

Storm Gods and Heroes

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Part I: Desperation, heroics in the face of nature's remorseless power

This is the first part of a five-part serial telling a story of extraordinary danger and courage in the Gulf of Alaska.

IN THE GULF OF ALASKA (AP) - Jesse Evans spoiled it first through the scope of his dad's Winchester rifle. Something small, red, about 100 yards down the bear trail. A dead fox, maybe.

Jesse and his best friend, George Conners, crept through the black spruce forest for a closer look. In the moss, beside bear scat and paw prints, lay a neoprene mitten, teeth gouges on the cuff.

Jesse picked it up. It felt heavy. With his hunting knife, he slit an "X" across the palm and peeled the mitten open.

Out tumbled sand - and five fingers. A shiver ran up Jesse's back.

"There's ... there's a dead body around here somewhere," George stammered. On Shuyak Island? The northernmost isle of Alaska's Kodiak archipelago was inhabited by bears, deer, wolves and varmints. Not humans. As far as the boys remembered, Jesse said later, there hadn't been any storms or reports of overboard fisherman in these waters all summer.

Where had this mitten come from?

Jesse poked inside it with his knife. He removed a thumbnail and three dime-sized bits of skin, dropping each one inside an empty tobacco tin.

Jesse, 17, and George, 16, had always dreamed of becoming detectives. Now, on this August hunting trip, they had stumbled onto a clue to a baffling, six-month mystery in the Gulf of Alaska. It was the last piece to a tale of danger and struggle, of desperation and courage, of great heroics in the face of nature's remorseless power.

The seas are twice as high as the ship. They rise in huge gray walls, their faces nearly vertical, their crests sheared off and slung for miles by wicked gusts.

The ship labors up the waves, teeters at the top and plunges down the backsides. On the steeper sweHs, when she cant get her bow up in time, she plunges straight through the crests, launching out the far side, water shooting out her scuppers.

The average windspeed is 60 knots, spiking to twice that. Visibility is 50 feet in blowing snow and sleet. The wind-chill factor is 18 below zero; spray freezes the moment its airborne. The barometric pressure is plunging a mililbar an hour.

The air is so highly charged with electricity that radios and navigational equipment are useless.

It is 6p.m., Jan. 30, 1998, on the Fairweather Grounds in the Gulf of Alaska. For the skipper and four-man crew of the La Conte, a fishing vessel, it's the maw of meteorological hell.

All afternoon, the La Conte has pounded into headwinds and building seas trying to make the nearest land, 80 miles eastward. In six hours, crew members will remember later, she manages 3 miles.

And the ship is leaking. Every hour, 2,200 gallons are pumped from her bilge, but the water keeps rising, sloshing now just below the engine.

In the wheelhouse, Mark Morley, a burly skipper who is supposed to celebrate his 36th birthday in 11 days, wrestles the spoked helm and fights to keep his feet on the heaving deck. Every few minutes, he leans forward to peer out at the storm gods through half-inch Lexan windows caking with ice.

Wind is screaming through the wire stays. Hail hammers the decks. Geysers of spray explode off the bow, coating the mast and rigging a ghostly white.

Morley can't see them, but rogue waves are prowling out there, merging, pulling apart, piling up on themselves. Some are as high as 10-story buildings.

In fishermen's lingo, the La Conte is a soft-chinned, western rig. That means she has a rounded stern, a wide cross section and a wheelhouse at the front of a raised midships section.

Built in 1919, she's 77 feet long and weighs 66 tons. Her hull is double-planked oak. In her belly sits a 365-horsepower diesel engine, which gives the La Conte speeds up to 12 knots.

Her wheelhouse is outfitted with state-of-the-art electronics: a Loran plotter, Global Positioning System for navigation, radar, VHF-FM short-range radio, and float switches that sound when the lower deck takes on too much water.

For emergencies she's equipped with five neoprene survival suits, seven lifejackets and an Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon - EPIRB. About the size of a bowling pin, the EPIRB sits in a plastic holster on the foredeck. It has a water-sensitive switch that sends out a radio signal if the ship goes down. EPIRB signals are automatically relayed by satellite to the U.S. Mission Control Center in Suitland, Md.

The La Conte is also equipped with the best electric bilge pumps, Morley told the crew a week earlier as they set sail from Sitka for the 150-mile trip north to the Fairweather Grounds. That's why the skipper didn't pay much mind to the loose plank on the stern's hull, close to the water line, that rattled to the touch of a mallet. The pumps can handle a slow leak just fine.

The La Conte arrived at the grounds shortly after 3 a.m. on Sunday, Jan. 25. Beneath an icy sky and aurora borealis, the crew - Robert Doyle, William Mork, Mike Decapua and David Hanlon - lowered their longlines and got to work.

They'd pulled up only a few hundred pounds of yelloweye when the seas began to build and the wind sheared ominously in the rigging. At noon Monday, Morley decided to leave the fishing gear in the water and make for Graves Harbor, 80 miles southeast.

Safe in port, the crew spent two days cleaning the engine and overhauling the bilge pumps as Morley, the captain, fussed about the abandoned gear, the unused space in the fish holds, and his fiancée, Tamara Westcott, at home in Sitka expecting a baby in seven months.

He needed to put money away, not lose it on lousy fishing trips, he told the crew. With two or three good sets, he could break even.

By late Wednesday afternoon, the winds eased a bit, but the seas were still coughing up

10-foot swells. A low-pressure system was cranking up all the way down Alaska's southeastern tail. The forecast: 40-knot winds and 30-foot breakers on the Fairweather Grounds within 24 hours.

Morley told the crew they were going back out to retrieve their gear. With luck, he said, they might get some more fishing in.

The crew appeared nonchalant - except for Hanlon, who had spent 34 years on the ocean and steered fishing vessels before he could drive.

Hanlon was quiet, self-assured, stow to judge. The sea had kept him simple. He let his sandy hair and mustache grow long, and he stuck to jeans, sweatshirts and XtraTufs rubber boots. He'd had a few girlfriends, never any kids. He had no car, no land address, not even a post-office box.

One thing he held tight was a deep respect for the sea. "She demands attention," he once told his older brother, John. "She's not judgmental, but she has no forgiveness in her either."

In commercial fishing, one of the most dangerous of professions, it's not uncommon for mariners to leave ship suddenly after getting a bad feeling about the sea, a vessel, the storm gods.

On Wednesday evening, Jan. 28, hours before the La Conte left Graves Harbor, Hanlon got one of those premonitions and rang up his brother, John, in Juneau. He wasn't home, but a nephew, James Hudson Jr., answered.

"She's not safe, Jimmy," Hudson remembers Hanlon saying. "I don't like her. This is going to be the last time I sail the La Conte."

Now it's 6:15 Friday evening, and Morley is staring into the teeth of the storm gods. So far, so good. The high-water alarm below decks hasn't flashed.

Then one of those rogue waves hits.

It avalanches over them, burying the decks under tons of flashing white broth. The ship hesitates; then slowly, heavily, the La Conte rears out of the water like a submarine surfacing.

"Skipper!"

Morley pulls himself up off the no-skids and focuses. The battery-powered emergency lights flicker. Someone's standing in the doorway, panting, dripping. It's Decapua, his deckhand.

"We got jeopardy," Decapua says. Water is rising fast in the engine room.

"Pumps?"

"Both out."

Below decks, Robert Doyle is up to his shins in bone-numbing water. Both electric bilge pumps have shorted out. The backup gas-powered pump is too wet to start. Half the engine is underwater. Doyle hears it gag, gurgle, cough.

The ship is losing her center of gravity and rocking wildly, crew members will say later. Doyle gets tossed about and slammed against a bulkhead.

Decapua bangs down the stairs, takes one look at the dead engine, the water showering through the seams of the deck, then sees Doyle, dazed, sitting in the water. "Bobby, get up! We gotta bail!"

Mork and Hanlon arrive and the four of them start a bucket brigade. It comes in faster than they can bail. Within minutes it's up to their thighs, then their chests. It's sloshing around their necks when Morley appears in the hatch. Wild-eyed.

"Get outta there! We're going down!"

'MAYDAY! MAYDAY!'

Morley huddles on the floor of the bridge, now a dark igloo. His ship is powerless and drifting in the dark, taking huge seas over her decks in the center of a powerful arctic storm. Below him, in the galley, the crew is pulling on survival suits, preparing to abandon ship.

Morley clutches the microphone, searching for a signal, a voice, anything but the static coming over the VHF speaker.

'MAYDAY! MAYDAY' This the F-V La Conte!"

Static.

His only link to the world is the EPIRB, the transmitter that emits a satellite signal. Morley scrambles out on deck and shoves it inside his suit.

Just then, a mountain of water rises over the stern, It hangs there, then folds forward and crashes against the wheelhouse, blowing out windows with the booms of shotguns.

In the galley, dishes, coffee mugs and spoons fly. Canned food rockets across counters. The refrigerator rips out of the wall and skids across the floor. The men go tumbling.

Doyle rolls over and sees whitewater bursting through the split doors like a blast from a firehose.

"Up to the deck! Up to the deck!"

But how? The walls have become the floor; the ceiling is now a wall. The La Conte is on her side, mast in the water.

Another lurch. The floor leaps up and everything is in free-fall again, somersaulting end over end. The La Conte is righting herself, lifting out of the sea like a prizefighter after a knockdown.

"Move! Move! Move!"

The men crawl along the floor, pelted by plates and cans. They climb to the foredeck. The ship is lurching, listing hard to starboard. Deck planks are buckling and flying off. The mast is flailing wildly.

The boat keels on a swell and they throw themselves on the deck to keep the wind from yanking them off. Spray rakes them like grapeshot. Out of the blackness, Morley staggers over.

"No life raft!" he yells.

With all the high-tech equipment on board, the one thing they need most isn't there. They look at each other.

Morley hands out pieces of rope. There's no time to panic or complain. If they don't jump ship now, they'll be sucked down by the vacuum of a 66-ton tomb making for the deep.

They wrap the half-inch rope around their waists, make a loop at the belt. A separate rope is fed through

each loop. They're a human chain now; their fates are tied. Doyle attaches two buoy floats, then the EPIRB, to the ends.

Like crabs, they claw up the icy, tilting deck to the gunwale on the port bow. Each man throws a leg over the railing, takes a deep breath and hesitates.

Below them is an ocean so dark that they can't tell the difference between a wave and a trough.

"WE GO IN TOGETHER!" Morley shouts. "ON THREE!"

They could fall 15 feet or 100.

"ONE!"

They could jump in front of a breaking wave and be smashed against the hull.

"TWO!"

The ship lists, begins to roll.

"NOW!"

Into the abyss they leap.

At first, all Mork feels is the cold. It tightens on his temples like a vise grip.

Gradually, the throbbing fades and it's all right. He's wrapped in darkness, falling without end, hearing only the bump-bump of his heart.

Mark doesn't know when he stops falling through the sea. It seems a long time. But he remembers rising and bursting into a deafening world, gulping air, and then going down again.

When Mark comes up the second time, he kicks his legs and fights the water in a heavy-footed panic. Then he feels the collar on his survival suit inflating and knows he will not drown.

The first thing he sees is the red-and-white flashing of the strobe light on the EPIRB, illuminating flecks of flying, swirling ice.

Carcasses of frigate birds, pieces of wood, a buoy float past him. Several hundred yards off, he spots the La Conte.

Only the hull is visible. The seas are jumping up and down on it, stomping it mercilessly. Then the ship disappears behind a swell, and when the wave passes, she's gone.

A head pops through the foam - spitting, gasping, hacking. It's Hanlon. Morley, the skipper, pops out a few feet away, then Decapua and Doyle.

"Sound off!" Morley shouts.

There's more water in the wind than air; it's like trying to scream above the noise of a passing train while taking a shower.

Out of nowhere a landslide of water buries them, then another, and countless others, sending them tumbling as if they're inside a washing machine. The ropes tying them together begin to slip.

At that moment, more than 4,000 miles away outside Washington, D.C., a computer inside the U.S. Mission Control Center is downloading an EPIRB signal from a COSPAS-SARSAT satellite.

It's an urgent distress call from the Gulf of Alaska, latitude N58-13.8, longitude W138- 19.4. The computer would identify the ship and its owner, except that this EPIRB was never registered with the Coast Guard.

Automatically, the computer relays the data to the station closest to the emergency - the Coast Guard's North Pacific Search and Rescue Coordination Center in Juneau.

It's 7:02 on a Friday night in Juneau, and Lt. Steve Rutz and Quartermaster Slake Kilbourne have the watch. They're sitting in front of computer terminals, a pot of coffee warming beside them, when the teletype starts spitting.

Kilbourne rips off the bulletin and scans it. No ID on the ship. Maybe the computer is still working on it. He checks the coordinates. Fairweather Grounds. Checks the printer again. Nothing.

The Middleton Island weather station is reporting windspeeds greater than 50 knots, water temperature of 38 degrees Fahrenheit. According to Coast Guard calculations, a 200-pound man in a survival suit has an 83 percent chance of surviving 2.6 hours in these waters. A 51 percent chance of lasting 4.7 hours.

That is, if wave heights remain below 25 feet. A data buoy outside Prince William Sound, 200 miles northwest of the Fairweather grounds, is registering 30-foot seas.

At 7:15 p.m., Kilbourne issues an Urgent Marine Information Broadcast, asking any ship that's accidentally tripped an EPIRB to radio the Coast Guard immediately.

Three minutes pass. Ten. A half hour. No response.

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This one's for real.

Sunken boat's crew wonders: 'Are the Coasties coming?'

This is the second part of a five-part narrative serial.

IN THE GULF OF ALASKA - At liftoff, wind speed is 25 knots. No sweat, Lt. William Adickes says to himself. He's flown helicopters for 15 years. He won a medal for saving fishermen in a storm. He's trained to fly in 30-knot winds.

But as he rises from the Coast Guard air base in Sitka and swings the H-60 Jayhawk helicopter around Mount Edgecumbe, they get swatted by a 40-knot gust. The anemometer jumps to 35, 45, 55. Within minutes, winds are hitting 70 knots.

The wind shear keeps spiking the helicopter downward and making its tail slew about.

"Jesus," he says, "how bad is this going to get?"

With his crash helmet rapping on the ceiling, he will say later, it feels like he's sitting on a jackhammer.

On the ground, Lt. Glen Jones, the watch captain, starts calling in reserves. Those boys, he thinks, are flying into trouble.

It's 7:52 p.m., Jan. 30, 1998, and the airbase is on red alert. Fifty minutes earlier, the Coast Guard received a satellite-relayed distress signal originating from the Fairweather Grounds.

Adickes and his three-man crew have no idea what type of ship is in trouble. They don't know if anyone is overboard or for how long. And they can only guess how bad the weather is out there.

In the jaws of the storm, 150 miles from Sitka, five fishermen in neoprene survival suits are bobbing in 80-foot seas. They're gasping for air, throwing up salt water. Their boat, the La Conte, is at the bottom of the ocean.

It's so dark, the survivors will remember later, that they can't see their hands.

The skipper, Mark Morley, yells again, weakly: "Sound off!"

Everyone responds but David Hanlon.

"DAAAVE!"

"Help!" Hanlon's voice is faint. "I can't keep my head up!"

Hanlon's survival suit is too big for him and its inflatable collar has failed to fill with air. He's swallowing water, losing consciousness. William Mork grabs Hanlon under the armpits and pulls him up so that his head rests on Mork's chest.

Mike Decapua is taking the waves blind; in his haste to zip his hood, his long hair flopped over his eyes.

Morley is in bigger trouble: He bounced off the hull jumping ship and tore a hole in his suit below the right knee. The 38-degree water is getting inside. He's shaking, jerking.

Robert Doyle wraps his arms and legs around Morley.

"Bobby," the skipper says. "I ain't gonna make it."

Doyle turns the talk to children. Time at sea has split up his marriage, but he has two boys. Morley says he's going to be a father in seven months. He plans on marrying his fiancée this summer. Can't wait to see his child.

A wave, snarling and foaming at the lip, is standing over them. The last thing Doyle remembers seeing before it hits is its barrel, big enough to park a Winnebago in.

Doyle pops up first, followed by Morley, Mork, Decapua.

Where's Hanlon?

"Dave?"

No response.

"DAAAVE!"

Later, the survivors won't be sure how long they kept calling his name.

Mork asks the question on all their minds. "Are the Coasties coming, Bob?"

"Sure they are," says Doyle, who spent 12 years in the Coast Guard.

Huddled, heads bowed, they pray aloud. Then another comber barrels toward them. They turn their faces away and take it.

Snow and sleet glaze the windscreen of the Jayhawk. Even with his night vision goggles, Lt. Dan Molthen, the co-pilot, can't make out the ragged ocean from 700 feet.

Adickes switches on his direction-finder, hoping to pick up a hit from the Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon, or EPIRB, the distress signal beaming from the Fairweather Grounds. He tries to raise Sitka base on his radio. Static.

They're on their own, flying through white out into the mouth of a powerful arctic storm.

The H-60 Jayhawk is the Coast Guard's most sophisticated helicopter. Powered by twin 1,980-horsepower engines, it can cruise at 140 knots and hit "dash" speeds of 180. It can fly 300 miles offshore, hover 45 minutes and return with a safe fuel reserve. Its computer can fly and land the aircraft, and its Global Positioning System can receive data simultaneously from four satellites, making navigation a snap.

That is, under normal conditions.

The helicopter bounces from 1,800 feet to 900 feet to 1,500 feet to 800 feet - in 15 seconds. Adickes tries to find clear air, climbing as high as 4,000 feet, but it does no good.

Fifty minutes into the flight, the direction-finder detects a weak signal from the EPIRB. The trouble, whatever it is, must be just below.

Adickes does a 180-degree spin, turning his nose straight into the headwind. At that moment, he will say later, he feels the full force of the storm. Each gust is a giant hand shoving them backwards. The helicopter shudders. Its nose lifts and pitches. Piloting becomes a matter of brute strength. Adickes and Molthen seize the joysticks with both hands. The Jayhawk had roared past the EPIRB in a half-second. With engines at full power, it takes 25 minutes to crawl back to it.

Sean Whitherspoon, the flight engineer, throws open the jump door to a blast of snow and ice. Molthen flips on the floodlights, which throw cones of light down from the aircraft's belly.

Below, the fishermen are looking for a sign of hope.

Doyle spots it - a bright flashlight in the sky.

"HEEEY!" He waves, his arm feeling like it's got a 50-pound weight attached to it.

From above, Whitherspoon spots silvery flashes - the reflective tape of survival suits.

Molthen's skin crawls at the thought of how cold those people must be. He's trying to - approach zero airspeed, establish a 100-foot hover above them.

But everything is jumping around the cockpit: Binoculars, flight manuals, maps. The dials on the instrument panel are a blur.

The few times the aircraft steadies and Moltheri can read them, the instruments make no sense, he will say later. The altimeters tell him his altitude is zero, then 100 feet, 20 feet, 110 feet.

Out the spotters' window, swells and sky coalesce into one black mass. Vertigo makes Moithen vomit into his lap.

Whitherspoon and Richard Sansone, the crew's rescue swimmer, heave out three saltwater-activated flares. They'll bum for 20 minutes, providing reference points in the darkness.

And then it hits.

A wicked gust, upwards of 120 knots, sledgehammers the helicopter. When Adickes regains control, the 21,000-pound aircraft has been blown backward a half mile. Whitherspoon peels himself off the rear wall, looks out the jump door and gasps. Swells are cresting 5 feet below the belly of the helicopter.

If a wave catches the tail, the Jayhawk will spin into the sea and sink.

"UP! UP! UP!"

Adickes and Moitheri pull the joysticks as far as they'll go and the aircraft lurches skyward.

Fifteen minutes of bucking and pitching, and the Jayhawk is again above the flares. There's no way Adickes is putting his swimmer, Sansone, in the water, so he tries lowering the rescue basket.

Whitherspoon pays out the steel cable and stares in shock as the 40-pound basket gets whisked backward at a 45-degree angle.

Adickes and Molthen peer out at the flares, rising and falling on the swells. Suddenly, one flare disappears. The pilots figure it's slipped behind a wave. They're wrong. It is riding a crest of a huge wave now looming over the helicopter.

The men in the water see exactly what's happening.

They're behind the flare, bobbing on the crest of the mountainous wave, looking down in horror at the rotor blades of the helicopter spinning below them.

To be continued tomorrow.

Rescuers fight the odds

This is the third part of a five-part narrative serial about the sinking of the fishing vessel La Conte. The remaining parts of the series will appear Wednesday and Thursday.

IN THE GULF OF ALASKA - Lt. Glen Jones is worried, and he should be. The Jayhawk helicopter he sent from Sitka station at 8 p.m. hasn't been heard from since it penetrated the southern edge of the storm. That was almost an hour ago.

The watch captain knows he won't be getting any help soon from the C-130 search- and-rescue planes at Kodiak station, the Coast Guard's biggest, on the other side of the Gulf of Alaska. That air base is buried under an avalanche of snow.

So he's called in a crew that has already worked a full day to fly another Jayhawk out to the Fairweather Grounds: Lt. Cmdr. David Durham, the pilot; co-pilot Lt. Russell Zullick; flight mechanic Chris Windnagle; and rescue swimmer A.J. Thompson.

This group has a more difficult mission than the first. The signal from the ship in distress is more than two hours old now, and time is running out for any survivors struggling in the 38-degree water. And now they also have to look for a potentially downed helicopter and its four-man crew.

At 9:35 p.m., the helicopter lifts away from the pad. No one inside says anything.

One hundred and fifty miles away, over the Fairweather Grounds, the first rescue helicopter is still airborne. It's been on scene for an hour and 20 minutes when Lt. William Adickes, the flight commander, decides he's reached his limit.

His crew can't get the rescue basket closer than 40 feet to the survivors, and they're too exhausted and afraid to swim to it. The flares his team tossed into the raging seas are sputtering out. The hoist cable that lowers the rescue basket is ruined, frayed by constant chafing against the side of the helicopter.

Lt. Dan Molthen, his co-pilot, is dizzy and retching from the aircraft's jackhammering. His flight mechanic, Sean Whitherspoon, is shaking from exhaustion and vertigo and is losing feeling in his left arm from hypothermia.

They've lost communications, and the fuel gauge is dropping. Adickes is only minutes from "bingo," the point at which the helicopter doesn't have enough fuel to return to base.

"It's time to go," he remembers whispering into the mike on his headset.

No one responds. They are trained to save lives under conditions no one else dares to challenge.

The Jayhawk labors skyward, and, against vicious headwinds, turns for Sitka. Whitherspoon pulls the jump door closed, sits down on the floor and goes into convulsions.

"Rich, man," says Whitherspoon, "I can't stop shaking."

Richard Sansone, the rescue swimmer, starts Whitherspoon on water and saline and pulls a thermal bag over him to raise his body temperature.

They huddle there in the indigo cabin light, trying not to think about the people they left behind.

The second rescue helicopter is 15 minutes from arriving when a call comes over the high-frequency radio. The caller identifies himself as the captain of Alaska Airlines flight 196, a commercial jetliner en route from Anchorage to Seattle.

"Coast Guard ... We've received a radio transmission from one of your sister helos

H-60 Jayhawk ... Flight commander Adickes says they are aborting mission and returning to base ... They report four to five people are still in the water, over."

Lt. David Durham rogers the message. The first helicopter is all right. Their job has just gotten easier.

Still, Chris Windnagle, the 34-year-old flight mechanic, is sweating and thinking about his family. Ninety minutes ago he had a pizza in the oven and was watching a Disney movie with his wife, two boys and baby girl.

Now he's in pitch darkness, getting hammered by the floor and ceiling of a Jayhawk as it hurtles into a powerful storm. He's never been on a high-seas rescue in six years of Coast Guard duty, never flown in zero visibility and killer wind shears.

Durham's adrenaline is pumping. "Let's get there fast, people," he remembers saying. "This thing will probably be nothing."

But it is something. Durham, 38, had been piloting helicopters since graduating from the Coast Guard academy in 1982. He'd flown in Alaska for more than three of those years and thought he'd seen ugly

weather.

Until now.

He's cruising at 300 feet beneath a heavy cloud cover, backing winds are pushing the aircraft into a 200-knot sprint and rain bands are swinging across his path like slamming doors.

When his direction finder hits on the EPIRB distress signal, indicating they've arrived at the scene, Durham swings the helicopter. But instead of heading back, it sails north as if skidding on ice.

To fight off the headwinds, Durham will say later, he has to "crab" the helicopter, swinging the nose and tail back and forth like a scampering crustacean. It takes them 25 minutes to return a half mile.

Durham and Lt. Russell Zullick, his co-pilot, take turns steering through a cloverleaf search pattern. For 45 minutes they find nothing.

Then, from the jump door, flight mechanic Chris Windnagle sees something twinkle. It must be the strobe light from the EPIRB.

The survivors are clustered around the strobe and what looks like a fish float. They're drifting so fast that Zullick has to reprogram his instruments every few minutes just to keep up.

Windnagle shouts to his pilots to establish a hover. Durham tries to edge the helicopter down, but his altimeters are swinging 180 feet in a matter of seconds.

"Hey, Russ," he hollers to his co-pilot, "are we going up or down?"

Out go five flares. They hit water and burst to life a half mile upwind of the survivors. Windnagle pitches out the basket and it flies back to the rotor tail. He winches it back in, tries again and again to get it down to the water near the survivors.

After seven tries, the closest he can drop it is about 30 feet from the strobe light. Later, he will say it was like "dropping a clothespin into a milk jug from a tall building." He's frustrated, delirious from vertigo.

After 20 minutes, the smokes sputter out. Durham's not sure, but he figures they're close to not having enough fuel to return to base.

"What do you think?" he asks his co-pilot. Zullick just nods.

It's 12:49 a.m. - five hours and 47 minutes since the La Conte sank. With each minute, the chances rise sharply of those men drowning or dying from hypothermia.

Durham takes the Jayhawk up to 300 feet and veers back to base.

Two hundred feet below, Robert Doyle and his exhausted crewmates watch their hopes clatter away.

To be continued tomorrow.

This is the fourth part of a five-part narrative serial about the sinking of the fishing vessel La Conte.

The series will conclude Thursday.

IN THE GULF OF ALASKA - Fred Kalt has that rugged, Steve McQueen look. Angular jaw, sharp nose, ice-blue eyes with not a trace of casualness in them.

Average height, average build, he speaks softly and slowly. His cool head, that sureness under pressure, would make him ideal for the role of a hero in a Hollywood blockbuster.

After high school in Tampa, Fla., he went straight into the U.S. Coast Guard at 18. There was never any doubt about his decision. "I wanted to experience a search and rescue," he says. "To save a person a life, in conditions no one else would want to risk themselves in."

Twenty years later, he's a flight engineer in Sitka, husband to a woman named Barbara, father to two girls. It's after midnight, Jan. 31, 1998, and he's crouched in the darkness of a Jayhawk helicopter, ready to fly into a powerful storm in the Gulf of Alaska.

Next to him sit Michael Fish, a rescue swimmer, and Lee Honnold, on board as a backup flight mechanic. In the cockpit, Lt. Steven Torpey and his co-pilot, Cmdr. Theodore Le Feuvre, are firing up the engines.

This is the third helicopter being sent to attempt a rescue of five men whose fishing vessel, the La Conte, sank in the Fairweather Grounds. The first nearly crashed into the ocean and returned without any of the survivors. The second is on scene but losing fuel rapidly.

It's almost a miracle the fishermen haven't frozen to death yet. They've been floating in 38-degree water and mountainous seas for more than 5 hours. The longest anyone should expect to survive in water that cold - in calm seas - is roughly 4 hours.

Even by Coast Guard standards, this is classified as a high-risk mission, meaning the survivors are close to perishing and the rescuers are flying in life-threatening conditions.

It's one of those missions that gets talked about for years in the remotest of air bases, in academy classrooms. It's the test of Kalt's life. He wouldn't be anywhere else.

His team is better prepared than the first two. They've got an extra flight mechanic, chemical "glow sticks" so the survivors will see the rescue basket in the dark, 26 special flares that burn for 50 minutes, and 700 extra pounds of fuel.

Kalt's going over this checklist in his mind when Le Feuvre's voice crackles over the intercom.

"We're launching, boys. Hang on."

They are on the scene 49 minutes later, in complete darkness.

Torpey and Le Feuvre, as they will tell it later, are fighting head winds, blurred dials and nausea as they try to keep the pitching aircraft out of the waves.

Kalt and Honnold crouch by the jump door, shouting altitudes above the roar of ice and snow. The helicopter is rising and falling like a roller coaster.

Through the sleet and snow rattling on his visor and helmet, Kalt spots strips of reflective tape on waving arms.

"Survivors!" he shouts.

Kalt drops nine flares. They hit water and shoot white light. Next, he lowers the rescue basket. It lands in a trough several hundred yards downwind of the men - too far for them to swim for it.

From his knees, Honnold shouts directions to the pilots. For 20 minutes, Kalt keeps hoisting and dropping the basket, trying to get it closer, but he can't do it.

Fish, the 30-year-old rescue swimmer, offers to jump into the maelstrom to help the survivors into the basket.

"Appreciate the offer, Mike," Torpey remembers shouting back, "but we don't want to have pull you out, too."

Kalt is tossing out more flares when a hammerhead clobbers them. The down draft drives the Jayhawk backward a quarter mile and down into a trough.

Hannold, Kalt and Fish are screaming "UP! UP! UP!" Torpey and Le Feuvre are practically yanking the joystick out of the floor to give them lift power. If one wave hits us, Le Feuvre remembers thinking, we're dead.

The radar altimeter reads 40 feet. Seconds pass. The altimeter is still at 40. This can't be, Le Feuvre says to himself. I'm pulling this helicopter up at full power. We should be going straight up.

They ARE climbing, but below them, a wave is rising at the same speed.

"Well, Lord, I'm going to meet you," Le Feuvre remembers thinking. "But do I have to go out being cold and wet?"

And then, they're clear. They've outraced the wave.

Ten minutes later, they're back over the survivors. As Kalt lowers the basket, he notices that its 3/16-inch cable is rubbing against the grating on the face of the searchlight on the helicopter's belly.

The basket bounces wildly from crest to trough. After 20 minutes, Torpey manages to drag the basket closer and closer until it's within 5 yards of the survivors.

Through his binoculars, Honnold sees one of the men break from the group, thrash across the water and claw his way into the basket.

He shouts: "Survivor in the basket!"

Kalt throws the hoist in gear. The basket is swinging and spinning, foam scudding from it. Kalt steadies the cable, and within 10 seconds it's hanging in front of the jump door. He grabs the basket and hauls it in.

A man rolls out and curls up in a fetal position. Fish slides him back into a corner, slits off his survival suit and slips a thermal-insulated sack over him.

"What's your name?"

"Mo-Mo-Mork," he stutters. "William Mork."

The basket is already going down again. It splashes into a trough 10 yards from the survivors. Once again, the cable is sawing against the search light. If it snaps, Kalt thinks, it's over.

Kalt can't see well through the ice and snow, but it looks as if someone is swimming toward the basket. He waits for a tug in the line.

A gust of wind buffets the chopper. The hoist cable shrieks and goes taut as a fiddle string, lashing the Jayhawk's hull. Crewmen are shouting, the hoist is moaning. The pilots force down the helicopter's nose to steady the aircraft.

Kalt struggles to the hoist control, finds it still operable. But the helicopter's high-frequency antenna is gone. The hoist cable has ripped it off. Worse, the cable is now frayed.

Below, the basket rises, bouncing like a yo-yo in the wind. It comes up, up, up until it is hanging just outside of the jump door.

"Hey!" yells Kalt. "Someone's still in the basket!"

He grabs the metal cage and pulls. It doesn't budge. He pulls again. Stuck. "Pull, Lee! Pull!" Kalt shouts. Both men lean back, pulling with all the strength in their cramping muscles.

Fish, who is tending to Mork on the floor of the cabin, looks up. Through an opening between Kalt's right leg and the jump door, he can see why the basket won't enter.

A man is dangling from it.

Each time Kalt and Honnold try to yank the basket in, the dangling man's arms and head get rammed against the lip of the jump door.

5: Sea rescue leaves final mystery Storm gods and heroes, part five

This is the final part of a five-day serial.

IN THE GULF OF ALASKA - Through driving sleet icing his visor, flight engineer Fred Kalt can barely make out the crouching figure inside the rescue basket hanging just outside the helicopter door. He reaches out and gives the basket another yank.

Something's wrong. No matter how hard he tries, he can't pull the basket inside.

"FRED!" shouts crew member Michael Fish. "FRED, SOMEONE'S HANGING ON THE BASKET!"

"Where?," Kalt screams into the wind. "I CAN'T SEE HIM!"

The man is inches below Kalt's boots, barely clinging to the bottom of the basket. He looks into the cabin and locks eyes with Fish.

For a second. Just one second.

Time enough for everything to pause in Fish's mind, for the whining sleet and the groaning turbines to hush.

Time enough for one man's eyes to scream for mercy, for another's to scream in horror. And then he's gone.

The altimeter on the cabin wall reads 1-0-3. One hundred and three feet. My God, Fish remembers thinking, that's far for a man to fall.

The clunk of steel on the deck snaps Fish out of his thoughts. It's the rescue basket. Kalt and flight mechanic Harold Lee Honnold have finally pulled it in.

Inside the basket is the second man they have managed to pull from the sea. His cheeks are the color of ice. Icicles twitch in his beard.

"Bob?" Fish whispers. "Bob Doyle?"

He knows this man. They once worked together at the Coast Guard's air base in Sitka.

Fish strips off Doyle's waterlogged suit and wraps him in a thermal bag. Doyle has survived more than 7 hours in 38-degree water.

"Bob," Fish remembers asking. "How many men were on the ship?" He puts his ear next to Doyle's blue lips.

"Five."

"Not four?"

"Five."

"Who just fell from the basket?"

"Mark Morley, our skipper."

From the cockpit, Torpey sees one survivor at the strobe and another man floating 100 feet downwind. Where is the fifth man? Torpey checks his fuel: To make it back to Sitka base, they have to leave now.

Torpey thinks a moment, then gives everyone the plan.

They will save the man at the strobe. They will try to recover Morley. They will look for the unsighted fifth fisherman. Then, they'll fly to the Yakutat airbase, not Sitka station. Yakutat is 70 miles away - half as far as Sitka - and they can ride a tailwind, which will save fuel.

Kalt lowers the basket, but he's worried about the cable. It is frayed badly now and could snap or jam in the hoist drum as it spools. For several minutes the basket bobs empty.

"What's he waiting for?" Honnold remembers saying.

Finally, the survivor leaves the buoy and thrashes his way to the basket. Kalt throws the hoist gear in reverse, and forty seconds later, Mike Decapua is in the helicopter.

"What took you so long?" Fish jokes.

"I couldn't see it," Decapua says. "I got long hair. It was in my eyes."

Torpey banks into a hover above Morley. The basket touches down right next to him, but he doesn't move. They bump him with the basket. Nothing. They try to scoop him up with the basket, but it doesn't work.

After 20 minutes of this, Torpey and Le Feuvre call it quits. They've been in the air nearly 3 hours. The crew is dehydrated and dizzy with vertigo. The three rescued men are hypothermic. And fuel is dangerously low. Torpey takes them up to 300 feet, drops the nose and starts for Yakutat.

Kalt pulls off his helmet and visor. The muscles in his legs flutter and a queasiness rises in the pit of his stomach. He doesn't feel much like a hero. He just feels exhausted.

At his feet sits the rescue basket. The light sticks inside it still glow a feeble green. Kalt stares at the sticks until they die out.

At daybreak the wind is blowing hard but seas are down to 40 feet and the sleet has softened to a cold rain that dances along the water.

At first light, two Coast Guard C-130 planes from Kodiak and a helicopter from Sitka station begin crisscrossing the Fairweather Grounds. Shortly after 3:30 pm., the helicopter plucks a body from the sea not 10 miles from where the La Conte sank. It is identified as that of Mark Morley. He will be buried six days later in his hometown, Plymouth, Mich.

But David Hanlon is still out there somewhere.

An area twice the size of Rhode Island is combed before the search is called off at 5 p.m., Wednesday, Feb. 4, 94 hours and \$678,545 after it began.

People reckon it'll be a week or so before a crabbing boat spots Hanlon's body or his remains turn up in a fishing net.

But a week passes. Then a month. Then six months.

For Hanlon's five sisters and two brothers, life drifts. Without a body, they can't say their goodbyes.

Jesse Evans, 17, and his friend George Connors, 16, dropped anchor in Bear Cove on uninhabited Shuyak Island because the deer hunting there is good.

They were following a bear trail through a spruce forest when the red, neoprene mitten appeared before them. Jesse was picking at it with his hunting knife when he felt the kick of George's boot.

"I see something!" George shouted.

They bolted down the trail to a ring of spruce trees. Parting the branches, they stepped inside the bear den. In the center was a fresh mound of dirt, a bear bed. Draped across it was the top half of a survival suit, severed at the waist, with a jagged rip down the back. The hood was missing.

Within an hour, a Coast Guard helicopter lowered state troopers Steve Hall and Tom Dunn to the beach so the boys could show them what they had found.

The troopers plucked bone chips, strands of hair and pieces of wetsuit from the dirt and dropped them into a plastic bag. They also took the fingers and bits of skin Jesse had plucked from the mitten.

Dunn wondered: Who is this person in my evidence bag? Where did he come from? How did he end up here?

The Alaska state crime laboratory needed 18 days to identify the remains.

The investigation started with the wetsuit, which had the word "Tomboy" stenciled on its back. Calls to skippers of boats named Tomboy led to a man who said someone had borrowed one of his survival suits to use on the La Conte.

Next, Walter McFarlane, an examiner at the Anchorage crime lab, checked the ridge patterns of the skin Jesse had plucked from the mitten. Comparing it to fingerprints state troopers kept on file, he announced, on Sept. 1, that he'd found a match.

The remains belonged to David Hanlon.

Somehow, the counterclockwise current in the Gulf of Alaska had swept the body an incredible 650 miles, where it washed up on Shuyak. What condition it was in when it reached the shore, no one will ever know.

No one, that is, except the black bear that ambled to the beach one day and found the last crewman of a doomed ship.

Postscript: The five members of the last rescue team - Lt. Stephen Torpey, Lt. Cmdr. Theodore Le Feuvre, rescue swimmer Michael Fish, flight mechanic Harold Lee Honnold and flight engineer Fred Kalt - were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, the highest aviation honor given in peacetime. The crews of the other two rescue helicopters received commendation medals.

Tamara Westcott, fiancée of the lost skipper, Mark Morley, gave birth to his son last summer. She named him Mark. The three surviving fishermen, William Mork, 39, Mike Decapua, 41, and Robert Doyle, 39, recovered from hypothermia and still fish the high seas.

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EDITOR'S NOTE - This story is based on interviews with 11 Coast Guard helicopter flight crew members involved in the rescue; three members of the ground crew; Coast Guard spokesmen in Juneau, Alaska, and Martinsburg, W.Va.; the surviving crew members of the La Conte; Jesse Evans, who found the remains on Shuyak Island; the two Alaska state troopers who recovered the remains; and two forensics experts at the Alaska State Medical Examiner's Office in Anchorage. The story also draws from the 523-page record of the Coast Guard's inquest into the sinking of the La Conte.

It is with gratitude to the Juneau Empire and Publisher Robert O. Hale that this story is printed here in digital form and available for all who respect and or love the Coast Guard so they can read and appreciate what happen that night, January 30, 1998.

*WebMaster, USCG Aviation History WebSite
<http://uscgaviationhistory.aoptero.org>*