

TOM WALTERS  
ON  
COAST GUARD AVIATION IN ALASKA  
AND  
Flying Conditions  
Weather  
Rescues

By

JAMES METZA

On April 14, 1993

At CDR Tom Walter's home

Editor

James Metza

Completed April 16, 1993

Restrictions, None

Kodiak Island College

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The following autobiographical interview was held on April 14, 1993, with Mr. Tom Walters, a retired U.S. Coast Guard Commander and helicopter pilot. The interview was held in Mr. Walters home on Kodiak Island in Alaska. The interviewer was James D. Metza, a student at Kodiak Island College.

JM: Tom, could you tell me a little bit about how you came to Alaska and what year?

TW: I actually began flying with the Airforce in 1971 right after college. Realizing I was going to get drafted I decided I wanted to be in rescue helicopters and so after flying years in Iceland I thought maybe there was a better way, or a nicer place of doing the flying in so I thought of the exchange pilot program with the United States Coast Guard. They had an opening in Astoria, Oregon in 1978 and I applied for it and I was accepted so I flew Coast Guard rescue missions as an exchange pilot from the Airforce for three years and I liked it so much that I asked for an inner service transfer and so I went from a Captain O3 in the Airforce and came straight across as a lieutenant O3 to the Coast Guard overnight. A few days later in October of 1981 I received orders to come to Kodiak. It was kind of a spur of the moment type deal because we had a Coast Guard helicopter that crashed; Pat Reeves and his crew were on a night rescue mission up in the Prince William sound area. It was at night in pretty crummy weather and some believe that he had accidentally dipped his tail into some heavy seas and of course that killed everybody. So they needed someone with cold weather experience so I came up in the middle of winter and since I felt like I owed everybody for letting me in they said come on up to Kodiak and I was glad to do it. Because I came up during that time and got here around the 10th of October, 1981 and that was my first time to Kodiak, of course at the time I did not realize, well there was really nothing to compare it with all of my experiences or rescues had been in Iceland and then off the coast of Oregon. Off the coast of Oregon it was mainly the trolling industry or medivacs off the ships going up and down the shipping lanes so I really had nothing to compare it with. When I first got here in October I didn't even realize we had mountains around because the weather was so crummy. The ceilings were always so low and blowing and snowing, and being new to it I had no idea. However, my first rescue case up here; when you come to Kodiak this is one of the few places that a pilot comes up here and doesn't matter how many years you have been flying or what your rank is you automatically have to wait 90 days before you can sign for that helicopter or airplane as the pilot in command, so the first case I went on the first 90 days I went as the copilot and the first big case I went on was the St. Patrick. The St. Patrick was a vessel that was scalloping out here in our waters. At one particular night something like in late November I think, there was a storm that went through and it was such that it flushed water over her decks and

knocked out the power source. The vessel went dark and I believe there were 16 people on board and most of these people had come up from the lower 48 and I think they originally started off in Florida and worked their way up around the Panama Canal and up the coast and finally made their way up here. They really were not used to the cold waters and the types of storms and so on that we get up here in Alaska. At least I don't think they were because a lot of them when the skipper told them to abandon ship, they were not very good at it and some of them jumped in the water without survival suits.

JM: And the water was very cold?

TW: Yes, you're talking the water temperature is in the upper 30 degrees Fahrenheit where you only have 15 minutes before you start losing dexterity or probably even before then and so you really can't use your fingers or your hands and so on. The winds were blowing as such that when they opened the life raft the winds caught it and took it off and several people jumped after it. There ended up being two survivors out of that, the rest of them died. That was my first learning experience of how bad the winters are up here and what the seas can do and really how untrained a lot of the fishermen are, especially from the lower 48. That was a real eye opener at the time.

JM: I imagine when 12 people die it must have been bad?

TW: Well, it really was bad because some of the folks on there were from Kodiak that had hired on when the ship came here. I know the parents of one of them in particular and yes that's a real heartache when you know the family or the people. That is one thing about the Coast Guard where ever you go especially in a community like this where its small you get to know the people and so when someone goes out its not just a fishing vessel, it's the people on there that you know and it really becomes discerning and heartbreaking when someone dies. The sad part about this too is that the vessel never sunk and it was sitting right up here near Marmot Island, and it's close by. The Mayday calls they got off did not say where they were and it turned out to be a real Chinese fire drill just trying to locate them. Then it was a reminder because the vessel sat right out here for years until the insurance companies decided what to do with it.

JM: So it was right off Kodiak only a few miles from the airstation?

TW: Yes.

JM: So it was a fairly quick response time but the inexperience of the boat crew?

TW: Well, it would have been a quicker response time. You had snow showers, it was night time, and not knowing where they were the crews that went out there didn't locate them. Really finding them was the next morning and by that time it was too late except for two of them. It was a real dramatic survival of one of the individuals. He lost some of his foot to frost bite but he had survived and he gave his interview and part of the survival tapes that were later made by University of Alaska along with the Coast Guard he told his story, so we have that on tape which is nice.

JM: What do you think at that time was the most difficult challenge for you as far as

the flying, and the most difficult rescue you have been on?

TW: Probably the biggest problem around Kodiak that you don't have in most places, well its a combination of things. First of all the weather forecasting is not very good. The weather systems spin off each other like tops and the weather forecasters have a real difficult time determining how these systems are going to move through, and because of that you might see 4 or 5 different systems move through Kodiak in a matter of 12 hours. So you never know what you're going to run into and each side of the island is so different. The north side is different than the side of the Shelikof Straits where you have winds that funnel down through glaciers and mountain passes and the other side you may have fog and on the south side it may be clear. You never really knew what you were going to be flying into when you took off, you just had to realize and be prepared that you might fly into something different. So I always carried the maximum amount of fuel realizing that I may not be able to make it back to Kodiak. I might have to cross over to King Salmon you see that gives someone a little bit more flexibility, the other thing was that it is always dark around here in the winter time. I mean it is dark, you don't have all the city lights and all the big airways that you have in the lower 48. The blackness of the surroundings with the lava rock and black sands isn't a very good contrast. Those days we had night vision goggles but they were the hand held type and they didn't work very good and so normally you didn't use them at all. It would tend to give you vertigo more than anything, so they were not used like they use them now. I think I could have saved a few extra grey hairs if we would have had them back then.

JM: Vertigo is you cant tell up from down and you don't know which way your Aircraft is in relation to the ground?

TW: It causes your head to spin and you look like a drunk walking down the street.

JM: So it must have been fairly difficult with no reference to see the ground or where the sealing was?

TW: Yes.

JM: So you really had no idea except for your instruments were you were flying?

TW: Well, yes and that presented another problem. The loran navigation towers that were up here were so close together that half the time it didn't work. They finally added another navigation system called omega in 1985, but the omega didn't work good in icing and snow conditions. You were better off in the summer when the omega would back up your loran but you never were quite sure where you were so your main reference points that you had, you had to really stay on the chart and you really had to concentrate on where you were so that was a problem and of course where did you train to learn all this stuff? Well, you didn't so you had to suck up as much information in those first 90 days up here as a copilot before they threw you in the briar patch.

JM: How long was it after you got here that you had your first real difficult flying situation where you had to use your skills to the best of your ability?

TW: That was a monthly occurence, there was always a vessel taking on water at

night, or having problems where we would at least go out and drop a dewatering pump to them or running into a rock. There were medivacs all over the island with different accidents on board so we were going out quite often.

JM: So there were a lot of vessels that sunk at that time?

TW: Yes, there were. We were on a lot of different searches when I first got here. You could see the downslide of the King crab industry here in Kodiak because there were less and less King crab out there, but there was still as many vessels, families, boat payments and insurance payments that had to be paid so you had the whole fishing fleet that was still going out to get what they could from the crab harvest. The only problem was that when the crab started diminishing, the fish and game folks started setting timelines that you could go out fishing. They might have just a 24 hour opening, a three day, a week or something like that. But in those days weather was not a factor, they would come up; I don't know whoever made those decisions I'm sure it was boards and everything else that made all those decisions but these poor guys when they had an opening they geared up for it and it was a one shot deal for many of them it was either you go out there and get your crab and come back and be able to pay the bank off and put food on the table so I really felt for these guys. They went out in some of the worse weather you could imagine and some of the vessels were wood but not as many of them because they were sinking pretty quick. They would get out there in some pretty bad weather and of course they would take these huge crab pots and the more they would carry the the more crab they would bring back so they would go out there many of them overloaded for the sea conditions and get out there and flip over. When you flip over in cold seas like that they often times didn't have time to get into survival suits or life rafts and quite frankly in those days you didn't have the requirements or the education. It was kind of like taboo to have survival suits around the boat because you were supposed to have trust in your boat.

JM: So they thought if they ignored it, it would not happen to them?

TW: Yeah, it was called superstition I guess.



JM: Is there any sar case in particular that you had extra difficulties with?

TW: Yes, I had a lot of them with difficulties. I had one case up near Cordova, Alaska These two guys were bringing a salmon seiner up from Oregon and they got themselves in 45 knot winds and the seas were 30 ft., just real nasty, and the boat was breaking apart and taking on water. The engine had quit and they were quickly getting blown into Kayak Island. They called out there Mayday and we started flying there at night and about two thirds of the way across before we got to Kayak Island, we started picking up ice.

JM: Ice on the helicopter?

TW: Yes, ice on the helicopter and lots of snow. The loran was about 30 miles off. We thought we knew where we were, doing a pretty good line across there and thought the loran was doing ok. That's the problem, the loran often times wouldn't just go on the blink and just say off. It would slowly move you 20 or 30 miles off course. Your over ocean and you don't have any landmarks to see so your kind of relying on this idiot box.

JM: So you show up in Cordova and your supposed to be in Valdez or something?

TW: Well, the only thing I remember is when you time and distance wised it we were getting close to Kayak and they were about 2 miles just to the south of Kayak drifting toward the island. We were kind of in a hurry because they were drifting into the rocks. One thing I remember was that there was a 150 Ft. tall rock on one end of it and you had the lighthouse station sitting right across from it and in between the rock and the cliff of the island where the station was you had yourself about 150 to 200 Ft. space to go through. What I remember is seeing the lighthouse flashing on the left side of us and going right between the rock and saying we're pretty darn lucky cause we didn't see it coming.

JM: And your rotor diameter is 60 some Ft.?

TW: Yes, that was a real eye opener, it was just after that we were able to talk the Coast Guard into getting us the Omega to kind of help us out because that was pretty scary. When we, were having real problems with the radio communications with the vessel and when we finally found them, we were only flying about 50 Ft.

JM: Is that because of the ceilings?

TW: Because the ceilings were down, and just for the visibility to be able to see anything we went across them and turned on the nose light to make a turn back around, and as soon as the nose light hit, and again the snow showers starts coming at you I got Immediate vertigo and again I was like a drunken pilot I mean my head was spinning and I felt like I was falling.

JM: So what do you do when you get vertigo?

TW: What I did was I tried to act as calm as I could and made it look like I wanted my copilot to set things up while I rested a little bit. Again it's a confidence game because you don't like to tell people how close you came to running into a rock and you don't want to make matters worse by telling them you got Vertigo so it was basically hey, would you take the controls and make the turn around

here and we will set up for the hoist. Meanwhile I had my eyes pinned to the instruments trying to regain my composure. It worked out pretty good once we got down into a hover and when you have turbulent type winds the helicopter is bouncing all around and then when you have the seas going in a different direction of what the winds are doing, you have yourself a real mixmaster. The boat is moving one way and your moving another so you have to put this basket on this little section of the deck that is tossing around and with the basket only having a quarter inch diameter steel cable attached to the hoist that can go up at about 240 Ft. So you see its a real timing game and that's one of the things I thought the Coast Guard were real masters of. In the coordination between the flight mechanic that is running the hoist behind you and the pilot up front. The flight mechanic is doing something we call conning in, which is talking the pilot into the position, or at least trying to with the boat bouncing all over the place. It can be real frustrating but the guys really get good at it. So after 4 or 5 attempts of trying to get this basket on the vessel, right before it hit the rocks we were able to get these two guys off the boat. Then you always think WOW! once I got these two guys off the vessel you say man is that great it's time to go get a beer and relax and let someone else take the duty. The only problem was we didn't have enough fuel to get back to Kodiak and we were closer to Cordova but the loran was acting up so it was all a matter of time and distance and trying to find some kind of landmark in the pitch black with snow and high winds with the Aircraft icing up and low on fuel. We noticed a quarter inch of ice built up on the windshield, it was real opaque and we couldn't see out very well but we could see out the side window so the copilot did a real good job pinpointing where we were, and we got down to about 25 feet and found some landmarks as we picked are way to Cordova to finally land. It took about 5 minutes for the survivors to find themselves a bottle and put themselves to sleep. I think that was the last time they ever volunteered to bring a vessel up from the lower 48.

JM: I understand that you landed in the water one time in really rough conditions?

TW: Yes, that was a case in December. I believe that was in 1986, we had a vessel that called a Mayday on the south part of the Island in the Shelikof Straits, they kind of got caught in a storm. It was a early launch for us I think is was about 4:00 A.M. The problem with that side of the island is that you had to go through Whale Pass, and with low ceilings in a hard rain with winds reaching 50 knots it made it real turbulent. That's where I got my first crack across my helmet from hitting the side of the cockpit because of the turbulence.

JM: It was that violent?

TW: Yes, it was bad enough that you really couldn't hold onto the controls, you were better off just letting it trim itself up and keep your hands nearby and when the helicopter would go up on its side then you would have to make a control movement. But then once we got threw the pass and into the Raspberry Straits it was a little better. Then we started heading south in the middle of Shelikof

Straits but the radio's were real scratchy and when we got within 20 miles of where they said or thought they were; a lot of times when their vessels are breaking up they have the same type of navigation problems that we do. But I remember there were two brothers, they were the Steven brothers and I remember that they had bought the vessel and they were taking it down to Sand Point. So when we were able to talk to them the communications were breaking up, partly because of the seas; when they are 30 or 40 Ft. and you have a 38 Ft. seiner that is in the trough, you loose comms completely. When we were so low because of the ceiling it was very difficult to get a good signal for the A.D.F. automatic direction finder which would give you a signal that a needle would point the direction of the boat. We knew we were in the right vicinity or at least within 20 miles or we would not have been able to get a signal if we were not. So as the transmissions from the brothers got a little louder we asked them to shoot off a flare. That's how we located them when we spotted the flare, but by that time the storm had picked up to 80 knot winds. I mean the seas were really really ugly they were easily 40 to 45Ft.

JM: I think a lot of people don't realize how hard it is to fly a helicopter in 80 knot winds, that must be particularly hard?

TW: Yes it was, especially with seas the way they were coming over the south end of the Island tumbling the way they were. Then you had the mixmaster situation where the vessel was going one way and the helo the other but the vessel was actually breaking up. It had a couple of stabilizers that were broken in two and the antenna's were broken off and the engines were burning up trying to keep the vessel into the wind. When I talked to them they wanted off really quick because the rudder had broken and the vessel was going completely over on its side and when the boat would come up, something else would break off. One of the brothers had gone to the aft deck and what we would do on something like that is lower a polyurethane trailline that was 100 Ft. long and had weight bags on one end and what we called a weak link on the other which was attached to the basket that the flight mechanic would lower to the boat. The crewman of the boat would pull the trailline and pull the basket to the boat and you wouldn't have to worry about the basket swinging or pendulum into the vessel and breaking the hoist. We had discussed this with the Steven brothers and they were prepared to do that; but when you talk about 80 knot winds the trail line would go way behind the helicopter and you couldn't get the trail line to the vessel unless you flew beyond the boat were the pilot couldn't see it. The pilot really needs to see the vessel or see something to have some kind of reference to hold the aircraft steady and fly formation with the vessel. It's just like flying formation with another airplane, you have to see it to keep good formation. If you don't or you loose the target you're completely depending on the flight mechanic to do a good job of conning the helicopter back over the target. This is ok but he is usually one or two seconds behind what I might need to keep the aircraft out of trouble in those kind of seas. So that's not the best situation to



be in, so what we did was to take an anchor and tie it to the trail line.

JM: Your anchor for the helicopter?

TW: Yes, he lowered that down and was able to get it to the vessel, but the weak-link that was attached to the end of the trail line that was hooked to the basket parted because he started pulling too hard on the trail line. That is what the weak-link was intended for was to break there instead of breaking the hoist. We had some more weight bags that we put on another trail line and we tried it, well it broke also, then basically we were out of trail lines. It took us a while trying to get these things on there anyway, so we were getting pretty frustrated and tired or fatigued.

JM: It must have been pretty challenging to hold a hover for that long?

TW: Exactly, it was a constant moving around and a lot of concentration and a lot of sweat trying to get this case over with. We had a mast swinging around under the helicopter and the helicopter was being pushed up and down because of the turbulence so you're constantly dodging and dodging his mast that's trying to cut you in half and put you in the water with him. That's always in your mind trying to keep that from happening. We decided to try the hoist even without a trail line because we didn't have any trail lines left. When we put the basket down the basket would sail way back behind the aircraft toward the tail rotor so I would fly way in front of the vessel and the flight mechanic which was his first rescue.

JM: So the flight mechanic was very green?

TW: Yes, he was very green but he was doing a good job. We did get it on the vessel and he backed me up so I could fly formation with the vessel. Then he noticed a fray in the hoist cable with some of the strands of steel broken on the cable. He was worried that it would snap once we started bringing these guys up. So we discussed it and took the basket off the deck which was real discouraging; all that work to get it on there and then we had to take it off. We cut the cable where it had frayed and installed a quick splice. The quick splice is a metal block about twice the size of a Hershey bar that has holes drilled in various places on it that you put the cable through. The quick splice has a hoist hook on it so we could use the hoist again with the basket. By this time we were really getting tired and were running low on fuel, We just had enough fuel to get down to Sitkinak Island, that was the island south of Kodiak that we had a fuel tank where we could land and get fuel so we had enough to get back to the city of Kodiak. So at that point we needed to get something happening there because we spent such a long time on this thing..... I like to hoist people out of a life raft, with that you can get down a lot closer to it and it makes flying a lot easier. So I had asked if they had a raft on board and they said yes and I said what I want you to do is get in your survival suits tie off with each other with a rope, deploy the life raft and both of you get in the life raft and I'll hoist you out of the life raft. They said ok. It wasn't more than 30 seconds both brothers were on the stern in their survival suits with what looked like bundles of something under their

arms. They both jumped in and I said great, this is going to be good now that they're both in the water they're going to deploy the life raft and they're going to get in. Well the life raft never deployed and the two bundles that they were carrying soon left their arms and they were struggling in the water and I'm thinking to myself, gee this is not like the plan that we had discussed. On the other hand they were in the water and it was like a life raft because I didn't have to worry about the mast. So I thought we will just put the basket in the water and they can easily swim to the basket or I could get it close to them and I could let out enough slack in the cable and back off from the basket. I could watch them and keep that helicopter pretty steady other than the winds bouncing me around. See, if I could see them I could fly formation with them. That was working out real good and they had swam over to the basket and both of them got into the basket and I'm saying man this is a done deal. I moved back up to them and started bringing them up. They got half way up to the helicopter, about 15 feet and darn if the cable didn't break.

JM: What was the cable strength?

TW: The cable was rated for 600 pounds but the cable broke right down by the quick splice. So here we are without trail lines, no basket and the flight mechanic brought the cable all the way up into the hoist drum because he was worried it would get in the tail rotor. So what was I to do? The only thing that we had practiced before was what was called a rough water landing.

JM: Have you ever done one in those kind of seas?

TW: Oh no never in that kind of seas. I had done it a couple of times in some calm seas but in these kind of seas you normally wouldn't even think about it or never practice it. The only time we did it was in calm water. We decided to get out the platform that stuck out from the side of the plane that was attached to the floor and the side of the cargo door which the flight mechanic could go out on.

JM: Kind of like a step?

TW: Yes, something you could go out on or step out on. I was going to get parallel with the seas and the winds were hitting me off the front left side or port side of the helicopter and soon as the top of the wave would come up I was going to sit down on the wave right next to the two guys and pick them up. This was a lot easier said than done, I remember the first time we landed; timing that just right where we could get down on the water the waves were coming right at the copilot from his side. When it got too close for comfort he would say up up up and we would immediately have to lift up. So he did that about three times; we would get right there two feet from them and up up up before the wave would slap us which it did a couple of times. The concern there was that if a wave hit us in the tail rotor it could flip us, or if it would have gone in the engine intake it would have knocked an engine out and we would of all been in the water. The third or fourth try we did get right down next to them, as a matter of fact I landed on top of one of the brothers. That's the fourth time I had to get up because the Flight Mechanic said your on top of them up up up. By this time I

was just plain beat.

JM: Mentally and physically?

TW: Yes, I was just wore out but you could tell the brothers had about had it. They had stopped struggling and hypothermia had set in. They were not able to swim anymore; one of their suits was open and it was filling with water, the other brother had his hands clasped together and was praying for someone to help him. I think they had lost all hope of rescue at that point. You could see it, we were that close to them but yet so far. So I told the crew that we didn't have any fuel and I thought every time I landed in the water that our chances of getting swamped increased.

JM: That must be very frustrating for an aircraft commander as yourself to think you know that you really want to do this but you also have to look out for your crew and thinking am I going to put these guys in jeopardy by landing again?

TW: Well yes that's it! I think a lot of the crew members thought on past cases that I pushed a little to hard anyway but I think I felt pretty comfortable in doing what I did because of the flying I did in Iceland. But in this particular instance I was getting concerned, so concerned that my conscious was talking to my subconscious which had never happened to me before. I said this is awfully strange that I'm sitting here talking to myself right in the middle of this case. It was kind of like the devil sitting on one shoulder and an angel sitting on the other. One saying think about your crew, the other saying what about these two guys in the water. That was a real tough decision I had to make then and I couldn't do it anymore. I told the crew we are going to try once more and that was it, we were going to have to leave. Then I decided I was going to land on top of the crest with the two brothers in the trough and then just slide down the wave and get down in the trough with them and try to pick them up. We did what we said and slid down the wave and we did grab them. We had three crewmen in the back; I had a Corpsman, Radioman and the Flight Mechanic. All three grabbed these two guys and they were not able to pull them in because their suits had all filled up with gallons of water like a big water balloon. So I asked my copilot to go back and give them a hand, so there was four of them struggling to get these guys in. Once we got them on the platform where they were hanging on it just with their arms I lifted back up above the waves and I was looking in the side mirror acting like a cheerleader and screaming support over on the ICS. Actually, I had the microphone keyed and they were listening to it back in Kodiak because they gave me a hard time when I got back. But in the back it looked like a wrestling tag team match, they had people by the heads and underneath their crotch trying to pull these guys in. It took them a good five minutes to finally get them in. If you could imagine doing a tug of war.

JM: So you were in the air at this time hovering above the waves with the survivors hanging on the platform?

TW: Yes, they were hanging on the outside and it was kind of scary too because a couple of them didn't have safety belts on an could have fell out. But after



about five minutes they all shot back in, kind of like a rubberband rolling in the cabin. The copilot came back up to his seat and the crew started treating the survivors for hypothermia. We started to head for Sitkinak to refuel and I was just beat. I didn't have anything left in me anymore and I asked the copilot to take the controls. He took the controls and after about five minutes he said hey Tom take the controls and why don't you fly, and I thought well that's pretty nervy. I thought he must really be tired after that struggle in the back, so I took it again and after about three minutes I realized hey John we don't have enough fuel to make it to Sitkinak. He said yeah that's what I thought that's why I gave you the controls back. So what we did instead of going into the wind like we were going we turned around and just shot across Shelikof Straits and we only had 15 minutes of fuel left. We were sucking fumes at that time so the first piece of land that we could see; of course it was so foggy and rainy at this time and all we saw was a little island that was twice the size of the helicopter but that was all we needed. We landed on it and shut down and after about 2 1/2 hours the Commanding Officer of Airstation Kodiak sent a C-130 over to find us and when it came down through the clouds about 150 Ft. it got knocked all over the place. The airstation was going to send another helicopter out to pick us up but the C-130 pilot said no, you don't want anyone to come out here till this storm blows over. Then it was 5 or 6 hours later that another helicopter came and picked us up.

JM: What were the conditions of the survivors?

TW: Good after we warmed them up slowly, I had asked them why they didn't deploy their raft and they said we didn't hear you or a word you said. The engines were so loud because they were burning up and causing all kinds of noise, all I heard was the word overboard. The two men are doing fine they write me once in awhile.

This file is part of the Kodiak History Project.

For an index of other recordings in this collection see the index:

96-49-01\_I01.pdf