

The Evolution of Helicopter Rescue Operations

Helicopters have been regularly used in Search and Rescue (SAR) operations since the Korean War. The Korean theatre presented two significant developments that would increase the survivability of battleground casualties. The combination of Mobile Army Surgical Hospitals (MASH) closer to the front line and the availability of helicopters, which have the capability of taking off and landing in remote and difficult access areas, resulted in medical aid being able to reach the sick and injured in time for life-saving intervention.

Call signs, such as DUSTOFF and specialized MEDEVAC units, became common during the Vietnam conflict. An evolution in equipment and training also took place between the two conflicts. The smaller H-13 and H-19 aircraft used in Korea were replaced by the much more capable UH-1 and H-3s. Pilots received advanced training as did other crewmembers. Other advances included improvements in navigation, communication and rescue equipment.

Following the conflict, the military initiated such programs such as the Military Assistance to Safety and Traffic (MAST) to be applied on the home front to assist civilian emergencies.

However, the use of helicopters in SAR operations continues to evolve, and despite having a lengthy history of usage in SAR, accidents continue to happen. This presentation will outline the background of helicopter rescue operations, the challenges that we continue to face and examine future regulations and standardization.