



РУССКИЙ МЕДЕВАК

or

“Russian Medevac”

by Captain Carlton W. Swickley, USCG (Ret.)

So far, it was a routine Sunday morning watch for Radioman Third Class Pat Carey at the Coast Guard radio station in Marshfield, Massachusetts. On that day, 16 July 1967, the summer boating season was in full swing, and Carey expected the volume of radio traffic to increase as the day wore on and thousands of pleasure craft took to the water. Long before he expected business to pick up, however, precisely at 0933, the loudspeaker monitoring 468 kilohertz came alive. “Coast Guard, Coast Guard, *Trudovaja Slava* here. On board have premature childbirth. Must have medical help. Please, helicopter!”

The message came from the 541-foot *Trudovaja Slava*, a large Soviet factory ship on station off the New England coast. Since the Soviet fishing fleet operated in a world of their own and rarely contacted others, the emergency message was most unusual. Carey’s watch supervisor immediately picked up the hotline phone—a direct line to the 1st District Rescue Coordination Center in

Boston—and passed the message to Lieutenant Junior Grade Stan Kruszewski, the duty controller. When *Trudovaja Slava* radioed her position as 41.14 north and 66.45 west, Kruszewski plotted the coordinates on his chart and was dismayed to find that the ship was 175 miles east of Provincetown—well beyond the range of Salem

Air Station’s helicopters. The one good thing was that *Trudovaja Slava* reported she had a helicopter landing area. Despite the excessive distance, Kruszewski was fully aware of how the new flightdeck-equipped cutters extended a helo’s range by acting as floating gas stations. Quickly reviewing the available resources, Kruszewski knew Salem Air stood ready to launch a helo within five minutes of a call on the hotline and could also put

a Grumman HU-16 *Albatross* in the air as escort. The 210-foot New Bedford-based Coast Guard cutter *Vigilant* (WMEC-617) was on standby at Provincetown. A doctor was on call at the U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS) Hospital in Brighton, a Boston suburb. Kruszewski decided



he had all the necessary tools at hand, grabbed the phone and set the wheels in motion.

The drama that was now unfolding all began when Alexandra Minaslowna Panko Perminov, of Latvia, USSR, signed on *Trudovaja Slava* as a stewardess. Her interest in sailing with the fleet was driven by a desire to be near her husband, a crewman on one of the fleet's trawlers. Perminov had experienced severe stomach pains the previous Friday that were at first thought to be caused by lifting heavy crates; but were soon discovered to be caused by a baby! Born prematurely at 0900 Sunday, Slava Perminov (named after the ship) came into the world three months early and weighing a mere two pounds, two ounces. Therefore, his chances of survival were nil unless he got to a proper medical facility. To his credit, *Trudovaja Slava's* captain put humanity above politics, cut a hole in the Iron Curtain, and called his capitalist seafaring neighbors, the U.S. Coast Guard, for help.

When Kruszewski's message to "Go!" arrived aboard *Vigilant* at 0948, her acting skipper, Lieutenant Commander Earl Martin, wasted no time in giving orders to up anchor and get underway. By 1000, the cutter had all engines on line and cleared Provincetown harbor. With the Provincetown lighthouse already fading in her frothy wake, *Vigilant's* job was to race as far east as possible while awaiting the arrival of Salem Air's helicopter.

Meanwhile, Salem Air was busy preparing

for its role. Ground crews quickly stripped an HH-52 *Sea Guardian* of all unnecessary gear to make room for all the fuel it could hold, plus a crew of four: Lieutenant Bill Solley (aircraft commander), Lieutenant Junior Grade George Ellis (copilot), Aviation Ordnanceman Second Class Richard Martin (hoist operator), and a USPHS doctor and his equipment. Since the narrow confines of the cramped HH-52 cockpit drastically hindered a pilot's ability to unfold and plot on charts, it was imperative that any requirement for extensive navigation be limited. Consequently, it was standard operating procedure, when conducting long offshore missions, to provide a fixed-wing escort aircraft to help with navigation and, if necessary, act as on-scene commander. Accordingly, Salem Air diverted Lieutenant Commander Bob Imbrie (aircraft commander) and Lieutenant Junior Grade Merrill Menlove (copilot) in their Grumman HU-16 *Albatross* to proceed offshore and verify *Trudovaja Slava's* position. They had departed Salem only a few minutes earlier on a routine training flight. With its main fuel tanks full, their HU-16 could stay in the air six and a half hours under normal flight conditions.

Upon receiving the call for his services, Dr. Abraham Benyunes, a pediatrician at the USPHS Hospital, put his fear of flying aside and responded quickly. First he gathered his medical bag, some oxygen bottles, and an incubator. Next,



Facing page, top: *The Soviet factory ship, Trudovaja Slava.* Author's collection Above: *The HH-52A Sea Guardian, built by Sikorsky Aircraft Company, was powered by a 1,250shp General Electric T58-GE-8 turboshaft engine. The HH-52A was fully amphibious and had several features for the search-and-rescue role, including a folding platform along the side of the fuselage and a hoist above the door. It had a maximum speed of 110 miles per hour and a capacity of more than 3,000 pounds.* USN Photo/EBNAL

he notified Boston City Hospital to be ready later that day for a premature baby. Then he hastened across town to the Coast Guard Base Boston's helicopter pad where Solley's HH-52 was now waiting. As soon as Benyunes climbed on board a few minutes after noon, Solley took off and sped southeastward over Boston Harbor and across Cape Cod Bay. Typical of the Coast Guard response to a distress at sea, they had spared nothing. Although the assembled rescue team was a group of well-trained professionals, they faced an extremely difficult task and would need a large dose of luck to pull it off.

As Imbrie approached *Slava's* reported position, visibility turned sour: less than a mile in fog. The radar-scope was filled with fishing fleet blips, but Imbrie surmised that the biggest one would be the factory ship. He descended into the soup, made a low pass across her stern and ... bingo! The words "*Trudovaja Slava*" emblazoned on the stern were easy to read. He then climbed back out of the fog and used his Loran to verify the ship's position before turning back toward Salem. Just as Imbrie's plane neared Marblehead, however, Salem directed it to turn back and escort the helicopter. Realizing they were in for a long day in which fuel might become critical, Imbrie pulled the throttles back, reduced rpm to its maximum endurance setting, and again headed outbound toward the cape.

The first challenge to Solley and his crew came when they left the beaches of Cape Cod and proceeded out to sea. Fog completely blanketed the surface. By then, *Vigilant* was already

several miles east of Provincetown and at flight quarters—ready to take the HH-52 aboard. But first, Solley had to find her. Once copilot Ellis cranked in *Vigilant's* homing signal on their automatic direction finder (ADF), Solley followed the ADF needle as it pointed the way to the ship. Several minutes later the needle swung swiftly 180 degrees, indicating that they had just passed directly over *Vigilant*. Solley turned away from the ship, flew outbound for three minutes while dropping down through the fog to 300 feet, then turned inbound to execute a beep-to-hover maneuver to the water. The beep-to-hover procedure, designed to let an HH-52 descend on

instruments so as to arrive at a hover 10 feet above the surface, was something Solley had practiced many times. Now he would put it to the test. Following doctrine, when the radar altimeter read 140 feet Solley decreased power to 40-percent torque and "beeped" the nose up to eight degrees on his artificial horizon. Then he carefully monitored the rate of descent as airspeed gradually bled off. At the end of the maneuver, and as the helo dropped out of translational lift, Solley pulled power and there they were, in a hover 10 feet above the ocean. The beep-to-hover had worked just as advertised. Even better, they spotted the foam

left by *Vigilant's* wake and followed it until the ship appeared out of the fog.

Vigilant did not have to alter course to take the helo aboard, and the instant it landed and settled into the anti-roll grid, the flightdeck crew attached the high and low tiedowns. With the



Vigilant is a Reliance-class medium endurance cutter 210-feet in length, with a beam of 34 feet and a displacement of 1,000 tons. Her two diesel engines produce a top speed of 18 knots. She has a crew of 75 and was commissioned in October 1964 in Cape Canaveral, Florida. Author's collection



A Grumman HU-16 Albatross taxis over the side at Salem Air Station. The Albatross featured a conventional two-step hull into the sides of which the main wheels retracted and a high wing with fixed stabilizing floats. Author's collection

HH-52 now “captured,” Solley shut her down and topped off the fuel tanks. Yet *Vigilant* was still too far from *Trudovaja Slava*. Solley and his crew sat impatiently for two and a half hours while the ship churned at top speed toward the launch point. It was during this lull, as Solley reflected on the flight out to *Vigilant*, that fear and doubt reared their ugly heads. Solley’s feeling that luck had played a part in his finding the ship in the dense fog began to sink in. Along with that came the realization that he would have to find *Vigilant* again on the return flight from *Slava*. A good aviator always leaves himself an out, but now, if he could not find *Vigilant*, there would be no place to go. And what about unforeseen situations that might pop up? He mulled over this discouraging situation, but nevertheless, Solley was confident in his ability to handle the HH-52 in just about any type of weather. Buoyed by that thought, plus the knowledge that in Ellis and Martin he had a good crew with him, doubt quickly disappeared and along with it, fear.

When the distance to *Trudovaja Slava* dropped to 120 miles, the flightdeck crew pulled the tiedowns and Solley launched for the most critical stage of the mission. The time was now 1533 and he had just enough fuel for the flight to and from *Trudovaja Slava*, plus 30 minutes of on-scene maneuvering.

Meanwhile, Imbrie was waiting aloft and

resumed his task of circling overhead as Solley popped up out of the fog and flew eastward. Imbrie took frequent Loran fixes, plotting them with Menlove’s help, to ensure that the helo was tracking directly toward *Trudovaja Slava*. Now, however, Imbrie became concerned about finding *Slava* in the fog among the many fishing vessels that were out there. Since the helo was too short on fuel to spend time looking for the ship, they had to get it right the first time. Accordingly, Imbrie gave Solley a final heading to *Slava*, then flew on ahead the final 50 miles to verify the ship’s position.

Soon Solley and Ellis began sighting fishing vessels through occasional breaks in the mist and called Imbrie to confirm. “Seven-two-one-four, this is One-three-seven-four. We just spotted a ship off our starboard side. Are you sure you have the right one?”

“Roger, One-three-seven-four,” responded Imbrie. “I’m over *Slava* right now. Request you give me a long count for homing.”

When Ellis counted to 10 and back, Imbrie radioed, “Roger your long count. Steer heading one-one-zero to *Slava*.”

By the time Solley arrived in the vicinity of *Trudovaja Slava*’s reported position, he was cruising at 1,000 feet over a patchy fog that mostly obscured the ocean’s surface. An hour and a half’s worth of fuel—600 pounds of

precious JP-5—had burned off, but now there she was! Sticking up through the fog were the masts of *Trudovaja Slava*. As Solley dropped down through the mist, visibility fell until the ship's stern loomed less than 50 yards ahead. Putting the HH-52 into a high hover, Solley moved forward to survey the helicopter landing area. What he saw was an unbelievably tiny, wet and slippery 50-foot area used to dump nets full of fish. If the Soviets used it as a helicopter landing area, they obviously used a helo much smaller than an HH-52. Additionally, the area was littered with barrels and other debris, not to mention several cables that dangled dangerously from nearby booms. If Solley and his crew were going to be of any help, they had to find another solution. Solley returned to the stern and hovered over *Slava's* rolling and pitching fantail while Martin lowered the incubator on the Stokes litter to the deck. Apparently understanding what was intended, sailors disconnected the litter and ran off with it as Solley backed away and tried to

enough room, baby first, mother second,” and sent the note back down. The written word fared no better than the radio at solving the language barrier. With hand signals, the sailor continued to urge Solley forward to the helo pad. More precious minutes slipped by until only eight minutes of on-scene time remained in which to get the baby aboard. Anything longer would result in a critical fuel situation and leave Solley no other choice but to abandon the rescue and return to *Vigilant*. Desperately they sought a solution. Sending Martin down on the hoist to hurry things up was ruled out due to the language problem. Lowering the doctor and leaving him aboard the ship would be of little help; the baby needed to get to a hospital. That left only one choice: Go for broke and attempt a landing amidships.

When Solley returned abeam the ship's starboard side, it was obvious her crew had been busy moving barrels and litter out of the way, raising booms, and tying the cables back.

Sailors surrounded the helo and led Dr. Benyunes away below decks. There, finding Slava blue and near death, Benyunes immediately placed him in the incubator and administered oxygen and medication.

talk to the ship via radio. No luck. The language barrier was insurmountable. As often happens in search and rescue operations, communications were a major obstacle. The only way Solley got a message to the ship was by transmitting it to Imbrie, who then relayed it to Boston where a translator stood by. Boston then sent the message to the ship. The reply had to follow the same cumbersome route in reverse—an impossible situation with time so critical.

Relentlessly, the second hand on the clock marched around the dial, nibbling at the 30 minutes of available on-scene time as the thirsty engine continued to guzzle fuel. No amount of wishful thinking could change the fact that the HH-52's engine was burning more than 400 pounds of fuel per hour. Then a Russian sailor appeared, waving a note. Martin lowered a hook, brought the note up and handed it to Ellis who managed to decipher only one word: “middle.” Apparently they wanted the helo to land on the helicopter pad amidships. Ellis wrote, “Not

Working against turbulence and the rolling motion of the ship, Solley skillfully moved in, landed, and shut down to save fuel. Smiling sailors swarmed around the helo and led Dr. Benyunes away below decks. There, finding baby Slava blue and near death, Benyunes immediately placed him in the incubator and administered oxygen and medication. To the great relief of his mother, who was in good condition considering she had recently given birth, Slava seemed to improve rapidly. They quickly gathered their things up and headed back to the helo pad.

Meanwhile, as they sat waiting, Solley and Ellis had a chance to look around. They were amazed to see that the whirling rotors had missed some of the ship's structure by a mere two feet. And what if, when they again started the rotors, one of the hastily secured rigging cables came loose? It would swing right into the rotors and ruin everyone's day. But then came Benyunes, Perminov and Slava in his incubator. Once they were aboard, Solley lost no time in



Standing in front of HH-52 1374, Lieutenant Junior Grade George Ellis (left), Lieutenant Bill Solley (middle) and Aviation Ordnanceman Second Class Richard Martin pause for photographs at an awards ceremony held shortly after the rescue.

getting started. His prayers were answered when the T58 engine spooled up on battery power on the first try and lit off without overtemping. Airborne and with their course set for *Vigilant*, Solley and his crew were relieved to at last be clear of *Trudovaja Slava* and on their way home. However, they were not out of the woods yet.

The fuel gauge said things were now critical—

it would be touch and go getting back to the gas station. What's more, fog continued to fill the gap between ships. Solley climbed through the mist, leveled off at 1,000 feet and flew toward *Vigilant* on instruments. Once again he used the ADF and Number One needle to point the way. Overhead, Imbrie resumed his escort duties, flying lazy circles but keeping the HH-52 in sight as his own

fuel supply also dwindled. While the helo had been away, *Vigilant* continued her eastward dash to make the helicopter's return flight as short as possible. By now, the distance had closed to 70 miles, but was it enough?

While Solley and Ellis watched their instruments and the ever-dropping fuel gauge needle, Martin and Benyunes were busy in the cabin where, now that the heater was on full blast to keep the incubator warm, it was like a sauna bath. To complicate matters, the incubator oxygen bottles grew so hot that Benyunes worried they might explode. Things were not as warm in the cockpit where the windows were wide open, so the doctor passed one bottle at a time to Ellis who held them outside to cool in the rushing slipstream.

The fuel gauge was nearing rock-bottom when, finally, the ADF needle grew nervous, then swung rapidly around indicating they had found *Vigilant*. Yet the fog was so thick that the pilots never saw the ship as they passed overhead, nor did *Vigilant's* crew see the helo. Well aware that unless they found a gas pump soon the mission would end in disaster, Solley dropped collective and descended once more into a beep-to-hover maneuver. As they passed through 30 feet, Ellis called out, "I have the water!" Now all they had to do was find *Vigilant*. Keeping the ADF needle pointed straight ahead, Solley slowly air-taxed forward until a white blob that was the ship's stern loomed out of the fog. In no time Solley brought the helo aboard and the flightdeck crew immediately had the tiedowns attached. The clock now read 1843. The low-fuel warning light glared brightly at Solley and Ellis as they shut down the rotors.

With the helo safely aboard *Vigilant*, Imbrie now faced the challenge of getting his *Albatross* to Boston's Logan International Airport on what little fuel he had left. His earlier decision to fly at maximum endurance had been a good one—when he finally landed in Boston, with the *Albatross* sucking fumes from its tanks, he had been airborne almost 10 hours on what normally would have been six and a half hours of fuel!

This time, instead of enjoying *Vigilant's* hospitality, the helo crew took off for Boston as soon as the fuel tanks were topped off.

Airborne at 1900, the HH-52 delivered baby Slava, his mother and Dr. Benyunes to a waiting ambulance at Logan International Airport one hour and thirty-nine minutes later. No doubt about it, 16 July had been a long day by the time Solley, Ellis and Martin landed back at Salem Air. But it was worth it—baby Slava survived, perhaps to someday crew on *Trudovaja Slava*, for which he was named.

Postscript

Despite the Cold War, the Soviet Embassy was sincere in expressing its appreciation to the Coast Guard, Solley, Ellis and Martin. Russian Third Secretary Yuri Chemukbud was sent to Salem, where he spoke at an awards ceremony and again at a convivial reception in the lighthouse. Chemukbud's message, delivered on behalf of his government, was full of kind words and congratulations for a job well done. ✪



Captain Carlton W. Swickley USCG (Ret.), is a graduate of the U.S. Coast Guard Academy. He entered flight training in Pensacola, Florida, in 1956 and was awarded his wings in 1957 in the seaplane program at

NAS Corpus Christi, Texas.

In addition to duties as a search and rescue pilot, Swickley specialized in aircraft maintenance. His assignments included a tour as CO of Group/Air Station, Port Angeles, Washington. He also served a tour of duty as southern area maintenance representative. He retired from his 26-year career in 1980 at Coast Guard headquarters.

After earning an MBA from George Mason University, he changed career fields to education, working first at Northern Virginia Community College, then moving on to George Mason University as assistant director, physical facilities. From 1987 until his retirement in 1994, Swickley served as director of the EAA Air Adventure Museum in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. He currently resides in Pensacola, Florida. "Russian Medevac" is an excerpt from Swickley's recently self-published book, Lighting Fires and Kicking Tires.