



# Longhorn SAR to the Rescue

By Anne McMillin and JO2 Jerry Knaak

When Mother Nature unleashes her fury, Navy search and rescue (SAR) crews are often called in to pick up the pieces. They are trained to deal with every kind of recovery situation, and constantly practice these scenarios. But in real life, a SAR crew must sometimes push themselves and their aircraft to the limit to complete a rescue.

The "Longhorn" SAR team at NAS Fallon, Nev., will not soon forget the extraordinary events that began with a phone call on 2 January. The Mono County (Calif.)

Sheriff's Department requested assistance in rescuing a man, woman and toddler stranded in their home by the rapidly rising waters of the Walker River near Walker, Calif.

On their way to retrieve the family, the Navy crew was diverted to assist six "rescuers" who became trapped by flood waters while en route to help the same family. Pilot Lieutenant Anne Wilson and copilot Lt. Don Benson flew the HH-1N "Huey" to the scene, arriving at dusk and in the pouring rain. They found one man in a tree, one on a roof and four on a patch of high ground. The river was rising so

fast around the rescuers that they had lost their life raft and ropes.

Night descended on the SAR crew while the helicopter hovered over the four people on the ground. Hoist operator Aviation Electrician's Mate Second Class (AE2) Marty Naylor lowered Aviation Machinist's Mate Second Class (AD2) Vince Wade to the ground as visibility decreased and the weather worsened. Wade hooked two men to the hoist, and they were lifted into the helo where Hospital Corpsman Second Class (HM2) Tom Spradlin attended them.

Leaving AD2 Wade behind with two victims, the crew flew to a nearby field, dropped the men off and returned to the river, repeating the procedure to rescue the other two men on the ground. "This was the first time I had ever gotten nervous during a rescue. Once the helo was gone, I had time to think about how much danger we were in," Wade rea-

called. "The water was now rushing from under the house and rising. I really didn't know if the helo would be back before the house washed down the river."

Returning to the scene a third time, the helo crew saw that water was getting dangerously close to the stranded family, and Wade was hoisted from the patch of ground to their house. The SAR crewman put the toddler in a parachute bag, which was then strapped to the woman. He told the man to hold on to the bag, then hooked the man and woman to the hoist, and the hovering helicopter lifted them and Wade to safety. The family was flown to the field where the first four victims had been dropped off, and the crew returned to the last two victims.

The man in the tree was directly below some power lines, which made an overhead rescue impossible. The SAR crew lowered a rope to the man on the roof, directing him to assist the man in the tree, who had lost the use of his hands due to the cold. The helo flew off momentarily to reposition and when it returned, both men were on the roof. The "Longhorn" crew did not see how the roofbound victim was able to retrieve his treetop compatriot, but people sometimes perform miracu-

lous feats in life-threatening situations. Next, the crew lowered Wade to secure the rooftop victims to the hoist, and lifted them and the SAR crewman aboard the HH-1N.

Less than 15 minutes later, the family's house and the tree were swept away by the river.

Lt. Wilson described the rescue scene as "intense" and "unbelievable." She said the fast-moving water

ily to a relief staging area for delivery to the Mono County Sheriff's Department. The 3 January evacuation took only 15 minutes from launch to recovery.

Throughout the daring rescues, the SAR crew felt proud to be part of the recovery efforts. "It was a most gratifying feeling to know we saved these people. The neatest moment was when our crew chief [Naylor] hoisted



**"Longhorn" heroes (l to r): Lt. Anne Wilson, HM2(NAC/PJ) Tom Spradlin, AE2(NAC) Marty Naylor, AD2(NAC) Vince Wade and Lt. Don Benson. This crew saved 13 people from 2-3 January during major flooding in Walker, Calif. Opposite, a Naval Aircrewman rappels from NAS Fallon SAR's HH-1N "Huey" during a training exercise. Left, a "Longhorn" rescue swimmer in mid-SAR jump during rescue training in June 1995.**

washed homes and trucks downriver as the crew hovered overhead rescuing the victims.

The helicopter crew remained in Walker overnight to be available for further emergencies.

Not 24 hours later, the "Longhorn" SAR team received word from the sheriff's office that a family of four was trapped in their home. Lts. Wilson and Benson and Petty Officers Naylor, Wade and Spradlin were airborne by 1145. They located the ill-fated house, which was surrounded by flood waters. Fortunately, the water had receded enough overnight so that Wilson and Benson could land the "Huey" in the front yard. Spradlin performed a quick first aid check of the family. Then, the man, woman and their two teenagers boarded the helicopter.

The SAR crew transported the fam-

a bag into the helicopter and inside was a little baby, quietly drinking from his bottle without a care in the world. He had no idea what just happened to him," Lt. Wilson said.

Defying Mother Nature by literally flying into her fury, the helicopter crew rescued 13 people within 24 hours under harrowing conditions—proving that humans can prevail against insurmountable odds. The two-day rescue effort brings the SAR unit's total to 49 people rescued over the past three years. If these events are any indication, 1997 will be an exciting year in the search and rescue business for the NAS Fallon team. And the "Longhorn" crew will be ready and waiting. ✈

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