

**TEXT OF HANDOUT AT THE
"GOODBYE TO RESCUE REUNION DINNER"
HELD IN PORTLAND
IN APRIL 2003
(COURTESY OF FELIX McLARNEY)**

**HISTORY OF THE 304TH
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The 304th Air Rescue Squadron (ARS) was activated in the Air Force Reserve on 16 Nov 57 at Portland Intl Airport, OR. Lt Col Vernon E. Acker was assigned as the first unit commander. In 1959 the unit was selected for the Air Reserve Technician Program (ART) and Major John A. Forsythe was assigned as the first ART commander. Unit strength increased to 24 officers and 66 airmen as it transitioned into an ART Reserve Squadron and Air Reserve Technicians began replacing the training cadre of regular Air Force personnel.

The unit's first assigned aircraft were the SA-16A Albatross, replaced by SA-16B models during the first quarter of 1960 and later redesignated HU-16B's in July 1963. The HU-16s were amphibian aircraft and could set down on water or land. There was one special tri-phantian HU-16 which could set down on water, land or snow.

Facilities were quite limited in the early 1960's. Command and Operations shared an old wooden barracks and maintenance had one small wooden building but no hangar. Nearly all the maintenance was done on the ramp with only an old tarp (with a hole in it) for a cover. Later, two engine-

stand buildings were acquired which could cover the engines for maintenance.

It wasn't until 1961 that Pararescuemen (PJs) were added to the unit. Because of Viet Nam conflict, there were no qualified PJs available to fill the positions at any of the five squadrons; 304th in Portland, OR, 302nd in Phoenix AZ, 301st at Homestead AFB FL, 305th at Selfridge ANGB MI, and 303rd at March AFB CA. The PJs had only an old Quonset Hut and little else. Equipment soon arrived and with strong leadership they became a top team involved in all missions. Today the 304th alone has five fulltime Air Reserve Technicians and 55 PJs.

During the 1960s the 304th had many search and rescue missions in the Pacific Northwest including one spectacular nighttime parachute jump on Mt St Helens to rescue two survivors of a small plane crash. They also participated in a highly classified mission in the South Pacific for two months in 1968. In October of 1961, the reserve units were called to active duty for the Berlin Crisis. They supported a 60-day search and rescue coverage of the North Atlantic from Goose Bay Labrador as many AF Squadrons flew overseas. The unit also had several SARs covering the North Pacific from Alaskan Air Strips as Air Force Squadrons flew overseas to the Far East.

On 18 January, 1966, the 304th ARS was officially designated the 304th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron and in December 1968 became the sole Air Force Reserve flying unit in the state of Oregon. Host-based responsibility passed to the Oregon Air National Guard and the 304 ARRS became a tenant unit.

In 1972, the unit was again reorganized and the HU-16B aircraft were reassigned and replaced by HH-34 Seabat helicopters which were re-designated as Chocktaw by the Air Force. 1974 saw the HH-34 being replaced by the HH-1H Huey helicopters. The 304th was assigned to the 403rd Air Rescue and Recovery Wing at Selfridge ANG, MI on 15 March 1976 and in July 1978 the unit was designated to participate in the Military Assistance to Safety and Traffic (MAST) program. They were the first AFRES unit so designated to provide emergency helicopter transportation services to the Northern Oregon-Southern Washington region.

1979 ushered in another change in aircraft when the unit received the UH-1N Huey helicopters and in 1985 received its first HC-130 Hercules. On 1 April 1985 the unit was officially activated as the 939th Air Rescue and Recovery Group eventually picking up the 301st ARRS at Homestead AFB, FL. December 1986 saw the arrival of H-3 Jolly Green Giant helicopters. During the 80's the unit saw numerous search and rescue and medical evacuation missions mainly in the Northwest. Most notably among these were the 100 plus missions following the eruption of Mt St Helens in May 1980.

The unit was once again re-designated on 1 April 1990 as the 939th Rescue Wing and in 1992 the 304th and 301st were re-designated from Air Rescue Squadrons to Rescue Squadrons. The unit also assumed command of the newly activated 305th Rescue Squadron at Davis-Monthan AFB, AZ in March 1994.

From 1985 to present the unit maintained helicopter refueling capability allowing for extended flights over the ocean. Crews have been deployed to provide SAR coverage worldwide. The

unit has supported the Olympics, provided coverage for space shuttle launches, assisted during hurricanes and provided search and rescue for lost hikers and crashed aircraft. In the "real world" arena the unit supported numerous peace-keeping missions overseas. They also participated in the Gulf War and the battle against terrorism in the Middle East. Most recently our PJs proved their merit by supporting Operation IRAQI FREEDOM.

The 939th Rescue Wing, with its two geographically separated unit, is the last bastion in the Continental United States. On 1 April 2003, this unique unit was once again converted only this time, along with a change in aircraft there was a change in mission. The 939th converted from HH-60G helicopters and HC-130 aircraft to the KC-135 aircraft and from the Rescue Mission to the Air Refueling Mission.

Even though we bid farewell to the rescue mission here in Portland, this unit will not soon be forgotten. Its contribution to the community and the Air Force is immeasurable. The history of this unit will remain steadfast in the hearts and minds of all those who have been touched by its compassion. Most especially the 583 souls saved over the last 54 years, truly epitomizing the rescue motto, "These things we do...that other may live."

