

Delta State and JFK Jr. – It all starts in Idaho

MISSISSIPPI LIFE

Mark H. Stowers Published 9:35 a.m. CT July 18, 2014



Good Mornin'! Good Mornin'!

Growing up in Mississippi, I always enjoyed swimming. And in Boy Scouts that joy was pushed to the extreme at Camp Tallaha as we competed in the Mile Swim, Swimming Merit Badge and eventually Boy Scout Lifeguard Training. Coming down the hill to the spring fed pool, Jimmy Russnogle and Rusty Harlow would be waiting to torture us. One would feign drowning on the far side and one the other would reciprocate in an even harder spot to get to. The trainees would strain to use every bit of knowledge they dunked us in.

Reach, throw, row and go.

I have a special respect for lifeguards and even more so for the men and women who put their life on the line around the US as Coast Guard Helicopter Rescue Swimmers. Their motto, "So others may live" encourages them to dive into icy seas of Alaska and other ports around the US. It's not an easy unit to join. I'm know the trainers are a million more times as hard as the duo I

endured. I don't think I would have cut it. But there's one adopted Mississippian who was part of the hallowed unit.

Todd Davis. Originally from Idaho, Davis and his wife Krista make their home in Cleveland where he teaches at Delta State as the Director of Recreation Leadership - 'Dave Heflin Professorship. The outdoorsman teaches all sorts of biking/hiking/mountain climbing/rappelling/skydiving/survival and has a heart for making folks healthier in and around Mississippi. He came to DSU after a career in the Coast Guard. But he wasn't always the outdoors guru and swim expert.



As a college junior at the University of Idaho majoring in civil engineering, Davis was in the middle of helping design a sewage system. His professor told them they would be working through Thanksgiving break. That wasn't appealing to Davis so he went to visit with his advisor and told him he'd had enough.

"I don't want to do this. I'm just not into it anymore. So I left."

He left campus, failed all of his classes and ended up at home with his parents. They encouraged him to figure out his life. Later he went to Seattle to watch an Air Show with friends. There just happen to be rescue helicopters in the show. Davis was inspired and after the show went down to meet the Coast Guard members to let them know he wanted to be apart.

But his "30 pound overweight" physique and "young pimply faced" look didn't garner any interest from them.

"And that was a challenge to me. So you think I can't do it, huh?" Davis said. "So I literally went to Spokane the next week, told my parents and I was on a plane in March to New Jersey."

And just like the movies, the bus was met with a loud and boisterous sergeant explaining the rules and regulations to the new recruits. Boot camp lasted 15 weeks and Davis made the cut to be in the Coast Guard. After boot camp he was assigned to a cutter ship in Seattle. The ship worked Alaska and Hawaii. The ships worked a lot of fisheries and intercepted a lot of aliens trying to get into America. As a non-rated Coast Guard member, Davis could sign up for any job in the Coast Guard, provided he could pass the training for it. At first he thought about being a Marine Scientist but later decided to become a Rescue Swimmer. After a year and a half on the ship he was sent to North Carolina for Aviation Survival Technician training.

For 18 weeks he was pretty much "water tortured" and trained in every aspect of the rescue swimmer program. But there's more to the job than just jumping out of a helicopter in frozen oceans to rescue folks.

"The real job is not to be a rescue swimmer. That's a secondary job," he explained. "The actual job is an Aviation Survival Technician. We are trained extensively – we are master sewers, we can sew anything. We sew helicopter cover canvas bags. Any of the safety equipment. We are trained extensively on small engine repair for all the pumps. We are able to deploy a pump to all sizes of boats from sailboats to ships to a freighter. We have to check all those pumps every day. On any given day you'd have 30 pumps to check. The third thing is parachuting. Anything that deploys from a C-130 and we are required to stay in shape. We swim, run, lift and we had to pass a regular PT test."

After his rigorous training, his first assignment was Cape Cod, Massachusetts in 1997. His territory was from the tip of Maine all the way to Atlantic City, New Jersey working out 400 miles into the ocean. He worked taking injured people off of cruise ships and had plenty of deep-water dives rescuing all sorts of people in need.

"Cape Cod was one of the most busiest Coast Guard stations," he said.

A typical week would include every fourth day checking in at 3:00 p.m. and be on duty for a full 24 hours. The other days were more normal 8 to 5. Fifteen years ago on July 16, 1999, Davis checked in for his long day. It would become even longer.

On a normal call, the pilots wake up first and go to the ready room and the swimmers are left to be called at the last moment to participate in whatever the situation is. This was not a normal

situation. The messenger who is normally non-chalant when getting the rescue swimmer let Davis know that "they weren't flying but they were needed in the ready room right away." That was at 2:00 a.m.

He got to the ready room only to find it filled with "strangers" and men in uniforms he didn't recognize. They were told that, "there had been a crash of a high profile person. And they were waiting to get released to go."

The air was thick with intrigue and unknown. Davis and his crew waited around for several hours waiting for the "red phone" to ring. It never did. At 6:30 a.m. it finally did.

"All we knew was a high profile person had crashed in a plane," he said. "They gave the tail numbers and the colors and such."

The crew was frustrated at the lack of facts and communication. They searched in the darkness for any clue but were coming up empty. As the sun began to rise and illuminate the ocean, Davis could see a whole fleet of helicopters and planes working the same area. But there weren't military or rescue personnel.

"Above us, about 2,000 feet was a bees nest of helicopters," he said. "The pilots knew that it had been leaked to the news. We thought it was someone like Billy Joel or some entertainer."

The crew switched their radio to normal AM/FM radio and discovered who they were looking for. The news told them that John F. Kennedy Jr. was missing.

"Then it was a firestorm. We searched for four or five hours. We did see an oil slick but did not see any debris. We burned an entire tank of fuel searching."

Davis and his crew came back to the station only to find more than 20 mobile news trucks both US and International working the story. They were met on the tarmac by the Coast Guard Press Officer giving them instruction on what they could and couldn't say. He spent the next four to six hours talking to reporters. He was interviewed by Christiane Amanpour from CNN and plenty of local newspapers.

With nothing to rescue the mission became a salvage mission and Davis the rescue swimmer was not involved. The Navy came in and eventually found the wreckage. The crash site was transferred to Davis' hangar and for the next six months the crash site was reconfigured. No one was allowed in and no cameras were ever allowed in. But Davis got to know the guard on duty and was let in, without a camera, to see up close what he had been looking for on that fateful night.

"It looked like a tin can that had been shot by a shotgun five or six times," he said. "It smelled like gas mixed with salt water and rust – it was a god awful smell. I only got to see it for five minutes but it changed my life forever in regards to what crashes are and how destructive the water can be."

Davis spent a few more years in the Coast Guard before opening a kayak and canoe rental business in the area. His business was bought out and he went back to Idaho to finish his schooling. There's plenty more to the story of how he made his way south but that's something we'll cover in another column.

Fifteen years ago he took part in searching for Camelot but to no avail. He had saved hundreds as a Coast Guard swimmer but this was one dive he wouldn't get to make.

Do you know any Coast Guard Swimmers? I'd always 'preciate your comments here or over at Facebook or you can tweet me @markhstowers....see yah next week!