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4 ROTORS



Offshore Business



**Interview
with EHA
Chairman**



The Odd Couple

Pleasant climate and a beautiful sunny spring morning invite to a stroll along the banks of Lake Iseo (north Italy in the Central Alps). The Mediterranean vegetation, olive groves and vineyards offer a pleasant and relaxing environment. The surrounding mountains are reflected in the lake whose waters are rippled by a gentle breeze. From the small port of Pisogne village a lone surfer leaves the shore with his surfboard and makes his way toward the middle of the lake.

It seems like a scene prepared for a landscape painter, when suddenly the solitary surfer loses his balance, perhaps shaken by the waves created by a passing ferry, knocks the head against the surfboard and ends up in the cold waters.

The scene is observed from the shores of the lake and the alarm is raised. The surfer is "lucky", because the men and women of the Scuola Italiana Cani Salvataggio S.I.C.S. — the "Italian School of Water Rescue Dogs" — are engaged in a heli-rescue training session. The Eliwork Ecureuil B3 starts up, and a SICS instructor and his Newfoundland dog climb on board.

The flight is short and from the shore one can see the K-9 Team, man and dog, jump from the helicopter hovering a few feet above the water at a safety distance from the surfer.

The odd couple, man and dog, swim side by side until they reach the victim; the rescuer supports the surfer who thrashes and grips the swimmer creating some difficulties for the helper — even if he is an experienced water rescuer.

The dog swims around the two men and they both grasp the bodice of the dog that now drags them in the water. It almost seems unreal that a dog could pull two men in water, but the Newfoundland is swimming slowly but steadily.

Once ashore, the survivor is taken care of and the dog given proper attention, a delicious recompense, and rewards for its rescue.

The Rescue Teams

Ferruccio Pilenga, founder and president of the SICS, explains: "To do what you have seen needs much

training, both for the dog and the handler. Some races have an innate propensity for water and for saving, especially Newfoundland, Labrador and Golden Retriever. The challenge is to transform this instinct into a real capacity to rescue. The unique relationship between the dog and his handler is crucial. He must be able to train his dog, must also have the necessary passion for the rescue activities, and a lot of dedication because the training and the maintenance of the qualification require great effort.

Starting from these assumptions we of the S.I.C.S. can transform the couple into an efficient and effective water rescue K-9 Unit."

The training syllabus is long and includes several steps. It teaches the dog to swim faster and in a pair with its handler without impeding him in his rescue effort. The dogs have to learn

- to tread water,
- how to position themselves to offer their special life-jacket to the person in the water so they can get a hold on it,
- to tow them to shore,
- drag a small boat,
- and to do all this from aboard small boats and in difficult weather conditions, in summer and winter.

The handler in addition to working with the dog must learn to drive



a boat, handle equipment such as transceivers and safety equipment, provide first aid and resuscitation when necessary.

The school, at the end of the training, issues a "SICS Operative Water Rescue Certificate" recognized by the government since it is the result of experiences made and knowledge gained and tested in collaboration with the Italian Coast Guard and Air Force rescuers.

To be awarded this certificate K-9 Teams have to pass the last and most demanding test: demonstrate the ability to operate from a helicopter, jump from it when it is hovering at 2 to 5 meters above the water, and of course carry out the rescue.

Heli Ops

Today's training session covers the helicopter operation. About twenty K-9 Teams are present. Every handler tests the dog's boarding and disembarking from the helicopter with rotor off; the presence on board of a senior Newfoundland seems to calm younger dogs.

Next comes checking how and where to position the dog in the cabin: an adult Newfoundland weighs over 50 kg and can take up quite some space. How to move at the time of the jump and to make sure the safety belt is fastened is last but not least since the flight is with open doors.

All this becomes more challenging when the rotor is turning and the helicopter in flight. The dogs are extremely sensitive to noise and ultrasounds and a helicopter generates them in abundance. The dogs have to get used to this stress factor.

For the teams doing all this for the first time the helicopter is in hover flight but only the handler will jump, while the dog at first remains in the cabin. This is a precautionary approach: No dog is forced to jump to avoid traumatizing it.

In fact jumping from a helicopter in hover over the water is not just as easy as it may seem.

Donatella Pasquale, S.I.C.S. Vice-President, explains how "the helicopter must hover at a height between two and four meters – more than five meters can be dangerous for the dog. Our instructors take care of this particular aspect when speaking with the pilot.

The other big problem is the downwash generated by rotor, which is more powerful and troublesome the bigger the helicopter. We have experience with the Lama, NH500, Alouette III, AB412, HH-3F and others, and we know well what the K9 Teams are experiencing.

The downwash creates a regular storm, wind and short waves, and a lot of water particles are suspended in the air. All this makes swimming difficult for both dog and handler. It

also reduces visibility, and the dog does not have the help of diving goggles! Breathing becomes problematic precisely when you need the maximum physical performance."

Retrieval

If the distance to shore is too great, the dog and the people will be hoisted up into the helicopter. This is made much easier by the special life-jacket developed specifically for water rescue dogs. This is a float vest



in high-visibility colors that is light and easy to fit. It is so comfortable that the dogs could wear it all the time. It is equipped with handles to hold on to or to attach ropes and the hoist hook. For the hoist operation too, the handler receives dedicated training on the technical equipment, on safety, and on communication with the helicopter crew.

The K-9 Team that obtains the S.I.C.S. certificate is capable of executing a perfect rescue, completely independent, efficient and with perfect timing. But the certificate is not the end of a process: It is valid for 12 months, and the teams must continuously update their training to maintain their operational capability.

Dino Marcellino



Scuola Italiana Cani Salvataggio

Ferruccio Pilenga, owner of a Newfoundland and volunteer in the Italian Civil Protection organization, decided to exploit the innate qualities of the afore-mentioned dog breeds developing their ability to save persons.

In 1989, he founded the Scuola Italiana Cani Salvataggio S.I.C.S. with the intent to support the activities of rescue-at-sea and air-rescue in the marine environment already performed by various civilians and military services.

The activity with helicopters began in 1992 and the close collaboration with the Coast Guard and Air Force's SAR services led to the school's official approval by the authorities responsible for emergency aid and the Ministry of Transport and Navigation in 1996.

Today, the school has its headquarters and nine branches throughout the country with qualified trainers and more than 200 water rescue dog K-9 Teams active and certified.

They are all volunteers, can be alerted around the clock by the Prefectures, by Civil Protection and Coast Guard. They also offer their service free of charge on Italian beaches.

S.I.C.S. is the only School of Water Rescue Dogs in Europe, maybe in the world. Should you know about others please let us know. They would be happy to share their respective experiences.



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