

Wet & Wild in San Diego Bay



By Lt. Curtis Macready

I was sitting in the ready room, briefing for my second good-deal fam flight in as many days, when the unexpected happened: We had a mishap. Actually, the aviation safety officer walked in unannounced and told my copilot and me that we were the lucky participants in a squadron pre-mishap drill. This drill was in conjunction with the squadron's SAR jumps scheduled for later that afternoon. Our flight was cancelled, and the fun began.

We went downstairs to the paraloft to grab the training AIRSAVE vests we would use swimming. They were loaners from the MCAS Miramar water-survival school. We picked up the rest of our gear, including cranials (instead of our flight helmets) and neoprene booties (to replace our flight boots). We then jumped in the white van for a quick drive down the Silver Strand to Naval Amphibious Base, Coronado, and boarded a boat to take us to our "crash site" in the middle of Glorietta Bay, just off NAB.

We inflated our AIRSAVE flotation vests, jumped in the balmy 64-degree water and awaited pickup. We were simulating going in the water, wearing what we normally would wear on a flight over water at that temperature. So, we didn't have any wetsuits, dry suits or aramids. I was prebriefed to have a back injury and to be a little incoherent—I was ready to play the part. My copilot had a PRC-149 (on loan from the Wing) he used to communicate with a squadron helicopter en route from NAS North Island. The copilot talked the helo to a position right on top of us.

Swimmer deployment went without a hitch, and, soon, my copilot was hoisted into the back of the helicopter. I was surprised, however, by how much water the aircraft kicked up in the form of spray and waves. The spray was so intense it leaked into my cranial goggles. With the saltwater running into my eyes, I was blinded. I couldn't wipe my eyes because, if I removed the goggles, my situation would get much worse. Life was difficult for me—the unfortunate guy still in the water, waiting for a pickup.

When it was my turn to be hoisted, the rescue swimmer came down the wire, swam up, and assessed my situation. I pretended to be incoherent as the script outlined, so I purposely was not much help. I let him know my back was injured, so he called for a litter, or backboard, to immobilize me for the ride up the rescue hoist. It seemed like an eternity, but, actually, the process went very quickly. It took only seven minutes to haul me into the back of the helicopter.

Things got interesting during those seven minutes. Because I was using a training-flotation device, not prefitted to my body, I floated lower in the water than I normally would. The rescue swimmer worked through his procedures for strapping me into the litter. The second strap he connected went over my chest and across my biceps, securing my arms to my sides. I no longer could tread water on my own, and the water level was at my chin. So those waves I mentioned earlier became drinking water for me. I was bobbing up and down, my mouth and nose in and



Photo by PH2 Darryl I. Wood

out of the water, trying to time my breaths to avoid inhaling water. Keep in mind, I still could not see because of the stinging saltwater in my eyes. After I tired of this little game, I managed to bend my arms upward to grab and pull the AIRSAVE lobes. My body then floated higher in the water, which eased my drinking problem.

The swimmer finally secured all the straps and signaled for the pickup. At that moment, the helo drifted behind me, so the litter cables draped off the right side of my body and connected to the rescue hoist behind me. Can you guess what happened next? After the pickup signal was given, and the crew chief began hoisting, I flipped 180 degrees, which wouldn't have been bad if I was vertical in the water.

However, 180 degrees from being on my back put me facedown in the water with my arms by my side, completely unable to right myself. My dilemma lasted for what seemed like an eternity, but actually was about five seconds. It's funny how being unable to breathe seems to make time slow down.

The crew chief kept hoisting, and the litter managed to right itself, allowing me to take a much-needed deep breath. What a nice feeling! I then felt a series of bumps, which I later learned was just the rescue hoist jerking. As it became quiet, I opened my eyes and saw I was under the

helo, moving up. After yet another time vacuum, while dangling helplessly from a small cable and strapped immobile to a board, I arrived at the cabin door. It took a few fruitless tries to receive me feet first before the crew chief finally pulled me headfirst into the cabin.

It was an interesting experience—one I wouldn't recommend, unless you need it to save your life. Most importantly, the squadron got a real-world opportunity to test the new AIRSAVE vest and PRC-149 radio. Meanwhile, the copilot and I gained a new perspective on rescues from the wavetop level. As a helicopter pilot, the eye-opener I would like to emphasize to other pilots is to keep the aircraft well away from the swimmer and survivor so you help them out. The rotor wash really can be a hindrance. 🦅

Lt. Macready flies with HS-4.

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