

By Gary Schreffler

Date: Feb. 12, 1986

Squadron: HS-12, embarked on USS Midway

Aircraft: Speargun 610, BUNO 152136.

Mission: plane guard

Crew: HAC: Lt. Ron Burton

H2P: Lt. Jeff Lunn

ASW 1st Crewman: AW2 Gary Schreffler

ASW 2nd Crewman-swimmer: AW3 Rusty Moore

A

Night

Ditching

It was a rainy night, with poor visibility. Lt. Lunn was in the right pilot seat, Lt. Burton was in the left pilot seat, I was in the left sonar seat, and Petty Officer Rusty Moore was sleeping on the troop seat.

After the last fixed-wing aircraft had trapped, we were tasked to identify a surface contact 80 miles from the ship. As we headed to the vector, our aircraft, without warning, began to vibrate violently. I looked forward from sonar and only could see a blur of shapes. I saw the upper and lower PAX doors fly open. Fearing catastrophic damage if the doors departed the aircraft and hit the rotor system, I unstrapped and tried to secure the doors. I managed to haul up and close the bottom one. I then got hold of the upper door and shut it, but it again popped open and departed the aircraft.

By this time, the vibration was worse. I heard a loud grinding noise coming from the transmission area. I decided the aircraft was in peril and immediately strapped back into sonar—tightly.

I turned around, looked at Rusty, and told him to prepare to ditch. He gave me thumbs up. I could hear the pilots troubleshooting. However, they essentially were blind, because the instruments were a

blur. The HAC expressed fear about flying into the water. I asked if he intended to ditch and he replied that we didn't have any other choices. I, by touch, turned my ICS dial to transmit and began broadcasting Maydays. The lower PAX door again sprung open, departed the aircraft, and I saw it fly past the sonar window.

The aircraft started a rapid turn to the right; the door had hit the tail rotor. I

punched out the left sonar window, turned to Rusty, exchanged thumbs-up signs, and braced for water entry. The sound was deafening, and I wasn't prepared for it. We hit the water rapidly while yawing to the right, with a pronounced right wing, nose-down attitude. The right side of the cockpit took the brunt of the force and collapsed. When we hit the water, my leg flew up, and my knee hit the lip of the pullout table of the sonar console—the scar still is on my knee. The aircraft immediately filled with water—and I mean immediately—no chance for a breath of air.

Between the noise and the sudden pain in my knee, I became disoriented. As I started to panic, I had a very clear image of the helo dunker. I was filled with calm because I knew getting out of the helo was no sweat. Thank God for NACCS.

I grabbed my reference point and pulled myself out the sonar window. What happened next has puzzled me to this day. I remember kicking off the side of the aircraft, gliding, and then popping my flotation. However, rather than rise to the surface, I came up underneath an object, with something on either side of me. I panicked, thinking I had screwed the pooch and had inflated inside the aircraft. Fortunately, as I thrashed about for a few seconds, I realized I was under the stub wing, not inside the aircraft. I reached for the leading edge of the wing and pulled myself to the surface. At some point, my upper left lobe got punctured, so I had only half my flotation. I owe a beer to the guy who designed the thing because I still floated without any real problems.

I yelled when I was on the surface and Lt. Burton called back that he was OK, but he did not know where Lt. Lunn or Rusty were. Looking around me, I could see a sponson and a lot of debris floating on the surface. The aircraft was gone, save for a large rush of bubbles that soon subsided.

Lt. Burton and I still were calling frantically for Lt. Lunn and Rusty when Lt. Lunn surfaced a short time later. He said the aircraft hitting the water had caused his side of the cockpit to collapse, shoving his head into the instrument panel and blocking his window. He had egressed through the broken chin bubble and nearly had become trapped in it.

The three of us connected ourselves together and used my flashlight to sweep the surface. We continued calling for Rusty, who by now, had been down several minutes. Suddenly, he exploded to the surface, in a full panic, flailing his arms and legs. He calmed down after several minutes and told us what had happened to him.

When we hit the water, the cargo door—unknown

to Rusty—had slammed shut. However, he assumed it still was open. He unstrapped and pushed himself toward the cargo door, unaware it was closed. When he hit a wall, he thought the currents had spun him around, so he went back to the other side. He never used handholds for reference points.

By this time, Rusty's lungs were on fire. He was completely lost and confused by all the debris in the after station: raft, sonobuoys, flares, helmet bag, SAR bag, and God knows what else. Knowing he was drowning, he decided to end the pain by breathing in water. He had quit. When he took a breath though, he felt air enter his lungs. As incredible as it sounds, he was in a small air pocket. He was breathing but still had no clue where he was and he remained in very serious trouble.

After a short while, the air got stale, so he decided to continue searching for an exit. He started trying to kick his way through the sheet metal. As he was kicking, Rusty felt something give, and when he reached down, he discovered he had kicked the cargo door open.

He then egressed the aircraft. By this time, though, he was quite deep. The flight surgeon estimated the depth to be triple digits. Because of this depth, nothing happened when he pulled his SAR-one inflation.

Rusty has no memory of what happened next until the rest of us were holding him. It is difficult to put into words how happy we were to all be on the surface together. It's amazing all of us lived to tell the tale. After being in the water for nearly an hour, we were rescued. We asked the rescue helo to not use any flares because we were covered with fuel. We all suffered rashes from the fuel. Only rotorheads nearly can drown in a helicopter and then cheer when another one comes to pick them up.

Rusty was a young kid who rarely took things seriously. When we did egress training, he always screwed around, and cheated by lifting the blindfold. This attitude nearly cost him his life. It is OK to have fun, but, when it comes to training, follow the procedures.

Before pulling your flotation, make sure you are clear. I still am not sure how I came up under the stub wing, but I assure you it was an unpleasant sensation.

Be aware of fuel in the water before tossing in a flare.

Epilogue: The pilots were awarded air medals. I lived to fly another day. As it turned out, we were the last crew to ditch without HEELS or HEEDS: emergency lighting and air. I am sure these items would have helped Rusty considerably.

Gary Schreffler was in HS-12 when this incident occurred.