

Crew Resource Management

Situational Awareness

Assertiveness

Decision Making

Communication

Leadership

Adaptability/Flexibility

Mission Analysis

Rescue in the Gulf of Oman

By Lt. Harrison Schramm

Most rotary-wing aviators dream of a chance to use their training to rescue someone. Many get the opportunity to rescue one or two people in their career. I never thought I would be part of a crew who would rescue 27 people in one day. I offer this article not only as an interesting sea story but, more importantly, to highlight what is possible with a good aircraft, a competent crew, and two brave rescue swimmers.

USNS *Concord* (T-AFS 5) received a distress signal at 1600 on June 23 from the motor vessel *Green Glory*. The initial distress call said the ship was taking on water. *Concord* headed out of the area for a vertrep the following morning, but, at 2030, 5th Fleet directed us to proceed to the distressed ship's location at best speed. The MH-60S crew assigned for the next day's vertrep, which was now cancelled, briefed and preflighted.

During the evening, RFA *Sir Tristram*, a Royal Navy auxiliary vessel, also was dispatched to the scene. During the night, *Concord* tried to communicate with *Green Glory* but had limited success. By the time flight quarters were set the following morning, *Green Glory* couldn't communicate.

We launched in KnightRider (KR) 62 at 0840 on June 24. Conditions on the *Concord* were pitch nine, roll 10, with winds 30, starboard at 28. Routine operations, such as spotting the aircraft on the flight deck, were challenging. Det 5 had to leave the tie-down chains attached to the aircraft and progressively push out the aircraft two to three feet at a time. With the helicopter alternately compressing the struts and the chains taking strain each roll, the helo move was nerve-racking for my det OinC. A mistake could send the aircraft and personnel over the side.

We took off by lifting as the ship rolled near center, and we immediately slid to port. Other merchant ships in the area pro-



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vided us a good latitude and longitude for the *Green Glory*. En-route visibility was about a mile underneath a 500-foot ceiling, and we spotted the distressed ship using the datum fix as a reference. Our det OinC assumed on-scene-commander duty and directed us from *Concord's* tower.

At 0910, we made a pass to assess the situation. The ship already was decks-awash and was taking rolls up to 40 degrees. We found our rescue options to be limited extremely by the severity of the sea state and the rolls the ship was taking. The ship's crew was on the upper decks, wearing Kapok life jackets, but none of their liferafts were deployed. Our initial plan was to hoist AO2 Rusty Jack and PR2 Joseph McCollum to the deck and to effect a rescue directly from the ship. However, this plan was abandoned after two unsuccessful attempts to lower the swimmers directly onto the deck. The sea state made the ship violently roll, which made hoisting directly to or from the ship impossible.

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The situation deteriorated throughout the day.

Our crew chief, AMC Mikel Carr recommended deploying the swimmers on the port (upwind) side of the distress vessel. This idea was the first of many good ones to come from crew members working in the back of the aircraft. I established a manual 40-foot hover while Chief Carr dropped a life raft in the water and then lowered the rescue swimmers with the hoist to a point about 50 yards off the port bow.

After deploying the swimmers, we were close to bingo fuel, and *Concord* still was about 50 miles away. We decided to return to *Concord* and refuel while the rescue swimmers took charge on-scene. The rescue swimmers now were on their own.

The landings on *Concord* were, by far, the most challenging part of the day for the pilots. The amount of pitch and roll *Concord* was taking made my stomach tight—like I was out for my first set of DLQs. My first approach ended in a waveoff, and the subsequent landing



was very firm: It fully compressed the first stage of our struts.

Subsequent takeoffs expanded the concept of crew-resource management to the entire ship. The OOD called tower when the seas in front of the ship looked relatively calm, then tower called for breakdown over the 5MC. Under the direction of AM1 Paul Borkowski, the chock and chainers were standing by the mainmounts. They broke down the chains, left the chocks in place, and cleared the rotor arc. Once the chain runners were clear of the foul line, we lifted out of the chocks and departed to port.

At the sinking ship, the rescue swimmers were working to remove the 27 survivors from the vessel and place them in life rafts. PR2 McCollum managed to get onboard the *Green Glory* by waiting until the ship was in an extreme roll; he timed the wave action to grab the deck and pulled himself onboard while AO2 Jack remained in the water. They worked together to help survivors jump from the ship into the raft. PR2 McCollum told the crew members when to jump, based on the wave and roll action. AO2 Jack grabbed the survivors as they came off the ship and pulled them into the liferaft. They moved four survivors using this method, until the mooring line on the liferaft snapped, sending the raft adrift. AO2 Jack got out of the raft and kept it close to the ship by swimming while hanging onto the line. It was a very long, physical day for Jack and McCollum, and, in retrospect, their actions that day were amazing.

Upon our return to the scene, we recovered the four survivors and AO2 Jack from the drifting raft. Although the helo's approach coupler usually is not used for daytime rescues, it was a great help in reducing the pilot workload. The coupler provided stability, while the crew chief provided verbal directions over the scene.

Fifth Fleet directed that survivors be transferred to the *Sir Tristram*, which only was six miles from the site, for medical attention and further transport. We checked the HOSTAC and decided the best place to land on the *Sir Tristram* was the amidships spot because it was certified for H-47s and H-53s. On arrival, we discovered the amidships spot was fouled with cargo containers. *Sir Tristram's* plan was to

recover us on the aft spot that was cleared for SH-60Bs.

Unfortunately, the aft spot was not suitable for landing MH-60Ss because of the aft location of the tail wheel on the Sierra model and the extreme sea state. *Sir Tristram* then maneuvered for "best seas" at my request. This maneuver resulted in a "down sea, down wind" condition. With the deck at pitch 3, roll 4, and relative winds at 170 degrees and 26 knots, I initiated a right-seat, starboard-to-port, athwart-ship approach, terminating in a 10-foot hover over the flight deck. My copilot, Ltjg. Isaiah Blake, recalled later the hover attitude was "nose level, left wing 10 to 12 degrees down" because of the relative wind component. However, after our landings on Concord and hoisting out of the open ocean, hoisting to *Sir Tristram* felt like a vacation. The survivors were hoisted down on the hook from the helicopter, two at a time, with AO2 Jack assisting them on deck to remove the rescue strop. The survivors quickly were ushered forward and taken into the custody of the British crew.

After hoisting down the first survivors, we returned to *Concord* for more fuel. *Concord* bridge cleared us in when the ship was about to enter a stretch of relative calm seas. We made an uneventful landing, took fuel, and departed, using the same techniques as our previous pass.

At the sinking ship, PR2 McCollum had been onboard the wrecked ship for about two hours and had taken charge of the non-English-speaking crew. He directed them to abandon ship and to board life rafts in the 25-foot seas. With progressively deteriorating conditions, PR2 McCollum loaded 16 survivors into the ship's first 20-man life raft before the mooring line snapped.

We located that raft and began the recovery process from as stable a hover as possible. Once in a stable hover into the 30-knot winds, we used a combination of verbal calls from the back and the HVR MODE display to keep the aircraft in position. The rise and fall of the surging swells made our aircraft height above the water vary between 40 and 60 feet during the hoisting process.

Chief Carr lowered AO2 Jack to the 20-man raft with two rescue strops in hand. AO2 Jack

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alternated rescue stops so a survivor always was rigged for rescue. Chief Carr hoisted the survivors into the helicopter one at a time, leaving AO2 Jack in the life raft until the cabin reached maximum occupancy (12). Keeping the helicopter and the raft within hoisting range was a challenge because our rotor wash constantly blew the raft away from us. We deposited our load of 12 survivors on the *Sir Tristram*. We returned to the second raft, recovered the next four survivors, and headed to the *Sir Tristram* again. But, *Sir Tristram* had suffered an engineering casualty and had gone red deck, which forced us to head to the *Concord*. After another quick re-fuel, we left the four survivors on *Concord* to await a later transfer to *Sir Tristram*.

While we refueled, PR2 McCollum managed to load four survivors into the ship's second 20-man raft before its mooring line snapped and set it adrift like the two previous rafts. With three survivors and himself still on the *Green Glory*, PR2 McCollum deployed the ship's final 20-man raft, but, before anyone could get into it, the mooring line again parted.

We returned to the scene and recovered

the four survivors from the second 20-man raft. We then tried to figure out a plan to get the final survivors off *Green Glory* and into the helicopter. It took expert coordination, using hand signals, to form a plan between the PR2 and the aircraft.

With time running out before the vessel sank, AO2 Jack was lowered directly into the ocean off the stern of *Green Glory*. PR2 McCollum directed the remaining survivors to jump into the sea. AO2 Jack took charge of the survivors in the water and kept them and the two swimmers located in a 20-yard area. Plucking them all from a considerable amount of fuel and oil in the water, which came from the sinking ship, and delivering them to *Sir Tristram*, capped off the rescue.

By this time, *Concord* had closed to within three miles of the site and had maneuvered for best pitch and roll, instead of best winds, for the remaining landings and survivor transfer. Our aircraft finally landed after a long and trying day at 1515, knowing 27 people owed their lives to our crew. 🛩️

Lt. Schramm flies with HC-5.