

A Brief History of SARWET

Sea-Air-Rotary-Wing Evacuation Team

by

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SARWET – Sea Air Rotary Wing Evacuation Team – was dreamed-up by AE3 Brian Lansburg and me, Bill Thrall, after a young girl was lost in a botched rescue attempt sometime around the summer of 1970. Back then, the HH-52 was our rescue helicopter, but it only carried three people: the pilot, co-pilot, and crewman. Of the three, only the co-pilot could be dispatched into the water, but only if the pilot authorized it and the co-pilot was willing and able. The crewman couldn't leave the helo because he was the hoist operator.

The young girl was reported missing after hiking along the San Mateo coast line with two or three friends. Supposedly, they walked along the shore (below the cliffs) during low tide and found a cave and entered it. Some time later the cave began to fill with water and everyone but the girl left the cave and hurried to get above the incoming tide. Sheriff and fire department personnel tried to reach the girl by rappelling down the cliff, but the cliff kept crumbling and people thought a landslide could occur; so, they called the Coast Guard.

The air station responded by sending the ready helo. It flew down the coast to the location, but all they could do was verify there was a cave at the bottom of the cliff and there was no sign of the 13 year old girl. So, they flew back to Hamilton AFB and picked-up two Paramedics. Flew back to SanFran and traded helos for one full of fuel. Flew back down the coast to the cave. The first Paramedic jumped out without any authorization of or coordination with our pilot; the second Paramedic wanted to get closer to the water. Apparently, the first Paramedic jumped way too soon and way too high. Upon hitting the water, the first Paramedic's face mask was ripped off. He was bounced on the bottom and washed into the cave by the ever increasing wave action. Upon surfacing in the cave, he found it to be empty...no girl. It was thought that the wave that threw him into the cave also washed her out, but her body was never found.

It was my contention that if the Coast Guard had had personnel trained to leave the helicopter and act like a lifeguard, that girl could have been saved...could have been rescued on the first trip to the cave (six hours earlier). So AE3 Brian Lansburg and I began brain-storming and typing-up a proposed program that would train Coast Guard personnel to safely and competently leave the helicopter. In addition, we developed a questionnaire to pass-out to pilots, crewman, and others that asked questions like: Would you dispatch a person to rescue outside of the helicopter? Would you volunteer for such a program? Would you be willing to leave the helicopter? Do you see a need or any value for such a program? As I remember, these questions took-up almost 2 pages. They were laboriously typed on mimeograph paper, using the famous two-finger method, and then copies run-off sufficient to pass-out to officer and enlisted alike. I handed them out and took the heat from the unbelievers.

It was my thought that armed with these answers (some in favor, some against), I could refine the proposal and then present it to the station Commanding Officer, CAPT [Harry] Solberg. However before I had gotten many questionnaires back, CAPT Solberg called me into his office, and with CDR John Steinbacher present, began to berate me and threaten me with a Court Martial for Mutiny and Sedition (because I didn't first get his approval to pass the questionnaire around). So, I went around the base and collected the questionnaires from everybody but CDR Steinbacher (he said I couldn't have it back).

I felt SARWET died that day and I was lucky not to be locked-up.

Several months later CAPT [Charles] Larkin relieved CAPT Solberg. About two weeks later, I was called to CAPT Larkin's office. CDR Steinbacher stood behind the Captain's desk. The Captain was sitting at his desk. And there, in the middle of his desk, was the copy of the infamous questionnaire and proposal I had left with CDR Steinbacher. The Captain asked if I had written it. I looked at the paper...I looked at him...I looked at the Commander, and thought, "This is it; I'm going to the Brig! CDR Steinbacher has done me in!" I answered, "Yes Sir, I wrote it."

Then CAPT Larkin wanted to know if I could train the men who volunteer. I said I could. He wanted to know what the equipment cost would be per person. I said about \$100 for wet suits and fins. He wanted to know how long it would take to train someone to jump out of helicopters and be able to rescue victims. And I told him it would vary with each trainee, but somewhere between 8 and 12 weeks. After I answered his questions, he said, "I want it. Make it happen." And so I wondered back to the maintenance hanger naïve as hell. What could have begun immediately was sabotaged by those in mid-management – personnel

who volunteered were assigned to a Check Crew and became unavailable. I couldn't get the time on training days to train. SARWET seemed doomed. Months went by. Then I was called back to CAPT Larkin's office.

He wanted to know how it was going and how many people were trained and ready (it had been almost 6 months since he told me he wanted the program). I told him nothing had been done. No one had been trained. He basically wanted to know why...didn't I understand he wanted it? And I told him the problem was he was an O-6 and I was just an E-5...I couldn't order anyone to support my efforts. It was then that he paused, stared at me, and (I swear it was like a light bulb came on above his head) he said, " Fine. Go back to the hanger...I'll handle it."

As I passed the outside window of his office, I could see him on the phone, speaking very animatedly. When I got to the hanger, there was a whole string of officers and chiefs standing outside. I was asked (I believe by CDR [Eugene] Bauman, but maybe CDR [Edmund] Cope), "Who do you want? When do you want them? And how long do you need them?" That cooperation allowed SARWET to begin. That's not to say there still weren't Chiefs and others who told me over and over again that it wouldn't work, but they no longer kept volunteers from training. And no one interfered with me when I took personnel to train. I'd like to think it was our dedicated, no-nonsense training regimen that seemed to impress some of them to believe I could make SARWET a reality and that it could work...that it might save lives.

From there, my volunteers and I used every training day to train. We used the pool at my old Boot Camp at TRACEN Alameda. We ran and did calisthenics at the Air Station. Sickbay and the Corpsmen arranged for lectures on first aid and shock. ASM2 Dave Hobson became a very valuable member, designing special SARWET equipment, helping to improve the training program, and taking over the training of the men when I left for OCS. The helicopter pilots and CDR Bauman (as Ops officer) arranged for us to get plenty of helicopter jump time.

LCDR Sam [Chester R.] Wawrznsky became our PR champion. He arranged for more training with the Air Force. He was instrumental in getting the SARWET team TV coverage and media coverage, including several articles in *Flight Lines*. At one time the CDR wanted us to learn to jump from C-130's...and we were willing!!!

Those were great days. Some of the volunteers had to quit. They weren't strong enough swimmers. Some had back problems. Others thought SARWET would get them out of work and into something easy. SARWET was anything but easy. If the volunteers made it through the pool days,

we would go to the coast and take turns swimming through the surf, learning what we could and could not do with a “victim” in tow. We would swim out to a waiting helicopter and get hoisted. Then we’d jump out and swim back to shore. As word got back to the base about how hard this was, others became interested and wanted to do it...wanted the challenge. Everybody in SARWET voiced the same desire – to be able to really touch the victim...help them instead of just watch them.

It was important that every member felt confident and secure both jumping from the helo and swimming in rough surf conditions. And, as time progressed, we became confident. We became strong swimmers and confident first aid deliverers. We were SARWET, ready to respond to any situation where a victim could not normally be hoisted.

After I went to OCS, it was Dave Hobson and the men he trained that successfully ran SARWET and performed the first SARWET rescues. I heard CAPT Larkin and his successor were able to fund or sponsor SARWET “out of hide” for about 4 years (1972-1976).

In the meantime, I graduated from OCS and came back to the station to say goodbye to all my co-workers, supervisors, and SARWET buddies. I especially wanted to stop by and say “Thank you and goodbye” to CAPT Larkin. I owed him so much. It was his efforts and fatherly counsel that placed me in OCS. However, it was Dave Hobson that gave me what would prove so valuable years later – a three-ring binder of 8x10 glossies of SARWET equipment and training situations and the complete SARWET Training Curricula, including equipment lists.

It was this three-ring binder I tried to give to Search and Rescue in 1972. I was told it needed a letter...a letter from me to the Commandant. So (naïve and ignorant bureaucrat that I was) I wrote a letter from ENS William J. Thrall to the Commandant of the USCG. No vials...just from me to him, and I carried this to the LCDR manning a desk in Search and Rescue. He politely took the letter and the binder and placed it in the lower left-hand drawer of his desk. Where it seemed to stay until early 1985.

I was again in HQ in 1985, working in G-NRN, when I received a call from someone in Search and Rescue who wanted to know if I was the same William Thrall who had provided a three-ring binder on SARWET. When I said I was, I was asked to come to their office to discuss it.

The men who questioned me and discussed SARWET that day seemed very interested and excited. Before I left their offices I was asked if I would mind appearing before Congress sometime that weekend because

they were submitting SARWET to Congress as a new tool to enhance SAR.

I was never called, but the concept of SARWET was approved and the RESCUE SWIMMER program was born. Again, Dave Hobson was in the right place at the right time and was able to be part of the early years of training and developing men and women to deploy from helicopters.

Me? As much as I tried, I wasn't in a position to do anything more with SARWET or the Rescue Swimmer program...other than watch, enviously, from the sidelines.

As I understand it, today the Rescue Swimmer program is directly responsible for saving hundreds (if not thousands) of lives annually and millions of dollars in property. It seems that every week there's a new clip of a Rescue Swimmer in action, saving someone. Watching them, I envy them. I'd like to be back, training and rescuing. Oh well...
