

An Old Guys Perspective on Aircrewman

I was recently at a retirement for a Master Chief that I believe was instrumental in the smooth conversion of all the non-tac rates to the AW rate. Master Chief Bud Nelson had the vision, along with several others, to see that the conversion was going to happen and that it needed to be done as smoothly and seamlessly as possible. He was staunch in his position and even made a believer out of this old, "I'd quit flying and retire if they ever made me become an AW", retired Master Chief.

The point of this is that at the reception following the retirement I had the opportunity to speak to Chiefs, Senior Chiefs and Master Chiefs about the condition of the SAR Aircrew community as a whole and found it to be in excellent hands with its senior enlisted leadership.

At this point I would like to reflect on what it took to be a Swimmer in the "Old Days".... Remember that I got my Aircrew Certification Card in 1968.

We did not have a real Aircrew Candidate School nor was there a Rescue Swimmer Curriculum. Though HU1 had one in design in 1966 it did not get CNO approval until 1971.

They were using a LUBA (twin tank scuba rig) device and putting swimmers in the water to effect pilot rescue but after about 3-4 classes they dropped the LUBA and continued to train the swimmers in deployment.

Pay attention to the time frames here as I will be skipping around a little. So that was in 1966. On December 6, 1950, note the date, one of the first documented water entry rescues was done in Korea off the USS Philippine Sea, CV 47 by HU1 by Duane Thorin NAP and his crewman Chester Todd. The man overboard was lost but the fact still remains that Todd entered the water via hoist from a hovering helo to effect the rescue. Fast forward to 1968 and the HT8 training syllabus. The H34 NATOPS basically said to fly over the survivor and after establishing a hover put the hoist chair in the water and recover the survivor. If you needed to deploy the swimmer he connected the "swimmers harness" via a reverse type clamp on the hoist cable and was lowered into the water to assist the survivor. Most of us wore shorts and the old UDT vest. The vest being the most standardized piece of equipment we had. Now if you think about this that's 40 or so feet of cable already out and another going out with the swimmer. The swimmer was then to seat the survivor in the seat and belt him in then be lifted out of the water first via the swimmers harness in order to facilitate the recovery of the survivor at the helo...all this to be done without getting tangled in the cable by either the swimmer or the survivor. And the HC1 guys were already deploying swimmers....East vs West Coast. HT8 was basically still doing things like they did in the 50's and HC1 was thinking forward. Something that I found the West Coast troops did the entire time through out my 28 year career.

There was a time in the mid to late 70's that we lost a Squadron CO in the IO because the crew chief would not deploy the swimmer or the hoist because the H3 NATOPS specifically stated not to do that with the pilot connected to the chute. Not wanting to be in violation of NATOPS the crew chief complied with NATOPS. When the SAR report hit the desk of the SAR Model Manager I just happened to be on the phone with him and he was livid. I told him to go to his archives that we had done "parachute rescues" with

the EOD guys in the bay off Ellyson Field in the late 60's and there were pictures. This combined with the enforcement of "NATOPS is considered a guide and not to override common sense" or however it is stated in the front of the NATOPS Manual made a change to parachute recovery procedures.

Standardization and Procedures were different and varied between the East and West Coast SAR Communities. When finally in the mid 70's the CNO determined that there were too many SAR Crewman getting hurt and injured it was determined that better training and control was needed to prevent this so he designated HC16 the CNO SAR MODEL MANAGER and provided the funds for SAR Swimmer School.

The SARMM alone would be responsible for all things SAR. Equipment Development, Tactics Manuals, Crew Safety Verbage and continuity between the two coasts. This was a tremendous tasking and the three individuals that were assigned that task are to be lauded for their efforts. Thru their efforts the first year of the SARMM existence was filled with new and bright ideas for equipment and tactics and led to the first fleet-wide SAR conference in 1978. This Conference in itself was a positive step in getting the two coasts talking to each other and sharing ideas. A brilliant concept that was embraced, tho grudgingly, by all the SAR crewman as a step toward continuity within the community. What made it historical was for the first time both coasts had the same wetsuits, the same masks, snorkels and fins, the same standardized calls and hand signals and most importantly the same training at SAR swimmer school. All done under the auspices of the CNO and his SAR Model Manager.

It was also during one of these CNO sponsored SAR Conferences that I was allowed to play guinea pig for the Helo Dunker or "Panic in a Drum", as it was called, but that is another story entirely. Yeah I got the T shirt!!!

SAR Swimmer School was tough but not so tough as to be designed to wash an enrollee out if he simply applied himself. He immediately became an asset to the fleet upon his completion and, to be honest, learned more in 9 weeks (Aircrew School and SAR Swimmer school combined length), then it took me 4 years to learn under the old system. The fleet began to get a better and more knowledgeable SAR Swimmer almost immediately and it made my job as a senior SAR guy easier. You still had the aggressive type A personalities to deal with but you knew what they knew and could feel comfortable around them in the helicopter. Most took a minimum amount of time to train in type because they already knew the words!!

WEAPONS RECOVERY. Assigned Barking Sands Kauai I was to become a "Weapons Recovery Expert". We were doing things with the H3 that had only been done in a very few other places so this was a special assignment. There were external loads and hard mounted launches just to name a few. We were constantly R&D for the Underwater System Command and it was here that I got my first SAR Air Medal.

In 1979 I was requested to train the HC1 crews in Weapons Recovery upon completion of that the CNAP H3 Evaluator had me sit with him to rewrite the Weapons Recovery portion of the H3 NATOPS...Sad to say the H3 is no longer with in the Fleet. I loved that Helicopter.

The year is 1980 and the assignment is INLAND SAR. I went to the UH1N community at Fallon, NV by request of my SAR detailer. The Inland SAR community was something no one in the Navy SAR Community wanted to know about. All the powers

that be were “Dippers” or VERTREP and believed no hoisting should be done above 10 feet on a hard surface.

Fallons record in August of 1980 was especially ragged as they had crashed two Helicopters and injured a couple crewman in either the crashes or doing unauthorized rappels. The COMNAVAIRPAC H1 Evaluator (ADC Jerry Balderson) and I determined that all the problems that Fallon had were due to lack of standardization in both the local syllabus and there was no guidance from the top. Namely the SAR Model Manager. Up until this time their concern had been for the Swimmers and Inland SAR guys were the Red Headed Step Child. We set about to change that.

When a CNAP SAR conference was held we went with the idea that we had to get the Inland SAR community recognized. That we did and were told point blank, “You Inland guys do what you want but don’t hurt anybody”! A license to steal as far as we were concerned.

So at the SARMM SAR conference in 1981 Balderson and I set about to rewrite Chapter 5 of the NWP3710. Inland SAR. With the 4 or 5 Inland SAR units throughout the Navy and Marine Corps we set about to gather the syllabus documents from them all which we gleaned what ever parts and pieces and relative equipment to each unit for inclusion into the NWP 3710. In essence we standardized the entire Inland SAR community with the same equipment, tactics and procedures. It took us a year to get those procedures approved. Those same procedures are in use today.

The SARMM wanted to take the Rappel training over and we were instrumental in starting and training the instructors at the rappel school. Inland SAR had reached a level compared to, on a somewhat lesser plane, to the SAR swimmer. In 1983 we had completed our goal.

VERTREP YOU BET...HC5 NAS AGANA GUAM...Standing up a squadron is always fun. I had never been in a 46 Squadron and because all my SAR shipmates had been I was determined to be assigned there. 46’s and Guam, forward deployed..Dont get any better does it? Lets see I spent about a year in the SAFETY/NATOPS/SAR/Aircrew Assignment office and got us thru the first NATOP/SAR evaluation with only a minimum of writers cramp. We did so well the Skipper rewarded me with Det 4. on the USS San Jose. Yeah Im a Shellback. 40 seconds deck to deck. “Forward Right and Down”...Now there’s a call you would never hear in the H3 community!! Having been in weapons recovery with the H3 I understood the system and we qualified several aircrewman in HC5 as “Hookers” should they be needed to do open sea frontier recovery. Upon return from the 85 cruise I was asked to volunteer for HC5 Det 6. SEAL team delivery where we developed all the FASTROPE tactics and utilized the NVG’s for the first time in a Navy 46 and just had a fun time doing SPECOP stuff. Again I believe most of the tactics used today were developed by HC5 Det 6. We did it all and everybody loved it. And yes we were in violation of NATOPS but common sense always prevailed.

So lets review. H34’s, H1’s, H3’s, H46’s all are like me “Retired”. With the exception of the H1 but even that is no longer the Helicopter that I flew. We had some great times in the 28 years I was a Sailor but that was 17 years ago...it was a great ride.

So to put it in perspective. You young guns have the helm now and I am satisfied that it is in excellent hands. What you have to remember is most of the equipment, tactics, verbal calls and even those screwy hand signals were hard fought for by guys like me

who have stuck our nose in it and came out on the other side with only a few seconds of terror involved. SO OTHERS MAY LIVE.....Red Dogg sends.

Permission has been given to publish this article by W. Moss to P. Poisson in February of 2008.

Note:

Master Chief Moss has been a member of NHA since 1978.

He was a Plank Owner in the Naval Helicopter Historical Society and a member of its Senior Enlisted Advisory board as a SAR Historian.

He is the first Enlisted Recipient of the NHHS Mark Starr Award.