

## 27 Hours in the Cold Alaska Sea

After serving four years at Coast Guard Air Station, Kodiak, it was an almost routine announcement on the intercom in Hangar One, “Put the ready C-130 on the line! Put the ready C-130 on the line! Vessel sinking. Put extra pumps onboard!” The crew scurried to open the hangar doors and push the 1601 from its warm nest out into the blowing April flurry morning. Up in Rescue Coordination Center (RCC), radio transmissions continued from the Fishing Vessel Clover Leaf, “May Day, May Day, May Day! We are in the Shelikof Strait, three men onboard, we’re taking on water and sinking and we’re preparing to abandon ship. We have survival suits and are putting them on.” The struggling vessel was sinking in 20 foot seas with a distant shoreline in sight. The visibility was limited, snow flurries, 500 foot ceiling and winds of approximately 65 mph. It was dawn on what would prove to be a long and deadly day for the terrified crew of the Clover Leaf!

The C-130 arrived on scene approximately one hour after the last radio transmissions were received from the Clover Leaf. They had managed to give their Loran position, and described a faint visual description of their position and distance from shore before the radio went silent. The Navigator and Pilot had a fairly good fix on their last location. The Hercules flew just below the cloud ceiling at about 200 knots, while the eyes of the scanners in back strained to see any sign of orange dots bobbing in the 20 foot white-capped swells. The turbulence bounced the 130,000 pound Lockheed around the sky like a small jeep speeding down a gravel road littered with potholes.

Minutes turned to hours and emotions of hope turned to frustration and despair as night-fall approached. The 130 crew knew there were men in the water with survival suits just below them hiding in the ferocious, wind-blown swells, but where? One blink, one visual diversion and you miss them. Little did the crew realize that two of the men were still alive and had seen their hope of rescue fly past them on more than one occasion.

“Comsta Kodiak, Comsta Kodiak, Coast Guard One -Six -Zero-One.” The flight ops report was dismal and the C-130 reluctantly departed scene enroute to Kodiak abandoning the souls bobbing helplessly in the cold northern sea for the night!

Before dawn the next morning, two Kodiak C-130’s were launched from Hangar One. I’m Greg King and I was an Aviation Machinist Mate, First Class and the flight engineer on the first plane to taxi out. Onboard were Lt. Commander Bernstein, the Aircraft Commander, Lt Tabata, Co- Pilot, AE2 Bishop, Navigator, and our scanner-drop master in the back was AD3 Bruce Erb, and AM3 Red West, scanner. We arrived on-scene just after daybreak and began a zig-zag search pattern below 500 feet. The other C-130 was above us and flying an expanding circular search pattern. With two 130’s and fourteen sets of eyes searching, we had hopes of finding the men. The sea was dotted with fellow fishing vessels being tossed around like corks through the twenty foot white-capped waves in search of their friends as well.

About an hour into our search an excited voice exclaimed over the intercom, “Pilot Scanner... HEY, there’s a guy on a log and he’s waiving his arms!” Our crews were well trained and automatically began preparing for what was next. Without thinking, I instinctively reached up on overhead panel in the cock pit and launched a flare... and then a second. It was the co-pilot’s job to do that, but in my excitement I wanted to make sure we had this guy tagged so we didn’t lose him! The co-pilot launched another flare, and then Bernstein began a 90-270 degree maneuver to turn the plane around and make a direct approach over the survivor. The Navigator got a “Mark” on the location as we passed over. I began to depressurize the plane from the engineer’s overhead and Bruce Erb began preparing the SAR pack, which included two- twenty man rafts with three survival packs in the middle, all tied together with 100 feet of nylon lanyard between them. Red West, our second scanner, stayed focused visually on the survivor.

Once the plane was depressurized, I went to the back of the plane to help Bruce with the drop after the pilot lined us up. As we were making our turn, Bruce and myself were kneeling on the lowered ramp, our gunner’s belts each secured to the “D” ring on the cargo deck, with the SAR Kit ready to drop! “Pilot – Drop! SAR kit is “Rigged and Ready!” Erb pointed toward the sea and made another startling report over the intercom. “Hey, there’s another guy in the water just behind us!” I could see the orange survival suit bobbing in the sea. Wow, what a feeling! Looks like we found two guys already! Where’s the third?

“OK guys, we’re coming up on our drop!” 15 seconds! 10 seconds! “Drop-Drop-Drop!” We pushed each of the five SAR Packs off the ramp at one second intervals as we glided over the survivor. The rafts on either end began to inflate upon their exit and the kit laid three feet from the survivor. Perfect drop! What an amazing feeling, kneeling on the edge of the ramp flying at 150 Knots, just 50 feet or so over the top of the waves and watching that poor guy holding onto a log as we flew over him!” But the action was just starting!

Bruce and Red secured the back of the airplane and I returned to my engineer seat, and re-pressurized. The pilot, radio-man and navigator were getting really busy. We had assumed “On-sight commander” position and were beginning to vector other fishing vessels toward the survivors, while at the same time coordinating the other C-130 to make sure we didn’t run into each other. Meanwhile, Kodiak launched a Sikorsky H-3 helo to the scene. Our main focus was on the survivors in the water. They had drifted about a mile apart from each other since abandoning ship. One fishing vessel steamed toward the second man in the water. They arrived before the helo and the captain radioed with sad news! “Coast Guard aircraft! Looks like this poor fella didn’t make er. He’s face down in the water.” His crew hauled the body onboard and confirmed that the young fisherman was gone.

Another vessel reached the known survivor who clung in desperation to his log rather than attempting to climb into a raft. After a long day and a longer night in the cold Alaskan sea it was amazing he was even alive, let alone strong enough to hold on to a log!

The vessel's crew pulled the survivor, Rick Laws, onboard and immediately got him out of his suit and wet clothes and began treating him for hypothermia. They said the guy was shaking really bad, but he could talk – barely though!

The H-3 arrived on scene and hoisted Laws first, then his deceased ship-mate. The decision was made for us to rendezvous with the helo in King Salmon to pick up the body of the deceased crewman while the helo med-evaced Laws back to Kodiak where he was miraculously treated for hypothermia over night in the hospital and then released. He remains the longest water survivor in history, spending an heroic 27 hours in the frigid Alaskan sea before being rescued.

Laws told the story of how the third crewman failed to don his survival suit in time before their vessel sank. He died in Laws arms shortly afterwards from exposure to the bitter cold water, but he continued to hold his friends lifeless body all day long and into the night before losing the strength to hold on any longer; then reluctantly let him slip into his dark watery grave. Sometime during the night, a log ran into Laws, and he grabbed hold and pulled himself onto the log where he remained until being hoisted from the water by his fellow fishermen. His other friend wasn't so lucky and apparently died during the night drifting alone in his survival suit.

This was my last Search and Rescue mission in the Coast Guard before being discharged four months later to attend college in Colorado. It happened April, 1980. In the six and a half years I served, it was also my most memorable!

This would be what Rick Laws saw as we flew over to make our drop.  
NOTE: The Ramp and Door are open, ready for their drop.

I worked and flew on this 130  
This is Kodiak, 1976. I was 21.



Making drops. I would have been on the right dropping the SAR Pack

Coast Guard Air Station Kodiak, Alaska Crews

