

Air Rescue—its blurred identity past, present, and future

The Air Force-wide air rescue mission has always been inclusive of more than getting rescue teams to the location of the unexpected downed or missing aircraft. This diversity of available capability results from the complexity of specialized skills, equipment, techniques needed to perform under the most demanding circumstances. The air rescue mission is daily, but it is not an everyday service just any unit or organization can provide.

The moral obligation not to abandon those sent into harms way when possibility to rescue them often puts aircraft, aircrew, and pararescuemen into a more brutal working environment that requires guts and adaptability. The doing of these combat rescue missions of downed aircrew requires the active participation of command authority, command and control, aircraft maintenance, rescue aircrews, and pararescue teams. Consequently the assets and resources capability to do combat air rescue results in ability to do many differing yet similar lateral missions. Thus the Air Force-wide air rescue mission ranges in a unique way proven by missions accomplished between combat rescue and benevolent humanitarian military assistance ends of military operations.

Unfortunately a significant lack of force structure combined with a mismatch of aircraft inventory poorly equipped to perform combat search and rescue obstructs the ability to respond to all mission requirements. This change happened in 1989 and it was the result of separating air rescue capabilities from special operations capabilities. The subsequent struggle to regain operational capability to just do the primary mission of combat rescue of downed aircrew has resulted in written published article after published article suggesting the direct cause is past failures of air rescue programs to establish its capability as being something unique in the Department of Defense.

All evidence to support claims of the Air Force's air rescue programs failure to become something unique is being limited to the years after 1989. The lack of disclosing mission capabilities and accomplishments from 1947 to 1989 suppresses the truthfulness that the Air Force once had an air rescue capability that produced significant tactical and strategic accomplishments and achievements. This nonconforming article produces competing facts and background information seldom disclosed by leadership that prefers to avoid extensive inquiry into all the relevant information needed for informed analysis.

Rescue aircrews and pararescue teams don't operate alone

Although rescue aircrews and pararescue teams don't operate alone this is the capability taking the risks to accomplish the mission. It is the rescue aircrews and pararescue teams emergency responders who are the first on-scene that are the something that is unique in the Department of Defense. The rescue mission is typically unforeseen and unexpected, the response is time limited which means planning is minimal and personal readiness and qualification to participate has to be there. Adequately describing uniqueness of rescue aircrew is difficult as they fly aircraft very similar to aircraft flown by other Air Force units and many Army, Navy, Marine, and Coast Guard units. The aircraft, however, typically have modifications and improvements that have in the past given air rescue aircrews the capability to accomplish air sampling missions, perform mid-air retrieval of returning space hardware, do Fulton recoveries of people and

materiel, do unplanned medical evacuations from remote and isolated areas and active combat zones (often within yards of the enemy), and provided on-scene airborne command and control.

Unfortunately rescue can not depend on survivors having the strength and mobility to get into the aircraft or to the aircrafts location on their own initiative. In these situations and circumstances the recovery of survivors is futile without some capability to bring survivors back to the aircraft. The recovery sensitive materiel and equipment typically relies on some capability or ability to leave the aircraft to perform duties on the ground. It was quickly apparent the on the ground on-scene responders would need ability to deploy by parachute, have significant emergency medical capabilities, possess significant survival, evasion, resistance, and escape (SERE) abilities and have significant combat skills. This resulted in the making of the capability provided by pararescuemen and pararescue teams. When the first Air Force Pararescue Teams became operational in 1947, the United States Air Force produced a rescue capability unique within the Department of Defense. The extensive capabilities and flexibility of utilization options pararescue provides commanders pertinent to peacetime rescues and combat military recoveries of downed aircrew and other isolated personnel has proven its worth mission after mission after mission.

**Highly Trained and Qualified Responders
with Preparedness and Willingness-to-Participate
are required**

Whether combat or humanitarian the typical search, rescue and recovery mission is time sensitive. The probability of finding survivors and their chances of survival diminish with each minute after an incident occurs. Records indicate that the life expectancy of injured survivors decreases as much as eighty percent during the first 24-hours following an accident, while the chances of survival of uninjured survivors rapidly diminish after the first three days. Exposure to climate and weather complicate the chances of survival further. In contested or politically unfriendly areas the capture or worse of survivors or isolated personnel cause other time limiting factors. Qualified aircrews dedicated to doing air rescue are certainly-so needed because rescue events and incidents happen unexpectedly and delay in response to events and incidents results in higher probabilities of death or capture.

The decision to conduct a search, rescue and recovery mission results from expectation, that even when harrowing conditions are existing, air rescue assets and capabilities will result in improving the odds for successful rescue and recovery of survivors. The performance expectation is this capability will be available to employ for the attempt to change worse case odds to even chance or better odds whether the goal is to fight to win, deter war, or promote peace. Having ability to improve odds of successful search, rescue and recovery in perilous surroundings requires more than a desire for glory, wanting to do the noble deed or having exceptional compassion. Performing these search, rescue and recovery duties requires persons having not only specialized skills and qualifications, but also the having readiness to endure a high amount of hardship and a willingness to place themselves in danger. Some equipment and materiel recovery missions out of necessity require accomplishing without consideration of the nobility of saving life.

Command authority always has the option to utilize Air Force air rescue units to accomplish humanitarian missions that contribute to furtherance of the national interests of the United States by generating regional, national, and international good will. Air rescue units can (if assets are available) provide forces and resources for “military support to civil authorities (MSCA) as directed by tasking authorities”¹. Any suggestion Air Force’s air rescue capabilities “need to mature or expand into performing nobler benevolent missions is misplaced”². It’s lacking force structure hindering air rescue assets from being more involved in doing humanitarian missions. There are also many non-military government agencies, non-governmental volunteer organizations available to help “win the ideological battles of winning hearts and minds”³.

The main purpose for sustaining an air rescue capability is the military rescue and recovery of downed aircrew and other isolated personnel from the active combat zone. This purpose isn’t humanitarian or defensive as international law states such activity and action is an explicit hostile offensive act. Consequently combat rescue isn’t a humanitarian mission and the non-combatant military status of medical personnel and medical aircraft hinders their use to perform such missions.⁴ More importantly the event causing a combat rescue is becoming less the result of a conventional conflict between opposing armies and more the result of an attack by an unconventional opponent (asymmetric enemy⁵). The Air Force has had some notable air rescue assets and resources able to respond and conduct operations on the asymmetric battlefield since 1947.

--Air Rescue, the operational essentials put to work--

“The tactical level of war deals with how we fight”⁶ and an “operational essential for rescue operations is the ability to render on scene assistance”⁷ and “the PJ is the arm by which the aircraft commander or mission commander accomplishes this task”⁸.

Air Rescue always sustained benevolent and humanitarian mission obligations to assist in joint SAR operations when requested and to support the National SAR Plan. There is no reason not to continue doing so. However Major General William J. Mall, Twenty-third Air Force commander wrote in a 7 September 1984 letter to his subordinate commanders: “I am personally concerned that we fully develop and maintain one of our finest 23rd AF capabilities, our pararescue force (PJs).”⁹ The following historical background gives testimony of why General Mall would consider pararescue a capability worthy of maintaining.

Employment concept for pararescue in the year 1947 was “maintaining capabilities compatible with the mission of long-range transports and bombers; to rendering medical and survival expertise to aircrews and other personnel on front lines and in territory behind the battle line; and to providing service for other agencies and activities when aerial rescue assistance is requested”.¹⁰ Pararescue employment concepts evolved and had expanded by 1962 to include retrieving hardware, materiel and isolated or injured personnel from land and sea incident sites and ocean going surface and subsurface vessels.¹¹

Many precautionary fixed wing missions were done by Air Rescue aircrews during the cold war to give rescue coverage to fighter aircraft flying long deployment flights over oceans or arctic surfaces or poised at entry and exit ends of RB-47 and U-2 reconnaissance and surveillance over

flights of the former Soviet Union and for similar flights over various other locations. If there was a natural disaster or great humanitarian need event anywhere in the world; Air Rescue deployed its forces there. Some example are Operation Hay Lift (January 1949), the French-Indochina conflict (1953-1954), the Congolese Army Revolt (July-October 1960), the Great Alaska Earthquake & Tsunami (March 27, 1964).

Special missions were also accomplished lacking life saving rescue purpose. “On 15 March 1960 after several days of searching, the crash location of a C-47 was located about 300 feet below a mountain summit in the central Apennine Range about three miles northeast of Amatrice, Italy. All on-board were clearly deceased but the jump was required to locate and secure classified launch codes for all the missile squadrons scattered all over Europe. So critical was the securing these launch codes that the SC-54 rescue aircrew and pararescue team (58th ARS, Wheelus AB, Libya) that found the crashed C-47 in Italy was pulled from a crash location of a French Air Force Nord Atlas with 19 souls on board while on jump final to deploy the PJs.”¹²

Arctic parachute rescue missions far above the arctic circle became routine during the 1950s. Pararescuemen TSgt Elliott Holder and SSgt Robert Christiansen jumped to the crash site of a Navy patrol bomber on 16 April 1954. They landed in high winds and traveled more than a mile over treacherous ice ridges to the crash. A storm with temperatures below zero and winds, oftentimes exceeding 100 knots, howled around them for eleven days. A helicopter transported the two PJs and the bodies (all aboard the bomber died upon impact) after the storm abated on the twelfth day. No expert prior to this mission considered military operations in the arctic practical or even possible on any significant scale because of the extreme cold, high winds, and difficult terrain. This and other ice-cap rescue jumps proved conclusively that with proper expertise, minimal equipment, and a few ‘guts’ troops can survive and operate for significant periods of time under the worst of arctic conditions.¹³

Supporting manned and unmanned space programs resulted in several parachute missions from fixed-wing aircraft and frequent hoist and low and slow missions from helicopters. PJs did a parachute “jump to the Aurora 7 Mercury spacecraft”¹⁴ manned by astronaut M. Scott Carpenter when it landed 250 miles from intended target area on 24 May 1962. PJs also did a parachute “jump to the Gemini 8 spacecraft”¹⁵ manned by astronauts Neil A. Armstrong and David R. Scott when it landed 58 miles from the closest U.S. Navy vessel in a contingency recovery area on 16 March 1966. The PJs’ uniquely indispensable day and night precision parachutist skills to land beside small drifting objects in the ocean, military SCUBA qualifications and survival expertise resulted in PJs being assigned to Air Force Systems Command to support “TO CATCH A FALLING STAR”¹⁶ operations. This directly contributed to it becoming a frequent event to parachute PJs from rescue aircraft 250 and more miles out at sea to provide life saving treatment to critically injured merchant, military and recreational sailors. The first night open water parachute jump to provide medical aid to a civilian merchant sailor happened eight hundred miles east of Guam in 1966. Pararescuemen Ton Newman, Jack Porter, and Jack Hoover jumped to the S.S. Guam Bear and had their patient stabilized within twelve hours and continued treating the patient until the ship reached port several days later.

The U.S. Army's 242nd Aviation Company which was the first unit to modify CH-47s to hover at high altitudes and to land at high elevations for purpose of accomplishing High Altitude Rescue Team (HART)¹⁷ operations in 1971. The Army's CH-47 HART crewmembers quickly discover the mountaineering, survival, and medical capability to lower down the hoist or out of the landed helicopter to go out of the landed helicopter onto the mountain to get something done on the ground capability part of the team was missing. This led to the request for 71st Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron PJs to fly on these Army HART missions. This causes Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service in coordination with Department of Defense to develop a "global deployable pararescue High Altitude Rescue Team having self sufficient capability to conduct operations on snow, ice, and rock at elevations up to 22,000 feet above sea level for 30-days"¹⁸. In 1978 the 71st ARRS Pararescue Team had "the only certified high altitude rescue climbing team capability in the Department of Defense".¹⁹

A joint U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Air Force, Canadian and merchant vessel rescue response to the burning cruise ship Prinsendam on 4 October 1980 demonstrated the value of helicopter rescue swimmers. "The extraordinary in the water and lifeboat accomplishments of two PJs is credited by the Coast Guard as being the first instrumental lessons learned from a mission demonstrating it needed helicopter rescue swimmers."²⁰

These samples of non-combat mission accomplishments demonstrate the significant contribution the Air Force's air rescue assets and resources have made to DOD since 1947. These missions also demonstrate it would be fair to claim pararescue is a unique enhancement that has proven its value in getting the mission accomplished. Pararescue is also the cause of several innovations in training over the years. Pararescue was among the first to establish training affiliations with civilian hospitals to embed pararescuemen in busy trauma centers to get hands on training under direct supervision of emergency trauma physicians while treating actual patients. The Pararescue School was the first enlisted military occupation training course sanctioned by a State Government to award paramedic certification (December 1981) and the Department of the Air Force sanctioned the paramedic program effective 4 June 1993.²¹ The Pararescue Speciality subsequently became the first in the Air Force requiring paramedic certification for award and retention of AFSC.

The above is just a small sampling of the historical records showing the skills and qualifications needed to successfully accomplish unexpected search, rescue and recovery missions. There is no lack of historical mission accomplishments demonstrating Air Rescue's aircrew arm and PJ arm were being there doing missions throughout the range of combat and non-combat military operations. Whether the goal was to fight to win, deter war, or promote peace doing humanitarian missions; the air rescue aircrew arm and PJ arm always had and will continue to have more than one trick in their bag of tricks.

--Air Rescue, one arm is not enough --

The Air Rescue Service's failure to deploy assets to support DESERT STORM combat operations and its repeated telling what it cannot do, rather than what air rescue assets could do is what caused and still sustains instability of the air rescue organization.²² Air Force combat pilots, Air Force ground combat warriors and combat support personnel want confidence rescue

is coming to help them when they call for air rescue. The instability of the Air Force's rescue organization can only be resolved by obtaining appropriate mix of force and sufficient numbers of each element of the mix of force to sustain expected operations tempo.

“Military leaders must carefully assess the nature of the missions they may be assigned, not only to properly determine the appropriate mix of forces but also to discern implied requirements.”²³

Discerning the requirements and determining appropriate mix of force for air rescue is about having the proper inventory of specialized fixed wing and rotary wing aircraft, having qualified aircrew to competently fly airplanes to conduct extended search and rescue operations, and qualified pararescue²⁴ to put on-scene on-the-ground quickly to perform duties that could well mean the difference of life and death for the survivors.

Air rescue has an inventory of rotary-wing²⁵ and fixed-wing²⁶ aircraft inadequate to do combat rescue missions in a direct exposure to hazards of combat tactical environment

The HC-130's primary purpose is to extend the range of combat search and rescue helicopters by providing air refueling in hostile or contested airspace and when possible to provide above scene command and control. Its value for refueling helicopter in-air makes it too specialized and limited an asset to risk for certain combat operations. Fuel load to refuel helicopters restricts its tactical maneuverability. The HC-130's role is strictly supportive to the rotary wing mission and peacetime SAR. Consequently “Air rescue fixed wing aircraft are not being utilized to fullest capability in the combat rescue role.”²⁷

The Air Force derivatives of the H-60 helicopter required extensive modifications that significantly increased its weight and significantly reduced its useable cabin area. The H-60 helicopter without extensive after production adding of “hoist”²⁸, refueling probe, internal fuel tanks, and etc, was only capable of local area rescue or local base rescue. Unfortunately the modifications reduced by half useable cabin space and this eliminated ability to carry medical, survival and other equipment relevant to the recovery of a rescued person having significant injury or needing on-ground extrication and transport to the helicopter. This situation contributed to objections to pararescuemen (PJs) doing (special operations) FAST rope, rope ladder, and rope rappels from air rescue helicopters.

A tragic mishap in Korea during the night hours of 8 March 1991 curtails any objections to PJs doing (special operations) FAST rope, rope ladder, and rope rappel procedures from air rescue helicopters. A SERE Instructor and A-10 pilot fell sixty feet to their deaths when the hoist cable retrieving them to a hovering H-60 helicopter sheared after coming in contact with the H-60's door frame. The PJ's request to rope rappel from the HH-60 to aid the fallen was denied by the aircraft commander or perhaps command and control made the decision to abandon the fallen not knowing the extent of their injuries. The HH-60 returned to Osan AB. On landing the PJ transferred to another HH-60 hoist equipped rescue helicopter and teamed up with a second PJ. On return to the incident location 50-60 minutes later the PJs did their best to save the still living SERE Instructor. The A-10 pilot had died prior their return. The reluctance and objection to rope rappelling and fast roping PJs from rescue aircraft being unneeded special operations tactics completely disappeared after this tragic accident.

The highly after production modified HH-60G has increased additional stressors on critical points composite design points and thus aging air rescue's fleet of HH-60G helicopters faster than expected. Increased vulnerabilities and risks of doing "hoists"²⁹ or rescues at high elevations/altitudes 10,000 feet above sea level also resulted. If any critical impairment disconnects of air rescue assets and missions exist, it is the inadequate HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopter.

It is however small inventory numbers of aircraft rather than deficient aircraft design preventing the Air Force's air rescue assets and resources from participating in accomplishing missions.

Reluctance to Utilize the PJs as other than a limited extension of the aircraft

A percentage of air rescue "aircrews consider PJ utilization outside of fixed-wing and rotary-wing aircraft high risk even though conditions may be more favorable than occur during normal proficiency and upgrade training."³⁰ During many a PJ's career there have been instances were the "aircraft commander has briefed the pararescuemen prior to take-off that they will not be deployed regardless of the situation"³¹. In 1989 this percentage suddenly became considerable primarily because PJ duties and training impaired the availability of PJ to do nothing but perform left scanner/gunner to support pilot proficiency and upgrade training. The considerable 1730th Pararescue Squadron budget dollars for PJ training, equipment and operation was needed to rebuild the air rescue service which had no budget. Complicating matters was the 1730th Pararescue Squadron being combat ready and tasked to deploy to Southwest Asia to perform combat rescue on AFSOC, US Army, and US marine aircraft and helicopters. This did not sit well with the commander and staff of the just reconstituted Air Rescue Service. In September 1990 verbal orders were given to the 1730th Squadron and its detachments to turn in all equipment to base supply and declare unit combat readiness C-5—Unit is undergoing a service-directed resource change and is not prepared, at this time, to undertake the wartime mission for which it is organized or designed—at all squadron and detachment locations. HQ Air Rescue Service subsequently deactivated the 1730th PRS effective 31 October 1990. The commander and staff of the HQ Air Rescue Service did their best to get those PJ who did deploy—before the go C-5 order was received—when tasked ordered home from the war. This effort failed as the units HQ ARS claimed the PJs were needed at weren't yet activated, lacked facilities, lacked aircraft, and lacked funding to operate. CENTAF needed the PJs and this is the only response to the on-the-ground location of a downed pilot air rescue capability to support the war effort. This was the beginning of the end for the air rescue service and begins to expose failures of air rescue isn't the result of rescue trying to be something it's not, but the result of many underhanded deed and acts that happened between 1989 and 1997.³²

Claims of none of past paths explored have resulted in lasting success certainly so misinforms and misrepresents the ideological white-hat versus black-hat conflict in the rescue community almost from its creation. It has always been the smaller percentage of the Air Rescue community that has participated doing combat rescue during times of conflict. After each conflict rescue has abandoned readiness to go to war and focused on being the global humanitarian good guys. The insistence of the air rescue service in 1951 that if the U.S. Army needed helicopter evacuation of the critically wounded from frontline battle areas of Korea that some other Air Force organization not air rescue units needs to be created and given helicopters to do this mission is

the first documented example.³³ Amazingly Air Force press releases concerning air rescue mission participation in Afghanistan and Iraq areas of combat operations are boasting how air rescue helicopter units are participating in the current war on terrorism efforts by doing air evacuation of wounded Army soldiers from active frontline combat zones.³⁴

Qualified aircrew and aircraft inventory has everything to get on-scene on-the-ground capability to the rescue incident, disaster crisis, or special mission objective. These two element, however, lack the qualified and proficient abilities to provided the assistance or perform the acts and deeds that could well mean the difference of life and death for the survivors, isolated personnel, or others finding themselves in urgent need of help. This having a ground capability to render emergency medical treatment, perform security, perform Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape is a critical mission need. Thus the Air Force with deliberate purpose and intent “gave “approval to constitute and activate USAF Pararescue teams in July 1947”³⁵ with the specific mission team concept of “appropriate composition of two or more PJs which can best respond to any tactical situation.”³⁶ Limiting pararescue employment from only air rescue HH-60G helicopters and air rescue HC-130 flying gas stations is one of several potentially dysfunctional “programmatic and leadership turmoil”³⁷ conflicts occurring in air rescue circles.

--How Pararescue differs from just being a medic—

Combat operations of World War II provided much of the formative insight into understanding that combatants with the most exposure to extreme emotional and physical stress suffered the highest incidence of psychological breakdown. Military commanders, the war reporters and eventually the American public also noticed units manned with well-trained and well-disciplined volunteers were very successful in accomplishing more difficult, comprehensive missions and complex operations. By 1947 the United States Air Force realized standardized equipment, procedures and highly trained volunteers were needed for the Air Force to have dominance and dependability in full-spectrum air rescue operations. This resulted in the basic concepts of employment of pararescue emerging that distinguishes members of the USAF Pararescue specialty as adept rescue and survival, evasion, resistance, and escape specialists versus being just a medic.

Pararescue’s primary role and utilization at its inception in 1947 is to perform peacetime and combat rescue for downed or distressed military airmen. This role and utilization quickly expanded into include location and recovery of highly sensitive equipment and documents that may be on a downed or crashed aircraft or errant manned or unmanned air or space vehicle. Concurrently the Key West Agreement of 1948 (modified in 1952) which distinguished and differentiated the Functions and responsibilities of the Armed Forces and the Joint Chiefs of Staff delegated the United States Air Force primary responsibility and obligation for in-land Search and Rescue anchored USAF Pararescue as a National SAR asset providing emergency medical capabilities. Regardless the pararescueman is expected to perform autonomously³⁸ and accomplish in the worse case scenario and environment, versus the best.

Enlisted Independent Duty Technicians (AF/Army), HM-8401 Search and Rescue Medical Technician, HM-8403 Fleet Marine Force Reconnaissance Independent Duty Corpsman, HM-8404 Field Medical Service Technician, HM-8425 Surface Force Independent Duty Corpsman, HM-8427 Fleet Marine Force Reconnaissance Corpsman, HM-8491 Special Operations

Independent Duty Corpsman, HM-8492 Special Operations Technician, and 18D-Special Forces Medical Sergeant (Coast Guard Helicopter Rescue Swimmers are not combat medics) can be and are embedded in small tactical units conducting combat operations, but there is a lack of standardized adept training and qualifications to ensure reasonable survivability and safety of these medics to perform the rescue and SERE missions. Pararescuemen are expected to and do accomplish. None of the enlisted medic classifications require all members to sustain full range of personal readiness and task qualifications of these combat medics to respond any-time, any land-place or sea-place regardless of the hazards and hardships to perform and accomplish rescue and recovery of lives and materiel.

Operations necessities to have assets and capabilities to seek, locate, rescue and recover from territory claimed or controlled by hostile or unfriendly government or forces provides direct connection to why the pararescue specialty is not classified as military combat medic occupation classification. This is direct cause for those performing pararescue duties to be members of the “combatant military” rather than members of the “non-combatant military”³⁹.

Non-combatant military service is enlisted and commissioned “service in the medical department of any of the armed forces, wherever performed.”⁴⁰ Medical personnel and chaplains have limitations and restrictions pertinent to participating in military operations as combatants. The Geneva Conventions, U.S. Army Field Manual 27-10, The Law of Land Warfare and other DOD, Department of Army, and Department of Air Force publications identify noncombatant military duty limitations. The Code of Conduct for Members of the Armed Forces identifies exceptions for medical personnel and chaplains resulting from their special status under the Geneva Conventions.⁴¹

The significance of separation between combatant military and non-combatant military is also revealed in the categories of military commission that can be granted. “Commission appointment in Line of the Air Force (LAF)”⁴² is always combatant military service, but “commission appointment in professional categories,”⁴³ other than military lawyers, is typically noncombatant military service. The simplest example of the difference is “chaplains cannot exercise command (10 U.S.C. § 3581), but they do have the authority to give lawful orders and exercise functions of operational supervision, control, and direction.”⁴⁴ The complicated example is “those officers designated as a medical, dental, veterinary, medical service, or biomedical sciences officer, or as a nurse, cannot exercise command except of those organizations and installations whose primary mission involves health care or the health professions (10 U.S.C. § 8579)”⁴⁵.

--“Leadership does not equal command”⁴⁶, but all PJ NCOs are leaders--

Chain of command is the succession of commanding officers from a superior to a subordinate through which command is exercised. In the operational environment of executing missions the noncommissioned officer is the lowest level of the chain of command. It is imperative the NCO put into duty position of being a small-unit combat leader be adaptable of conducting a full range of military operations in highly ambiguous situations for an undeterminable amount of time and possesses a warrior ethos. An NCO performing this operational level of leader duties understands and can execute decentralized and independent operations.

The level of command authority relationship when such tactical control is delegated to the noncommissioned officer is directly connected to local direction and control of movements or maneuvers of a small-unit tactical team to carry out executing and accomplishing a mission.

Within Army tactical organization and operational concepts emphasis is consistently given to although command authority originates with the President and may be supplemented by law and regulation, such authority is not limited to commissioned officers.⁴⁷

Although level of command authority is acquired by virtue of position to direct or control others, there is a unique impact tactical control demarcation of executing and conducting operational missions between positions lacking non-combat roles and positions having assigned combat roles. Line NCO (a no longer dominant term used by the US Army) best distinguishes the small-unit combat leader NCO from skilled technician NCOs who are not normally small-unit combat leaders. It emphasizes duties of the position requires the adeptness to convert direction from unit and mission commanders into mission accomplishment and executing duties of the position brings with it delegated legal authority to issue orders appropriate for mission accomplishment.

Air Force doctrine identifies the corresponding leading competency as the Operational Competence Level⁴⁸. The Air Force describes it as the level where SNCOs transition from being expert technicians and first line supervisors to leaders who have broader operational leadership, supervisory, and managerial responsibilities. It is the level of leadership involving tasks that become more complex and sophisticated. It is a leader competency normally applied to Master Sergeant through Chief Master Sergeant performing duties below the MAJCOM or Headquarters Air Force (HAF) levels. Unfortunately Air Force tactical organization and operational concepts makes no distinct demarcation between noncommissioned officer as a small-unit combat leader and a technically skilled NCO having no small-unit combat leader command responsibilities and authority.

The peculiar influences of lacking duty assignments in a tactical military organization affects career development in both Air Force enlisted and commissioned officer specialties. Each promotion in most enlisted Air Force specialties removes the NCO further from “turning the wrenches on a routine basis” and further towards staff-to-staff contacting and coordinating of functional matters rather than operational tactical control of a team executing tactical military operations.⁴⁹ Although the Air Force has many line officer specialties most are technical specialties having minimal, if any, opportunities of being a small unit combat leader. Broader operational leadership, supervisory, and managerial responsibilities necessary to be the commanding officer of a warship, ground combat unit, or combat aviation unit is not career path reality either.

Leader duties and responsibilities for the majority seldom extend beyond maintains, administers and manages Air Force equipment and conducting the daily business of the unit within established orders, directives and policies at a level commensurate with their rank.⁵⁰ This encourages an organizational culture belief merit of commissioned rank is necessary to have command authority in the operational chain of command. Put another way, there is an organizational ignorance of the level of chain of command authority an NCO can be delegated.⁵¹

These same influences manifest lack of opportunity to develop gain of an Operational Competence Level ability to lead in most Air Force enlisted and commissioned specialties.

“NCO line of authority”⁵² isn’t “appointment to command”⁵³ because “enlisted members cannot exercise command”⁵⁴. However, there are aspects of doing Pararescue Team Leader duties requiring being in command of the team in similar way an Army Infantry Squad leader is in the chain of command and Platoon Sergeant is in a higher level in the chain of command when there is no assigned commissioned platoon leader.

Performing team leader duties to accomplish recovery of sensitive materiel or rescue and recovery of isolated personnel requires extraordinary ability. The USAF Pararescue NCO must not only be technically proficient but also capable in control of leading a team executing an operational tasking. With each promotion the pararescue NCO is expected to gain the diversity of skills and ability that more broadly contribute to acquiring and sustaining assigned to unit’s tactical capability and participating in keeping operational concepts up-to-date. The primary duty emphasis always continues to be the pararescue team leader NCO is there to produce coordinated effective group or team response to a problem that produces success when failure is both possible and probable.

Military operations vary in size, purpose, and combat intensity within a range that extends from military engagement, security cooperation, and deterrence activities to crisis response and limited contingency operations and, if necessary, major operations and campaigns. The challenges of isolated personnel and sensitive materiel recovery exist throughout the range of potential operations. The USAF pararescue team executing such an operational tasking whether within US-owned territory at home, in international waters, or abroad in foreign countries is doing tactical activities and actions in an area of interest or area of operations. In this perspective USAF Pararescuemen provides a combatant ground capability used for a wider range of tactical employment during peace time and combat than any other Battlefield Airman specialty⁵⁵.

It’s difficult to decipher how commissioned and NCO authority to issue certain lawful orders differ. The only certainty is NCO authority derives solely from his or her commanding officer (unit or mission).

“The authority to issue lawful orders does not require a superior-subordinate relationship”⁵⁶, but the issuing an order to a subordinate does require commissioned, warrant, noncommissioned officer or petty officer rank (UCMJ Articles 89, 90, 91, and 92). The disobeying of a lawful requiring the performance of a duty or act is disobeyed at the peril of the subordinate (Article 92 – failure to obey a lawful order).

US Code Title 10 is distinctly clear and concise, “the commissioned officer issuing an order must have authority, either by law, regulation, or custom of the service, to issue the order. The order must relate to military duty, which includes all activities reasonably necessary to accomplish a military mission, or safeguard or promote the morale, discipline, and usefulness of member of a command and directly connected with the maintenance of good order and discipline. An order may not without valid reason interfere with a person’s private rights or personal affairs. An order may not conflict with the statutory or constitutional rights of the person receiving the order. The

order must be directed and transmitted specifically to the person, and the person must have actual knowledge of the order. Manual for Courts-Martial, Part IV, paragraph 14c(2)(a)(iii)—(iv), (b)—(e).”⁵⁷

NCO line of authority and being an NCO leader is not about disobeying orders or being insubordinate and disrespectful to superiors, but it is about being there on-scene with presence of authority to make rapid decisions and direct appropriate actions of others as immediate situations and circumstances necessitate. NCO line of authority needed to perform certain leader duties with concurrent technical skills is why there is need for pararescue team leader qualification training. Certified PJ team leader qualifications are: Rotary Wing Team Leader (requires 5-skill level), Fixed Wing Team Leader (requires 7-skill level) and Special Mission Team Leader (requires 7-skill level).⁵⁸

The employment mobility of pararescue assets combined with the vast on the ground demands of doing search and rescue on the battlefield and behind enemy lines demand the pararescue team being a “small-unit fire team with a NCO leader”⁵⁹. Skills and operational capability in ever-increasing demand as tactical organization and operational concepts change to the necessities of modern warfare.

THE CONVENTIONAL COMBAT RESCUE VS SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES AMBIGUITY

The USAF Pararescue specialty and its adept core skills and missions accomplished during the thirty-nine years before USSOCOM and AFSOC were established blurs the demarcation between conventional forces and special operations forces more than any other existing military occupation. False and uninformed assumptions feed beliefs pararescuemen are ill prepared and unable to perform conventional ground combat, unconventional, asymmetric and peacetime special missions. However, Pararescuemen are among the better trained and among the more versatile resources existing in the Department of Defense. The lives saved, equipment recovered, and other missions performed by USAF pararescuemen have been routinely proven under the most demanding circumstances since 1947.

For historical comparison purpose:

- The U.S. Army Special Forces activated its “first unit 10 June 1952.”⁶⁰
- The first U.S Navy Sea-Air-Land (SEAL) Teams were “activated January 1962.”⁶¹
- The Air Force activated its first Combat Control Team 15 January 1953 at Donaldson AFB South Carolina.⁶² Special Operations Weather Teams (SOWT) was established January 1963⁶³ and Tactical Air Control Party Team (TACP) was established as an enlisted specialty 30 April 1977⁶⁴.

All pararescuemen are volunteers who were screened and selected to not only perform under duress of extraordinary physical and abnormal psychological hardships, but when they find themselves having to make decisions that are normally made by persons much higher up the line of authority--to make those decisions. Pertinent to volunteer status, screening/selection and the functional fitness required to perform pararescue duties there is nothing in the requirement and standards to detect as being of lesser or inferior quality when compared to other special operations assets and capabilities.

When making comparisons of “delivering distinctive expertise into the ground combat environment with unequaled accuracy, responsiveness, flexibility and persistence”⁶⁵. The comparison must consider willing to face hardships and hazards and ready to lead because training experiences and skill qualifications develop the capabilities and abilities to meet any challenge”⁶⁶. There is no basis to legitimately assert pararescue is some how a lesser quality of capability compared to other special operations assets and capabilities.

Pararescuemen are “skilled, knowledgeable, and competent airmen who can apply the best tools, techniques, and procedures to produce a required operational capability. Integrated is a level of problem solving self-determination and self-sufficiency and decision making authority results from the have to accomplish with minimal supervision while isolated and separated from getting relief or assistance. This builds reasonable certainty of accomplishing the mission that is similar to other special operations assets and capabilities.

The activated and established dates for the other mentioned Air Force specialties is misleading pertinent to incidence of mission tasking. Peacetime mission utilization and employment of these other specialties to accomplish missions of any significant risk requiring self-sufficiency and preparedness to perform duties before self interests was limited and less frequent compared to the peacetime and wartime missions frequently performed by pararescuemen.

From the perspective of USAF pararescuemen, the participating as members of a Special Tactics Squadron accomplishing the “October 1985 Achille Lauro terrorist capture attempt”⁶⁷ differs very little from participating in the November 21, 1970 Son Tay Raid or the May 12-15, 1975 assault to liberate the crew of the seized the American container ship SS Mayagüez. There is no equipment, tactics, or physical conditions differences between the employing of Airman Pitsenbarger by hoist from a hovering combat rescue HH-43 helicopter on April 11, 1966, into thick jungle near Saigon during fierce firefight to aid and evacuate U.S. casualties and treating and aiding casualties during a fierce fire fight at Rio Hato Airfield Panama (Just Cause-1989) or treating and aiding casualties during the first battle of Mogadishu Somali (3-4 October 1993) or on Roberts Ridge Afghanistan (March 4, 2002). The pararescuemen being a conventional force or special operations force had and has no influence in the participating contributions to mission accomplishment. The discriminating factor is the PJ is trained for the direct ground combat mission regardless of being a SOF asset or conventional combat rescue asset.

--Air Rescue Service vs. air expeditionary force--

“Organizations must encourage rapid decision making, so they should be flat structures without intermediate levels, unless mission requirements cannot otherwise be met. When used,

intermediate organizations will consist of tactical functions only, without a full range of staff functions.”⁶⁸

The Air Rescue Service’s functional control was in undeniable identity crisis as early as 1972. General William W. Momyer (HQ Tactical Air Command) in a message to General John D. Ryan (AF/CS) stated the “highest probability of retaining air rescue assets is to assign them to the operational combat commands where their essentiality as combat forces can be made most visible. There is a serious void in our data otherwise capability and unless we give them recourse and a visible mission, the Air Force could lose what little role we have in this area, and the Army will take over the mission due to lack of Air Force interest.”⁶⁹ The Air Force’s 1972 search and rescue study inquired into question of command authority versus operational control. The general consensus was operational control alone is inadequate and violates the basic principles of command. Various AF component combatant commanders and major command commanders expressed assets available in the air rescue force structure were insufficient to meet their dispersed forward operating location needs to include numbers of Joint Rescue Coordination Centers/Rescue Coordination centers that should either be collocated with or integrated into task force operating centers.

The Air Force’s 1972 search and rescue study identified concerns Air Rescue wasn’t providing the proper mix of capability and assets to support AF component commander (combat air forces) needs. European theater commanders stated “It is envisioned that both classic SEA recovery and covert operational tactics will be used to effect rescue recoveries in European theater.”⁷⁰ European theater AF component commander made recommendation “CSAR covert concepts be closely aligned with the SOTFE mission and each would compliment the other. This concept strongly suggests that SOF and ARS C-130 missions in EUCOM be consolidated under ARRS.”⁷¹ This CSAR special operations consolidation became more than a suggestion on 10 May 1983 with the establishment of Twenty-third Air Force (MAC) which was elevated to AFSOC on 22 May 1990. It was the creation of AFSOC and a reluctance of many air rescue pilots and aircrews to be involved in doing special operations missions that contributed in Air Rescue becoming a stand alone service again in 1989. In 1993 ARS was disbanded and ACC gained lead command ownership of all rescue programs and responsibilities, most of the HQ ARS staff were reassigned to a newly created rescue directorate on the HQ ACC staff. This staff was a peacetime staff psychologically orientated towards humanitarian missions and low threat combat rescue. The staff’s delusions had them believe there was no longer a requirement for pararescue and began to eliminate the pararescue capability from air rescue. Their intent was converting PJs to aircrew gunner scanners with no medical, SERE, parachuting, ground combat and other skills and qualifications.⁷² Other than AFSOC’s temporary lead command ownership of rescue programs, assets, and resources from 1 October 2003 to 27 February 2006, lead command ownership of rescue programs, assets, and resources since the deactivation of the Air Rescue Service is ACC.

The Goldwater Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 caused changes in service and joint force organization and command relationships. The subsequent establishment of current Air Forces expeditionary organization ensured the Air Rescue Service had become an ineffective and inefficient force providing functional management Headquarters.

Air rescue activities are specialized and its missions are Air Force-wide missions, but inability to establish stability of operations for the long haul didn't result from the disappearance of an intermediate functional management headquarters. The lack of stability of operations results from lack of assets available to do all the mission taskings for the long duration.

The being there doing assets needed to do air rescue missions is aircraft, aircrew and pararescue. Pararescue doesn't always need the other assets of specialized rescue aircraft and specialized rescue aircrew to get on-scene and back. Despite the "programmatically and leadership turmoil"⁷³ the concurrent "activation of Combat Rescue Officer (CRO) career field (13DX0)"⁷⁴, based on Corona Fall Decision CFOOD-12 and Guardian Angel Weapon system effective 3 June 2003"⁷⁵ gave significant capability and flexibility to appropriately task employment of unit or non-organizational element capability (PJ team) to do search and rescue missions. This was accomplished "the aligning of CRO, PJ, and Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape (SERE) capabilities to better meet the war fighting commander requirements,"⁷⁶ and the establishing of Pararescue Squadrons commanded by the CRO.

Consequently, if "military strategy encompasses the ends, ways, means, and risk involved in securing policy objectives through use of the military instrument of power"⁷⁷, it's the lack of sufficient assets to do each mission needed to secure policy objectives that is lacking.

"Guardian Angel Weapon System"⁷⁸ and specialized Air Rescue Squadrons provide unique capabilities pertinent to doing the primary mission of combat search and rescue and being there doing other secondary "benevolent hearts-and-minds missions"⁷⁹. Nothing is missing except sufficient force structure and acquisition of the replacement for the HH-60G Helicopter.

There never should be any question or doubt a response to the call for help to Air Force's Air Rescue units will always be in a here I am-send me now mission readiness. There is no need to be "groping for a vision".⁸⁰ All that is needed is command authority to decide what is needed to get done, who can best do it and then task the who to go get it done.

--Conclusion--

I have written a nonconforming history perspective that I hope gives understanding combat search and rescue is an offensive military mission done by combatants having specialized military skills and qualifications. I hope I have dismissed lack of vision being the disconnection causing lack of visible mission and purpose, but rather the cause is lack of sufficient force structure. Air rescue units do what National Command Authority or air and space expeditionary task force (AETF) commanders task them to do. Lack of force structure to sustain being there doing several concurrent missions or ability to regenerate assets to do several consecutive missions is the problem.

The who owns the PJs, who controls the PJs and who can do what with the PJs is the cause of much of the "programmatically and leadership turmoil"⁸¹ since its start in 1989. The current lean organizational structure and specifically the HC-130 role of supporting helicopter missions makes it prudent to be able to employ PJ capability from other suitable aircraft existing in the inventory.

A robust air rescue helicopter inventory requires replacing of the HH-60G Pave Hawk inventory, whatever that choice might be. Hopefully the next CSAR helicopter will be capable of flying faster over longer ranges and higher altitudes, day or night, during adverse weather conditions, while carrying more personnel and specialized equipment than the HH-60 G Pave Hawk.

Resurrecting the Air Rescue Service or keeping search and rescue units in specialized rescue expeditionary wings may not be the better decision for providing useful results. The Air Force should consider mission accomplishing gains and advantages resulting from integrating Air Rescue assets of aircraft, aircrew and PJs integrated in each Air Expeditionary Wing. Other than the Air Force Rescue Coordination Center, Langley AFB Virginia, the Air Force should consider mission accomplishing gains resulting from assimilating, Joint Rescue Coordination Centers and Rescue Coordination Centers in the expeditionary operations centers. The Air Force should consider advantages of integrating Air Force liaison officers in the Coast Guard Rescue Coordination Centers to facilitate furnishing available aircraft and PJs to assist in a rescue mission when requested by the Coast Guard to support a maritime SAR.

Regardless of how the battlefields change and how much modification and change is made in tactics to win the fight, three undeniable truths never change: (1) reckless actions in ignorance or from incompetence needlessly results in the enemy killing and capturing our warriors, our combatants, our comrades; (2) no matter how technology causes it to change those being there doing the exposed to the hazards of combat fighting still want some sound, common sense advice that they could follow in order to keep from being killed or maimed; and (3) when it comes to needing combat rescue our combat pilots, our ground combat warriors and combat support personnel want confidence rescue is coming to help them.

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