

By David Lemereis©

"Mayday, Mayday, we're going down, we're sinking! This is the Dora H, Dora H..."

Mark Worley, the young but experienced skipper of the fishing boat Dora H, was one of the many skippers in the Gulf of Alaska headed for a safe harbor with their fishing boats on the afternoon of Wednesday, May 8, 1991 to unload their catch of halibut. A storm was brewing and the weather worsened.

The day before, Tuesday at the stroke of noon, a veritable gold rush swept across the waters off the American state of Alaska. An armada of more than five-thousand fishing vessels set out on a twenty-four hour hunt for halibut, a prized flat fish which sometimes weighs over four-hundred pounds. Under pressure from the short, derby style fishing season – only two twenty-four hour 'halibut-openers' a year – and disregarding a storm warning, the fishing boats bucked into the high seas.

For Mark Worley and his crew it had been a good day. They'd hauled a fortune in fish to the surface. The four fishermen aboard the Dora H labored for twenty-four hours non-stop to bring the fish aboard, to dress them and to put them on ice in the fish hold.

Dan Bass, the newest crewman, was busy storing the flag pole (three-meter tall floats). The fishermen used the lights on top of them to locate their fishing gear at night. "I just made a small fortune," Dan thought, exhausted from the hard labor. "I can afford to buy Mark some new batteries." He set aside the flag pole without removing the batteries or switching the lights off.

At twelve noon on Wednesday the halibut opener ended and with a full load the Dora H set course for a harbor. The weather forecast for the afternoon and night predicted high winds and stormy seas and the worn-out but happy crew secured all gear on deck for the upcoming storm.

After the chores on deck were done Mark discussed his plan with his crew. He also talked over radio to the two skippers of the fishing boats the Kiska and the Hornet, who were friends of Mark. They told him that they were heading for anchorage in the lee of an island to wait out the storm. Mark on the other hand, was pressed for time. A few days before the halibut opener his girlfriend Lisa Newland had a baby-

daughter and Mark's mind had been occupied with his family instead of the upcoming halibut derby. And now he needed all the time he could find to prepare for the approaching cod season and decided to brave the already developing storm. He spun the wheel around and sailed towards Alitak, a remote fishing harbor on the island of Kodiak.

Throughout the afternoon the storm intensified and by the time evening fell the wind drove the seas into a frenzy.

Mark fought sleep for several hours and now barely able to keep his eyelids open he woke Kirk Van Doren to take the wheel. With a few remarks on what course to hold, Mark handed the responsibility of the vessel over to Kirk and sought the warmth of his sleeping bag. To relinquish the wheel to his crew demanded his total trust and faith in their competence. But doubt never crossed the skipper's mind; over the years Mark and Kirk went through thick and thin trying to scrape a living from the sea. In the winter time, when Kirk didn't longline with Mark he could be found on the rocking deck of a crab boat prowling the Bering sea in search of crab. Only the toughest and the most experienced men survived the notoriously dangerous crab-fishery and the six foot tall, burly fisherman was one of them. Neither did Mark have any doubts about Eric, the tall and slender, blond crew member who now slept below deck in the fo'c'sle, forward of the engine room. The three of them fished together until a few years back when Eric almost ruptured a disk in his back. Since his childhood he felt drawn to the water and in the early eighties he went out on his first fishing trip. Ever since his love for the hard rugged lifestyle grew stronger. But with an injured back preventing him to stand up to the strenuous conditions of the fisherman's life and a wife and a baby boy to take care off, he regretfully changed occupations and became an aircraft mechanic.

A few days before this halibut opener Mark called him and asked him whether he liked to try fishing again. Eric's back felt much better and he felt the urge to be out on the water. Unable to resist the temptation he decided to join the crew for this halibut opener only.

Neither Mark nor the other two crewmen knew Dan very well. Originally from Arizona the call of Alaska had beckoned the adventurer in him. He left home for the summer and headed North. After several stints on different fishing boats that summer he returned to Arizona and went to college for the winter. The following summer he landed a job longlining halibut on the Dora H. At first the experienced fishermen considered the new deckhand as somewhat of a 'college-boy' but

pulling his fair share on deck, working hard side by side with the others, he slowly gained respect. With this in mind Mark lay down in his sleeping on the folded down galley table and fell into a vast, deep sleep.

Kirk sat on a small, wooden seat in a corner of the dark wheelhouse. It was almost 11.30 PM and he had made it through half his watch. With his callused hands he tried to rub the sleep out of his bloodshot eyes but it didn't relieve the fatigue he felt. Instead he turned his attention to the radar. The dim, eerie green light shone on the weary face of the fisherman. "Not too many boats are going to be around in this lousy weather," he murmured as he peered through the window at the waves thundering by. The storm didn't face Kirk as a threat to the boat and its crew. In her many years at sea, Dora H had withstood many a beating far worse than which she endured now. A complete rebuild and recaulking, two years earlier, of her hull and a new electrical alarm system made Dora H a very seaworthy fishing vessel. Her solid hull constructed of fir planking on oak beams and a small main cabin, with a wheelhouse forward, a settee to starboard and a galley to port, were built in 1912 by highly skilled craftsmen in a very traditional manner. Below deck, forward of the engine room in the fo'c'sle where Dan and Eric slept, the familiar sound of her fir planking moaning and creaking, as they had for nearly a century, mingled with the rumble of the diesel engine.

The waves continuously knocked the boat off course, but each time the automatic pilot corrected the steering so that the boat once more rode with the wind and waves to the stern. Suddenly the boat heeled over and hung there, listing slightly to port. Kirk leapt off his seat, threw the lever of the auto-pilot and swung the wheel hard around to starboard. "What's going on?" he cried out. Bracing himself against the sloping deck of the wheelhouse, and with a pounding heart he steered the port side of the boat hard into the wind. The rolling seas pushed the boat upright. Kirk gave a sigh of relief and sat back down on the seat to catch his breath. "Man, I'm so tired I'm starting to see things," Kirk thought as he combed his hands through his blond curly hair. But no sooner than his adrenaline rush started to fade or the boat once again heeled over to port. Kirk reacted immediately, but this time he couldn't get the boat upright. He decided to rouse the captain from his deep sleep.

"Mark... MARK! There's something wrong with the boat!" Mark immediately jumped out of his sleeping bag and rushed into the wheelhouse forward of the small galley. He too steered the boat hard

into the wind, but the boat just wouldn't right itself. Waves washed over the port railing and flooded the deck. With a list to port Dora H lay tossing on the foaming waves.

Eric, sound asleep below deck in the fo'c'sle, woke up when he sensed the boat listing to port. "This doesn't feel right," and he shot out of his bunk and flew up the ladder leading to the galley and the wheelhouse.

"Something wrong. Why won't the boat straighten up?", Mark shouted. "Kirk, get the survival suits!" While Kirk went for the survival suits, Eric yelled down the open hatch across from the captain's cabin. "Dan. Get up. Now, now, now!" Kirk ran, as quickly as possible, across the pitching, sloping deck passed the settee in the galley to the after deck. He pulled the survival suits out of a container in the stern. Hastily, he leapt back across the deck to the galley and threw the bags onto the table.

Eric's frantic voice woke Dan, but he didn't quite grasp the urgency of the situation. "Something's broken loose on the deck," he thought. With his big, sore hands he groped around for his boots and started to pull them on when Eric's red face appeared through the hatch above him. "Dan, forget those boots and get your survival suit!" Instantly, he jolted wide awake. He sprang to the ladder and flew through the hatch into the galley. Eric already had one leg into his survival suit when Dan came running in. He heard Kirk shout to Mark.

"What's happening?"

"I don't know. I just don't know what's going on!"

At first Dan felt so groggy and tired, he couldn't figure out what the panic was all about. The boat listed to one side, but apart from that she seemed quite normal. While he tried to get a grip on the situation, Kirk spread the remaining survival suits out on the galley table and floor. If they had to abandon ship, the suits would be crucial to their survival. The watertight suit, resembling a thick, neoprene coverall with a hood, a face mask, mittens and boots attached, would protect the fisherman from the freezing water and keep him afloat. Without the protection of the suit he would die from hypothermia in less than thirty minutes.

In this moment when the others were still trying to get a hold of themselves and the situation, Kirk acted as a leader; calm and instinctively. He checked the engine room for leaks, found nothing and reasoned the problem must be somewhere in the stern of the boat. But he couldn't get there. The fish hold packed with halibut blocked his way to the stern. Disgusted, he climbed out of the engine

room into the galley.

While Mark fought to save his boat, the three fishermen in the galley donned their survival suits. They had them partway on when all three hesitated. Outside the water drained through the scuppers off the deck. The fishermen started to pull their survival suits off. "Were they really going to sink? The shrill ringing of the bilge-water alarm, immediately followed by a second and third alarm, cut through their silent thoughts. Everyone stood glued to the deck. Suddenly, Dora H heeled further over to port. Things began to happen very quickly. The boat was sinking and the three men scrambled over one another to squeeze into their suits. Everyone was shouting at once, "What's going on? She's not coming backup. She's not straightening up again."

Dora H listed further and the stern sank deeper and deeper into the sea. Waves washed over her wooden deck and slammed against the wheelhouse. It was too late to save her. Mark left the wheelhouse, grabbed his survival suit and tried to wriggle his tall, slender body into it.

"The EPIRB (emergency transmitter) is still in the fo'c'sle. Kirk, go and get it!"

"No, get it yourself!"

"No, you get it!"

"Get lost!"

Once in the water the EPIRB would be their only means of sending an emergency signal by which the Coast Guard could locate them as they drifted away from the scene of the sinking. The solidly mounted VHF- and the sideband radios in the wheelhouse would be of no use once the boat sank. But none of the fishermen were willing to crawl into the fo'c'sle to grab the emergency transmitter and risk going down with the boat. They left the EPIRB where it was.

Kirk donned his survival suit first. As he ran out the galley door to climb on top of the wheelhouse to untie the life raft, he yelled, "Send a Mayday!" Mark, with the heavy suit partway on, stumbled into the wheelhouse grabbed the mike of the VHF radio and called for help.

"Mayday, Mayday, we're going down, we're sinking! This is the Dora N, Dora H, Mayday, Mayday our position is 55°-57' North and 154°-58'W. We're going down, can't hold her any longer! "

At 11.36 PM the Coast Guard Air Station on Kodiak island received the skipper's distress call. The boat had sunk near Chirikof, an island 150 miles south-west of Kodiak. Less than a minute later the Air Station's Operations Center launched the search and rescue operation

(SAR).

Lieutenant Commander Keith Comer was at his home on base when he heard the SAR-alarm go off. Next the phone rang and he picked up the horn. "Fishing vessel Dora H Mayday. Put the Ready H-3 (helicopter) on line." LCDR Comer rushed to the Operations Center to file a flight report and check on the weather conditions. When he entered the briefing room he ran into his copilot-pilot, Lieutenant Junior Grade Bob Yerex.

Flight Mechanic 2nd class Jef Waite was on the last stretch of supervising the mid shift when the SAR- alarm went off. The Operations Center called down to the hanger and announced an H-3 launch. "Maybe I can get some flight time in," Jef thought as he wandered over to the Flight Mechanic on duty. "Can I take this flight?" he asked. "I need the time."
"Sure, go ahead."

Earlier that night, during a practice flight, the ICS radio cable on Avionics Man 2nd class Dave Schrone's helmet had given him trouble. He could hear but he couldn't transmit. Now, aboard the helicopter the cable once again malfunctioned and he didn't have time to run out and grab another helmet. "Hand me a regular headset, will you." he said to Aviation Survival Man 3rd class (Rescue Swimmer) Gary Strebe. "Here," Strebe said, "wear mine, I probably don't need it." And he handed his helmet over to Schrone.

Meanwhile the ground crew readied a HC- 130 aircraft to fly cover as the on-scene commander for the rescue helicopter. Once on scene the fHC-130 would assist in the search for survivors and handle all the communications between the helicopter and the Coast Guard station on Kodiak island freeing the helicopter crew of this task so that they could concentrate on the actual rescue. And in the unlikely event the helicopter would go down during the mission the HC-130 would immediately be able to help them by dropping a life-raft and direct the rescue of the helicopter crew.

Seven minutes after midnight, in the pitch dark, Commander Comer and his copilot-pilot Bob Yerex took to the controls and the SAR helicopter lifted off from Air Station Kodiak on its way to the last known position of the Dora H.

They flew over the bay and as they rounded the corner near Chiniak the weather conditions instantly worsened. Rain and wind battering the cockpit windows reduced the pilots' vision to half a mile and the

cloud ceiling forced them down to an altitude of 500 feet. Flight Mechanic Waite peered through a window down at the white capped waves below him. "Doesn't look all that bad," and he didn't think much of it.

Meanwhile the pilots and Dave Schrone kept losing their orientation. Schrone plotted the fastest course to the scene but the radar and the navigational equipment didn't function properly. Each time copilot-pilot Yerex tried to get a bearing on their position he had to switch the radar to a wider range by turning it completely off and then on again; losing the radar-image for a short while. Also the out-of-synch-Loran and Omega navigators gave inaccurate position-readings. At the same time the pilots struggled with a 45 knot South-easterly wind forcing the H-3 off course. To compensate for the drift of the helicopter Commander Comer angled the nose of the helicopter fifteen to twenty-five degrees into the wind.

As Mark transmitted the Mayday call, the engine died. The throbbing of the diesel engine subsided and for the first time the crew heard the roar of the angry seas.

Eric stood on the after deck in a daze. On his many fishing trips before he had wondered what it would be like to sink and to go into the water and now he panicked, "It's really happening, we're going down!" Kirk yelled at him and pulled him out of his stupor.

Meanwhile Dan had trouble zipping up his suit. The rubber mittens of his suit, twice the size of his hands, made it almost impossible to get a good grip on the zipper. "Eric, help me, please!" he screamed over the howling wind. With Eric's help he managed to fasten the zipper. Adrenaline screaming through his veins, he then pulled the rubber face shield, designed to make the suit watertight, with much force over his mouth and nose. But his survival suit was in such bad shape that he tore the shield off. Shocked, he looked at the piece of rubber in his hand. Without the face shield the survival suit was practically useless. The ice cold water would just seep into the suit. "Oh God, I'm dead, I'm dead," he kept saying in terror. "I don't stand a chance in that freezing water!"

Back at the Air Station, Lieutenant Jim McKell, copilot-pilot Lieutenant Tim Frazier, Flight Engineer Robert Ensley and Navigator Michael Cook, accompanied by their three-man crew, ran one last time through the pre-flight checklist as they taxied the HC-130 SAR rescue plane to the runway for take-off. At 0.45 AM the HC-130 was airborne en route to

assist in the search and rescue mission.

Turbulence rocked the rescue plane violently as it flew through the storm. Flying at a much higher speed than the helicopter, the plane arrived on site first. At 1.30 AM pilots started flying a standard search pattern. Radio Man William Briggs radioed the fishing vessels near the scene of the sinking. He asked them for assistance and to be on the lookout for a raft or survival suits. Several boats responded. Fishing Vessel Snow King, an estimated 40 minutes from the scene, changed course and steamed as fast as the horrendous weather allowed to the location where disaster had struck.

In the tail of the aircraft loadmasters Forker and Jess E. Constantini placed a MA2 raft-kit in position for immediate deployment out of the back of the airplane in case of an emergency. After securing the raft they returned to their scanning stations located on each side behind the cockpit. Leaning close to the large window they looked out over the churning seas, scanning for any sign of survivors.

While Dan struggled with his suit, Eric and Kirk fought with the two life rafts on top of the wheelhouse. "Oh no," Kirk yelled, "the metal bands are still around the crate!" Mark had bought a new raft before the halibut opener, but the crew hadn't had the time to take it out of the wooden crate.

Pointing skyward and listing 60 degrees, the men only found refuge on top of the sloping wheelhouse of the boat. The sea had swallowed the stern. Eric hung onto the rigging and tried to reach the release-button on the other, older life raft. He couldn't. The plastic shell containing the raft submerged on each successive wave.

In the wheelhouse Mark waded through the knee-deep water when he heard Kirk yell. Streaks of his pitch black wet hair matted wild across his forehead as he spun around looking for a new halibut knife. He found one and reached out the door to throw it to Kirk. With the razor sharp knife Kirk slashed through the metal bands as if they were made of soft plastic. He battered the crate with the knife and his big fists until he smashed through the wood and with the strength born of despair he ripped the crate into bits and pieces. As he pulled the raft out the crate he flipped it over to find the instructions on the new raft. The boat dipped and a wave washed the raft overboard. "Oh my God, there goes the raft."

Dan stood next to Eric who continued his struggle with the old raft. Still in a state of shock from the torn face shield and scared to death

that without the protection of a raft he didn't have long to live, he cursed and kicked the old raft. "My face shield has torn off," he yelled, over and over again. Finally, Eric managed to pop the raft out of the brackets but it floated into the rigging and got stuck.

Below the men's feet Mark waded through waist deep water in the galley. If he didn't get out now he'd get trapped. The boat rode up a swell, water rushed out flinging the door open. This was his only chance and he dove through the opening out of the wheelhouse. Just as he washed out he managed to grab hold of the ladder and climb on top of the sloping wheelhouse. He scurried his tall body over to the old raft stuck in the rigging and began beating it.

"Let's tie ourselves together!" Kirk yelled. They looked around and found a 100 fathoms long line.

"Get the knife and cut it!"

"It went over board with the raft!"

"What?"

"Yeah," Kirk screamed frantically, "I got it lose but it went overboard!" The crew looked up and saw the raft drifting away from the boat. They glanced at each other and without a word spoken spontaneously plunged into the freezing water. They swam like madmen over the huge, breaking waves to get to the raft. Eventhough Dan's suit was only two years old it had dried out and become porous. As he swam he felt the deadly cold water seeping into his suit. If he stayed in the water much longer it would fill up with icy water. The cold would slow down his movements, his speech would become incoherent and finally, when the cold reached his heart, he would become delirious, lose consciousness and drown.

"Just hang in there and you'll survive," Eric thought as he rose up on a swell. He'd been a swimmer all his life and now he felt strangely secure, almost comfortable in the water.

All four of them reached the plastic canister and they clung tightly to each other.

Mark turned his head and sadly watched the shining bow light of the Dora H disappear into the churning seas. Even as the boat sank deeper and deeper the lights kept shining. And then she was gone.

The shipwrecked sailors had no time to worry about the fate of their boat. The plastic casing floating in front of them contained their only hope of survival. But try as they might, the men just couldn't find their way into it. Seething with rage, they cursed all life rafts and beat the canister with their fists. To live! They wanted to live! A mixture of anger, calmness and sorrow took control of Dan. "I've had it. I can't do

anything to stop it. The water is going to kill me!"

After what seemed like an eternity, Eric yelled, "I've got the cord!" The cord had become entangled around his leg. All this time it had floated underneath the raft and the men. They pulled the cord and the casing split apart. With a loud hissing noise the raft unfolded like a flower. The men cried out in delight.

On board the raft the men found two waterproof bags and a fluorescent light-rod. By the weak, green light the fishermen searched through the bags and found three cans of water, some more light rods, a few packs of dried food, a number of objects they couldn't identify and a short aluminum paddle. It wasn't much, but anything might come in handy.

Around the raft the wind and waves played their deadly game with the flimsy, little rubber boat. The raft spun over the flanks of the colossal waves. The men in the raft waged a constant battle with the flap shielding the entrance to the raft. Flapping wildly in the wind, it refused to shut. Directly across from the entrance, waves found their way into the raft through a peek-hole in the canopy, the size of a man's head. The bottom of the raft filled with sea water. By the eerie, fluorescent glow of the light-rod the men tried to close the openings with strings and Velcro. The clumsiness of the enormous mittens of the suits turned the simple task of tying a knot into an hellish effort and it drove the men into a frenzy. After much cursing and frustration they finally succeeded in somewhat tying the flap and closing the entrance. The fishermen leaned against the tubes of the raft to catch their breath. Mark and Eric unzipped the suits a little and took the hood off to make themselves more comfortable. But they couldn't kick back for long. Even with the flap fastened, the waves kept spewing water through the gaps in the canopy openings. The men lifted the corner of the flap barely enough to bale the sea water out of the raft with their hands – they didn't have a baling can. The effort seemed futile. Water poured in just as fast as they could bale it out.

"Fifteen minutes ETA on scene," Commander Comer said over the helicopter's intercom, "Strebe, suit-up for deployment in the water." Rescue swimmer Gary Strebe grabbed his gear bag, pulled out his neoprene dry-suit, goggles and snorkel and set down in one of the seats to pull his flight suit off and change into the dry-suit. A rush of adrenaline coursed through his muscular body in anticipation of the action soon to come. With his dry-suit on he moved to the back of the helicopter and looked out the window into the dark, violent night.

The HC-130 directed the helicopter to the scene and at 1.58 AM they flew over the spot where Mark had last talked over the radio before the Dora H sunk. Until then Avionics Man Schrone had maintained radio contact, at intervals of fifteen minutes, with Communications Station Kodiak. Now he transferred his guard to the crew of the HC-130 rescue plane.

Flying at a higher speed and altitude than the helicopter it was hard for the crew of the HC-130 to recognize objects or lights in the water. On the other hand they covered a much greater area and if they saw something important they could direct the helicopter to take a closer look. "This is going to be quite a search," Commander McKell thought as the turbulence jolted him in his seat. He had little hope they would find the shipwrecked sailors at night, in this kind of weather.

A small distance from the raft a wave grew and grew to terrifying proportions and was closing in on them at great speed. The men in the raft couldn't see the wave approaching, but they heard a deep rumbling sound as if a runaway freight train was thundering down upon them. With an earsplitting roar the wave collapsed onto the raft. The canopy caved in under the overwhelming pressure of the mass of water and smashed the heads of the men between their knees. The entire raft submerged.

It seemed like a lifetime before the raft bobbed to the surface. Sea water streamed out through the openings in the canopy and part of the survival equipment washed overboard. The fishermen gasped for air. "I thought I was a goner, I thought I'd had it," Mark sputtered terrified. Icy water had gushed into both Mark's and Eric's suit and chilled them to the bone. "How stupid," Mark thought as he zipped his suit up again, "I'll never take my hood off again." Eric fumbled with his hood to pull it over his head but he couldn't see a thing in the dark. Something ripped and he tore a piece of rubber off his hood. It flopped useless around his head.

Three times a gigantic wave crashed onto their raft and each time they thought they wouldn't come out alive. Mark kept thinking of the Dora H. "All the work we put into it and now she's gone." Together with his girlfriend Lisa Newland who owned the boat, they had worked for months to make the Dora H a safe and good fishing boat. They'd rebuild the engine, put a new bilge alarm system in, redid the planking and caulking and thousands of new fasteners replaced the old ones. Mark found it hard to digest he had lost the boat he'd grown so fond of. "But I'm still alive," he thought. "If someone finds us I'll see Lisa

and my baby daughter again."

The fishermen, exhausted through lack of sleep, the energy-sapping cold and the struggle to survive, lay shivering in their suits. If one of them nodded off or showed signs of despair the others would say a few words to lift his spirit. There was no doubt in their minds they had to stick together to make it through alive and for awhile succulent fantasies about fabulous dinners and jokes kept the four men awake.

"Hey, anybody want a beer," Kirk said jokingly as he watched debris off the boat floating by the raft. None of them felt like drinking any but the thought of having a beer, sitting in a raft in these angry seas, made them roar with laughter. Humor gave them a temporary respite from their nerve-wracking predicament.

The impenetrable darkness of the night increased the sense of loneliness and the men longed for the dawn. Their emotions changed from minute to minute. "How ironic," Eric thought, "My first fishing trip in two years and I sink."

Kirk couldn't believe his bad luck either. The winter before a Bering sea storm had blown five windows out of the wheelhouse of the crab boat he worked on and now less than six months later his boat went down.

The storm raged relentlessly into the early hours of the morning. The wind tore the caps of the waves into shreds and whipped the foam along at great speed.

Kirk looked out through a slit in the canopy opening. "Hey! I can see the lights of a boat on the horizon." The others were jolted out of their delirious state and took turns peering out through the hole. The sight of a boat gave the men new hope and their sense of utter despair changed into one of delight. But their elation was short-lived. The boat didn't head their way. They fell back into desperation.

The men were at the end of their strength - help had to come soon. They were too tired to keep each other awake any longer. Time went by like a gray mist upon them.

"Oh, God! Please! Not another of those waves." In the distance a huge wave approached and the roar grew louder and louder. They braced themselves to take the crash. By the sound it they knew this was going to be the biggest wave they'd endured so far.

"No, no, no. It's an airplane!" Dan shouted.

"Shut up."

"No, I know the sound of the waves. That's an airplane."

Kirk thrust his head out and saw an American Coast Guard HC-130

search and rescue plane flying over.

"It's flying past. It hasn't spotted us," Kirk yelled desperately .

For the first twenty-five minutes the rescue plane and the helicopter identified the different light sources they spotted as boats. And then one of the crew members of the HC-130 thought he saw a strobe-light in the water. Navigator Michael Cook immediately entered the position into the navigational system. "We've got some lights over here," the pilots radioed to the helicopter and gave them the coordinates. Commander Comer and Copilot-pilot Yerex flew over the area and scanned the area with night vision goggles. Flying as low as 150 feet the crew of the helicopter saw the immensity of the seas thundering below them. "I've got buoy-lights at two o'clock," Yerex reported as the helicopter bounced up and down from the heavy turbulence. On closer look they discovered a string of flag poles with strobe-lights flashing. Suddenly, Bob Yerex caught a glimpse of a faint light. It disappeared but reappeared a second later. "I've got a raft!," he exclaimed excitedly. Keith Comer marked the spot in the navigational computer.

The flag poles that caught the pilots' attention came off the Dora H. When the boat sank they'd broken loose from the deck and the wind and the current had driven them along with the life raft.

The pilots flew in a race track-like pattern over the area. At 2.30 AM Flight Mechanic Waite reported: "It's positively a raft!" Dave Schrone and Waite immediately opened the sliding door on the right side of the helicopter and shone the sunspot, a search light, on the raft. The pilots flew a bit up wind of the raft and dropped two bright, burning flares to use as a reference.

By now the fishing vessel Snow King arrived on the scene. The turbulent seas threw the big boat around like a lightweight cork. Radio Man William Briggs of the HC-130 rescue plane directed the vessel about a half mile upwind from the raft so that the helicopter pilots could use its bright, halogen deck-lights as an artificial, horizon-reference.

Keith Comer made a turn, flew down wind of the tiny, rubber boat and turned into the wind for a hover-approach above the raft. At 75 feet he upped the power to slow the rate of descent. Nothing happened. The helicopter sank straight for the waves. He pulled all the power he had, but still they descended. The only thing that flashed through Bob

Yerex' mind was his survival suit. Flight Mechanic Waite too glanced at his survival suit. As a last resort Comer over-torgued slightly and finally the rate of descent slowed down. At twenty-five feet above the water the helicopter steadied. A sigh of relieve went through the helicopter. They'd almost crashed and the pilots aborted their first hover-attempt to try again. What had caused this they didn't know. Usually the wind came from a steady direction but today it blew all over. The unpredictable weather could make the rescue mission extremely difficult.

Hopeful Kirk stared into the dark, stormy night. "It's turning around," and he saw the HC-130 fly back over the raft. "The Coast Guard is here!", the men jumped around delirious with joy. They had been seen! But not long after, worry overtook their joy. "How are they going to get us out?" Kirk wondered. "Look at those waves pounding that boat over there!" Fishing vessel Snow King bucked into the waves a mile or so from the raft. The sight of the massive waves smashing against the steel hull of the boat frightened the shipwrecked men. Not long after they heard the sound of a helicopter. The sound grew louder and then night turned into day. Without hesitating Kirk signaled the helicopter with a flash light.

The raft, awash in the light of the powerful helicopter lamps, spun over the flanks of the 20 to 35 foot waves. "Someone is in the raft," Schrone reported to the pilots after he saw some flashes coming from the raft. The wind blew the helicopter all over and they couldn't drop a basket near the raft. Only with help from the rescue swimmer could they save the fishermen.

Comer could not order the twenty-two year old rescue swimmer to risk his life. "It's your decision whether you want to go down into the water," Comer told Gary Strebe. "Sir, I'm going down," said the small, muscular Strebe with recklessness that comes with youth and the eagerness of someone thoroughly prepared for the situation. This was why he had joined the Coast Guard. Day in day out he swam laps, lifted weights rode bikes and attended safety and rescue classes to condition himself physically and mentally for such a rescue mission. "I've got to go out there all alone." The thought of being all by himself on the water instead of having his fellow rescue swimmers train beside him in the pool as they usually did struck him as odd. But it did not deter him from his mission.

Schrone helped Strebe put on the hoist sling around his chest. He

adjusted his mask and snorkel over his youthful face and gave Jef Waite the sign to drop him down.

Dropping the rescue swimmer into those dangerous waters was easy but getting him out of the water was another story. The decision to do so weighed heavily on Comer. But he had no time to reflect upon it. He fought the controls to maintain a steady hover. The wind, sometimes gusting over fifty knots, played havoc with the helicopter. Flying in the pitch dark, with little or no reference to go by, and world below him moving and rolling he relied on instructions from his copilot-pilot Yerex and Flight Mechanic Waite.

Flight Mechanic Waite lowered Strebe into the waves. He hung just above the water and raised his arms to slip out of the sling. As he slid out of the sling the wave dropped out from underneath him. Waite tried to let out more cable but couldn't keep up. The sling ripped Strebe's mask and snorkel off his face as he fell ten feet down before hitting the water. "He lost his mask and snorkel!," Waite reported to the pilots.

Strebe had another mask and snorkel aboard the helicopter but he thought: "No time for that now, I'm in the water." He gave the helicopter crew the thumbs-up sign. He was okay. Once in the water Strebe realized what he had gotten into. These weren't merely big waves, these were moving mountains of water. Never before did he swim in such seas. Because he couldn't see the raft behind the waves he followed the spot light Schrone shone leading him to it. Up a hill he swam, crested its foaming top, and raced down its slope into the next valley. It took Strebe several minutes to swim the 50 yards to the raft.

Kirk looked out through the entrance and in the light of the helicopter's floodlight he saw the diver dropping down on a cable. "They're sending him down... He's in the water. He'll be here soon!" The fishermen were overjoyed.

They quickly pulled the rescue swimmer on board to prevent the waves from washing into the raft. "Man, it's nasty out there," Strebe said as he lay panting on the bottom of the raft. "This is definitely not like a training-drill!" The fishermen looked at him startled. They hadn't expected such a young man come to their rescue. "Hey," Strebe said next, "you guys have any goggles or a snorkel. I lost mine on the way up."

"Listen buddy. We're on this raft because our boat's sunk and we have absolutely nothing!", the men responded.

"Okay, listen up. This what we're going to do," and the rescue swimmer calmly instructed the four men how he was going to take them out to the rescue basket and what they had to do. Strebe took Eric first.

"I'm going to swim holding onto you ," Strebe said.

"Don't worry," Eric said, "I won't fight you."

"Forward right fifteen... Left ten. Steady." The pilots couldn't see the men in the water below and Flight Mechanic Waite instructed Commander Comer where to fly. But no sooner did the pilot position the basket near the two men in the water or a freak gust of wind blew the helicopter 30 feet up and away. It seemed impossible to hover steadily for more then a couple seconds. To make matters worse the hoisting cable and the rescue basket didn't hang straight down. Wind and waves gripped the basket just as rescue swimmer Strebe reached out to grab it. The basket flew underneath and behind the helicopter. Again and again the pilots attempted to position the basket. Waite's voice was steady as a rock. Even the smallest panic in his voice would throw the pilot off. "Aft left 10... Steady... man in basket." They had done it!

The basket jerked Eric straight into the air. Jubilant, he raised his hands and shouted, "Yeah, here we go! We've made it!" The basket swung wildly through the air. Eric looked up and suddenly crashed into top of a large wave. He held on tightly for the rest of the ride up to the helicopter.

Kneeling in the open doorway Avionics Man Schrone grabbed the basket , swung it around, and guided Eric, back first, into the safety of the helicopter.

Strebe fought his way over the tremendous waves, back to the raft. The salty sea water stung his eyes. Already he'd swallowed a lot of sea water and it made him vomit. But nothing could stop him. "I've got to get these guys out," he thought. His mind switched to auto-mode and he felt no fear, merely determination.

Dan lay on his back in the water while the diver held him with one arm and swam with the other. Their timing was wrong. A succession of monstrous waves drastically slowed them down and the rescue operation took twice as long as with Eric.

"How's it going?" , the Strebe yelled over the howling wind.

"My suit's filling up. Do something, quickly!"

Dan began to panic as he felt his suit filling up. He tried to twist around but Strebe squeezed his arm tightly around Dan's chest to reassure him he was save. Dan relaxed.

The helicopter hovered wildly above the two and only after several attempts did Strebe grab hold of the basket. Safely in the basket, the world around Dan stopped. The basket shot into the air. But an instant later Dan flew backwards, straight through a wave. For a split second he was in the core of the wave. He hung onto the basket for dear life, while everything around him turned into a green haze. A few seconds later the basket cleared the water and he was pulled into the air.

Above, Schrone and Waite watched Strebe struggle to put Dan into the basket. As soon as he was in the basket Waite started hoisting. With one hand he ran the controls and with his other, gloved hand he guided the cable. Schrone, kneeling next to him assisted. Suddenly, a big wave flung the basket away and ripped the cable out of Waite's hand. It swung out, came back and with great force and with a loud bang smashed into the left side of Schrone's helmet. He slammed hard against the door way.

"What was that?", the pilots wondered as they heard a loud noise over the whirring of the helicopter's engine. Schrone saw stars but after the initial dizziness passed he went right back to work and pulled Dan aboard.

Eric sat grinning as he watched Dan rolling on the deck of the helicopter and shrieking with laughter, shouting again and again: "Yes, Yes, I'm alive!" But the rescue mission wasn't over yet. Kirk, Mark and the rescue swimmer Strebe were still in the water.

The concentration required to maintain a hover fatigued Commander Comer. He processed and acted upon an enormous amount of information. The instrument readings, the limited visual references, the constant beeping of the altitude-alarm as the helicopter sank too close to the water, hovering directions from his copilot-pilot Yerex and at the same time flying directions from Flight Mechanic Waite. The instruments told him they drifted to the left while what he saw outside the windows made him feel they drifted to the right and forward. He lost his orientation as he fought mind over matter.

Down in the water, Strebe too became extremely tired. He just helped Kirk to the basket and swam back to the raft to get Mark out.

"I'm out of here," Kirk yelled as the basket jerked him away from the waves. It seemed like a dream; the raft and the diver below him in the colossal, heaving seas, the HC-130 circling the scene in the distance,

the lights of the boats in the surrounding area, and the helicopter above him. The basket began to spin and the sights around him vanished in a blur of indistinguishable colors and impressions. Schrone pulled him aboard and he crawled to a spot next to Eric.

By now Strebe had been in the water for over 35 minutes. He gagged as he swallowed some more salt water. He swam in the trough of an exceptionally high wave when a sudden panic seized him. "Where's the heli, where is it!" he shouted as he spun around in the water to find it. The huge wave blocked the helicopter, hovering fifty feet above, from his vision. A second later the helicopter appeared again and the spotlight found him.

When Strebe disappeared Schrone and Waite stared straight into the face of a monstrous, rogue wave heading, directly towards the helicopter. "Up, up, up!" they shouted and, in the nick of time, Commander Comer pulled the helicopter up and away. Underneath them, the 50 foot mountain of water roared harmlessly by.

Strebe climbed into the raft. For a while he just lay there vomiting. He was exhausted and had swallowed a lot of salt water. One last time he had to battle the huge seas with Mark in tow. But first he needed to catch his breath.

In the cockpit lieutenant Yerex concentrated on the instruments. Hovering the helicopter felt like balancing on top of a giant ball. If the right wing leaned over, or if they drifted, he directed Commander Comer according to his instrument readings. "Forward... up left wing," and a sudden disorientation hit Yerex. The world around him seemed to move in every which way. His stomach heaved as he quickly opened the cockpit window and vomited. Without giving it any more thought, he immediately dove back into his instrument panel to help the pilot fly the helicopter. Everyone was so engrossed in their task no one noticed.

"I hope Strebe comes up on this next hoist," Commander Comer worried. He was dead tired and he didn't know whether they could do a fifth hoist. Also, fuel was running low. He had been in the water close to forty minutes. If he didn't come up with the next hoist they might have to leave him in the water with a raft to be picked up later by another helicopter. "Come on Strebe, get in the basket," Waite thought and he glanced over to Schrone beside him and sensed the Avionics Man struggling with the same concern.

Strebe arms felt heavy and he knew he had to get out of the water. "I'm going up on this hoist. There's no way I'm staying out here alone." He struggled the last few feet to the rescue basket, holding on to Mark. "I'm going to climb on top of you," Gary told Mark, "so don't get nervous."

Strebe sprawled on top of him and clipped his D-ring onto the riser of the basket. He gave Waite the up-signal. Just as the basket jerked into the air, a wave knocked Strebe out. Waite didn't realize Strebe had hooked himself to the basket and dropped the basket down into the water. Strebe once again swam to reposition the basket under the helicopter. This time though, he stayed out of the basket and hung underneath till they cleared the water. Halfway up, he climbed on top of Mark.

Schrone helped them aboard the helicopter and immediately checked the four fishermen for signs of hypothermia. He gave them warm blankets and asked them a couple of questions to see how they responded. All four men lay still trying to grasp what had happened to them. Little was said on the way to Air Station. But all thought the same, "We're alive!"

Strebe dropped into the basket and vomited from all the salt water he ingested. The courageous swimmer swam in seas sometimes higher than 35 feet for more than 45 minutes. He passed out from utter exhaustion.

3.20 AM Commander Comer passed the controls over to lieutenant Yerex to fly the helicopter back to Air Station Kodiak. His flight suit drenched with sweat, he slumped back into the seat and closed his eyes for a second. The mission had drained every last ounce of energy out of him.

Fuel was running low and the pilots didn't know whether they could fly straight to the base without stopping at Sitkinak, a remote refueling point. If the fishermen were in bad shape, refueling time could mean the difference between life and death. After deliberating with the HC-130, still flying cover overhead, they figured they had just enough fuel to fly directly to the base.

Twenty minutes to five, in the wee of the morning, an ambulance whisked the four survivors off to Kodiak Island Hospital. Eric and Mark turned out slightly hypothermic; nothing a hot cup of coffee didn't correct. After the nurse washed and dried their clothes all four

fishermen were released from the hospital and caught a cab into town. At seven in the morning the four stumbled into a restaurant wearing nothing more than the clothes they wore at the time of sinking and some garbage bags for shoes, wrapped around their feet. They looked for a phone to call their families and friends. Mark finally got through to Lisa in Gig Harbor, Washington state and told her that they had sunk. Gripping the phone tightly Lisa's heart skipped a couple of beats until Mark eased her fear. "We're fine. The Coast Guard pulled all four of us out alive!"

As they sat around the table, talking wildly, trying to digest what happened to them they all felt the same. They had survived their harrowing ordeal by sticking close together, by relying on one another for help. But as is often with men who toil and labor side by side, hour on end, through day and through night, on the rolling decks of fishing boats, they weren't apt to express their comradery verbally. Though silent as it was, the feeling was mutual, and it was there to stay.

Not until they touched the tarmac, did the crews of the rescue plane and helicopter realize what feat they accomplished. Winds gusting over 50 knots, visibility reduced to half a mile and seas higher than 35 feet did not stop the Coast Guard men from successfully finishing the rescue mission. "The bottom line to the success of this mission?" said Flight Mechanic Jef Waite, "teamwork!"

Dan went back to Arizona to spent the winter and in the summer of 1992 returned to Alaska to fish. Although Eric loves the fishermen's lifestyle, he decided to take care of his back and went home to his wife and child in Eagle River, Alaska.

Not long after the incident Mark and Lisa bought a new fishing boat. On board the Golden Chalice, Mark and Kirk once again prowl the Alaskan seas in search of the mother lode.

The helicopter crew received several awards for the 1991 rescue of the Dora H crew: LCDR Clifford K. Comer and ASM3 Gary L. Strebe both received the US Coast Guard Distinguished Flying Cross. Strebe also received a US Coast Guard award for heroism and the Western Regional Naval Helicopter Association Award for the best Air Rescue Crew member of the year. LTJG Bob P. Yerex, AE2 Dave F. Schrone and AM2

Jeffrey C. Waite received the US Coast Guard Air Medal. Besides these honors the entire helicopter crew received the Alaska Legislative award and the Western Regional Naval Helicopter Association Award for the best Air Rescue team of the year. And in February of 1992 they won the National Naval Helicopter Association Award for the best Air Rescue team of 1991. This award ranks amongst the most prestigious in the Aviation community. "I have one other reminder of this mission," Strebe said, "I made a lamp out of the helmet Dave Schrone wore. It has gouge on the side of the helmet where the cable hit him."