

Military Recovery

by Charles H. Briscoe

of Downed Airmen in
Eastern Korea



The American military services invest considerable time and money to qualify pilots and aircrew members to operate aircraft anytime and under any conditions. Compounded with those environmental demands are combat air patrols, close air support, bombing raids, reconnaissance, and air delivery missions associated with prosecuting war. Outnumbered UN land forces in the Korean War (1950-1953) relied heavily on air support. Maintaining air superiority was critical to counterbalancing Communist forces. Combat experienced aircrews continue to be more valuable than aircraft. 'Shoot downs' have to be mitigated by quick aircrew recoveries. This keeps combat experienced airmen in the fight and morale high among military flyers today, just as it did during the Korean war.¹

In the summer of 1950, any pilot shot down behind enemy lines was expected to 'walk out' as best he could.² When it became obvious that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was not able to establish a guerrilla-operated escape and evasion (E&E) corridor across North Korea, UN pilots rapidly learned to fly their crippled aircraft to the coasts. The island of Paengnyong-do on the Northwest coast in the Yellow Sea and Yo-do outside Wonsan harbor on the East coast had U.S. military-supported guerrillas. Far East Air Force (FEAF) was given responsibility for coordinating Army, Navy, and

Air Force search and rescue activities in the Far East Command (FEC). Naval Forces Far East (NAVFE) and FEAF formed an aircrew recovery operations cell while the two services scrambled in the States to expand air and sea rescue capabilities.³

U.S. military aircraft and tactics for recovering downed aircrews in Korea were WWII vintage. Helicopters were 1945 production Sikorsky H-5 *Dragonflies*. They had already replaced seaplanes aboard aircraft carriers for pilot rescues and performed reconnaissance for battleships and cruisers. The woefully understrength U.S. Air Force Air Rescue Service (ARS) was equipped with WWII fixed wing aircraft (L-5 *Sentinel*, SC-47 *Skytrain*, SB-17 *Flying Fortress*, and SB-29 *Superfortress*) and some H-5 *Dragonfly* helicopters.⁴ Although the SA-16 *Albatross* (twin-engine amphibian) was being fielded, neither Pacific-based squadron had received them.⁵

The ARS scrambled to get its 3rd Rescue Squadron (RS) up to strength. Temporary duty (TDY) was the solution. The 2nd RS on Okinawa furnished airmen until personnel could come from the States. The 5th RS at Lowry Field, Colorado, provided its SA-16 detachment for 150 days. The Air Force gave Korea-bound aircraft parts, supplies, and mechanics priority. The 3rd received its SB-29 complement in August 1950.⁶

The 3rd RS pushed Detachment F forward to K-2 (combat airstrip) in Taegu, Korea. It had L-5 *Sentinels* and H-5 *Dragonfly* helicopters. By the Armistice in July 1953, 3rd RS aircraft had rescued 997 UN personnel; the H-5 *Dragonfly* and H-19 *Chickasaw* helicopters picked up 846 (730 and 116 respectively). The 3rd RS helicopters handled a third of the air MEDEVACs (8,373 personnel of an estimated 25,000 UN casualties) flown to rear area hospitals.⁷ Recovery rates increased by rotating helicopters, crews, and crash rescue boat teams to Paengnyong-do and Yo-do, keeping a SA-16 *Albatross* aloft during large air attacks on North



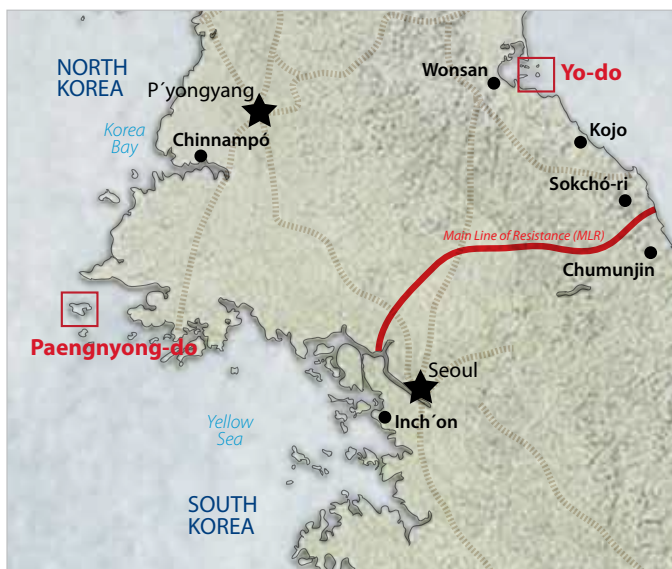
United States Seventh Fleet Pocket Insignia



Far East Air Force SSI



U.S.A.F. Air Rescue Service Pocket Insignia



UN pilots learned to fly crippled aircraft toward the coasts. U.S.-military supported guerrillas were on the islands of Paengnyong-do (West coast) and Yo-do outside Wonsan harbor (East Coast).



Detachment F, 3rd Rescue Squadron was pushed forward to K-2 airstrip outside Taegu, Korea in the fall of 1950.

World War II Aircraft dominated the U.S.A.F. Air Rescue Service in Korea



The WWII-vintage Stinson L-5 *Sentinel* was part of the 3rd ARS 'first response' package to Korea in 1950.



The SC-47 *Skytrain* carried rubber life rafts which were airdropped to airmen downed over water.



The SB-17 *Flying Fortress* carried an air droppable life boat under its fuselage.



Like the SB-17, the SB-29 *Superfortress* carried a life boat, only larger.



The Grumman SA-16 *Albatross*, a twin-engine amphibian, was being fielded to the U.S.A.F. Air Rescue Service when war broke out in Korea. The black-painted model was used to support special operations missions.



A 3rd RS H-5 *Dragonfly* helicopter crew carries a wounded soldier to an ambulance in Korea.

Note: Because the U.S. military services applied different nomenclatures to aircraft, Sikorsky model numbers with Army nicknames are used: H-5 *Dragonfly* and H-19 *Chickasaw*.

Korea, and by employing crash boats from Japan. Navy aircraft carriers relied on integral H-5s and 3rd RS assets, but ingeniously employed other resources.

After the Hungnam evacuation in December 1950, LST-799 returned to Yokosuka to be converted into a mobile tender and supply base for mine spotting helicopters and minesweepers. Capable of handling three H-5 helicopters topside, air-sea rescue soon became its primary mission. Though typically stationed on the leeward side of Yo-do, "the majority of our rescues were performed underway," said skipper LT T.E. Houston, "and most of them were over land. I would head the LST to the nearest safe spot [adjacent] to land to reduce the flight distance as much as possible."⁸ "Our total pilot recovery score was twenty-four, two by boat and twenty-two by helicopter. Our big rescue day was 13 June 1952," commented LT Paul D. Drummond, the succeeding captain of LST-799.⁹ Some helicopter rescues were accomplished at night, under enemy fire.

Navy LT S.B. Murphy, a night attack pilot, was shot down on 29 January 1952 near Hungnam. When the LST-799 helicopter (piloted by LTJG J.T. Stultz), reached the area, LT Murphy was spotted running across a snow-covered rice paddy pursued by five enemy soldiers. When he stopped momentarily to light a flare, a bullet creased his neck. LT Stultz landed the H-5 and Seaman R.L. Martin pulled the exhausted Murphy aboard.¹⁰ Additional recovery measures were needed for Wonsan.

The harbor had become a major destination for pilots flying disabled aircraft. LTC Richard G. Warga, the Marine Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Company (ANGLICO) commander, suggested that the old Japanese airstrip on Yo-do (2500 feet) be lengthened and widened to accommodate landings by most single and twin-engine propeller aircraft. Though the North Koreans had several shore batteries within range, the number of Seventh Fleet planes that might be saved (ratio of jet to propeller sorties was 1:1 in June 1952) and the morale boost for pilots made the risks acceptable. Seabees of Naval Beach Group One did it in sixteen days (25 June 1952), four weeks ahead of schedule with a ramp for barges to easily recover the non-flyable airplanes. This measure paid for itself on 15 July 1952 when seven WWII-era F4U Corsairs, short on fuel, avoided ditching in Wonsan harbor. Though the enemy coastal batteries shelled Yo-do daily, the airstrip was never rendered unusable.¹¹

Knowledge that the Air Force and Navy had dedicated, competent air rescue teams willing to risk their aircraft and crew to recover them was a major relief to UN pilots. Though only ten percent of USAF airmen downed during the Korean War were saved, half of the 'shoot downs' had no realistic chance for rescue. Paengnyong-do on the West coast and Yo-do on the East were reliable island bases for launching air and sea rescues.¹² West coast guerrillas helped to recover more than a hundred airmen. Pilots quickly realized that their survival depended on getting to seas patrolled by UN blockade vessels. Air Force and Navy rescue elements were best prepared and the most reliable. ♣



3rd RS personnel practice securing a 'wounded' dummy in the 'people pod' of their H-5 Dragonfly helicopter.



A 3rd RS Sikorsky H-19 Chickasaw helicopter practices a winch recovery of a simulated downed pilot in the ocean off Korea (1953).



(L to R) LT Dixon rescued LT junior grade Keene offshore of Wonsan. The lifesaving ring buoy with seven 'hashmarks' on the H-5 fuselage indicates seven rescues by LT Dixon.



U.S. Navy Utility Helicopter Squadron One (HU-1) flew aircrew rescue missions from the LSTs. This was their flight jacket patch.

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Endnotes

- 1 Forrest L. Marion, *That Others May Live: USAF Air Rescue in Korea* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air Force History and Museums Program, 2004), 25.
- 2 Marion, *That Others May Live*, 47.
- 3 U.S. Air Force Historical Study No. 95: *Air-Sea Rescue 1941-1952* (Maxwell, AFB, AL: USAF Historical Division, Research Studies Institute, Air University, August 1954), 160.
- 4 *Air-Sea Rescue 1941-1952*, 160-161.



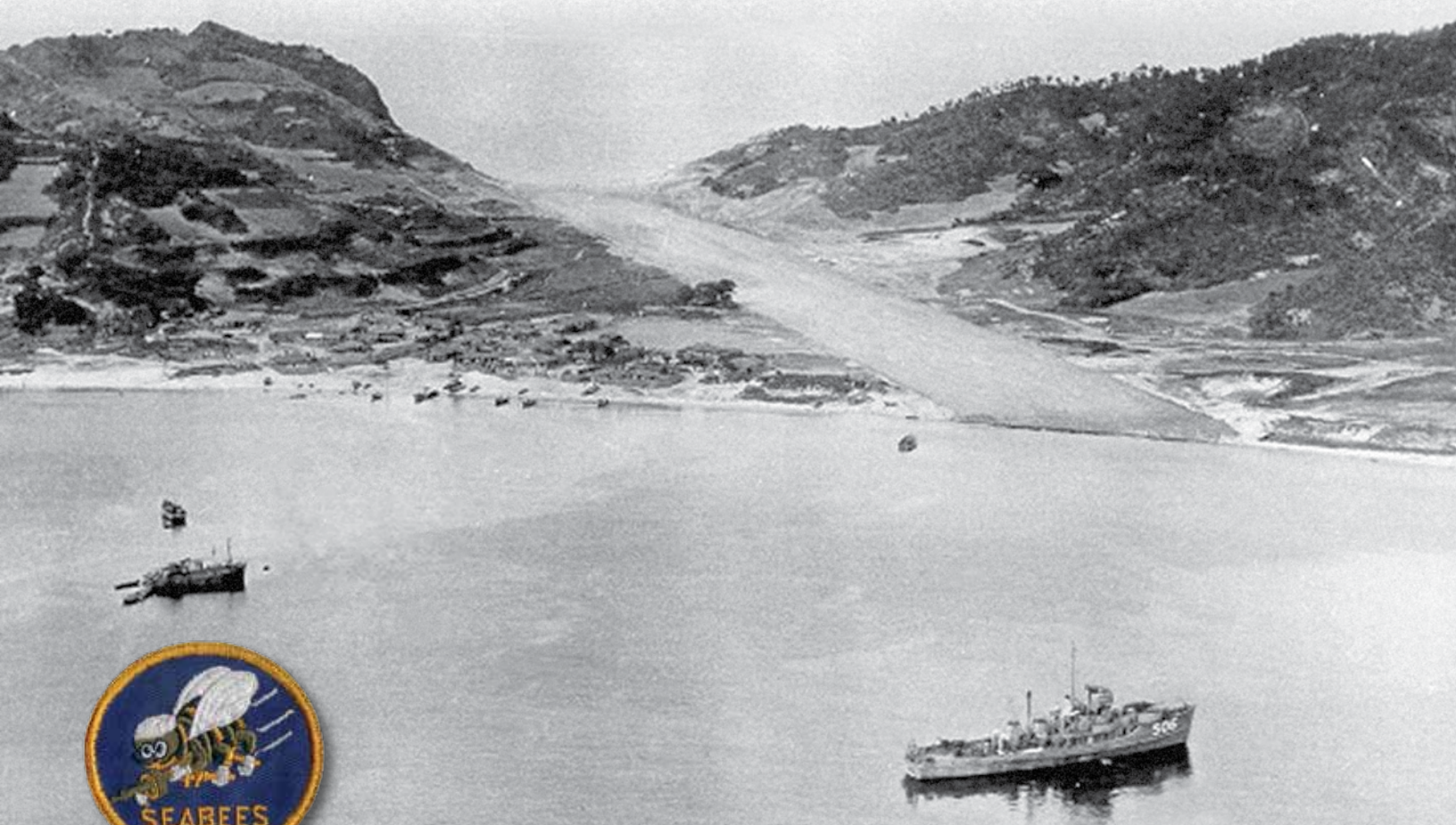
U.S. Navy Utility Helicopter Squadron One (HU-1) airmen from Unit 10 aboard LST-799: (L to R, bottom, then top row: T.J. Woodall, M.J. Kadlecik, and C.W. Schiefelbein; H. Tierney, AP pilot, LT G. Johnson, pilot, J. Watkins, G.A. Tupper, and P.P. Cavanaugh.)



A chocked Navy H-5 *Dragonfly* aboard LST-799 in 1952.

A H-5 *Dragonfly* helicopter belonging to HU-1 stands ready aboard the Japanese LST 0007, the back-up for U.S. Navy LST-799.

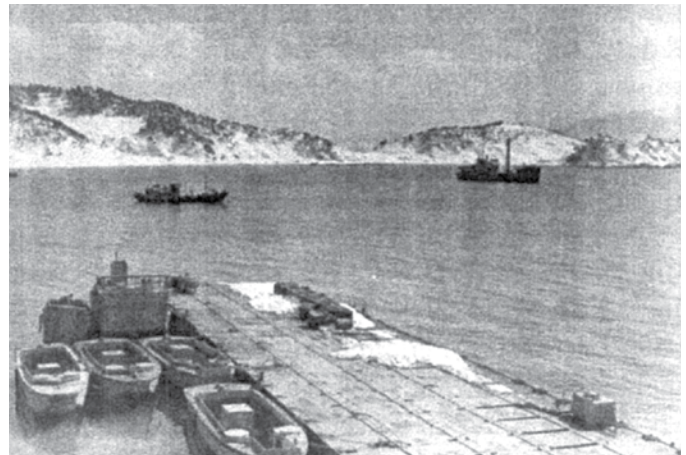




The leeward side of the Seabee-extended airstrip on Yo-do was a safe harbor for K-333 and K-444 trawlers (left) and Army Q-boats.



The extended runway on Yo-do paid for itself within days of completion. Seven F4U Corsairs, short on fuel, made emergency landings on 15 July 1952. After being refueled with hand pumps they returned to their aircraft carrier.



The pier of the 'Marina' was on the western (leeward) side of Yo-do, just below the Korean village. One of the CIA trawlers (K-333 or K-444) is moored offshore to the right.

- 5 Marion, *That Others May Live*, 21-22. The Air Force was the only service using fixed-wing amphibious aircraft to recover downed air crew. While the Navy had two flying boats in Korea, the Martin PBM *Mariners* and P5 *Marlins*, they were used for antisubmarine patrol, minesweeping operations, and escort missions.
- 6 *Air-Sea Rescue 1941-1952*, 160-161. Personnel strength in the 3rd ARS jumped from 88 officers and 381 airmen on 25 June 1950 to 133 officers and 623 airmen on 15 November 1950; eleven officers over Table of Organization and Equipment (T/O & E [7-1613]). The wartime high on 1 February 1952 was 1,028. Marion, *That Others May Live*, 3.
- 7 Marion, *That Others May Live*, 17.
- 8 CDRs Malcolm W. Cagle and Frank A. Manson, *The Sea War in Korea* (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 1957), 415-416.
- 9 Cagle and Manson, *The Sea War in Korea*, 425.
- 10 Cagle and Manson, *The Sea War in Korea*, 424.
- 11 Cagle and Manson, *The Sea War in Korea*, 427-430, 523; Steve Karoly, "Operation Crippled Chick: ACB 1 Builds Emergency Airstrip Behind Enemy Lines," at http://www.seabeecook.com/history/Korea/crippled_chick.htm accessed 3/18/2013; Karoly, "A Seabee's Impressions of Yo Do" at http://www.seabeecook.com/history/Korea/Yo_do_impressions.htm accessed 3/18/2013..
- 12 Marion, *That Others May Live*, 17; MG Edward J. Timberlake, the Fifth Air Force commander, commended the EUSA Guerrilla Command for recovering several of his downed pilots. The Paengnyong-do guerrillas found the aircrews and turned them over to the American advisors who arranged return transport with 3rd RS. BG John H. McGee letter to COL Rod Paschall, 24 March 1986, 17-18. John Hugh McGee Papers, Box 38, Entry F7, U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center (AHEC), Carlisle Barracks, PA.