Rescue Swimmer Program Starts After Tragedy at Sea

NATIONAL HARBOR, Md. – The Coast Guard rescue swimmer program was born after a deadly ship sinking in 1983 off the coast of Virginia that claimed the lives of 31 people.

During a stormy February night, the 605-foot SS Marine Electric, a bulk carrying ship, capsized about 30 miles off the coast of Chincoteague, Virginia.

The service sent a helicopter to assist in the rescue mission. At that time the Coast Guard did not have any rescue swimmers, and when they would respond to a distress call, they'd lower the basket and the person in the water would have to swim toward it to then be raised up inside the helicopter.

"Unfortunately, it didn't always work the best," Aviation Survival Technician Chief Petty Officer Eric Biehn said during a floor presentation.

The service spent two hours trying to recuse the 34 people in the water after the ship capsized, but with the weather conditions, and freezing water, was unable to lift anyone up. The Navy came, as they had rescues swimmers at the time, and was able to save three lives with their rescue swimmer.

The following year, the Coast Guard put funding in start a

rescue swimmer program in the Coast Guard Authorization Act of 1984.

“That maritime disaster was enough to wake up Congress and the United States,” Biehn said.

By 1985, the first team of rescue swimmers was deployed to a base in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, and by 1991 the program was fully deployed in 23 bases.