The Jaws of Life

Kevin Brick is the former president of Phoenix Rescue Equipment, Inc. His father, Mike Brick, developed and marketed the Jaws of Life.

How was the Jaws of Life developed?

In 1970 my father, Mike Brick, was a fire suppression development and marketing engineer in Kentucky. He was contacted by George Hurst to head up the safety division of Hurst Performance, which made gear shifters for race cars. My father took the job and moved the family to Pennsylvania. Upon arrival at Hurst headquarters in Warminster, he inquired where the safety division was located. He was told that he WAS the safety division. He was given a mandate to develop a hand-carried hydraulic rescue tool within a year. The previous Hurst rescue tool, which was tried at Daytona International Speedway, was an apparatus that weighed more than 350 pounds and was attached to a pickup truck. Mike hired a team of engineers and within the year developed a working, portable prototype.
The prototype proved that Mike and his team had a sound concept that could be refined. In December 1971 they sold their first tool to the Parkland Fire Company in Parkland, Pennsylvania.

**Why was the Jaws of Life better than previous methods of extricating victims from car wrecks?**

Up to this point, the only forms of extrication from cars available to fire departments were pry bars, winches, and jacks. It was very time-consuming, taking as long as an hour or more to free an accident victim. Now with the Hurst Power Rescue Tool and a hydraulic power unit, rescue times were considerably shortened, with less trauma to the victims and increased survivability.

**What is the origin of the now-famous nickname?**

In 1972, a promotional film about the production tool was made, and the film narrator explained, "The view from the driver's seat is not so grim because the driver is saved from the jaws of death to the jaws of life!" Later that year the film was shown to the actors in the television show “Emergency!” An actor couldn't remember the name of the tool during a scene, but he remembered the line in the film. He said, "Give me the Jaws of Life." And from that point on, it has been known as the Jaws of Life.

**The Smithsonian's 1977 Jaws of Life, from the Carlsbad (New Mexico) Fire Department, was one of many that were sold in the 1970s. What made the Jaws of Life so successful?**

The tool sold well because it was light years ahead of any other extrication method. With the Jaws of Life, one man could save an accident victim in 10-15 minutes, compared with other methods, which took more than an hour. An added benefit was that it was the only tool of its kind.

**How did the tool work?**

The tool was attached to a hydraulic power unit via hoses. The Jaws had a valve that could raise or lower a piston in the housing of the tool. The piston was attached through internal linkage to two arms. When the piston was extended the arms would spread open; when retracted they would close. The Hurst Tool operated under 5000 psi. Mike Brick believed this low pressure system was the safest for both the operator and the victim.
Mike Brick using one of the early Jaws of Life tools. Photo courtesy of Kevin Brick

What did Mike Brick do after marketing the Jaws of Life?

Mike left Hurst in 1982 and started Phoenix Rescue Equipment, where he and I developed a dual cutter and spreader made of titanium. Together we enhanced and improved the tool that is now in fire companies across the country and on six continents. We sold the business in 2002.

On October 29, 2011, Mike Brick and his wife were in their car and were hit broadside by a pickup truck while crossing an intersection. The truck hit the passenger side where Mike was sitting. No airbags deployed, and he was pinned in the car with multiple injuries including 18 broken ribs, a broken hip and pelvis. He had to be extricated by the Trappe, Pennsylvania Fire Department using the Jaws of Life.

Mike passed away on November 20, 2012 at age 82. In my biased opinion he is the true father of the modern hydraulic rescue tool.