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## ***Winter Storm Claims Vessel, Prepared Crew Survives***

*Feature by PA2 Christopher McLaughlin*

On January 5, four fishermen set out from Cordova Alaska heading for the rich fishing grounds of the Bering Sea. With a break in the weather, the crew of the fishing vessel Hunter saw their window of opportunity and made their move west. But two days into their voyage that window slammed shut, trapping the captain and crew in the midst of a brutal winter storm. It soon became clear that the situation was going from bad to worse as ice accumulated on the



KODIAK, Alaska – Ron Blake, captain of the fishing vessel Hunter, is brought aboard a Coast Guard HH-60 Jayhawk helicopter from Air Station Kodiak after his boat sank in the Shelikoff Strait near Kodiak January 7, 2007.

Official U.S. Coast Guard photo.

Hunter at an uncontrollable rate. From that realization it took minutes for the Hunter to sink, but only seconds for the crew to make the decisions that ultimately led to their survival.

The waters of Alaska are some of the richest fishing grounds in the world, and lure thousands of fishermen each year. The Hunter was one of many ships on its way to fish near Dutch Harbor Alaska. The 58-foot long liner home ported in Cordova was captained by third generation Alaska fisherman Ron Blake. At 37 years old, Blake had already spent 18 years fishing from Hawaii to the Bering, and understood the unpredictability of his profession. He could never have predicted that in just a few days the Hunter would be lost.

On the morning of January 7 the Hunter and its crew were transiting the Shelikoff Strait under increasingly deteriorating weather conditions. The sub zero temperatures, winds of 40 to 60 miles per hour and seas of 10 to 15 feet were nothing that the Hunter had not faced in the past, Blake said.



KODIAK, Alaska – A Coast Guard Jayhawk helicopter crew from Air Station Kodiak hovers above four fishermen in a life raft from the fishing vessel Hunter. The Hunter sank in the Shelikoff Strait near Kodiak, Alaska the January 7, 2007. All four crewmen were rescued by the HH-60 Jayhawk helicopter crew and brought to Kodiak for medical treatment. (Official Coast Guard photo)

“We probably made three inches of ice in two hours and we were making ice faster, faster and faster,” he explained.

As the ice accumulated, the Hunter became top heavy. Combined with the wind, the ship began to heel over. Recognizing the danger, Blake roused the crew and they started to beat the ice off the ship, two at a time. In the freezing temperatures, the crew could do little against the ice shell encasing the Hunter.

“It was minus 6 degrees and it was getting worse and worse,” Blake said. “We were in real trouble. That was as bad of a situation as I have ever seen on the ocean.”

Blake looked to his number two man aboard the Hunter, John Mehelich, who was in charge of taking care of the crew during an emergency. Without direction Mehelich was already getting everyone in their immersion suits as Blake reached for the radio and called for help.

“Mayday, mayday, mayday this is the fishing vessel Hunter, fishing vessel Hunter, fishing vessel Hunter!”

At that moment Blake’s ice covered boat was struck by a powerful whirlwind that laid the Hunter on its side. A forward hatch torn free by the wind was now allowing water to enter the Hunter. Blake, with his survival suit half on, gave the coordinates over the radio one last time and ran out of the pilot house onto the deck of the listing ship, pausing only to hit the emergency transponder button.

When Blake came out of the pilot house Mehelich was pulling Charles “Andy” Nipple’s, face strap of the emersion suit over his mouth. Despite the raging wind Blake distinctly remembers Mehelich shouting to Nipple, “I’m making sure you’re gonna live.” Mehelich then put on his own suit.

Despite having their suits Blake and the crew were still faced with a problem. The ice had not only encased the ship, but also the life raft and the Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon. The equipment they needed to survive, was about to go down with the ship.

“I had this overwhelming feeling that I had to get the EPIRB,” Blake said.

However, with the Hunter laid over, the EPIRB and life raft were at times submerged 8 feet and restrained by ice. Blake made a desperate attempt to free the survival gear by climbing onto the side of the pilot house and dropping into the thrashing sea.

“I aimed and I dropped, and fell under water and kicked the thing,” he explained. “Nothing happened, but I knew I needed to try and get the ice off.”

He resurfaced and climbed back to the mast. Water had filled his survival suit which he could not close over his many layers of clothes. Looking up Blake saw a buoy hook that he could use to try and free the EPIRB. As he was reaching for the hook a wave hit the boat and the mast shook violently, bending up and down. The boat was rolling.

Mehelich and crewmember John Quinlin were swept from the deck into the sea, leaving Blake and Nipple clinging to the Hunter. Blake was hanging from the boat still and just before he let go he pulled the pin on the strap that was securing the raft to the boat.

“The boat rolled real hard and the raft and the EPIRB came up at almost the same time,” Blake said. “I grabbed the EPIRB and Andy went and got the line on the raft.

Andy was about to inflate the raft when Blake shouted to him, “Stop, everybody get to the life raft.” Both Johns were still 100 feet from the raft. “We all got to the raft before we blew it up.”

Nipple was the first one to climb into the raft. His suit, sealed by Mehilich, kept him completely dry and he easily jumped into the raft, Blake explained.



KODIAK, Alaska – John Mehelich, a crewmember aboard the fishing vessel Hunter, is carried to an ambulance by emergency medical personnel after he was rescued by a Coast Guard HH-60 Jayhawk helicopter crew January 7, 2007. The Hunter sank in the Shelikoff Strait near Kodiak in the afternoon with four crewmen on board. All four crewmen were rescued. (Official Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Kurt Fredrickson.

“The water temperature was about 36 degrees and it froze everything it touched,” Blake said. “My suit was full of water and I couldn’t get in the raft.”

Nipple pulled Blake and his water logged suit into the raft followed by Mehelich and Quinlin.

“When we were all in the raft we were thinking everything is going to be ok, they’re going to come,” Blake said. “Mehelich asked me ‘did you get a response from the mayday’ and I said no, but I did push the button on the emergency transponder.”

As they waited for help, the crew of the Hunter began to open the survival equipment in the raft. Among the items they found their emergency blankets.

“I was starting to shiver so I put it over me,” Blake said. “John was really starting to shiver and said ‘well boys it’s been nice. I don’t think I’m gonna make it till morning.’”

“No, no you’re gonna,” Blake assured him.

After nearly an hour, the four men thought they heard the faint sound of a propeller. Andy looked out of the raft and strained to listen against the sound of the wind. At that moment a Coast Guard C-130 from Air Station Kodiak, Alaska descended from the ice laden clouds and flew straight over them, eliciting a cheer from the crew according to Blake.

“When you’re out there in your itty bitty life raft, and you know they know where you’re at, that’s a relief,” Blake said. “It’s unimaginable. There coming and everything’s gonna be ok.”

The HH-60 Jayhawk helicopter crew from Air Station Kodiak arrived shortly after and deployed the rescue swimmer who swam up to the four men huddled in the life raft.

“They just kind of looked at me with a blank stare,” said Petty Officer Matthew Thiessen, Coast Guard rescue swimmer. “I asked who was in the worst shape.”

Two of the crew immediately pointed towards John Mehelich.

“I got his gumby suit zipped all the way up and told the other guys to do the same thing,”

Thiessen said. “I called on the radio and told them that we had all four people in the raft and that everyone was accounted for.”

Blake and his crew were safely hoisted into the helicopter and transported to Air Station Kodiak where they were taken to Providence Kodiak Island Medical Center for further treatment.

“You do your drills every time you start a fishing season; everybody should do it,” Blake said. “What saved lives was when the situation looked serious...action was taken.

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