



The Big Mission

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It's an unwritten law that these things have to happen at night! I don't mean late in the evening, I mean late at night. Just like doctors getting calls about babies, rescue pilots have gotten used to getting 0330 calls about the big mission. And so... that's how this story begins, at 0330, when with an unconscious reflex, Mark, our hero, answers the phone.

1987 MAC Flight Safety Writing Contest Honorable Mention

He'd been flying the big Jolly Greens for five years now and knew he could fly it as well as anybody. Mark upgraded to aircraft commander in record time, and everyone could tell he loved his work. That's one reason the late phone call not only didn't bother him, but had him wide awake in seconds.

The flight suit went on with practiced ease and he'd driven halfway to work before his boots were fully laced up. The SP at the gate waved him on as if he knew how urgent the mission was.

By the time Mark walked into operations, his heart was pounding and he could feel the excitement everywhere! Just behind Mark walked the flight engineer, a crusty old master sergeant from way back, and the brand spankin' new second lieutenant copilot. Tim Clyde, the flight engineer, looked as if he'd just finished a battle in the Civil War. (Mark even made a mental note to ask Sergeant Clyde about some of his war stories. He was sure to have some good ones.)

The duty officer started to talk about the mission. A ship was sinking almost a hundred miles off the coast with four souls on board and no chance of reaching land. Mark had to silently laugh when Tim shook the copilot back into a conscious state. "Come on, this ain't no college course. We're about to make you into a genuine American hero."

"Go check out the aircraft," said Mark as soon as the briefing was over. "We'll follow you with all the medical gear," he continued. "Okay, let's go . . . we've got lives to save and time's a-wasting."

Running with 50 pounds of gear was not one of the things Mark had considered when he came into the Air Force, but the adrenalin was pumping and the

urgency of the mission made it easy. The gear was tied down in the aircraft and Mark was getting nervous about the delay in getting airborne. It hadn't been more than a dozen minutes since they'd arrived at the squadron, but to Mark it seemed like hours.

"How're you doing up there, Sergeant?" came out of Mark's mouth before he'd even thought to say it.

"It's going to be a little while sir. I've already found the engine oil over-serviced, and I don't want to miss anything else that might be wrong," said Sergeant Clyde.

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"Come on, let's get going. You heard the ops officer. Those people don't have much time left," replied Mark, and then instantly regretted it. Mark knew Tim was a professional and if he felt uncomfortable with the aircraft, there probably was a good reason. After all, hadn't Tim been flying these helicopters since old Igor Sikorsky had invented them?

Mark could sense the need to rush, the need to get out to the ship and save lives, but the rest only felt the little pushes to get their jobs done sooner. That's how the checklist went also—Mark was always one or two steps ahead of what was supposed to be checked. Tim did his best to keep things under control and not allow any items to be missed . . . but . . .

Mark was in command, and he let everyone know he was in a hurry.

That's how it happened. Nothing noticeable right away. A small filler cap on the intermediate gearbox was left unscrewed. The small gearbox turning the tail rotor drive shaft hardly ever gave anyone trouble. It only needed a couple of quarts of oil to work all day.

"Gear up, After Takeoff Check," commanded Mark, "and let's get the aircraft cleaned up as soon as we can."

Tim was glad to get a chance to tie down everything in the back while the copilot finished the checklist.

Radio calls to command post with all the latest information on everything from the ship's exact location to the survivors' condition were passed. As the next 30 minutes went by, everything was updated and double-checked. Those items that had been rushed on the ground were now meticulously reviewed.

"Roger, we're about 60 miles out now and estimate the ship in another 15 to 20 minutes," radioed the copilot.

"Let us know the minute you have the ship in sight," was the command post's reply.

That's when Sergeant Clyde saw smoke building up in the cargo compartment. Not a lot of smoke—just a light blue haze—about the same way a cigarette smokes up a small room.

"Sir, I think we might have a problem back here," said Tim.

The filler cap had finally vibrated off. Air was flowing over the filler neck causing oil to be syphoned into the aircraft slip stream.

"What kind of a problem do we have?" asked Mark.

Tim replied, "I don't know yet, sir. Maybe you'd better take a good look at the gauges to see if there's anything wrong while I go and check in the back."

Tim couldn't see the area around the gear box, but if he could have he would have seen the bright silver paint on the outside of the gear box turning a deep brown. The gear box had long since started to overheat.

"Sir, I've got smoke in the cargo area. The best I can determine, it's coming from the tail pylon," commented Tim.

"Is it something serious? We can't smell anything burning up here," asked Mark. He was still hoping to make the rescue, but was beginning to feel uncomfortable about it.

"We need to turn around and get back to shore. This doesn't look good at all," Tim said with some insistence.

"They're going to love this back at the squadron," said the copilot. "We're almost at the ship now and we have to turn around without making the pickup."

This made Mark feel even worse. He knew no one would leave him alone for the next week. A little kidding may be good for the soul, but this would be terrible; lives were at stake. That's one reason he hesitated another minute or two before turning the helicopter around and headed for the nearest shore.

"Understand you're declaring an emergency?" was all that came from the command post.

"Yes, we're inbound with some type of smoke building up in the cabin area," radioed Mark.

Tim had long since guessed the gear box was causing the problem. He was extremely grateful Mark had turned the aircraft around without too much argument. They'd already gone through the smoke and fume elimination checklist, but the smoke came right back and showed every sign of staying for the duration.

"Here it is in the Dash One, sir," said Tim.

Tim read the warning out loud. They would have to ditch if

Saving time won't always save lives!

anything else associated with the gear box area went wrong. Suddenly, Mark went from worrying about the aborted rescue to hoping they'd be able to get back to shore without another problem. Mark's hopes were shattered as the helicopter started to shake. It started as a small vibration, but everyone could feel it growing by the second. The gauges got fuzzy, it became hard to talk, and Mark was no longer flying the aircraft as much as he was just herding it in the right direction.

"AUTOROTATION," yelled everyone at the same time.

From 2,000 ft it seemed to take forever to get to the water. That is, until they passed 300 ft—then it all happened at once. The dark water took shape as swells

and waves became visible. The wind was whipping up some good waves, but it was the swells that got everyone's attention. From altitude they'd appeared to be 5 to 10 ft high, but nothing like the 20-foot swells they could see now.

Touchdown was softer than normal. Mark had set the helo down on a swell just as it reached its peak. Then the roller coaster ride began. The helicopter went up and down on the swells five times before turning upside down. It rolled over with no real warning and faster than anyone could have anticipated. Tim pushed the life raft out the cargo door and held on to let it pull him to the surface. Minutes passed before he could get his breath and climb into the raft.

The lights of the overturned helicopter were visible and illuminated the crewmembers who all managed to make it out safely. They swam to the raft with Tim's encouragement. Once they were all inside, no one said a word. It was almost 15 minutes before they finally started to talk and the survival radio was put to work.

The crew spent just over an hour in the raft before another rescue helicopter arrived on scene. Tim watched it lower its rescue hoist to pick him up while wondering—*how much of a preflight had they really done to be able to get here so fast?*

Captain Fitzgerald is a graduate of Miami University with a degree in accounting and a minor in aeronautical mathematics. Commissioned through ROTC in May 1978, he has flown helicopters since. He's flown the HH-3E, Jolly Greens, at Clark AB, Philippines; Shaw AFB, South Carolina; Osan AB, Korea; and is presently an instructor and the wing's Chief of Safety at Kirtland AFB, New Mexico.