

Speaker: Howard Thorsen

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I'm Howard Thorsen, Vice Admiral, US Coast Guard retired. I graduated from the Coast Guard Academy in 1955. We spent two years at sea in Coast Guard Cutter Ingham, usually in the north Atlantic, and weather patrol, refresher training, that type of thing, and then, fortunately, got orders to flight training. Left the ship in April of '57 for Pensacola and basic aviation training. Finished that in January of '58, and transferred to Corpus Christi, Texas, and got my wings in August of 1958, Aviator number 776. I flew the T34 and SNJ in Pensacola, and the PB ... Well checked out a little bit in the P5M at Corpus Christi, but primarily flew the S2F in most of the flying and advanced flying in Corpus Christi.

I left there and reported to my first aviation unit, which was Argentinia, Newfoundland. It was a change in Coast Guard policy, that they had previously had not assigned recent graduates because of the, shall we say, the difficult weather conditions, etc., but they changed ... They sent three of us up there. Bill Beckford, Bill Sander, and myself. Was in about a three, four month period of time. They were also sending them to an island during that period of time.

We flew the R5D, the C54, got those aircraft from the Air Force. One of 'em, swear to God, had coal dust in it. I think still left from the Berlin Airlift. But they were very, very good aircraft. Four engines, R2000, cables and pulleys, and no rudder assist or anything else, but extremely reliable. We flew many search and rescue required, but our primary mission was from January through June, we flew searching for icebergs, for International Ice Patrol that the Coast Guard has run since the Titanic days. And because of our lack of sophisticated equipment, we had to do that visually.

So we would routinely fly five, six, seven-hour flights out over the Atlantic searching for icebergs and plotting them as best we could. And we had to do this visually because our radar was not accurate enough to discern whether it was an iceberg or a ship. And sometimes to do that, to get down, you'd have to fly below the fog, and we would fly, believe it or not, flights of five, six hours, about 50 feet above the water. And you were able to see maybe half a mile ahead at the most.

So at times when we weren't sure because you'd be looking out over the wingtip to see if it was a white target went by or a dark. And now you weren't sure if it was a

ship or an iceberg, and you'd have to take another swing around and the radarman back hone you in on it, and at a quarter of a mile, it'd turn 20 degrees. And then look out over the wingtip to see if you could find out what it was. So that was interesting.

And we had no great difficulties. Everything seemed to work well. The older pilots ... I flew with my First Ops Officer was Gus Shrode, well, well, well known. And we had good crew, but living conditions inside were pretty austere. Then I was sent to Aircraft Maintenance School at Chanute Air Force Base in Illinois. From there I went to helicopter training in Pensacola because I was going to San Diego to fly helicopters and to fly the A216. San Diego from '62, August or September of '62 to '65. And I flew the Goat and the HO4S.

My most exciting time there in the HO4S, course the HO4S was single pilot. We flew in any conditions whatsoever with a single pilot sitting up and a single crewman down below. Got the word that there were people stranded on rocks offshore of Ensenada, Mexico, and so we launched, went down there. And of course there's no horizon, no reference point for hovering, but we were able to pick up two people who were stranded on rocks. Tide coming in and washing over them, and we were able to pick both of them up and fly them back up into San Diego. For that, I received the Air Medal.

Not too long after that, I was transferred from San Diego all the way to Los Angeles. I think I had asked for Cape Cod or whatever it was, but they sent me 110 miles north to Los Angeles. And we'd transitioned from the HO4S to the H52 just before I left San Diego. And of course, they had the H52 at Los Angeles.

The most interesting time I had there was, I was called in to ... I was a maintenance officer of course, and I was called in to do an inspection on a rotor head, required by headquarters at about 11:00 at night. And because we only kept one pilot on board, and he'd call a second pilot in if they're gonna launch. But since I was there we got the word that there had been a bends case on Tanner Bank, about 100 miles off San Diego. They launched, the H52 went out there, and long story short, the H52 ... They got vertigo, and they ended up inverted in the water. San Diego didn't have another one to go, and so they hollered for us. And since I was there I took it with the duty pilot. And we flew down, and the overcast was from about 3200 feet down to about 800 feet. And what had happened to the previous helicopter I guess, is

they had had their lights on when they went down through the clouds and got vertigo and never recovered.

So we got down through underneath, and it was absolutely flat-ass calm. There was no wind whatsoever. So there you are, no wind, no moon, no anything, but we were able to locate the H52. We got down into a hover and all we found was wheels sticking up out of the water. Thought, "Good heavens, what's happened?" And then out of the corners I saw a light and turned our light over to there, and there was a cabin cruiser with three uniforms, flight uniform people waving on the deck. So we knew they were okay.

And we went over to then find the little boat that was anchored out there. The guys, two guys, and one had been abalone fishing, and he stayed down too long and got scared by a shark and came up and he got the bends. And it's not very deep out there, so they were just anchored. So we were able to finally get into a hover over them, and we just blew them all around. There was no way ... And for the first time and only time in my life I said, "I can't do this." We found that there was a navy ship nearby and got him over there. They picked the bends victim up and we were able to then very easily go to the Navy ship and pick him up off of there and get back. Made it back to San Diego with not a whole lot of fuel left over. So that was the most interesting time I had at Los Angeles.

Then transferred to Brooklyn, Brooklyn Air Station. And again, flying the H52 and the A216. Different conditions, but again, well-run air station. No significant events. I should mention, I should go back again ... Oh, I won't, that's come on the... Then my career path changed dramatically. All of the sudden I got orders to the Coast Guard Academy to be head of the Navigation, which I had never asked for but ... So I spent three years there and then was assigned back to Aeronautical Engineering at headquarters for the first time.

After three years there, from '72 to '75, I was transferred to Command, to Coast Guard Air Station in Corpus Christi, Texas, which was without question the finest, finest duty that anybody ever could have. First of all, I was only there for a year. Headquarters had decided that I should go to the Industrial College of the Armed Forces. They didn't ask me. They thought that they had asked ... They had asked one of the board members to call me. He didn't. But they had already made arrangements to have a relief come in, and they had to go to the Commandant to

short tour me, which he did. And then I found out from one of my, my pilot's meeting. They said, "Captain, could you comment on your being transferred?" And I said, "Well of course not." Only been here a year. Well, I called headquarters, and they said okay; I could turn it down, but it would not have been the right thing to do. So off to the Industrial College I'm gonna go.

But shortly before leaving we had the most significant event that I experienced during my aviation career. A jack-up rig, offshore drilling rig, jack-up rigs ... To describe them, they are as the name goes. They're designed to go out into rather shallow water, and with long legs, are jacked down onto the bottom. And then the drilling platform and everything else is above there. And they're towed out into position. And we were having a, what they call a blue norther in Corpus Christi, a very severe weather system coming through. And one of the jack-up rigs being towed started to take on water down below and was lifting. And they hollered. So we had a ready helicopter and a readily fixed wing. And John Lewis and the co-pilot took off in the H52, and I was bowling onboard. And the duty officer called me and said, "Captain, how many beers have you had?" And I said none. He said, "Well we really need" ...

And so long story short, I quickly went down, got my gear on, got out in a helicopter with Dick McBride, was the co-pilot, and we headed on out. The wind was sufficient, where they were closing the tower at the Naval air station. We got out and there were a lot of lights around a lot of different vessels, that's whatever it is, John had had a difficult time trying to find the right one. And he did find it, but if you can picture this jack up rig, it's listing about 30 degrees or so. It's got these tall legs above the platform, and as a helicopter pilot the worst thing you have, is you have to go into a landing area where you can't see what's out there. And so he had tried once or twice, and couldn't get it, and then we were coming up on scene.

I said, "Hold on John, we've got the night sun." We had a million candle power light on our helicopter, and so we got into a hover. And this is how strong the wind was, we were hovering with 55% torque, which was normally to hover you might be at 80 or something like that. But we were almost like flying along, and we were watching ... Watched John go in and the landing platform was angled, and he came in and the rescue basket below him dragged along that the. And the captain, that's the only one there, jumped into or onto that rescue basket and John moved off.

And as he moved off, the entire rig started to tip and tipped right over, capsized down under the water. All the lights going off underneath and all that kind of stuff. Well there, of course, they had a crew of about 24, 25 people and they all, with the exception of the captain, had abandoned in a rescue vehicle, which was unsinkable. To describe it, if you could picture a disc and then put a cup on top of it and a cup underneath it. And so it was essentially unsinkable, and you had one entrance on top of that disc on one side, and you could put about 20, 22 people inside and close it up. And it had little motor, and some kind of a propellor or something in the back, and lowered down, slid down off the jack-up rig. So we then looked around for that and found it, and it had been secured to one of the tugs. And I said, "Well, there's nothing we can do here." But the seas were really probably 20, 25, 30 feet. So it was being tossed around quite a bit, but we said, "Well, they're in good hands." So we went back to Corpus Christi.

A few hours later I went in and just got some shut-eye in case we're needed. And then got the word, no. The capsule had parted the line, and it had unfortunately been tipped over by that towering line on the tug, and actually flipped over. Now, the only entrance way then was underwater, and so most of the people didn't get out of there. So we were then launched to search for it, and there was a Navy aircraft carrier that was used out of Pensacola for flight training there, was in the area, located it, and I landed aboard the carrier and went on up. And they were raising this thing up on the side, and water came pouring out of that hatch along with about 17 people. So that was the most terrible experience I have ever had.

After Corpus Christi, then I went in the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, Washington D.C. And then was sent back to aeronautical engineering. I was aeronautical engineering from '77 to '80. They had just signed a contract for the Falcons just before I arrived, and they also had given approval to start the procurement for the helicopter replacements for the H52. In my previous headquarters tour there I had been one of five people that came up with the 17 required characteristics for the H52 replacement. I had to go 150 miles offshore, pick up four people, come back again, single pilot. Everything from D.C. to x-ray as far as communications was concerned. Amphibious was not required because the H52 had very infrequently been used, and the availability of helicopters that would fit and everything else did not include any kind of an amphibian one.

So I then headed, as Chief of Aeronautical Engineering, had the project for the Falcons out of Little Rock, Arkansas. And then we started the procurement process for the H52 replacement. There were five, six of us. We had a very, very good process to do that, where it had to be a flying machine, not just something on paper. Long story short, we had a Bell helicopter; we had the Sikorsky 76, and the Aérospatiale. We all wanted the Sikorsky cause we'd been flying Sikorsky forever, and it was a nice machine. We qualified with the aid of the Navy Test Pilot School, pilots and everything else to see that they would meet the requirements, each one of the three. And then at the very last minute, Sikorsky dropped. They had decided that with the economic situation of offshore drilling and everything else that it made more sense for them to provide helicopters for that than to commit to the Coast Guard at a fairly speeded up delivery rate.

So we were disappointed, but fortunately, the other two were qualified, and we got the Dauphin, which has turned out to be one of the best helicopters the Coast Guard has ever had. So I'm very proud of the role I had in that. We all disbanded after the contract was signed, and then we promptly got sued, and for the next year I spent most of my time still as Chief of Aeronautical Engineering in defending against that, and we were successful.

Then, to conclude, I was sent to become a cadets at the Coast Guard Academy for three years. Followed by that I was a Chief of Staff in the fifth district in Norfolk, where I was selected for flag. Served two years as Chief of Research and Development. And then two years as Commander of the seventh district in Miami, and then finally a short tour of six, seven months as Chief of Operations in Coast Guard Headquarters. Then I got my third star and moved as Commander of Atlantic Area out of Governor's Island, and my 36-year career ended.

Okay. I forgot to mention, at Air station Brooklyn we were requested, Coast Guard was requested, to provide transportation for a mafia member. His name was Joe Valachi. Joe Valachi was in federal prison up in I think, near Darien, Connecticut. And they were trying Joe Bananas, I think was the guy in New York City. And of course there was a big price on Valachi's head, and so the problem they had was how were they going to get him from Connecticut down into Manhattan and back again. I don't know how they ever got him back again, but we used to fly a helicopter up to a landing strip up near Darien, right along the shore, pick up

Valachi and two, I don't know who would have been, FBI or whoever it was.

Well, I took the last flight, and we took off just about, little before daybreak from Brooklyn and flew on out there. It was beautiful. We got up there and landed and outcome these three people, and I tell you it could have been like central casting. You got Joe Valachi; he's got the camel hair coat. He's probably, what five foot four. Camel hair coat, fedora, and it looked like right out of central casting. And alongside of him are two of the biggest, Hulkest guys you've ever seen in your life. So they get in the helicopter.

And we take off, and now we're heading back down, and look up and say, "Oh. The weather's gotten worse." So we're talking to them at idle while there, and I said, "Well the weather's closing in here." So we flew under the Tappan Zee Bridge, no big deal. And then we get on down there and said, "Well, there's no way we're gonna be able to do this if we don't stay down low." And so we did. We went down, and we flew under every bridge along the East River all the way down past Manhattan. Commute traffic was coming in on the bridges overhead, and I can imagine what they ... If anybody ever looked down and saw this helicopter going by ... And we flew down and climbed on up over a ship that was tied up at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, and landed there and opened the door. Those three got out and there's a car waiting for them, and they stopped about 25, 30 yards out. And those two guys looked back and just shook their heads like ... So that was one of the more interesting times.