AIR FORCE MAGAZINE
Journal of the Air Force Association
August 2003 Vol. 86, No. 8

Combat search and rescue soon will be part of the special operations world.

CSAR, Under New Management

By Adam J. Hebert, Senior Editor

An HH-60 departs Tallil Air Base, Iraq, after depositing a pararescueman.

The Air Force has found a new home for its vital combat search and rescue mission. At present, most of the forces, equipment, and oversight of CSAR belong to Air Combat Command. However, service leaders have concluded that the mission fits better in the world of special operations. On Oct. 1, the mission passes to Air Force Special Operations Command.

Air Force leaders believe the move will strengthen CSAR operations, make them more efficient, and raise their profile by putting them in a smaller organization.

The idea of shifting search and rescue out of ACC had been studied for more than a year. Ultimately, the Air Force concluded that the "synergies" to be achieved with the move outweighed any negative factors, ACC commander Gen. Hal M. Hornburg told Air Force Magazine.

" Better for the community overall" is how Hornburg described the outcome of the transfer.

The move brings together, under one command, most of the equipment and personnel needed to perform rescues and puts them in close proximity to commandos, some of whom perform similar types of missions.

AFSOC already has search and rescue as a secondary mission, with special ops units filling in when dedicated CSAR forces are not available. This tends to happen a lot, as search and rescue capabilities are among the most heavily tasked in the Air Force.

Commanders frequently seek the ability to recover combat personnel trapped in enemy territory. In Iraq, CSAR was heavily used and highly successful, according to a report by Lt. Gen. T. Michael Moseley, the Gulf War II air commander.

According to Moseley's "By the Numbers" assessment of the air campaign, Operation Iraqi Freedom's joint search and rescue center was the largest JSRC ever, and it assisted in 20 rescues, saving 73 personnel.

AFSOC has already planned to modify its MC-130H Combat Talon II airlifters, such as this one, to provide much needed additional capability to aerial refuel CSAR helicopters.

Falling Short

Twice in recent years, search and rescue limitations complicated combat operations, however.

In 1999, Gen. John P. Jumper, now Air Force Chief of Staff, commanded United States Air Forces in Europe. He said that USAF "acutely felt" the lack of a permanent CSAR presence in Europe during Operation Allied Force, the air war over Kosovo. The successful rescues of downed F-16 and F-117 pilots during that conflict were achieved by special operations forces, not dedicated rescue assets.

USAFE has since stationed a CSAR unit at NAS Keflavik, Iceland. The CSAR units assigned to the Pacific Air Forces and USAFE will remain in those commands.

More recently, ACC's CSAR units were slow to arrive in Afghanistan in 2001 for Operation Enduring Freedom. The need for AFSOC to fill in led to the successful push for change. In an interview, Lt. Gen. Paul V. Hester, AFSOC commander, said getting CSAR into position around Afghanistan was the final preparatory step to be completed. The initial rescue presence was provided by special operations forces trained to perform rescues as a "tangential mission," Hester said.

It took a month for ACC's search and rescue units to fully assume the Enduring Freedom CSAR mission, officials said.

It is hoped the change in oversight will bring an end to these types of situations.
Hester said AFSOC will look for ways to get US-based rescue forces to the combat theaters faster, but that the timing problem will not vanish on Oct. 1 when the changeover occurs. If the problems involved in getting assets deployed were easy to solve, he noted, "ACC would have solved them already."

Officials say the move will also broaden career opportunities. With related missions aligned under AFSOC, there will be more leadership opportunities for rescuers and helicopter crewmen, Hester said. This will create a much broader leadership path for CSAR members, because the rescue mission will not be an afterthought in AFSOC as it was in ACC.

There will be a need to update training operations, said Hester. AFSOC will work with Air Education and Training Command to determine how search and rescue training should be integrated with the training regimes of conventional commandos, he said.

AFSOC will be given control of Moody AFB, Ga., a former fighter facility currently operated by ACC. The 347th Rescue Wing, which has HH-60s and the HC-130s used for CSAR refueling, is the host wing at Moody and will transfer to AFSOC.

The CSAR switch will affect about 9,000 Air Force members. Only a few, however, will be changing locations. Hester said most people affected will simply change patches. The change includes shifting:

- 91 positions to Davis–Monthan AFB, Ariz.
- 53 positions to Hurlburt Field, Fla.
- 31 positions to Nellis AFB, Nev.

According to Hester, the Air Force realignment had no connection with the Pentagon's decision this year to increase the size and authority of US Special Operations Command. The CSAR units will continue to be organized, trained, and equipped as Air Force rescue assets and will not belong to SOCOM.

CSAR at work: An A-10 pilot shot down near Baghdad returns to base accompanied by his heavily armed rescuers. This was one of 20 successful recoveries for Iraqi Freedom's joint search and rescue center.

Long in Flux

Combat search and rescue had been in flux for years. There had been discussions about moving CSAR out of ACC throughout the 1990s, but the right time never seemed to arrive.

Officials had been debating the proper home for CSAR since at least 1990, when AFSOC was created out of the former 23rd Air Force in a move to increase the role of special operations.

More recently, the Air Force has carried out various administrative changes to better CSAR's lot within the Air Combat Command structure. These included moving Air Force Reserve Command rescue equipment in Oregon to an active duty unit at Davis–Monthan, a change that will be completed later this year. (The AFRC unit is switching from a CSAR to an aerial refueling mission.)

Officials approved a service life extension program for the oldest of the HH-60 Pave Hawks to ensure they remain workable until a next generation recovery vehicle becomes available around 2010. And the size of the HC-130 refueling fleet is being increased through the conversion of 10 WC-130s to the tanker configuration.

These conversions should be complete by 2006.

A recent ACC study recommended replacing the 105 lightweight HH-60s used for CSAR with 132 medium-lift helicopters. Use of the new helicopters will not only improve aircraft availability but also address several HH-60 deficiencies such as limited range and small payload.

For the time being, however, AFSOC will have possession of two aging rotorcraft platforms that are due for replacement. In addition to the HH-60s, the MH-53 Pave Lows used to transport commandos are also aging out. The Air Force backs separate programs to replace those aircraft, given the different missions the Pave Hawks and Pave Lows are asked to perform.

AFSOC will soon possess two aging helicopters frequently used for rescues. Like the HH-60, the MH-53 (pictured) is due for replacement. The Air Force is developing the CV-22 tilt-rotor as successor to the MH-53 Pave Low and favors a medium-lift, conventional helicopter as a Pave Hawk successor.

The V-22 tilt-rotor that is expected to replace the MH-53 was also considered for the CSAR mission, but was passed over in favor of a more traditional, medium-lift replacement for the HH-60. Hester noted that the study recommendation calls for an "off the shelf" purchase, unlike the ground-up development and acquisition of the V-22.

In spite of the recent and planned changes, CSAR remained an overstressed, overtasked mission area that was never able to get to the top of ACC's list of priorities.

Hornburg acknowledged that, over the years, ACC did "a less than adequate job" of budgeting for CSAR, even though ACC units are most in need of rescue support. After all, pilots in the combat air forces are in danger of going down in enemy territory almost every time they perform a wartime mission.
