

SGT. ROGER MULVANEY

# For those in peril

The explosion on the 20-metre Hedonist B took place off Dingli cliffs at 4.45 p.m. on Sunday, April 30, 1999, and a fire raged from stem to stern in no time...

**T**he rescue operation began quickly, thanks to a timely call to the AFM's Operations Centre by an off-duty member of the Armed Forces of Malta who happened to be at Dingli at the time.

Ops Centre immediately ordered the deployment of an Alouette SA 316 and as I climbed into the helicopter with my partner, L/Bdr. Derek Pepe, I could feel my heart beating wildly like a drum. No matter how many rescue operations you've carried out, no matter how many lives you've saved throughout the years, the thrill of it all, that overwhelming excitement, never dies away..

Within moments, the pulsating swoosh sound of the helicopter's turning rotor blades broke the silence, the warning lights flickered, the engine roared like some wild animal awakened from a deep sleep as the pilot, Captain Anthony Zammit, made the final checks. Then the green and white Alouette took off, heading west.

We arrived on the scene within five minutes of the alarm being raised and what we saw was frightening to say the least.

The motor yacht had now become a blazing inferno amidst a cloud of thick black smoke. I looked at my partner. Our eyes met and in that split second we no doubt had the same

thought in our minds: Could anybody have possibly survived in that hell? And if there were survivors, trapped somewhere inside the yacht, what were the possibilities of winching them up without putting the helicopter and its crew in danger due to the heat and smoke?

It was a few moments later as I was forming a quick action plan with the pilot, that Sergeant Charles Mallia, the winch-man, spotted two men waving frantically in our direction. They were in a small dinghy not far away from the inferno.

They could only be survivors.

A rescue diver jumps from a helicopter from a maximum height of 20 feet and at a maximum speed of five knots wearing a wet suit, mask, fins, knife and buoyancy jacket. The decision to dispatch the rescue diver is made by the pilot after considering the aircraft's limitations, the sea state and visibility. Jumping out of the aircraft near a survivor in the water instead of being winched down saves precious time and avoids the difficulties to the survivor caused by the noise and spray from the helicopter's downwash.

We hit the cold water about 20 metres away from the dinghy and swam as fast as we could to the survivors. Once on the ►

## REAL LIFE DRAMA

dinghy we immediately checked whether there were other persons aboard the yacht and the two survivors confirmed that there weren't.

Thank God for that then, I found myself saying out loud.

The two men, one Maltese and the other Dutch, were suffering from hypothermia, shock and smoke inhalation. They looked terrible and were in dire need of special medical care. As Derek administered emergency aid, I signalled the helicopter to come in for us. It was still going to be a difficult operation because of the risk of the helicopter's downwash capsizing the dinghy, but I wasn't going to chance having the casualties lowered into the sea for a recovery, not in their condition.

In the end, I'm glad I took the risk because the winch-man successfully hoisted us all up into the safety of the Alouette in no time and five minutes later the survivors were handed over to the emergency personnel at St Luke's hospital.

As for us, we flew back to base to resume our stand-by duties; stand-by, that is, for any other emergencies that may arise during our 24 hour 'watch'...



## SEARCH AND RESCUE

SAR is an internationally recognised acronym that stands for Search and Rescue. It involves the launching of a search as soon as the alarm is raised, which hopefully is followed by a successful rescue. As soon as the Rescue Coordination Centre at AFM Headquarters receives an emergency call, the information gathered by the duty SAR Coordinator is passed to the Air Squadron, and the stand-by SAR team is scrambled.

On receiving the call, the duty pilot quickly gathers all the details relevant to the rescue, two rescue divers prepare their kits according to the type of emergency they face while the ground crew prepare the helicopter on the apron under the supervision of the duty crew chief. All this takes place in a matter of minutes.

The emergency may vary from a swimmer in difficulties, a person falling from a cliff face or a sick or injured sailor needing to be transferred from a ship to hospital. Sometimes it may even be a touch more dramatic; like having to pluck a crew off a sinking ship in gale force winds and rough seas or rescuing people trapped in a capsized boat. ●