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FEATURE ARTICLE

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Combat Rescue Units See Shift in Missions

By Michael Peck



Air Force combat rescue teams increasingly are shifting their training and resources to the evacuation of casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan, instead of just focusing on the recovery of downed pilots.

“Now we’re using our combat search and rescue forces to perform casualty evacuation under fire,” said Maj. Scott Shepard, a combat rescue officer at the Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC). These evacuation missions have “significantly increased the operational tempo for all AFSOC vertical lift aircraft and recovery teams,” he added.

This surge in the pace of operations can be gleaned from figures provided to National Defense by U.S. Central Command Air Forces. Air Force units flew about 300 rescue missions in Iraq and Afghanistan between October 2001 and November 2005. But 250 of those were classified as casualty evacuation — or

transporting casualties from the battlefield to medical facilities — and medical evacuation, or moving patients from one medical staging area to another. Only 20 missions were classified as combat search and rescue. Of the 300 total missions, more than 85 percent were in Afghanistan.

Combat rescue units can evacuate casualties under battlefield conditions hazardous to standard evacuation aircraft and medics. “By utilizing para-jumpers and offensive recovery vehicles such as the HH-60 and MH-53 helicopters, the Air Force can increase the level of trauma care provided in a combat or austere environment,” said Shepard. “When anyone calls the personnel recovery center and says an evacuation is beyond them, if there is an American or coalition partner that has requested help, we don’t turn them down.”

Yet casualty evacuation has traditionally been considered a collateral capability of the scarce and specialized rescue teams, which are classified as high-demand, low-density units. While the number of missions flown in Afghanistan and Iraq doesn’t appear excessive — averaging over one a week — combatant commands demand a 24/7 response.

“We may not be flying actual missions every day, but we’re postured to fly missions every day,” said Lt. Col. Lee Pera, commander of the 41st Rescue Squadron, which

operates HH-60 helicopters as part of the 347th Rescue Wing based at Moody Air Force Base, Ga. "This is a higher burden than most assets because we have got to always be ready at a moment's notice to execute a search and rescue mission."

The numbers illustrate the changing face of combat rescue. Gone are the days of lumbering jolly green giant helicopters plucking downed pilots from Asian jungles. Current conflicts have changed the environment, the adversaries and the stresses on Air Force rescue teams.

Retrieving pilots is a fraction of the job description. Rescue teams recover stranded special operations forces, pick up civilian contractors in trouble, and retrieve weapons and equipment. "We did multiple dives into the Euphrates River to recover human remains," said Lt. Col. Perry Johnson, commander of the 38th Rescue Squadron, a para-jumper unit attached to the 347th Rescue Wing, which is the Air Force's only active-duty combat search and rescue wing.

The Vietnamese jungle was no para-jumper's paradise, but it was arguably easier than rescuing an airman from an Afghan mountain or Iraqi city teeming with civilians who may or may not be hostile, rescue officers said. "The environment has completely shifted from a jungle where we had all the right equipment, to an environment with high altitudes in excess of 15,000 feet, to an urban environment with clutter, to working out in the open ocean," said Shepard.

Even the term combat search and rescue, or CSAR, has become obsolete. It has been replaced by "personnel recovery operations." CSAR is generally a "narrow term that is used for a rescue package to pick up a downed pilot," Shepard said. "We basically had all these years the concept that if a fighter pilot was shot down, his wingman would know where the crash was. There was no ability to track and tag anyone moving in an urban environment or on the open ocean."

The emphasis now is on an overarching doctrine of which CSAR is just one phase. "Air Force doctrine has officially changed," said Shepard. "We have personnel recovery operations under which CSAR is our primary mechanism. It encompasses everything from the first task of reporting that something that has happened, to locating the individual that is missing, to recovery and reintegration."

For example, there is a new emphasis on using tracking devices so personnel can be recovered in a matter of hours, and in a manner that minimizes risk to the rescuers and rescued. Those risks cannot be overstated. A Defense Department report said that one Air Force search and rescue crewman and two aircraft were lost for every 9.2 recoveries in Vietnam, while the Navy lost a crewman for every 1.8 recoveries. And memories are fresh of the debacle in Somalia, where warlords downed Army Black Hawk helicopters with rocket propelled grenades. "We're changing our tactics from a 'Black Hawk Down' situation where you put a helicopter directly over a building," Shepard said. "That's probably not a good situation."

It is no longer politically acceptable to pour firepower into a civilian area during a rescue. The approach now is more "stealthy," and takes advantage of capabilities of coalition partners and non-defense agencies. Shepard declined to comment on the role of civilian intelligence agencies, but noted that the "best thing is to identify different networks and capabilities that can help us get that individual out."

Equipment is evolving as well as doctrine. One important item is the Sov-3 parachute which allows landings at altitudes above 8,000 feet, where normal parachutes would have difficulty with the thin air. They have already been used twice in missions in Afghanistan, according to Shepard. Communications gear is also being revamped to allow para-jumpers to carry fewer radios.

The most significant equipment change is the Air Force's plan to acquire a new CSAR helicopter to replace the HH-60s. "We could use more high altitude capability and better performance in high altitude, hot weather and bad weather conditions," said Pera. While the HH-60s are holding up, with availability rates above 90 percent, the aircraft are aging. "As aircraft get older, we add more things to them," Pera said. "They weigh more. The power margins they were originally designed with, they don't have anymore."

Shepard believes the most pressing challenge for rescue forces in today's environment is the sheer volume of potential customers. "The biggest threat is that we're putting a much larger number of personnel in the battle space than ever before. If you look at Operation Iraqi Freedom and count the number of civilians and contractors, they are all in the battle space. In Vietnam, Korea and other conventional conflicts, those civilian contractors stayed on the base."

Only selected personnel have traditionally been trained in escape and evasion. "Previous to the current global war on terror, we really only identified high risk of isolation personnel, and that was really in terms of how much that person could be exploited" for propaganda purposes if captured, Shepard noted. Special operations troops and pilots received intensive training, but support and logistics units did not.

Despite the heavy losses suffered during CSAR operations in Vietnam, Shepard believe the U.S. campaign against terrorism will be even harder for rescue forces. "I'm working in a environment where I am unable to determine whether that civilian is a good guy or bad guy. It is a much more difficult environment. There is less I can do about it."

Shepard said he was unaware of any civilians being injured during personnel recover operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. But, he added, "You're going to be called on the carpet sooner or later for making a bad call and injuring a non-player."

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