VX-20, Pax SAR teams assist in rescue of downed Hawkeye crew

By Paul Lagasse
Naval Test Wing Atlantic Communications

Two aircraft crews from NAS Patuxent River played pivotal roles in the rescue of an E-2C Hawkeye crew who had to bail out along the Atlantic Coast recently.

A P-8A Poseidon assigned to Air Test and Evaluation Squadron (VX) 20 served as the on-scene commander of the rescue effort, which also involved crews from three local volunteer fire departments and personnel from NASA’s Wallops Flight Facility. An MH-60S Seahawk of NAS Patuxent River’s Station Search and Rescue (SAR) division helped locate all four downed aviators and, after ensuring they were uninjured and in good health, flew them back to their base.

“It was one of those things that you’re never really expecting, especially on a quiet day like that, when we were the only aircraft in the area,” said Aviation Warfare Systems Operator 2nd Class Andrew Harlan, who was operating the P-8A’s radar on the flight. “It felt great to be a part of making sure that all four of those guys were able to get home safely again.”

“It was truly a team effort,” said Lt. Samantha Grimes, the pilot of the SAR helicopter. “This involved teamwork not only between the emergency medical services units, air traffic control, and us and the P-8A, but within our own aircraft as well. All five crew members really played a huge part in getting these guys safely where they needed to go.”

Harlan and the rest of his P-8A crew — pilot Lt. Cmdr. Megan Stater, co-pilots Lt. Chris Sheehan and Lt. Cmdr. Nathan Durham, lead tactical coordinator Bryan Smith, and co-tactical coordinators Royal Australian Air Force Squadron Leader Joseph Mack and Lt. Kevin Wunderley of Air Test and Evaluation Squadron (VX) 1 — were cruising at 6,000 feet over Maryland’s Eastern Shore, an hour into a captive carry test of an anti-ship missile, when they received a radio communication from NAS Patuxent River advising them that radar contact with an aircraft believed to be an E-2C had been lost southeast of their position and that the the aircraft was possibly down.

As the only aircraft in the area, the P-8A — call sign “Score 42” — was requested to assist in locating and confirming the mishap aircraft. Within minutes, they arrived on the scene, and the crew began performing a visual search as the aircraft descended to a lower altitude.

NASAs Wallops Flight Facility, near the mishap site, told the P-8A that they had heard the E-2C crew announce they were bailing out, and provided them with a vector. Meanwhile, the P-8A crew enlisted the help of the flight test engineering team back at NAS Patuxent River to help identify where the stricken aircraft was from and how many people were aboard.

Automobile vs. aircraft: Aircraft always has the right of way

By Donna Cipolloni
NAS Patuxent River Public Affairs

Working onboard a naval air station presents unique road hazards, such as when drivers in their automobiles encounter pilots in their aircraft. Here’s all you need to know: Obey traffic signals. Stop and wait. The aircraft has the right of way, always.

It would seem like an easy decision to bring a car to a complete stop until an aircraft safely clears the taxiway in front of it, yet there are drivers at NAS Patuxent River who either do not notice the red lights indicating a stop, or decide they can beat the aircraft across and proceed ahead in defiance.

“This year alone so far, we’ve had five incidents, with two of them just a few weeks apart,” said Cdr. Michael Kirby, safety officer for Air Test and Evaluation Squadron (VX) 20, and an active flyer. “There have been about 15 over the past five years or so, and that’s just from data at VX-20; and just incidents that are officially reported. Each squadron keeps its own records.”

A hotspot seems to be Taxiway Alpha, where aircraft frequently cross Cedar Point Road near Millstone Road, and where the red light to stop traffic is activated from the Air Traffic Control Tower at the request of pilots approaching the intersection.

“When we approach an active road on a taxiway, we call Ground [a position in the tower that controls all vehicles and aircraft moving on the taxiways] and tell them to turn on the red lights that signal traffic to hold from crossing the taxiway,” Kirby explained. “It’s like a four-way intersection. The lights are red for the aircraft until there’s sufficient time for the cars to stop; then when our light turns green, we’ll look both ways, and continue on.”

Kirby estimates that with the VX-1 and VX-20 hangars next to each other, there are at least 10 aircraft per day going out and coming back in, totaling 20 aircraft crossings at Taxiway Alpha throughout the workday.

TAXIWAY CROSSINGS TO KNOW
• Cedar Point Road near Millstone
• Just past the U.S. Naval Test Pilot School
• Far side of Pax River near the approach end of Runway 32
• At the location of Air Test and Evaluation Squadron (VX) 23