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PARARESCUEMEN, THE UNSUNG HEROES

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Heroes. Everyone needs heroes. This country was built on the exploits of such men as Davy Crockett, Jim Bowie, Wild Bill Hickok and Wyatt Earp. American military history glorifies the likes of George Washington, Andrew Jackson, Robert E. Lee, Sergeant York, Audie Murphy, George Patton, and Douglas MacArthur. Although our Air Force history is short, we also have heroes. The problem is, when most people think of Air Force heroes, they automatically think of our pilots. The names Eddie Rickenbacker, Chuck Yeagar, and Bud Day immediately come to mind. These men are heroes. They took greater risks and sacrificed more than most of us could ever imagine, but they are not the only airmen worthy of the title; HERO. There is a small group of highly trained, highly dedicated enlisted men who seldom receive the acclaim they deserve. They don't fly jets, but they are the most welcome sight a downed aviator can see. They are the Air Force Pararescuemen or PJs, and this is their story.

I guess one could call PJs the Air Forces' special forces. They are in fact a very elite group who number only about 350 (8:37). Much like the Army's Green Berets and the Navy's SEALs, only a select few of the hundreds of applicants can complete the rigorous program and go on to wear the coveted maroon beret. Like their counterparts, they all receive long, intensive training. But unlike the Green Berets and SEALs, who learn how to quickly and effectively wreak death and destruction upon the enemy, PJs learn the art of rescue. Their emphasis is on recovering downed pilots behind enemy lines. This is not an easy task. It requires strength, stamina and nearly a year of initial training. Preparation for these rescue missions starts at least a year earlier at Air Force Basic Training.

Many of the potential PJs volunteer while in basic training. Basic trainees who volunteer are screened for physical ability, stamina and willpower (9:23). Many want-to-be supermen never make it past this screening, but that is probably for the best. What lies ahead is not for the faint-of-heart. The selected few will attend the four-week joint, pararescue/combat control initial familiarization which introduces them to their respective programs. They then go on to the eight-week joint indoctrination course. (9:24) This is the beginning of what some call "Superman U". The emphasis here is physical conditioning. A typical day starts with a six-mile run and a swim that can be from 1,500 to 4,000 meters long. SCUBA practice is next, then it's lunch time. A brief classroom period follows lunch, then it's on to calisthenics. Pararescue candidates will do hundreds of sit-ups and push-ups each day. They will do as many as 1,000 push-ups per day. An average of only five of the 25 starting candidates will complete the eight-week course. (8:37) Most airmen who make it this far will complete PJ training, but it is still very demanding. Training continues with parachute training, underwater swimmer training, air crew water survival training, underwater egress training, and air crew combat survival training. Then it's off to Kirtland NM for 23 weeks of Pararescue School. Here, emphasis is placed on emergency medical training and ground and air search operations. Anyone who completes this intensive training course has earned the privilege of wearing the maroon beret which identifies him as one of the Air Forces' elite. Among the many things he will do is offer feedback on how better prepare future graduates for the field. This is the exact kind of information several PJs gave in their End-of-Tour Reports (ETR) upon leaving South East Asia (SEA).

Pararescueman MSgt Charles W. Hoell, Jr. commented on the school's psychological preparation in his ETR which covered his September 1968 to August 1969 tour in SEA. He stated, "The initiative and motivation of our pararescuemen continues to be very high. I feel that this can be attributed to the schools they are required to attend that are highly demanding of the individual; i.e., parachute school, SCUBA school; etc. Whatever turns our career field may take in the future in regards to helicopter utilization, the pararescueman should continue to receive all the

training he does now to properly outfit him psychologically for the job." (5:4) SMSgt Ted R. Hawkins, of 38th ARRS Pararescue Standardization in SEA from June 1967 to June 1968 echoed the same comments about all pararescuemen assigned to the 3rd ARRGp in SEA in his ETR. (4:6) TSgt George Schipper, a PJ with two tours in SEA, said, "We gave fighter pilots the best rescue coverage they ever had. We were able to be on the scene in a matter of minutes, often flying within 5 to 10 miles of the strikes. This can only be attributed to the devotion and loyalty of the men." (12:5) He also had recommendations for improvements..

He recommended that three-level PJs not be sent to SEA. Although they were doing an outstanding job, but they were making errors. Much of this was because there was no time to train them while in combat areas. (12:5) He also addressed refresher training in mountainous areas and the basic curriculum at PJ school. Some of his recommendations were later implemented. TSgt Schipper sought more flexibility in PJ's rescue efforts. There were many discussions about when and if a PJ should go in under a given situation. Many times headquarters or the pilot of the rescue aircraft made the call and wouldn't let the PJ go down to search for someone. TSgt Schipper believed the PJ, as the most qualified rescue person on board should decide. He said flexibility was the key and there is no "yes or no" answer to rescue. He said, "I know a captain that fought to keep us in the helicopter, especially after Bill Pitsenbarger was killed." (A1C William H. Pitsenbarger was Killed in action and was awarded the Air Force Cross). "Thirty years old and twelve years of military service, I cried for this individual I had known for only five months. He gave his life doing a job he believed in, and it made me more determined to fulfill what I believe is part of our mission. If we don't go down, Rescue is losing one of its most valuable resources." (12:7-8) Other PJs recommendations were also used to improve Air Force rescue.

SSgt Peter J. GaNun served with the 37th Aerospace Rescue & Recovery Squadron from September 1967 to September 1968. He said, "The commander at the time I was there, was a desk jockey of some years previous. This was his first flying command in fact. He knew as much about the workings of a flying command, as he did of flying a chopper. Due to his lack of

familiarization, with the task that faced him, as commander of the 37th ARRS, he did much to hurt the moral[e] of the squadron." (2:1) His observations did lead to command improvements. In 1987, officers once again started attending the pararescue school. Col. Ed Behling, commander of the 1730th Pararescue Squadron said, "Even though we don't envision our commanders going into the field, they must have an extensive working knowledge of pararescue capabilities. The qualification training will educate our new officers and help them establish the rapport needed when leading a pararescue unit." (1:4) Of course, everybody has his own idea of what is good and what can be improved on.

TSgt Kerry Kelly, pararescueman with the 40th ARRS from June 1967 to June 1968 had suggestions concerning the arrival of new helicopters, crowded working conditions, and the awards program. He said, "The awards and decoration program showed lack of continuity between units for the same mission and/or type of missions. The program itself at times was way out of proportion to what was actually accomplished and deserved, i.e. The awards were too high. I have personal knowledge of one Air Force Cross which I sincerely do not believe was deserved." (7:2) This may or may not be true, but day after day these men saved lives and that was their ultimate reward.

On October 23, 1965, SSgt Leon Fullwood rescued a downed pilot near Plei Me, Vietnam. He received the Distinguished Flying Cross. (16:30) In January 1966, two rescue crews evacuated eight severely wounded Marines near Da Nang, South Vietnam. On board were two PJs from the 38th ARRS: A1C Michael D. Leonard and A2C Albert W. Foster. All total, they flew eight missions in five hours and 50 minutes. It was just another routine mission. (15:2-4) By March 1966, the 38th ARRS had successfully completed its 200th rescue in SEA (17:1) Some pararescuemen became legendary. On December 20, 1972, pararescuemen TSgt John K. Carlson and Sgt Stephen L. Caldwell and their crews spent more than four hours searching for a B-52 crew on mountainous terrain in fog so dense, that they couldn't see the ground from 150 feet. Five of the six crew members were rescued. Caldwell was awarded the Silver Star and Carlson the

Distinguished Flying Cross. (11:39-41) MSgt Wayne Fisk flew 450 combat missions and rescued 14 air crew members. He was awarded two Silver Stars. (10:24-25) All total, pararescuemen made 3,883 saves in SEA (13:156). That's 3,883 people who would not have come home if it weren't for the selfless acts performed by these men. But it doesn't stop in SEA. Sgt Ben Pnington rescued Navy Lt. Devon Jones 165 miles inside the Iraqi border during Desert Storm (3:20). As recent as October 3, 1993, PJs have been doing what they are trained to do. MSgt Scott Fales and TSgt Timothy Wilkinson were serving in Mogadishu, Somalia. After an intense, 15-hour fire-fight, Fales was awarded the Silver Star and Wilkinson was awarded the Air Force Cross for saving three Army Rangers. (14:22-24) None of these men consider themselves heroes, but as a group, pararescuemen are the highest decorated of any enlisted specialty.

Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service members in SEA were awarded more than 33,000 individual decorations. Their units earned 86 campaign streamers, 128 decorations and numerous Presidential Unit Citations and Outstanding Unit Awards. The men were awarded over 600 Silver Stars and over 6,000 Distinguished Flying Crosses. (6:38) The Air Force Cross is the Nation's second highest award for gallantry. It has been awarded to only 20 enlisted airmen, 11 were PJs. Ten were awarded the Air Force Cross in SEA, and one in Somalia. Pararescuemen are proud of their record, but they are more proud of their accomplishments.

Since its inception on March 13, 1946, the ARRS has saved over 20,000 lives. Most were combat saves, their primary mission, but over 9,000 were peace-time saves. (6:38) Pararescuemen go wherever a life is in danger. Often it is behind enemy lines to rescue a downed pilot. Sometimes it's to an endangered ship at sea to rescue her crew and passengers. They helped recover every Apollo space capsule. They rush premature babies from remote areas to neonatal units in major hospitals. They search for lost children, mountain climbers, missing civilian pilots and more. They've been to Korea, Vietnam, Mount St. Helens and the Gulf of Alaska. Wherever a life is threatened, they will be there fulfilling their motto; "That Others May Live".

Everyone needs heroes, our country was built on exploits of heroes. Why shouldn't a young airman look up to a pararescueman as a hero? Don't get me wrong, there are other enlisted folks just as worthy: Flight engineers, security policemen, combat controllers. But there is something about that maroon beret that draws people's attention. There are lots of enlisted heroes who should be recognized, I'm not trying to diminish their contributions. I'm just trying to start somewhere and recognizing pararescuemen seemed like a good place to start. Our enlisted list of heroes includes the names: Black, Pitsenbarger, Hackney, Maysey, Newman, Fish, McGrath, Smith, King, Talley, and Wilkinson. These 11 PJs were all awarded our nation's second highest honor: The Air Force Cross. I'm not a pararescueman, I wouldn't attempt to compare myself with any of these men. But I can look to them with admiration and I can pass their feats on to other enlisted members so they can take pride in our enlisted heritage. It's important for all of us to have heroes, and what better hero could a young airman have than an enlisted man.

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