

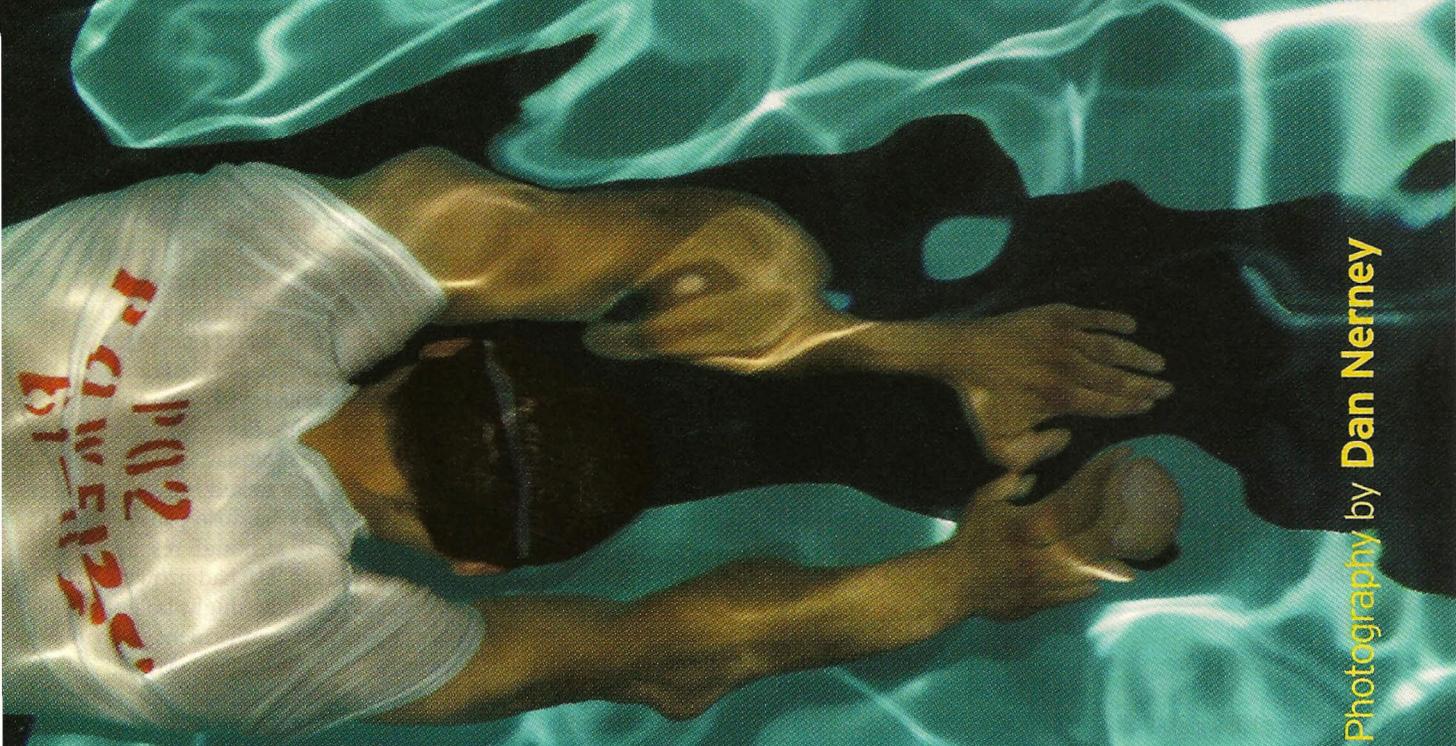
Story by Wendy Mitman Clark

HERO

Very few people are cut out to be Coast Guard rescue swimmers.

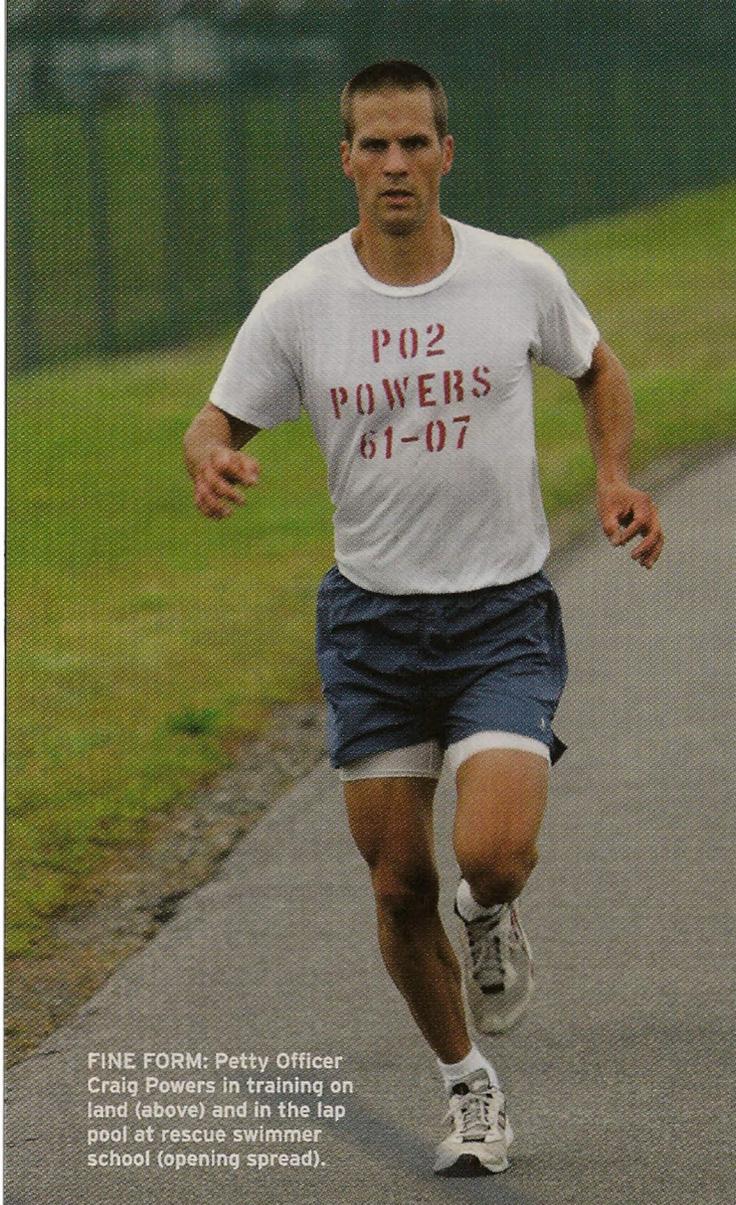


Here's what it takes.



Photography by **Dan Nerney**

IN TRAINING



FINE FORM: Petty Officer Craig Powers in training on land (above) and in the lap pool at rescue swimmer school (opening spread).

May 4, 2007, 0700

Petty Officer 2nd Class Craig Powers and three other young men are on “the grinder,” a rectangle of treated surface that’s seen endless push-ups, sit-ups, chin-ups and pull-ups. They’ve been here a million times over the last eight weeks, but today is different.

Powers, 28, is a machinery technician with seven years in the Coast Guard, and his whole life has come down to this cool, drizzly morning. He and his three classmates are halfway through their training to become Coast Guard rescue swimmers. The eight others who started with them in Class 6107 have already bailed out, an attrition rate that isn’t all that uncommon. On average, only half of those who start the 18-week training complete it, even after a four-month prep program they must pass before coming here, to Air Station Elizabeth City, N.C., home of the Coast Guard Helicopter Rescue Swimmer School.

There are only about 330 rescue swimmers in the Coast Guard, the service’s smallest rating. Few are cut out for the physical demands of the training; even few-

er have the mental and emotional fortitude required. It’s a little like walking in space while learning to survive underwater with nothing but a scrap of air in your lungs.

Today’s eight-week benchmark test starts with PT, or physical training—push-ups, sit-ups, chin-ups, pull-ups, a two-mile run, a 500-yard swim and finally an underwater swim. Then the real fun begins, what’s called the “multi.” One at a time, the students are given a rescue scenario in the pool with several instructors posing as survivors, and they must correctly use every piece of their training.

Today’s test is probably the toughest they will face. They have two chances to pass, and if they succeed odds are good they’ll make it all the way.

AST1 Craig Miller (AST stands for Aviation Survival Technician, 1 for first class) calls them to attention. He’s this class’s instructor, although several other instructors who will participate in the multi are watching, too. “You have to go all the way down,” Miller says in a low voice with little give in it. “You must complete fifty-five continuous push-ups. If you stop, you fail.” At 42, Miller is still an active rescue swimmer; he passed the rating in 1989. To maintain his qualification he’s routinely tested at the same level as a newly minted rescue swimmer. Neither he nor the other instructors have much sympathy for a 19-year-old who can’t pass the same PT they themselves face every month.

Powers is quick and unwavering in his work. Next to him, Airman Daniel Casey is quivering, and one of the instructors is shaking his head. Casey’s been struggling with PT. Within a minute, he has failed push-ups, and Class 6107 is that much closer to being down to three.

Powers, who grew up outside of Cincinnati, joined the Coast Guard when his best buddy talked him into it. When he finished boot camp in 1999 he wasn’t sure what he wanted to do in the Coast Guard, although rescue swimmer was at the back of his mind. He had grown up swimming competitively and thought he might be good at it. Four years later, by the end of his enlistment, he had served at stations in Cape Cod and Gloucester, Mass., and in Sitka, Alaska. He had married another Coastie and earned a variety of qualifications. He extended his duty for two more years and ended up back in Gloucester, “with no Plan B.” Swimmer school beckoned.

0730 Powers finishes the two-mile run under time in 12:20, followed shortly by Airman (AN) Stephen Nicoll and AN Kenneth Hood, Casey bringing up the rear. They head into the building that houses the pool and emerge in formation from the locker room. “Five-hundred yards, ten-and-a-half minutes,” Miller says.

The Coast Guard developed its rescue swimmer program after the sinking of the *Marine Electric* in 1983 off the Virginia coast. Loaded with 25,000 tons of coal, the ship foundered in 40-foot seas and 60-knot winds. At 4 a.m. on February 12 the captain sent a distress call, but by the time a helicopter from Elizabeth City arrived the ship was gone and 34 people were in the water. The helicopter crew lowered a rescue basket to them, but they were so numb they couldn’t climb in. The Coast Guard asked the Navy for a rescue swimmer, and Petty Officer



ULTIMATE TEST: Powers put all his training to the test during the simulated rescues.



James McCann swam for hours in water so cold it froze on his facemask. He saved three people.

At first, the Coast Guard trained with the Navy swimmers at their school in Pensacola, Fla., but the Navy's four-week program wasn't enough. Navy swimmers are trained to rescue downed aviators; the Coast Guard primarily rescues the general public. So it started its own school in Elizabeth City in 1997. Since its inception in 1985, the Coast Guard program has graduated 713 swimmers who have saved 15,623 lives.

0803 Powers finishes the lap swim in 7:29. He stands at the end of the pool, rolling his shoulders to stay loose before the underwater swim. When that's done Miller orders them from the pool and they stand at attention, dripping. "I'm gonna give you fifteen minutes in the locker room," he says. "This is what you've been training for, people. Hope you have your head on straight this morning."

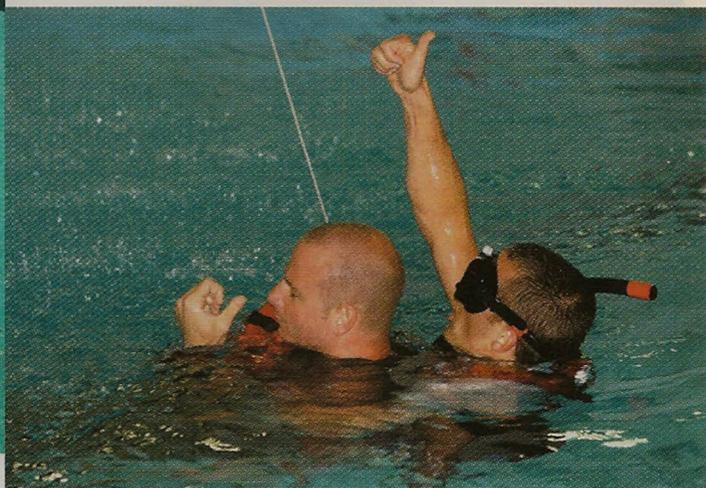
Powers, Nicoll and Hood march to the locker room. Miller holds Casey back, tells him he failed his push-ups and will have to retake his PT on Monday and sit out today's multi. He sends him to the women's locker room to wait.

0832 In the men's locker room Powers, Nicoll and Hood sit beneath the running showers to stay warm. Each man now has an inflatable life vest as well as an empty tool belt. Usually the tool belt holds flares, a VHF, a small heat blanket and other survival gear in case the swimmer has to be left behind. In January 1995 ASTI Mike Odom spent 50 minutes in a raging sea off Savannah, Ga., rescuing three people from a sailboat. As the last survivor was hoisted into the helicopter the cable unraveled and the hoist drum froze. Odom was stranded. Low on fuel, the helicopter dropped him a life raft and headed back to Elizabeth City. Knowing it would be hours before another helo could get to him, Odom felt himself going hypothermic. He lashed himself to the raft face up. Four hours later, another rescue swimmer found him unconscious. They flew him to a nearby Navy ship where he quickly recovered. He was back at work the next day.

"Nicoll! Let's go!" Miller yells.

"Oo-rah Nicoll!" Powers and Hood yell, and then the door closes again and they're left under the showers. From out on the pool deck comes the steady whine of a compressor that runs water through PVC pipes to simulate spray, and there's a lot of shouting. Powers sits quietly, stretches his legs. Hood sings snippets of a song in a falsetto.

Over the last several weeks they've practiced a variety of rescue scenarios—oil spills, sinking vessels, downed planes—so they have some sense of what to expect when they're called to the pool. But today it's not practice, and



they don't know how aggressive the instructors might be.

Powers closes his eyes. He is the leader of this class and he feels confident, but he has felt confident before and been mistaken. Over a year ago, he started the program and lasted three weeks before a stress fracture in his foot took him out. By then he'd realized he wasn't quite as ready as he'd thought. "I had never had the experience of people being confrontational in the water, grabbing you, taking you under," he says.

The instructors do that, says Miller, because 99 percent of the time when a swimmer is deployed the people in the water are happy to see him, cooperative and compliant. It's that one percent, though, that a rescue swimmer needs to know how to handle to avoid being drowned.

0850 Hood is called next. Only nine minutes later Miller calls for Powers, and he knows that Hood has failed. What he doesn't know is that Nicoll has failed also. He "pinched out," pinching an instructor to stop the exercise because he felt he couldn't continue.

Powers marches to the 12-foot tall steel tower at the side of the pool that replicates the deck and doorway of a helicopter, where he puts on mask, snorkel and fins. Miller crouches next to him. "We've got a report of a mid-air collision," he says. "Somebody said they saw a parachute. We do not know how many people are in the water. You have thirty minutes for this rescue."

Powers launches himself into the pool. When he surfaces, AST2 Timothy Kessell lunges from behind, screaming and climbing onto his head. Powers goes under and dives deep to elude him. Most survivors, no matter how panicked they are, won't follow a swimmer down. He pops up behind Kessell and wraps his arm across his chest to subdue him; Kessell struggles and reaches for Powers' mask, trying to rip it off his face. Powers dives again, and re-emerges. They struggle for another minute or so and finally Kessell gives in. Powers hands him a life belt that's floating nearby and tells him to wait.

There are two other survivors, one floating quietly in a life ring and the other obviously the pilot. He's in full gear with his parachute still attached, lying in the bottom of a small life raft. Powers talks with the quiet survivor who says he's okay then swims toward the life raft. The pilot—AST2 Randy Habba—mumbles he's alright

but he barely moves. Powers pulls him gently from the life raft, puts him in a hold and begins swimming around the pool, holding Habba and steadily trying to clear what seems like miles of parachute line. The line is a demon, tangling in places Powers can't see, so he does much of it by feel. Once he clears the line, he must unbuckle the chute harness from the pilot's chest and legs, "pop" the life raft with an imaginary knife and then swim beneath the pilot twice to verify that his legs are clear.

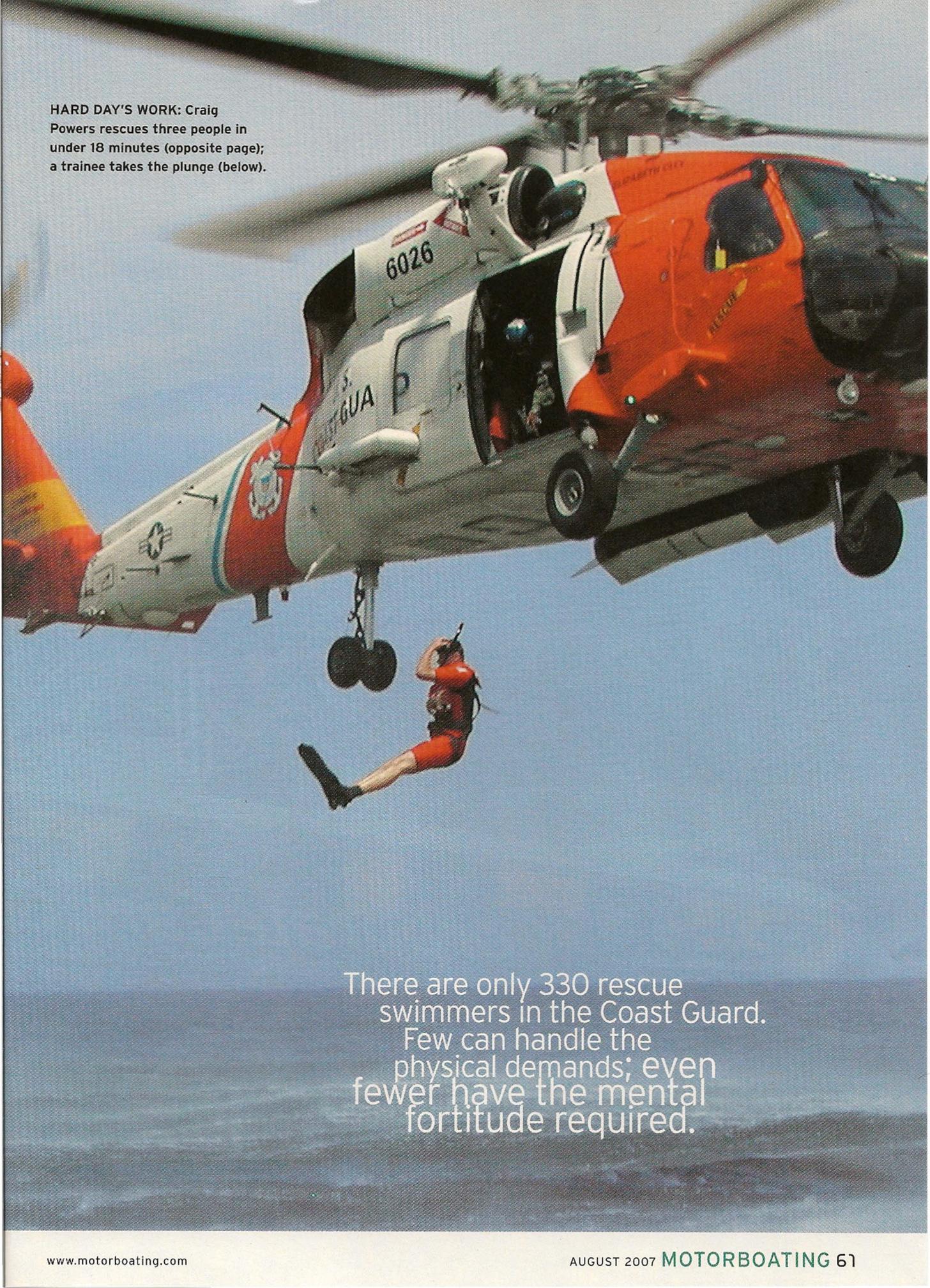
0910 Powers gets Habba into the basket and signals for it to be raised, then moves back to Kessell, who's screaming at him again. The life belt Powers had given him has a long strap attached to it that Kessell has wrapped around his foot. "Take a deep breath," Powers yells to Kessell between heaving breaths, "I've gotta check your legs!" He dives under Kessell and clears the strap, but after he surfaces it tangles again so he clears it once more.

With Kessell in the basket, Powers moves to the last survivor. Because Miller told him he must come up with the last survivor, Powers has to use the strop rather than the basket. In the real world this could be necessary if a victim is unconscious or the helo is too low on fuel to stay on station any longer. It's harder than the basket because the survivor and the swimmer must be strapped in correctly.

0920 Miller hoists Powers and the last survivor onto the tower and Powers carefully lays him down. "Seventeen thirty-one, total evolution," Miller says. "Good job. You may be the only one to pass here today."

As it turns out, that's not the case. Nicoll and Hood pass the multi on their second try, yet Class 6107 would drop to three, as Casey would fail his second PT on Monday. In eight more weeks, Powers, Nicoll and Hood will take another multi. The test will be similar to today's, but the pool will be lights-out and full of fog, with an insane racket booming from the speakers.

If Powers passes that, he goes on a swimmer helo flight a week before graduating, then on to three weeks of emergency medical technician training. Afterwards, he's hoping for his choice of assignments—Humboldt Bay in northern California or back to the cold waters of Sitka. He's not in this to relax, after all. He's in this to be a Coast Guard helicopter rescue swimmer. ♾

A photograph of a Coast Guard helicopter in flight. The helicopter is white with orange and red accents. The number '6026' is visible on the side. A rescuer in a red suit is rappelling down from the side of the helicopter. The background is a clear blue sky.

HARD DAY'S WORK: Craig Powers rescues three people in under 18 minutes (opposite page); a trainee takes the plunge (below).

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