

Interview Summary

Interview: Lt. Dave Neel
Time/Date: December 14, 2004
Location: Air Station Kodiak
Present: Erickson, Baldessari

During the interview, Lt. Neel provided the following information:

Lt. Neel was the helicopter commander for the flight, and he was the copilot, seated in the left seat. The helicopter had been positioned at Dutch Harbor to assist with rescue of personnel from the Selendang Ayu. He stated that he was called in Dutch Harbor by the operations officer from Air Station Kodiak. His initial instructions were to proceed to the Coast Guard Cutter ALEX HALEY, pickup 26 survival suits, and deliver them to the vessel. He was to validate whether the anchor was holding, and loiter 3 hours in the area unless needed or released. He commented that he was uncertain if he could validate if the vessel's anchor was holding.

The helicopter departed Dutch Harbor and encountered heavy weather en route. There were snow squalls, moderate to severe turbulence upwind of any terrain, the visibility was "up and down" due to snow squalls, and the radar was marginally effective due to winds and snow squalls. Upon arrival in the area, they visually located the bay and saw a white speck on the water, which turned out to be a tugboat, not the ALEX HALEY. They realized that they were looking too far out to sea, and saw "an aircraft carrier sized vessel," much closer to the shore than they expected. The wind direction was 300 to 310 degrees, and the vessel was abeam to the wind, facing west. The crew of CG6020 located the ALEX HALEY as it was passing along the starboard side of the Selendang Ayu. The crew called the ALEX HALEY to arrange for the pickup of the survival suits, and was told, "stand by," as the cutter was planning an attempt to pass a towline to the vessel. That attempt failed, and the vessel's anchor line was not holding.

The ALEX HALEY had radio conversations with the master of the vessel, telling him the helicopter was ready to hoist, trying to convince him to leave the vessel, but the master was uncooperative. Lt. Neel was flying from the left seat, and began to reconnoiter hoisting areas on the vessel, and landing areas on the beach. He located the center hatch of the vessel that had a large circle, appropriate for hoisting in calm conditions, but the vessel was rolling with waves washing over the deck. Lt Neel was concerned about the safety of the vessel crew trying to reach the center hatch area over an open deck. Further examination of the vessel revealed the safest area was near the fo'c'sle. Lt. Neel said that further discussion about dropping survival suits to the vessel crew appeared to end at the failed attempt to pass a towline. Their mission changed to conducting a hoist operation during daylight. He also reconnoitered the beach area and located a spot for landing but encountered some turbulence.

CG6020 was recalled to the vessel by the ALEX HALEY to prepare for hoisting. The crew completed the aircraft's rescue checklist Part 1, and a portion of Part 2. They observed the vessel crew deploy the starboard anchor, which eventually seemed to catch. The vessel rotated into the wind, and the master of the vessel reported that the anchor was holding. He also said that his instruments were showing that the anchor was not holding, but he seemed convinced the anchor was holding. The ALEX HALEY finally convinced the master of the vessel to evacuate some of the crewmembers. The crew of CG6020 contacted the master of the vessel via radio and coordinated with him the location of the hoisting operation. The crew of CG6020 completed rescue checklist Part 2 and waited for the vessel crewmembers to appear on deck.

The helicopter took up position with Lt. Watson doing the flying, and they decided not to use a trail line. Vessel crewmembers would appear and then disappear, coming onto the deck in a leisurely manner. The helicopter crew hoisted vessel crewmembers as they appeared on deck, and after about the 5th or 6th hoist, they loaded luggage into the rescue basket. CG6020 radioed the master of the vessel to advise him that luggage was not allowed, and finally completed hoisting nine personnel, and one load of luggage. CG6020 conferred with the ALEX HALEY about hoisting the vessel personnel onto the cutter. The ALEX HALEY took up station about 45 degrees from the wind line. The flight mechanic conned the pilot over the deck. At times, they could see the bow of the cutter in the water and the propeller screws out of the water. It was decided to utilize a trail line from the rescue basket to the deck. They completed 10 hoists, nine crewmembers and one of luggage. This was accomplished by watching the wave sets. Lt. Neel called the wave troughs and sets, and Lt. Watson would back off during extreme conditions, and moved in again during a lull in the wave action.

CG6021 hoisted nine crewmembers from the Selendang Ayu, and was expecting to continue removing vessel crewmembers. The master of the vessel reported that the anchor was holding, and he was not going to remove any more crew. The ALEX HALEY urged the master of the vessel to abandon ship, but he refused. CG6020 was now down to about 1800 to 1900 pounds of fuel, but CG6021 had more. The two crews conferred and decided that CG6020 would take the nine crewmembers from CG6021 and an exchange was made on the beach. CG6020 returned to Dutch Harbor.

Upon reaching Dutch Harbor, they shutdown and called for fuel, and immigration officials. Lt. Neel took on fuel to 5,000 pounds, expecting to relieve CG6021 on-scene. He said he knew that CG6021 had instructions to leave the scene with enough fuel to return to Cold Bay. He contacted the operations officer at Air Station Kodiak, and was given instructions to either remain in Dutch Harbor for the night, or return to Cold Bay. He was told that CG67021 was also coming to Dutch Harbor. He preferred to remain in Dutch Harbor and was told by the operations officer to park near the Penn Air hanger, and leave and hanger area open for CG6021. Lt. Neel said he remembered that there was some maintenance retorques due on the helicopter. Heavy weather was still coming through the area. The outside temperature was about 3 degree C with high winds. Lt. Neel decided that due to the weather conditions, the maintenance checks could wait, and they were

probably finished for the day. The crew had been on-duty 9 hours, and had flown 4.8 hours.

The crew went for a meal, but a marine safety officer came looking for the crew with a cell phone in-hand. The commander of Air Station Kodiak operations was on the phone, reporting that the ALEX HALEY did not know where the helicopter crew was. Lt. Neel explained that the operations duty officer knew of the plan to remain in Dutch Harbor, and he was complying with the operations officer's instructions. Lt. Neel was informed that there had been a change in the duty operations officer, CG6021 was returning to Cold Bay, and CG6020 was needed at the now grounded vessel. He then discussed the pending maintenance retorques on the helicopter, but was told that was not a worry, and the helicopter was needed on-scene. Lt. Neel said the mission was not a problem, and he was not surprised at being tasked for another mission. The crew of CG6020 did not voice any dissent over the decision, and they knew they were the only resource.

The crew returned to the helicopter and started. They waited on the ramp at Dutch Harbor for a passing snow squall, and then departed about 1720. The weather conditions were about the same, but the daylight was less. The flight took about 30 minutes during which they encountered clear-air turbulence. They arrived on-scene about 1745 to 1750 and noticed the vessel was about ½ mile from shore. They could not see the ALEX HALEY, but were informed that CG6513 was about ready to launch. The pilot of CG6020, Lt. Watson, could see the anticollision lights from CG6513. The ALEX HALEY stated that they did not care who did the hoisting, the two crews conferred, with CG6020 stating they have more internal volume and could perform the hoist.

Lt. Watson hovered the helicopter into position over the same hoisting position. The weather conditions were about the same as the past, with waves of snow squalls that would periodically move through the area. The bow of the vessel was pointing into the wind and sea, with the pitching of the deck reduced since it was now on the shoal. The vessel's deck lights were on and bright, and there was good visibility on the deck. Eight crewmembers were near the bow and appeared ready to be hoisted. The crew completed rescue checklist Part 2. There was a good power margin in 40 knots of wind. The crew identified obstacles and about 1755, began hoisting. Lt. Neel did not recall seeing CG6513 once they started hoisting. The flight mechanic lowered the rescue basket to the same spot as before, but the vessel crew did not approach the basket. One of the helicopter crew suggested that the rescue swimmer could be placed on deck and that was accomplished. The rescue swimmer got the crew moving.

The crew of CG6020 completed 2 hoists, and a snow squall moved over the scene. The helicopter was hovered off to the side of the vessel until the squall passed. The crew reassessed the conditions, commenting that the illumination around the hoisting spot had not changed, and they continued hoisting. Two more hoists were completed. During the 5th hoist, Lt. Neel commented that the helicopter was "a little tight," near one of the vessel's booms. This position was corrected and he continued to monitor the hoisting operation. Lt. Neel said that waves would occasionally wash over the deck, and from his position in the left seat, could not

see the vessel reference areas well. He had to trust the right seat pilot and the flight mechanic. The 6th hoist was completed, and the 7th hoist was underway, when he noticed a big wave set approaching the vessel, and commented that they "had time." As the 7th hoist was coming up, he called, "clear back and left and up." Lt. Neel said he repeated to Lt. Watson, "O.K. Doug, come up, up, up." He pulled up on the collective pitch and CG6020 gained altitude. Lt. Watson stated, "I got it," and he relaxed. He said that he thought the helicopter was well clear of any wave. He had been increasingly conservative throughout the day. Then, something hit the windshield, like "soapy water." The helicopter's windshield went white, and he questioned, "what was that?"

Lt. Neel stated that he recalled hearing the flight mechanic yelling, "up!" He said he could feel the helicopter sliding to the right and downward. He said he grabbed the flight controls and pulled power to get the helicopter up and to the left. He then heard Lt. Watson say, "Nr, Nr." He looked at the instrument panel and noticed the instruments going into the red range (low). He felt the helicopter sliding down and left. He said he did not remember water impact, but water began to come into the cockpit. He released his shoulder harness as the helicopter began to roll to the left. He pulled himself out of the left door window, and was only underwater for a few seconds. His drysuit provided some buoyancy without inflating his life vest. When he came to the surface, the helicopter was in front of him, upwind and up sea from his position. He tried to move away from the wreckage by backstroking. He said he did not remember having to swim around or avoid any main rotor blades. He saw a wall of steel, and was concerned about the helicopter rolling on him, or getting beat against the ship or the rocks.

Lt. Neel said he inflated his life vest, and he recalled feeling warm, except for his hands. On one wave crest, he saw the helicopter in the trough, and noticed that the tail boom was gone. He could not see anyone else, but then heard the sound of CG6513. He said he was concerned that because he was wearing a blue drysuit, he might not be seen. He waved to attract attention, and when he looked up for a third time, he saw a strand of something next to him in the water. He discovered that it was the hoist cable and the rescue basket was right behind him. He pulled the basket around in front, pulled it down, and climbed in. He said he had no memory of any other persons in the water. He recalled thinking that the rescue swimmer was safe onboard the vessel. Once he was hoisted into CG6513, he moved to the back corner of the cabin, and put his neoprene gloves on.

The next person hoisted into CG6513 was in an orange drysuit, and it was the flight mechanic. The next hoist retrieved Lt. Watson. Lt. Neel said he was thinking that Lt. Watson was dead until he saw him come up in the basket. On the next hoist, the basket was out for a long time, and when it finally came into the cabin, Lt. Neel was not sure what it was. It turned out to be a vessel crewmember, and he initially thought he was covered in blood, but it was oil. Someone from the crew cleared the person's eyes, and mouth, but he thought the person was dead. After a short period, CG6513 started to head for the ALEX HALEY, but then diverted to Dutch Harbor. Lt. Neel recalled thinking that the ride to Dutch Harbor was most scary. He knew the weather conditions were going to be bad. The helicopter crew flew low to avoid any potential icing conditions, but encountered a lot of

turbulence. He said he was not happy about the ride back to Dutch Harbor and recalled only deflating his life vest partially, just in case the helicopter went into the water. Once back in Dutch Harbor, Lt. Neel said he resumed command of his crew.

Lt. Neel stated that he has accrued about 4,000 hours of H-60 flight time, with about 1,700 hours accrued in the U.S. Army. He joined the U.S. Coast Guard in July, 1999, and has been assigned to Alaska for the past 2 ½ years.