

The story of the Air Force's First High Altitude Rescue Team
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An assortment of current operations and broad operational concerns evolved and progressed in a manner during the mid-1970s to result in the 71st Aerospace Rescue & Recovery Squadron's Pararescue team, Elmendorf AFB Alaska providing the Department of Defense a new unique operational capability that satisfied a mission need.

The new operational capability provided was a designated by name 6 to 8 man world-wide deployable ready on an eight hour notice high altitude mountaineering rescue and recovery team having qualifications and capability to conduct operations on snow, ice, and rock at elevations up to 22,000 feet above sea level for a self-sufficient period of no less than 20 days.

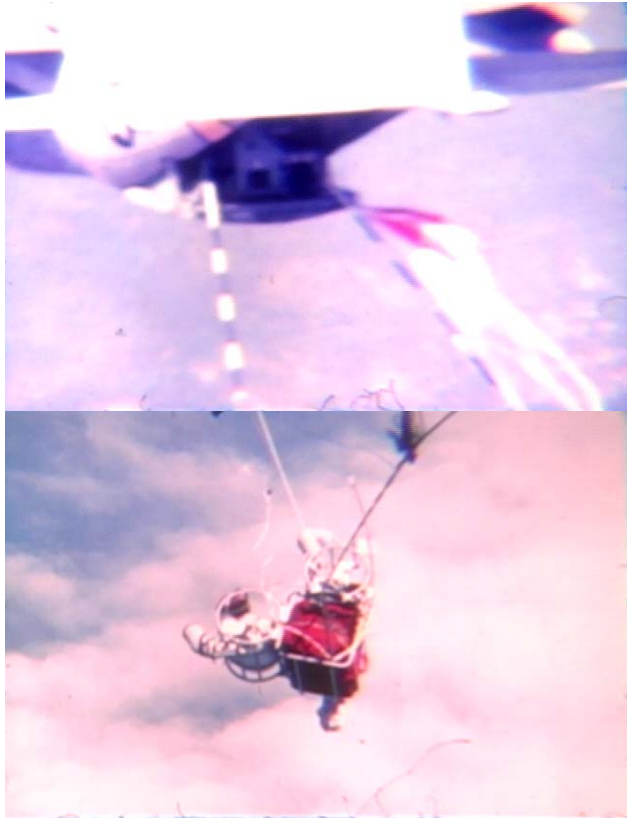
Reaching this point of needing this new operational capability was indirectly in part a result of the problematic air-to-air retrieval of film capsules and other devices descending by parachute after dropped by an orbiting satellite or unmanned extreme high altitude balloon and rescue support for the aircrews flying clandestine reconnaissance missions gathering information as near as possible over land to international borders or at just outside the twelve mile limit defining international waters.



Unmanned extreme high altitude balloons and one-time use high resolution photography satellites replaced penetrating reconnaissance over flights done by manned aircraft as a result of a U-2 being shot down over the Soviet Union on May 1, 1960. As digital imaging and other supporting technology was not adequately developed and available until the mid-1980s, getting what was photographed or collected depended physically on catching a jettisoned film canister or equipment gondola as it descended under parachute. Although the air-to-air recovery techniques and methods to do this was operational by the end of 1951¹, the unpredictability behavior of high altitude wind currents, recovery zone weather and unanticipated timer failures often complicated mid-air retrieval being there to catch the devices descending under parachute.

When the air-to-air recovery attempt of the payload was unsuccessful, the recovery of this sensitive materiel became a ground or water surface recovery operation.

Air Force policy put in place by May 1958² clearly stated the Air Rescue Service will assist in retrieving hazardous cargo (special weapons) in accordance with Air Force Regulation 55-14. Consequently the land and sea surface operation capability purpose for Pararescue included



supporting cold war strategic and tactical reconnaissance operations having purpose of finding threats that might be developing and for verifying arms reduction, nuclear test-ban agreements.

USAF pararescue mission support involvement spanned from the scheduled “catch a falling Star operations” done by pararescuemen assigned to the 6594th Test Group at Hickam AFB Hawaii to the unscheduled gone astray recovery events.

Although boarder penetrating over flights fell in disfavor as a result of a U-2 being shot down over the Soviet Union on May 1, 1960, reconnaissance aircraft continued to fly as close as possible to a border over land or just outside the twelve mile limit defining international waters to gather information throughout the cold war. In the period from 1945 to 1977 more than 40 reconnaissance aircraft performing such clandestine missions

were shot down³ and other sources indicated several hundred went missing over or near international borders of interest.

Range limited unmanned reconnaissance drones were also developed and used during the 1960s that were operated from a launch aircraft such as the DC-130 and were designed to be midair retrieved in a designated recovery area. At the peak of operations such drones made 30 to 40 flights per month over North Vietnam and adjacent communist forces controlled areas of Indochina. No less than 578 drones were lost over China and North Vietnam: 251 were shot down, 80 were declared, missing in action“, 53 were lost during recovery, 30 during winching up and the rest to different reasons.

The 21 June 1971 enemy shooting down of Jolly Green 54, HH-53 Tail Number 66-8285 some distance north of the Plains of Jars, Laos during an attempt to recover an AQM-34 *Buffalo Hunter* unmanned reconnaissance drone that didn’t make it home is an example of an unscheduled gone astray materiel recovery mission.



Although the Jolly's Flight Engineer and one pararescueman were severely injured in the crash all were rescued.

Pararescueman Jon Hoberg was on the hoist when the Jolly went down and was struck in the face by a rotor blade. Chuck McGrath was the second pararescueman on his first combat mission. Both the drone and the downed 40th ARRS HH-53 were subsequently destroyed by air strike to prevent sensitive materiel from falling into enemy hands.

This history of rescue and recovery operations supporting strategic and tactical reconnaissance operations fails to explain the mission area relevant need for a high altitude rescue and recovery mountaineering capability. It was broadening national security concerns beyond the territories of Soviet Union and communist China that increased concern a high altitude mountaineering recovery capability was needed.

By the late 1970s it was realized worldwide expansionist communist ideology was not the only problematic national security concern. Manned and unmanned over fly and orbital reconnaissance operations had become burdened and complicated with emerging awareness of significant trade potential existing in various South American countries combined with need for counter drug activities and posturing for contingency operations. This resulted in distinct concern to have a rescue and recovery response capable of conducting high altitude mountaineering operations on the mountains of the Andean Ridge. Regime changes, nuclear proliferation, and increasing instability elsewhere in the world established awareness and concern of eventually some payload, sensitive materiel, hazardous cargo or aircrew will go down in a remote area at an elevation too high to be a simple no mountaineering expertise required helicopter recovery operation.

Consequently an awareness of a potential mission area deficiency was present at HQ Air Force when the 71st ARRS Pararescue team proposed to the Air Staff a dedicated high elevation mountaineering expedition capability was needed to reduce severity of risk exposure when high altitude rescuing of survivors or recovery of sensitive materiel must be done.

How and why the 71st ARRS Pararescue team had a unique high altitude mountaineering capability was directly caused by local area rescues of civilian mountain climbers off the high altitude slopes of Mt. McKinley, Mt. Foraker and other high peaks near Mt. McKinley.

Much of the increasing frequency of doing such high altitude rescues is also directly linked to the 71st ARRS pararescuemen doing joint high altitude rescue missions as crew members on Army CH-47 helicopters that arrived in Alaska in 1970. The ability to hover or land helicopters on or over mountainous terrain at elevations ten thousand feet above sea level was nonexistent in Alaska prior to this.



The Army's 242nd ASHC, 222nd Combat Aviation Battalion began modifying its CH-47 C model helicopters to operate at high altitudes immediately after relocated from Vietnam to Ft Wainwright Alaska in 1970. The modification resulted in such significant flight performance improvements these helicopter were capable of flying over the 20,320 foot summit of Mt. McKinley. The unit's official history discloses its first high altitude rescue was done at the 17,800 foot level on Mt McKinley in 1971 and the unit's CH-47 helicopter's aircrews soon afterwards began to frequently practice training landings to a site located at the 18,000 foot level of Mt McKinley.

The Army quickly discovered the CH-47 helicopter and its aircrews had a mission short coming of lacking a high altitude mountaineering rescue capability to put on the ground by hoist to recover the injured or to go out of the landed helicopter onto the mountain to bring the injured to the helicopter. This resulted in the 71st ARRS Pararescue team being tasked to provide this capability and caused more frequent utilizing of pararescuemen to do hazardous and technically demanding high altitude mountaineering rescue and recovery operations in Alaska.

One such mission, Elmendorf RCC number 159 happening on 28 July 1979 gives typical example of the involved risks. On that mission pararescueman SSgt Gilbert Vaillancourt rode down the cargo winch from a CH-47 having less than 20-minutes of fuel while it was hovering out of ground effect at 16,400 feet. With rotor blades spinning within 10 feet of a near vertical slope, SSgt Vaillancourt was lowered 40 feet below the CH-47. A pendulum action of the hoist cable was then established to swing the lowered PJ into the slope with expectation he would swing into and grab the distressed climber.

Mission difficulties began increasing during the 5 to 10 minutes it took SSgt Vaillancourt to secure the distressed climber to the penetrator and to subsequently cut the climber free of the ropes stopping the climber from falling down the mountain. These difficulties began with an electrical system malfunction that put out of action the intercom and supplemental oxygen systems. The loss of the intercom only caused the inconvenience of the crew having to communicate through hand signals while the loss of supplemental oxygen significantly increased the hazard risk of hypoxia impairing the consciousness of one or more crewmembers'. The intensity of what else can go wrong increased when one of two engines flamed out resulting in the pilots putting the CH-47 into autorotation while the lowered PJ and climber were about to be pulled through the cargo hatch. The other on-board pararescueman used brute strength to get SSgt Vaillancourt and the distressed climber completely into the helicopter. SSgt Vaillancourt's extraordinary heroic accomplishments resulted in him being awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. Air Medals were awarded to the Army crewmembers and the other PJ involved in getting this rescue done. At one time this was the highest hoist rescue; the current CH-47 record is 18,200 feet.

CMSgt John Tobey and SMSgt Gene Nardi provide the push and shove power leadership at the 71st needed to get funding, scheduling, training and procedural approval requests through squadron, wing, Major Command, and AF Headquarters staffs. It was SSgt Robert LaPointe however who was the primary principle leader developing concepts of operations and providing the final selecting the first core team members and getting them trained and equipped to do HART missions. His being the concept originator and leading efforts and performance not only culminated in the Department of Defense getting its first high altitude mountaineering rescue and

recovery team but also in him being nominated for and selected as one of twelve outstanding airmen of the year for 1978.



Mt. McKinley; second time for AF team

Rescue men climb to top



Tsgt. Robert L. LaPointe on Mt. McKinley's 20,320 foot summit. (U.S. Air Force photo by Tsgt. Michael French)

By Capt. Richard E. Hodges
Tsgt. Robert L. LaPointe, 30,
ELMENDORF AFB, AK—Capt.
LaPointe, an AF-100 Helicopter
aircraft commander with the 1st
Aerospace Rescue and Recovery
Squadron (ARRS), here, handed
his gear and swung rescue air
plane into a tight turn. Operations
Officer, Lt. Col. Rick Hoover,
sitting in the cockpit's seat,
watched the radio button.
"Pararescue, Pararescue, this is
Tsgt. Robert L. LaPointe. This is
a rescue mission. I've got a
message to read to your team.
(May) General (Ralph S.)
Stander. I've been following
your progress. I salute you upon
achieving your goal. All at all in
Rescue are proud of you. Have a
safe trip home."
Comments from the 1st
Aerospace Rescue and Recovery
Squadron (ARRS) commander to first
Air Force pararescue specialist atop
the summit of Mt. McKinley, North
America's tallest mountain. Later
that day direct communication by
radio-telephone was established
and General Standers personally
passed his congratulations to the
team.
Tsgt. Robert L. LaPointe, a
pararescue specialist and team
leader with the 1st ARRS,
acknowledged from the 20,320-foot
peak. It was Sergeant LaPointe's
third and toughest climb of Mt.
McKinley. It was the second climb
by an Air Force team, and the first
by the Air Force's only certified
high altitude rescue team.
The "hard" climb included
eight PJs from the 1st ARRS,
one Air Force rescue team from
1st ARRS, March AFB, CA,
and a climber from the Air
National Guard's 1st ARRS,
Hickam City Airport, HI. The
seasoned mountain climbers
began their climb May 21 from a
30,000-foot camp.
The climb was to provide
realistic high altitude rescue
training as well as refine aerial
mountaineering techniques.
After the climb, the team members
were certified as the Air Force's
only high altitude rescue team
and ready for deployment to any
where in the world.
Led by Sergeant LaPointe, five
members of the 10-man team
reached the summit June 3. They
were: Tsgt. Terry L. Retzel, High

The mountaineering High Altitude Rescue Team's mission ready certification May-June 1978 ascent of the 20,320 foot summit of Mt McKinley Alaska resulted in the only accredited high altitude mountaineering rescue team in the Air Force and in the Department of Defense. The PJs on this climb were SSgt Robert LaPointe (team leader), TSgt Terry Wetzel (Assistant Team leader), TSgt Michael French, TSgt George Gonzales, SSgt Daniel Hodler, Sgt John Cassidy, Sgt Gerald Hoag, Sgt Paul Koester, Sgt Thomas Crouch, and SrA Bruce Hickson. The five members attaining the summit on June 3, 1978 were LaPointe, Wetzel, French, Hodler, and Cassidy.

This operational readiness evaluation resulted in the June 15, 1978 change 1 to the December 1, 1977 ARRSR 55-11 Pararescue Operational Regulation

stating "The 41st RWRW has the primary responsibility of maintaining by name, one eight-man high altitude team capable of recovering sensitive equipment. This team will consist of six 71st ARRS assigned pararescuemen plus one National Guard and one reserve pararescueman. The 71st ARRS has the added responsibility of training and maintenance of equipment for this team."

The West Buttress route used to ascend Mt. McKinley in 1978 lacked technical difficulty, but the purpose of the climb was to show a twenty day self sufficiency and the ability to conduct sustained rescue and recovery operations at elevations above 10,000 feet . It was decided by TSgt LaPointe that a more technical difficulty climb was needed in 1979 to clearly demonstrate the expertise of the capability available to DoD. The mountain chosen was the 12,337 foot high, Mt. Deborah, in the Hayes Range Alaska.

Very few attempts to climb Mt Deborah had been made between 1979 and when it was first successfully climbed in 1954. Its remoteness and lack of terrain suitable for a landing strip made it difficult to get to, additionally unpredictable weather and considerable presence of unstable rock, snow and ice made for a dangerous climb. The PJs on this climb were Robert LaPointe, Daniel Hodler, Russell Tanner, John Cassidy, Tom Crouch, TJ Bruce, Paul Koester, and Terry Wetzel.

The obstacle of remoteness was not a difficulty for the 71st ARRS H-3 helicopters that transported the team and equipment to the base of the mountain. The weather and unstable rock, snow, and ice were the only difficulties the team needed to deal with.

The expedition establishes base camp on Yanert Glacier during the second week of August 1979. High winds, sleet, and limited visibility unexpectedly come between the sorties transporting the team and equipment to base camp on the same day as planned. Four of eight climbers not only dealt with extreme weather conditions that broke tent poles during the first night at base camp, they also had uncertainty of how safe they were from avalanche dangers. While 50 to 80 mile per hour winds with rain and sleet battered the tents, the climbers heard the deafening roar and felt the vibrations of frequent and unpredictable falling of small and large ice, snow, and rock avalanches from the vertical and near vertical slopes in close proximity of the base camp. The weather cleared the next day and the remainder of the team arrived at the battered base camp. Unfortunately, the several days of cloudless skies and very warm weather that followed the rain and sleet began melting and destabilizing the snow, ice and rock. This hazardous condition eventually thwarted the climb as a stable route could not be found through the 1000 foot ice face that had to be gotten through to get to the higher elevations of the mountain.

Attempts were made for three days to find a passable route up the ice face. On the third day of making this attempt, several members of the team barely avoided being buried and crushed by falling ice. The climbers avoided serious injuries by taking what little cover they could under over hangs as the ice passed by. The increasing frequency and amount of ice, snow, and



rock falling off the mountain sides and ice faces as the climbers retreated back to base camp made it evident it was just too dangerous to push forward with any more attempts. It was discovered during a medical exam a few days after returning to Elmendorf AFB, that TSgt Terry Wetzal had gotten a hair-line fractured pelvis from the ice block that had struck him; no other Mt. Deborah expedition member had any documented injury resulting from the Mt. Deborah climb.

High altitude mountaineering training opportunity for all pararescuemen came to a halt a few months after the Mt Deborah climb when HQ Air Rescue & Recovery Service imposed a training restriction forbidding PJs from conducting mountaineering training on high altitude terrain above 10,000 feet. The decision was risk assessment driven as the 15 June 1980 ARRSR 55-11 Pararescue Regulation discloses the policy was implemented to avert risks of high Altitude induced illnesses and disability which can effect both the inexperienced and experienced

Pararescueman alike as indication are that substantial disability and loss of effectiveness are likely to occur in 50 to 80 percent of men rapidly brought to altitudes in excess of 12,000 feet. It interestingly added the restriction “only personnel specifically identified that have actually performed at elevations above 18,000 feet will be used for operations over 18,000 feet.

It wasn't until Air Rescue Service merged with Air Force special operations to form 23rd AF did commissioned officers lacking alpine mountaineering experience and qualifications doing risk assessments against operational mission needs reluctantly realize PJs needed to get back into doing rescue and recovery mountaineering training above 10,000 feet. The 1 August 1989 MACR 23-13, 1730th Pararescue Squadron identified Detachment 4 1730th PRS RAF Woodbridge United Kingdom and Detachment 5 1730th PRS Elmendorf AFB AK are designated to conduct high altitude mountain rescue and recovery in support of US Air Force and theater requirements.

Although Air Force high altitude rescue mountaineering training expeditions are no longer put on a mountain each year to summit a high altitude mountain peak, the Air Force's capability to do extended ground rescue and recovery operations above 10,000 feet MSL is being sustained by the Alaska Air National Guard pararescue team.

Missions having need of persons with considerable mountaineering skills and experience do happen unexpectedly and such ground activities and deeds are often not highlighted in official Air Force record afterwards as they should be. Sometimes such skills have nothing to do with mountains, but with searching through collapsed and damaged manmade structures. A collapsed and damaged structure example is the October 17, 1989 San Francisco Bay area 7.1 earthquake. PJs from the 129th and 41st Rescue squadrons arriving in the disaster area were used to crawl through and around the collapsed I-880 freeway and other structures to survey damage and to access and recover both survivors and bodies. In August 1989 PJs were sent to Ethiopia to search for and rescue Democratic Congressman Mickey Leland and others of his staff who were passengers on a missing aircraft.

The aircraft carrying the Congressman Leland delegation had flown into the side of a mountain and it was clear when it was found that there were no survivors. Mission commanders were reluctant to involve the PJs in mortuary body recovery and accident investigation operations. However, this reluctance quickly disappeared after the mountain revealed the safety need to prevent injuries caused by persons lacking mountaineering skills falling down the steep mountain slope. The choices for reducing this risk were limited to a solution of lowering a mountaineering climbing team by hoist from a hovering helicopter. The only persons available having both experience and more importantly the mountaineering equipment with them in Ethiopia was the PJs.

High altitude rescue and recovery mountaineering particularly with its almost always being an frigid unpredictable weather environment and altitude exposure to frostbite, dehydration, hypothermia, acute mountain sickness, falls and avalanche is no place for inexperience, poor leadership, over estimation of strength, and faulty or inadequate equipment. The jeopardy is comparable to the risks encountered during actual combat operations.

High altitude rescue experience and training enhances combat readiness to accomplish real world mountain warfare CSAR missions in rugged, high-altitude conditions. Operational Risk Management includes knowing the degree of technical and performance risk involved and how and why an operational capability came to be mission-relevant. All these elements evolve into a performance readiness of having military members with the training, experience, and judgment when the mission objective involves getting something unexpected or unplanned done on the ground.

¹ Directory of US Rockets and Missiles, Appendix 4 Reconnaissance Balloons (WS-119L/WS-461L), Andreas Parsch, 2006.

² Air Force Regulation 20-54, 28 May 1958: 1. Mission ...The Air Rescue Service will also: ... c. assist in retrieving and safeguarding hazardous cargoes (special weapons) in accordance with AFR 55-14.

³ Air Warfare, An International Encyclopedia, Walter J. Boyne, ABC-CLIO, Inc, Santa Barbra California, 2002. Volume 1, page 140, "By one count 40 US aircraft were shot down between 1947 and 1977, most while on intelligence-gathering Ferret flights.

Sources not identified in end notes:

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History of 6594th Test Group, unpublished manuscript, author/writer unknown (unclassified). Activated 1 November 1953, Decommissioned Sept. 30, 1986. Disclosed reason and mission role change effective 31 March 1971 that removed not full time scuba specialist who also didn't hold trained and qualified pararescue AFSC from helicopter duties and also off of the unit manning documents. Until then part of the purpose of the 76th ARRs was to supply PJs to do the recovery missions have both probability and potential to be an extended water operation. It also discloses a good summary of in 1971 ARRS produced a study arguing it should take over the mission of the 6594th Test Group and why this didn't happen. Most interesting is the HC-130s went to 23rd AF and remain in AFSOCs aircraft inventory and were not given to rescue when rescue was split out of AFSOC in 1989.

Ike's gambit: The KH-8 reconnaissance satellite, Dwayne A. Day, Monday, January 12, 2009, The Space Review.

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Read more at Suite101: Soviet and US Air Combat 1950-1991: When the Cold War Turned Hot in the Air.
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Spies in the Himalayas : secret missions and perilous climbs, Kohli, M. S., & Conboy, K. J. (2002), Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas. And various tin hat conspiracy articles claiming attempts from 1965 to 1968 were made to locate and recover a lost/misplaced CIA plutonium powered listening device on or near Nanda Devi (highest peak in the Indian Garhwal Himalaya) that had purpose to monitor possible Chinese nuclear activity in Tibet. However, extreme high altitude reconnaissance balloons did fly over this region.

Spy SAT Down, Dwayne A. Day, The Space Review, Monday February 18, 2008

Spy Satellite Recovery was Plum Air Force Job, Honolulu-Star Bulletin, Friday, August 19, 2005

The Corona Project: America's First Spy Satellites by Curtis Peebles. Naval Institute Press, 118 Maryland Avenue, Annapolis, Maryland 21402, 1997. "Closer to home were the equally experimental methods developed to recover the film as it returned to earth. First with specially configured C-119s and later C-130s, aircrews practiced and perfected techniques that resulted in a midair catch of the film-return capsule's parachute. This method was successful only due to the flying skill of the airmen and their willingness to experiment with different methods of rigging the hook assemblies. On a few occasions, the capsule went into the ocean and was recovered by US Navy or US Air Force pararescuemen. During one such situation, the capsule landed in the water but wasn't spotted until late in the afternoon. Two USAF pararescuemen floated with the capsule overnight in a rolling sea and were recovered the next morning cold and drenched but successful in their mission. Airmanship and sacrifice come in many forms."

The Genesis Payload: Just How Dangerous are its Contents?, Leonard David, Senior Space Writer, 30 August 2004
<http://www.space.com/288-genesis-payload-dangerous-contents.html> "Corona program managers have said that whenever they gave briefings to senior officers in the late 1950s the generals would sit there passively listening to them explain about operating a robotic vehicle in vacuum, extreme cold, and controlling it from hundreds of miles away. But they would violently object when they heard about the recovery plan," Day related. "The generals were pilots and they thought that catching something falling on a parachute was impossible. What they did not realize was that it had already been done."

The Genetrix Balloons-USAF reconnaissance flights over the Soviet Union: 10 January-6 February 1956 , Charles Stephenson, Osprey Publishing-The Destination for Military History, May 1, 2001. Discusses Turkey being launch site for covering areas of southern Siberia and Northern China.