

Speaker: Bob Workman

Date Recorded: 10-26-2016

I'm Bob workman. I'm a retired Coast Guard Captain. Coast Guard aviator number 914, and Coast Guard helicopter pilot number 458. My wife says I belong in a museum. I've been stationed at Coast Guard Air Station San Diego, Coast Guard air station at Alaska, Coast Guard air station St. Petersburg, Florida, Coast Guard Air Station Brooklyn, New York, Coast Guard Air Station Detroit, Michigan. Then they caught up with me for staff duty, and I was chief of boating safety division and federal law enforcement for the Ninth Coast Guard District of Cleveland, and there I was assigned to Coast Guard headquarters for the operations research study of the resources and policies for the national search and rescue system that was directed to be done by the officer of management and budget.

My last year and a half before I retired was at the headquarters, and assigned, unofficially, to Vice President Bush's staff, because the JAGS at the Pentagon were refusing to let the Coast Guard use intelligence sensors to assist him tracking and capturing for boarding parties, traffickers, and cocaine and arms from the Caribbean. I spent about most of my time at the National War College for logistics and administrative support, and much of my time was down in the jungles of Columbia in the Guajira Peninsula and the jungles of Panama. And Nicaragua. I coordinated closely with General Gorman's staff at Southcom when it was still in Panama. That's basically my assignments.

I was qualified aircraft commander. The H13 helicopter. The HO4S3G helicopter, the H52 helicopter, the H3C, the HH3A, and the HH3E, the Air Force versions of the H3, and the HH3F in the Coast Guard. Also had about six months in the P5M under instruction at Corpus Christi Naval Air Station in Texas, but mostly through the Gumman albatross. The HU16E out of San Diego and Arnett. That was a real eye-opener for experience. San Diego was a good opener for a young pilot straight out of flight training. We did many medical evacuations, as well as offshore landings. The last of the offshore landings in the Coast Guard.

The interesting thing about the medical evacuations were we tried to get away from having to land offshore whenever we're evacuating from a ship with a fixed wing. Helicopters hadn't really developed enough to go far or to stay out for very long. Most of the meta-decks were by fixed wing. We would ask a Navy ship, for example, let's say he had a seaman with a battery that blew up in his face, and he had metal fragments in his eyes, and he needed to be evacuated to the Naval Hospital in San Diego, we would fly down to Magdalena Bay in Baja, Mexico. We'd ask the destroyer to head over to Baja while we were flying down there. We would land in Magdalena

Bay.

Well, the California gray whale, many who had gone to Alaska and gone to Glacier Bay have seen the California gray whales up there. Well, they migrate down to Magdalena Bay for birthing and for mating. We would land on the water and shut down the engines while we were waiting for the lots from the destroyer, for example, bringing the patient over to us, and the whales would have fun with us. We'd be looking down at the whales, and they would be pushing us around. The fuselage in the water must have looked like a whale to them, but they would turn us around in circles. They didn't do anything to hurt the aircraft, they were very gentle with us, but it was a lot of fun just watching that. It was a unique experience. Up in a net, that was pretty horrible flying conditions. We had six fathoms of rain a year. That's 36 feet of rain a year.

In the wintertime, that was all ice and snow. The flying conditions were treacherous up there, plus you had mountains on either side and as a result, we lost three aircraft and 27 people while I was up there. I'm not going to go into some of the cases up there because the flying was too brutal. We go down now to St. Petersburg, Florida, and I'll describe one of the cases I had in 1967 with the H52 helicopter. 120 miles offshore, the coastal freighter, Cecil Ann was sinking in a winter storm with 28-foot seas. That's 56 feet from Croft to crest with six crew on board. The crew were all 300-pound football build guys. Well, the H52 was designed to hoist for 200 pounders. That would have put me a little over 1000 pounds over gross weight for the helicopter, which wasn't designed for that.

Dewey Barfield took off in a Grumman Albatross from St. Petersburg air station to locate them and to try to drop pumps and rafts to them, and the wind was so fierce that it blew them away, and the ship was sinking. He called us out about two in the morning. We headed out in our H 52, and we got on scene just as they were leaving because they were low on fuel. Here we are out there at night in a single engine helicopter 120 miles offshore in a fierce winter storm looking to hoist six people that the helicopter wasn't designed to hoist. We discussed the situation with the crew and asked if any of them had any objections, or didn't want to take the risks, and they all agreed with my evaluation. I told the hoist operator, for the last two hoists, if the survivor butt hits the sea, you're to jettison the hoist and we're done. They're done.

That was their only chance to survive, but we will take it and hope for the best. The first four came up fine as a normal hoist. The second one I was using maximum power just to stay in a hover. Now, realize that this is at night offshore, there are no lights, there is no horizon, so this is a full instrument hoist. I'm on instruments the whole time. My copilot, Norm Hoff, did a wonderful job. He was monitoring the instruments for me, doing the navigation for me, keeping track of the fuel, and there were things that I just can be diverted from because I had my hands full just trying to fly the helicopter in a stable hover as I could for the hoist operator. The

fifth hoist, as I said, was maximum power, and it was right at the limit.

We have an instrument in the cockpit that has a red bar that goes across it that's a torque limiter that tells you when you've over torqued the engine. He was monitoring that as part of his duties as well. The last survivor, the 6th survivor, I had to refer back to my HO4S days before we had standardization. We flew the flight envelope back then. We didn't have standardized numbers that we flew by. But that machine, you had to milk that helicopter to get everything out of it you could for staying airborne when you're getting heavy. I used many of those procedures since we had the same rotors and the same rotor gearbox as the HO4S.

The last hoist was done with translational lift. I told the operator, "Now, we're going to do a flyby a little over 15 knots, and you're going to instruct him to jump in the basket as we go by. If he makes it, great. If he doesn't, we only have enough fuel for one try. He made it, and I told [Name inaudible, Chaz-a-ru 00:09:58], my hoist operator, I said, "Now, if his butt so much as hits the water, remember, you locate that explosive bolt for the hoist cable and you hit the explosive bolt and jettison the basket. Because that'll be our way to fly out of it. As long as he is coming up faster than we're going down, will continue. He acknowledged that, and everybody in the crew acknowledged that it was a worthy risk, and we go ahead and take it.

Fortunately, he came up faster than we went down, and he was brought aboard. By that time, I had over torqued the main engine, I had over torqued the main gearbox for the rotors, and so I was instructing the crew to keep their ears open for any grinding noise from the gearbox or from the engine, and I flew at 150 feet ready to go into a full autorotation to the surface if we lost an engine, or if the gearbox started to grind and was in danger of freezing up on us. My copilot had calculated that Cedar Keys, Florida was the closest point of land, and so we were heading directly for Cedar Keys.

About daybreak, we arrived at the beach at Cedar Keys after watching the fuel warning lights for about 15 minutes before he got to the beach, so I put it down right on the beach, and two other helicopters from St. Pierre station came up to meet us and took my crew and the survivors back to the air station. There is a fuel truck was driven up from the air station to refuel us, and a mechanic came over and stuck the tanks to measure how much fuel I had remaining, and he said I had eight minutes of fuel to drive tanks. We refueled at Crystal city airport. I picked it up and was a half mile away. I picked it up, and flew over there, and met the fuel truck. They refueled us, and I flew back to St. Petersburg air station, and there the old man was waiting for me.

I figured this is probably one of those situations where you either had a court-martial, or you were going to get an award, one of the two. Norm Miley was my skipper, and he says, "Don't worry, you did a good job, Bob." Then the semi flatbed came out of from behind the hangar with a crane, and they hoisted the

helicopter on the flatbed, and strapped it down, and drove it to Elizabeth city for overhaul because it was considered an unplayable airplane at that point. The 1426 was a replacement helicopter, which that helicopter now is hanging in Udvar-Hazy Smithsonian air and space Museum. From there, I went up to Coast Guard air station in Brooklyn, New York, and flew both H52's and H3's up there.

Now, I'll relate one one case up there, early in the morning about 1 o'clock, I got a call from a rescue coordination Center saying that they wanted me to fly an H3 down to ... This is my duty night, down to naval operations base, Norfolk, where they would refuel me, and be met by a Navy neurosurgeon. The nuclear submarine SS Flying Fish had a torpedo man whose head had been crushed in the forward torpedo room, and he needed to be given medical attention or an evacuation back to the Naval Hospital in Norfolk in Portsmouth. The problem was, all the airports were closed down from obscured ceilings and visibility on the East Coast. We had about a 70-foot ceiling and less than a quarter-mile visibility, and I had to go out 150 miles offshore at night to rendezvous with the Flying Fish.

Fortunately, Elizabeth city air station had a C-130 that had located the submarine and was orbiting over it, and they vectored me directly to the sub so that I wouldn't waste any fuel getting there so I could do the hoist and get back. Picked up the doctor, the neurosurgeon, we flew out and arrived on scene. Flew out about 70 feet off the surface of there. The first hoist was wild because we had heavy seas. The submarine had submerged with only the conning tower showing above the surface, so as to try to stabilize the submarine from too much rocking and rolling. The sale on the sub was still whipping back and forth, which made it very difficult to stay over the hatch and the sale there on the sub to get the doctor on board. Plus, when the sub was submerged, I had no visual reference whatsoever.

Again, it's a hoist on instruments without any outside reference for visual reference. It was a very difficult hoist. It was a wild ride for the doctor. He went over the side in a basket and was being lowered, and he was swaying back and forth in the basket trying to, as the hoist operator was trying to keep the helicopter and the basket over the conning tower, and he lost his medical bag over the side it was so violent. He was scared to death. We brought them back up for another try, and he tried to get out, scramble out of the basket, and my hoist operator took his hand, and put on his forehead, and shoved him back into the basket and over the side, he went again to go down to the sub.

This time we were successful in getting him on board, and we all decided, the skipper of the sub, and the doctor, and myself that it was too dangerous to try to bring the patient up in those conditions, so the neurosurgeon stayed on board and stabilized him, and the submarine sank, went below the surface, and sailed into Norfolk underwater. Well, we still had to get back. I didn't want to go back at 70 feet, 5270 feet off the surface again, so I climbed up to in IFR, and filed IFR for an instrument flight back to the Hampton Roads area, which was the closest point to

land, because we were at the maximum distance offshore for the H3, which was 150 miles. It's 300-mile round-trip with allowing you 20 minutes for hoisting.

Well, we were on the fuel warning lights again for the last 15 minutes before we got to the beach, and I contacted Langley Air Force Base for a ground control radar, GCA approach. They said, "Sorry, the airport's closed, we're not accepting any inbound traffic." I said, "But all the other airports up and down the East Coast are closed, and this is Coast Guard rescue." I gave them my tail number, and I told them what we had been doing and we're coming inbound, and we are landing, because I won't have any fuel to take us any further, and I would really like to stay clear of buildings or obstructions. When we came down, and, "Sorry, sir, we can't give you GCA." So I, "Let me speak to the supervisors." The sergeant came on, I love sergeants and chief petty officers, they're the guys that get the job done.

The Sarge was on there, said, "Commanding general says we can't give you any GCA's. It's a direct order." I said, "Well, Sarge, can you give me a practice GCA. Did he tell you you couldn't give me any practice GCA's?" "Absolutely not, sir. We sure can give you a practice GCA." And it gives me a heading to come to. He brought us straight in. The GCA takes you down to 100 feet quarter-mile visibility. We brought us into a hover at 100 feet, and we couldn't see a thing. We started letting down a little bit at a time, a little bit of the time. The procedures are that while you're letting down, the pilot flies the helicopter on instruments while the copilot is looking for visual contact. When he gets visual contact he says, "Contact." He takes the helicopter controls, and you look up as a pilot, and when you have contact you say, "Contact, I have it." You take it back, and you land. That's the normal procedure.

That happened at about two feet above the deck when we first saw the runway and taxi lights. When we called into Langley approach and said, "Can you guys send a ground vehicle out to bring us in, because we haven't the slightest idea where we are, and we can't see where we are." They did, so we remained overnight, refueled in the morning, and the Air Force guys were amazed when we took off in the morning and flew back to Brooklyn air station. We also did some armed boarding party deliveries at Brooklyn air station with the Soviet fishing fleet offshore. They were a lot of fun.

You go out to Montauk point with your armed boarding party on board with fast ropes attached inside, and you would make a high-speed run after you looked like a charter boat going out with the charter boats on the vessel you wanted to board, and do a half Cuban eight taking pictures, come up to a quick stop overhead, and your rappelling lines would go over, and the boarding crew would go aboard. You really got your jollies off flying that one. The only other one I had that might be of interest would be, and that's strictly a historical thing, is when I was exec at our Coast Guard air station, Detroit, upon the Great Lakes, I scrambled out at night on the sinking of the Edmund Fitzgerald. For those of you who may have heard,

Gordon Lightfoot's song, the Edmund Fitzgerald, that's the sinking of the ore boat, Edmund Fitzgerald.

When we arrived there, it had already sunk and taken all hands down, so we couldn't do a thing. That was an interesting scramble. We had, at Brooklyn air station, one other one I ought to mention, and that is we scrambled out with Paul Resnick took an H3, went ahead of us, and I was in an H52 flying from Floyd Bennett Field in Brooklyn to the Great Lakes. The Ninth Coast Guard District up in the Great Lakes had a severe winter storm came through, and respond a lot of tornadoes, and they had over 250 boats overdue and missing. It was too much for them to try to handle on their own, so they were asking for assistance from other Coast Guard districts. It was the frontal passage with lots of hail and thunderstorms, and I was very glad to have the H3 with its radar flying ahead of me and telling us where to stay clear of thunder cells with hail.

We were getting beat up pretty badly with headwinds, so we fought all night and got as far as Wilkes Barre Scranton airport where we landed to refuel because we were running low on fuel as well, and we decided we were tired and we needed to get some sleep. We checked in with Erie station, lifeboat station on Lake Erie, let them know where we were, and gave them our phone number, and went to the local motel. About two in the morning, we were called and said, "You guys got to get up and get going to the Vermilion, Ohio, which is up by Sandusky." Because the Vermilion dam had burst. There were houses and trailers being washed out into Lake Erie. There were people on roofs, and in the water, and such.

Well, Paul had gone there ahead of us in the H3, because it was a faster helicopter, so we flew a foot on the beach and a foot over the water, because again, we had about 70, 80-foot ceilings, and about a quarter of a mile visibility again. He flew all the way from Erie to Vermilion, and when we got there, fortunately, the front had passed, and we had BFR conditions. It was a mess. It was a massive flood. Flood waters have come down. The town of Vermilion had 200-year-old oak trees nestled right up against the houses. Huge oak trees. We had to take the helicopter to clear the area of where you could get a hoist basket down through the trees to get to people. You had to push the helicopter down into the trees to spread the branches so that it opened up a whole for you to drop the basket down.

One of those where there is a lady with a broken hip, and she was panicking, and we didn't have rescue swimmers back then. Glen Saroski was my copilot, and I had Glen take a PRC 16 radio with him, remote radio with him, and he was lowered down, and he had to swing back and forth and crashed through a window to get into the house, stabilize the lady, we lowered a Stokes litter to him. He had her strapped in Stokes litter, and we brought her up, and then brought him up.

Well, before we were done, we had hoisted 16 people from rooftops and out of the water and brought them over to a football field that was just above the surface of

the water where there was a police car. We set up a command station with a police car to keep the locals informed of what we were doing, and who we were bringing in, and that sort of thing. That was an interesting trip. After that, when I went to headquarters, the operations research study established a lot of the resources and policies that are used for the national search and rescue system today. I guess that's about the story of my career. It was a wonderful career. I love the Coast Guard, and I loved what I did. I miss it a great deal, and I miss the comradeship and the friendship of those I served with.