



LIFEGUARDS ON DUTY

The California Air Guard rescues those in peril on the sea.
by Phil Scott



MAJ. THOMAS LAUT was mowing his lawn when the telephone rang that evening. It was Maj. Chuck Baker, supervisor of flying for the 129th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Group.

The unit is launching a rescue mission, Baker said. Would you come in early tomorrow?

Sure, said Laut. When?

Three a.m.

"It's the law of the sea," says Laut. "You drop what you're doing and help the guy in trouble." In this case the guy in trouble was a 25-year-old Italian seaman named Santi Rando, stricken with acute appendicitis while aboard the Alaska-bound *M/S Reunion*, a Liberian tank-



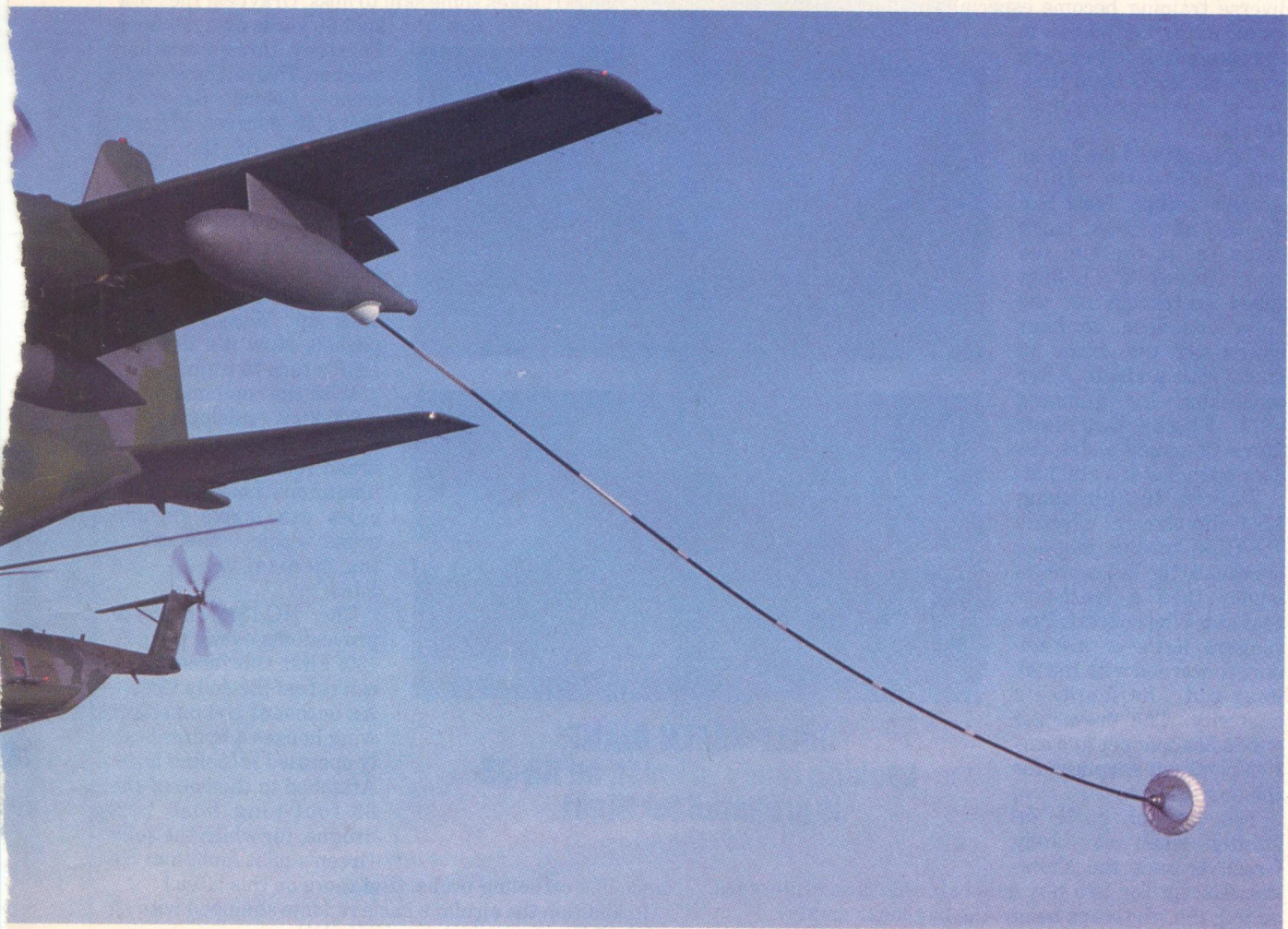


The HC-130P's radome houses an ARD-17 Tracker, which homes in on ELTs. A Fulton Recovery System, once used to rescue pilots, is the reason for the strange snout.

er 600 miles west of Acapulco, Mexico. Mexican authorities relayed the ship's distress call to the U.S. Coast Guard.

With no hospital ships near, the Coast Guard dispatched a C-130 with three Air Force pararescuemen (PJs in military parlance), who parachuted to the *Reunion* and stabilized Rando's condition. But the seaman still needed to get to a hospital fast, and the round trip of 1,200 miles between the *Reunion* and Acapulco was well beyond the range of Coast Guard helicopters.

That's where the 129th came in: it's the only Air National Guard unit on the Pacific Coast outfitted with Sikorsky HH-3Es, a variant of the Jolly Green Giant equipped with a retractable refueling probe. Refueled by



one of the unit's HC-130P tankers, a 129th Jolly Green can mean the difference between life and death in medical emergencies far out to sea.

By the time Baker called Laut, a Jolly Green was slowly flying the 1,100 miles from the 129th's base at Moffett Field, near San Jose, California, to La Paz, Mexico, near the southern tip of Baja, California. Laut and a fresh helicopter crew left in an HC-130P in the morning, arriving at La Paz less than three hours after the Jolly Green. From there Laut and crew took over the helicopter.

With the HC-130P close by for fuel and navigation, the Jolly Green arrived at the ship in the late afternoon. Less than 20 minutes later Rando was hoisted aboard and on his way to a hospital in Acapulco. And more than 18 hours

Capt. Paul Zimmerman (top left) flies the HC-130P for the refueling and the deployment of pararescuemen. Above: A Jolly Green crewmember enjoys the view.



“Inside the cockpit it’s louder than a front-row seat at a Who concert.”

after his day began, Laut was wearily sipping a beer in an Acapulco hotel, swapping rescue stories with the other men and silently adding Santi Rando’s name to the list of nearly 200 lives that have been saved by the 129th ARRG in the past 13 years.

Speedy mobilization is a necessity for the only long-range rescue unit on the Pacific Coast, so long hours of diverse training become especially important. The personnel of the 129th know it and accept it. But there are worse places to train than here in Monterey Bay, California.

Flying toward the bay at 130 knots, the Jolly Green’s cockpit feels like the cab of a work truck that’s sat in the sun too long. There’s a 115-knot speed restriction on the huge side door, so Laut bleeds off the extra 15 knots with a climb. After rechecking his gunner’s belt, Flight Engineer Steve Courtney slides the door open, but it’s still hot.

With its two shrieking 1,500-shp General Electric T58-GE-5 turbine engines overhead, the helicopter is louder than a front-row seat at a Who concert. Passengers, however, are seldom concerned with the 20-year-old helicopter’s austerity. The crew just wears headphones and carries plenty of earplugs for the unsuspecting.

The interior cools instantly when the Jolly Green crosses the shoreline. Except for two tiny sailboats that gracefully tack among the whitecaps below, the bay looks empty.

The copilot, Maj. Terry Graybeal, is the first to spot a rubber Zodiac boat speeding toward the bay’s center. We swing down to take a closer look, while the men on the boat wave and launch an International Orange one-man life raft. Hitting this bobbing six-foot-by-two-foot piece of rubber—our “simulated survivor”—will be the main goal for much of this training mission.

Before the first exercise, a midocean approach and retrieval, Laut lets the Jolly Green rise and orbit for a few minutes; he wants to let the raft drift. This has to be a fair fight, after all. He turns the helicopter over to Graybeal, who sights the raft after a couple of low orbits.

“Where?” asks Laut.

“There. Port,” Graybeal says, quickly jabbing a finger down toward the sea.

Stealing a glance and a smirk backward at his jumpseat pilot, Laut inspects both of his hands, deciding that the left is indeed port. Graybeal isn’t concerned with the ribbing; he’s not about to let the raft out of sight.

Skimming the water’s surface, the Jolly Green pauses while Courtney chucks overboard a lime-green sea dye marker. Suddenly, with the spreading sea dye surrounding it, the raft takes some skill to miss. Graybeal flies to a spot 30 yards away, where Courtney throws another marker. This is a hover reference, which Graybeal keeps 45 degrees off the right side of the nose. Courtney runs the hoist’s penetrator (a device with seats and a flotation ring, its name derived from its ability to penetrate a forest) down to the raft and back up. Mission accomplished. Now it’s the HC-130P’s turn to train.



**JOLLY GREEN GIANT:
Looking ready to joust, an HH-3E
is prepared for flight.**

With the combination of a 320-knot cruising speed, 3,000-nm range and a broad rear ramp door, the ubiquitous Lockheed Hercules can arrive on the scene within hours carrying medical relief—the PJs.

The HC-130P has improvements over a plain C-130. First and foremost, it can refuel the Jolly Green. An outboard pod on either wing houses a hydraulically operated refueling hose. Attached to the end of the 83-foot-long hose is a drogue, for which the Jolly Green’s pilot must aim his

lance-like refueling probe. (But more on this later.)

In addition the airplane has a radome equipped with an ARD-17 Tracker, which is a UHF/DF emergency locator tracker originally used in the days of the Apollo and Skylab space programs. With U.S. space efforts now on hold, the 129th uses the Tracker to find downed aircraft, homing in on the ELT’s signal.

“The SARSAT [Search and Rescue Satellite-Aided Tracking] satellite will give close approximations to an ELT signal,” says Col. Charles Cross, air operations officer for the 129th. “The HC-130P can track the signal to a pinpoint.”

Once, the HC-130P’s nose held the Fulton Recovery System. A downed pilot deployed a helium-filled balloon on a nylon line that was attached to a harness. The airplane snagged the line with a nose yoke and lifted the pilot to safety. The system was later abandoned; its legacy



"All those helicopters at once—it was like we were back in Vietnam."

is the HC-130P's strange snout.

Today, the airplane has Doppler radar and an Omega navigation system to guide the navigationally impaired Jolly Green. Often, however, a ship equipped with proper medical facilities will divert and be there sooner than can the 120-knot Jolly Green.

Capt. Paul Zimmerman flies the airplane over the sea-dyed raft at an altitude of 1,500 feet. At the moment the HC-130P is over the raft a crewmember tosses out a spotter parachute, which spews a stream of smoke. The small parachute lands downwind of the raft, leaving a fluffy and expanding plume behind.

Zimmerman circles for nine minutes, letting the smoke from the spotter parachute continue its rise and drift. Then, for an accurate drop, he flies from the smoke to directly over the sea dye, counting the seconds; as he crosses over the lime smear he counts down.

At the count of zero it's time for the PJ to do what he's supposed to do best: he takes a flying frog leap out the side door, parachute billowing out in drag the instant the static line pulls the ripcord.

Majors Laut and Graybeal groan sympathetically when the jumper hits the water. Just imagine how cold it must be down there (even if you *are* wearing a wet suit), splashing around in the drink with 150 pounds of medical

and rescue equipment and a 28-foot drenched parachute thrown in for good measure. Another orbit and another PJ goes out. Their goal, of course, is to land right on top of the life raft.

Since this is a training mission, most of the PJs' equipment will be salvaged. Even the parachutes, now full of saltwater, can be saved; they'll be washed and hung in a room designed for drying parachutes. But in a real emergency the PJs are more concerned with saving lives than saving equipment. "When we hit the water we cut the parachute away," says Sgt. Mark Schneider, a PJ. "And we lose equipment as we go along."

For air-to-air refueling proficiency, the HC-130P meets another Jolly Green, piloted by Cross. The HH-3E is fitted with an eight-foot-long retractable refueling probe, which extends an additional seven feet—four feet beyond the rotor disc. Coming up from behind the helicopter, the HC-130P extends its two refueling drogue hoses to their maximum length, pegs 130 knots and slowly overtakes the Jolly Green before slowing to match its 110-knot speed. When the seemingly incongruous aircraft meet, the sparks fly; static electricity builds up when the drogues unwind.

"You can't see it in the day, but at night it's something else," says Cross. With all the fuel nearby, that's an un-

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derstatement. Nevertheless, Cross says there's no chance of ignition because the fuel isn't flowing.

Looking like a mechanical hummingbird collecting nectar from a blossom, the Jolly Green takes on fuel at a rate of 880 pounds per minute. On an actual refueling the pair transfers approximately 2,000 pounds of fuel.

The days of this unlikely marriage of aircraft are numbered: the 129th will be equipped with six new MH-60G Pave Hawks, the Air Force version of the H-60 Black Hawk. Outfitted with updated avionics, the Pave Hawk won't rely on the HC-130Ps for navigation; yet the newer helicopters will still come with refueling probes. The Pave Hawks won't be arriving until late next year, so in the meantime the 129th will continue to flog its Jolly Greens far out to sea.

Not all of the 129th's rescues are ones in which sick seamen are plucked off ships in the Pacific. The unit is prepared to battle blazing forests, retrieve trapped mountain climbers and rescue downed pilots. In the aftermath of torrential flooding two years ago, the unit worked from dawn until well after dusk hoisting residents of Guerneville, California, off their roofs. All four of the 129th's Jolly Greens were in the air, while two of its HC-130Ps, orbiting overhead, provided communications control and air refueling. With the addition of four helicopters from the Army National Guard, the operation brought on a feeling of *déjà vu* for some of the pilots.

"All those helicopters in the air at once—it was like we were back in Vietnam," Cross says.

The 129th saved 33 residents of Guerneville and received several requests to save livestock. Word got around quickly, however, that the emphasis was on humans; animals were to be left behind.

"Of course, they knew we wouldn't leave babies. So more than once we'd pick up someone holding a bundle with a little black tail wagging out the bottom," says Cross.

While the 129th continues to rack up an impressive save count, it must also fight an identity problem. The media, in reporting the unit's exploits, often mistake the Air Guard unit for a Coast Guard unit. The personnel of the 129th take it in stride and point to the dozens of framed thank-you letters that line the headquarters' walls. The authors, survivors all, know the difference.



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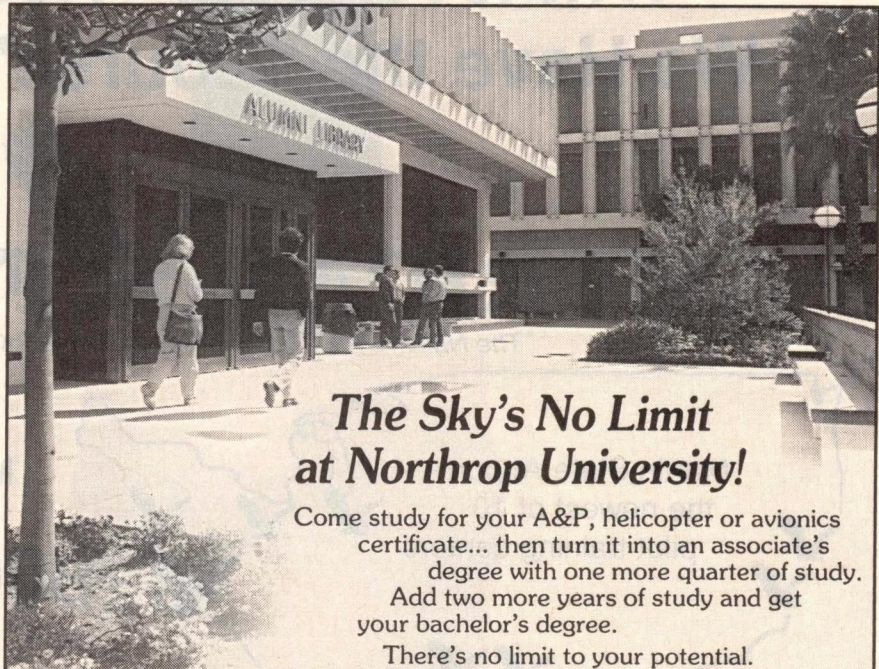
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