



Coast Guardsman Awarded for Heroic Bering Sea Rescue

By PA1 Kurt Fredrickson



KODIAK, Alaska – Petty Officer 1st Class Wil Milam, an aviation survival technician at Coast Guard Air Station Kodiak, stands in full flight gear awaiting the arrival of an HH-65B Dolphin helicopter to conduct training. Milam received the Coast Guard Foundation Individual Award for Heroism during a dinner in New York City Thursday night. USCG photo by PA1Kurt Fredrickson.

KODIAK, Alaska - The Bering Sea is perhaps one of the most unforgiving, harsh and dangerous places in the world and although the risk is high, many mariners depend on it for their livelihood. But in the dark winter months, when things can quickly go from bad to worse, they rely on the Coast Guard to be there. For one Coast Guardsman, his lifesaving actions in the midst of a brutal winter storm, earned him a prestigious award and public recognition for heroic achievement. The award recounts his actions as an individual, but the rescue, like so many others, displays the elements inherent in all Coast Guardsmen willing to put their lives on the line so others may live, exposes the teamwork necessary to accomplish the mission and reveals the often unseen and true reward of saving lives at sea.

On Feb. 9, 2007, the 378-foot Coast Guard Cutter Mellon was moored in Dutch Harbor, Alaska on its Bering Sea mid patrol break. Petty Officer 1st Class Wil Milam, two pilots and a flight mechanic were deployed from Air Station Kodiak to man an HH-65B Dolphin helicopter stationed aboard the cutter for its several week patrol of the Bering. As an aviation survival technician, better known as a rescue swimmer, Milam was a key part of a four person rescue team deployed seemingly to the ends of the earth.

At 11:22 p.m., Coast Guard Rescue Coordination center Juneau received an unlocated first alert signal from a 406 emergency position indicating radio beacon registered to the 42-foot fishing vessel Illusion. The Coast Guard attempted to plot the vessels possible location by contacting family members of the crew and the harbor master in Dutch Harbor. Reports indicated that the Illusion was most likely fishing somewhere in Makushin Bay

near Unalaska Island. At 12:01 a.m., the location was verified by the receipt of a second emergency signal.

With nothing more than a point on a map, the small red helicopter took off into the darkness. With turbulent winds of 40 to 50 mph and gusts in excess of 60, low clouds, horizontal rain and visibility of one-quarter of a mile, the danger for Milam and his crewmembers had already begun.

"I wasn't too keen on going flying because I knew what the case was," Milam said. "Nine times out of 10 we go out there and tell some boat, hey your EPIRBs going off."

Several minutes into the flight the pilots spotted and headed for a steady light on the water. But suddenly the eerie red glow of a flare enveloped the clouds and mist around the helicopter, immediately changing the tone of the situation, Milam explained. Everyone knew this case was now a rescue.

Soon after the flare, the helicopter over flew a raft and Milam heard his queue from the pilots, "rescue checklist part one for a swimmer deployment." The process was as they had trained, Milam noted, and despite the severity of the weather and situation, the whole evolution was routine.

Milam moved into position at the edge of the helicopter's open door. Below him, through the rain and darkness, he could make out the small raft being tossed in the stormy 15-foot seas. After 20 years of service, Milam jokingly recounted his last vivid thought before heading out the door, "I pulled my retirement letter for this?" Ironically enough, Milam's first rescue swimmer experience was not much different from those now in the raft below him.

In 1985, at the age of 19 while serving in the Navy, Milam and a friend took a boat out of bounds looking for a good surf spot near the cliffs of Point Loma in California. Shortly after leaving the protection of the bay the small boat was swamped by a series of large waves and they found themselves in need of rescue.

"About 20 minutes later this H3 Coast Guard helicopter comes flying over the top of Point Loma," Milam explained. "I remember looking up at the guy sitting in the door and saying to myself, I'm getting that guys job."



BERING SEA - Petty Officer 1st Class Wil Milam, an aviation survival technician at Coast Guard Air Station Kodiak, sits in the door of an HH-65B Dolphin helicopter while on a Bering Sea patrol January 20, 2007. (Official U.S. Coast Guard photo)

Now, after 14 years as a rescue swimmer, Milam has flown on more than 100 missions and found himself sitting on the edge of a Coast Guard helicopter door an unimaginable number of times. But, it would be on this rescue that things would be brought into perspective as never before.

Milam was lowered to the water within 10 feet of the raft and disconnected from the hoist cable. Immersed in the tossing swells, he lost sight of the raft several times. Upon reaching the raft he found four men wearing no survival suits. Having been exposed to the wind and 40 degree seas, one survivor was already severely hypothermic. Individuals who fall into the Bering Sea may only survive a few minutes, and reaching a raft without a survival suit is no guarantee of survival. For these mariners, their best chance had just arrived.

Milam radioed for the rescue basket to be lowered as close as possible to the raft to minimize exposing the already hypothermic survivors to the frigid water. To better increase their chances for survival the air crew's survival suits were first to be lowered to be

lowered to be put on by the survivors. Although battling harsh weather conditions, darkness and cold, the rescue evolution was going by the book; that is until Milam reentered the water from the raft to get the guide line attached to the survival suits being lowered from the helicopter.

"When I slid into the water off the raft I could feel the water flowing into my suit," Milam explained. "It filled up instantaneously and it was taking my breath away."

Milam, now exposed to the same elements as the survivors, knew that things had just taken a turn for the worse. Still cognizant of his mission he reached for the line, knowing that the suits were essential to the survival of the four men in the raft. Climbing back onto the raft, he straddled its side and waited for the suits to descend.

"I tried to zip up my suit," he explained. "But at that point I didn't know if my zipper had come open, I didn't know if I had torn my suit or if the seal had ripped."

As Milam tried to remove the suits from the line, two fell into the water and began drifting away. Diving after the suits, Milam held onto the guide line with one hand, and grabbing the drifting suits with the other, swam back to the raft using only his fins. Again Milam felt the frigid water surge into his suit, further debilitating him. After struggling to climb back into the raft, he assisted the most hypothermic survivor don a survival suit while instructing the others to get into theirs.

The basket was lowered near the raft and Milam entered the water with the most critical survivor. Unknown to the crew above, Milam's legs started going numb as hypothermia began to quickly take hold. After struggling to place the disoriented and combative survivor into the basket, Milam watched as he was hoisted into the helicopter. Milam, now alone in the water, realized that the raft had drifted too far for him to reach in his current condition. For the first time in his career he signaled for an emergency pickup.

Once inside the helicopter the crew became aware of Milam's situation. Lying on the helicopter floor, he could feel the frigid water slosh in his suit up to his neck. The flight mechanic assisted in securing his equipment and inspected his suit for the source of the leak as Milam's motor skills were so badly deteriorated he was unable to do it himself.

But an equally deadly problem was quickly presenting itself. With fuel nearing a critical level, and severe head winds, the helicopter had only 15 minutes to recover the three survivors still in the water and reach shore before running out of fuel.



NEW YORK - Petty Officer 1st Class Wil Milam, an aviation survival technician at Coast Guard Air Station Kodiak, receives the Coast Guard Foundation Individual Award for Heroism Thursday night from Admiral Thad Allen, Commandant of the Coast Guard. Photo by John Harrington

Considering Milam's condition the crew discussed the possibility of lowering the basket to the survivors in the hope that they could get in themselves. But at that point, Milam understood the dis-oriented condition of the survivors better than anyone.

"If we try it that way we might get one or two of them out, but were going to have to leave one out there," he told his crewmembers. "If we only need 15 minutes I'll get out there and get it done. I can do 15 more minutes."

In hindsight, Milam added, "that's about all I had was 15 minutes."

The air crew agreed that the best chance of rescuing everyone and returning to shore as quickly as possible lay with Milam entering the water again. Milam was lowered to the raft and assisted the second survivor into the basket. As the first survivor, he became combative and Milam, for the sake of time, was forced to subdue him before positioning him in the basket for the hoist.

"In the raft they're in a state of shock and they're relieved to see you, and the last thing they want to do is get back in the water," Milam explained. "When you get them in the water and a wave breaks over their face all you get are to them is a piece of floatation."

Now feeling the exhaustive effects of hypothermia Milam turned to the raft and explained to the remaining two men to remain

calm and follow his instructions. Milam assisted the third survivor into the basket without incident. But as the basket was returned to the water for the final pickup, Milam looked back to the raft just in time to see the fourth survivor jump feet first from the raft, his legs breaking through the bottom of the basket. The basket was pulled from Milam's hands and he began struggling to pull the survivor from the now entangled basket. With one hand he tried to uncoil the hoist cable from the top of the basket, while holding the survivor with the other. A wave broke over the two men, sending the survivor into a state of panic and causing Milam to lose his grip on the flailing man. The hoist cable was no longer tangled around the basket, but rather the neck of the panicking man. From above, the flight mechanic witnessed what was happening and let out cable to prevent the man from being strangled. But as Milam tried to grab the basket, the survivor jumped on him, pushing him under water. Milam struggled with him, subduing him several times before successfully placing him in the basket and watching him ascend to the helicopter.

"I never really dwelled on getting cold until those four guys were gone and safely in the helicopter," Milam said. "Once the last guy went up in the helicopter that's when I really started feeling cold and really knew that alright, now I'm in trouble."

With fuel reaching critical levels, and the weather not improving, the basket was lowered to Milam. But his hypothermia and combative encounters with the survivors had left him exhausted, delusional and unable to move effectively. His crewmembers above could only watch as he clumsily maneuvered away from the basket.

"In my mind I thought I was doing everything fine," Milam said. "I thought I was swimming, I thought I was stroking, I thought I was doing everything, because I was so hypothermic I didn't know. I thought I was just fine."

But Milam was not fine, and was now drifting in and out of consciousness. The flight mechanic skillfully lowered the basket close to Milam, enabling him to climb inside. As Milam was dumped out of the basket onto the floor of the helicopter he looked back and saw the four guys just pulled out of the water. "I gave them a thumbs up, and then that was it for me."

Milam awoke in the clinic in Dutch Harbor, cocooned in blankets and surrounded by heat lamps. After a few hours of recovery he was released only to come face to face with those he had just rescued. For Coast Guard rescuers, survivors are generally dropped off and are never seen again, Milam explained.