

# Kirtland Team Conducts Mid-Ocean Rescue

## Sailors Struck Ill; 3 Rescued, 1 Dies

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It was minutes after midnight when the "go" message came in to Kirtland Air Force Base for a Pacific Ocean search-and-rescue mission involving two men aboard a merchant vessel.

About 1,800 miles from Albuquerque and more than five hours of flight time later, four Air Force pararescuemen on Tuesday had jumped into the open ocean, climbed aboard an 800-foot cargo ship, began treat-

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ing two sailors suffering from dire abdominal problems and plucked from the water two vessel shipmates who had fallen overboard.

In short, three of the four men once in deadly trouble are alive today, thanks in

part to Air Force rescue instructors and a flight crew from the New Mexico desert.

Late Wednesday, a Coast Guard HH-60J Jayhawk recovery helicopter was flying two of the rescued American patients to Stanford University Medical Center in Palo Alto, Calif. Coast Guard officials identified the patients as Paul Myers, 56, and John McGuire, 67. Their hometowns were not immediately known.

The two were among the five-member crew of a 36-foot sailboat named Alcyone that was traveling in the Pacific when they fell ill, according to a Coast Guard news release.

On Monday, more than 800 miles due

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west of San Francisco, Myers and McGuire were picked up by a nearby cargo ship, Automobile Ace. There they waited for help from Air Force rescuers, while a Coast Guard cutter from the states headed their way.

Through Monday night and early Tuesday morning, Air Force officials at Kirtland planned for a rescue, including finding the needed equipment and coordinating for mid-air refuelings with Beale Air Force Base, Calif.

Fourteen airmen from the 58th Special Operations Wing, which trains flight crews for special operation flying, and the Pararescue and Combat Rescue Officer School departed before 10:30 a.m. Tuesday aboard a MC-130H Combat Talon II.

Those pararescuemen, touted as ninja surgeons who save downed pilots and others in distress, faced an unusual mission Tuesday. Normally, rescuers from the West Coast — not New Mexico — are called for mid-ocean calamities.

None were available, said Lt. Col. Dan Gard, one of the airship crew members who deliv-

ered the four rescuers.

"This is just one of the missions that we could do, but not one that we would normally participate in," Gard said in a telephone interview Wednesday.

In fact, it was the first known open-ocean rescue that PJs stationed at Kirtland had been given in the school's history. Usually, rescue squadrons from Portland or San Diego are given Pacific Ocean jobs, said Chief Master Sgt. Bruce Hickson, commandant of the pararescuemen school.

Working on a 12-hour-old location for the Automobile Ace, the combat-modified cargo plane swept below a 700-foot-high cloud ceiling to find the ship. After communication was established, the Air Force rescuers climbed the plane up to 3,000 feet and dropped an inflatable Zodiac raft and other supplies into the ocean before three PJs parachuted in.

Of the four PJs, Tech. Sgt. James Sanchez, Tech. Sgt. Dave Swan, Staff Sgt. Blain Morgan and Staff Sgt. Jeremiah Coomer, only Swan had performed an ocean rescue before Tuesday, Hickson said. Although Air Force pararescuemen have rescued others

from the ocean, including NASA astronauts, those missions are considered rare.

The fourth PJ parachuted into the water when the plane swept over another time, and they all made their way onto the freighter.

While the rescuers tended to the two patients from the Alcyone with the help of school medical director Lt. Col. Gary Hurwitz, who worked as on-board surgeon, two sailors of the Automobile Ace were knocked overboard. Officials were uncertain Wednesday why the two fell overboard.

PJs dove from the massive ship after them, retrieving the sailors. Although they worked to save both, one died.

Coast Guard officials didn't have the sailors' identities or countries of origin late Wednesday.

All Air Force crew members returned to Albuquerque except for the four PJs, who are expected back today at Kirtland, said 2nd Lt. Kelley Jeter.

Hickson, noting the school isn't readily prepared for such rescues, said he was "totally impressed" with those involved.