

# All in a Day's Work

By Ltjg. Eric D. Hutter

What started out as a normal flight on 11 May 2005 resulted in the most important flight of my young career. It may not have made the news, but it was a wonderful opportunity to make a positive impact in the Middle East.

We launched our SH-60B Seahawk of Helicopter Antisubmarine Squadron Light 45 Det 5 at 0200 from our mother unit, *Mustin* (DDG 89). We were tasked with yet another three-hour mission of routine search and surveillance. These uneventful flights had made up the bulk of our missions over the last three months, and offered little excitement save the occasional query of a transiting vessel. As we took off on this flight, our ship notified us that a vessel was broadcasting a distress call over the radio. Since the location it was calling out was over 100 miles away, the destroyer had decided not to respond. Although emergencies are not a matter to be taken lightly, it is not uncommon to hear mariners in this region make outrageous claims in order to entertain themselves during the long hours they spend moving cargo from port to port or sitting with their fishing nets in the water.

After taking off and calling “operations normal,” I quickly went through our after takeoff checklist while the pilot, Lt. Neil Penso, climbed to 400 feet and asked for an initial course to steer for our tasking. Meanwhile, the aircrewman, AW2 Jay Peer, brought up our radar and began initial tracking of the shipping contacts around us. We all scanned outside as well, matching radar contacts with what we saw out our windows. As is typical in this part of the Arabian Gulf, there were about thirty vessels within a fifteen-mile radius around us. Scanning the horizon with my night-vision goggles, I noticed that one ship seemed to be much brighter than the all the others. Man, that thing was lit up like a Christmas tree . . . wait, those weren't lights!

Lt. Penso turned the aircraft toward the brightly lit vessel while I activated the forward looking infrared (FLIR) camera. FLIR is one of our greatest assets on night missions, because it enables us to see extremely long distances with magnification both day and night. In this case the camera zoomed in on a large merchant vessel sitting dead in the water with flames spewing from the pilothouse and aft superstructure. I called out what I

was seeing, and we sped inbound to get a closer look. Meanwhile, I relayed our findings to *Mustin*. Our FLIR camera automatically downlinks real-time footage to our ship, so the controller on the other end can see everything that we see. That controller began recording the footage, notifying the chain of command, and initiating the rescue effort. I tuned the appropriate bridge-to-bridge frequency in the radio to communicate with the distressed vessel, while AW2 Peer passed its position to *Mustin*. So much for being 100 miles away! As it turned out, the merchant ship's navigation equipment was all in the pilothouse, which was entirely engulfed in flames. As GPS is decidedly averse to open flame, the captain was just guessing his position and calling out his maydays in the hopes that someone would see his boat and come to the rescue. In reality, the merchant ship was only 10 miles from *Mustin*.

As we drew closer we could see that the burning ship was a bulk cargo merchant with the superstructure aft. Flames covered the superstructure, but hadn't yet reached the rest of the ship. We spotted three personnel in a large circular life raft tied off the stern, and a larger lifeboat hung up in its lines and dangling precariously from the starboard side of the ship. We sped in and established an orbit around the ship at 500 feet, making sure we stayed above the long trail of smoke that was drifting downwind. After multiple attempts on the radio, we finally raised the vessel's captain, who replied, “Yes, this is merchant vessel *Olympias*, please help, we are on fire. I say again, we are on fire and in need of immediate assistance!”

“*Olympias*, this is coalition helicopter, please state how many crew are on board and what cargo you carry, over.”

“Yes, this is *Olympias*, we are in ballast, in ballast, no cargo. We have 27 people on board, we are all up forward on the bow. Please help, please come soon!”

We circled the ship, peering into the intense brightness of the flames and smelling the acrid smoke that had drifted up into the helo, and we began to think: What do we do now? Where do we come in? By now *Mustin* was less than five miles away, and her small boats were probably the best—and safest—way to effect a rescue. Still, knowing how fires can catch the wrong breeze and

Facing page, Art Director Morgan Wilbur's oil painting depicts the SH-60B of HSL-45 Det 5 approaching the burning merchant ship *Olympias* on 11 May 2005.





spread quickly, we weren't sure how much time we had. Should we try to hoist the mariners from the bow of the ship into our helicopter? That would be the heroic thing to do, in the dead of night with the ship's flames billowing out of control less than 20 yards from our rotor blades. We continued circling the ship, noting that the crew was standing on a narrow walkway in close proximity to two industrial cranes. The cranes in turn were surrounded by extensive rigging: cables running from mast and cranes to the deck, a spider web of obstacles that we wouldn't really be able to pick out until we were probably closer than we should be. Being in that close to the ship, the flames from the fire would be blindingly bright in our night vision goggles, and it would be extremely hard to maintain a steady hover. We discussed the options among the crew, and agreed that a hoist rescue probably wasn't the wisest choice.

Just as we were wrapping up our decision to stand off, the explosions started. Gigantic balls of flame began spewing out of the superstructure, scattering showers of sparks and billowing smoke. It looked like something out of a Vin Diesel movie, this five story-tall conflagration. We could tell that the flames were spreading to the starboard side of the ship as well, meaning that the life raft that was tied to the fantail was probably now inaccessible to the distressed crew. The explosions were also making our infrared camera even harder to use—the heat of the flames was so intense the camera could no longer pick out the finer details that we had earlier been able to see.

We continued communicating to *Mustin* and to the vessel in distress, now with an added sense of urgency—

we didn't know if these explosions were going to hit a fuel tank and really go up, or if the breeze might change and bring the fire sweeping forward, where the remaining crew still milled around waiting for rescue. The vessel master's voice on the radio was no longer so calm and professional:

"Coalition warship, this is *Olympias*, where are you? We are on fire, please hurry, we are in distress. Please hurry, I say again the entire ship is on fire."

We offered our best assurances over the radio, but *Mustin* had its own concerns. Intelligence had warned us of the possibility of terrorist forces faking an emergency at sea to lure unprepared warships into lowering their guard. The captain of our ship was obviously aware of the risk, and asked *Olympias* several questions to determine what type of cargo was aboard, how much fuel was left in the tanks, and where they were from. Meanwhile, we were tasked with patrolling the immediate area to make sure there weren't any suspicious vessels in the vicinity. It must be funny to someone at home reading this paragraph, to see the concerns and cautions that a ship might go through before rendering assistance to a captain so obviously in distress. But it seems like anything is possible out in the Gulf. It was only a year ago that a terrorist group died in a suicide attempt to blow up Iraq's main oil export terminal. That terminal is less than 100 miles away from our current position, and in the middle of the night the gas burn-off from the Gulf's hundreds of oil platforms glow red all around us on the horizon and give the night an eerie, uncomfortable feeling. The warm night air sits still and heavy on your skin, and somehow smells

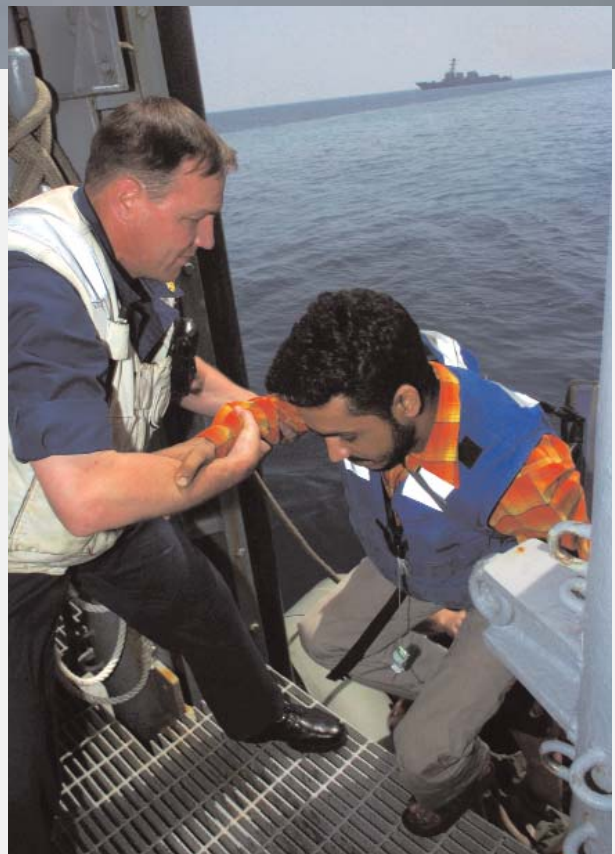


**Facing page, HSL-45 flies SH-60B Seahawks such as this one seen operating from *Rodney M. Davis* (FFG 60). Photo by PH1 Thomas J. Brennan. Above, the merchant ship *Olympias* burns in the early morning hours of 11 May 2005. Right, BNCS Gary Arehart assists an *Olympias* crewman aboard *Carl Vinson* (CVN 70) after being transferred from *Mustin* (DDG 89). Photo by AN Refugio Carrillo.**

saturated, as if even the wind finds your presence there unwelcome. In the middle of the night, it's easy to feel like you may be the next target.

Finally, assured of her safety, *Mustin* approached to within a few miles to render assistance. Her small boats, *Privateer* and *Rumrunner*, were quickly lowered into the water. We maintained our orbit and directed the two boats the remaining distance to *Olympias* and the ladder that had been lowered halfway down her starboard side. We brought the helicopter to a hover and covered the boat crews with our machine gun as they unloaded *Olympias*' crew members, who faced the difficult task of climbing down a 40-foot ladder in the middle of the night into a pitching boat only slightly larger than a Boston Whaler. Amazingly, the two boats were able to carry the entire crew of 27 people and the rescue went off without a hitch.

Upon completion of the transfer of personnel from the small boats to *Mustin*, the flight deck was cleared and we landed for a hotseat to another aircrew. As I shed my flight gear, I made my way into the hangar where the rescued crew was housed. As I expected, *Mustin* provided myriad amenities to ensure that the crew was treated like guests of the ship: blankets, breakfast, coffee, even designated smoking areas. The crew was mostly Indian and Sri Lankan, from elderly men and women to



teenagers, and all seemed in good spirits and grateful for their fortuitous rescue.

The story of this rescue didn't make it into the mainstream American news. No one died, no bombs were dropped, nobody performed any shining acts of heroism. It was simply a series of events made possible by the willingness of a well-trained ship's crew to render aid to some fellow sailors—all in a day's work. ✈️

Ltjg. Hutter, a pilot with HSL-45, received the Navy Achievement Medal along with Lt. Penso and AW2 Peer for their participation in this rescue.