

FLEXIBILITY IS KEY TO PARARESCUE

by Major General William J. Mall Jr.
23d Air Force Commander

There are a number of questions being asked these days about the pararescue career field. Most focus on where we're going. What is our direction and speed?

The current pararescue force, which was officially formed in 1947, traces its beginnings to World War II when a doctor and two medics parachuted into the remote Burma jungles to rescue survivors of an aircraft crash. At that time, we could not get an airplane directly to the survivors, so we sent para-jumpers (PJs) to their aid. These specialists provided care and eventually led the survivors to freedom.

In Southeast Asia, circumstances of the war dictated our tactics and use of PJs. By the middle and latter parts of the war, we had air refuelable helicopters that were capable--with enough time and fighter assistance--to reach almost anywhere in the theater. We also had air superiority, but we were not always in control on the ground. Our intelligence was less than complete and, at any given moment, you were never sure of who was where. This fact, coupled with the thick jungle and rugged terrain, made extended surface operations unsafe, undesirable and generally unnecessary. The PJ always ran the risk of being left on the ground anytime he deployed from a helicopter, but the rule of thumb was to insert the pararescueman as close to the survivor's position as possible. We moved the helicopter to the survivor.

Reviewing our experience in SEA, we learned, or confirmed, several things. One point is that PJs were probably not as well trained and equipped for surface operations and survival in a hostile environment as they should have been. Another is that there were a number of occasions when the mission would have gone better if we had deployed the PJ to help the survivor get to and get on the hoist. A survivor was normally in shock, often injured and sometimes incapable of assisting the rescue force. These items, plus others, form the basis of our knowledge as we address the future.

When we look at what we require for the next contingency or war, only one thing is certain. We do not know the location or the circumstances of that next conflict. Thus, it seems reasonable to have a well-trained, well-equipped force with a reasonable amount of flexibility. We will then be able to quickly adapt to a new situation and best do our job.

Flexibility is the key. We need the surface tactical option for our pararescue force to provide that flexibility. We need to exercise these tactics to see how they apply in different theaters of operation. To provide for this, we have increased our ground combat skills and authorized additional weapons for protection while on the ground. Low-level, pop-up, single-pass

deployment from the HC-130 and night helicopter infiltration/exfiltration capabilities, using night vision goggles, are being brought on line. The high-glide-ratio, "ram-air" parachute also adds potential combat capability and will be used in future exercises. We envision some situations where the need, geography and threat, coupled with reliable intelligence, will make extended PJ ground employment a reasonable concept. These situations include: deploying from an HC-130 to be picked up by a helicopter later; a drop-off in a "low threat" area to infiltrate to a "high threat" (for aircraft) area to gather the objective(s) and return to a predesignated recovery point; and deploying in one area to go to a selected area for evasion (SAFE) area or designated area for recovery (DAR) to bring people out when the threat, or security, denies taking an aircraft directly to the spot. There are many other examples, but the objective is a flexible search and rescue system.

There are, of course, a number of concerns and potential costs with all of this. We have increased training requirements for a career field that is already overloaded. We are now evaluating what is most important and what training can be reduced, deferred or eliminated. We are also looking at downloading the pararescue force from some aircrew, administrative and support duties that now reduce available training time.

Others have suggested we are creating another full-time job when we consider expanded ground operations. At some future point that might be true and more manpower may be justified. But, for the immediate future, we are looking closely at what we are capable of doing, validating these concepts in exercises and starting an analysis addressing the potential increase in combat rescue capability an expanded PJ role could offer. These days, any proposed increase in force structure (aircraft and people) needs to be justified by a comprehensive analysis.

We have identified pararescue capability in several documents so we can exercise our existing capability and work to adapt it to our changing environment. The PJ is a highly trained, very unique resource and we are obligated to make the best use of him. We are re-evaluating the training requirements, concept of operations and force size.

Again, the objective of all this is flexibility, so we may obtain an increase in overall capability. We must train to the capabilities published in tactics and operations documents. We need to manage the training requirements and available training time at all levels. If we are in an exercise or conflict, we need to manage our assets so all PJs are not "on the ground" and we are short when we need them for vital aircrew duties. We must assign assets where they are most needed. As we adjust to changing requirements, I challenge each of you to help us through this evolution. Your contributions in ideas and feedback will be crucial to our progress.

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