

## Speaker: Dave Spillman

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My name is Dave Spillman. I'm a retired captain from the Coast Guard. I went to the Coast Guard Academy. Graduated in 1979, then I went to the Coast Guard Cutter Dependable in Panama City, Florida, for about a year, and then I went to flight school. I graduated from there in I think it was October of 1981. Transitioned to the H-52. I went to Savannah for my first air station. I flew the H-52, and then on to Corpus Christi in I think 1985. I flew the H-52 there for about a year and then transitioned to the H-65 in 1988. I went up to Air Station Houston, transitioned back into the H-52. I think I did the last H-52 transition course. Then, six months or so after that, transitioned back into the H-65 again. Then I went to graduate school. I was an aeronautical engineer, so I went to graduate school at Purdue.

Then I went to the Coast Guard Research and Development Center, where I worked on aviation projects for three or four years. After that, I went to Air Station Kodiak, where I was the EO, then I became the XO, and from there Air Station Detroit, where I was the CO. Then my last tour, I was the Chief of Search and Rescue in the First Coast Guard District in Boston. I retired in 2006. So it's a long, great career. We had a fabulous time. My wife and I ... I met my wife my first air station, Savannah. Charlie Ray, Vice-Admiral Charlie Ray, the current HM Albatross, introduced me to her. He was a lieutenant JG and I was a lieutenant. We got married in Corpus Christi, and we've been together now for 30 years.

So, stories. I got a Distinguished Flying Cross, I thought I'd tell that story. When I was in Houston, that would have been in 1989. It was early August in 1989, and I had a duty. I came in at three o'clock. We relieved in the afternoon. There was a hurricane had just kind of sprung up in the Gulf. Hurricane Chantal. It's a category one, small hurricane. That was probably around four o'clock, they notified us that, in 48 hours or something they thought, the hurricane was going to affect Houston, so we started making preparation to evacuate ... hurricane evacuation in the helicopters. We were going to San Antonio, I think.

I think only one of our four helicopters was flyable, so I was the engineering officer and my maintenance guys started working pretty hard to put everything back together and get everything cleaned up as well as we could. That lasted most of the

afternoon, and I flew a couple of test flights, and we had eventually three out of the four up. The fourth one was not going to flyable, it was hard down. Just before we went to bed, I think we got launched out for a case in Galveston. The wind was just starting to pick up a little bit then, so we hoisted two guys off the jetties in Galveston and brought them to the airport at Galveston, and came back home, went to bed probably around 11:30 or midnight, or something like that.

During the night, the hurricane accelerated very quickly, so we were awakened at I think about 4 AM. The station at Sabine, Texas, which is right on the Texas Louisiana border, called us to say that a shrimp boat had capsized on the edge of the jetty, which sticks out about probably a mile and a half into the Gulf of Mexico from Sabine ... from the Sabine River. Their 41-footer had been out there to try to evacuate, and they couldn't get to them because it was probably 30 feet of surf or something like that breaking over the top of the capsized boat. So he said ... I remember he said, "Can you fly?" I said, "I don't know. I just woke up. I can hear it's raining. That's about all I know. So let me check the weather and we'll get back to you in a little bit."

So I went and looked at the weather, and the weather was pretty crummy. As you could imagine, that hurricane was just about to come ashore on the ... so the eye was just a little bit south of the coastline. Talked to the captain ... We had only transitioned to the H-65 maybe six months before that or something like that. I was one of the most experienced aircraft commanders because I'd flown it at my previous air station, and we only had really one other aircraft commander that was very experienced in aircraft at all. So I called him. He was our ops officer, Dana Goward, and I talked to him, and I talked to our CO, Captain Ted White, who had just relieved six weeks before or something like that.

I told him I thought I could make it, so they sort of reluctantly agreed to let us fly. I'd called the FAA for a weather briefing, and I remember I laughed at the end. He gave me the whole weather briefing, you know, "A hundred foot overcast and quarter mile visibility. Heavy winds. Embedded thunderstorms. Embedded tornadoes." His last sentence was, "VFR flight not recommended." So I said to him, "Oh. Okay, so what, you think I should go into the clouds?" He laughed and he said, "No, I'm just reading the script." So we took off. We flew from Houston, it was probably ... it might have been 200-foot overcast and maybe half a mile visibility or something. I

remember on the way out we flew past Space Center Boulevard.

I had to go around the water tower on the Johnson Space Center because the cloud deck was down below that. As we went over my house, was like a block south of the flight path, and my wife was up feeding our then six-month old baby, my son Steve, who's 27 now. She heard the helicopter go over and couldn't believe that we were flying. Actually, she couldn't even bring herself to call the station. She called a friend of ours to say, "Was that the helicopter I just heard go over?" He called the station for her, and called her back and said, "Yeah, they went." So I remember she told me that she paced for like two hours, waiting to hear the helicopter come back over.

So Mike Houtz was my co-pilot, and John Romano who we called the Cheese Dog, was the flight mechanic. We didn't have rescue swimmers in those days. We flew out over ... I remember we went by ... again, after we went around the water tower, we went past ... I think it was a Hilton Hotel on the shoreline of Claire Lake that we went by at maybe the fifth or sixth-floor level, and then out over Galveston Bay. Once we got over Galveston Bay it got really dark, so we had a hard time finding our way. We got a little confused over Galveston Bay for a while and figured out finally we were going further up the bay instead of toward Sabine. So we set ourselves a way point and started flying toward that.

We got over the beach on the coastline of Texas ... the Gulf of Mexico ... and the wind was blowing about probably ... maybe sixty or seventy knots, and we were crammed into it pretty severely, so we were pointing about probably forty degrees offshore, although we were following the coastline. Mike Houtz and I were sharing the controls. Whichever one of us could see would fly the cyclic, so that was him most of the first part because he was on the left side. He could see the shoreline. Whichever one of us didn't have the cyclic would control the collective to try to hold altitude and keep us at some semblance of air speed. It was a pretty severe turbulence.

The hurricane ... actually, we went through the eye of the hurricane just around High Island, Texas, and we punched through the wall of clouds, and it's just like they say. It was clear blue skies above us, and calm winds and everything was great for about two miles, then we'd punch back in on the other side. Of course, we were on the other side of the hurricane, the crab angle changed about 40 degrees the other way. So then I started flying the cyclic and Mike Houtz started flying the collective. We got to the Sabine, we followed the jetty all the way out, and the shrimp boat was

lying on its starboard side, right on the very tip of the jetty with the port outrigger sticking straight up in the air, about maybe 30 feet or so, and there were five guys hanging on the gunnel with about 30 feet of surf of something breaking over them every once a minute or something.

I just couldn't believe that they were still able to hang on. So we got in a hover. We had between 60 and 70 knots of wind in the hover, probably, so it didn't take very much power to hover, fortunately. Told John to go and hop Mike, and we did the rescue brief, everything. He coned me up to the point where the only thing I could see was the tip of the outrigger, and pretty much I was just flying formation on that. He had a bunch of extra weight bags on the basket to try to keep it hanging straight down, but even so, it was blowing 30 or 40 feet behind the airplane, probably. So he had to con us way forward to get it there. So he got the basket somehow down by him, and three of them jumped in.

So he said ... I remember him saying, "There's three of them," and I said, "Well, do you think they weigh more than 600 pounds?" He said, "No, no, they're little Vietnamese guys." I said, "Alright, well, bring them up." So I could feel a pretty good list when he took the load, but the basket came up fine. As it came up to the door, I remember hearing him yell, "Stay in the basket. Stay in the basket." They were trying to jump out. They were pretty crowded in the basket, too. So then, as he pulled the basket in, Mike Houtz was kind of leaning across the center console and in the back helping him get it in and get people positioned and everything. Then we put the basket back down. Must have been six people, because I remember we made two hoists, six people. So there were three people in the basket each time.

So we had them all on board. We took off from there and went back. There's a little landing strip right at the base of the jetty basically, and station Sabine is right behind there. So we landed on the runway and the guys didn't want to get out because two of their ship mates were still missing, had been washed over. They wanted to help us search for those other two guys. So there's a pretty significant language barrier. They were Vietnamese, they didn't speak very good English. They were really worried about their shipmates. They didn't want to get out at all. The station was there to pick them up, but ... So we spent only maybe two or three minutes trying to convince them to leave, and fortunately for us, another helicopter had taken off from Houston about maybe 45 minutes behind us, or something like

that.

The ops officer Dana Goward and Pat McCue had come in to fly that, and I think Tony Johnson was their flight mechanic. They had ... by the grace of God, they found the two guys in the water and picked them up just about that time. So we were able to tell them, "No, it's okay. The other helicopter has your buddies," and they finally agreed to get out. So then we had to get back to the air station. We were on the wrong side of the hurricane, we thought. We were on the right-hand side, which we thought would be the worst side. So we decided to go kind of behind it. The eye had moved farther ashore. It was not an easy flight back. Pretty much the same conditions. It was probably 200 all over in half a mile or a quarter mile vis, mostly back, and 60 to 75 knots of wind most of the way.

But we made it back, and we landed, and everybody was fine. So we ... then, the two crews, our crew, and Dana Goward's crew, both were named as the Helicopter Association International, the HAI, Humanitarian Service Award for that year. I got a DFC. Everybody in my crew got an air medal. Yeah, one of the most rewarding rescues of my whole career. So yeah, thanks, that was a unique time in my life.

So then I want to tell another story about ... this is when I was in Houston, also. It wasn't a rescue story, but the mega tanker Mega Borg caught on fire and was dumping oil about 70 miles offshore from Houston or something like that. This tanker was in the lightering area offshore, where there they would transfer ... they were too big into the port of Houston. So they would transfer their oil to lightering barges, then they'd shuttle it in. One of the pumps caught on fire and started a big leak. The ship was on fire and oil was flowing into the Gulf of Mexico. I can't remember if ... millions of barrel of oil were leaked into the Gulf of Mexico, and the tanker burned for ... I want to say eight or ten days, and the oil was leaking for probably two weeks or something like that.

So I got called in ... actually, I was the second crew, I didn't have the duty that night. I got called in probably around six o'clock in the morning I think, and hours of Saturday morning. We launched out, and you could see this column of smoke rising as soon as we left the ground at Houston. So we followed that column of smoke for about 70 miles and found the ship. There was nothing that we could do really when we got out there. The ship was burning, the previous crew had already lifted off whatever crew had survived, and there was a lot of fireboats and that kind of thing

on scene. So we spent probably four or five hours that day just shuttling back and forth to the beach, and pick up extra firefighters and firefighting foam and that kind of thing. That was on Saturday.

Probably by Monday, I think three more helicopters and a bunch of crews from various other Gulf Coast air stations arrived. We only flew from sunrise to sunset, but we ... during those hours, they put a 2-10, I think the Valiant was the on-scene commander. Between sunrise and sunset, about every 30 minutes, one of our helicopters would hit the flight deck of the Valiant, just hauling people and logistics and food and water and whatever they needed. So they had a regular schedule where they'd call the air station and bring us to bring stuff, and we'd load it up and bring it out there. I want to say we did about fifteen sorties a day for three weeks, just hauling stuff back and forth to them.

But the funniest story was at the very end, Valiant had been on scene for three weeks or something, and they were tired, and our guys were tired. So the Valiant CO called our air station CO, Captain White, and said, "I want to give me guys pizza. If I order Domino's, will you guys deliver?". Captain White said, "Of course we will." So I happened to have the duty that night. He called Domino's and ordered a hundred pizzas for his crew. The Domino's guy had no idea what was going on. He drove to the air station with a car full of pizza. He got there, we were sitting out on the ramp with the rotor turning already, so he figured out pretty fast what was going on. He gave us all of the boxes and he gave us the little red warming things that they go in. For the last thing, he took the sign off the top of his car. He gave it to us and we stuck it in the chin bubble of the helicopter.

So we flew out to the Valiant, and these guys, they were tired, you know. They've been offloading stuff for three weeks, every hour or something like that. So they cleared us to land, we taxied in. When we cleared the edge of the flight deck, you could see the guys in the flight deck crew just ... they saw that Domino's sign in the window and they figured it out. So we landed and opened the door and they started offloading pizzas. It was one of the funniest stories of my whole career. I think about that all the time. What a great thing it was. You know, just the camaraderie of the Coast Guard is ... what a wonderful, wonderful thing.

