

# Marco Island CAP Senior Squadron

## Historical Highlights of the Nineties

The Marco Island Senior Squadron was chartered in September 1981 as Florida Wing Unit 08376 of the Civil Air Patrol (CAP) an auxiliary of the U.S. Air Force. Perhaps best known for search & rescue efforts, CAP flies more than 90% of all inland search & rescue missions directed by the U.S. Air Force. Locally these missions and daily coastal (sundown) patrols are flown in a Cessna 172 or 182 Air Force owned aircraft based in the CAP facility at Marco Island Executive Airport.

The Marco squadron is comprised of 50 to 60 unpaid volunteer men and women who have donated their time and energy to support CAP goals and missions. In October 1991, two of Marco's dedicated squadron members, Majors Clay Reid and Jim Mathews sacrificed their lives during a search & rescue mission. It was several weeks after they disappeared before the wreckage was found deep in the mangroves south of Everglades City. Over the years there have been many "finds" that saved the lives of boaters in distress in the Ten Thousand Island area waters.

Marco pilot Maj. Fritz Schaller and observer 2 Lt. Robert Thomas picked up a radio call requesting CAP assistance while flying a routine "sundown patrol" on May 22, 1994. A boat had run aground below Cape Romano and could not be located because of heavy smoke from a brush fire to the east. The air crew was able to locate the disabled craft and radio its position to Sea Tow. The CAP crew then guided Sea Tow through the dense smoke until it was abreast of the grounded boat. The vessel was safely towed back to shore.

On a chilly and windy day in Jan. 1995, the Marco aircraft crew spotted a grounded 20 ft. sailboat in Capri Pass. Pilot Lt Col. Fritz Schaller flew lower and observer 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Ron Gordon saw two persons waving frantically while trying to bail out their boat. Ground radio operator Capt. Rich Schlinder contacted Capri Fire & Rescue who dispatched a rescue boat to the scene. A woman and her two children were quickly rescued. A Collier County Sheriff's patrol boat and a second rescue boat from Capri assisted the skipper in successfully bailing and refloating the disabled craft.

In October 1995, five people were rescued from a disabled rental boat found by Marco aircrew members Maj. John McCormack and 1<sup>ST</sup> Lt. Robert Thomas. The long overdue pontoon craft had run hard aground on Tiger Key. Ground radio operator Maj. Monty Lazarus contacted Port of the Islands for a rescue boat that was later guided by CAP aircrew to the distressed boaters. They were all successfully transferred to the rescue boat and taken back to Port of the Islands.

Six people were rescued in Nov. 1995 from a sinking 55 ft. cabin cruiser located midway between Marco and Key West. During a routine "sundown patrol" aircrew members Fritz Schaller and Ron Gordon intercepted a mayday call and were advised that the vessel was taking on water. The Coast Guard was contacted by ground radio operator Robert Thomas who immediately received the CAP search request. Proceeding out into the Gulf of Mexico, the aircrew quickly found the badly listing boat and called the lat-long coordinates into the Coast Guard and a Marco tow company. Observer Ron Gordon directed a nearby cabin cruiser by radio to the sinking vessel and four of the six people were rescued. The captain and his first mate stayed aboard to assist in saving their crippled vessel. Col. Schaller continued to circle the distressed craft until a USCG helicopter arrived on the scene. The Coast Guard chopper attempted a "pump-out" of the sinking boat using a pump they lowered but the effort failed. The cruiser was successfully pumped out two hours later by Tow Boat U.S. using three pumps and towed to Naples.

In April 1996, Collier County Sheriff's Office requested CAP assistance in locating a long overdue waverunner with two females aboard. Marco's sundown patrol aircraft piloted by Capt. Robert Sheehan was diverted to the Goodland area by ground radio operator Maj. Buddy Harris. As darkness was approaching, observer Capt. Robert Warsaw finally spotted the missing craft well south of Goodland. The two young ladies who had apparently been lost were fine and returning to port.

One of the most dramatic rescues was in January 1997 when Marco pilot 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Donn May and observer Buddy Harris picked a distress call on the aircraft's marine radio at the beginning of their sundown patrol. A man pleading for help said that his boat had crashed and he was in unbearable pain. The injured skipper was able to give a vague location before passing out. Minutes later the aircrew *found the boat which had hit an oyster* shoal at full speed in McIlvane Bay. CAP ground radio operator Capt. Jim Love provided the lat-long coordinates and called emergency services. An Isle of Capri Fire and Rescue boat and Collier County Sheriff deputies quickly arrived on the scene and provided immediate first aid. The severely injured man was then transported to the 951 boat ramp where they were met by a MEDVAC helicopter. Hospital doctors later reported that the boater's injuries were so severe that he could not have lived 30 minutes longer.

There were two saves of boaters in distress in October 1999. In the first incident, pilot Maj. Richard Mandell and observer Lt. Col. Charley Krout heard a mayday call while on a routine sundown patrol south of Chokoloskee. The distressed vessel was a 36 ft. sailboat on its way to Key West when the rudder jammed. The Marco aircrew located the boat 20 miles south of Pavilion Key. The boat's position was radioed to ground radio operator Capt. Donn May who called for a rescue tow boat. The boat was successfully towed back to Marco Island by Tow Boat U.S.

The second October 99 “save” involved an elderly couple stranded deep in the backwaters south of Pavilion Key. Marco pilot Capt. Paul Lundberg and observer Ron Gordon were flying the sundown patrol when they picked up a faint mayday call. Marine radio contact with the distressed 18 ft. boat indicated it was broken down in the Lostman’s River area. Ground radio operator Lt. Col. Charlie Krout notified the Coast Guard and the air search was launched. After a complete search of Lostman’s River, the boat was finally located in one of the back bays of the Everglades National Park. Sea Tow was called with the lat-long coordinates and the couple was rescued about 2 hours later and towed back to Everglades City in the dark.

These saves and many others less publicized helped the Marco Senior Squadron earn Florida Wing’s coveted “Squadron of the Year Award” for the years 1994, 1995 and 1996. The award is bestowed upon the squadron which excels in the number of air search & rescue missions flown, sundown patrols flown, membership growth, hours of ground and air training, safety performance, promotions and earned awards.

There were 55 CAP senior or composite squadrons in the state of Florida during the nineties.

Written by Maj. Ron Gordon, Squadron Historian

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