
MARIAN IAN WALKUP

"Who Could Capsize In This?": A Nighttime SAR

By AW2 Ren Owens

It's funny how some things go exactly how you train for them, even if the way you train, is to train for the unexpected. After all, that was the mantra when I went through search and rescue (SAR) school—expect the unexpected and train for the worst. I had already completed one cruise, six months in Southeast Asia, single steaming with absolutely no other SAR assets around, in the middle of typhoon season. We spent all of that cruise certain we would get called upon for a rescue, but in the end we had not even received a false alarm. Now, in mid-January, barely 1,000 miles south of San Diego, Calif., with Coast Guard cutters and Mexican navy vessels all around, after a beautiful day and what started as a clear night, we got the SAR call.

I was deployed aboard *Ford* (FFG 54) as one of three air crew members from Helicopter Anti-Submarine Squadron Light (HSL) 49 Det 6. We had started our six-month counterdrug ops cruise just 10 days prior. Flight operations had secured for the night after finding nothing of interest.

Art Director Morgan I. Wilbur captured the challenging conditions that the crew of HSL-49 Det 6, embarked on *Ford* (FFG 54), faced during a night rescue in the Pacific Ocean.

Above, the HSL-49 Det 6 SAR team of Ltjg. Chris Ryckebusch, LCdr. Connie Avery, AW2 Chris Gotelli, and AW2 Ren Owens braved strong winds and heavy seas to rescue two people from a sinking sailboat in the Pacific Ocean, while embarked aboard *Ford* (FFG 54). The adverse conditions were far different from training exercises conducted by HSL-49 Seahawks over the calm waters off San Diego, Calif., facing page.

Postflight duties were completed and I was well into my evening workout in the gym when the captain came over the 1MC. He started off calmly, talking about a sailboat sinking in high seas and how *Ford* was the only rescue asset. At first I thought it was a drill, and I had a vague sense of déjà vu after my last cruise, when I ran into the hangar wearing only gym clothes, SAR bag in hand, only to find out it was a drill and to be laughed at by the detachment. But this time the captain mentioned pulling the helo out on deck and readying her for flight. This was not a drill. I was on my feet and down to berthing to change out and grab a second crew member. Of the three AWs, I was still in my flight window (based on crew rest) and my junior crewman the next most rested. I'd like to say we had a more sophisticated way of deciding who would go as the rescue swimmer, but it came down to a best of three, rock-paper-scissors game. I lost, so I was going to be the hoist operator.

We briefed in the ship's Combat Information Center as the rest of the air detachment readied the helicopter. While my swimmer dressed out, I prepped the cabin by pulling out the third seat and excess gear, and staging the SAR curtain and medical kit. The ship was closing on the distressed boat and we were ready to launch. The rotors spun up and as if on queue, Murphy's Law took hold. After almost seven hours of flight time earlier that day with no system degradations, this was when things started failing. The navigation computers went first. They crashed, and then came back up full of errors and needed a reload, and then they wouldn't come up at all. Finally, the navigation computers came up but then it was the forward-looking infrared (FLIR) pod's turn to go haywire. It failed the precheck and the picture wouldn't come up. Since we were still almost 90 miles out from the search area, I figured I'd have time to troubleshoot in the air. As we took off, I looked out the cabin door at the slightly overcast night and relatively calm seas and thought, "Who could capsize in this?"

We headed south toward the Gulf of Tehuantepec, off southwestern Mexico. The computers were up and running and once we got airborne the FLIR started working again. The picture on radar ahead of us was not a welcoming one. Sea clutter and strong cloud lines told us what was in store. As we proceeded toward the distressed craft, the crew and I, who were wearing night vision goggles, noticed that the seas were definitely

getting stronger. Whitecaps started to break beneath us and the swells were growing. It was a much different ocean than the one we had taken off in just 40 or so miles behind us. My cabin was already prepped, my swimmer was ready, and my pilots were deep in the SAR problem, setting a bingo fuel state and choosing search patterns in case we couldn't reach the distressed boat on the radio. At this point, one of the pilots asked, "What are you reading on winds back there?" I glanced down at the computer screen to check the estimated winds but it took me a moment to realize what I was looking at. "That would be almost 50 knots, ma'am."

The search area was the exact opposite of what we had expected, with winds well into the 50s and huge rolling seas easily 15 to 20 feet high. The pilots contacted the survivors on the radio and I picked up their 35-foot catamaran on the FLIR as it was getting tossed around in the swells. The boat was wider than I had expected and had cables running up the masts. The wildly pitching deck made any hopes of placing the rescue swimmer physically on the boat a dangerous idea. A second set of lines ran from the back of the boat out into the ocean to the sea anchors behind it. I rigged the swimmer, thrust the rescue hook into his hand and yelled over the sound of the rotors, "Whatever happens, you do not come off this hook. Understand?" He gave me a nod.

Both of us had been trained in the new direct deployment procedure, but outside of calm, controlled practice in the placid San Diego Bay, neither of us had ever operationally put any of it to use. Direct deployment is a new procedure in our community, slightly different than the old method of nighttime deployment. The swimmer remains attached to the hook and hangs below the helicopter only a few feet off the water. The hoist operator guides the pilots into position and lowers the swimmer into the water at the last second, and for only long enough to secure the survivor. The new method keeps the swimmer in a safer position but puts much more of the burden on the hoist operator, from positioning the helicopter, to keeping the swimmer in the right place and safe from danger. Direct deployment is designed almost specifically for situations like this, when rough seas would make a traditional rescue almost impossible.

I gave the swimmer the thumbs up, which he returned, and then he was out the cabin door to the top of the hoist. I spun him around and got one last OK from him that he was ready, and down he went. The wind caught him hard as he descended below the cabin door, and continued to push him around the further he went. We crept forward toward the boat, and again Murphy's Law came in to effect. The automatic flight control system (AFCS), which the hoist operator uses to help the pilots fly, shut off. As the pilots called out the emergency, I thumbed the hoist control from full down to full up. My swimmer jerked in the air as I prepared to get him back in the cabin, just in case things got worse. We often discuss and train for emergencies, but right then the only thing I

could think about was a full system degradation with my junior crewman being dragged around beneath the helicopter on 80 feet of cable at 100-plus knots. My concern had now switched from the rescue to getting my swimmer back in the cabin safely before we had to depart from our hover. Luckily, the pilots restored the AFCS and we decided to go ahead with the rescue knowing what might lie in store for us.

In calm seas and sunny San Diego afternoons, hoisting a swimmer down to a slightly bored simulated survivor is a fairly mundane task. During a black night, under high seas and heavy winds, it's a much different game. We got in position about a dozen yards behind the catamaran. The surge was so strong and the troughs so deep that each time the small boat crested over a wave and back down the other side, it would slide nearly 50 feet out of position, then come rushing back forward again with the full force of the next wave. Timing was critical. With the swimmer just a few feet over the wave crests, I thought to myself, "If I drop him too soon, he could get pulled out of position and away from the survivors; too late, and the boat will be too far away to reach." We radioed for the first survivor to jump off toward the swimmer as the boat rolled up the face of the wave. I lowered the swimmer just as the crest brought the two of them together. He made a quick dash for the survivor and held on as the boat slid back and away. What took only a few seconds felt like forever as he hooked up the rescue strop and completed his final checks. The entire time I continuously adjusted the rescue hoist. I paid out cable and guided the pilots forward to keep from jerking the swimmer back like a fish on a line. Then I had to reel the same cable back in, concerned it might become a snag hazard in the water. Back and forth the cable went and the pilots tried their best to stay over the top in a relative hover as the swimmer and survivor floated with the surge. Finally, I got the pick-up signal from the swimmer. We positioned over the top and hoisted the swimmer and first survivor in. I relaxed only slightly as they came up and clear of the water.

Winds were still high and with AFCS faulting on and off we didn't have time to come back around for a second pass. Once the first survivor was safe and situated in a seat, we had to side-step back over the

While conducting counterdrug ops in the Pacific Ocean off Mexico, *Ford* (FFG 54), facing page, was called upon to rescue the crew of a sinking sailboat. Photo by MC2 Bradley J. Sapp. Above, the ship's embarked MH-60R Seahawk, as seen from the view of LSO Lt. Nicole Taus, carried out the mission to rescue the sailboat's two crew members. Photo by MC2 Oscar Espinoza.

boat and my swimmer went down a second time. The plan was the same; get him as close as possible and have the survivor jump to him. Except this time the next rolling trough didn't pull the boat, rather it just lingered there only a few yards away. Now I was concerned that if a larger wave came, it would crush the two of them beneath the boat or, when I brought them up, there was a risk of them getting entangled in the mast and its many lines. I had the pilot slowly start to drift to the left, and I let the cable go taut when I felt the swimmer had a good grip. Slowly, we pulled the two to a clear distance from the boat, and again I got the pick-up signal and the two came up.

The fun was not over quite yet. As the swimmer and survivor reached the cabin door and I began to pull the two in, the AFCS decided it had finally had enough and failed completely. We departed and as we nosed over, gaining forward airspeed, the 50-knot wind that made fighting the two into the cabin hard enough, turned into an 80-plus (and climbing) knot wind. The swimmer had only one foot in the cabin door and grabbed for whatever handle he could as I tightened my grip on the survivor. With my free hand I swatted at the down switch and fed out a little slack on the hoist cable and manhandled the swimmer and second survivor aboard. With one hand on the survivor and the other on the back of the swimmer's harness, I pulled them in as one huge, sopping wet body. As if to make sure I was paying attention, the survivor had managed to tie three bags around him that now tangled between himself and the swimmer and blew out the cabin door. The swimmer and I hauled aboard the water-filled bags and slammed the door closed.

Both survivors were in good condition and with the wind now behind us we were on our way home. Everything for which I'd ever been trained came into play, from rough weather, to changing conditions, to unexpected situations, and even several emergencies. Even with all this against us we still pulled off a successful rescue in less than half an hour and in almost textbook fashion. And the funniest thing is, I always thought the crewman had the easy job in the SAR.

AW2 Owens is an aircrewman with HSL-49. The pilots in this rescue were LCdr. Connie Avery and Ltjg. Chris Ryckebusch, and the rescue swimmer was AW2 Chris Gotelli. The members of HSL-49 Det 6 returned to NAS North Island, Calif., from the deployment on *Ford* in June.