

Kodak Coast Guard HH-60 Helicopter Crash For first time, crew describes rescue mission

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Co-pilot Lt. Doug Watson was at the controls of the HH-60 Jayhawk helicopter that went down last week during a rescue at Unalaska Island

KODIAK -- Battered by 60-knot gusts and dodging 30-foot waves, the Coast Guard HH-60 Jayhawk helicopter and its four-member crew hovered over the doomed freighter grounded in a frigid Bering Sea gale.

The moment would soon turn tragic, according to the first personal accounts from members of the Kodiak-based helicopter crew involved in last Wednesday's rescue in the Aleutians. A rescue basket had been dropped on a cable to the rocking deck, ready to hoist the last eight crewmen from the wrecked 738-foot Selendang Ayu to safety in the aircraft.

From about three stories above, Coast Guard flight mechanic Petty Officer 2nd Class Brian Lickfield leaned from the open cockpit and motioned frantically for them to get in the basket.

But the eight men just stood there, dressed in dangerously light clothing and wearing simple life jackets.

Snow squalls raged in 30-degree temperatures. Enormous breaking swells hammered their ship sideways. Night was falling. The Selendang, longer than two football fields, would tear in half within an hour.

The crew on deck didn't move.

"Nobody got in," said Lt. Doug Watson, one of the Jayhawk's two pilots that night. "They just looked at it. ... It seemed like forever because I'm just desperately trying to maintain position with the winds and waves."

"I think they were just terrified," Lickfield said. "They sat there looking at the basket. Nobody would move. ... We were wasting a lot of time. In the end, time became lives." The delay by the freighter's crew is one of the most dramatic details emerging from the extraordinary rescue Wednesday night -- a rescue that left a Coast Guard helicopter crashed upside down in the sea on the remote west coast of Unalaska Island and six freighter crewmen presumed dead.

After sending down Coast Guard rescue swimmer Petty Officer 3rd Class Aaron Bean to the ship's deck and hoisting up seven crewmen, the Jayhawk would suddenly go down with Watson, pilot Lt. Dave Neel and Lickfield aboard.

The three guardsmen would escape the sinking aircraft to help save one freighter crewman who surfaced alive. An HH-65 Dolphin helicopter from the cutter Alex Haley yanked these

four survivors to safety. Two hours later, the helicopter returned to lift Bean and the ship's captain from the freighter's bow, after the ship had split in two. But six other men -- none wearing the survival gear that Alaska mariners routinely carry into the Bering Sea -- would be lost. A two-day search was suspended Friday evening.

Over the weekend, crewmen from the Jayhawk and the HH-65 Dolphin that rescued them have been telling their stories to Coast Guard investigators. Watson and Lickfield, both based in Kodiak, spoke with the Daily News, offering a glimpse of their experience. Their story dramatically shows how three trained guardsmen were able to rescue themselves from an aircraft rapidly sinking into a sea gone mad with turbulence.

"The cockpit filled up with water instantly," Watson recalled. "We were under water. ... All I know is that I went through the training steps we practice every year."

It shows, also, the horror of trying to save men who may have already drowned, floating lifeless in water too cold for anyone to survive in without proper gear.

The 40,000-ton Selendang Ayu lost power early last week and drifted onto the rocks off Unalaska Island on Wednesday night, spilling at least 140,000 gallons of heavy bunker fuel on remote bays of western Unalaska Island, about 750 miles from Anchorage in the eastern Aleutian Chain.

Over the course of a long day, Coast Guard helicopter crews -- including those from the Jayhawk that crashed -- evacuated 20 of the ship's 26 members to the cutter Alex Haley and Unalaska.

The Jayhawk crew had arrived in Unalaska to take part in the operation about 11 a.m. Wednesday. Their first rescue took place in midafternoon, after the Selendang Ayu set an anchor that held for a while in the gale.

The four men were dressed in orange survival suits, with fleece jumpsuits underneath, rubber booties on their feet, gaskets on wrists and neck. "If you ever go in water, your body is completely dry except for your head and hands," Watson said.

It took a half hour to fly over the island to the west coast in the gusting winds and blowing snow.

"The weather was absolutely crummy," Watson said. "We had to wait a minute or two for the snow squalls to come through to see the terrain."

The helicopter was able to lift nine men off the bow of the Selendang and drop them one by one onto the bucking, rolling deck of the cutter Alex Haley.

"The toughest hoisting done that day was on the Alex Haley," Watson said. "It was pitching and rolling, pitching and rolling, pitching and rolling."

Another helicopter took another nine men aboard, and Watson's Jayhawk picked them up on a beach and carried them back to Unalaska, where they could obtain more fuel.

For the second time that afternoon, the ship's anchor lost its hold on the bottom. Watson said the Jayhawk's crew was told that Coast Guard officers aboard the Alex Haley were urging the Selendang's captain, as they had been all day long, to have his crew evacuated.

He kept delaying, saying he thought they could get the engine started if he could get the ship stable.

Finally, about 6 p.m., the Jayhawk crew got the word. The freighter had gone aground, and the captain wanted his crew evacuated.

The chopper flew to the scene through winter gale conditions, which meant moments when snow cut all visibility, when winds knocked the helicopter about, when seas peaked 30 to 40 feet high.

The smaller Dolphin helicopter had scrambled from the cutter to do the rescue, but the Dolphin would have to make two trips. So the decision was made that the larger Jayhawk would take the rescue and the Dolphin would cover.

"We decided, 'Let's just do this all at once.' It is crappy weather, hard conditions, and it's safer to do it all at once," Watson said.

This hoist should have been easier than earlier ones, Watson said. All eight men were waiting on deck. The vessel was aground, not moving as much as it had been when it was anchored.

"The problem was, however, instead of being a mile out to sea, we were now on shore in the break zone," Watson said.

Swells up to 40 feet high slammed into the bow. The sea churned and thrashed. Time was running out.

And then the crew didn't respond when the basket was dropped.

Lickfield kept motioning to crew members below to get in the basket. He said it went on and on.

"I'm trying to convey that they need to get into the basket," Lickfield said. "I was frustrated."

He pulled the basket up and sent down the diver, Bean, who walked each person to the basket as waves broke over the bow.

Seven men were hoisted up. With each passing minute, conditions appeared to grow more dire, the breakers more ferocious.

"They were getting a little bigger," Watson said. "Water was beginning to break over the top of the bow of the boat. We knew the boat was sinking at the bow."

When big sets of waves rushed toward the aircraft, Neel and Lickfield would warn Watson, and he would guide the aircraft up and away. When the waves would subside slightly, he would take the chopper back over the ship, holding maybe 30 to 40 feet up.

The waves kept building.

"We saw they were no longer coming in sets," as they had been earlier in the day. "They were just coming all the time."

The seventh man was on his way up. "And all that remained on the deck was the captain and the rescue swimmer," Watson said. "And that's when something happened. And the aircraft went in the water."

As Lickfield was hoisting, he heard Neel say over the radio: "Wow, this is a big wave.' He said it three or four times. 'This is a big wave.' I could tell there was urgency in his voice." But the seventh man wasn't quite in. Lickfield completed the hoist and pulled the basket into the cabin of the helicopter.

"All of sudden, the force of this wave, like a force I've never seen before, a wall of water engulfed the helicopter," he said. "Water came blasting into the cabin."

Lickfield heard the engines "flame out" and felt the helicopter begin a sickening descent. When the helicopter hit the water, it began to roll. Lickfield held on to the door handle and rode it 180 degrees and bailed out on to the surface.

Watson, who was flying the helicopter, said he didn't know what happened. He would not speculate about causes in an interview.

"It happened so fast. I remember us going down into the water. It was like being in our (flight training) simulator in Mobile, Ala. It was like the worst scenario they ever give you in the simulator. It didn't seem real."

Warning horns were going off. Lights flashed red. Nothing was visible through the windows. "The flight mechanic was calling 'Up, up, up' but there was nothing really we could do, and the aircraft settled in the water."

Upside down, Watson reached for a tube that connected him to a two-minute oxygen supply. The suck of air calmed him, he said.

"Then I patiently felt my hand around the door frame to my right. I just needed to think about where it was, the door handle," he said. "The training steps that we always use they have always hammered into our minds -- to maintain a reference point."

Maybe 45 seconds had passed, Watson said. With his eyes closed, he grasped the handle, opened the door. He undid his seat belt and harness with his left hand and pulled himself into the water with his right hand.

"I didn't even have to swim. The buoyancy of the dry suit, it just floated me to the surface," he said. "It only took a couple seconds for me to make it to the surface."

The HH-65 Dolphin had already dropped a basket to get Neel, who was out in the waves.

The wind and seas were blowing everyone toward the beach.

Watson said he realized he was OK, fairly warm in his suit and buoyant. The helicopter's tail stabilizer had ripped off. There was oil, jet fuel and junk on the surface. He could see several others in life jackets, rising and falling on the same huge swells.

The Dolphin finished its second hoist and dropped the basket to Watson. He said he swam for one of the freighter crewmen in a life jacket to put him the basket first.

He grabbed the basket and pulled it to his right toward the man in the life jacket. "I was warm. I figured he wasn't," Watson said. "So I brought the basket over to him and I pounded on his life preserver."

There was no response.

Watson turned the man and peered close. His pupils were fixed.

"I was fairly confident he was dead by that point," Watson said. "So I climbed into the basket."

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