

# AResco

***If a pilot goes down in Operation Southern Watch, Moody AFB will ride to the rescue. Two squadrons from south Georgia are on permanent deployments to Southwest Asia.***

by Tech. Sgt. George Hayward ✦ photos by Senior Master Sgt. Rose Reynolds





# W e r s

**S**taff Sgt. Bruce Rammel leaned against a truck, chatting with a visitor in the morning sun next to a helipad at Ahmed Al Jaber Air Base in Southwest Asia. It was still spring, and the

desert weather was breezy and pleasant. Some of Rammel's co-workers casually busied themselves with routine training and self-help projects like building shelves. It looked to be another quiet day. ...





Quiet, until a pickup roared up to the pad and screeched to a halt. A man in a flight suit jumped out, shouting. Without hesitation, Rammel and his co-workers dropped what they were doing and sprinted to two HH-60 helicopters sitting on the pad.

They swarmed the choppers like ants, and the helos were armed, fu-

eled and ready for flight in minutes. Just seconds later, brakes squealed again as vans carrying aircrews slammed to stops next to the pad. The aircrews sprinted to the choppers, and the pad filled with the vacuumlike sound of engine generators kicking in.

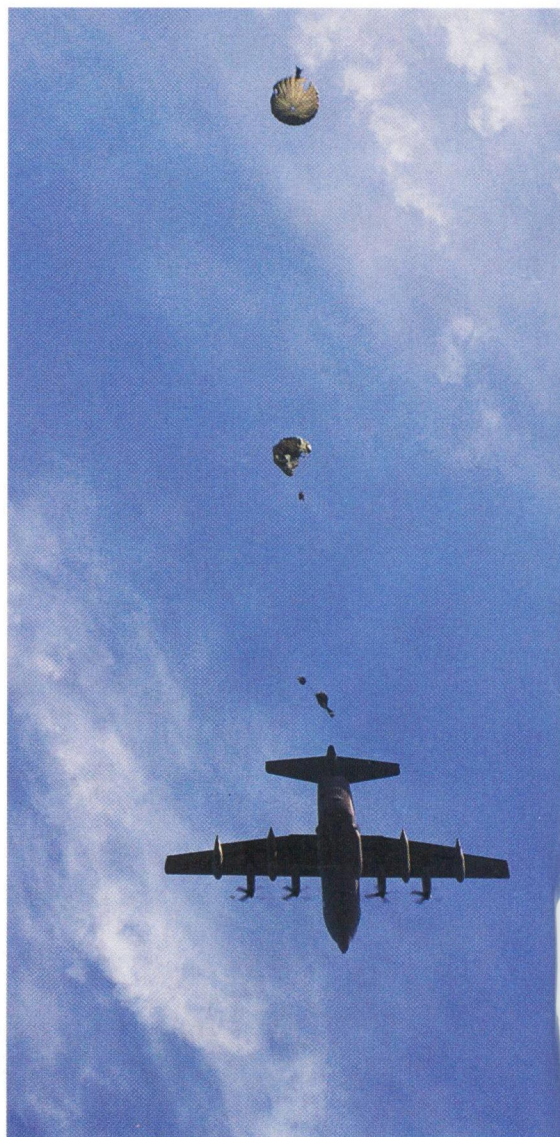
If this had not been an exercise, the helos would have been on their way to Iraq. Their mission: rescue a downed Operation Southern Watch pilot.

Rammel is a helicopter crew chief

with the 41st Rescue Squadron from Moody Air Force Base, Ga. He spent 45 days earlier this year deployed to Al Jaber. But to call his desert tour a “deployment” is perhaps a misnomer. Rammel’s squadron and its Moody sister unit, the 71st Rescue Squadron, are the lifeline that would be cast to any Operation Southern Watch pilot who goes down in Southwest Asia. Any time. All the time. The two squadrons provide the year-round rescue mission for Operation Southern Watch. The desert is the Moody

**Senior Airman Justin Ivie (left) adjusts the parachute harness of Airman 1st Class Justin Shook, a fellow pararescueman, prior to a training jump from a 71st Rescue Squadron HC-130.**

*Although no Operation Southern Watch pilot has ever required a combat search and rescue, Moody pararescuemen (center and right) make frequent jumps to stay ready for a real mission.*





rescue units' home away from home.

"Our squadrons are here 365 days a year," said Maj. Jeff Braley, deployed to nearby Ali Al Salem Air Base with the 71st Rescue Squadron.

Braley's squadron is the only active duty HC-130 combat search and rescue unit, and Rammel's unit is one of only four active duty rescue squadrons flying HH-60 helicopters. The other squadrons provide continual rescue support for Operation Northern Watch, and the Atlantic and Pacific regions.

For the less than 500 people assigned to the two Moody squadrons, Southern Watch offers the potential for perpetual jet lag. They deploy for 45 to 60 days at a time, but can make the trip from south Georgia to Southwest Asia many times during their tours at Moody. Braley was at Al Salem on his fourth desert rotation, and he said his ops tempo is light compared to his squadron mates. Rammel was at Al Jaber for his seventh desert tour. "I've been rotating in and out of here since '95," he said.

"Everybody does at least two deployments a year here," said Braley, an HC-130 pilot. "Some guys will do 60 days here, go home for 60, then come back. About a quarter of our squadron is here at any given time." And some Moody people have even had deployments cut short because they've hit the maximum of 179 days deployed in a year.

## **Hercs to the rescue**

The rescue mission in Southwest Asia has been quiet since the Persian Gulf War because no Operation Southern Watch pilot has ever been shot down. But if a rescue were necessary, the Moody squadrons would scramble more than just a couple helicopters.

The HC-130 Hercules of the 71st Rescue Squadron are aerial refuelers capable of gassing two helicopters simultaneously. Hoses controlled by the flight engineer are hydraulically reeled out of the plane's wingtips. Then it's up to the helicopter pilots to catch the nozzles with a probe that extends beyond the helo's propeller arc. The refueling operation is like siphoning a car's gas tank, with fuel flowing directly from the airplane's tanks to the helicopter. The HC-130s can loiter aloft for more than nine hours, giving helicopters ample time to find and rescue a downed pilot. "We are here primarily to extend the legs of the HH-60 helicopters," Braley said.

But the Hercs are more than gas stations for the choppers. They also can be the primary aircraft on the rescue mission, carrying pararescuemen, or "PJs," and equipment to the aid of the aircrew on the ground.

"There are criteria that dictate what airframe will be used to rescue the pilot," said Master Sgt. Mike Maltz, a Moody pararescueman. "Some of those include how far away the pilot





is, if the pilot is injured or if the area is contested by the enemy. The HC-130 flies twice as fast as the HH-60, so it can get there in half the time. But the HH-60 is more likely to be used because of its flexibility.”

At times both airframes may be used to maximize their strengths. “If the rescue is in a nonthreat environment and there’s any kind of a road, even a dirt road, we can land on as little as 3,000 feet of landing surface,” Braley said. For instance, in an op-

eration called a “transload,” the HC-130 will land as close as possible to the rescue area while the more mobile helicopters fly on with the PJs to rescue the downed aircrew. The helicopter will bring the aircrew to the HC-130, which will evacuate them from the area. “We have the capability to get them to a hospital quicker than the helicopters can,” Braley explained.

They also can carry more gear and people than the helicopters. Although the PJs have extensive medical training, the HC-130 crew includes a flight surgeon. “The PJs may run into an injury where they don’t know what to

do,” Braley said. “So we keep in constant radio contact with the crew on the ground, and the flight surgeon can give them medical advice on how to handle the situation.”

While PJs usually “fast rope” into action out of helicopters, they parachute from the HC-130s, either free-falling or via static line. Regardless of how they arrive, the PJs will go in with hundreds of pounds of equipment and weapons. And the HC-130s will air-drop even more bundles of supplies and weapons, including all-terrain vehicles. “The ATVs land on the ground, the PJs land on the ground behind them and away they

**Tech. Sgt. Robert Sheets, a pararescueman deployed to Al Jaber,** is ready for a training mission as the HH-60 helicopter spins up.





go,” Braley explained. “That gives us the capability of moving a survivor out of a threat environment or to a place where we can more effectively execute rescue.”

All Moody pararescuemen — about a third

of the entire career field, according to Maltz — are assigned to the 41st Rescue Squadron, but many are trained to operate out of both the 41st’s helicopters and the 71st’s HC-130s. During their spring deployment to Ali Al Salem, Maltz’s four-man team was assigned to the HC-130s at Al Salem, while another PJ team was based with the choppers at Al Jaber. “And four months from now, we could come back and be assigned to the helos,” Maltz said.

## Brawn and brain

On a search and rescue mission, the PJs are trained for almost any situation, whether medical, military or just plain survival. Airman 1st Class Justin Shook was part of Maltz’s team just months after graduation from more than a year of grueling training that produces warriors as tough as any Navy SEAL or Army Ranger. “It encompasses everything: land navigation, scuba, free-fall parachute, rappelling, rock climbing, weapons, tactics and medical,” Shook said.

“They’re the guys you want with you behind the lines,” said Capt. Brian Jones, a 41st Rescue Squadron helicopter pilot. And they’re as smart as they are tough.

“We’re not all brawn and no brain,” said Maltz. “Most PJs have



two or more years of college.” In fact, Shook, 27, entered the Air Force with a bachelor’s degree in exercise sports science, and his quiet, intellectual demeanor makes him look more like a computer programmer than a man trained to save lives behind enemy lines.

Just two days after they arrived at Al Salem, Maltz’s team was busy unpacking their gear and getting settled into their home away from home.

Al Salem is an austere facility — a fortified tent city just 39 miles from Iraq (See story on Page 30). But the constant rotation of PJs has turned the pararescuemen’s living quarters and ops center into a mansion by Al Salem standards. They’ve expanded it from just a tent to a wooden bungalow that may still have that dim and dusty deployed feel, but it includes a carpeted floor and a comfortably worn sofa. And even plywood walls are better than a billowing tent flap. “Every team here does something to improve the place,” Shook said. “It looks pretty good now, but it wasn’t always like this.”

They have the time to play “Home Improvement” because despite their constant training and alert readiness, the PJs and aircrews are like the girl who gets stood up by her prom date. “We’re all dressed up with nowhere

**Moody’s HC-130s put flexibility in rescue operations.** They can be the primary aircraft on a rescue mission, or with refueling pods extended from wingtips, simultaneously gas two helicopters.

to go,” said Maltz.

The squadrons fly sorties almost daily, and unexpected exercises like the previous day’s helicopter scramble keep them alert. But for the Moody rescue units and particularly the pararescuemen, Operation Southern Watch is an ironic dichotomy: They are eager to do more than just train. They want to save lives. But if they’re ever called for a real mission, it means somebody may be hurt. It means somebody’s life is on the line.

“You never want anything bad to happen, and you want everyone to be safe,” Shook said. “But that’s why we’re here. We want to do something special for those pilots who are flying for our country. We’re excited to do our job, which is to go get a pilot who needs our help.”

So each time an alert interrupts their quiet days, the adrenaline rush is an unlikely mix of angst and excitement as they scramble the aircraft. One of these days, it may not be an exercise. The desert may be the Moody rescuers’ home away from home. But they live there to make sure everybody else comes home. ☼