U.S. COAST GUARD

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Pelican Tales:

The Last of the Coast Guard's Amphibious Aircraft

by

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On May 6, 1994 the last Sikorsky HH-3F "Pelican" helicopter was retired

from Coast Guard service, marking the end of Coast Guard Aviation's "amphibious era." I flew the H-3 for almost 2000 hours, and by 1977, when we stopped recording helicopter landings, I had more than 100 water landings in the Pelican, some of them recounted in the following anecdotes:

We were flying over Mississippi Sound on a Fisheries Enforcement Patrol when we noticed a boat tied up to a day marker. Thinking the vessel might have broken down, since it's illegal to use navigation aids as mooring buoys, we made a low pass to investigate. The occupants were fishing, and waved happily as we flew by. Since all Coast Guard officers are also Federal Law Enforcement officers, we came to a hover and tried using hand signals to indicate that the vessel was illegally moored to the day marker. Because of the rotor downwash from the helicopter, however, we couldn't get close enough to make ourselves understood. Undaunted, we made a water landing, taxied closer to the vessel, and used the small blackboard we carried for such occasions to get the message across. The chastened fisherman quickly untied and sped away.

We were dispatched from New Orleans to Destin, FL to assist some boaters whose craft had struck a jetty, throwing them in to the water. Arriving on scene, we discovered that one person had managed to climb on to the rock jetty and make his way to safety, but the other was foundering in the surf. He was caught in a rip tide carrying him away from the jetties parallel to the shore line, in strong surf from a coming storm. An attempt

to hoist him failed as he was too tired to swim to the rescue basket. After a quick discussion on procedures, we rigged the rescue platform, a 4 foot by 4 foot perforated metal device which fits in the cabin door. We then made a partial water landing downstream of the struggling swimmer between the wave crests, and let the current carry him to us. The timing worked out perfectly, and we scooped him to safety just ahead of the next wave.

We launched from New Orleans to assist an oil rig work boat reported taking on water in the Gulf of Mexico. The report indicated that there were three people on board. We arrived on scene in time to observe the work boat slipping beneath the waves, with an inflated 9 man raft and a 12' John Boat (flat bottom, square ended duck hunting boat) along side. There were 3 people in the John Boat, so we landed nearby, and motioned for them to paddle to us. Interrogation disclosed that there 12 more people inside the covered raft, oil rig workers whose presence was omitted in the initial report. To avoid bringing the raft under our rotor blades, we used the John Boat to carry a line to the raft, then backed just enough to keep the raft outside the rotor disc. The John Boat proved a capable ferry, and we soon had all 15 safely on board. (We did decline a request from one who wanted to go back to the raft to retrieve some forgotten luggage.) Until all 15 were on board, we didn't know what the final count would be, and as they continued to pour out of the raft, the rescue took on aspects of the Circus Clown Car Skit, in which a seemingly endless stream of clowns keep on popping out of a tiny car. The post script to this story is that we delivered the barefoot survivors to Coast Guard Station Grand Isle, LA. It's close to the beach, and the helipad there is

surrounded by sand which is heavily populated with sand spurs. A case of adding insult to injury . . . !

During hoist training with a Coast Guard boat on Lake Ponchartrain, LA, the Tail Rotor Gear Box warning light came on, indicating the presence of metal chips. The emergency procedures for that situation

call for landing as soon as practicable, since chips indicate imminent failure of the gear box and probable loss of directional control. The amphibious capabilities of the H-3 made the lake our landing spot of choice, especially since we had the CG boat nearby to tow us to a local airport with a seaplane ramp. We landed and shut down the helicopter, whereupon the utility boat took us in tow toward the airport some five miles away. There was a modest crosswind, however, and we soon got a complaint from the Coxswain about the helicopter weather cocking and not having a water rudder. Our ever resourceful aircrew had soon rigged the sea drogue we carried for emergency water landings, using the helicopter's ramp cables as a bridle, and the helicopter was safely recovered and returned to service. The ramp cables had to be replaced, however, having been unraveled by the slow rotation of the sea anchor.

The downside to the Search and Rescue business is that not all cases have a happy ending. One evening, a family of six, flying from Daytona Beach to New Orleans, ran out of fuel about ½ mile short of the runway and ditched in Lake Ponchartrain. Despite an extensive search lasing three days, no survivors were found. The day after the search was suspended, however, the oldest child, a 13 year old boy, was found barely alive about 10 miles form the crash site. He related that the

family had survived the ditching and exited the plane, but had no life preservers or signaling devices, and thus had not been sighted. About a week after the incident, the bodies began to pop to the surface, and we were called out to recover them. A water landing, the rescue platform, and a body bag proved to be the best method of recovering the remains, but it was a traumatic mission for the flight crew. After wrestling three bodies into the helicopter, our flight mechanic asked to curtail the mission so that he could get a shower and fresh clothes. Another crew finished the grisly task.

We were sent to evacuate an injured fisherman from a boat about 200 miles east of Cape Cod. The wind and seas were dead calm, but there was a thick fog from the surface to about 300 feet as a result of the warm air overlying the cooler water. We located the vessel with no trouble and although we could see it from above, the surface visibility was about 1/8 mile. The helicopter's weather radar was only good down to about ¼ mile, however, and we were concerned that making an instrument approach to a hover wouldn't get us close enough to see the boat without the possibility of hitting it. Consultation with the fishing boat's captain revealed that his radar was good to 100 yards or so, and that he had been able to see us clearly on the radar during our previous approach. We made another instrument approach and landed on the quiet Atlantic. The fishing boat motored up to us until we had visual contact at 1/16 of a mile or so, and we completed the medical evacuation without incident.

We launched in response to a Piper Super Cub fish spotting aircraft losing engine oil 150 miles northeast of Cape Cod. We rendezvoused with the plane, and discussed ditching procedures with the pilot as he

headed for Provincetown. About 20 miles short of the airport, the Cub's engine finally seized, and the pilot executed a flawless emergency landing on the soft swells of the Atlantic Ocean. He boarded his one man life raft, and we landed in the water nearby so as not to upset it. He paddled over to us and climbed aboard. The crewman noted that he seemed somewhat irritable, and when we inquired as to why, he explained that despite all his careful planning, meticulous preparation, and flawless execution of the ditching, he had slipped while climbing from the sinking plane into his raft, and had gotten his expensive snakeskin boots wet.

Another advantage to a twin engine amphibious helicopter is the

ability to operate with relative safety in close proximity to the water. During the *Argo Merchant* grounding and oil spill off Nantucket in December 1976, many of the rescue and recovery missions were predicated on the fact that if the lowering ceilings and dropping temperatures generated airframe icing at normal altitudes, we planned to fly just above the water with enough speed and altitude for a safe single engine landing if need be, but also low enough to take advantage of warmer temperatures near the water to stave off icing. While we never did have to resort to the technique, it was an amphibious ace in the hole to avoid running out of ideas and altitude at the same time.

We were flying a routine fisheries enforcement patrol over the North Atlantic east of Cape Cod when we sighted a trawler hauling back its nets. Upon descending to observe, we saw that they had netted a medium swordfish, a species they were required to release. The trawler's crew soon had the large fish over the side, but it appeared to

have succumbed to the trauma of being netted and released. As the trawler moved off, we went down for a closer look, and determined that the fish was indeed dead. Not wanting to waste fresh swordfish steak, we made a water landing, wrestled the carcass into the helicopter via the rescue platform, and proceeded to the Air Station at maximum speed, where the galley staff soon prepared a swordfish feast for the crew.

Water landing rescues were not always possible, of course, and in the aftermath of the *Marine Electric* sinking in 1983, the Coast Guard Rescue Swimmer program was developed. This new capability obviated the need for water landings, and the Pelican was subsequently replaced by the non-amphibious HH-60 Jay Hawk. To those who flew the Pelican, it was always a comfort to know that the water landing option existed, and could be trusted when the need arose.