

Seabees Jump In to Help Save Pilot Whales

Military Training an Asset in Rescue Effort

WHEN TWENTY-ONE STRANDED pilot whales were discovered along the shores of Cudjoe Key, Florida, hundreds of volunteers responded, including participants in the Marine Mammal Stranding Network (MMSN) and twenty-two Seabees from the Navy's Construction Battalion Maintenance Unit-202 (CBMU-202 DET Key West).

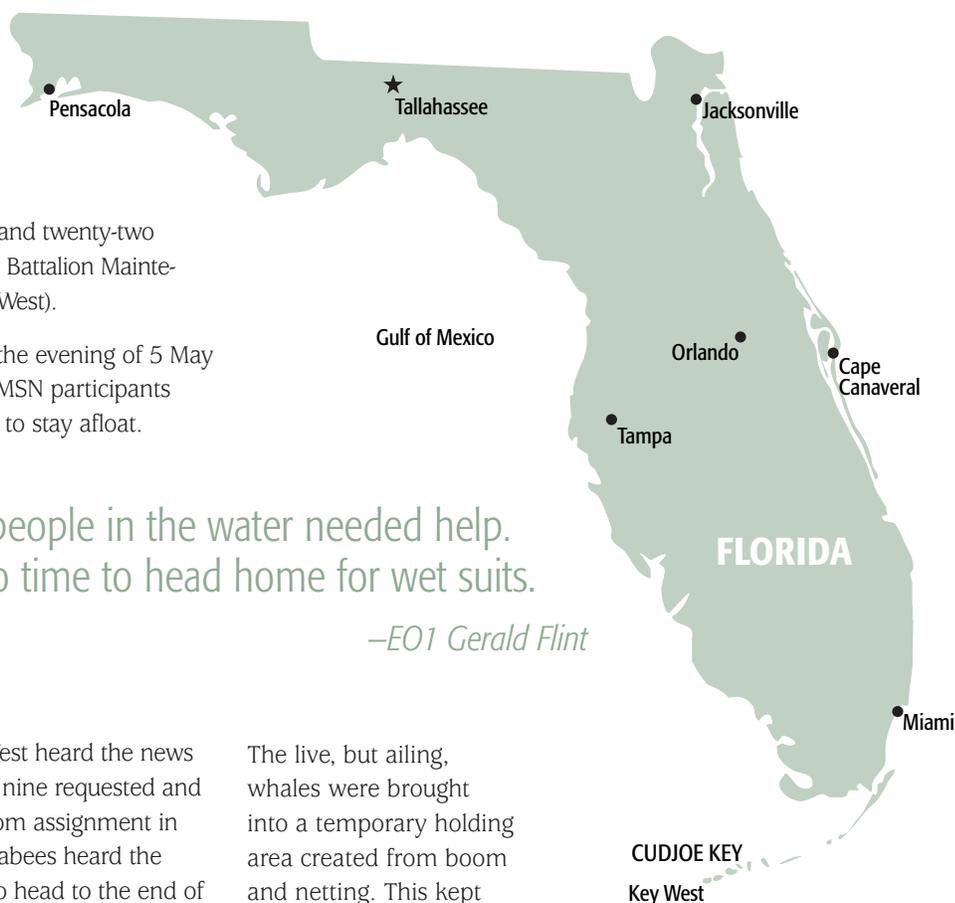
A kayaker discovered the first whale the evening of 5 May 2011. By the early hours of 6 May, MMSN participants were in the water helping the whales to stay afloat.

The whales and the people in the water needed help.
There was no time to head home for wet suits.

—EO1 Gerald Flint

A member of CBMU-202 DET Key West heard the news on his way to work. The first crew of nine requested and received permission to be relieved from assignment in order to help the whales. As other Seabees heard the news, they too received permission to head to the end of Blimp Road where the whales were being corralled and assisted. By 0900, the Seabees were being divided into groups and assigned tasks. Several teams of two headed into the water in their work camouflage uniforms to relieve the volunteers who had been in the water for hours. As one of the participating Seabees, EO1 Gerald Flint, noted, "The whales and the people in the water needed help. There was no time to head home for wet suits. We just needed to get to work."

The live, but ailing, whales were brought into a temporary holding area created from boom and netting. This kept the whales together and protected them from predators. Several of the whales appeared to have pulmonary edema (build up of water in the lungs) that caused labored breathing and indicated possible infection. Veterinarians drew blood samples to test for viruses, administered antibiotics for infections and regularly checked vital signs. The whales also received rehydration liquids.





Pilot Whale fluke.

Rescue of R301 and R302.
(Rescued whales are assigned numbers for research recordkeeping and to reduce bonding by their human rescuers.)



Because of their fragile state, the whales needed help staying afloat to prevent drowning. Following a quick briefing, two volunteers were assigned to each whale, cradling it in a special hold and keeping it wet. Necessary precautions included keeping water away from the whale's blowhole, keeping the animal wet and cool and holding gently to avoid peeling the whale's sunburned skin. In one case, a large male became sufficiently agitated when another male was brought in that he threw off his holders. Otherwise it seemed as though the whales knew the humans were helping. EO1 Flint commented, "Sometimes a whale would wrap its pectoral fin around its human helper, which also helped to keep the person warm."

Volunteers served in the water, on shore and out on boats. Those in the water

Teaching volunteers how to properly hold a marine mammal.



worked four-hour shifts around the clock. Despite water temperatures in the high 70's and daytime air temperatures in the 90's, those in the water were chilled by the end of a shift. On-shore volunteers provided drinks and food, including warm clam chowder, to those coming out of the water.

Pilot whales are social animals, traveling in large groups, or pods. If one pod member is ill and strands itself, others typically will follow. Yet it does not mean all pod members will be in one location. For the Cudjoe Key pod, individual whales were stranding in mangrove stands and in shallows over an area of roughly five square miles.

The MMSN team needed boats and crews out looking for other whales. Seabee BUC Danny Rose headed to a nearby marina and secured a boat to help search for other whales.

When live whales were found, each would be loaded onto a zodiac (inflatable boat) and towed back to the temporary pen to be evaluated and

Marine Mammal Stranding Network & the Marine Mammal Conservancy

IT TAKES A well coordinate team to respond to marine mammal strandings. Following enactment of the 1992 amendments to the Marine Mammal Protection Act, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) of the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration was designated as the lead agency to establish regional volunteer stranding response networks.

The Southeast Region stranding network covers eight states, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. Approximately four hundred organizations participate, including federal, state and local governments and nonprofit groups. Organizations are authorized via NMFS Letters of Authority and receive NMFS training. Only a limited number of the organizations are authorized to rehabilitate cetaceans.

One of these organizations, the Marine Mammal Conservancy (MMC), had a prominent role in the Cudjoe Key pilot whale rescue and rehabilitation effort. The nonprofit MMC, located in Key Largo, Florida, is authorized by NMFS to respond, rescue, transport and rehabilitate marine mammals. The organization's rescue range covers the Florida Keys, from Biscayne National Park in the northeast to Cape Sable in the northwest and to the Dry Tortugas in the Southeast.

The Conservancy works to encourage public participation in protecting and rescuing marine mammals. In addition to its rescue and rehabilitation efforts, MMC sponsors

volunteer training and education outreach. The MMC has advised other countries on marine mammal rescue and supported efforts throughout the Gulf Coast and the Southeast Atlantic region.

Other MMSN organizations that were instrumental in the pilot whale rescue were Sea World, Ocean Embassy, Harbor Branch Oceanographic and the Georgia Aquarium. These organizations provided veterinarians and other experts, equipment and supplies.

Rescue and rehabilitation is an expensive and resource intensive effort. Specific costs vary by species and age but estimates range from \$250,000 to \$500,000 per animal. This does

not include all of the volunteer time and contributions, from boats to food to equipment.

Robert Lingenfelter, MMC President, summarized the commitment to such efforts by saying, "As the dominant species on this planet, we have a duty and an obligation to properly protect and manage all of our resources. You cannot do that without the basic science. That is what the stranding network is for—to provide some of that data to make a difference in the health of our oceans tomorrow as well as the health of our planet in which we all depend."

For more information about the MMC, visit <http://marinemammalconservancy.org>.





Navy Seabees helping out during rescue operations.

helped. To the people in the water and along the shoreline, those zodiacs were a hopeful sign. Observers knew that boats returning without the zodiac carried only a carcass.

for these social pilot whales, it is important that they can see that they are not alone. Once the circle was formed, the whales were notably calmer.

And it was not just the humans who knew when the boats brought live whales or carcasses. Each time a boat returned with a dead whale, the whales in the pen would call out and become agitated. To help calm the corralled whales, they were brought into a circle to let them see each other. Particularly



Y401—a male's dorsal fin.



Applying a satellite tag.



Loading Y400 and Y404 for release back into the wild.

Two whales, identified as Y401 and Y404, were determined to be sufficiently healthy to release. These whales were equipped with satellite tags and loaded onto a barge to get them out to deeper water. Seabees and several MMSN participants assisted with the release operation. The first whale lowered into the water stayed near the boat until the second was lowered. The two touched then headed off together. Over the next few days they were



We could not have done what we did without the Seabees' help.

—Robert Lingenfelter

tracked heading out into the Gulf Stream and making their way up the Atlantic coast.

By Tuesday, 10 May, five surviving but critically ill whales were transported to the Marine Mammal Conservancy's rehabilitation center in Key Largo, Florida. When a transport truck from the Georgia Aquarium, slated to transport the

whales, encountered mechanical problems, the Publix grocery store chain provided one of its trucks to make the trip.

Twenty-four hour volunteer support continued at the rehabilitation center. Despite all efforts, a few days after arriving at the center, the largest male was euthanized as his pulmonary edema worsened. The

remaining four are expected to require months of rehabilitation.

It may never be known why this group stranded. Blood and tissue are being tested to help researchers understand more about the condition of the whales and to determine if known viruses may have contributed. There was no Navy sonar use in the Gulf of Mexico training range or

Construction Battalion Maintenance Unit-202 Detachment Key West

FOR THE SECOND time in eight years, Seabees have responded to help stranded marine mammals. The Seabees also helped during the 2005 stranding of rough-toothed dolphins. The following Seabees from CBMU-202 DET Key West participated in the 2011 pilot whale rescue effort:

1. BU2 Ernie Gant
2. BU2 Jeremy Tellier
3. BU2 Sergio Armas
4. BU2 William Travis
5. BU3 Cody Hoeck
6. CE2 Steven Meakins
7. CE3 David Lasch
8. CM2 Timothy Long
9. CMCA Casey King
10. CMCN Tara Strieby
11. EA3 An Chi Lo
12. EO1 Gerald Flint
13. EO1 Robert Kendall
14. EO2 Carlos Guzman
15. EO2 John Hagelund
16. EO3 Tyson Wright
17. EOCN Luis Torres
18. EOCN Trevor Stanley
19. SW2 Geoffrey Sark
20. SW2 John Smith
21. SW2 Terryl McCormack

BUC Danny Rose from the Naval Facilities Engineering Command Southeast DET Key West also supported this rescue effort.

The CBMU-202 DET Key West will be disestablished on 1 September 2011.



Team members from the Marine Mammal Conservancy, Sea World and Ocean Embassy prepare to release Y400 back into the wild.

around the Florida Keys for the seven days prior to the strandings.

Robert Lingenfelter, MMC President, shared his appreciation of the Seabee help. "These rescue efforts depend on a chain of command structure that the Seabees understand. Their training enables them to respond immediately to direction. We cannot succeed without volunteers and we could not have done what we did without the Seabees' help."

SW2 McCormack remarked, "The Seabees put out an amazing effort. We

are trained for disaster relief and contingency construction, and although we have never done anything like this before, we stepped up and proved once again that there truly is no limit to what the Seabees CAN DO." ⚓

*Photos by Bob & Mariela Care
Photography*

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