

“Nineteen, talk to me!”

by

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U.S. Coast Guard petty officer, Michael Odom, dropped earlier from a helicopter, knows he is dying. Alone in a life raft tossed by the stormy-winter Atlantic Ocean, 350 miles east of Savannah, Georgia, he lies exhausted after struggling to save three lives. Waves hurl him repeatedly, cart wheeling him from the raft. Ingested saltwater empties his stomach, his body is cramping from violent retching. His core temperature is reaching a fatal level.

For fifty minutes, he struggles, pulling panicked sailors to the rescue basket, from seas piling as high as three story buildings driven by forty-knot winds. He watches them soar to safety and disappear inside the helicopter above. Suddenly, as the third man reaches sanctuary in the sky, the hoist cable, Odom’s lifeline, shreds jamming the hoist mechanism. Minutes later, he can only watch, bewildered, as the helicopter, low on fuel, disappears into the storm-filled night. There is no rescue for the rescuer. He knows it. He can only wait and prepare for his death.

Hours later, his numbed mind, in the twilight of consciousness, focuses on one thought. He wants “them to find my body.”¹ In a final struggle, he ties himself to the life raft then escapes the tempest succumbing to the darkness of oblivion.

ASM1 Mike Odom, Coast Guard rescue swimmer, completes his checklist for the water rescue of survivors from the sailboat, *Mirage*. The five sailors are briefed on the radio by Lieutenant Matt Reid piloting a circling Coast Guard HC-130H Hercules, a four engine turboprop transport airplane, and Lieutenant Jay Balda, the pilot of Odom’s HH-60J Jayhawk, twin turbine helicopter, on what to expect.

Odom’s intentions are to be in the water aft of the sinking sailboat and to grab each sailor after he jumps into the water. Unexpectedly, at the last moment, just before the five begin their leap into the sea, the sailboat’s captain, still in the cabin, and unknown to the others, radios he will not leave the vessel.

This radio call is relayed to the Coast Guard Search and Rescue (SAR) Coordinator in Miami. Immediately, the SAR coordinator responds with the instructions, "The helo [will] rescue all of them or none." The SAR coordinator's conclusion from the sailboat's radio message is that conditions are stable, now that the storm has passed since the captain decides not to go overboard. The risk of pulling five men from the sea is greater than having them stay with the boat.²

Odom waits for the *Mirage* crew's next response. He sits in the crew entrance door of the hovering helicopter, legs and feet with frog like flippers dangling in space. He watches the nearby sailboat churning in the waves, illuminated by the helicopter's searchlight. This situation has the appearance of yet another non-event for this now long evening.

It is similar to many; like the earlier case flown a few hours before, soon after he came to work this evening, or rather since it is now almost 1:20 in the morning—yesterday. Odom expects a non-flying night. Work waits for him in his shop. However, the assigned rescue swimmer suffers from a virus, so Odom, the shop's supervisor, takes his flight duty.

Soon after Odom starts work, he is "scrambled" with the crew of a helicopter heading for a ship reported sinking off the North Carolina coast. Odom rides the hour and fifteen-minute flight in the helicopter out over the storm-battered Atlantic dressed in his blue, red, and yellow swimmer's dry suit, prepared for action that does not come. A Coast Guard vessel arrives to assist. The distress is canceled. The helicopter goes home. He sees no action on this one.

Back in his survival equipment shop, he eats a quick, late supper of pizza brought in from the local pizza parlor, does "a little work around the shop and some paperwork."³

In those same moments 320 miles to the southeast, terror numbs the crew of the forty-foot racing sailboat *Mirage* on the third day out from St. Augustine, Florida, en-route to the Virgin Islands. Most in the crew already feel death is a certainty.

A strong winter weather-front is sweeping down the Atlantic coast. The men have little experience to cope with its effects. On the second day out on this voyage, the engine

fails. Batteries eventually die and cannot be charged. Their food supply, mostly in frozen dinners is thawing.

Winds are fresh on the first day, stronger than most have experienced. Instead of the expected drop off in velocity, winds grow in intensity, building larger and larger waves. One of *Mirage's* crew, Mark Cole, thinks—and hopes—that the storm will pass quickly as storms he remembers do on the Kentucky lakes where he acquired his boating experience. It is the relentless rising wind and building seas that alarm the five crewmembers. Three days pass. Winds do not stop. They only worsen.

The electric autopilot does not work—corrosion in the boat's electrical system. Effects that are more insidious are erupting from neglected maintenance. Sitting in dry-storage in a yard, suffering from the Florida climate for nearly a year, *Mirage* is hastily launched for a quick delivery to the Caribbean. A shakedown trial sail is skipped before challenging the wintertime Atlantic. Furthermore, the crew is unfamiliar with the boat. The wind-driven self-steering device does work for a time when the winds are mild, but Cole says "nobody (has) used one before." It does not work when the winds increase. With the lack of autopilots, each man must take turns steering the wildly surging boat.

This routine takes its toll in energies. First, they take two-hour stints; later fatigue drives them to refuge in their bunks more frequently. Appetites abate. Food preparation becomes an impossibility in *Mirage's* small gyrating galley. Rest is impossible. Thomas Steier, the boat's owner muses, "I guess we [are] a bunch of landlubbers." By the third day, all are suffering from the lack of nourishment and "pretty fatigued."⁴

Then the savagery of the storm finally hits. "It just [starts] picking up and picking up and picking up and the waves [keep] getting bigger and skies getting darker," [Cole pauses in his account, searching for words that do not exist, describing the enormity of his plight, then rambles on, repeating phrases] "and we [are] getting toward evening. The seas [keep] getting higher."⁵

Darkness adds gloom to an already frightening seascape. "It wasn't pitch black. It was just dark." Cole can still see "waves coming behind the boat, and breaking, and wondering just how much higher these waves [are] going to be." Down below, in the cabin where three crewmembers cower from the storm, Cole says the noise is "just incredible, you just can't imagine being on a boat and having these kinds of sounds."⁶

The winds reach fifty knots when the front passes, then instantly shifts direction from their southwesterly course to the west-northwest. A confused wave pattern surges from the new, arctic driven winds. These galloping waves impose themselves on the diminishing waves from the steady tropical winds of the past three days, creating a confusing tumble of dangerous peaks in already mountainous waves.

Allen Brugger, the forty-foot sailboat’s hired captain, and only experienced crewmember, takes the helm about dark. His crew is incapable of steering in these conditions. Brugger steers for about three hours until a confluence of waves towering “fifty feet”⁷ tumbles over and plunges the fiberglass shell beneath countless tons of roiling water. The boat succumbs to the sea’s violence. It rolls about 120 degrees as the wave tumbles over it shoving it beneath the surface.

At this moment, 320 miles north-west at Elizabeth City’s Coast Guard Air Station, Odom, a rescue swimmer, takes his first bite of pizza.

The wave passes; white water boils in its wake. Slowly, the white hull struggles upright, popping back to the surface shuddering, water cascading across its decks. Everything lashed to the decks, including the stainless steel tube framed fabric “dodger” is swept away.

Cole, trying to sleep—at that moment—hurls across the cabin. He describes the feeling as being in a room suddenly flung into the air. He recovers unsteadily and glances into the new surreal world where there is no up or down. Anything familiar is now jumbled in space with a new element tossed in, seawater. It is “just a mess. Everything—food, clothing, flooring, everything.” Two to three feet of water sloshes throughout the bottom of the now nearly upright boat mixing in the ingredients formerly used for sustenance and comfort. Adding confusion for the three men trying to regain footing in the cacophony, a meaningless mixture of debris, cabin lights start going out—shorted by saltwater in the electrical system.

Cole is the first to burst out of the cabin into the cockpit expecting to find it empty—with Brugger and his friend Fred Neilson washed away. Brugger is still at the wheel holding on, staring ahead; Neilson is gone, washed overboard! Then Cole sees Neilson, upside-down, dragging along behind the boat hooked on by his safety harness.

Next, in a devastating vision, one that caps his rising fear into full-blown terror, Cole watches their only hope for survival, the life raft, disappearing into the darkness, rolling and tumbling like a giant tire racing with the winds across the spume-washed waves. Anticipating its possible need earlier in the day, they move the raft into the cockpit lashing it to the steering wheel column. Tying it off, using the only line available, with the lanyard that also inflates the raft. The wave, when it hits, washes the raft overboard. The lanyard immediately reaches its limit, tugs the firing mechanism, inflating the raft. The lanyard's tied-off end then slips free from its lubber's knot leaving the winds to drive the raft into the night.

Brugger and Cole pull a panic stricken Neilson back on board. He goes below in a state of near hysteria.

It is sometime after eight p.m., shortly after the boat rights itself when crew member Dave Denman, a private pilot, figures out how to operate the SSB HF radio (single sideband high frequency transmitter). No one is familiar with its operation or of the EPIRB (emergency position indicating radio beacon). It never works; they do not know to attach the antenna.

At 8:30 p.m. EST, 23 January 1995, the Coast Guard radio stations at Hampton Roads and Cape May copies a *MAYDAY* message from Denman on *Mirage*. Coast Guard units are alerted from Miami to Norfolk. This offers no solace; the *Mirage* crew knows they are to die soon in the cold Atlantic. The boat is sinking, their life raft is gone and in this storm, they perceive, no one can offer any aid in these conditions, even if help might arrive in time.

Desperately, they pump water from the wallowing hull; more comes in. Cole suspects a cracked hull. Pumping is futile. They report to the Coast Guard they cannot stay afloat.

The crew begins a deathwatch. Brugger, the professional mariner, a charter boat captain with a Coast Guard issued license, tries cheering the hapless crew. He even suggests they might float on the boat's cushions after it sinks. Float, for what? To them, the ocean is empty. The nearest merchant ship is three hours away and a Navy submarine is 150 miles off. However, they do not know this.

It is the sight of the Coast Guard Air Station Elizabeth City's (North Carolina) HC-130H, CGNR 1502, arriving overhead three hours later that brings the first relief from the helpless panic. Cole later relates, "When the boat rolled, I thought we were sunk. I thought this was the end. I truly didn't think we'd make it. Not until the Coast Guard flew over the first time in the C-130. Somebody found us."⁸

Lieutenant Matt Reid, aircraft commander in the C-130 guides Lieutenant Jay Balda flying the H-60 helicopter to the sailboat, trudging along the track at half the C-130s three hundred knot pace. Balda makes a nine minute stop en route at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point topping off the fuel tanks prior to jumping offshore.

The Jayhawk, Coast Guard number CGNR 6019, moves over *Mirage* at 1:10 a.m., watching the boat whipped by the maelstrom.⁹ The helicopter crew is ready for action. It has fuel enough now to remain about fifty minutes. Reid in the C-130, tells Balda, that the "master of vessel declined pumps and survival kits offered by the CGNR 1502." Instead the "master requested to be removed from vessel," because of flooding from an unknown source.¹⁰

Balda cannot hover over the boat to retrieve its occupants. Lowering the rescue basket to the deck of the sailboat is impossible. The wildly whipping mast is like a rapier thrust skyward deftly probing at aerial intruders by the boat's violent lunging in the twenty-five foot waves and forty-knot winds. As they watch, a wave suddenly swats the stricken craft sweeping it sideways the length of a basketball court.¹¹

The helicopter's crew concludes their only option for recovering the distressed sailors is to have each man jump in the water, one at a time, to be grasped by the waiting rescue swimmer in the water, and loaded into the rescue basket. They know the water is too wild for the men to get in the rescue basket un-aided.

AMS3 Mario Vittone, backup rescue swimmer, observing from the cabin of the hovering helicopter was the rescue swimmer on a similar case three months earlier. That time he grabbed four survivors from the water following their leap off the sailboat *Marine Flower II*, 410 miles east of Norfolk, Virginia, caught in the late season hurricane, Gordon, churning the Atlantic waters near Bermuda. On this case, the Elizabeth City Jayhawk reached the scene by refueling aboard the Navy aircraft carrier,

USS *America* on the way to the scene. They safely retrieved two adults, a 13 year-old girl and four-month-old boy strapped to his mother's chest.¹²

Mirage's captain is alerted: if "you don't come off now you will be beyond the range of helicopter rescue."¹³

Then comes an unexpected call from the boat. The captain refuses to jump overboard. This sole resolve, however, is unknown to the boat's other crewmembers already assembled on deck preparing to leap.

They string a line as instructed, about fifty feet long, trailing aft with a boat fender tied to its free end. The rescue swimmer plans to hold onto this line and grab each man as he goes overboard. This procedure, however, means three hoists from the helicopter for each man lifted. The first hoist places the rescue swimmer in the water next to the survivor, the second hoist pulls the survivor into the helicopter, and the third recovers the rescue swimmer for the move back to the boat for the next cycle. Confounding this recovery plan is Brugger's decision to keep sail up. The racing sailboat barrels along with the tethered float bobbing and skipping off the water like an abandoned water ski rope towed behind a speedboat.

Caught by this new development with the captain refusing to jump, the helicopter crew aborts their plans. Miami search and rescue coordinators, when learning this from Brugger, immediately send a radio message to *Mirage* telling the captain that *all* are to remain aboard if *one* intends to stay.¹⁴

The hovering Jayhawk waits "right behind *Mirage*" continuing their "rescue check list" as a matter of procedure awaiting a release from scene. Watching the sailboat, spotted in the helicopter's light, the crew is stunned to see a new unexpected scenario in the waves.¹⁵

Thirty seconds after CGNR 1502 sends Miami's "remain aboard" message to *Mirage*, the crew on CGNR 6019 see Mark Cole jump into the water.

Cole struggles to hold onto the line "but the boat was going so fast...there was just no way to hold on to that line. And then I just let go."¹⁶

Not expecting this, Odom is not in the water with the rescue basket waiting to grab any survivors. As dark waters envelop Cole, Odom is still sitting in the cabin door watching with the same disbelief shared the rest of his crew. Balda quickly pushes the

helicopter forward, presses heavily on the left rudder peddle spinning the nose into the wind, holding a hover, keeping Cole in sight throughout the maneuver. Odom is hurriedly lowered into the water with the cable end snapped to his harness. The cable is retrieved, the basket attached, then lowered for Odom to catch after he swims to Cole.

The boat sails swiftly away and is out of Cole's sight immediately. The fifty-three degree water is shockingly cold—much colder than Cole expects. The air temperature is falling to forty degrees. He still has on the cotton sweat suit he put on at the start of the trip. Over it, he wears foul weather gear and two lifejackets, one inflatable—he did not inflate. Almost before he can add new fears to his already terrified mind, Cole feels Odom touch him. "It was a great feeling when that fellow put his arm around me," as Cole remembers.

Cole, like most of the *Mirage's* crew, never before experienced the sea offshore on a small boat. Early during the voyage, apprehension over building winds and seas becomes the foundation of fear. Fear turns to terror when he sees the boat (his world) sinking and the life raft, his only hope, scurrying away born by the winds, scudding, rolling, and skipping off with the tempest. He *knows* a terrifying death awaits him and his companions and is only hours if not minutes away. Now, however, with the neoprene dressed arm wrapped across his chest, he is released from that horror. His new world, though surrounded by cold dark swirling waters, now is the reality of blazing light from above, noise, the blast of wind and spray from the helicopter's downwash, and a comforting voice saying he is 'okay.' He is safe even in the maw of this man made tornado.¹⁷

These are not easy moments for the rescue swimmer, Odom. He swims hard for the basket swinging below the helicopter while holding onto Cole. Balda, the helicopter's pilot, has no visual reference on which to hold a position. The plunging waves spewing spindrifts convey a false sense of motion to him even when the helicopter is stationary. It is the sensation many experience when parked in an automobile waiting at a crossing for a passing freight train. The thirty-five to forty knot winds are also trying to blow the helicopter away from that tiny spot on the water from where Odom's arm is reaching, grasping for a whipping basket on a cable.

Balda's guidance comes from AD3 Mark Bafetti, the flight mechanic and hoist operator. He is watching Cole, sighting down the cable, from the helicopter's open doorway aft of the cockpit on the starboard side. Bafetti is leaning in space, kneeling on the cabin floor, restrained from pitching out by only a strap around his waist clipped to the helicopter. He calls out in steady-calm tones through the internal communications system (ICS), "back ten—right, back, back—hold, hold, hold—left five, hold." Balda applies slight pressures on his control stick almost wishing the helicopter in the directions called for by Bafetti. He is flying in a world of inches even in a gale.

Bafetti, holding on to the cable with his left hand, tries swinging the basket to Odom while at the same moment controlling its up and down movement matching the wave heights with a push-button controller in his right hand. He is wary. He knows slack can be fatal to those in the water if the cable should make a loop and wrap around body parts and then go tight suddenly—forming a giant garrote. Odom, swimming frantically holding on to Cole, just gets the basket at his fingertips when suddenly a wave drops him several feet and it is "jerked away."

After several attempts, Odom captures the basket and gets Cole in. But Cole will not sit down; he freezes and stops responding to instructions. Cole's head and shoulders are above the basket's bail as he wraps his arms around the bail placing his head, arms, and torso next to the whipping cable.¹⁸ Suddenly the basket is violently jerked out of the water as a wave surges past. Odom, in alarm, "seriously feared we had broken his neck." Cole, miraculously still in the basket, ends back in the water, submerged by the next wave. Odom swims as hard as he can to Cole, unbelievably finding him okay. The basket starts up again but swings wildly, with the cable striking the helicopter's airframe.¹⁹

Cole is recovered safely inside the helicopter's cabin finally, after a twenty-minute struggle. But four *Mirage* crewmembers still must be retrieved. Only thirty minutes fuel remains for the helicopter to stay on station. Odom is hoisted aboard. The helicopter does a quick turn and chases after the sailboat, now nearly a mile away down wind.

Steier is next. "Jumping off the boat," Steier says is "the hardest thing to do." At one point, he nearly refuses to jump. "Not that I'd want to go down with the boat, but jumping off the boat into that black water was the *most* difficult thing to do." He jumps.

Odom, once more back in the water, grabs him in the swirling darkness penetrated only by the light from the hovering helicopter and says, "Hey as long as I got you nothing's going to happen to you, and I'm taking care of you and don't worry about it."²⁰ Steier experiences difficulty squeezing his six foot two inch frame into the rescue basket tumbling in the seas. Finally, Odom releases him for the hoist and the basket is up about ten feet when a huge wave overwhelms Steier. "All of a sudden, I was under water" being jolted and jerked "and I kinda' had a snap when I came out of the water." Coming up now in the air, he swings in circles with the basket banging the bottom of the helicopter and external fuel tank before he is pulled safely inside.

"Here is where a weird thing happens," explains Odom. The wave that swallows Steier "scared the heck out of me to the point where I was swimming like heck to get out of the way of the aircraft. I've never seen water so close to a helicopter....The flight mech jumped back in the aircraft and dropped his hoist unit and backed off." Odom explains, "The wave didn't hit them and they got back and picked me up. It was a good twenty-five to thirty-five footer."²¹ Odom, once again back aboard the aircraft for the run back to the sailboat, recommends to the pilot, Balda a higher hover altitude for the next hoist. Balda needs no encouragement. The entire crew sees the wave pass just inches below their aircraft. Vittone observes Odom during their short passage together in the back of the helicopter and sees Odom is "fatigued." He asks, "Are you ready for me to go, Mike?" Odom responds with the over confident, "One more. Let me have just one more."²²

Time and fuel are now critical. Nearly forty minutes elapses recovering the first two survivors. Less than ten minutes remain with three survivors still on the disabled sailboat.

The CGNR 6019 moves about a half mile to the next survivor and climbs to a one-hundred-foot hover to keep away from any more rogue waves. The third crewman from *Mirage*, Denman, is in the water. As Odom goes down this time, swinging at the end of the long cable, he "hit the water hard, gasped for air, and sucked seawater." He coughs and vomits while struggling to reach Denman. Odom, still vomiting, works him into the basket. The hoist operator, Bafetti, cannot "retrieve and pay out slack fast enough to keep pace with the seas" while Odom is loading Denman in the basket. He has out nearly one hundred feet of cable, with the aircraft in a high hover. Bafetti is working hard

keeping dangerous slack from forming loops in the cable but at the same time allowing enough slack to keep the basket from being jerked from Odom's hands as the waves constantly change the distance from the surface to the helicopter. As Denman, finally in the basket, comes up, Vittone assist the hoist operator by lying on the cabin deck, using both hands, struggling "unsuccessfully to control the cable and keep it away from the aircraft." As the basket ascends, it is swinging in wide circles. The cable, in its arcing, slams into the 120 gallon fuel tank, hung out from the right side of the fuselage, then sweeps between the tank and fuselage, slides along the edge of the cabin door frame, flies out, hits the side of the tank, then repeats the arc.

Cable strands start popping. Vittone yells to Bafetti as he feels sharp spurs of small wires peeling off the cable. Denman is sixty to seventy feet above the churning seas dangling in the basket. Bafetti reacts and runs the hoist at full speed winding in the snarled cable to recover Denman quickly before it should snap and drops him to his death. Denman is trundled safely aboard as the co-pilot, Lieutenant (j.g.) Guy Pearce, announces "six minutes to bingo." Only six minutes' fuel remains until the helicopter *must* leave. Broken cable strands jam the hoist mechanism. Emergency procedures do not free the metallic Medusa. The hoist no longer works.

Odom, still in the water, cannot be recovered.

Bafetti attempts signaling Odom by hand for him to call back on his radio. Odom does not respond. The pilot flashes hover lights; a signal meaning the aircraft crew no longer sees the rescue swimmer. It is not true, but it is their only signal to indicate a problem to the man in the water. Odom confused, believing they lost sight of him fires a flare and attaches his strobe light to the top of his head.

The co-pilot, fatefully, calls "bingo."

Odom bewildered, watching the helicopter, sees the freed rescue basket drop into the sea. The Jayhawk is drifting around in a hover about two hundred yards away. The crew is ditching equipment. Odom then sees the DMB (Datum Marker Buoy) drop into the water. This floating radio transmitter is used to track drift of objects in the vicinity. "I looked at that and it didn't look right." Odom thinks, "There's something wrong." Fear grips him. He does not know what is happening. He cannot understand how they could not see him. With a sinking heart, he can only mutter a choked, "*Oh, NO.*"

Slowly the Jayhawk moves back over him. Looking up, he can only see the glare of lights. He cannot see the faces twenty-five feet away looking back. The H-60 crew tries to figure a method to recover Odom. But they are out of time. It is now seven minutes past bingo. They have to leave immediately for their own survival; Odom *must* be left behind, abandoned in this fearsome space alone, unrecoverable.

Petty Officer Vittone, Odom's best friend and in their "personal life...pretty much connected at the hip," kicks out a life raft. Odom alone on the unmerciful ocean is bewildered by these unexplainable events. The life raft lands within arm's reach. The helicopter waits overhead until Odom inflates it and climbs aboard. Vittone watches him as the helicopter slowly accelerates into forward flight then shuts the cabin door on his friend as darkness closes the scene.

Blackness once again surrounds Odom on the tumbling surface, with the lights from the vanishing helicopter disappearing in the tempest, "So it was an extremely emotional..." [a long pause—Odom does not finish this sentence] "There's a lot of stress at this point..." [again, long silence—emotion etches his voice—Odom pauses, then starts speaking in bolder tones:]

I know how far offshore I am, and I know there's no other rescue resources backing them up. And I'm thinking to myself, there's no way, there's no way. [a pause] And the aircraft takes off. And I see them disappear into the night. At this point, I got on my radio and screaming, 'nineteen talk to me! What's going on? Nineteen talk to me!' I'm talking to them on the radio and I'm stressed. And I'm not hearing from them.²³

Both were trying to talk on the radio at the same time, blocking each other's transmissions.

Meanwhile, *Mirage's* owner, Steier, huddled, shivering in the rear of the helicopter cabin watches as the door is closed after Denman, only the third member of their five-person boat crew, trundles into the cabin. To the new passengers, it feels as if the helicopter remains in its hover waiting. Without being able to see outside, they cannot sense going from a hover to forward flight. Steier wonders, what are they waiting for? The door is closed. They know their two crewmates still remain on the boat and Odom is in the water. "We had no idea what's going on. I looked over at one of the Coast Guard

lieutenants (sic)²⁴ [Vittone] in the back and he had tears in his eyes. And I didn't have any idea what in the world was goin' on.” Steier remembers being cold from his wet clothing and it was dark, but looking at Vittone, he still can see “his eyes were all watery.”²⁵

Odom alone, with only the seemingly impotent circling Hercules overhead, sits in his raft. This is a raft *he* recently re-packed for use in saving other lives—one of his jobs as a survival equipment technician. His emotional state deteriorates minutes later when a large swell slams into the life raft and hurls him back into the sea. Now, he finally realizes, *he* is the survivor.

Odom swims swiftly after the raft, grabbing it before the winds and seas can snatch it away forever. He clammers aboard and is again trying to find the lanyard to attach himself to the raft when it is struck violently once more, tossing him back into the tumbling waters. Recapturing it once more, he slithers aboard, “exhausted, physically ill, unable to talk to the helo, having no idea what happened and knowing that he [is] three hundred miles offshore and another helo couldn't reach him for at least four hours,” Odom becomes “understandably panicked.”²⁶

Reid, piloting the still orbiting C-130, has been out just over four hours. Fuel remaining is now a concern. He is ordered to return to base but Reid and his crew are not leaving their shipmate, Odom, alone. The Hercules' crew does not know how long they must wait. A relief Coast Guard C-130 is being readied to fly out from Clearwater, Florida. It will not arrive, however, before the time all the fuel in CGNR 1502 is exhausted. Reid defies orders to return, shuts down two of his four engines to conserve what fuel remains, and continues to circle Odom for as long as he can. This white and red Coast Guard transport with its crew of seven keeps Odom alive with hope and encouragement during the bleak hours of darkness before the dawn.²⁷

Odom finally lashes himself to the raft and is still very sick. Seasickness and depression begins consuming him. He is aware of the status of all potential rescue helicopters and knows the only two Jayhawks that might reach him are both out of commission in the hangar at Elizabeth City. The Marines at MCAS Cherry Point have nothing that can come this far to sea. He is unaware of a navy cruiser, USS *Ticonderoga*,

with a SH-60B Seahawk helicopter aboard, but this ship is beyond its aircraft's range from Odom. The cruiser, at the Coast Guard's request, starts steaming rapidly towards Odom's position closing that gap, but time and distance are too great. While en route, crews from the navy ship prepare its helicopter for flight. Their task is burdensome. *Ticonderoga* is buffeted and is heaving in the same storm. This takes time; time that Odom does not have. A merchant ship, *M/S Diletta F*, alerted by the Coast Guard through the AMVER (Automated Merchant Vessel Reporting) system turns and steams for the lone swimmer. Odom cannot hold out much longer. He is weakening; body strength going with a mind whipped with emotions.

Odom says the C-130 "comes up on the radio." His only lifeline now is the small handheld radio. "You all right, Mike?" The co-pilot, Lieutenant Mark Russell, in the orbiting Hercules, calls. He reports to Odom that another plane is on the way. This is not true. It is over an hour before two more C-130s and a H-60 are launched—at 3:35 a.m. Furthermore, the Navy is not close enough and does not launch its SH-60 from *Ticonderoga* until 6:06 a.m.

"You can make it," Russell asserts with unfound boldness. Russell, according to Odom, "starts developing a mental attitude for me." Russell asks if Odom wants any equipment dropped and then says they will drop flares. This "calms me down a lot. And at this point we actually joked around a little bit." Together on the radio, they recall a rumored incident months earlier where a Coast Guard aircraft drops a flare that accidentally falls into the raft of Cubans. Odom reminds Russell, "Remember, I'm not a Cuban."

The lighthearted banter works. "We're actually joking around a little bit and [it calms] me down quickly." Flares drop around Odom, these small pyrotechnic candles floating on the waves nearby light up the bleakness of the night and his mind.²⁸

The reverie ends suddenly. "Another wave crashes over and back in the water I go." This time he does not have to swim after the raft. He is attached by the lanyard. But Odom is much weaker. It is more difficult for him to clamber back aboard. He cannot keep water bailed out; he sloshes about in his miniature six-foot round pond. Lying in cold water is robbing his body heat.

Panic takes over. He screams on the radio that he needs "help fast!" The seas are wearing him down. He questions how much longer he can fight the seas and is now intermittently on his knees in the raft vomiting—dry heaves.

Russell suggests Odom open the emergency survival pack with the raft and drink some of the fresh water. He cannot get it open, then remembers his knife. He immediately discards this idea for fear of accidentally jabbing the heaving raft. Odom removes a glove to untie the line closing the survival equipment envelope. The glove washes overboard. Finally, he gets to a plastic bag of water, tears it open with his teeth, and drinks. Odom immediately regurgitates. "The water taste like..." [Odom stops in mid-sentence recalling the incident. He cannot describe the taste.] He tells Russell on the radio "if anything comes from this rescue, they need better water in the raft." Odom's humor returns—briefly. They all join in laughter over the radio, a tinny sound that sustains life. Odom offers to trade places with Russell.

Levity is not sustainable. His gut still cramps violently reminding him of the overwhelming reality of his situation. Russell is busy also, assisting the pilot, Reid, flying the airplane, with two of its engines shut down at low altitude in stormy-night skies, while at the same time managing the communications to Miami and Elizabeth City. The flight engineer sitting between the C-130s' pilot and co-pilot, AD1 Berry Freeman, friend and shipmate of Odom's, starts talking on the radio. "And he was wonderful," cites Odom.

Odom is reaching critical stages at the edge of life. The numbing coldness overwhelms him. He passes through the shivering stage. This alarms him. He knows the signs from his training as an emergency medical technician. He knows now he has little time left. Freeman, with his commanding presence on the radio, keeps a spark of life going during this critical period. "That man was just amazing on the radio. I cannot stress it enough."

This fragile electronic link is soon severed.

Odom is still convulsing, trying to throw up but with nothing more to release from his tortured stomach. He is dehydrated; body temperature is falling, and weakening rapidly. His thoughts turn to death. His limbs now are numb. His hands are drawing up.

He stops talking on the radio because he can no longer lift the small handheld radio to his mouth. His vision is going.

He tries to focus on the low-flying C-130 as it sweeps toward him in its racetrack pattern. He sees the lights, thinks it's the helicopter finally coming. As it comes closer, he sees the lights at the wingtips spread wide apart knowing it's the C-130 but still hoping it is the helicopter. Finally, expectation for rescue is gone.

"They've given me no indication that the helo is anywhere in the area so I started thinking to myself the things you think before you die. I think about my family. I think about my ex-wife. I think I'm glad it's me, I have no kids, and I have no wife and most of the guys in my shop do have a wife." Then the thirty-year-old Houston, Texas native, Odom makes his final commitment. He does not want to be thrown from the raft when he dies so he ties himself in face up. At least his tortured mind reasons, "they will be able to find my body." Odom knows from his own Coast Guard rescue experience the frustrations of body searches. He does not want the Coast Guard wasting "all the resources for days searching" for *his* body. But Odom knows his shipmates *will* try.

The relief Hercules, CGNR 1504, arrives overhead Odom from Elizabeth City at 4:36 a.m. and relieves CGNR 1502. Odom's boss, Lieutenant (j.g.) Dan Rocco, is the copilot.²⁹ The Clearwater Hercules, CGNR 1714,³⁰ diverts north to intercept the Elizabeth City Jayhawk, CGNR 6034,³¹ refueling at MCAS Cherry Point prior to turning offshore en route to Odom's location. The Clearwater C-130 escorts the H-60, CGNR 6034 for thirty minutes passing its covering responsibility at 0545 a.m. to the Elizabeth City Hercules, CGNR 1504 and diverts to search for *Mirage*. After relocating *Mirage*, it takes up its vigil there orbiting until the *Mirage* distress case is resolved.

The last thing Odom remembers is "the C-130 coming over extremely low. It was hard to focus on it." His vision is nearly gone. The aircraft's crew looks hard to see if Odom is still with the raft and if he might respond by waving or moving as the aircraft flies low overhead. He has been off the radio for too many minutes. In the glare from their landing lights, they see a lifeless body. The helicopter is still fifty minutes away.

Earlier during the night, phones are busy in Elizabeth City recalling crews. The station bustles with daytime-like activity. Crews have to get the second Hercules airborne

to relieve the CGNR 1502. Mechanics have to repair the Jayhawk, CGNR 6034 so it can fly. It requires a test flight—not permissible at nighttime. The air station's commanding officer Captain Stanley J. Walz waives the restriction. Lieutenant Commander Bruce Jones then races the helicopter CGNR 6034 out to Odom's position. The crew of this rescue Jayhawk soon experiences a life-threatening encounter. Flying at seven thousand feet to conserve fuel, the aircraft suddenly runs into icing. The helicopter blades take on ice rapidly. Vibrations shudder through the airframe; control becomes difficult. They drop to a lower altitude, lose the ice, regain full control, and continue.

Lieutenant Commander Dan Osborn, the pilot of relief Hercules, CGNR 1504, overhead Odom, directs Jones's helicopter to the raft's position. The merchant vessel *Diletta F.* also arrives at the scene as the storm-saturated eastern sky begins to lighten with a wintry dawn. While it cannot pick up Odom, the ship offers itself as a wind and sea break assisting the hovering helicopter in Odom's retrieval.

The Jayhawk settles in a hover above the drifting life raft at 6:13, four hours and fifty minutes after Odom first went into the water. The helicopter crew sees the lifeless figure of Odom in the raft in a sitting position. It is over an hour since he transmitted his last words on his radio to Freeman. Then he was only repeating, "I'm cold, I'm cold."

Rescue swimmer, ASM3 Jim Peterson drops down from the hovering Jayhawk into the raft, straddling Odom. He shouts in Odom's face at the same time vigorously rubbing his chest. Odom remains motionless, his head rigid, twisted to one side. Next, Peterson inserts his hand beneath the Odom's hood to check the carotid pulse. At that moment, Odom's arm comes up in an unconscious effort reaching out to his rescuer.

He is alive!

Quickly Peterson snaps Odom's harness to his harness and the two are lifted together. In the rush as they start up, the life raft's webbing tangles and snags Peterson's arm. The raft loaded with water rises with the two, adding a critical load to the helicopter's hoist and cable. Peterson, after "several sharp tugs" frees them from this deadly trap. The sea gives up. They are recovered into the hovering helicopter with Odom still unconscious.³²

Meanwhile, miles away, the two *Mirage* crewmen are still aboard the distressed sailboat, waiting for evacuation with Clearwater's C-130, CGNR 1714 circling overhead.

Jones, the aircraft commander of CGNR 6034, with Odom just recovered and in the helicopter, is ordered to pick up these two. Instead, he reports the critical medical condition of Odom and the immediate urgency for medical attention. He is then directed to bring Odom to a hospital, which is over two hours away. Jones elects instead, to proceed to the navy cruiser, *Ticonderoga*, now one hundred and fifty miles or just over an hour away, to drop Odom off for quicker medical attention, refueling at the same time. After this mid-ocean stop, he plans to return to *Mirage* with his escort, the C-130, CGNR 1504, pick up the two sailors, and make it back to the nearest coastal airport.

Odom's body temperature is 92.5 degrees F. when he is pulled aboard the helicopter. The crew cuts Odom's survival suit off including his thermal undergarments, wrap him tightly in blankets, and start him breathing oxygen. Elizabeth City air station has three thermal recovery capsules for this type of emergency, a unit critically needed now for Odom's survival. All of them are in the Jayhawk CGNR 6019 that left him behind. It is presently sitting on deck at Wilmington, North Carolina.³³

The co-pilot in CGNR 6034, Lieutenant (j.g.) Dan Molthen runs the cabin temperature controller up to maximum heat "which was just smoking those fellows in survival suits." Odom later remarks, "It must have been a hundred plus degrees inside the cabin." During the one hour and ten minute flight to the cruiser, Odom recovers consciousness and his temperature climbs to 97.1 degrees. Navy corpsman, later, aboard *Ticonderoga* treat Odom for his exposure. His recovery is rapid but he remains aboard for the next twenty-four hours.³⁴

Meanwhile, the two crewmen aboard *Mirage* are still claiming they are in distress and want helicopter evacuation. Jones is unaware of the sailboat's captain previous refusal to jump from the vessel, so he proceeds en route to retrieve the two after dropping Odom off at the cruiser. Fred Neilson, who suffers physically and emotionally from his being tossed overboard, now over thirteen hours earlier, is eager to leave the boat. However, the captain, Brugger, again refuses the helicopter's evacuation when it arrives. Boat crewmember, Mark Cole later claims, as a possible reason, Brugger has personal belongings aboard for his move to the Virgin Islands. Some items are "family heirlooms."³⁵ Jones informs Brugger no other assistance will be provided and leaves after only recovering Neilson aboard the helicopter.

The following day, the navy's SH-60B Seahawk, aboard *Ticonderoga* returns Odom to MCAS Cherry Point where he is fetched home by his unit's aircraft to a welcome by "all hands" and a cup of hot chocolate offered by the commanding officer, Captain Walz.

Odom returns to work the next day. Three days later, he is flying on another rescue mission. He still eats pizza, his favorite meal, but is eating a different brand.³⁶

"Captain" Brugger sails on after the Coast Guard Jayhawk and Hercules leaves him alone on the stormy Atlantic, arriving at his destination in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands safely after a seventeen-day passage. He is readying the boat to haul passengers for hire in the popular winter charter service.³⁷

The helicopter has finally achieved the ability for humans using it as a tool for rescue to reach out and pluck the adrift mariner from a lonely doom. This is a challenge touching the edge of humankind's abilities. Odom could not be rescued a year and a half previously—fifty years following the first flight of the operational helicopter—it had not evolved that far even in this period. Now he is snatched from certain death by a vehicle and ideas homogenized over less than two human generations of risks, failures, and successes. This case shows what Coast Guard rescue helicopter can finally achieve at the beginning its second half-century of operational flight.

¹ Michael Odom, author telephone interview, recorded with permission, 2 March 1995.

² Coast Guard Air Station Elizabeth City, message 272139Z Jan 95, (CGAS Elizabeth City).

³ Michael Odom, author telephone interview, 2 March 1995.

⁴ Thomas Steier, author telephone interview, recorded with permission, 27 February 1995.

⁵ Mark A. Cole, author telephone interview, recorded with permission 24 February 1995.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Thomas Steier, author telephone interview.

⁸ Mark A. Cole, author telephone interview.

⁹ Crew aboard CGNR 6019: Lt. Jay Balda, Lt.(jg) Guy Pearce, AD3 Mark Bafetti, ASM1 Michael Odom, ASM3 Mario Vittone.

¹⁰ CG Air Station Elizabeth City, message, 241530Z JAN 95

¹¹ CG Air Station Elizabeth City, video tape recording from camera mounted in CGNR 6019 taken at the scene, 26 January 1995.

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- ¹² Wings of Gold, "Elizabeth City USCG in Action," Winter 1994, 25.
- ¹³ Michael Odom, author telephone interview.
- ¹⁴ CG Air Station Elizabeth City, message, 272139Z JAN 95.
- ¹⁵ Jay Balda, notes to author.
- ¹⁶ Mark A. Cole, author telephone interview.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Michael Odom, author telephone interview.
- ¹⁹ Ibid. CG Air Station Elizabeth City, message, 272139Z JAN 95.
- ²⁰ Thomas Steier, author telephone interview.
- ²¹ Michael Odom, author telephone interview.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Steier was observing Vitttone.
- ²⁵ Thomas Steier, author telephone interview.
- ²⁶ Michael Odom, author telephone interview.
- ²⁷ Crew aboard CGNR 1502: Lt. Matt Reid, Lt Mark Russell, AD1 Berry Freeman, AT1 David Ebert, AT3 Steve Rost, AM2 James Washington, AD2 Keith Browne.
- ²⁸ Michael Odom, author telephone interview.
- ²⁹ Crew aboard CGNR 1504: Lt.Comdr. Dan Osborn, Lt.(jg) Dan Rocco, AE2 Matt Elliot, AT3 Kent Hammack, AT3 Ron Mitchell, AD3 Mike Gardner, AM3 Cory Gibbons, AM3 James Josey, AD3 Damien Hopkins.
- ³⁰ Crew aboard CGNR 1714: Lt.Comdr. Larry Cheek, Lt.Comdr. Norville Wicker, AE1 Frank Saprito, AT3 John Browning, AT2 Stephen Twardy, AM3 Jerrod Bowden, AD3 Jon Johnson.
- ³¹ Crew aboard CGNR 6034: Lt.Comdr. Bruce Jones, Lt.(jg) Dan Molthen, AD3 Chris Shawl, ASM3 Jim Peterson, AM3 Warren Bernard.
- ³² CG Air Station Elizabeth City, message 272139Z JAN 95.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Michael Odom, author telephone interview.
- ³⁵ Mark A. Cole, author telephone interview.
- ³⁶ Michael Odom, author telephone interview, 13 March 1995.
- ³⁷ Mark A. Cole, author telephone interview.