

New mom who was evacuated from Korean island meets her rescuers

By Jeremy Kirk Seoul bureau chief



Jeremy Cross / Stars and Stripes
Yu Shin-ja receives gifts the U.S. Air Force helicopter crew that transported her to an Incheon hospital after South Korean emergency crews were unable to reach the woman, who was experiencing pregnancy complications. Members of the crew are, from left, Staff Sgt. Jason E. Lydon, Capt. Shelly G.

Black, Tech. Sgt. Michael L. Pearce, and Staff Sgt. Matthew A. Domboski.

INCHEON, South Korea — Yu Shin-ja smiled from her hospital bed as 15 U.S. airmen presented her with gifts and flowers Thursday, a celebration of a harrowing helicopter rescue Monday. On that day, a helicopter crew from the 33rd Rescue Squadron of Osan Air Base ferried the 33-year-old through thick fog from her Baek Ryung Island home to an Incheon hospital, where she delivered a healthy six-pound baby girl.

Baek Ryung, located in the Yellow Sea, is home to a few thousand South Korean Marines and civilians and is within sight of North Korea.

Yu's water broke Sunday night, and she needed an emergency Caesarean section. But the island's doctor was gone, and Yu's situation became life threatening. She needed to be evacuated.

Because of the poor weather, South Korean police and military helicopters could not safely fly to the island. The call for help found its way to Osan's 33rd Rescue Squadron, which specializes in nighttime rescues of downed F-16 and A-10 pilots.

Early Monday morning, a maintenance crew was called in to prepare an HH-60G Pave Hawk, a variant of the Black Hawk helicopter. The Pave Hawk could take the mission because of its special night-vision and navigation system. On the way to the helicopter, the crew's van broke down. They were about a half-mile away. "We just jumped out and left the vehicle," said Staff Sgt. Kevin Fife, helicopter crew chief. "We took off and started running."

By 2 a.m., a seven-person crew took off from Osan for the 90-minute flight to the island. The weather was miserable. "We didn't have any visibility," said Capt. Shelly Black, one of two pilots on the helicopter. "I've never flown in weather like that."

For training missions, guidelines call for a minimum 2-mile visibility, but that night the visibility was less than that, Black said. During training, pilots use night-vision goggles, but there must be some ambient light for them to work. The clouds and fog made them ineffective, Black said. The pilot then relies on the infrared that defines clouds and terrain. But at night over water without terrain features and vision, pilots must rely on cockpit instruments. "It was the most challenging flight I've been on in six years," Black said. When they approached the island, visibility improved and the crew found the landing spot, Black said. Swirling ambulance lights helped.

During the flight to Incheon's Gil Hospital, Yu's heart rate and blood pressure fluctuated, said Staff Sgt. Jason E. Lydon, a pararescueman. Lydon helped give her fluids and oxygen to stabilize her.

On Thursday, Yu remembered Lydon, who presented her with flowers and balloons. "This is awesome," Lydon said. "This is great. She looks incredible."

After taking photos with Yu, the airmen went downstairs to see the baby girl, who had not yet been named by her mother and father, Kim Jong-wook. A nurse held up the little girl while people peered through the window.

"We feel partially responsible for those two making it," said Tech Sgt. Richard Reed, a communication and navigation specialist. "We've got a lot of pride there."

For their efforts, members of the helicopter maintenance crew have been nominated for achievement medals. On Saturday, the South Korean Marine Corps commandant is scheduled to present letters of appreciation to some flight crewmembers.

"I think this is great," said Tech. Sgt. Michael L. Pearce, a gunner who was aboard the helicopter during the rescue. "Being a helicopter guy in the Air Force, you're not always in the limelight."