

Torii Teller

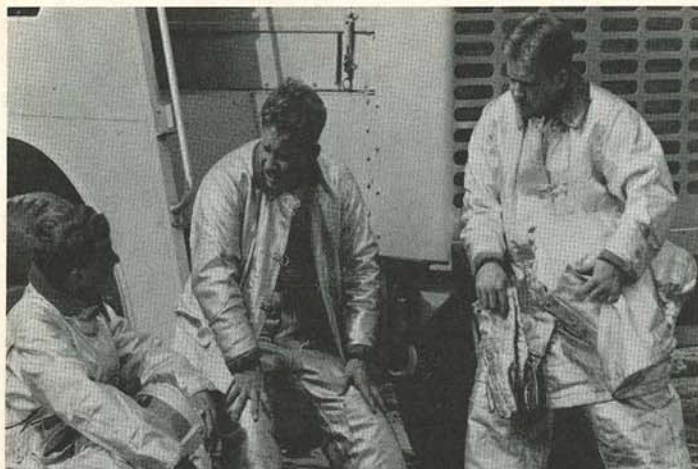
Marine Corps Air Station, Iwakuni, Japan
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A black and white photograph showing two firefighters from behind, wearing full protective suits and helmets. They are holding a hose that extends towards a large, intense fire in the background. The fire is very bright and billowing with smoke. The firefighters are positioned in the lower half of the frame, facing away from the camera towards the fire.

With experienced Crash Crew fire fighters like SSgt. Bob Massey (left) and LCpl. Al McPartney, singlehandedly taking on these thousand degree flames, pilots can fly confident that in an emergency professionals like them will be there...ready and waiting.

Fighting fires, saving lives....by the numbers

(See pages 6 and 7)



After three practice fire and rescue drills, LCpls (L & R) Tod Bucholt and Dave Hill and Cpl. Duffy O'Laughlin, hot and exhausted, relax while awaiting the command "mount up for another run."



Even before the crash truck stops the turret mounted water cannons are preparing the way for a rescue team.



Their is no room for fear of fire in Crash Crew. These Marines do fear one thing... failing to rescue a pilot in time.

Crash Crew lives by the ticking of a two minute clock

Story and photos by Sgt. Ernie Walter

For most of us, two minutes in the morning means the difference between clean teeth and bad breath. For Crash Crew Marines here it could mean the difference between life and death.

Within these two precious minutes lies the story of Crash Crew. It is the maximum time allowed from the second the crash siren goes off in the station house to the time a pilot must be rescued from a downed and possibly burning aircraft.

The time is 6 a.m. and tactical aircraft are taxiing on the runway to begin training flights. One...two...three away and it's just like any other day for the Crash Crew. As always, they're playing the waiting game. However, the experienced NCOs know the law of averages is ever vigilant and working against them. It's their job to make sure that if those averages catch up, they won't include a man's life.

A fourth aircraft is just lifting off when the sound of an explosion, caused by a fuel line leak, is heard and the plane bursts into flames and impacts with the runway.

The crash siren blares in the station house. The two-minute count down begins.

Crash truck engines race into life... sirens scream, heralding disaster. Fifteen fire fighters jockey into position on their yellow vehicles, moving like crazed holdup men making their get-away. They're off. ...elapsed time...10 seconds!

It will take 30 seconds to reach the crash site. They've got that long to don their bunker gear (the silver, heat-repellent suit worn by fire fighters) and ready themselves for action.

Already on the scene and fighting the blaze is "Hot Spot" (a crash truck and five-man crew stationed on the runway for just such emergencies). There is no sign of movement from within the burning wreckage.

The main force of fire fighters arrive. Within 200 feet of the blaze and while still moving, the joint force of seven turret mounted water cannons begin spewing out more than 22,000 gallons of light water (a chemical mixed with water) a minute. Their target...the cockpit and forerunning fire.

...elapsed time... 40 seconds!

The trucks halt inches from the fire while the cannons keep pouring it on and the flames begin to die.

The rescue team grabs a ladder and heads for the cockpit and its priceless cargo... a pilot.

...elapsed time...50 seconds!

The pilot is unconscious...they'll have to blow the canopy. The fire is all but out. Canopy away.

...elapsed time...1:10 seconds!

Ever mindful to stay clear of ejection seat levers, the rescue team undoes the seat harness and lifts out the aviator.

...elapsed time 1:45 seconds! Well within the two-minute mark.

Dynamic scenes such as this seldom

occur but Crash Crew knows that it could happen any time, so they keep on training and keep on waiting. Training to the tune of more than 1100 hours a month. Waiting... well, if they're on duty and not training, that's just what they're doing. If that sounds boring, it is.

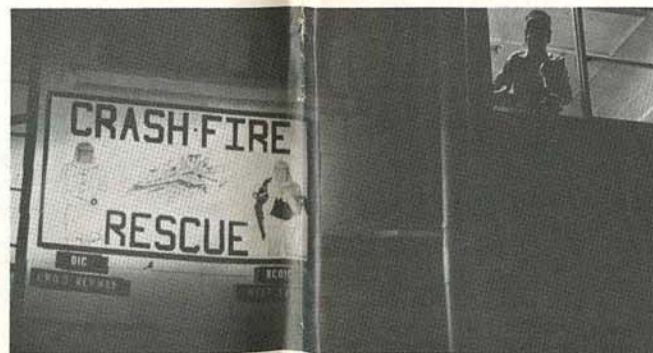
"Boredom is the biggest battle any Crash Crewman must fight," says MSgt. R.E. Takacs, Crash Crew NCOIC, "but when the chips are down these Marines bust their tail and love every minute of it."

To the average bystander their hurried actions might resemble confusion, but it's a well organized, quick thinking approach to a deadly business. They have to think and move fast. Not

only for the sake of a trapped pilot but for their own. The temperature of a fuel oil fire can easily reach into the thousands and their bunker gear can catch fire at temperatures exceeding 400 degrees, not to mention the possibility of their boots melting.

Such eventualities are accepted by the Iwakuni Crash Crew with a nonchalance that is difficult to describe. But the explanation is simple. Experience.

Crash Crew. The two most beautiful words in the English language to a pilot coming in for a forced "hold on" landing. Because he knows that they'll go beyond the expected into the impossible if it means getting him out of his aircraft alive.



While the Air Station sleeps a Crash Crew dispatcher and 15 man crew stand a lonely watch.



With a path cleared through the flames, a two-man rescue team assaults this mockup of a cockpit containing a 200 pound subject during a recent practice fire.