

Interview Summary

Interview: Lt. Douglas Watson
Time/Date: December 14, 2004
Location: Air Station Kodiak
Present: Commander Karl Baldessari, Scott Erickson

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

Lt. Watson was initially sent along with fellow crewmembers to Cold Bay. On December 8, the crew was given the task to support rescue operations from the vessel, Selendang Ayu, and was dispatched to Dutch Harbor. Lt. Watson was the flying pilot, seated in the right seat. The copilot was the helicopter commander, seated in the left seat. The weather conditions along the route to Dutch Harbor consisted of 20 to 30 foot seas, wind gusts of 30 to 50 knots, ¼ mile visibility in snow squalls, and a temperature of about – 1 degree C. Once in Dutch Harbor, the crew removed all nonessential equipment from the helicopter, and decided not to add fuel, since they had about 3,000 pounds of fuel. After eating lunch about 1100, the crew of CG6020 received a cell phone call from Air Station Kodiak advising them to get ready to launch.

The weather conditions at Dutch Harbor had snow squalls that occasionally obscured the visibility to zero. There was moderate turbulence, and ocean swells were breaking on the airport ramp. After takeoff, the flight to the area was about 30 minutes, with the Coast Guard Cutter ALEX HALEY assuming on-scene control. They located the Selendang Ayu, and overheard the ALEX HALEY trying to convince the vessel crew to leave the ship. The crew researched several beach areas along the shore for either landing, or dropping vessel crewmembers. Upon arrival at the vessel, it was abeam to the seas. One anchor line was in the water from the port side of the vessel. The vessel crew appeared to be attempting to deploy the starboard anchor.

The helicopter crew surveyed the deck for locations to conduct hoist operations, and initially selected an area along the centerline of the ship, but realized that wave action and ocean spray made the location unsafe for the vessel crewmembers. They examined an area near the bow, including the top of the fo'c'sle (forecastle), but that spot was rolling 15 to 20 degrees, heaving 30 feet, and moving laterally about 20 to 30 feet. The crew decided to not use a trail line attached to the rescue basket because the crewmembers of the vessel were not trained in its use. The helicopter crew observed the vessel crew get the starboard anchor line out, and the vessel seemed to stabilize somewhat, and swung into the wind. The vessel was about 1 mile from the shore, and was heaving in 20 to 30 foot waves that came in 3 to 4 wave sets, with about 1 minute between sets.

The crew of CG6020 selected what appeared to be the most stable hoisting area, just aft of the fo'c'sle, along the port side. As the helicopter was surveying the area, vessel crewmembers appeared on the deck and then disappeared. After about 15 minutes, a group of crewmembers came on deck, and helicopter crew began

hoisting. During one of the hoisting operations, several vessel crewmembers loaded their luggage in the rescue basket. During the hoisting cycles, the vessel's heaving resulted in an altitude above the deck from 15 to 40 feet. This placed the helicopter between 45 to 70 feet over the water. The helicopter crew could not use their radar altitude hold because of the heaving deck. The freeboard of the vessel was about 30 feet. The crew decided to use a low hover altitude to see the wave action and wave sets, and to expedite the hoist cycles.

The crew loaded 9 vessel crewmembers into the helicopter and moved over to the ALEX HALEY. Depositing the vessel passengers onto the deck of the ALEX HALEY was the most challenging part of the hoisting. The bow of the ALEX HALEY was positioned 45 degrees to the right of the wind direction; the deck was pitching and rolling in 20 to 30 foot seas. The crew utilized a trail line to the deck and completed all hoisting in about 15 minutes even though the ALEX HALEY was taking water over its bow, and its propeller screws were occasionally out of the water. CG6021 hoisted 9 additional vessel crewmembers off the Selendang Ayu, and deposited them on the beach.

The crew of CG6020 then thought they were going to be tasked to remove all remaining vessel crewmembers. They overheard the master of the vessel report that he was confident the anchor line was holding, but his "electronic data" stated otherwise. The ALEX HALEY again questioned the master of the vessel, but he again felt confident that the anchor line was holding. CG6020 overflew the vessel and saw no additional crewmembers on deck, and were then told that no other crewmembers were coming off at that time. They picked up the nine vessel crew from the beach, and returned to Dutch Harbor. CG6021 had more fuel and remained on scene until they had to divert to Cold Bay.

The vessel crewmembers were lightly dressed, and were wearing a horse-collar style life preserver. During the flight back to Dutch Harbor, the copilot was flying and he had to divert around heavy snow squalls. Upon landing, the passengers were handed over to customs officials. The crew fueled the helicopter with 5,000 pounds of fuel, and was told by the Air Station operations officer that they could stand down for the time being. The helicopter commander informed the Air Station that they were available if need. The crew repositioned the helicopter near the Penn Air hanger at Dutch Harbor in a 30 to 40 knot wind, with near zero visibility due to snow squalls, and then went to a restaurant. The crew discussed the need for scheduled maintenance items that included fuel samples and a retorque requirement, but the adverse weather conditions precluded any work on the helicopter.

While eating, a marine safety officer located the crew and advised them that the Air Station Kodiak duty officer needed to talk to them. The helicopter commander discussed the maintenance issues and crew status, and he decided that the crew could accept the request to launch. The time back to the vessel was about 30 minutes, and the crew arrived on scene about 15 minutes before sunset. While en route, the crew contacted the ALEX HALEY, and heard the cutter's pitch and roll data being provided to the crew of CG6513 that was preparing to launch. CG6513 got airborne from the helideck of the ALEX HALEY and arrived at the now grounded

vessel just before CG6020. The crewmembers of each helicopter conferred about a plan, and decided that due to the larger capacity, CG6020 would perform the hoisting of the remaining crewmembers off the vessel.

The stern of the Selendang Ayu was about 200 yards from the beach. The bow was facing into the wind and waves were striking the bow. CG6020 came into the wind and decided to hoist from the previous spot they utilized before. Vessel crewmember appeared on deck, and appeared to be lightly dressed, some carrying small bags. The bow of the vessel was in the surf break zone, with 30 to 40 foot swells occasionally breaking over the bow. There were no dramatic changes from their previous hoisting operations, but when the rescue basket was placed on the deck, no vessel crewmembers approached the basket. The flight mechanic motioned to the vessel crew to get into the basket, but there was no movement.

The flight mechanic recovered the basket, and sent the helicopter's rescue swimmer down to the deck. He mustered the crewmembers and got them organized and moving. The vessel was more stable than the first hoisting operation, but its position in relation to the wind had now moved about 15 degrees counterclockwise. This position placed the tail rotor of the helicopter more over the deck. During the hoisting, when either the wind or sea condition was too dangerous, the helicopter pilot moved the aircraft away from the hoisting spot, and then returned as conditions moderated. Occasionally, waves would wash over the bow and deck of the vessel, and wind-driven spray would hit the windshield of the helicopter, but not heavy enough to utilize the windshield wipers.

As the crew was conducting the seventh hoist, the copilot observed a large wave approaching and stated "big wave, big wave." The pilot waited until the rescue basket came off the deck. The copilot stated, "up, up, up," and started to assist the pilot by pulling up collective pitch to place the helicopter in a high hover. Lt. Watson said that as the helicopter hovered upward, he thought the aircraft was now twice as high as his initial hover height, perhaps higher than the forward mast of the vessel. The wave broke over the bow of the vessel and then hit the hovering helicopter. He heard a loud bang and the low rotor warning horn, and heard the engines fluctuating. He said he saw the triple tachometer gauge indicate low, saw the rotor rpm gauge first in the low range, and then in the red range. The helicopter seemed to rock forward and shudder, and suddenly was in the water.

Lt Watson described the descent and impact with the water as "gentle." After water impact, the cockpit filled with water, and he reminded himself to wait until all motion stopped. He was not certain if the helicopter was right side up, or upside down. He tried to feel for his door handle, but could not initially locate it. He tried to utilize his emergency air bottle (HEED), but he could not get it into his mouth (he thought later that perhaps his helmet visor was in the way). He released his hold on the HEED and again tried to locate the door handle, but again was unsuccessful. He then tried the HEED bottle and got the mouthpiece into his mouth, but it seemed that he could not get a breath. He tried a third time to locate the door handle and a third time to get air from the HEED. Lt. Watson said he finally released his grip on the helicopter's cyclic control, got a breath from the HEED. He then felt relieved and relaxed. He located the door handle, opened it and released his harness, and

pulled himself forcibly out the door. He floated to the surface with CG6020 to his left, rising and falling in the swell.

Lt. Watson moved away from the wreckage and saw the rescue basket from CG6513 coming down. He said that he saw a life preserver and person about 15 feet to his right, and another about 20 feet away. He did not know initially who the person was, but concluded it was a vessel crewmember. He did not see any helicopter crew. He remembered to inflate his life vest and pulled out his strobe light. He did not activate the strobe because he was worried that the crew of CG6513 might have been utilizing night vision goggles. He said he saw the rescue basket come down three times, and when it came to him, he swam with the basket to one of the visible persons in the water, calling out to him. When he reached the person, he saw that it was a vessel crewmember. He said he grabbed the person's jacket, yelling and tapping him on his chest. The person was unresponsive, and his eyes were fixed. He splashed water on the person, but there was no response. He then entered the rescue basket and was hoisted into CG6513.

Lt. Watson stated that he was not utilizing any night vision goggles. There was sufficient light provided by the vessel's sodium vapor lighting on the masts. The pilot was asked about his thought process as he approached the floating vessel crewmember in the water. Lt. Watson said that he thought he would find the person alive, and was shocked at not finding him alive. He initially thought about trying to somehow get the person into the basket, but then realized that the crew of CG6513 needed him to get into the basket, and out of the water.

Once Lt. Watson was in CG6513, he observed the flight mechanic lower the basket again. He could see the emergency egress lights on CG6-020 illuminated, and initially observed that the tail pylon was missing. He heard the flight mechanic say that the next person to be hoisted was tangled in the hoist line. The hoist was raised anyway and he helped pull the person, who was a vessel crewmember, into the helicopter. The rescued person was covered in oil, and initially, he thought the person was dead. The flight mechanic went back to the door of CG6513, and the now rescued crew of CG6020 noticed that the latest person was breathing. They all assisted in warming the crewmember, and providing what emergency care they could.

Lt. Watson reported that he finished Coast Guard flight school in July, 1999. He has accrued about 1,900 hours in an HH-60 helicopter, with about 500 hours accrued in Alaska. He has been stationed at Air Station Kodiak since June, 2003. He has about 1,000 hours of civilian fixed wing experience.