

Military & Professional Operations

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Date: 5 May 2008

The **Naval Helicopter Association (NHA)** announced the recipient of the **3rd annual Rescue Swimmer Award** in conjunction with the **2008 Naval Helicopter Association Annual Symposium in Norfolk, Virginia**. This award was made possible by the corporate sponsorship of **Aqua Lung/U.S. Divers of Vista, California** and was presented on 15 April, 2008 at the annual NHA Awards Banquet. Pictured below is the recipient, **AST2 Drew D. Dazzo** and his wife **Debbie** along with **David K. Stancil** of Aqua Lung/U.S. Divers.



The following narrative summary was taken from the nomination documents submitted by the United States Coast Guard:

Coast Guard Air Station Elizabeth City proudly nominates Aviation Survival Technician Second Class (AST2) **Drew D. Dazzo** as the 2007 Naval Helicopter Association Rescue Swimmer of the Year. Though his heroic and selfless actions he was responsible for saving the lives of three civilian mariners. At 0743L on 7 May 2007, Coast Guard helicopter CG6014 departed Air Station Elizabeth City to rescue three survivors reported to be in a raft after they had abandoned the 44' sailing vessel SEAN SEAMOUR II when it sank 225NM SE of Elizabeth City. The crew was sailing from Green Coves Spring, FL across the Atlantic to the Azores when they were caught in a storm 180NM E of Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point. In the near hurricane force winds of subtropical storm **ANDREA**, the vessel and its crew struggled mightily throughout the early morning hours. The vessel had

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capsized during the night and trapped the three sailors within. When the vessel eventually righted itself, the three abandoned it and entered a small life-raft. They activated their EPIRB as the sailing vessel's bow submerged and it was swallowed by the sea. A Coast Guard C-130 successfully located the raft earlier that morning as they battled gusty winds and slashing rain showers. The enormous waves and the speed of the anchor-less black raft as it skipped across the sea made it difficult for the C-130 to maintain visual contact with the survivors. The C-130's crew was only able to spot the raft every other orbit.

Through the perseverance of the crew and the expert use of the onboard sensor equipment, the C-130 was able to maintain visual contact with the raft. CG6014 established radio contact with the C-130 which skillfully vectored them directly to the raft's position saving valuable fuel and ultimately allowing CG6014 to remain on scene longer. Once on scene, the crew of CG6014 immediately formulated a rescue plan to save the imperiled survivors. After discussing the potential dangers, the Flight Mechanic prepared AST2 **Dazzo**, the Rescue Swimmer, for deployment into the treacherous seas. With the Pilot struggling to hold a stable 100° hover near the raft, AST2 **Dazzo** proposed a harness deployment into the rolling waves below.

Through precise teamwork, the Pilot and Flight Mechanic expertly lowered AST2 **Dazzo** between the 40 and 50 foot swells. Once in the water, AST2 **Dazzo** stroked mightily in the punishing waves to reach the tossing raft. Upon reaching the raft, he calmed the anxious survivors, assessed their condition, and briefed them on what to expect during the upcoming evolution. AST2 **Dazzo** directed the first survivor, who had a possible broken rib, and was not wearing a survival suit, to enter the water for the first hoist. He struggled to carefully position the injured survivor into the rescue basket while simultaneously being pummeled by the relentless waves and 45 knot winds. The ocean continued its assault on the raft and quickly pushed it hundreds of yards away from the Rescue Swimmer and helicopter. After the first survivor was safely aboard, AST2 **Dazzo** was hoisted back into the helicopter to propose a follow-on course of action with the aircrew. With the Copilot calling out the intervals and size of the approaching sets of more dangerous waves, the Pilot and Flight Mechanic executed a second text book harness deployment of AST2 **Dazzo** near the raft. Once in the water, AST **Dazzo** was violently slammed by a wave which knocked the mask off of his face. He promptly refitted his mask, regained his composure, and pressed on. The winds and waves continued to shove the raft away from the helicopter furiously as the second survivor entered the water. AST2 **Dazzo** positioned this second survivor with great difficulty into the rescue basket and the Flight Mechanic hoisted him up to the safety of the aircraft. In order to expedite the rescue of the third survivor, he adroitly communicated to the Flight Mechanic to lift him only 30 feet above the waves and immediately relocated him near the raft.

While demonstrating exacting crew coordination, teamwork, and aeronautical skill, the Pilot and Flight Mechanic quickly and safely hover-taxed the rescue swimmer toward the raft as he dangled precipitously below the helicopter above the violently tossing waves. After being successfully lowered into the water for the third time, AST2 **Dazzo** began the final arduous swim toward the last survivor in the raft. He helped the survivor from the raft, and as the Rescue Swimmer textbook directs, promptly punctured the raft with his knife to avoid a potential airborne

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missile hazard in the high winds and to avoid follow-on requests for help on subsequent sightings. The hoist of the last survivor was about to be affected when AST2 **Dazzo** ingested a significant amount of salt water. While rapidly succumbing to sheer exhaustion and the effects of salt water ingestion, he shoved the last survivor into the rescue basket and provided the ready for pick up signal to the Flight Mechanic. As the Flight Mechanic raised the rescue basket with the survivor, he felt the broken strands from the broken cable cut his glove with the basket still 100 feet below the aircraft.

A critical life or death decision had to be made as the Flight Mechanic continued to retrieve the final survivor, not knowing if the cable would part or not. By this time AST2 **Dazzo** as reaching his physical and mental limits as he tossed about in the angry sea. Only after seeing the last survivor safely enter the helicopter did AST2 **Dazzo** give the emergency pick-up signal. He could not stop vomiting due to water ingestion, and was unable to get a good breath because of the relentless, towering waves. The emergency pick-up signal was immediately spotted by the Pilot who then communicated to the Flight Mechanic as he was bringing the last survivor aboard. The Flight Mechanic, while still cognizant of the fraying hoist cable, quickly disconnected the basket and lowered the bare hook to the Rescue Swimmer. The Rescue Swimmer attached himself to the bare hook as the confused seas immediately dropped and suspended him over a trough which wrenched his back causing extreme pain. The Flight Mechanic Notified the Pilot that the rescue Swimmer may have been injured as he continued to recover him. Once aboard, AST2 **Dazzo** was still ill due to the salt water ingestion and was experiencing significant pain. Disregarding extreme discomfort in his back, nausea from continual vomiting, and sheer exhaustion, AST2 **Dazzo** rendered the necessary assistance to the hypothermic sailors, and administered oxygen to the survivor with the broken rib. The Pilots then navigated 180 nm through the storm to Marine Corps Air Station Cherry point where three ambulances awaited the grateful survivors. Petty Officer **Dazzo** was also met by the next ambulance where he was evaluated and treated for his back pain and dehydration by medical personnel and returned to duty.