



Just Another Day at Work

By AW2 Patrick Neeley

It was just another hot and humid June day in the Arabian Gulf, and we were deployed on the new DDG Flight IIA with an East Coast HSL detachment. My crew and I came together at 1215 in the helo-control tower to brief. The flight was scheduled as a routine mission in which another AW and I would rebase our M-60 qualification. I clearly can remember thinking during the brief how this day likely would be just another “fun” day in the Gulf.

The NATOPS brief ended, and the crew scheduled before us went to preflight. Because we would not launch until after their flight, I returned to my duties. At 1530, my crew went to combat for our tactical brief. When I got there, however, I saw the ASTAC staring intently at his FLIR video screen. When I asked him what was going on, he said the previous aircrew had

received a distress signal from an Iraqi dhow, and they were inbound to locate the distressed vessel. I stood next to the ASTAC and watched on the screen as a large cargo dhow came into view. I remember seeing the entire crew jumping up and down on the deck, waving crude flags, and smiling and yelling as the helicopter circled. The mood in combat intensified as talk spread of a possible terrorist strike against our helicopter.

As the on-scene crew reported that the vessel obviously was riding very low and taking waves over the deck, several courses of action were discussed. Soon the decision was made to keep the helicopter on-scene, while our ship turned and began the hour-and-a-half trek toward the distressed vessel. While I monitored the situation from combat, my OinC told me to dress out in SAR gear and be ready for a possible rescue. After

a quick check of my gear, I changed out and awaited the aircraft's return.

The ship arrived on-scene and recovered the aircraft for a quick hot-pump and crew swap. The previous crew's AW stayed in the helicopter as briefed, and we launched to support the ship's boarding team as they went to assess the problem. The ship's boarding team soon reported the vessel had been taking on water, and the engine compartment was flooded. The dhow's crew had been adrift with no food or water for two days. After bringing over food, water, and medical supplies, the dewatering process began. An Iranian tug soon showed up, and we were assured our help no longer was needed. My crew and I breathed a collective sigh of relief and headed outbound to continue with our M-60 shoot. Our shoot went off without a hitch as the sun went down. We started back to the ship, talking about how close things had come, and how much fun we'd just had.

As we were on final, the ASTAC came over HAWK link and told us to hold our position. We immediately asked what was happening, and then came the words that would steer the course of the next couple of days in a way that none of us could have guessed: "I think that dhow just sank."

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The mood immediately sobered as we broke off from our approach and bustered to the last known position of the dhow. We arrived to find the Iranian tug but no dhow. Simultaneously, the ship turned inbound to the site, and we began our search. The other crewman and I hurriedly began rigging the cabin for rescue. I sat in the door and did a last minute check of my gear.

I soon heard the ASTAC report the tug had picked up only one of 11 people from the water. After a few minutes of searching, my heart jumped as the HAC called out, "Come left!"

Using FLIR, he had sighted three survivors clinging to a box amid the fuel and debris. We passed over the survivors one time and then began our approach. The helo steadied out in a 40-foot hover just left and aft of the survivors, as I popped a chemlight and put my mask on my head. The crewman grabbed my harness and hooked me up to the rescue hoist. One smack on my

chest and I took off my gunner's belt—I was going into the water.

I could see mother, nearly half a mile away, approach us. I sat dumbfounded in the door as we maintained our hover and did nothing. I later learned the decision had been made to let the ship's RHIBs, nearly a quarter-mile away, maneuver into position so we could continue the search for the other seven men in the water. We maintained our hover until the RHIB maneuvered into position to recover the three survivors, and then we continued our search.

As we searched, we received word one body had been recovered and one had sunk. That left another five men out there. We exhausted our fuel supply, refueled, and continued searching the area. By the end of the night, we had spent nearly seven hours airborne.

Exhausted and quiet, we landed and shut down. The adrenaline and sheer force of heart that had kept us going for so long began to fade. I could not help but feel sad for the seven men who had died that evening.

As a rescue swimmer, we're trained to handle the worst-case scenarios. I can remember all the crusty, old swimmers telling me if I ever did get a rescue, it wouldn't come when I expected. It wouldn't be at noon

in a calm sea. Rather, it would come in the middle of the darkest night, in high seas, with fuel, debris and other hidden dangers spread everywhere. I always had laughed that idea off, but, considering that's exactly what happened, our rescue has become something much nearer and dearer to me.

I can't help but ask myself if we couldn't have done more to save those other men that night. I know there always will be a million "what ifs" and unanswered questions, and that is something everyone involved will have to deal with. With time, I have come to understand the truth, which is very simple: In the heat of the moment, when things seemed the worst, training took over, and we did exactly what all were trained to do. We saved three men. I'll never forget June 13, 2004—just another day at work. 

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