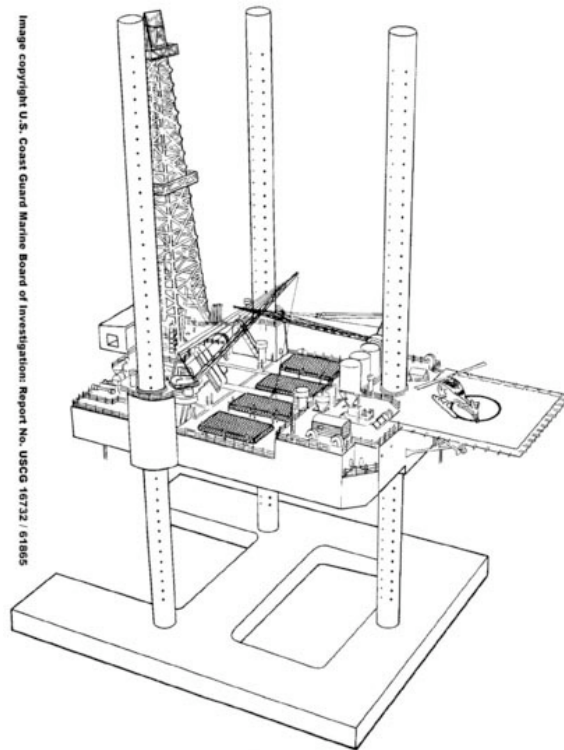


## *Ocean Express*

Lt. Commander, Tom Beard, USCG (Retired)

Coast Guard helicopter crews constantly engage in dramatic rescues usually with deeds far beyond description by words. Of the hundreds of these events, few are even noticed except by those involved. To capture all the astonishing deeds carried out by Coast Guard aircrews would fill books; to tell one account and exclude all others is choosing the best among all one's children. The performance by the participants in this story mirrors similar deeds by hundreds of others that daily go out into harm's way to offer what help they can to save even one life. To illustrate:

*Ocean Express*, an unusual ocean-going vessel, was in reality a movable offshore oil-drilling rig, in the form of a barge nearly 200 feet long and over 100 feet wide. It had three legs — steel columns or tubes — twelve feet in diameter. With the legs jacked down in the rig's working position, their feet, and an attached lower-platform connecting them, rested on the seabed. Underway, towed by tugs, this lower platform was raised to eighty feet below the surface and the main platform floated, becoming an enormous barge with the legs towering nearly 240 feet above the sea's surface. Centered on the platform and rising between these three giant tubes was the drilling derrick. Buildings on the barge's deck provided offices and accommodation spaces for the 33 crewmembers working and living aboard.



John Lewis related years later that, “What happened that night in April 1976, wrote a new chapter in offshore rescue — a chapter so complex” it was years before a

“Coast Guard Board of inquiry pieced together the story.” Lewis flew with two others in his crew in a Sikorsky HH-52A, Seaguard, helicopter from Corpus Christi, Texas, into a storm in the Gulf of Mexico. While en route to the barge’s location, he was “pleased to hear from the bargemaster that the entire crew had gotten away in [survival] capsules.” It was a bad night for flying. It was a very bad night on the Gulf of Mexico waters.

The unexpected storm brought hurricane force winds. High winds were already battering the Naval Air station in Corpus Christi where Lewis, the senior duty officer at the Coast Guard air station, had all the aircraft brought into the hangar for protection. Gusts drumming the large hangar doors gave hints to the flight crews of promises for a



night ahead. Shortly after 8 p.m. Lewis received a report that a floating drilling platform with 50 people on board was sinking in the Gulf. He had a choice between aircraft. He could fly the twin-engine amphibian, Grumman HU-16E Albatross, which could offer

no assistance directly or the single-engine amphibian helicopter, Sikorsky HH-52A Seaguard, with limited abilities for this situation. Under ideal conditions, Lewis might expect to take ten survivors aboard the helicopter at one time. He elected to fly the helicopter and started for the scene in the storm.



Conditions were already so severe in Corpus Christi that the Naval Air Station aircraft control tower operators abandoned the tower and closed the field.

Soon after, a Navy helicopter following Lewis turned back when its pilots, buffeted and battered by the storm's viciousness, saw the sea's condition they might encounter in a rescue attempt. For them, this was a hopeless situation.

As the storm began, three tugs were pulling the elevated rig along the Texas coast at three knots against the building southerly winds when one tug lost power. Sixty-knot winds twisted the rig around; the crippled tug was unable to hold. Next, a tow cable from a second tug parted. The storm intensified in the tempest-darkened night. Waves smashed over the now out-of-control barge, sweeping the deck as the ungainly craft wobbled and lurched, adrift in roiling seas no longer restrained by tugs.

Stacks of drill pipes on the barge deck broke loose; the 363-ton derrick became detached at the base and began sliding. Foreseen by the bargemaster and crew was that unleashed weights moving to one side would soon capsize the barge in the still-building tempest. Their fears were shortly realized when the wallowing mass began to tilt. Accompanying tugs were unable to move in to assist or retrieve the barge crew. They had to get off without help.

The crew abandoned ship in two capsule-like lifeboats once a radio distress-call went out. The bargemaster, however, unexpectedly remained on board, and with the lifeboats gone, there was no escape for him. Lewis discovered the captain's plight when he arrived overhead, 54 miles out in the Gulf — instead of the expected 20 miles — and confirmed, he was talking to *Ocean Express*' captain, who was using a hand-held radio. He then spotted the bargemaster clinging to the outer edge of the now tilted, helicopter landing-platform. Lewis was no longer only a witness to a maritime casualty, but instantly he realized he and his crew were the sole means available to save a man's life.

The sight, Lewis recalls, of the floundering rig as he flew near, "... was nightmarish." "It was like a movie set — all lights were on as it was being pummeled in huge waves." "I could see two orange capsules (containing the crew) beneath looking like they were in a washing machine." Seas were rolling over the barge. The *Ocean Express*'s helicopter landing-platform was upwind or at the forward edge of the barge deck and tilting upwards at an unusable 20 to 25 degrees. Even if the landing platform were

utilizable to land, Lewis would have to fly the helicopter backwards and insert its tail between the wavering steel towers extending high above him plus miss striking the shifting drilling-tower.

Impossible.

His only course was to hover alongside the towers, flying crosswind in winds gusting in excess of 60 knots in a helicopter that could only fly at 108 knots maximum in smooth air, much less in turbulence, and hoist the captain from the outer edge of the helicopter-landing platform.

Lewis, after briefing his crew, started the first approach. Buffeting from wind surging over the platform's edge made control of the helicopter close-in impossible. Storm-driven waves crashed into the platform, becoming windborne sheets of saltwater, then tumbling up and over the hovering helicopter. The single turbojet-engine mounted over the cockpit, ingested seawater in large gulps. The gas-turbine surged, critical engine rpm's dropping with each saltwater dousing. Lewis waved off his first attempt, flying through sea spray on instruments. By the time he began his second approach, just moments later, the towers were already listing thirty degrees.

Lewis knew now the rig was beginning to capsize. Only moments remained. The aircrewman, Aviation Machinist's Mate First Class Harold J. Thomas, hung out the fuselage's starboard side door into the slipstream about eight feet behind Lewis, attached to the aircraft only by a wide belt about his waist. A lanyard attached to the belt was snapped to a cabin-floor ring. Thomas directed Lewis verbally into position over the bargeman for the pickup with the cable-hoist with its attached rescue basket. Lewis recounted, "From the pilot's seat in our helicopter you can't see what you are hoisting because you have a pontoon out here, and so you have to depend on your crew member to talk to you, ...and he says come forward, come right, come left, he talks and tells you to hold. I was unable to hold it, although my crewmember, Thomas, was outstanding, real good that night, but I couldn't hold the first time. I got on out here where there was no reference. Yet I made an instrument climb back out, came back downwind. I could see the

captain standing up there. He was talking to us and trying to direct us in. So I came around the second time.”

Work lights glowed over the entire rig, creating a strange illusion. There were no references for the pilot to orient to other than the rolling and swaying giant spaceship, caught in an eerie maelstrom, soaring in an ill-defined interface. But to him, the specter appeared stationary, unmoving against the black night. The helicopter, in contrast, seemed to the pilots to jump and roll about unmanageably against this false backdrop. This can be described as similar to the situation of waiting at a railroad-crossing in an automobile watching freight cars rush by at high speed then suddenly feeling as if the train is still and the car is moving sideways. Lewis experienced vertigo. His instruments read correctly but the stage was wandering. This is the ultimate in mind-numbing disorientation. The highly experienced Lewis did as he should, disregarding his feelings, and relying on instruments to fly safely away.

Then the entire rug suddenly lit up in a brilliant, glaring bluish-light. Lewis exclaimed then he and his crew “clearly saw the tangle of pipe on deck, the shifted derrick.” In this sudden bright light they saw the barge “rearing up backward like a horse and falling off to its right side.” The mass repeated this ocean gallop, riding out each new wave. Captain Howard Thorsen, USCG, the Corpus Christi air station’s commanding officer, with Commander Richard McBride as co-pilot, followed Lewis’s helicopter out several minutes later in a second HH-52A, this one fitted with a “Night Sun” floodlight. Thorsen lit the scene with the million-candlepower beam.

Lewis backed his aircraft away and planned one more attempt with this new aid. The tower tips were now halfway to the water — the mass leaning forty-five degrees. He thought, “*It’s now or never for that poor guy.*” Lewis moved the helicopter in for his expected last attempt. His only reference, the eerily glowing platform, suddenly began rearing up, pitching over nearly backwards. As he got close to it in a hover, the platform rose suddenly beneath the helicopter. Thomas, from his position hanging out the side door looking down at an instantly rising steel deck, yelled, “Up! Up!” Lewis pulled away abruptly, a new wave of seawater cascading over his windscreen and helicopter. The barge

captain still clung to the outer edge of the helicopter landing-pad elevated high above the tilting, and now sinking, barge beneath.

Lewis explains next: “I abandoned that approach, but time seemed to be of the essence now, so rather than climbing out, I moved over to the side...and we had a little discussion, me and the crew, and tried to get a little better organized for this next approach in because it looked like the rig was maybe 45 degrees by this time, and when we were over here the waves that were hitting were — actually some of the waves and spray were getting up into the helicopter.” To his copilot, Ensign John DiLeonardo, Lewis said, “See if you can monitor a seventy-five foot hover on the radar altimeter and keep us there,” a mere 75 feet above the lunging, plunging steel decking. Later, Lewis related DiLeonardo’s feelings at that moment, sitting there in the helicopter’s left pilot-seat: His wife was pregnant with twins and it was then he revealed a sincerely felt regret, “I’m never going to see my twin boys.”

To Thomas, Lewis said to start lowering the basket early and to be sure it was down on the platform as they arrived in a hover over the bargeman, because, “I knew I couldn't stay in there very long; it was too turbulent. I don't want to say that the helicopter was out of control but when I got over there it was blowing so hard and it was so turbulent that it was, just about.” The hoist only held 100 feet of 3/16 inch stainless steel cable, 90 feet usable — the last ten painted red. Lewis was playing within 15 feet of vertical airspace to hit his target with the basket at the cable’s end.

DiLeonardo called altitudes as he read them from the radar altimeter and Thomas directed Lewis into position with commands spoken in a monotone into his microphone, devoid of any emotion he might be experiencing, with the single phrases: “move forward,” “move back,” “move left,” “move right,” “come up,” “down.” Single or multiple commands were repeated continuously until Thomas got the desired response from Lewis’ placing the helicopter over the spot he targeted. But Lewis was steering a raging bull in attempting to place a wind-whipped basket, he can’t see on the end of a 75-foot cable, directly next to a frightened man on a surging platform where spatial relationships long before vanished.

Only Thomas could see the barge's sole occupant now with Lewis moving against the wind in a hover overhead. But just at the critical point where Thomas was sweeping the basket to the captain, DiLeonardo, obediently observing the radar altimeter, barked: "You're losing altitude *too fast!*" In a desperate cry he followed immediately with, "*We're going down!*" Thomas at the same moment losing professional calm, yelled, "*Pull up, pull up, we're going down fast!*"

The barge now in its final plunge rolled further; the basket scraped and bounded up a forever-increasing angle helicopter-landing platform toward the outer, now upper, edge. As a result of the barge's sudden heeling, the barge's helicopter-pad with the stranded captain rose rapidly. It was not the helicopter going down but the platform lunging upwards towards it. Lewis, in desperation for their safety, once again pulled away, flying on instruments, knowing this was *their last chance to save a life*. Waves blinded his view to the outside, smothered the helicopter, choking the engine once more as they dashed completely over the dragonfly in a tempest. It was a tough moment with the realization that they just lost a life, and their own in the next few seconds, too, relied on every skill Lewis could bring to controlling the helicopter.

At that very same moment the basket — which bumped along on the platform — but down-slope from the captain, suddenly slid toward him with the suddenly swiftly rising helicopter. He grabbed on as it scooted by, just within reach, and frantically rolled in. The basket continued shooting upwards. Lewis, just trying to avoid the rising deck, did not know it until Thomas shouted, "We've got him — he's in the basket!"

Thorsen, still training the light from his hovering helicopter and watching from above, now witnessed an awesome sight. He recounted, as best he could, events later of a vivid image impossible for description by words: "Five seconds after John pulled away, the rig rolled over." Thorsen and his crew then sat as helpless spectators as Lewis's helicopter vanished beneath the sudden cascading waves and wind-flung spray surging over the capsizing *Ocean Express*.

And then, just as suddenly as it disappeared beneath the sea, the plucky “52” emerged through bounding waves and spray, seemingly coming up from beneath the sea’s surface — in flight, their survivor dangling in the basket below!

The barge sank in those moments. Thirteen men in one escape capsule drowned when it capsized before rescuers could reach them.

Lewis’ crewman, Thomas, after the helicopter landed, suffered a heart attack.

Captain Van de Graaf, Bargeman, still remembers Commander Lewis with a card on Christmas every year.