



Abandon Ship!

The Story Behind the Greatest Rescue in Coast Guard History

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This is the gripping saga of a fishing vessel sinking in the icy waters off the shore of Alaska with 47 people on board. In response, the United States Coast Guard embarked on a risk-fraught rescue mission, the most daring mission in its history, to save the doomed passengers. Will they be able to extricate everyone from the frigid waters before they freeze to death?

“Help! Help! Mayday, Mayday, Mayday! This is the *Alaska Ranger*. 5, 3, 5, 3 north, 1, 6, 9, 5, 8 west... We are flooding, taking on water in our rudder room. We need immediate assistance.”

The time was 2:52 AM. The date was March 23, 2008. The ship in trouble was the 189-foot fishing vessel, the *Alaska Ranger*, stationed in the icy waters of the Bering Sea, off the Alaskan shore. The frantic plea for help in the frosty pre-dawn hours was transmitted by Captain Peter Jacobsen, a veteran with 23 years of experience.

His call for help was picked up by the Coast Guard station Kodiak, 800 miles away.

“Roger,” the Coast Guard officer on duty responded. “I’ve got your location. I need to know how many people are aboard the vessel.”

Static crackled over the radio, but a minute later, the response came through. “The number of persons aboard: 47.”

The Coast Guard officer gasped audibly. This was a serious crisis if there ever was one. An equally unprecedented rescue mission was called for if those aboard were to survive.

The Alarms Go Off

One hour earlier, Captain Jacobsen was sitting in his tiny captain’s cabin when several emergency alarms suddenly began wailing in sync. Hurrying to the lower deck, the crew discovered water cascading into the vessel. The sight sent them reeling. How in the world had this happened? But there was no time to think. They quickly brought forth a pump and attempted to battle the invading waters, but it was of no use....

Captain Jacobsen was forced to come to terms with a stark reality: the vessel was beyond saving. The 65-year-old captain had sailed the Bering Sea in various fishing vessels for more than two decades, and he knew a hopeless situation when he

saw one. Never mind the ship now; he had to save the people aboard.

Jacobsen tried radioing other fishing vessels in the area. He relayed the precise position of the *Alaska Ranger*: 120 miles from the Aleutian Islands in Alaska. Could anyone steer their vessels toward the crippled ship?

About 230 miles north, in the tiny Coast Guard station on St. Paul Island, Pilot Steve Bonn paced, whiling away the time, reading newspapers and drinking coffee, when the phone rang. Hastily, he lifted the receiver and pressed it to his ear. It was quite unusual for his station to receive a phone call in the pre-dawn hours.

Bonn listened intently, his heart pounding, as Kodiak headquarters on the other end of the line apprised him of the details.

A former Army Blackhawk pilot, Bonn had joined the Coast Guard eight years ago. This was his fourth day of a two-week shift at the isolated base. The station was staffed with rescue teams primed to respond to calls for help coming in from the surrounding areas, which were known as the largest and most dangerous fishing region in the US.

Bonn hastened to the barracks and shook his crew awake. There was co-pilot Brian McLaughlin, flight mechanic Robert Debolt and rescue-diver O’Brien Hollow. Minutes later, the team boarded two SUVs and set out across the icy terrain over three-foot-deep snow, heading for the tiny airport where the 14,000-pound Jayhawk helicopter sat waiting.

Meanwhile, the Coast Guard cutter *Munro*, on patrol near the deserted Pribilof Islands, received the call for help from the *Alaska Ranger*. Captain Craig Lloyd instructed his crew to shut off the diesel motor of the ship and switch to the powerful “Pratt & Whitney” engine instead, similar to the ones used in Boeing 707s. The 160 sailors aboard the *Munro* were rudely awakened by the earth-shattering roar of 18,000 tons of horse-power, and the Coast Guard vessel set out swiftly toward the sinking fishing boat at a speed of nearly 30 knots, or 35 miles per hour.

“How Can You Sleep?! The Boat Is Sinking!”

Back on the *Alaska Ranger*, the captain ordered his crew to don their full-body life-suits. It didn’t take a genius to figure out the captain’s intent. Their vessel was beyond repair, and they would have to abandon ship, with nowhere to escape to but the frigid waters. The thick, neoprene “Gumby” suit, which looks a little like a child’s footed pajamas, is intended to serve two purposes: to protect its wearers from the icy temperatures and to keep them dry. A special zipper at the neck seals the suit tightly, rendering it 100% waterproof.

David Hull, a 28-year-old seaman from Seattle, was sleeping soundly in one of the lower decks of the boat in the room he shared with three other crewmen. A factory of sorts had been built into the lower deck of the ship where the fish were prepared for sale. Hull worked in the “factory,” packing the fish into special containers to be sold.

Hull was roused from his slumber by a loud bang as the door to his cabin was flung open. A fellow crewmember was standing at the threshold, screaming hysterically, “How can you sleep? The boat is sinking! Get into your life-suit immediately.”

In a panic, Hull leaped out of bed and reached for his padded red life-suit. His trembling limbs did not make matters any easier, and by the time he got his feet into the pants, the suit was already filled with water. But there was no time to do anything about it. He raced up to the deck, and like the rest of his colleagues proceeded to stand next to the lifeboat that had previously been assigned to him. (These weren’t actual lifeboats; they were rather like a small inflatable swimming pool that can float on water.)

The distraught crew took turns warming up in the captain’s tiny cabin in five minute shifts. Clad in their bulky, hooded life-suits, they barely recognized each other.

Outside, the deck was slick with ice,



Coast Guard units during a training exercise.



The *Alaska Ranger* ship in better times.



The Coast Guard conducts a rescue operation after a boat comes under attack by stormy waves.