

# UNDERWATER SAFETY A CRITICAL CONCERN FOR OFFSHORE WORKERS

Petans has established itself as a trusted provider of Helicopter Underwater Escape Training (HUET) for the offshore sector.

**For experienced offshore workers, Helicopter Underwater Escape Training (HUET) is an established part of their training regime. It is mandatory for anyone travelling over water by helicopter and must be refreshed every four years.**

Thankfully, in recent years, incidents involving helicopters ditching into water have been few and far between, but a recent incident off the Norwegian coast near Bergen demonstrated the importance of

HUET training. Although sadly there was a loss of life in the incident, five individuals successfully escaped.

Petans, an emergency safety and survival training provider based in Norwich, puts over 2,000 individuals through HUET training annually. This includes those working in the energy sector, helicopter pilots and crew, and those in the military and emergency services.

“Over the years, HUET modules have changed in design, from clumsy-looking boxes that launched from the side of a pool to the more sophisticated units we see nowadays,” said Andie Marshall, business manager. “But fundamentally, the training and most importantly its objective remain unchanged – to save lives.”

The origins of HUET are military. Following several incidents of aircraft ditching into water, the need to simulate the experience during training was recognised by the US Navy. In March 1943, Ensign Wilfred Kaneb was tasked with developing a training device.

Kaneb’s objective was to teach trainees to orient themselves underwater. Leading a team of engineers, a mock-up of

what he called the ‘Underwater Cockpit Escape Device’ was developed. They named it the ‘Dilbert Dunker’ after a hapless cartoon character. The name ‘Dunker’ appears to have stuck – although whether that is from the US cartoon character or the action of dunking is unclear.

In the 1970s, the first underwater escape training unit was built in Portsmouth, UK for use by the Royal Navy. It followed numerous fatal accidents involving helicopters crash landing in water, with a high proportion of them showing that the helicopter inverted upon landing in the water.

Along with physical improvements to seats and release systems, the need for a training facility to train crew and passengers in emergency egress from ditched aircraft was identified as a clear way to save lives.

The introduction of HUET training in the oil and gas industry did not fully surface until the following decade. Gas was first discovered in the North Sea in 1965 with production starting the following year, but commercial oil was not discovered until five years later with production beginning in 1975.

By the late 1970s, the industry was reliant on helicopter travel ferrying workers to and from their place of work.

According to a paper presented for the

1980 Oceanology International conference in Brighton by A E Urguhart and Lt J.H Cross of the Robert Gordon’s Institute of Technology (RGIT), Aberdeen, 219,600 worker movements were recorded in the 12 months from November 1978 in Dyce, Aberdeen alone.

Having used the learnings from the Naval Underwater Escape Unit, the pair developed what is instantly recognisable as today’s Helicopter Underwater Escape Training.

“Reading their paper on how they developed the unit – and how the training drills work – the similarity to what we teach today is clear,” said Andie Marshall. “It demonstrates that this training comes from a proven process of analysis and development to produce something effective”.

Petans recently received a visit from Grant Campbell, senior advisor – air safety at Shell Aircraft. Grant was visiting Petans to review the facilities and processes used in HUET and other training.

“Grant is a huge supporter of the need for HUET training within the industry,” said Andie. “Although technology and helicopter design has greatly supported the reduction in helicopter ditchings over the past 50 years, there is so much evidence of HUET training working over the years.”

Grant said: “HUET is mandated by industry requirements, and these requirements also mandate the type of helicopter used and the safety equipment fitted to the helicopter.”

“Personally, I think the training today, compared to when I first did the RGIT course in about 1985, has improved. The units used today really reflect the safety equipment in the helicopters in use – and the survival equipment supplied

to passengers.”

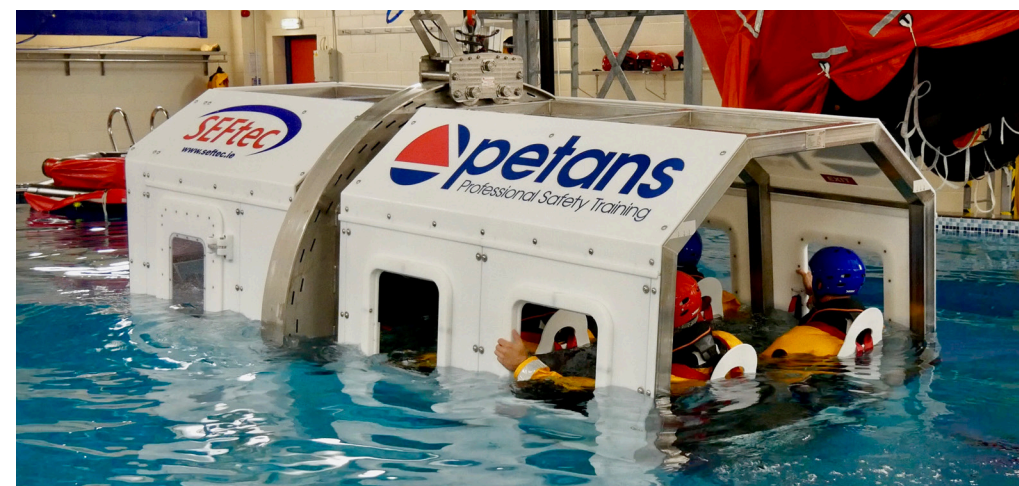
In recent years, Petans has felt that some delegates attending the training for the energy industry haven’t understood the importance of HUET – and more importantly where the need has come from.

“We provide structured and purposeful training with the aim being that in the event of the worst-case scenario occurring, we have equipped workers to manage themselves in such a way to withstand impact and give

them the utmost chance of safely exiting the helicopter,” said Andie.

“A helicopter ditching into water is thankfully a rare occurrence, but it doesn’t take much research to demonstrate how many people over the years attribute their safe escape to HUET training.” ●

**For more information, visit [petans.co.uk](http://petans.co.uk), email [info@petans.co.uk](mailto:info@petans.co.uk) or call 01603 891255.**



**Far left:** Andie Marshall, business manager at Petans  
**Image:** Petans  
**Above:** Helicopter Underwater Escape Training (HUET) is mandatory for anyone travelling over water by helicopter  
**Image:** Getty Images  
**Left:** Petans puts over 2,000 individuals through HUET training annually  
**Image:** Richard Hermann – RJH Productions