

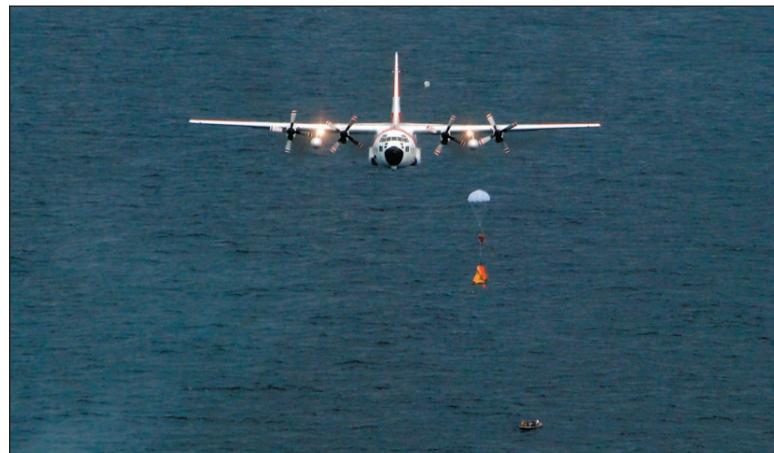
Hercules Heroes

Story by PA3 Rob Simpson, PADET St. Petersburg, Fla.

The Coast Guard has been assisting mariners in distress for more than 200 years, and since 1790 its members have saved more than one million lives. Throughout those decades, Coast Guard members have changed, upgraded and refined the ways crewmembers search for troubled seafarers.

The Coast Guard began using the HC-130 Hercules aircraft in 1959 and since then it has become the services' premier workhorse of the aviation fleet. The aircraft is capable of being called on almost every Coast Guard mission, and it excels in search and rescue.

"We can fly for about 12 hours depending on the situation, and that gives us a lot of time to spend on scene," said Lt. j.g. Jesse Hyles, a C-130 co-pilot at Coast Guard Air Station Clearwater, Fla.



Crewmembers in a C-130 from Coast Guard Air Station Clearwater, Fla., drop a life raft to survivors after their vessel sank Feb. 1. (Photo courtesy of Customs and Border Protection)

"We have a crew of seven, compared to the three or four that normally fly in our helicopters. The more eyes you have looking around in the water, the better chances you have of finding what you're looking for."

The plane's four turbo-prop engines can propel the C-130 along at more than 250 nautical miles per hour.

It can fly a distance of 4,000-nautical miles, and combined with the ability to carry 86 personnel or more than 30,000 pounds of cargo, the C-130 continues to demonstrate itself as an essential part of the Coast Guard.

"The C-130 also gives our Coast Guard operational controllers the ability to expand our range for search and rescue," said Lt. Jimmy Zawrotny, a C-130 pilot at Coast Guard Air Station Clearwater. "We have the ability to speak to multiple military assets, and we can also monitor several on-scene assets at one time. These capabilities, along with our extended flying time, make us a great platform as on-scene commander for many cases."

The C-130 demonstrated its versatility during search-and-rescue operations after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in September 2005. C-130 air crews from Air Station Clearwater were among the first to deploy to the devastated region, and because of the damage to local airports

and control towers, the crews coordinated with multi-agency rescue helicopters in an effort to aid those in distress. C-130 pilots also monitored radio frequencies used by various rescue teams and simultaneously determined locations for hospital landing pads and other rescue points. The C-130 pilots were able to fly for 8-to-10 hours a day, which allowed them to maintain command-and-control functions for entire work shifts without having to land.

However, while many of the Coast Guard's assets have the ability to get close to a person in the water, the C-130 never physically "rescues" anyone.

"We can establish communications via radio, or if that isn't available, we can drop a number of different equipment items including life vests, life rafts, radios, and first-aid kits," said Petty Officer 3rd Class Jerry Scott, a C-130 aviation maintenance technician at Coast Guard Air Station Clearwater.

"Even with calm seas and blue skies, being stranded at sea with no one around can make a person feel uneasy. We can give them the support they need to help them survive in sometimes horrible conditions, and just knowing that help is coming can mean the difference between fighting to survive and giving up," Scott added.

The plane's impact on the Coast Guard's life-saving mission is as impressive to some of its crewmembers as it is to some of those found by its search efforts.

"When I opened up the ramp in-flight for the first time, I remember stepping to the edge to begin searching for a missing person, and I realized, 'Here I am...I can save a life...this is why I joined...I'm living a dream,'" said Scott. "It really makes me feel like a modern-day superhero."



Petty Officer 3rd Class Jerry Scott, a C-130 aviation maintenance technician at Air Station Clearwater, releases a simulated life raft out of the back of a C-130 during search-and-rescue training March 11, near Sand Key, Fla. Photo by PA3 Rob Simpson.

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