

Interview Summary

Interview: Petty Officer, Aviation Maintenance Technician (AMT) Brian Lickfield
Time/Date: December 14, 2004
Location: Air Station Kodiak
Present: Commander Karl Baldessari, Scott Erickson

During the interview, AMT Lickfield provided the following information:

He was the flight mechanic/hoist operator on CG6020. Prior to the helicopter departure from Dutch Harbor to assist the Selendang Ayu, the crew planned to conduct hoisting operations. All unnecessary equipment was removed from the helicopter and left at Dutch Harbor. The flight to the vessel was about 30 to 40 minutes. The crew of the helicopter talked to the Coast Cutter ALEX HALEY, and flew by the vessel to look for hoisting locations. At that time, the vessel was broadside to the waves. He could see a chain line from the port side of the vessel and crewmembers on the deck appeared to be attempting to set the right anchor. The helicopter crew waited until it appeared the right anchor line was holding and the vessel swung into the wind. He selected a hoisting position near the bow along the left side of the vessel. He said he was initially concerned about engine power, but the pilot's commented that with the wind, they had plenty of power to hover.

The crew of CG6020 began hoisting, but the vessel crew appeared to be taking a lot of time, and at one time during the hoisting, filled the rescue basket with luggage. They completed hoisting nine crewmembers from the vessel in about 30 minutes, and then hoisted their passengers onto the ALEX HALEY. AMT Lickfield was asked about the seating of the vessel crewmembers as they came aboard CG6020 during the first hoist operations. He commented that once each person got into the cabin, they arranged themselves in seats, or took a seat on the floor, mostly toward the forward portion of the cabin. He did not confirm if each person occupying a seat actually fastened their seat belt. Each vessel crewmember was wearing a Type II PFD.

CG6021 hoisted nine additional crew and dropped them on a beach. CG6020 picked up the crewmembers off the beach and returned to Dutch Harbor. CG6021 remained on-scene until the helicopter got a warning chip light, and departed for Cold Bay.

CG6020 was called by Air Station Kodiak and requested to return to the vessel. During the flight to the now grounded vessel, the helicopter encountered heavy snow squalls. AMT Lickfield said that the crew felt frustrated for the need to return for additional crewmembers because the master did not abandon the vessel earlier. As they were approaching the area, he heard the pilots of CG6020 discussing the hoisting request with CG6513. CG6020 said they could do the hoisting, and CG6513 moved away. The wind was from the bow, about 30 knots, and the seas were about 20 feet. Once they began hoisting, he could not see the wave activity from his position.

AMT Lickfield put the rescue basket on the deck, near the port rail and a deck cleat, where the basket could wedge itself and not move around on the pitching deck. He said the deck was not pitching as bad as the earlier hoist operation, but the waves were larger due to the vessel being on the shoal. He placed the basket on the deck but vessel crewmembers did not move toward the basket. He retrieved the basket and the helicopter crew decided to put the rescue swimmer down on the vessel. Once that was accomplished, 6 hoisting cycles went quickly. He said during the 6th hoist, he looked at the position of the helicopter's tail rotor over the deck of the vessel, and noticed it was near one of the vessel's booms. He advised the pilot to move left and aft. This was accomplished and the crew conferred about continuing the hoists. The crew concurred that it was safe to continue.

During this time, wave action washed over the bow of the vessel and knocked the rescue swimmer off his feet. The rescue swimmer walked the next vessel crewmember to the basket to begin the 7th hoist, and the copilot stated that there was a "big wave." AMT Lickfield estimated that the helicopter was about 30 feet above the deck, which was low enough to have rapid hoisting cycles.

AMT Lickfield said that he began reeling in the hoist line on the 7th hoist, and heard the copilot say again, "big wave, big wave, back, up, up." He said he perceived that the helicopter was gaining altitude as he was getting the basket up to the helicopter. He turned the basket to pull it into the open door, when the helicopter was hit by a wave. He said that water "blasted" through the helicopter door, and he yelled, "white water in the cabin." He then heard the engine's flame out, he heard the main rotor gearbox coasting down, and felt the helicopter nose down and descend. He heard a "bang" and the aircraft shuddered, and he thought the tail rotor hit the vessel.

The helicopter hit the water, and he grabbed a handle by the door and held on. He said he felt the helicopter roll to the left and invert, 180 degrees. He grabbed his HEED, noticed the emergency egress lights illuminate, and found that he was still positioned at the door. He pushed out from the helicopter but discovered that his gunner's belt was still attached to the helicopter. He released the belt and came to the surface within about 10 seconds. The helicopter was next to him, inverted with the nose submerged. He could see that the tail boom, from the intermediate gearbox aft, was missing. He said he swam backwards, inflated his life vest in about 20 to 30 foot swells. He swallowed seawater and jet fuel and continued to try and move away from the wreckage. Wind and swells were pushing him toward the helicopter and the side of the vessel. He said he changed his backward swimming angle to about 45 degrees, which allowed easier movement.

AMT Lickfield was asked about the actions of the rescued vessel crewmembers in the cabin of CG6020. He said he heard no sounds during the accident. He saw only water in the cabin, and he thought he was the first to get out of the cabin. He saw no others exit the cabin. He said he thought the last person hoisted was perhaps still in the rescue basket when the water hit the helicopter.

Once on the surface, AMT Lickfield noticed Lt. Neel in the water, but they exchanged no words. He then looked up and noticed CG6513, and he said he had forgotten that it was there. A rescue basket came down and he swam toward the sinking helicopter to be more visible. He swam into the lights from CG6513, and swam into the rescue basket. During the hoist ride in the basket, he said he looked down and saw Lt. Watson and a floating vessel crewmember in the water. CG6020 was just sinking, after being afloat for about 4 to 5 minutes. Upon reaching CG6513, he plugged his helmet into the communications system. Lt. Watson was the next person to being hoisted.

AMT Lickfield heard the flight mechanic of CG6513 report that he had another survivor in the water, and conned the helicopter into position. He attempted to scoop the survivor into the basket, but he became fouled in the hoist cable. The flight mechanic hoisted the basket anyway and retrieved the survivor who was draped over the bails of the rescue basket. The person was covered in oil. After getting him into the helicopter, he was laid down, and was thought to be dead. The flight mechanic of CG6513 turned back to the helicopter door and continued searching for other survivors. AMT Lickfield and other rescued crewmembers from CG6020 noticed the last survivor's chest heave, and heave again within a few seconds. It was recognized that the person was alive. The survivor was rolled onto his side and appeared in pain. He began screaming and thrashing. The helicopter crew discussed where to take the survivor and decided that he needed hospital care. The helicopter proceeded to Dutch Harbor where an ambulance met the aircraft. All rescued crew disembarked and CG6513 departed again for the vessel.

AMT Lickfield became a qualified mechanic in 1992. He came into the HH-60 fleet in July, 1997. He was assigned to Air Station Sitka in July, 2001, and to Air Station Kodiak in June, 2004.