

Speaker: Mario Marini

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My name is Mario Marini. I joined the Coast Guard in August of 1980. I went to my aviation school at Elizabeth City, North Carolina, in 1985, when the rescue swimmer program was just starting out for the Coast Guard. I was assigned to Air Station Kodiak in January of 1986. It was what was going to be the first of what turned out to be three tours in Kodiak, Alaska. I was very lucky to be there.

My first tour, I was there as a C-130 Drop Master. We didn't have the rescue swimmer program active yet in Kodiak. So, I did my tour there. I left, and then I went to rescue swimmers school down in Pensacola, Florida, in 1988. And, upon completion of the school there, I was transferred back up to Kodiak, where Kodiak was getting ready to go, as we called it, online, or become operational for rescue swimmers. We were going to be going online, officially, as a rescue swimmer unit in November of 1989.

One thing that came to my mind as I was preparing for this, was I was on a swimmer flight, training flight, just prior to us going online. This was September 19th of 1989. Another rescue swimmer friend of mine, Pat Barry, he and I were the swimmers on this flight. And we had just gotten on scene, and we both had jumped in the water and practiced a couple of hoists. We were probably ... I think it was our third hoist we were getting ready for, Pat Barry jumped in, out of the helicopter, and swam out little ways. And he was going to be the survivor for that next evolution. And then, I got ready to jump in, to be the rescuer.

Well, as I jumped from the helicopter and swam over to Pat Barry, and I met up with him in the water, I turned him around so that we could face the aircraft. Then, all of a sudden, I noticed that the helicopter was just dropping down out of the sky. And it looked kind of odd, because I immediately yelled to Pat, over the noise of the helicopter. I said, "Did you signal for an emergency pickup?" And he said, "No."

At that point, I noticed the flight mechanic is just sending the rescue cable down, which I hadn't signaled for yet, either. So, I had to just go with the assumption that maybe there was something wrong with the helicopter. I had no sooner grabbed the hook and hooked us both in, and before I could even signal "ready for pickup," the flight mechanic just, basically, ripped us up out of the water.

So, of course, I was really curious to find out, as we got up to the cabin door, "What the heck was going on?" As the flight mechanic pulled us into the door, I remember looking at him. And I said, "Hey, what's the problem? Is the helicopter okay?" And he started yelling. But I couldn't hear him because of the noise of the helicopter. So, he pulled my hood away from my ear, and he started yelling, "Killer whale! A killer

whale!" I'm like, "What?" And he started pointing out the cabin door.

When we flew back to the air station and landed, we found out that while Pat had jumped into the water, and then I jumped out to get him, the helicopter pulled off into a hover to wait for our signal. And they noticed a killer whale had swam right underneath us, had passed to the side, and started coming up behind us. And so, by pure luck, the helicopter descending and making all that noise, made it go elsewhere.

And, so, anyways, it was something that was exciting, even though we didn't know what was going on. And it, kind of, gave me an idea, since we were just getting ready to become the first Coast Guard rescue swimmers, in November, to design a rescue swimmer patch. So, the rescue swimmer patch for the swimmers in Kodiak, Alaska, has a rescue swimmer holding onto the dorsal fin of a killer whale, while he's reaching for the north star. And that's been the rescue swimmer patch for Kodiak since November of 1989. And, just one of my favorite little stories to tell about the program.

I went on, later that year, to meet my wife in Kodiak, Alaska. And then, I ended up being stationed down in San Diego for 4 1/2 amazing years. And, as luck would have it, I asked for and received, my third and final tour back up in Kodiak. It was an amazing place to be, gorgeous scenery, incredible conditions to be flying in, good and bad. I was very, very honored to have been part of the rescue swimmer program, and especially to be a part of the Coast Guard.

In the 21 years that I served, I just found it an absolute blessing to be a part of something that is so much bigger than one individual can imagine. It taught me a lot about thinking a whole lot less about myself and thinking more about doing for others. And, if there's anything I've taken with me in my years since I retired in 2001, it's just always looking out for other people. I think I find a lot of happiness in knowing you can make a difference by helping other people.

So, that's pretty much my story with the Coast Guard, in a nutshell. But, I do thank you for allowing me the opportunity to share this. And maybe, someday somebody will hear this, and they'll know the story behind the Coast Guard rescue swimmer patch in Kodiak, Alaska. So, thank you.