

Pioneers in Aviation

By Martha LaGuardia-Kotite

Collective credit must be given to pioneering women and men within the U.S. Coast Guard aviation community with the development of a rescue swimmer program known worldwide as the best of the best. Over 600 rescue swimmers have served with flight mechanics and pilots since the profession's inception in 1985. Their joint efforts helped shape the success of the program's two decades of service. Of those, only six women have served as Coast Guard rescue swimmers and approximately two-dozen women as flight mechanics.

There were protests at many levels to the Coast Guard's plan of having a woman attend the Navy Aviation Rescue Swimmer School in Pensacola, Florida, the only such school for American military members to train in the beginning. Captain George Krietemeyer, chief of training and education for the Coast Guard in the mid-1980's, was aware the Navy was territorial about who they trained. With the news of a woman in the training pipeline, he received a call from the Navy commander managing the Pensacola school. "Captain, we don't take women in the Navy rescue swimmer school," Krietemeyer recalled of their conversation. "I replied, 'She's not in the Navy is she?' I never heard another word about it and Kelly Mogk made it through just fine."

Making it through "just fine" is a bit oversimplified. The Navy school taught Marine Corps, Navy, and Coast Guard students. It had the reputation of being so difficult that many participants felt some of the harsh training conditions put their lives at risk. In 1988, it shut down temporarily to review procedures after the death of Airman Recruit Lee Mirecki.



Two years before this tragedy, Kelly Mogk had attended the training. "I really worked out and got myself into great shape," said a determined Mogk. The instructors at the Navy school had already seen a woman go through before her and resign. Mogk believed passing was within her reach despite their efforts to eliminate her and her classmates. Being one of the first women to attend the training, accommodations were created out of what existed. Her locker was a converted closet. While her male classmates were in their locker room, she'd wait outside on many occasions doing push-ups.

"They were doing everything in their power to make me quit," said Mogk. "Once they realized I would not give up and was doing well, it became less and less a big deal to them. It was tough, a tough school for everybody. A lot of people failed." The other students in her class melded into a support group with Mogk—"my brothers," she affectionately referred to them.

"What gave me my determination was when the instructors were telling me, 'You're going to fail; I'll give you two weeks.' So there was a little bit of 'I'm going to prove them wrong,'" said Mogk. "Mostly, I want to be a rescue swimmer. I want to be in aviation. This is a part of it and yes I want to be the frontline person in the rescue. So, yes I was all pumped up!"

Mogk became the first woman to complete the training. She returned for graduation from the Coast Guard program in Elizabeth City, North Carolina and became the first woman to qualify as a rescue swimmer in the Coast Guard and in all the military services. Since then only five other

women have achieved the qualification of rescue swimmer in the Coast Guard.

About this distinction, "I just happened to be the first," said Mogk. "It's a new program and someone had to do it."

Mogk's story, featured in Chapter 4 of *So Others May Live* is a story of a woman who believed in herself and weathered the challenges of those who wanted her to fail, drop out of the training program. It is the story of a woman who believed in the mission of saving lives as her calling and with the support of her "brothers," who were also tested and challenged, they would support and pull each other through. It is the story of women and men working together to be ready to answer the call, helping each other to achieve a common goal of saving lives.

The idea for such a program began over thirty years ago. In the 1970's, visionaries created their own grass roots techniques to train volunteers in the art of rescuing people in the water using the service's amphibious helicopters prior to the national and Congressional spotlight on the need. Limited by modest funding for equipment and lukewarm command support, these motivated individuals took steps to forge ahead prior to the Congressional mandate of 1984, which would require the Coast Guard to implement such a program. Without this mandate though, their initiatives never caught on throughout the Coast Guard so they were not able to see their vision sustained beyond their own dedicated service. Most notable of such initiatives were New York's Air Station Brooklyn's team and California's Air Station San Francisco's Sea Air Rotor Wing Evacuation Team (SARWET). The originality of the concept for SARWET was due AT2 William J. Thrall.

The funding and development of the helicopter rescue swimmer program followed the culmination of two tragic incidents with significant loss of life in the early 1980s. Congress authorized the service to proceed with its own program in 1984 following the Marine Electric investigation and findings resulting from the Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee hearings, which had reviewed the Coast Guard's existing techniques and equipment. It was determined that search and rescue requirements and capabilities at that time

were not able to assist hypothermic people or, for that matter, anyone otherwise injured in the water who was unable to climb into a rescue basket lowered by a helicopter.

“Coupled with the Air Florida accident and the Marine Electric, Congress levied a mandate to the Coast Guard to develop a program which would provide a trained and capable individual to enter the water and essentially rescue people from the water,” recalled Coast Guard Master Chief (ret) Larry Farmer, manager of the Helicopter Rescue Swimmer Standardization Team from 1984 to 1991. “Prior to 1984 when the congressional mandate came down, it was always a coin toss. We spent years dangling a rescue basket near a survivor or victim hoping they could get in. If they could not, then they would ‘toss a coin’ to decide who was going to go down and apply the hands-on rescue.” This type of rescue would usually involve landing the helicopter for pickup or sending someone down the steel hoist cable in the rescue basket.

“Back in those days, on the HH-52A helicopter the crew was only three individuals, two pilots and one crew member in the back. In some situations, the only other person who could go was the copilot,” recalled Farmer. “Most time they would sit in the basket and go down and grab the individual that needed to be saved, pull the person across their lap. Then the flight mechanic would hoist the two people up.”

On October 5, 1984, the first two Coast Guard rescue swimmers graduated from the U.S. Navy’s Aviation Rescue Swimmer School. In November, three more men graduated the grueling training. Together, they are known as the “First Five” (ASM2 Steve Ober, ASM3 Kelly Gordon, ASM1 Rick Woolford, ASM2 Matt Fithian and ASM3 Butch Flythe). Now, Master Chief Petty Officer, Joseph “Butch” Flythe, has been an influential and key figure in developing the training techniques that are used today and described in the book, *So Others May Live*. Flythe also worked as a subject matter specialist on the set of the recent Disney feature film, *The Guardian* with Kevin Costner and Ashton Kutcher.

The program and its members have come a long way in the last two decades when the Coast Guard flew amphibious helicopters. The vision and service of the Coast Guard's early pioneers, "First Five", rescue swimmers like Petty Officer Kelly Mogk who serves today as a Coast Guard pilot, other pilots and flight mechanics opened many doors for anyone who wanted to follow, man or woman. The Coast Guard founded its own rescue swimmer basic training school in Elizabeth City, North Carolina and an advanced school in Astoria, Oregon where all members of the aircrew train together.

These extraordinary men and women of Coast Guard aviation and the service as a whole have earned every right to celebrate and be recognized in film and their stories preserved in print as noted by their swimmer motto: "So Others May Live." The collection of true stories featured in the book *So Others May Live* tell the history and challenges of the U.S. Coast Guard helicopter rescue swimmer. The events unfold in diverse geographic areas and environments: oceans, hurricanes, oil rigs, caves, sinking vessels, floods, Niagara Falls and in the aftermath of one of our countries worst natural disasters, Hurricane Katrina. These stories reveal for the first time how swimmers deal with their own, raw feelings and emotional distress following difficult or tragic cases. Now, instead of leaving the service, they are assisted through their recovery by Critical Incident Stress Management counselors and return to work. There are twelve heroic stories, including Kelly Mogk's, which chronicle a representation of the greatest maritime rescues attempted since the inception of the program 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 life to reach out and save a stranger.

Portions of this article were excerpted from the author's book. A portion of the author's proceeds from the sale of her book, *So Others May Live: Coast Guard Rescue Swimmers Saving Lives, Defying Death* (June 2006 The Lyons Press) will be donated via the Coast Guard Foundation for the development of a new aquatic training facility. For more information about upcoming book discussions and events go to the author's website: www.mlaguardiakotite.com or The Lyons Press (www.globepequot.com).