

The Coast Guard's Most Famous Rescue of Which You've Never Heard

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Just last month the U.S. Coast Guard rescued over 11,000 people and nearly 1,400 pets from the flooded Houston, Texas metropolitan area in the wake of Hurricane Harvey; hundreds more in the Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico and Florida were rescued following Hurricanes Irma and Maria. Roughly one-fifth of those rescues were conducted by helicopter, from rooftops and trees amidst rushing waters. We've all seen, or at least heard of, a rescue swimmer plucking a fisherman out of frigid Alaskan or New England seas, as well as helicopter medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) from the top deck of a cruise ship. Some of you may have even heard of how the sinking of the coal collier SS MARINE ELECTRIC in February 1983 led to the creation of the Coast Guard's rescue swimmer program – a story well told in Robert Frump's book, *Until the Sea Shall Free Them*. This corps of daring, and incredibly physically fit, young men and women is the Service's closest analog to the Defense Department's Special Forces. Each and every one of them nonetheless depends on a helicopter to cover many miles out to and back from that lifesaving swim.

So when and where exactly was the first use of a helicopter to rescue civilians in distress? Believe it or not, this aviation milestone occurred shortly after the end of World War II. And as you've probably figured since I'm standing up here, it was the Coast Guard that made it happen, albeit with a lot of support from the U.S. Army and the U.S. Air Force's predecessor service, the U.S. Army Air Forces.

The year was 1946, and commercial trans-Atlantic flight was still in its early years. SABENA, the Belgian National Airlines, had only been flying the route for three months when one of its Douglas DC-4 "Skymasters," callsign Oscar Oscar Charlie Baker George (OO-CBG), was flying from Brussels to New York City, starting on the afternoon of September 17th and scheduled to arrive midday on the 18th, with stops for fuel in Shannon, Ireland, and Gander, Newfoundland. Again, this was the early years of long-

distance commercial air travel, and this unpressurized SABENA airliner – with 37 passengers – had only a single flight crew of seven for a trip spanning over 24 hours.

Refueling in Shannon had gone smoothly, but the trip across the North Atlantic was very turbulent with icing conditions all the way across. The pilot attempted to climb to over 15,000 feet altitude to cruise above the weather, but could not remain at that height due to passengers “becoming distressed” – presumably due to hypoxia. As OO-CBG approached Newfoundland, the air became very rough. After this very long and turbulent leg of the journey, pilot Captain Jean Ester faced the daunting task of locating Newfoundland Airport – as Gander International Airport was then known – in dark and completely overcast conditions, with a 500-foot ceiling, one-mile visibility and north-northeasterly winds gusting up to 40 knots.

Located about 25 miles from the coast in the most northeast region of the North American Continent, Newfoundland Airport was completed in 1938. So vital to enabling trans-Atlantic aviation, a lifeline to the Allies throughout the Second World War, the facilities at Gander grew rapidly; for several years Newfoundland Airport was the largest airport in the world, both in physical size and volume of aircraft. And this was all before the Dominion of Newfoundland became a province of Canada in 1949. Gander International Airport most recently made the news on September 11th, 2001. When all air traffic in the continental United States was halted in the wake of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in Manhattan and the Pentagon, 28 airliners – with a total of 6,122 passengers and 473 crew – landed at Gander. Nearly doubling the population of this remote North American outpost, the story of the generous welcome and housing of the stranded travelers for four days is well told in Jim DeFede’s 2003 book, *The Day the*

World Came to Town. The story was also the inspiration for the hit Broadway musical *Come from Away*.

Returning to OO-CBG, the aircraft did have good radio communications with the tower at Gander as it prepared for an instrument approach landing. At the time, there were no official instrument approach procedures established for airports. Instead, each airline developed its own procedures for each airport. SABENA followed the procedures developed and used by Pan Am. As part of the set-up for the instrument approach, OO-CBG called the tower at 5:03am local with the message, “high cone, 2,000 feet,” indicating that the aircraft was directly over the Gander radio beacon range station; procedures, however, dictated that the aircraft should have been at a minimum altitude of 4,000 feet. At 5:07am, OO-CBG again radioed Gander with the message “Procedure Turn,” to make the tower aware that the aircraft had completed its turn to make its final approach to the runway. After also obtaining the barometric pressure at the airfield, no further radio transmissions were received from OO-CBG.

When the tower could not raise OO-CBG on the radio, Gander contacted nearby airports in Stephenville and Torbay in hopes that the SABENA airliner had diverted to land elsewhere. When it was determined that OO-CBG had not landed elsewhere, Newfoundland Airport declared an emergency and contacted the U.S. Coast Guard Air Detachment, Argentia, in the southeast peninsula of Newfoundland, to assist in the search for the missing DC-4.

To support the International Ice Patrol mission and remote LORAN-A radio navigation stations, the Argentia Air Detachment had two B-17G “Flying Fortresses,” designated PB-1Gs by the Coast Guard, and two PBY-5A “Catalina” amphibians. Upon receiving word of the lost SABENA airliner, the Coast Guard air crews took off to begin the search; a PB-1G began to search offshore, while the two amphibians centered their

searches around Newfoundland Airport. The three aircraft searched throughout the day with no sign of OO-CBG.

As searches resumed on the morning of September 19th, the weather began to clear. Shortly before noon, a Trans World Airlines (TWA) airliner approaching Newfoundland Airport spotted a possible crash site approximately 20 miles southwest of the airport. The airliner remained in the area until one of the Coast Guard amphibians was able to fly to the scene and confirm the wreckage was that of OO-CBG; the Coast Guard crew also saw that there were survivors from the crash.

On the ground, the survivors had gone through a hellish experience and remained in great peril. In the dark and cloudy conditions of the morning of the 18th, the pilot had apparently misjudged his height above the ground when looking for the airport. The DC-4 was flown into the forest in a level-flight, cruising configuration at approximately 100 knots; the flaps were still up and the landing gear retracted. The aircraft cut a swath of nearly 375 feet through the trees before finally stopping and bursting into flames – there was still approximately seven and one-half hours of fuel aboard. Every seat with a buckled-in passenger tore free of the passenger compartment floor and many of the passengers, still in their seats, were thrown clear of the fuselage. All told, 17 of the 37 passengers survived the crash and fire, and only one of the crew of seven was still alive, Hostess Jean Rookx; she was badly injured with two broken legs. In the course of the eventual accident investigation it would show that the navigator's watch stopped at 5:12am – and 30 seconds – local time. Just over five minutes elapsed between last radio contact and the crash.

The survivors had to endure the first day on their own, as the fires burned out amidst continuing windy and drizzly conditions. The few passengers who made it through the crash with no, or only minor, injuries did what they could to pull the injured

and trapped from the burning wreckage. The first help that did arrive, midday on the 19th, were two local hunters apparently drawn to the crash site by the TWA airliner and Coast Guard Catalina circling overhead. The hunters did what they could to comfort and warm the survivors by sharing their coats and sleeping bags, and by brewing hot tea.

At the same time, word was quickly spreading of the located survivors. At U.S. Army Fort McAndrew, collocated with the Coast Guard Air Detachment in Argentia, an Army Medical team was assembled and began planning for a rescue. Because the crash site was heavily wooded and happened to be in a large bog – “muskeg,” as such bogs are known in northern North America – aircraft could not land nearby. Instead, Coast Guard aircraft began dropping emergency supplies to the survivors in the early afternoon.

Later that same day, the rescue team, led by Captain Samuel P. Martin, a U.S. Army medical officer, was flown by one of the Catalinas to the lake closest to the crash site, about five miles away. From there the team members were led by a local guide as they paddled down a small river in rubber boats as far as they could before slogging their way across the muskeg to the survivors, relieving the two hunters.

Assessing the geography and the survivors’ injuries – 14 required stretchers – Captain Martin quickly determined that there was no way to safely evacuate along the five-mile trek the rescue team had taken inbound. As word of the perilous situation was passed back to the Air Detachment and onto the Coast Guard Eastern Area Rescue Officer, Captain R.L. Burke, the Coast Guard decided to attempt employing an emerging aviation technology, the helicopter, in effecting the rescue.

The first operational helicopter, Germany’s Focke-Wulf Fw61, had flown in 1936. The first mass production helicopter, however, was developed here in the United States – Igor Sikorsky’s 1942 R-4 “Hoverfly.” In September 1946, the Coast Guard possessed only two helicopters, both built by Sikorsky: the fabric covered HNS,

essentially a slightly modified version of the R-4, at Air Station Elizabeth City, North Carolina; and the metal-skinned HOS “Hoverfly II,” at Air Station Brooklyn, New York. Each was powered by a piston engine, rather than the gas turbines typically powering helicopters from the Vietnam War through to today.

As these early helicopters had very limited range, orders were given for the airframes to be disassembled for transport. The Coast Guard crews immediately undertook this complex and extremely unusual task to begin the rescue. U.S. Army Air Forces C-54s, the military version of the DC-4, arrived at both Brooklyn and Elizabeth City in the early evening of the 20th. They were loaded with the helicopters and their crews, and were on their way to Gander before midnight.

Upon arrival in Newfoundland shortly after sunrise, the crews – under the command of Coast Guard Helicopter Pilot #1, Commander Frank Erickson – immediately set to work on reassembling the helicopters. Realizing the challenges of landing a helicopter on the soft and unstable muskeg, the Argentic Coast Guard aircrews dropped lumber that same morning at the crash site to construct a landing platform. A second landing platform was also constructed at the edge of Gander Lake, about seven miles from the crash site, where the survivors could be brought to waiting Coast Guard Catalina amphibians for a short flight to Newfoundland airport and awaiting medical services.

To accommodate the injured survivors, Coast Guard technicians modified both helicopters to carry a Stokes litter: the Air Station Elizabeth City HNS with the litter hanging on the outside, and the Brooklyn HOS with litter inside the fuselage. The crew of the HOS had it assembled and successfully test flown by the early afternoon, but the Elizabeth City HNS had to undergo troubleshooting and reassembly by the crew when problems were experienced in its initial test flights. Nonetheless, thanks to the tireless efforts of the Coast Guardsmen, on the 21st the HOS was able to evacuate the eight most

critical patients before darkness set in, including the severely injured Hostess Jean Rookx who was reluctant to leave the passengers for whose care she felt strongly responsible. So quickly had the HOS undertaken rescues that it nearly sank into the mucky muskeg on its first flight, when it attempted to land on a stretched tarpaulin because one of the wooden landing platforms hadn't yet been finished.

The next morning both helicopters successfully evacuated the remaining ten survivors, and spent the afternoon flying out Captain Martin's medical rescue team of fourteen. Although one of the survivors passed away from medical complications a few days later, this miraculous mission was in no way diminished – this first helicopter evacuation of civilians from the scene of a disaster had been completed in less than 48 hours from the initial notification that helicopters were the sole hope for success. To reiterate, these Coast Guard pioneers effected the disassembly, transportation and reassembly of the helicopters, as well as the safe transportation of over 30 people – one at a time – all in less than two days.

Admittedly, I spent a 29-year career in the Coast Guard completely unaware of the service's contribution to this milestone in aviation history. A year ago, however, I had the opportunity to fly up to Gander with VADM Charlie Ray, the Coast Guard's Deputy Commandant of Operations and "Ancient Albatross" – the senior aviator, to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the rescue. It turns out that the efforts of Captain Martin and Commander Erickson, and their teams, are well remembered in Newfoundland. Dozens of locals turned out to celebrate the rescue and thank the U.S. Coast Guard and U.S. Army; the Mayor took the opportunity to name a street in Gander after Coast Guard pilot Commander Stewart Graham, and another street after Army Captain Samuel Martin. We then had the opportunity to overfly the crash site aboard a Royal Canadian Air Force CH-149 Cormorant – a very big helicopter. As a chaplain

offered a prayer, a rescue swimmer was lowered to place a wreath at the small graveyard where the victims of the crash are buried. That graveyard has been named “St. Martin’s in the Woods,” in honor of Captain Martin. It was indeed a solemn day.

A bit of an epilogue, Commander Stewart “Stew” Graham, USCG (Retired), – Coast Guard Helicopter Pilot #2, Enlisted Pilot #40 and Surfman #68 – the last surviving pilot from the Gander Rescue passed away on August 13th, 2016, and will be buried at Arlington National Cemetery with full military honors on the 26th of this month (October, 2017).

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OO-CBG Crash Site

Photo: Public Affairs Division, USCG Headquarters



HEROIC ARMY RESCUERS who paddled rubber boats and hacked a trail thru wilderness and muskeg to reach survivors of the Newfoundland tragedy. Standing, center, **Cap.t. Samuel P. Martin**, in command. Left, a guide. Acme

Captain Samuel Martin, USA, and his rescue team

Photo: Denver Post



HNS Helicopter from USCG Air Station Elizabeth City, NC
(on makeshift landing pad in muskeg)

Photo: Public Affairs Division, USCG Headquarters



HOS Helicopter from USCG Air Station Brooklyn, NY
(approaching makeshift landing pad in muskeg)

Photo: Public Affairs Division, USCG Headquarters



Gander HNS Rescue Crew
(LT Stew Graham, second from left)

Photo: Public Affairs Division, USCG Headquarters



“St. Martin’s in the Woods”
Memorial at SABENA OO-CBG Crash Site

Photo: Gander Our Town