

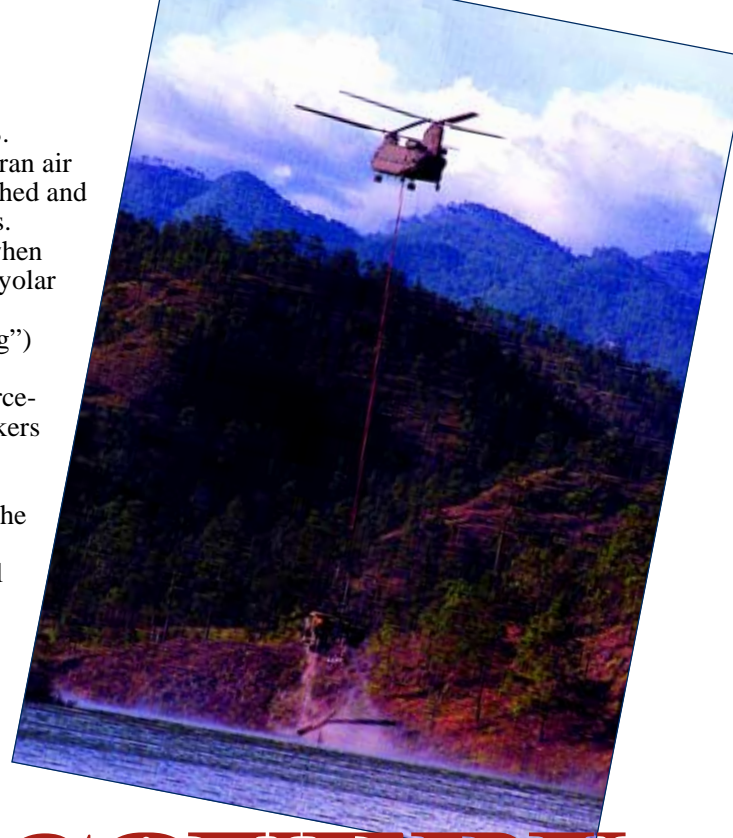
**T**EAMWORK was key to mission accomplishment when U.S. soldiers, sailors and airmen pulled the wreckage of a Honduran air force helicopter from its watery grave. The UH-1H had crashed and sunk 35 feet to the bottom of a reservoir in central Honduras.

Three Honduran airmen and one passenger were killed in June when the low-flying helicopter struck a wire cable strung across the El Coyolar Dam. The helicopter was participating in a joint United States and Honduran military exercise called Relampago Azul (“Blue Lightning”) when it crashed.

U.S. search-and-rescue personnel and divers from Joint Task Force-Bravo at Soto Cano Air Base joined with Honduran emergency workers to recover the bodies of four crew members.

Frank Almaguer, the U.S. ambassador to Honduras, offered America’s assistance in recovering the helicopter and investigating the crash. Honduran air force accident investigators wanted to raise the helicopter so they could determine the cause of the crash, while civil authorities wanted it removed to avoid contaminating the reservoir.

In late August a team from the U.S. Navy’s Mobile Diving and Salvage Unit Two Detachment at Roosevelt Roads Naval Station, Puerto Rico, made an underwater assessment of the helicopter’s



# MISSION: JOINT RECOVERY

Story and Photos by Master Sgt. Pat McKenna, USAF

condition. Team members then spent several weeks planning how to raise the helicopter. The dive was considered high-risk because the aircraft had crashed at an elevation of 2,800 feet, which increased the divers’ risk of decompression sickness.

The Navy divers and a team of more than 40 people convoyed 25 miles from Soto Cano to the El Coyolar Dam. The JTF-B team included Air Force firefighters and rescue personnel, and Army military police and helicopter riggers.

Master Sgt. Pat McKenna is NCOIC of the JTF-B Public Affairs Office.



Divers from the Mobile Diving and Salvage Unit 2 detachment, based at Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico, prepare for a dive.

(Top) A CH-47 Chinook from the 1st Bn., 228th Aviation Regt., from Soto Cano Air Base, lifts the remains of the crashed helicopter with a 100-foot steel cable.

“In the truest sense of the term, this was a joint operation,” said Air Force Lt. Col. John Brainerd, the on-scene commander of the recovery operation and Air Force Forces commander at JTF-Bravo.

The six divers launched from a makeshift barge made of wood and lashed-together 55-gallon drums, which was towed to the middle of the reservoir. The divers threaded two Kevlar slings through the downed helicopter’s fuselage while soldiers topside rigged the sling for the following portion of the recovery, said Army SGT Randy Clemons, a parachute rigger with JTF-B’s headquarters and support company platoon.

The divers attached rubber bladders to the Huey, then inflated them with compressed air. Within a minute, the 7,000-pound helicopter floated to the surface. A CH-47 Chinook from the Army’s 1st Bn., 228th Aviation Regt. at Soto Cano dropped a 100-foot cable, which the divers attached to the sling-loaded Huey. The Chinook pulled the mangled helicopter across the reservoir and deposited it on a concrete pad.

Riggers then inspected the helicopter and determined that it would be unsafe to haul it back to Soto Cano. Honduran accident officials are still investigating the cause of the crash.

Master diver and Senior Chief Petty Officer Kent Robarts said the dive was no milk run.

“We were diving at altitude in murky water, and had poor visibility. And we had to swim around sharp, jagged edges,” he said. “But in the end, everything went smoothly and according to plan, just like we drew it up in Puerto Rico. All the work done topside paid off in the end.” □