

A BRIEF HISTORY OF USAF COMBAT RESCUE, 1939-1985

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1939-1945

During the early stages of World War II (1939-1945), both the Germans and the British maintained dedicated forces to rescue downed aircrews. Most of this activity took place in or near the English Channel, and quite often the fate of aircrews was determined by whose rescue forces who were first to arrive on the scene. The United States Army Air Forces cooperated with the air-sea rescue missions of the British, resulting in the saving of more than 5,000 British and American lives in the waters around the United Kingdom.

Concurrently, separate United States Army Air Force emergency rescue (ER) units were formed between 1943 and 1945. A total of nine emergency rescue squadrons were activated during World War II, and they served with the United States Army Air Force numbered air forces throughout the world. The equipment used consisted mostly of OA-10 "Catalina" aircraft, P-47 "Jugs," and B-17G aircraft equipped with droppable lifeboats.

1946-1949 — Following World War II the United States Army Air Forces (later the United States Air Force) recognized the need for a more permanent air rescue capability. Accordingly, on 13 March 1946 the Air Rescue Service was established and assigned to the Air Transport Command (later the Military Air Transport Service, and finally the Military Airlift Command).

From a rather humble beginning, Air Rescue Service operated with a wide variety of aircraft, including C-47s, B-17s, OA-10s, L-5s, AT-11s, and a few R-5s (later H-5), helicopters. B-29s, equipped with droppable lifeboats, were added in 1947. During the period 1946-1950, Air Rescue Service performed search and rescue missions from Central America to the Greenland Ice Cap.

1950-1953 — With the advent of the Korean War (1950-1953), the number of Air Rescue Service units and personnel increased geometrically. Aircraft used included OA-10s, C-47s, C-82s, B-17s, B-29s, H-5s, H-19s, and SA-16s (later HU-16s). Total personnel strength increased to 7,600. Air

Rescue Service accomplished 996 combat saves during the war. Also in 1952, two H-19 helicopters performed a significant feat when they flew across the North Atlantic route to England.

1954 - 1963 — After the Korean War the resources of Air Rescue Service tumbled as fast as they had grown, and by 1960 they force had diminished to 1,500. At this point, other missions were added to bolster the utility of the command. In addition to the regular search and rescue mission, Air Rescue Service added supervision of rescue coordination centers, rescue support for space operations, command of local base rescue units at 70 locations, and recovery of atmospheric sampling balloons.

1964 - 1975 — In 1964, Air Rescue Service became involved in the War in Southeast Asia (1964-1975), and the force expanded gradually to approximately 5,700 persons by 1972. A total of 2,780 combat saves were credited to the Air Rescue Service (later the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service or ARRS) during the war. Captain Gerald O. Young was awarded the Medal of Honor, and 37 other ARRS personnel were awarded the Air Force Cross. The command participated in the San Tay Raid (1970), the first transpacific helicopter flight (1970), the evacuation of Phom Penh and Saigon (1975), and the Assault on Koh Tang Island (1975).

Numerous other worldwide accomplishment were taking place during the same period (1964-1975). In 1966 ARRS people became the first Air Force personnel to test the surface-to-air pickup system (also called the Fulton Recovery System), and in 1967 the command first used the air-to-air recovery system to "catch" high altitude sampling devices. In 1967 two H-3s flew nonstop across the Atlantic Ocean to Paris, following the route of Charles Lindbergh in 1927.

In 1969 ARRS helicopters saved the lives of 2,516 Tunisians during floods in that country. In 1972 Lieutenant Colonel Edgar Allison, Jr., flew an HC-130 nonstop from Chung Chaun Kang AB, Taiwan, to Scott AFB, Illinois, establishing a new long distance record. In 1974 the command established the Air Force Rescue Coordination Center (AFRCC) at Scott AFB, forming a nationwide focal point for search and rescue activities.

In 1973 ARRS was assigned the mission and H-1 helicopters for security support of the Intercontinental Ballistics Missile Sites (ICBMs) of the Strategic Air Command (SAC). In 1975 ARRS was assigned United States Air Force WC-130 and WC-135 aircraft and the command assumed the additional missions of weather reconnaissance and aerial sampling.

1976 - 1982 — In the postwar period (1976-1982) ARRS leveled off to about 4,200 personnel, increased exercise activities, and concentrated on combat readiness. In 1978 the command was assigned the job of evacuating more than 900 human remains from Jonestown, Guyana, and in 1979 ARRS helicopters were placed on standby at Incirlik AB, Turkey, for the possible evacuation of Americans from Iran. Later in 1979 ARRS helicopters were deployed to Central America during a crisis in Nicaragua.

Again, in 1980-1981, following the unsuccessful attempt to rescue American hostages in Iran, ARRS forces underwent concentrated training for possible contingency rescue operations. When Mount St. Helens "blew its top" on 18 May 1980, the H-1 helicopters of the 304th Squadron saved 61 persons, and when the Prinsendam, a Dutch luxury liner, was sinking due to fire damage in the Gulf of Alaska on 4 October 1980, ARRS personnel saved 65 lives.

On 22 September 1981 Air Rescue Service/ARRS passed the significant milestone of 20,000 cumulative saves since 1946, and President Ronald W. Reagan passed his congratulations to the command. Concurrently, during the period 1976-1982, ARRS personnel continued to accumulate significant honors. Four persons were designated among the Twelve Most Outstanding Airmen in the Air Force. Master Sergeant Wayne Fisk was selected as one of the Ten Most Outstanding Young Men in America (1980). Two men won the Mackay Trophy.

1983-1985 — In 1983 a significant reorganization took place. The 23rd Air Force was established on 1 March 1983. The primary purpose of the new command was to link the combat rescue operations functions of ARRS and the special operations functions of the 2nd Air Division under a MAC numbered air force (NAF). During the next

few years the Twenty-Third Air Force adjusted to its many missions and a wide variety of aircraft and equipment.

In May 1983 the command was tasked to participate with H-1 helicopters in Operation BAT, a cooperative effort between the United States and Bahamas to curtail illegal drug operations. In October 1983 the Twenty-Third Air Force was ordered to participate in the Grenada Contingency, and MC-130s, AC-130s, and one EC-130 participated in that operation.

By 1984 the Twenty-Third Air Force was assigned command authority over three bases: Scott AFB, Illinois; Hurlburt Field, Florida and Kirtland AFB, New Mexico. On 1 January 1984 the Twenty-Third Air Force assumed command over two more missions, aeromedical evacuation and operational support airlift. By July 1985 a total of more than 15,000 personnel were assigned. Aircraft systems included: H-60s, H-53s, H-3s, H-1s, HC-130s, AC-130s, MC-130s, WC-130s, WC-135s, C-21s, C-12s, and C-9. Combat rescue functions continued to be assigned primarily to the 39th, 41st, and 1550th Wings of the Twenty-Third Air Force.

