and two life jackets.

12 A.M. SEPT. 19
The Coast Guard receives a call reporting the two men missing. An official search begins the next morning.

2:15 P.M. SEPT. 19
With a storm looming, a 920th Rescue Wing HC-130 Hercules departs to help look for the missing boaters.

6 P.M. SEPT. 20
Staff Sgt. Bruce Slamin, 920th loadmaster, spots John Burkhalter's boat, and the crew calls for helicopter support.

6:30 P.M. SEPT. 20
Three HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopters arrive from Moody. John Burkhalter is hoisted to safety and airlifted to a local hospital.



courtesy photo

In the shadow of a giant

Air Force Reserve pararescuemen (PJs) from the 920th Rescue Wing make camp for the night 8,500 feet above sea level on Oregon's Mount Hood Sept. 8 as part of massive search for two climbers presumed killed nine months earlier during a fierce snowstorm. Dozens of other Oregon State and volunteer rescuers joined the search the following morning but, despite the concerted effort, no trace could be found of the missing men.

The pararescue group was comprised of Staff Sgt. Patrick Dunn from the 920th Rescue Wing's home at Patrick Air Force Base; five PJs from the wing's geographically-separated unit (GSU) at Portland, Ore. and one SERE (Search Evasion Resistance and Escape) specialist from the 943rd Rescue Group, the wing's other GSU, at Tucson, Ariz.

