

YOUTH

Wind beneath her wings

When the perfect storm brews over the boundless sea and lives are at stake, a crew of highly trained professionals embarks on a mission impossible to search for and rescue survivors from the choppy waters. Wan Qiuwen is one of them. And, she's a woman.

The 36-year-old from Shanghai has broken the glass ceiling to become one of China's first two female rescue helicopter pilots who respond 24/7 to search and rescue missions involving cargo ship snags, vessel accidents, medical emergencies and special marine operations.

Wan and Song Yin, the only other female pilot, graduated from Shanghai Maritime University in 2008 to join Donghai No 1 Rescue Flying Service of the Ministry of Transport, a career of both unparalleled adventure and mortal peril.

"Being a search and rescue pilot is a high-risk job. It is a big commitment and requires personal sacrifices that not many are willing to make. But I feel lucky and proud to be a part of this elite force," Wan says.

The demanding nature of the profession had always favored male candidates until the rules were altered for the first and only time.

"Admission to the maritime university's nautical program comes with its own set of riders. One has to undergo a strict physical examination, measure up to the minimum height requirement of 165 centimeters and have vision above 5.0," Wan says.

The physical test for aspiring rescue pilots is stricter. "Failure means disqualification from the whole program," she adds.

Wan nevertheless decided to give it a try. She was thrilled when she finally cleared all the hurdles and was sent to Adelaide, Australia, to train for 15 months, at the end of which she acquired a commercial pilot's license. Back in the country, she received further training in helicopter search and rescue.

In 2010, she was among China's first batch of female rescue pilots, and then went on to become a chief captain four years later. In the past 13 years, Wan has saved at least 200 lives in more than 300 risky missions.

"Rescue at sea can be both challenging and terrifying. It is never a level playing field with nature. You have to keep your wits about you. If you don't think and act fast, people may die. It is a huge responsibility. Experience builds confidence," she says.

In early 2020 right after the COVID-19 pandemic, Wan's team was tasked with rescuing a crew member suspected of being infected by coronavirus. The disease was still shrouded in mystery and people everywhere were panicking.

But not Wan. She didn't flinch from accepting the mission. "We are trained to be selfless. When duty calls, we respond. It is like a conditioned reflex," she says.

If courage is her middle name, excellent tactical skills give her the edge. Survivors of vessel accidents will vouch for her abilities.

On Aug 20, 2020, an oil tanker ferrying 3,000 metric tons of gasoline collided with a cargo ship loaded with sand and gravel about 1.5 nautical miles (2,778 meters) southeast of the Yangtze River estuary, sparking a fire on the deck of the oil tanker and causing the latter to sink.

Wan was among the first responders. She flew to the site from Gaodong helicopter airport, which is the country's first-of-its-kind marine rescue launchpad. "The tanker was still burning and there was a thick envelope of smoke, reducing visibility to near zero," she recalls.

And yet, with her sea savvy, Wan spotted a survivor and executed a successful rescue operation. She hovered above the troubled waters for a couple of minutes to gauge the best extraction point, and then threw down a rope and pulled up a grievously injured crew member.

The incredible rescue won Wan a

One of China's first female sea-rescue pilots looks back in pride at 300-plus missions and pledges to save more lives, **Yang Feiyue** reports.



Pilot Wan Qiuwen at Donghai Rescue Bureau of the Ministry of Transport in Shanghai. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

“Rescue at sea can be both challenging and terrifying. ... You have to keep your wits about you.”

Wan Qiuwen, 36, rescue helicopter pilot

special commendation from the Donghai Rescue Bureau of the Ministry of Transport.

Last year, the bureau signed a cooperation agreement with the Shanghai Jiao Tong University's Ruijin Hospital to jointly develop a national sea-rescue lifeline. The move reduces the time of ferrying critical patients or accident survivors to the nearest hospital from sea by at least 30 minutes.

Wan has since joined several such missions. When she first flew above downtown Huangpu district in Shanghai, she realized there had been a paradigm shift in her job.

"Land missions are very different from those at sea. Above water, it is usually crosswinds, and sometimes blinding rain and lightning, that

pose challenges. If you have carefully assessed meteorological risks, you are good to go. The city, on the other hand, is an unpredictable obstacle course," she says.

Even though the Shanghai administration has done a good job to mark or clear potential threats, skyscrapers continue to be a hazard for chopper rescue services, she explains.

Dong Enze, an official at the Donghai Rescue Bureau, says there are nearly 100 sea search and rescue missions every year.

"Earlier, helicopters brought survivors/patients to Gaodong helicopter airport, from where the 120 emergency medical service was

used to rush them to hospital by road. Now, they can be directly airlifted to hospital using the Lianyang-Xiamen waters channel. It is a free service," Dong says.

Since last year, Wan has also taken up the role of a flight instructor as the country increases its investment in marine rescue. "The fleet has gone up from one to more than 20 helicopters, and models are being upgraded. Rescue bases have expanded, with more than 200 professional salvage vessels."

Mission capabilities have improved too, Wan says. "Earlier, only daytime rescues were carried out. Now, night missions take place," she says, adding that the latter is rare in other countries.

That is not all. The team's response time has reduced from 45 minutes to 30. "Every compressed minute increases safety pressure, so you have to do better to defuse those risks and bring hope to people in danger," she adds.

Pregnancy and motherhood, seven years ago, didn't stop Wan from doing what she does best. "Piloting is about sharp reflexes and decisive adaptability. I believe, as long as we strictly follow the standard operating procedure, safety is guaranteed," she says.

When people ask her if she will continue to fly once her child grows up, Wan's response is affirmative. "This profession is about saving lives, not gender hindrances. A woman is perfectly capable of being a rescue pilot, once and always."

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