

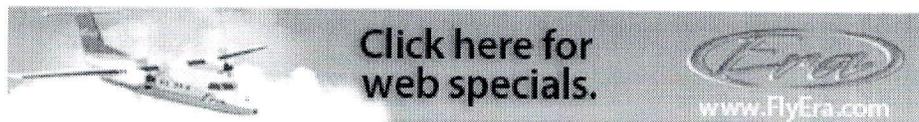
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STORY

Days of days

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Coast Guard honors crewmen in Alaska Ranger rescue

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By RALPH GIBBS
Mirror Writer

Vice Adm. Gene Brooks was in Kodiak Thursday honoring the U.S. Coast Guard heroes who helped rescue the fishermen of the Alaska Ranger.

He called that day — March 23, 2008 — the days of days.

"The days of days are these memorable outer experiences," Brooks said. "For me, one of my days of days was 15 miles north of Havana, Cuba, in October 1994. To be there and to look as far as you can see in every direction were thousands of boats and rafts and inner tubes all filed with people screaming, 'Save me, save me.' They were drowning, they were dying."

Days like these, he said, were life-defining, and that is what is meant by the days of days.

"For me, ever after, I never had to question why I was born," Brooks said.

But the days of days have a life of their own and never happen when you expect.

"(These days) often happen in horrible weather, under extremely difficult circumstances. You're generally exhausted, you're cold, you're scratchy from seawater, you're seasick. All you really want to do is lie down and quit," Brooks said. "But in the days of days, something makes you push forward."

That's what it was for HH-65 Dolphin rescue helicopter pilot Lt. Tim Schmitz and his aircrew the night the Alaska Ranger went down. The helicopter was onboard the Coast Guard cutter Munro.

Easter Sunday

Onboard the Munro, it had been a long day for the ship's crew. Outside, the wind howled and blew freezing rain and snow across the ship's decks, making them difficult to traverse.

The crew was tired and cold and most had already settled into the 2-by-6 foot cubicles they affectionately call bunks as the ship, pushed by

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heavy waves, rocked them to sleep.

Then the days of days happened.

"It was about 3 a.m. when I got the call," Schmitz said. "The phone went off the hook. At first it seemed like the standard vessel-taking-on-water call."

It wasn't.

When the crew of the Munro first received the call, they were approximately 120 nautical miles from the Alaska Ranger, too far for the H-65 Dolphin to launch and make it back safely.

"I would have to depart the Munro, get on scene, maybe do a medevac if someone was hurt and get back to the ship," Schmitz said. "I didn't have the fuel to get anywhere else."

Capt. Craig Lloyd, commander of the Munro, ordered an intercept course and best speed to the area. Schmitz used the time to make his way to the ship's operations center to plan the rescue.

Conditions were not looking good and Schmitz wasn't sure he was willing to risk his aircrew to the weather outside, which included near-zero visibility, minus 24-degree wind-chill and vertigo-inducing snow squalls.

Then the Munro received word the Alaska Ranger was experiencing uncontrollable flooding and caution was thrown to the wind.

"I fully expected to over-torque the helicopter on takeoff," Schmitz said. "We were excessively heavy. I expected to over-torque the helicopter on scene. It just worked out. We used the pitching of the ship to launch us and conserved power."

"The Munro did an amazing job of getting on scene. The ship is built to do 28 knots and it was doing 30. We launched at 80 miles," he said.

It was still cutting the fuel range close, especially in the howling weather, but the plan was to have the Munro continue to close the Alaska Ranger while Schmitz and his aircrew worked the scene.

"That's not how it turned out," Schmitz said.

The ship was only able to close about 18 miles.

Schmitz' helicopter wasn't the first helicopter on the scene.

An Air Station Kodiak HH-60 Jayhawk, piloted by Lt. Steven Bonn, had already plucked 12 survivors from the water and were making their way to the Munro.

The Munro, waiting to receive the incoming helicopter and refuel it while the aircraft lowered survivors its deck, had to turn to an unfavorable course that did not allow it to get closer to the Alaska Ranger.

Schmitz knew this, but continued toward the Alaska Ranger, aware that most of the Alaska Ranger's crew was in the cold water of the Bering Sea.

"At that point, there were at least a dozen survivors left in the water, not in rafts," Schmitz said."

The pilot was ready.

He had 16 years of flying experience under his belt to draw upon.

An army soldier first, Schmitz flew the Cobra attack helicopter before transferring to the Coast Guard.

However, he doesn't credit all his preparations for this days of days on flying experience alone.

"What prepared me, I think, were all the leaders and all the people I'd worked with over the years that gave me that little bit of leadership guidance and prepared me for the decisions I had to make," Schmitz said.

One of those decisions that night would leave one of his crew, Abram Heller, behind.

By the time Schmitz and his crew were in the air and rushing toward the Alaska Ranger, the crew of the Ranger had been in the water about 90 minutes.

When Schmitz and his aircrew arrived, they plucked four survivors from the frigid waters.

The rescue was not flawless.

Ranger crewmen Byron Carrillo never made it into the helicopter, slipping 40 feet from the rescue basket back into the water. He was one of five that died that night.

"We just weren't able to get him in," Schmitz said. "When he started coming up out of the water, he wasn't positioned in the basket properly and he slipped out due to all the weight of the water in his suit. I knew I had to keep my crew focused because we had other people in the water. It was my decision to move on. There was nothing more we could do at that point."

After bringing on the fourth survivor, Schmitz circled the helicopter back around to a group of four fishermen.

With fuel running low, Schmitz had to make a decision. The fishermen had been in the water a long time and might not survive much longer, so he deployed Heller, his search and rescue swimmer, again.

Castaway

"I discussed it with him," Schmitz said. "I told him I would like to leave him on scene and he said, 'Roger.'"

To help him and the fishermen survive until another helicopter arrived, Petty Officer Alfred Musgrave, the helicopter's mechanic, deployed a life raft into the water.

It was a perfect placement.

"He deployed (the raft) upwind, upswell," Schmitz said. "It just worked out perfectly. The raft drifted right to the survivors. There was no way I was going (to leave Heller behind) if he didn't have a raft. He wouldn't have survived without a raft."

They recovered a fifth survivor and departed for the Munro.

Before Schmitz left, he circled one last time and observed one survivor getting into the raft and helping another.

"As I flew back, I wondered if I had overcommitted myself and my crew with the (dwindling levels of) fuel," Schmitz said.

Schmitz landed back on the ship with about 18 minutes of fuel

remaining.

Before the helicopter finished shutting down, Schmitz was running down to the ship's operations center to see if there was any word on Heller.

Back at the scene, Heller was so focused on the welfare of the Alaska Ranger crewmen left in his charge, he never had time to focus on himself.

"The gravity of the situation never hit me until afterwards," Heller said. "We were just doing what we needed to do."

Unlike Schmitz, Heller didn't have years of experience to draw on. He has been in the Coast Guard for a little more than four years. This was his first days of days experience.

"I've been involved in a few medevacs," Heller said. "The only other time I've had to get in the water, we landed on a beach and I waded out to a boat. This was actually my first water rescue."

Instead of experience, Heller used rescue swimmer training to keep him focused while he did his job.

Part of that job was getting the fishermen into the raft, which Heller said wasn't easy.

He also tried to keep in contact with the ship. To do that he had to jump in and out of the raft several times to get the radio out of his dry suit.

He stayed in that raft for about 40 minutes before the second helicopter arrived back on scene and plucked him and the fishermen he was safeguarding out of the water.

All in all, Heller said he was fine from this experience — with one exception.

"I ended up getting sick because I had swallowed a bunch of saltwater," Heller said. "It crossed my mind that I never wanted to be in an actual shipwreck."

Once the rescue was over, it crossed everyone's mind that this was one of those days of days, a life-changing experience.

"This is a case that will live with everybody," Schmitz said.

Brooks agreed.

"This was a dramatic rescue that saved 42 lives," he said.

For their efforts, on Thursday, Brooks awarded Schmitz, co-pilot Lt. Greg Gedemer and Musgrave the Air Service Medal.

Heller has been recommended for the Distinguished Flying Cross.

The other helicopter crew awarded the Air Service Medal were Bonn, co-pilot Brian McLaughlin, Petty Officer O'Brien Hollow and Petty Officer Robert DeBolt.

The crew of the Munro was given the Unit Commendation Award.

Also awarded was the C-130 crew. Pilot Lt. Cmdr. Matthew Duben received the Coast Guard Achievement Medal. Receiving a letter of commendation were co-pilot Lt. Thomas Wallin, Petty Officer Phillip Tacconelli and Petty Officer Darren Johnson.

The Munro saved 20 fishermen. The Alaska Ranger's sister ship, the

Alaska Warrior, rescued 22.

Mirror writer Ralph Gibbs can be reached by e-mail at rgibbs@kodiakdailymirror.com.

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