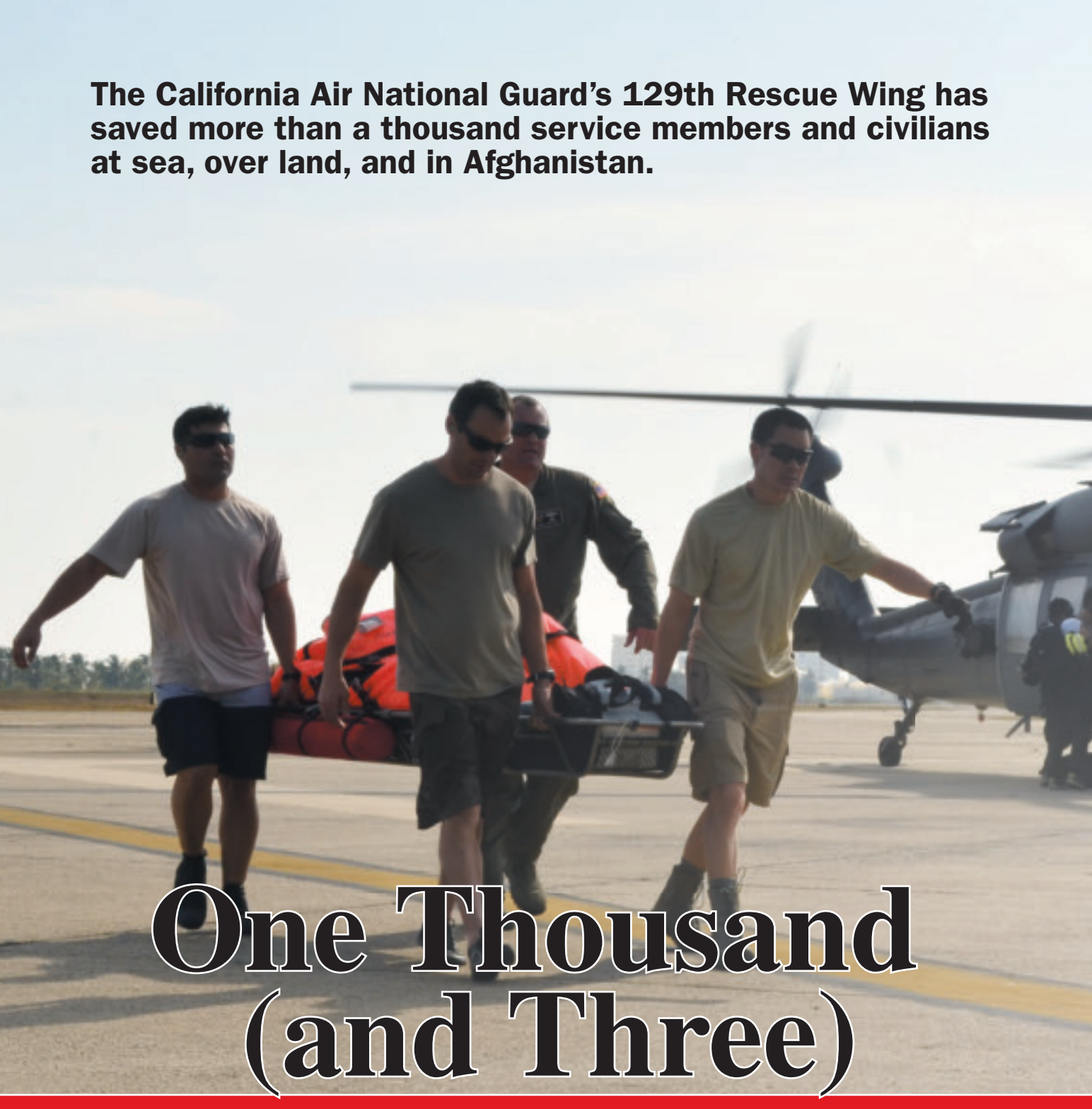
The California Air National Guard's 129th Rescue Wing has saved more than a thousand service members and civilians at sea, over land, and in Afghanistan.



One Thousand (and Three) RESCUES

By June L. Kim, Associate Editor

Pararescuemen—"Guardian Angels"—from the 129th Rescue Wing carry an injured fisherman away from an HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopter in March 2012. The crew rescued two fishermen burned by a fire aboard a Chinese fishing vessel hundreds of miles off Mexico's Pacific coast.

ANG photo by A1C John D. Pharr III

The pararescue jumpers knew they were up against Mother Nature and time as they jumped out of a Coast Guard C-130 and parachuted into the dark stormy waters of the Pacific on April 1, 2010. The California Air National Guard's 129th Rescue Wing, based at Moffett Field, and the US Coast Guard were responding to a call about a severely injured civilian on the sailboat *Wind Child* some 1,400 miles off the coast of Mexico.

Just before dawn, a gust of wind sent the sailboat's boom across the boat, entangling Michael Kalahar in the heavy lines of the mainsheet. Kalahar, from Port Angeles, Wash., fell backward and struck his head on a winch, biting his tongue in the process. Crew members rushed to his aid but the injuries to his head and neck called for a more sophisticated plan.

The Coast Guard called the pararescue jumpers (PJs) to help with the rescue. After parachuting down, the PJs found their way onto their Zodiac boat and motored toward *Wind Child*. "Everything was pushed to the limit" on this rescue, recalled Capt. Tristan Grell, a combat rescue officer on the mission. "A lot of things [were] out of our control."

The waves were swelling at 12-to-14-feet and within an hour, the PJs were seasick. The medics kept having to go below deck, "do [the] treatment, come back up, throw up over the side, and go do treatment again," Grell said. Still, the rescuers performed flawlessly, he said, and the rescue mission was ultimately successful.

The PJs set up Kalahar with an IV to keep him hydrated and bandaged him, but after they'd been on *Wind Child* for nearly 12 hours, the sailboat lost power when a line got caught in the rudder.

By that time, though, a Liberian cargo ship had come to their rescue and the PJs were able to transfer the patient aboard and bring him closer to shore. The team spent three days on the cargo ship until HH-60 Pave Hawks could fly out and pick them up, transporting Kalahar to a hospital in San Diego where he recovered.

From the Beginning

The men who saved his life come from a unit with a federal mission to provide personnel recovery in military operations, as well as crisis response—like this—at the state and national level.

This elite group of airmen come from all walks of life with the same desire to rescue those in need. In the close-knit USAF rescue community, the PJs are known as "Guardian Angels."

PJs go through nearly two years of training, starting with a 10-week indoctrination selection course at JBSA-Lackland in Texas, where the dropout rate is 90 percent. Capt. Darren Pon, a combat rescue officer with the 129th RQW, graduated in the early 2000s. "I think we started with 86 to 90 guys and then graduated [with] 14," he said.

After indoctrination, PJs spend four to six weeks at the Air Force Combat Dive Course in Panama City, Fla. Next, they spend three weeks at the US Army's Airborne School at Fort Benning, Ga., and five weeks at the Military Free Fall

Photo courtesy of SSgt. Andrew Gibson

School at both Fort Bragg, N.C., and Yuma Proving Grounds, Ariz. Though this is the primary military free fall school, some PJs attend the Navy's school in San Diego.

PJs then spend three weeks at the Air Force Survival School at Fairchild AFB, Wash., approximately six months in a paramedic course at Kirtland AFB, N.M., and another six months in a pararescue recovery specialist course, also at Kirtland.

Even after a PJ completes the pararescue pipeline, he continues training for the rest of his career. They train "quite a bit" offsite, said TSgt. Christopher Klaftenegger, a PJ since 2005. "Just to stay current, we've got 70 days of training" a year, he said, but "to be proficient is a whole 'nother animal, so we're constantly looking for ways to stay sharp."

PJs have to keep up with all kinds of training because they never know what scenario they'll be in next. "Whether it be alpine, swift water, earthquakes, combat search and rescue, open ocean rescue, [or any] major hurricane, we've been on standby for that," said Capt. Lejon Boudreaux, a 129th RQW combat rescue officer.

The wing of 900 airmen comprises three rescue squadrons: the 129th, the 130th, and the 131st. The 129th RQS is made up of HH-60 Pave Hawk crew and maintainers; the 130th RQS has the MC-130 Combat Shadow crew and maintainers; and the 131st RQS holds the PJs.

The wing's rescue mission dates to 1975 when it was designated the 129th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Group. In March 1977, the group saw its first rescue when it picked up a downed A-10 pilot who crashed during a Red Flag exercise.

The wing now uses MC-130P Combat Shadow aircraft and HH-60G Pave Hawks. The two aircraft work in concert; the C-130s drop off PJs where Pave Hawks can't fly, and the Pave Hawks come in to pick them up. Sometimes, if the rescue site is close enough, the Pave Hawks will fly in for a drop off. "Helicopters can refuel, … but they can only fly [for] so long," explained Pon, the 129th combat rescue officer.

For example, in water rescues, "there's an imaginary line that we draw in the ocean that between that line and closer [to the coast], we'll go out and do a helicopter pickup. Anything beyond that line, we'll [fly out in a C-130], parachute in, and we'll steer whatever boat we happen to be on toward that imaginary line, and then the helicopter can come pick us up."

A combat rescue officer assigned to the 26th Expeditionary Rescue Squadron from the 129th Rescue Wing runs through a preflight inspection on a Pave Hawk in 2013 at Camp Bastion, Afghanistan. Air National Guardsmen recorded the wing's 1,000th save May 18, when members of the unit rescued an Afghan national wounded by gunfire in southern Afghanistan.

Help at Sea

In August 2012, the 129th RQW received a call that two Ecuadorian fishermen on the fishing boat *Mirelur,* 1,600 miles off the coast of Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, were in need of emergency care. One man had gastrointes-

USAF photo by SrA. Scott Saldukas

ANG photo by A1C John D. Pharr III

Far left: An HH-60 Pave Hawk from California's 129th Rescue Wing maneuvers toward a container ship during an offshore rescue mission in 2010. Left: Guardian Angels from the 129th transfer a patient to land-based medical facilities after a long-range overwater rescue mission 1,400 miles off the coast of Acapulco, Mexico. They saved the lives of two Ecuadorians.

tinal problems and the other had been hit by a 400-pound tuna and hurt his back. The wing dispatched PJs to help.

Mirelur was too far for a helicopter pickup so Capt. Bevan Hart, MSgt. Seth Zweben, TSgt. Mark Finney, and Klaftenegger flew in and parachuted down. They reached *Mirelur* and began assessing the situation. The captain spoke a little English but the rest of the crew didn't, Finney said, so the rescue team got by with high school Spanish and basic sign language.

The patient with the stomach problems, Francisco Daniel Bravo Medranda, was treated by Klaftenegger. "His belly was super rigid and tight and he was in a lot of pain," he said. Medrandra was "big-sick," as Klaftenegger put it.

"We took care of [the patients] for three days," Klaftenegger said, both on *Mirelur* and then on a Coast Guard cutter, which picked them up and traveled quicker than the fishing boat. Once they got within range for Pave Hawks to fly out and pick them up, the PJs hoisted them up and transferred the patients to a hospital in San José del Cabo in Mexico.

Medranda was diagnosed with gangrenous appendicitis, according to *El Mercurio,* an Ecuadorian newspaper that printed his account of the harrowing rescue. Medranda went into surgery the following day, recalled Finney, who had taken care of the patient with the back pain.

If the boat had taken the normal time to get back, Medranda "definitely would have died on the way. He was kind of a ticking time bomb," Klaftenegger said.

About a week after the rescue, Medranda's wife wrote to the 129th RQW a heartfelt email thanking the crew members and praising them for playing a crucial part in saving her husband.

Oceans and Deserts

As of early March, the 129th RQW is credited with a remarkable total of 1,003 cumulative saves. Of those saves, 414 are combat-related and 589 are civilian-related. Since 2001, the wing has deployed nine times to Kuwait, Turkey, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The last deployment was in January 2013, to Afghanistan. More than 200 airmen from the 129th RQW deployed to Camp Bastion for operations there and in the Horn of Africa. Once in Afghanistan, the 129th flew as the 26th Expeditionary Rescue Squadron.

On one notable mission last May, a small Marine Corps unit was on an early morning ground patrol in Helmand province when the rear patrolman, Pfc. Duncan S. Mathis, slid down an embankment and fell into a 60-foot-deep dry well.

The marine landed on his feet, crushing his legs, said SSgt. Nick Plummer, a PJ who participated in the rescue. Mathis suffered an open fracture to his left tibia and fibula, which went straight "through his boot," said Plummer. Mathis also had

Lost in Line of Duty

During its 40-year history with more than a thousand successful saves, the 129th Rescue Wing lost seven of its PJs in mission-related situations. They are:

- Sgt. Lawrence Zimmerman, who died in a 1977 parachute accident during a training jump.
- Lt. Col. Les Spencer, Maj. Terry Nelson, SSgt. Steven Courtney, and SSgt. Steven Carlyle, who perished in a 1988 HH-3E helicopter accident.
- SSgt. Kevin McKenna died from natural causes while deployed in 1993.
- MSgt. John Horton died in a 2002 training accident.

USAF photo by SrA. John D. Pharr III

An HH-60G hoists a patient from a Chinese fishing vessel in 2012. The rescue saved the lives of two fishermen.

a compound fracture on his left femur and a dislocated right shoulder. "He was pretty messed up," said Boudreaux, the team commander on the mission. Mathis was able to make a loose tourniquet for his leg but couldn't do much else but wait until rescue arrived.

The area where Mathis had fallen was a previously contested area, so when PJs reached the scene, the marines on-site remained alert and watchful, making the PJs more aware of their situation. Plummer helped construct an anchor nearby that would be used to take SSgt. Nathan Schmidt, another PJ, down the well to reach Mathis. Once Schmidt reached the bottom of the well, there was no space for him to move around.

"The well was probably the size for someone more like five feet tall," Plummer said, and both Schmidt and Mathis were taller than six feet. Schmidt "had to straddle the patient" since there was no leg room. Basically "we [had] two of the biggest people" down this well, said Plummer. Mathis couldn't move without pain. Schmidt gave the patient 50 milligrams of ketamine and "he was still screaming," said Boudreaux.

"I'll never forget the sounds that he was making as we were raising him, because there [was] really no good way around bringing him up out of the well. So he was screaming at the top of his lungs. My guys on the surface were telling him, 'This is going to be probably the worst minute or two minutes of your life right here. You just gotta be tough and push through it,'" recalled Boudreaux.

When Mathis reached the top of the well, Plummer noted his femur looked like a purple watermelon. Despite his injuries, "he was a great patient," said Plummer. When he wasn't being moved, "he was laughing and joking the whole time. ... I'll remember that kid for the rest of my life."

The PJs loaded Mathis into a special litter called a Skedco, and Plummer and another PJ, SSgt. Jacob Garel, placed him in a Pave Hawk and medevaced him to a hospital. By the time Mathis arrived at the hospital, the entire mission had taken 30 minutes. "That was honestly one of the few times where I was like, 'Man, I really feel like my training paid off' and I wasn't just a flying ambulance [or] taxi service," said Plummer.

"The civilian mission is obviously very important and very gratifying; however, being out with your troops in the military, supplying them with personnel recovery and [combat search and rescue] is a great privilege and something to be proud of," said Capt. Kyl Wells, a CRO with the wing. "It just ties in more to our jobs as pararescue and combat rescue officers."

The Thousandth Save

In the days leading up to the wing's 1,000th mission, someone had set up a big placard with the number of rescues made so far, Boudreaux said. It sat in the alert facility in Afghanistan where they had their morning briefings. The unit operated as two shifts, a morning shift and a "p.m." shift. "It would be like 996 that day, and then the next shift would get two rescues and then it would be 998," he said. There was a "kind of competition" to see who would make the 1,000th save because the PJs knew one of the shifts was going to get it.

The call came in midday, toward the end of Boudreaux's shift on May 18, 2013.

Near Lashkar Gah, an Afghan National Army individual had suffered life-threatening injuries to his lower extremities from a gunshot wound. He was considered a Category A patient—in danger of losing his life, limb, or eyesight and immediate response was needed, explained Boudreaux.

"We did a minimal brief time inside the alert facility, got all the pertinent information," and then within five minutes, the Guardian Angels spun up and flew to a forward operating base in southern Afghanistan to pick up the patient, he said.

When they landed at the FOB, there were a couple of small little one-story buildings surrounded by barrier walls with an Afghan flag, said Plummer. Because the patient was an Afghan national, the PJs took him to an Afghan-run airfield inside Lashkar Gah, where the local hospital staff could easily communicate with him. On the helo ride to Lashkar Gah, the PJs dressed his wound, gave him an IV to keep him hydrated, and administered painkillers, Boudreaux said.

On their return to Camp Bastion, the PJs threw a mini celebration in honor of their 1,000th mission, he said.

Seven months later, in January 2014, the 26th ERQS inactivated and returned to Moffett Field. ■