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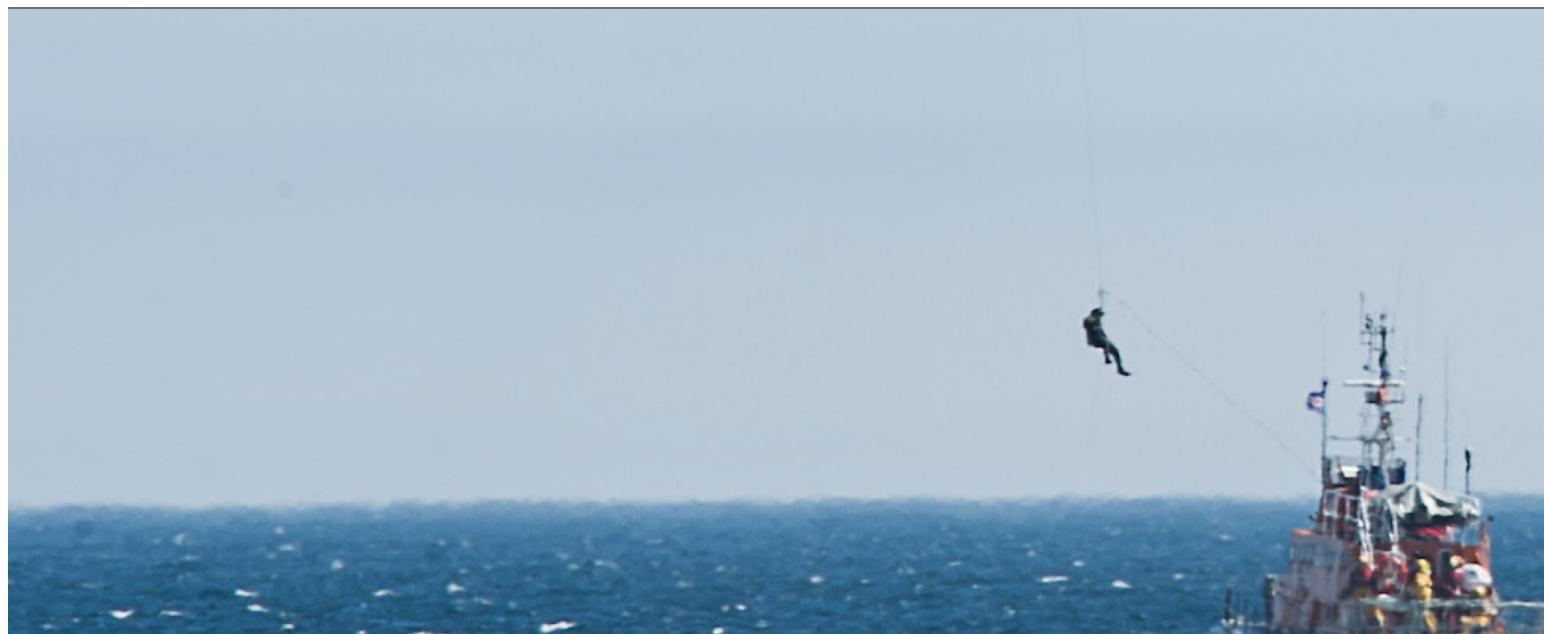
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AF 'impossible' rescue mission recognized



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48th Air Expeditionary Group Public Affairs

VODVLAVIK, Iceland (AFNS) -- On the remote coastline of Eastern Iceland, inaccessible to ordinary travel, a plaque was dedicated May 30 to commemorate a U.S. Air Force rescue team operation accomplished 20 years earlier.

On Jan. 10, 1994, members of the 56th Rescue Squadron, then located at Naval Air Station Keflavik, Iceland, executed a mission in extreme weather against the odds to rescue the crew of the Godinn, stranded just off the coast of Vodvlavik, Iceland.

Skuli Hjaltson, Icelandic Search and Rescue volunteer who was on shore to assist the day of the rescue said, "I've been taking part in a lot of rescue missions, on land and in the sea. So I am very familiar with the weather conditions that your people have to deal with during this rescue mission.

"So we thought 20 years later, thinking back around the time we have done these things, this is one of the greatest done ever here -- as simple as that."

The morning of the operation started like many other days for the men of the 56th RQS. Training was scheduled for two of the HH-60 Pave Hawks to practice aerial refueling and low-level flying. However, weather conditions were too bad to fly and the training was postponed.

Retired colonel and former 56th RQS commander Gary Copsey recalled the days event during a speech at the unveiling of the plaque.

"The weather was too bad, we could not launch and we got the call that we might be needed," he said. "An Icelandic ship is in trouble off the north east coast. We didn't know the full situation, but we were told that the Icelandic Coast Guard was going to go, but they wanted us as backup."

Copsey, a captain at the time, said the rescue team was not yet permitted to fly to the scene of the shipwreck, but when the weather cleared enough, they could continue training.

Knowing that they could get the call to action at any moment the two Pave Hawk crews took Air Force pararescuemen and a doctor along on the training mission and headed east.

"After we took off, the weather started getting worse both in front of us and behind us, but we got permission then to come on this mission," he said. "It was like flying inside a ping-pong ball because everything we saw was white. That's all we could see."

Because the original training mission was to practice refueling, the HH-60 pilots were given confidence knowing the HC-130 Combat King could fly ahead to check weather conditions.

While enroute to the scene, the pilots received word that the Icelandic rescue forces had to turn back due to the extreme weather conditions. Shortly after that, the HC-130 reported a dangerous in-flight emergency -- a wing overheat -- and had to abort the mission, leaving the Pave Hawks on their own.

"We didn't know the situation out here in the harbor, all we knew was a ship was in trouble and was far as we know it was floating somewhere off the coast," Copsey remembered. "We did not know that it had already sunk and that six crew members were tied to the top of the wheel house and that one crew member had already perished and washed up on shore."

The crew called back to check the weather conditions, about to declare the mission too dangerous to continue.

But before the pilots could even speak, the control center updated them that there were now only six men to rescue -- one had already died.

"We quit even thinking about turning around," said Copsey. "All we could think about then, is there are six lives that are truly in danger. We know now that it had to be very, very difficult and if we didn't go, there would be six more lives lost."

After refueling, the rescue team flew toward the scene, staying about 200 feet off the water when a downdraft caught them by surprise.

"All I remember is looking over at Jim Sills who was flying the helicopter and I felt like my stomach was in my throat," Copsey recalled. "I looked at him and he just holds his microphone and says, 'hold on boys we might hit.'

"We stopped about 15 meters off the water."

Once the team arrived at the Godinn, they began making trips to and from shore, ferrying the boat's crew to rescue teams waiting on snowmobiles. With 70-naught winds on the nose of the HH-60s the pilots were not able to turn with patients so they backed up to the coastline, maintaining their heading.

"We all laughed about it later, but as we backed up with them hanging down, we lost altitude," said Copsey. "They said, 'you know we thought we were wet enough, but you apparently thought we needed to get more water.' They hit the water and our flight engineer yells over the radio, 'up 50, up 100, up now you put them in the water!'"

With the last two crewmembers and doctor on board, the pilots began looking for the closest possible hospital. With terrible winds and weather conditions, they headed toward familiar territory in Neskaupstadur.

Because the aircraft commander, then Lt. Col. and squadron commander Jim Sills, had forgotten his night vision goggle mounts, Copsey took the controls as pilot. However, when Copsey experienced vertigo, the two had to fly together. Sills held the controls in one hand and goggles in the other while Copsey controlled the altitude with his head between his knees to regain orientation.

Once the crew arrived in Neskaupstadur, they landed at the first possible chance. Both HH-60s landed in a small lot, leaving only about six feet between their rotors.

Copsey remembers the district commissioner asking why they landed there. After a short explanation of the mission, according to Copsey the commissioner said, "No, I mean why did you land right here when there is an airfield two kilometers down the road."

At the culmination of his speech, Copsey said, "When it comes to saving lives, you do what you've got to do. That's what we really believe in for our mission, 'these things we do that others may live.'"

Airmen deployed with the 48th Air Expeditionary Group, including pararescuemen from the 31st Rescue Squadron attended the dedication ceremony in Vodvlavik to represent the U.S. Air Force and pararescue community.

For their actions on Jan. 10, 1994, Air Force Rescue 206 and 208 received the following accolades, making this mission one of the most honored in U.S. Air Force history:

Lt. Col. Jim Sills – Jabara Award for Airmanship; Capt. John Blumentritt – 1994 Aviator Valor Award; Pararescuemen, Mat Wells and Jesse Goerz – Cheney Award; Both Crews – 1994 Outstanding Airmanship Award and the 1994 MacKay Trophy

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