



# GRAMPAW PETTIBONE

## Victory at Sea

*Theresa Lee*, a 185-foot U.S. merchant vessel was floundering in violent 30 to 40-foot seas with a broken rudder and was in imminent danger of sinking in Bristol Bay, 65 miles northwest of Port Heiden, Alaska.

At 1928L, a Coast Guard HH-3F SAR helo was launched from Coast Guard Air Station Kodiak, with Lt. Ng (pronounced Ing) and a crew of three, to rescue the 22 crewmen aboard the endangered vessel. This was their third launch of the day. They had previously accumulated 4.3 flight hours on two search missions for lost hunters and had conducted a hazardous rescue from a cliff along a narrow beach area.

Weather conditions at the scene were miserable with 60 to 70-knot northerly winds, severe turbulence, one-quarter mile visibility, and 300 to 500-foot cloud ceilings with heavy rain and haze on that darkening August night. Lt. Ng assessed the circumstances and thoroughly briefed his crew. Realizing the perilous task which lay before them, they accepted the risks and pressed on through ever-worsening conditions. Their progress en route was hampered by high headwinds, turbulence, heavy rain, mountainous terrain, and low visibility. At one point, they were forced to circumnavigate water spouts.

An HC-130 aircraft, launched simultaneously, arrived on scene prior to the helo and established radio communications with the ship. The HC-130 pilot reported that the *Theresa Lee* estimated only four to five hours remained before flooding would sink the vessel. He expressed serious doubt that rescue hoisting would be possible under the terrible on-scene weather conditions.

Lt. Ng's crew negotiated the 200-mile distance in just under three hours.



The night was pitch black when the helo arrived on scene at 2230L. The ship's skipper requested immediate rescue, informing the pilot that the lives of his crew were also threatened with the presence of leaking cargo ammonia fumes, in addition to the threat of capsizing.

Lt. Ng and his crew moved into position and commenced rescue efforts, but the rough seas tossed the ship violently about like a cork. Large curling waves bashed across the deck washing the listing vessel rapidly down swell. Stacks of cargo, a 50-foot kingpost/mast, radio antenna and other obstructions on the stern area further complicated the hoisting attempts.

Two dewatering pumps were first lowered to bring the flooding under control. Despite efforts to compensate for gusting winds, the cable and rescue basket trailed well downwind, behind the helo. The ship's crew, at great risk of being washed overboard, were required to crawl along the wave-washed decks to the stern to be hoisted. Each hoist was extremely arduous. Repeatedly, the hoist cable became fouled, but was cleared just at the point when cutting the cable would have been necessary. During the three hours of hovering and hoisting, the copilot and radioman were overcome by the violent conditions and experienced severe nausea. After hoisting the seventeenth man, the C-130 pilot reported that the remaining five crewmen were too frightened to attempt the hoist and would remain with the ship. Lt. Ng secured the hoisting operation and attempted to transition the helicopter to forward flight but was momentarily overcome by exhaustion and nausea. He was unable to pull the necessary amount of collective to establish a climb and called for the copilot to take control of the aircraft, which he did and executed a safe climb-out.

Once out of the turbulent hover conditions, the crew recovered somewhat from their severe nausea. However, at 55 miles from their planned destination of Port Heiden, the fumes which had been present throughout the hoisting evolution grew worse. Lt. Ng declared an emergency and the C-130 aircraft proceeded to intercept the helo. The fumes were thought to have been from a malfunctioning aircraft heater but, after equipment isolation, the source was identified as an electrical failure in a windshield wiper motor.

The helo continued to Port Heiden without further complication, landing with an exhausted crew, fuel nearly

gone and seventeen terrified but grateful passengers.



Grampaw Pettibone says:

Great jumpin' Jehoshaphat! Gents, this has got to be one of the most dramatic rescues recorded in my dusty old log. Just the description of the rigors involved in this "dark and stormy night" rescue left Old Fearless Ferrus Bones here totally exhausted and danged near speechless. I almost became nauseous just reading the narrative.

There might be those who would say that the actions of this crew were irresponsible and foolhardy in view of all the hazards involved. Be that as it may, you can rest assured that the crew of the *Theresa Lee* didn't think it foolhardy. They all know full well this "angel" was "heaven sent!"

Lt. Ng's crew assessed the risks, their capabilities, the value of the 22 lives at stake, and then gave it their best shot. Their above and beyond the call efforts on this exhaustive rescue was truly a victory at sea. This crew's outstanding demonstration of responsibility, decision making, and courage of execution was a true testimony

of some mighty high-quality training, professionalism and individual courage.

For their gallant efforts the crew, consisting of Lt. Michael B. Garwood (copilot), flight mechanic AD2 Drew E. Bratt, and avionicsman AT1 James H. Ellis, were awarded individual air medals. Lt. Ng was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. He was also selected as "Helicopter Aviator of the Year (1980)," by the Association of Naval Aviation.

Old Gramps can't envision a more dynamic demonstration to project the official Coast Guard motto of *Semper Paratus*.

