

## U. S. Coast Guard Helicopter Rescue Swimmer Program

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At approximately 0400 on Saturday, 12 February 1983, the M/V MARINE ELECTRIC sent a distress call. The vessel was taking on water and sinking off the Virginia coast in 20– 40 foot seas with winds in excess of 60 knots. The Rescue Coordination Center Portsmouth alerted the Navy at NAS Oceana and the Coast Guard Air Station at Elizabeth City. The ready-helicopter HH-3F helicopter from Coast Guard Air Station Elizabeth City was immediately dispatched. It was one hour-fifteen minutes enroute in freezing rain. By the time the helicopter arrived the ship had sunk and 34 people were now desperately fighting for their lives in the frigid waters. The rescue basket was prepared and lowered but numbed by severe hypothermia the men were unable to grab the basket and pull themselves in. The Navy helicopter, with a rescue swimmer, was delayed because NAS Oceana did not keep a ready-crew on board the station at night but due to a shorter enroute time to the scene the Navy H-3 helicopter arrived on scene just shortly after the Coast Guard. The Navy swimmer immediately deployed but had difficulty with the Billy Pugh net collapsing in the rough seas. The two crews agreed to have the rescue swimmer work with a rigid basket lowered from the Coast Guard helicopter. For over an hour, both aircraft, supplemented by a second HH- 3F out of Elizabeth City, positioned themselves to receive survivors. The Navy rescue swimmer swam to the point of exhaustion in 40-foot seas in his effort to save as many as he could. Conditions were so severe and the temperatures so cold that sea water on his facemask froze. A number of hoists were made but only three persons were recovered alive. Tragically a total of 31 crewmen perished.

The Congressional Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee convened hearings to question why the world's premier maritime rescue service was unable to assist people in the water. It was a very good question. During the Vietnam conflict a number of Coast Guard aviators had been assigned duty with the Air Force 37th Rescue and Recovery Squadron; the highly respected Jolly Green Giants. The Rescue and Recovery Squadrons utilized rescue technicians who in spite of the designation were called PJs. They were trained to ride the hoist down to recover downed airmen from both land and sea environments. They were also trained as emergency medical technicians. Upon return of these aviators to Coast Guard duties there were no debriefings or special efforts made to find out if there was Air Force rescue equipment or procedures that had application to the Coast Guard. Letters to Coast Guard Headquarters were written by a number of the returning aviators outlining the duties of the PJ and recommending the establishment of a similar capability for use by the Coast Guard. The letters produced no results. It became apparent during the hearings that the existing Coast Guard techniques and equipment were inadequate for rescue in such circumstances as occurred with the MARINE ELECTRIC. Congress, therefore, mandated in the Coast Guard Authorization Act of 1984 that "The Commandant of the Coast Guard shall use such sums as are necessary, from amounts appropriated for the operational maintenance of the Coast Guard, to establish a helicopter rescue swimmer program for the purpose of training selected Coast Guard personnel in rescue swimming skills."

The source and designation of Coast Guard helicopter rescue swimmers was addressed. Aviation ratings in the Coast Guard, in addition to flight crew duties, were maintenance orientated and highly specialized. The extensive training and the maintaining of demanding rescue swimmer

qualifications required a specific rating dedicated solely to this function. It was decided to transform a present rating rather than establish a new one. The rating most easily transformed was Aviation Survivalman (ASM). Transition of the ASM rating, however, raised concerns for those individuals within that rating who had no interest or the ability to become rescue swimmers. This was resolved by exempting individuals who were E-7 or above and providing a satisfactory procedure to change to a different rating. In June 1984 the Commandant authorized a five-year period to implement the program throughout Coast Guard aviation. Physical fitness standards and requirements were established. The requirements were mission specific. Female personnel who possessed the strength and stamina and met the established standards were eligible to become rescue swimmers.

The initial concept of the Coast Guard program was primarily a maritime rescue resource similar to the Navy's. An agreement was entered into with the Navy by which Coast Guard helicopter rescue swimmers were trained at the U. S. Navy Rescue Swimmer School at NAS Pensacola, Florida. Training commenced on 10 September 1984. The Coast Guard Air Station Elizabeth City was the first unit to go operational in March of 1985. Two months later the Air Station recorded the first life saved by a rescue swimmer when a severely hypothermic survivor was unable to climb into the rescue basket.

Training for the Aviation Survivalman rating is both specific and intense. As of 1 January 1986, individuals have been required first to pass a physical fitness screening test and then attend sixteen weeks of Aviation Survivalman "A" School at ATTC Elizabeth City.

This was followed by four weeks of training at Rescue Swimmer School. It was determined that the ability to provide pre-hospital life support for rescued individuals was a necessity. For a short period of time hospital corpsmen were part of the flight crew. Due to weight and space limitations on HH-65 and HH-60 helicopters it was decided that Coast Guard helicopter rescue swimmers should be qualified to perform these duties eliminating the need to carry a hospital corpsmen in the aircraft. Therefore, in addition to their other training, rescue swimmers are required to attend three weeks of training at EMT School at Coast Guard Training Center Petaluma, CA.

Initially there was a reluctance to deploy rescue swimmers except under favorable conditions. As operational experience was gained the saving of life dictated otherwise and Rescue Swimmers were increasingly utilized in extreme weather conditions. On 10 December 1987, Air Station Sitka, Alaska, received a distress call from the F/V Bluebird taking on water about 10 miles southwest of Sitka. An HH-3F was quickly launched to search for the vessel. The weather conditions were terrible. Visibility was down to ¼ mile in a severe snow storm, the seas were running at about 25 to 30 feet and the wind was blowing at 35 knots with gusts up to 70 knots. Aboard the vessel was a 33 year-old man and his 6 year-old son both of whom were wearing survival suits. In the heavy seas the tall rigging of the sinking boat swayed violently from side to side with the stern already awash. Despite numerous attempts the pilot and hoist operator were unable to get the rescue basket to the two people on the boat. The two survivors abandoned the vessel as it rolled and went down by the stern. The man's survival suit leaked and immediately filled with water. After several attempts to get into the basket, it became apparent that they could not. The rescue swimmer, ASM2 Jeffery Tunks, volunteered for deployment. In a few short

moments Petty Officer Tunks was in the turbulent water and swimming to assist the two individuals. Fighting heavy seas and winds, Petty Officer Tunks struggled to get the two survivors into the rescue basket. Once secured, they were hoisted to the hovering HH-3. With the aircraft being buffeted by extremely gusty winds during the subsequent effort to recover the rescue swimmer, Petty Officer Tunks was dragged through an enormous sea swell, causing him to lose his mask and snorkel and sustain an injured back. Tunks was ultimately recovered and with the two survivors safely aboard, the HH-3 returned to Sitka. For his courage and presence of mind in deploying into conditions as yet not previously encountered during previous rescue swimmer operations ASM2 Jeffery Tunks became the first rescue swimmer to earn the Distinguished Flying Cross; the Nation's highest peacetime award for heroism.

Operations such as this continued to occur with increased regularity. As more people became aware of the significant enhancement that rescue swimmers gave to SAR team capabilities attitudes changed and resistance to the program changed to endorsement.

Like so many programs in the Coast Guard, lack of funding was a problem. The program was temporarily halted during 1987 and much of 1988. Fortunately funding for the program was restored in 1988 and implementation of the remaining air stations was rescheduled. Ten air stations went operational during 1988-1989. Budget constraints occurred again in 1990 and only three air stations went operational

Rescue swimmers were being utilized in an increasing variety of operational situations. The Coast Guard was responding to persons in distress along rugged coastlines as well as further inland in ever increasing numbers. Concern was expressed that the training received by rescue swimmers and flight crews did not adequately prepare them for such conditions. The requirement for additional training and procedures did not gain a sense of urgency until a rescue swimmer was nearly killed in an attempt to rescue a stranded hiker off a 120 foot cliff along the rugged Oregon coastline.

Techniques were developed whereby the rescue swimmer remained attached to the hoist cable and deployed directly to a survivor. This was followed by a program to expose rescue swimmers to severe sea conditions. A formal proposal was made and approved and an Advanced Rescue Swimmers School was established at Astoria, Oregon. **Renamed the Advanced Helicopter Rescue School.** The rugged coastline, demanding surf and prevailing high seas provided ideal training conditions. Twice a year for one month periods, HH-65A, HH-60J and Rescue Swimmer Training Branches from ATC Mobile host advanced rescue swimmer training for pilots, hoist operators, flight mechanics and rescue swimmers from all Coast Guard air stations. Although the mission of the school is to conduct training in advanced rescue swimmer operations, the focus is upon integrating the pilots and aircrew into an entire team to enhance the Coast Guard's ability to conduct helicopter rescue safely and efficiently. It is now a highly sought training opportunity by not only Coast Guard rescue swimmers, but also Navy, Air Force and international students. In 1997, the Coast Guard opened the Rescue Swimmer Training School at the Coast Guard Aviation Technical Training Center.

The Coast Guard Helicopter Rescue Swimmer Program has and continues to be outstandingly successful. During the period 1985-2009, **Coast Guard helicopter rescue swimmers saved more than 20,000 lives**. This elite group operates in the most severe weather conditions imaginable deploying into extremely hostile environments. The record of success is directly attributable to the training, professionalism and courage not only of the rescue swimmers but also of the aircrews who deploy them. Only those who have willfully placed themselves in harm's way and have known that innermost feeling which comes from a personal experiences resulting in the saving of life can understand the bonding and uniqueness of this group of kindred spirits. Courage and devotion to duty is a common trait.

The Aviation Survivalman (ASM) rating was subsequently changed to **Aviation Survival Technician (AST)**.

**Aviation Survival Technicians** are enlisted United States Coast Guard airborne "rescue swimmers".

They are trained at the U.S. Coast Guard's enlisted Aviation Survival Technician/Rescue Swimmer School at the Coast Guard Aviation Technical Training Center, Elizabeth City, North Carolina. The course is 18 weeks long; more than three times the length of the United States Navy and Marine Corps schools. The course includes instruction on rescue techniques, helicopter deployment techniques, and myriad technical skills from small engine repair to parachute packing and maintenance. Successful completion of this course results in being awarded the Aviation Survival Technician rating, the technical rating for a variety of aircraft and survival equipment maintenance.

After completion of A-School, all AST's are sent to Training Center Petaluma, California to attend the Coast Guard's Emergency Medical Technician school. After three weeks of EMT training, they must take and pass the National Registry of Emergency Medical Technicians-Basic (NREMT-B) test as part of their qualification as a helicopter rescue swimmer.

Full qualification as a rescue swimmer can take up to a year from the first day of A-School, as graduates must learn the aircraft systems and emergency procedures of their assigned aircraft.



Coast Guard Petty Officer 2nd Class Charles Mitchell, a rescue swimmer from Coast Guard Air Station Cape Cod, Massachusetts, is hoisted back into an HH-60 Jayhawk after retrieving Oscar, a rescue training dummy, 50 miles east of Boston, 25 March 2008.

Prior to a realignment of enlisted aviation rates throughout the Coast Guard circa 1999, the AST rate was called ASM, Aviation Survivalman.

This extremely challenging job is featured prominently in the **2006 film *The Guardian***, starring Kevin Costner and Ashton Kutcher.

## **Daring Coast Guard rescuer says, ‘there wasn’t any fear in my mind’**

By Robert Sibley, The Ottawa Citizen February 3, 2010 8:08 AM



Rudy Snel of Manotick, left, says he is alive today thanks to Drew Dazzo who plunged from a helicopter into four-storey waves in the Atlantic to rescue Snel and two other men. Dazzo, an American, will be honoured Thursday with the Star of Courage, which will be presented by Gov. Gen. Michaëlle Jean at Rideau Hall.



Ottawa adventurer Rudy Snel, left, is seen aboard a U.S. Coast Guard helicopter after being rescued in this May 7, 2007 coast guard photo. The man who rescued Snel and two fellow sailors — Petty Officer 2nd Class Drew D. Dazzo — is to receive the Star of Courage at Rideau Hall this week. It is Canada's second-highest award for bravery.

OTTAWA — Looking down from the helicopter, it was like staring into a giant, churning washing machine. Gale-force winds — gusting at close to 150 kilometres per hour — had turned the Atlantic Ocean into a sea of grey heaving mountains. Yet Drew Dazzo, petty officer (second class), was about to jump into the maelstrom.

Below him, barely discernible as a small orange ring angled on the side of a sloping wall of water, three men clung to a tattered life-raft. It was the morning of May 7, 2007. They were about 260 kilometres off the coast of North Carolina. Their 44-foot sailboat, the Sean Seamour II, had capsized hours earlier, a victim of sub-tropical storm Andrea that had pounded the American east coast. The three men had given up hope of being rescued.

Yet, at 10:30 a.m., some eight hours after they capsized, the threesome, including veteran Ottawa sailor Rudy Snel, were looking up at the marvelous sight of a red-and-white Coast Guard H60 Jayhawk helicopter hovering 150 metres above them. Dazzo, a Coast Guard rescue swimmer, and his flight mechanic, Petty Officer (second class) Scott Higgins, were looking down.

Exactly 31 minutes later, after Higgins had lowered and hoisted Dazzo three times, all three men — 62-year-old Snel, Frenchman Jean Pierre de Lutz, 58, and a Briton, Ben Tye, 31 — were aboard the helicopter, wet, shivering and jubilant.

Nearly three years later, Dazzo and Higgins, along with their wives, Debi and Jess, were honoured guests in Snel's Manotick home, waiting until Thursday when Dazzo will receive the Star of Courage for "acts of conspicuous courage in circumstance

of great peril" from Gov. Gen. Michaëlle Jean at Rideau Hall. The award is Canada's second-highest decoration for bravery. There are about 50 people being honoured Thursday.

In Dazzo's case, the award declares that he "displayed a very high degree of courage, determination and endurance during the rescue, which was performed in extreme weather and perilous sea conditions."

That, indeed, was the case.

Dazzo was lowered and hoisted on the end of 30 or 40 metres of cable into the Atlantic, buffeted by winds that at times had him flapping like a wad of paper on the end of a string beneath the helicopter until he finally hit the water.

After he got one man in the metal basket and hauled it up to the helicopter, he had to be hauled up himself, then lowered again into the water for the next rescue. But by that time, the raft had drifted away, so he was literally skimmed across the waves — air taxied, they call it — to the raft.

"It was extremely dangerous," says Higgins, who at times feared his colleague would be hit by one of those mountainous waves and knocked unconscious, or worse. "It scared me that we'd made a bad mistake. I thought, what was I going to tell his wife?"

Mistake or not, they did their job. It took half a dozen attempts to get the basket down to Dazzo so he could get the first man into it and hoisted aboard. At that point, Dazzo, too, wondered what he was doing.

"There wasn't any fear in my mind. I was all pumped up on adrenaline. But I said to myself, 'Man, are we going to be able to do this?' At one point I couldn't see the helicopter on the horizon. That's how big the waves were. I just didn't know if we were going to get the other two guys and myself out."

Indeed, after Snel and Tye were aboard, Dazzo gave Higgins the emergency signal, waving his arm above his head in a fan motion, basically saying: "Hey, I don't feel safe. Come and get me as fast as you can."

The pilot dropped the helicopter as low as possible. The cable was reeled out. Dazzo was slipping the collar under his legs for a carry lift when a wave hit, bending him so far backward that he felt his back muscles go into an agonizing spasm.

"I honestly thought he'd broke his back," said Higgins, pointing out that when the helicopter cable was later inspected, 15 strands were snapped.

Dazzo was hauled aboard exhausted, vomiting seawater, unable to feel his hands and in pain from the violent wrenching to his back. Back on shore, he was rushed to hospital for a check. Happily, he was soon visiting the rooms of the three men he'd rescued.

Today, Dazzo, 37, remains a rescue swimmer, and Higgins, 34, is still a flight mechanic. Both have been promoted to petty officer (first class). And they've done other rescues. But none, they say, as high-risk as the one in 2007.

"That was a once-in-a-career rescue," says Dazzo. "One's enough for me."

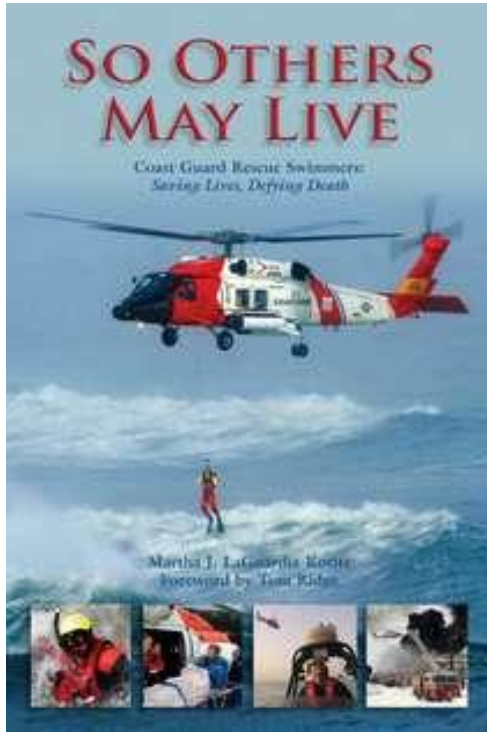
Snel is certainly grateful that he and his friends were beneficiaries of that "career" rescue. "I feel real attachment to Drew and Scott, but particularly Drew. He voluntarily put himself in as much danger as we were in. He saved my life."

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**AST2 Dazzo will receive the Star of Courage from Gov. Gen. Michaëlle Jean at Rideau Hall when she officially recognizes 47 people for acts of bravery.**

**See next page-----**

**“So Others May Live”, by Martha J. LaGuardia-Kotite**



So Others May Live is the untold story of the U.S. Coast Guard helicopter rescue swimmer. The triple award winning book recently was featured on the Weather Channel’s documentary “When Weather Changed History.” In startlingly clear and exceptional writing, it tells twelve heroic stories of the greatest maritime rescues attempted by Coast Guard aircrews since the program was started in 1985. These feats, told through the eyes of the hero, reveal an understanding of how and why the rescuer, with flight crew assistance, risks his or her own life to reach out to save a stranger. The book covers diverse environments: oceans, hurricanes, oil rigs, caves, sinking vessels, floods, Niagara Falls and even Hurricane Katrina. It is truly a can’t-put-it-down collection.

## News Release

Date: September 09, 2009

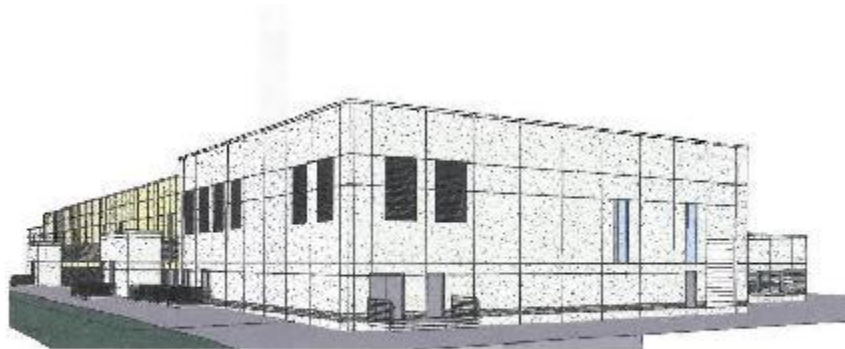
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### **Coast Guard awards contract for new facility in N.C.**

NORFOLK, Va. - The Coast Guard Facilities Design and Construction Center awarded a \$22.8 million contract Sept. 3, to The Oak Group, Inc., for the design and construction of the Coast Guard's Rescue Swimmer Training Facility in Elizabeth City, N.C.

The project scope includes construction of a 50,000-square-foot facility that includes a 50-by-25 meter training pool, a Modular Egress Training Simulator pool, a fitness room, locker rooms, classrooms, laboratory spaces and offices.

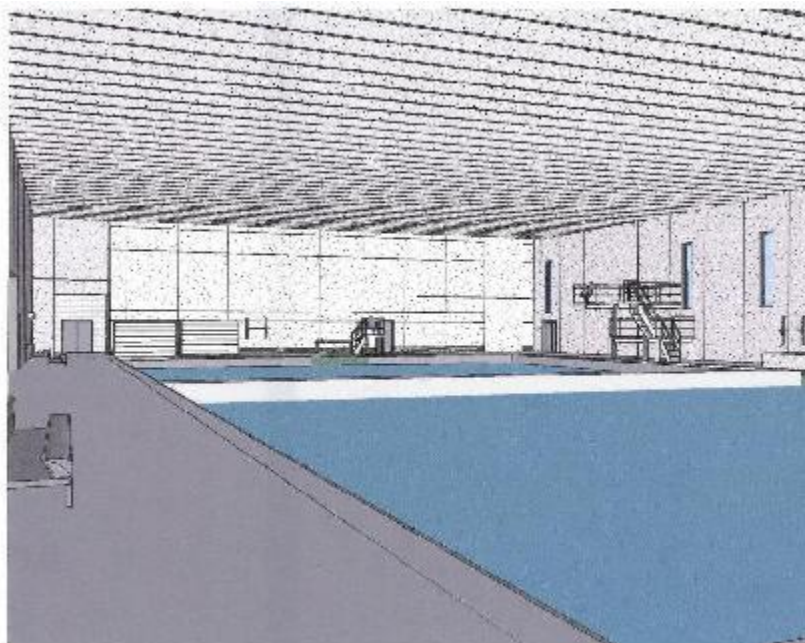


4 GRADE VIEW FROM SOUTHEAST

Conceptual plans - Subject to change.

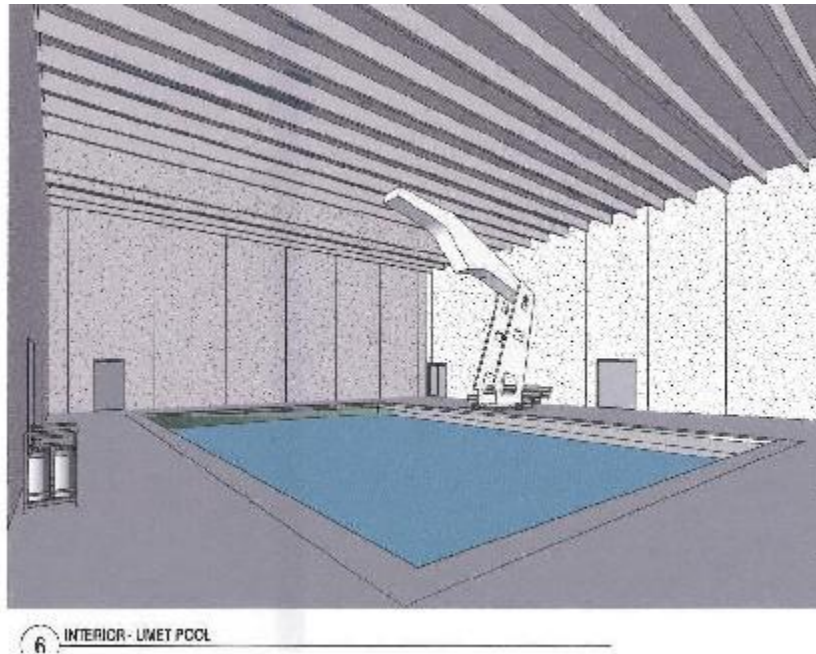
The facility will allow the Coast Guard to train rescue swimmer candidates in real world training conditions. In addition, the installation of the METS "dunker" will allow personnel to practice emergency aircraft and small boat evacuation in the event of an overturning or a landing in the water.

The facility ground breaking is scheduled for early 2010 and the completed construction for Sept. 2011.



5 INTERIOR - RESCUE SWIMMER POOL

Artist's rendering of new rescue swimmer pool.



Artist's rendering of METS dunker pool.

### **The OAK Group, Inc., L. Robert Kimball & Associates, and Henderson, Inc. Selected to Help Design and Build U.S. Coast Guard Rescue Training Facility**

PITTSBURGH, Jan. 29 /PRNewswire/ -- A multifaceted architecture, engineering and contracting team composed of The OAK Group, Inc. of Camden, N.J.; L. Robert Kimball & Associates (Kimball) of Ebensburg, Pa.; and Henderson, Inc. of Williamsburg, Va. has been selected by the U.S. Coast Guard and the U.S. Department of Defense to design and build a **\$22.8 million U.S. Coast Guard Rescue Swimmer Training Facility in Elizabeth City, N.C.**

The OAK Group, Inc. assembled the combined team, will provide construction services, and will manage the U.S. Coast Guard Rescue Swimmer Training Facility construction project. Kimball will oversee the design, architecture and building-engineering for the facility, while Henderson, Inc. will support the facility with day-to-day contracting and subcontractor management activities.

"The complexity of this project – building an aquatic facility capable of replicating weather conditions such as waves, fog and even lightning – is very exciting to us. Additionally, there is

tremendous satisfaction in knowing that the facility we are creating will prepare these incredibly brave rescue swimmers and Coast Guard air crews for the dangerous tasks they are asked to perform," said The OAK Group's president, Eduard Eichen, CIH.

**Expected to be complete in 2012, this facility will train U.S. Coast Guard members to effectively perform search-and-rescue operations using infrastructure designed to simulate real-world rescue conditions, including high waves, heavy lightning, night conditions and more.** The complex also will include a METS facility featuring a mock helicopter cockpit, from which U.S. Coast Guard members will be trained to eject while submerged in a large pool of water and forced to exit. Kimball Vice President of Commercial and Federal Architecture George Halkias, AIA, LEED AP, says the Kimball team looks forward to leveraging its experience with large-scale infrastructure and Armed Forces projects to help build the one-of-a-kind facility.

"Kimball is honored to have been selected as part of a very specialized group to bring this highly important, unprecedented U.S. Coast Guard Rescue Swimmer Training Facility to fruition," said Halkias. "Real-world search-and-rescue training requires real-world infrastructure to support it, and we're glad to apply our expertise to ensure members of the U.S. Coast Guard have the facility that they need to maximize the value of their training."

Following three years of project planning by the U.S. Coast Guard and the U.S. Department of Defense, the OAK Group-Kimball-Henderson team's combined vision for the facility most closely matched those plans among a field of over 20 organizations that submitted proposals.

Henderson Vice President of Federal Operations, James Neilson, DBIA, understands the significance of the Rescue Swimmer Training Facility as it relates to the mission of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. "Henderson appreciates this unique opportunity to support the United States Coast Guard in its pursuit of maritime safety, security and national defense by utilizing our ability to successfully plan, execute and delivery quality and timely construction," said Neilson.



## HAI Announces Recipient of the 2010 Eurocopter Golden Hour Award

HAI is pleased to announce the 2010 Eurocopter Golden Hour Award recipient, Crew of CGNR 6573; U.S. Coast Guard, Coast Guard Air Station Kodiak, Alaska.



At approximately 6:00 a.m. on January 30, 2009, it was reported that a crewman on a fishing vessel south of Sanak Island in Alaska was suffering a severe head injury. Battling driving blizzard conditions, and with ceilings below 150 feet, poor visibility, and icing, U.S. Coast Guard CGNR 6573, piloted by Lt. Jason S. Smith and Lt. Greg S. Gedemer, made the 90 mile flight to the vessel navigating in and around unforgiving mountainous terrain, relying on charts, GPS, and intermittent radar as visual references came and went.

Arriving on scene, the crew conducted an instrument approach, and then used NVGs to locate the vessel. Having discussed several options to facilitate the safest recovery of the man from the pitching and rolling vessel, the crew engaged in a challenging Dead in the Water (DIW) hoist from 75 feet altitude, encumbered by limited deck space, extensive rigging, high winds, and heavy seas.

With the altitude and the vessel's bright lights causing disorientation, Rescue Swimmer AST1 Matthew J. Thiessen struck the vessel's crane. To avoid entanglement, he shed his trail line and aborted the initial hoist. Flight Mechanic AMT3 Blaize D. Potts was able to discern a safer delivery point while Thiessen, ignoring his pain, refocused on another hoist. Despite the vessel being DIW, and now without the stability of a trail line, Thiessen was successfully placed on deck and received the rescue litter. Thiessen quickly packed the injured crewman and untangled the previously discarded trail line, allowing for a more controlled trail line recovery of the litter.

Retrieving the injured crewman, CGNR 6573 departed, providing first aid treatment until landing in Cold Bay to awaiting medical personnel who transported the patient to the Cold Bay clinic.

Demonstrating superb planning and local area knowledge, the heroic efforts of the crew resulted in the saving of life under the most appalling conditions.

All winners will be recognized at HELI-EXPO 2010's annual "Salute to Excellence" Awards Banquet on February 22, 2010 in Houston, Texas. For more information about the 2010 "Salute to Excellence" Awards, contact HAI's Communications Department at 703-683-4646, fax: 703-683-4745, or email: [rotor@rotor.com](mailto:rotor@rotor.com). For more information on HELI-EXPO 2010, visit [www.rotor.com](http://www.rotor.com).

More on the Rescue Swimmer Program and USCG Aviation may be read at <http://uscgaviationhistory.aoptero.org/>

<http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=25362>