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U.S. Coast Guard Oral History Program

Interview of **LCDR ANDREA SACCHETTI, USCG**

Conducted by **DR. DAVID ROSEN, PACAREA HISTORIAN**

September 24, 2008
Air Station San Francisco

INTERVIEWER: This is Dave Rosen in Air Station San Francisco. It is September 24th, 2008.

SACCHETTI: Lieutenant Commander Andrea Sacchetti, Air Station San Francisco. I was the Air Operations Officer for the Barrow forward operating location. I have been in the Coast Guard about 12 years now.

INTERVIEWER: Where did you start out?

SACCHETTI: I went to a ship first, out of the Academy, and so I was on the cutter *Midgett* for almost two years, then went to flight school. Then I went to Humboldt Bay for a little over three years, and then I went to polar operations where I deployed on the icebreakers, *Polar Star* and *Healy* specifically.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, boy.

SACCHETTI: So I've been to Antarctica and the Arctic. Across the North Pole over to Norway was our last *Healy* trip.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, boy.

SACCHETTI: In 2005, I closed down the polar ops. I was one of the last AVDETs [Aviation Detachments]. I was the last AVDET, with myself and the three other pilots and the flight mechanics that were on that trip that did polar operations.

And then I came to San Francisco, and just last -- I guess it was early -- late winter, I was asked by a friend of mine in District 17 who I had worked with

before, and he's up at D17 now, and he knew my background, and he called to see if I would be interested in doing a concept of operation up in Barrow, Alaska, during the summer of 2008.

And I thought about it for a little bit, and I said I would do it. So I ended up being the Air Operations Officer for the Barrow forward operating location for two weeks.

We actually had two helicopters up there along with a 12-person AVDET, including myself. It was four pilots and eight mechanics and swimmers, and along with the rest of the Coast Guard contingent that was up there, there was a total of about 35 Coast Guard members up there, including the AVDET, all led by Commander [Michelle] Webber who was the officer in charge of the operation while we were up there.

The two helicopters, one came from Air Station Kodiak, the other came from Air Station San Francisco. We left around the 22nd of July from Air Station San Francisco to do the cross-country EP. And we met the Kodiak helicopter in Anchorage and then continued the rest of the cross-county EP through the interior of Alaska up to Barrow.

And we arrived in Barrow on August 11th. We were there -- I'm sorry -- on July 27th, and we were there until August 11th, for about two weeks. And it took us about nine days, actually, to get back from Barrow.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, my God.

SACCHETTI: We got back through the interior. We departed ways with the Kodiak helicopter from Anchorage and ran into some weather delays, et cetera, in places like Seward and Sitka, some maintenance issues, but it took us about nine days to get back to Port Angeles where we left the helicopter there for them to use for a little bit.

INTERVIEWER: What were the facilities like there, say, when you landed in the hangar and the airstrip there?

SACCHETTI: Well, the airport is actually in pretty good condition. The runway, there are instrument approaches that go into the airport, but it is a commercial airport. So Alaskan Airways and some other planes go in and out of there. So there are facilities there. Infrastructure-wise, it's limited.

North Slope Borough Search and Rescue does have a fantastic hangar facility up there, but they are very full. They have a helicopter and two fixed-wing planes that are kind of stuffed in their hangar. So we had limited support from them, although, we were able to put one of the helicopters into their hangar with the blades folded during a storm where there was a lot of heavy 40-knot winds

and such that was blowing up a lot of rocks and debris on the ramp, and we didn't want our helicopters to get damaged.

So some of the other facilities, Alaskan Airlines obviously has some hangar facilities up there, but those are owned by them and run by them.

Another facility that is up there is the Cape Smythe Hangar, and that is owned by Shell, and they contract out Cougar Aviation for their own private helicopter rescue resources up there. And they have an old -- similar to an H-3 up there.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, my.

SACCHETTI: It's in fantastic shape. It's a very nice helicopter. I think it's actually called an S-61, in the civilian [version]. Don't quote me on that, though. I forget exactly.

Hang on just a quick second.

[Interruption.]

INTERVIEWER: There weren't any 65s?

SACCHETTI: Yeah, the H-65, two H-65 helicopters. There's pros and cons, I think, to the H-65, which we have put in our after-action report. The pro is that the size and ease of maintenance that our helicopter has makes it a lot easier to work up there, if we're stuck in areas. We did get stuck in Deadhorse for a couple of days, doing a three-day SAR case, and we couldn't --

INTERVIEWER: Oh, my.

SACCHETTI: -- leave Deadhorse because the weather in Barrow was kind of bad.

Let's wait until that goes by, actually.

[Pause.]

SACCHETTI: So, yeah, we were stuck in Deadhorse, Alaska, for about three days because of the weather in Barrow. We were doing a SAR case out to the eastern side of Deadhorse, and we couldn't get back to Barrow for about three days because of the fog.

But because we were so small, we were able to push our helicopters into a hangar and keep them sheltered for the night. Whereas, an [HH-] 60, you know, they're a lot bigger. The downside is we can't carry enough, as much fuel.

We can't carry as many people and equipment for logistics, and our range for our legs and distances that we can go travel are obviously much reduced than the 60 is. So there's pros and cons to having either type of helicopter up there.

INTERVIEWER: Were there other SAR cases?

SACCHETTI: No, just the one. It was -- actually, it wasn't a search-and-rescue case, as much as a recovery. It was a father and his 13-year-old son had -- well, they were out fishing in a very small boat. The storm came through right at the beginning of the week, I think around the 1st, and they got either capsized or fell overboard. I think the father fell overboard. The son thought he could go get him. Neither one of them ended up surviving. The father's remains were found prior to us going out there, and we were out there with North Slope Borough SAR and our other helicopter trying to find the 13-year-old boy because they hadn't found him yet.

So they did eventually find him on the third day, and we didn't find him during any of our searches, but the local authorities who were doing searches on the ground and in the water had found him. So it was kind of sad, but we were there to kind of try to provide some closure to the families, and so that was that case.

We also did some rescue swimmer operations while we were up there, kind of for training and practice to see what the temperatures would be like.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, boy. I imagine.

SACCHETTI: It was obviously very cold. The rescue swimmer from San Francisco didn't have some of the gear that the Kodiak swimmer had. So he ceased operations a lot earlier than the Kodiak swimmer did. So that was definitely a lesson learned about having -- if we're going to use rescue swimmers up there, the kind of equipment that they would need to have in order to do operations up in such cold water because obviously the water temperature is in the 30s.

INTERVIEWER: Did you, yourself, meet with any of the other authorities, the native --

SACCHETTI: Oh, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: -- Alaskans and such?

SACCHETTI: Commander Webber did a lot of that. She did most of that. Plus, the Tribal Liaison from District 17, Joel Castro, he --

INTERVIEWER: Right.

SACCHETTI: -- did a lot of that as well. So they were the primary point of contacts for them.

But I was able to go to a luncheon with some of the locals. They were really fantastic people. They had a lot of great concerns about Coast Guard presence up there, as far as what kind of an impact we would have on their culture, on their boating, on their subsistence lifestyle, and it's really interesting. It is a different kind of culture about how their elders take such a big role in the community and in the policies and in the things that they do. So that was really great.

We also did a community outreach project where we helped to build a basketball court on a playground in the town.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, boy.

SACCHETTI: So that was a big project, and so we worked on that for two days while we were up there as well, with the help of some of the local construction guys.

INTERVIEWER: Boy, that's something.

SACCHETTI: And one of the local restaurants actually gave us -- they provided some pizza and stuff for us that night, too, which was really nice of them. We got to kind of get out into the community that day.

INTERVIEWER: So, generally, you had a pleasant reception?

SACCHETTI: We did, yeah. We were very busy up there, operations was, especially for the AVDET. We were really busy the entire time.

A lot of the reason we were so busy, I think, was some of the logistics, just trying to coordinate, not having our own hangar to put all our own stuff away. You know, trying to look for things in all of our support kits and everything, that always slows us down a little bit. So I think logistics were kind of troublesome.

But, yeah, so that's what we did while we were up there. The aviation detachment flew most days. We had a couple of days where we couldn't fly because of weather, and there was one or two days where we couldn't fly because of maintenance, but for the most part, we tried to fly every day, even if it was just for a short flight.

INTERVIEWER: What about your lessons learned or after-action, anything you would care to share?

SACCHETTI: We did -- I think that some of the lessons learned that we had, I actually sent that up already, but, like I talked about, some of the logistics, not having our own hangar does definitely impact how quickly we can get operations done, and so that was an issue.

There are some deserted hangars up there, kind of near the long-range radar facility, that need a lot of work, but they would be, I think, a great location to put a Coast Guard contingent, not just because there's a hangar there but because there would also be facilities for the small boats and the other Coast Guard members as well. It would be kind of a centralized location for everyone, so we weren't all scattered.

Computer connectivity was definitely a problem as well.

INTERVIEWER: I'm sure.

SACCHETTI: We were kind of working off two personal laptops to get work done, and with the way maintenance and aviation tracking goes nowadays, it's all done on the computer. So that caused some delays in some of our operations.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think they're working on satellite hookups?

SACCHETTI: Mm-hmm.

Communication. Communications was definitely an issue as well. It was hit or miss whether we could actually communicate with the trailer that they brought up there. The Coast Guard members had brought a communications trailer up there. It usually worked pretty well, within about 30 miles. Outside of that, it was more difficult to keep in communications with them.

As one measure, one risk mitigation measure, we continued to fly. Each flight, we had to fly dual aircraft. So, if one helicopter was flying, the other helicopter was also flying, and we flew formation pretty much the entire operation. So that way, we could keep communications with each other. We could also -- if one of the helicopters had a problem and had to put down in a field somewhere or in a remote location, the other helicopter could then be available to go get help and know exactly where that crew was.

We had a hard time communicating with Kodiak using HF, but I think with some of the new radios that we have in the H-65, I think that should be alleviated or at least solved a little bit. I'd be interested to see with our new HF radios in the MH-65 how those communications work.

But there are also FM frequencies that some of the local boating communities use up there, specifically the companies like Shell and BP, and

some of the other companies have towers up there to communicate on FM. We did talk to some of those controllers every now and then, and if they knew we were going to be flying, they generally listened up for us and were easy to get a hold of.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Well, that's great. You have been very helpful. Are you anxious to go back, yourself?

SACCHETTI: Yeah, I'm not sure. We'll see what happens. You know, I've deployed a lot, and, you know, it's time for some of the other folks to deploy, some of the junior folks. I'm getting more senior, so --

INTERVIEWER: Where will you go after this, do you know?

SACCHETTI: Oh, I have no idea where I'll go next. So we'll see.

INTERVIEWER: How long do you stay here?

SACCHETTI: I have at least another year or two.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, that's great.

SACCHETTI: So, mm-hmm.

INTERVIEWER: All right. Well, thanks very much for your time.

SACCHETTI: No problem. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

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