

Beached whale encounter leads Airman to Sea World volunteerism

By Maj. Cathleen Snow, 920th Rescue Wing Public Affairs / Published October 18, 2016

PATRICK AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. --

As an Air Force Reserve security forces Airman, Tech. Sgt. Bridget Gayden never imagined she'd be responding to help a sick mammal, however on Sept. 7, Gayden and fellow 920th Rescue Wing SF Airmen were called to help a 10-foot whale stranded on Patrick Air Force Base's beach.

"It was an unforgettable experience," said Gayden which led her to volunteering with the marine organization her team assisted.

At approximately 7:15 a.m., Gina Monteith, wife of Brig. Gen. Wayne Monteith, 45th Space Wing commander, found and reported a beached whale along the Patrick Air Force Base shoreline. The 45th SW Environmental Conservation personnel reported the incident to Sea World Orlando, whom they later met on scene.

In the meantime, 920th RQW Reserve Airmen teamed up with local volunteers from a local office of the Hubbs-Sea World Research Institute.

Volunteer Kasey Farrell said the whale was a species of Cogia, either a dwarf or pygmy. She explained, "When an animal like this that belongs in the deep water beaches itself, it's already sick. Putting it back in the water will make it strand again and just prolong its suffering."

The goal of this military-marine life team of helpers, was comfort. "Keepin it in the shade because they can get sunburnt; keeping the skin moist; keeping it comfortable," until a Sea World research scientist arrived, said Farrell.

Despite wearing mid-calf combat boots and camouflage battle dress, Gayden waded back and forth into the surf filling a plastic container full of sea water to pour onto the animal's skin – keeping it cool from the searing 80-degree heat.

Although the outcome today would not be what everyone on scene had hoped for, there were benefits.

Because these whales have never been successfully rehabilitated in captivity in the history of the 'stranding program', Wendy Noke-Gurgen, HSWRI Scientist, said the whale would be euthanized and taken back to Sea World for clinical research.

While the act of comforting a whale fell out of an SF Airman's normal range of military duties, Gayden also didn't expect to bond with the animal and her encounter has led to her current role as an HSWRI volunteer. She said it is her hope to help more sick animals like the whale.

"What we know about these animals, almost all of it comes from stranded ones. Rarely seen, they come from deep water. They are deep divers. We are hopeful we can find out why this animal stranded and the biology of the species and maybe learn something to help them down the road," said Noke-Gurgen.

Anyone on Florida's Space Coast who encounters a distressed whale, dolphin, manatee, sea turtle or any other type of animal, can call a 24-hour Fish and Wildlife Commission hotline— 1-888-404-3922.

This was the 97th response to an injured animal by personnel from the 45th SW's Environmental Conservation program this year. The program covers both Cape Canaveral Air Force Station and PAFB installations and they respond to a variety of animals ranging from birds to whales.

The HSWRI was founded in 1963 to conduct research in the tradition of world-renowned scientists, Dr. Carl L. and Laura C. Hubbs. Since 1963 our charter has been: "To return to the sea some measure of the benefits derived from it."

"I am very proud of our team's response to this unfortunate event, said Gen. Monteith. "We take our mission as environmental stewards as seriously as we do our launch mission so I was glad to have our partners from Sea World on the scene with us."



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Patrick Air Force Base and Sea World personnel team up to help a sick whale Sept. 7, which led Air Force Reservist Tech. Sgt. Bridget Gayden, 920th Rescue Wing Security Forces Airman, to become a Sea World volunteer to help sick animals.(U.S. Air Force photo Master Sgt. Paul Flipse)

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