

The 920th Rescue Wing at Patrick AFB, Fla., can boast of 26 combat “saves” in Iraqi Freedom.



RESCUE 920

Photography by Guy Aceto



Training jumps are a routine part of the job for the pararescue jumpers, or PJs, located at Patrick AFB., six of whom are shown here suited up for the task. In the background is one of the wing's specialized HC-130 aircraft.

Patrick AFB, Fla., is the home of the 920th Rescue Wing, an element of Air Force Reserve Command that trains and equips roughly 1,200 airmen in the art and science of recovering US military personnel. It is the only rescue outfit in AFRC. Wing detachment personnel serve at Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz., and alongside Air National Guard units in Portland, Ore.

At right, HH-60G Pave Hawks of the 301st RS stand ready for launch.

After the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, USAF activated about 400 of the wing's airmen for two years. Crews can boast of 26 Iraqi Freedom "saves." Examples: the rescue of an A-10 pilot forced to eject after a mission over Baghdad, and the recovery behind enemy lines of a Marine Corps team pinned down near Nasiriyah. The wing has a colorful history. In the 1960s, during the early days of the manned space program, the wing's aircraft and airmen assisted in the recovery of US astronauts after splash-down into the Atlantic.



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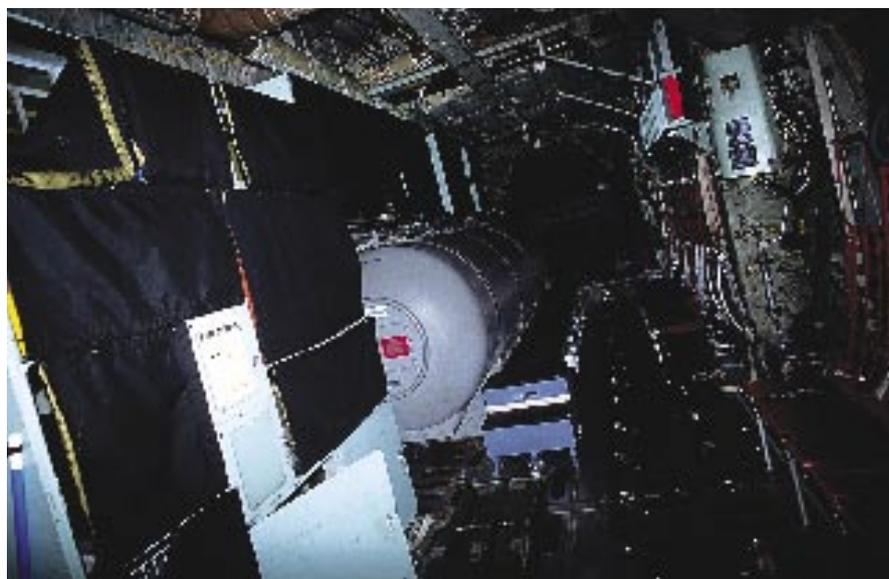
At left, an airman works on a rotor while, above, a Pave Hawk flies on a training sortie. The 920th works with local law enforcement and also helps boaters in distress off the coast of Florida.

The 39th RS at Patrick operates five tactical transports—a mix of HC-130Ps and HC-130Ns. The aircraft are old but expertly maintained and are veterans of many modifications. In the photo at right, one sees two adaptations that are useful for the rescue mission—the forward-looking infrared (FLIR) pod just under the nose of the aircraft and the nonstandard observation window aft of the nose landing gear.





In photo at top, an HC-130 taxis to a stop after landing on a small strip at Cape Canaveral AFS, Fla. The wing's aircrews regularly practice short-field takeoffs and landings as well as nighttime operations. Given the frequency of the wing's nighttime missions, it is imperative that the pilots master the art of flying with the aid of night vision goggles. Some 70 percent of the wing's sorties are flown in the dark.



The HC-130 interior pictured above features an internal fuel tank, which is used to gas up forward deployed rescue helicopters. Wing maintainers keep their aircraft immaculate. Even so, there is no denying the age of the equipment; the tail code at left shows that this airplane was acquired in 1964.

Maintenance is critical; the aircraft must perform perfectly in the risky business of rescue, which frequently takes place over water or in a hostile combat zone. At right, workers open up a Hercules for the kinds of checks and repairs that 40-year-old airplanes inevitably require. Each of the 39th's five HC-130 machines receives a semi-annual inspection, during which every panel is opened and every system given fine-grain scrutiny.



Everything needed for rescue must be ready to go at a moment's notice. At left, all-terrain vehicles are packaged with parachutes, prepared for a combat drop, mounted on shock-absorbing material that will cushion the jolt of a landing on hard ground. The PJs themselves are responsible for keeping their Zodiac boats, medical gear, and weapons in top condition and primed for action, but support personnel have recently been made available to tend to the equipment while the PJs are "on assignment."

The pararescue career field is small but critical, and in the reserves, draws people from all walks of civilian life: firefighters, emergency medical technicians, and paramedics, for example.

First Lieutenant Ross Wilson (center of the photo at right) is one of a new breed of PJs—a combat rescue officer, or CRO. Nearly all CROs are formerly enlisted PJs. Here, Ross straps gear into a Stokes metal-framed litter, used to bring out an immobilized injured person. Though they are getting ready for a training mission, this crew will carry all of the gear they need in case they are suddenly diverted to a real-world rescue.





Neither sleek nor fast, the Pave Hawk of the 920th is still a thing of beauty to those in need of rescue from a bad situation. The Pave Hawk in the photo at top is making an approach on a training sortie.

At right, SSgt. Omar Rivera, a flight engineer, sets the switches for the Pave Hawk's pilots. Below, Rivera does a preflight walk-around check of the Pave Hawk. While most pilots prefer to do their own preflight, if they can, these aircraft are kept at a constant state of readiness for a mission. Often, they lift off as soon as the pilots can strap in.



At left, a Pave Hawk embarks at dusk on a training mission. Though daylight may be waning, the mission continues apace. The helicopter carries a door gunner; he is charged with keeping an eye out for the enemy, much as he will in the unit's upcoming deployment to Afghanistan. ■