

Upon the first anniversary
of the historic superstorm...

The Ship That Defied Hurricane Sandy



Meteorologists had been tracking the monstrous storm at sea for days. Everyone knew to prepare for the once-in-a-lifetime event long before Hurricane Sandy made landfall. The waters off the eastern seaboard of the US cleared as all seafaring vessels pulled into port to ride out the storm in safety. Yet, at the height of these preparations, the *Bounty*, a leaky, outdated sailing ship, set out as if nothing was amiss.

The moment the storm arrived, the *Bounty* found itself tossing in the huge waves, pounded by winds that threatened to send it to the ocean floor. The Coast Guard, unable to safely use its usual craft, launched a massive operation to rescue the ship's crew. Above all, the question lingers: Why was the *Bounty* out at sea?

Monday, October 29, 2012

Heavy winds began to pound the coast in the pre-dawn hours, exactly as meteorologists had been warning for days. A hurricane as powerful as this one promised to be typically only hits this region once in decades. Everyone spoke the name “Sandy” with a note of awe, even fear, as they awaited the appearance of the monstrous storm. Federal, state and local officials did their best to prepare for a catastrophe that had the potential to cause tens of billions of dollars in damage, and many fatalities.

Yesterday afternoon, Coast Guard Lieutenant Wes McIntosh and the crew of his C-130 transport had evacuated their base in Elizabeth City, North Carolina. Heavy winds had forced officials to close the runways. McIntosh and his six aides took up temporary residence in a hotel near the Raleigh-Durham Airport so they would be able to hop right over in case of a crisis.

At 9:00 PM, McIntosh’s phone suddenly rang. The Coast Guard headquarters in North Carolina had received a distress call from Tracie Simonin, director of the HMS Bounty Organization. This group owned the *HMS Bounty*, a larger, built-to-scale replica of the historical merchant ship of the 18th century by that name. The original *Bounty* was the subject of a famous mutiny in 1789 in the South Pacific that left its captain, William Bligh, and 18 others adrift at sea. Bligh managed to navigate his group to safety 3,600 miles away after 49 days of incredible seamanship.

Simonin reported that the ship had lost electric power and was taking on water at an alarming rate. It was located somewhere in the region of Hatteras Canyon, a treacherous area at sea about 100 miles off the North Carolina coast. At the best of times the sea could be very stormy there, and now it had a hurricane to whip it up even further.

Nobody knew the ship’s precise location or the condition of its crew. The first indication that *Bounty* was in danger was an e-mail



A US Coast Guard C-130.

Simonin had received from the captain at 8:45 PM. Since then the electricity had been lost and communication had been reduced to hand-radios that had extremely limited range.

By now the winds made it too dangerous to dispatch the regular Coast Guard cutters or the Jayhawk helicopters. Instead the Coast Guard sent out an urgent message to all local merchant marines that had not evacuated to assist in rescuing the *Bounty*. Only one boat was situated in the area, and that was the 30,000-ton Danish oil tanker *Torm Rosetta*. But its captain reported that the waters were already too dangerous for him to get involved.

As hurricanes go, Sandy was not the most powerful. Nevertheless, it was the largest hurricane to hit the northeast in recorded history. The storm was so gargantuan that it covered an area of 1.8 million square miles! It was also composed of a particularly complex mix of high-speed winds blowing in differing directions.

The last recorded position the Coast Guard could provide for the *Bounty* was 100 miles off Cape Fear in northeastern North Carolina at noontime that day. In all probability the ship was now trapped in the wildest portion of the hurricane, dealing with 70 MPH winds and rains so heavy that the wooden ship could not be detected by radar.

The Coast Guard was desperate to get



Coast Guard rescue team in training.

a better fix on the situation. Despite the heavy risk, Coast Guard commanders hoped McIntosh could fly his C-130 close enough to the site to be able to assess the conditions. As soon as the storm calmed down enough to permit it, a rescue helicopter would then be dispatched from Elizabeth City.

McIntosh lifted off from Raleigh Airfield at 11:00 PM. Soon after takeoff the aircraft’s de-icing equipment failed. This forced McIntosh to remain below a ceiling of 7,000 feet. Here temperatures were warm enough that he would not risk developing ice on the wings that could dangerously reduce their lift. Shortly thereafter the airplane’s weather radar ceased functioning. Now McIntosh and his first officer, Mike Myers, were forced to rely on their own sight—something that was virtually impossible under storm conditions. They donned night-vision goggles, which improved the situation somewhat. They reduced their altitude to 1,000 feet and finally to just 500 feet as they headed directly into the storm.

By the time McIntosh reached the area where the *Bounty* was thought to be, the clock had already struck midnight. He fought to keep the plane steady against the howling winds while Myers scanned the sea below with binoculars. “What do you see? What do you see?” McIntosh kept asking his co-pilot. Myers’s stubborn silence more than answered his question.

Suddenly, Myers spoke up: “I see a huge pirate ship in the middle of the hurricane!”

McIntosh banked the plane sharply to give his crew a better view of the stranded ship. She was 180 feet long and had three masts. The scene could have come straight out of a children’s adventure book.

The powerful waves tossed the ship around, sweeping over its deck with walls of water two stories high. The wooden vessel appeared to be in danger of being ripped open by the powerful forces nature had unleashed on it. The *Bounty* listed heavily to starboard, indicating that water was entering the hold on that side.

McIntosh could do nothing to help the floundering ship. Approaching it was unthinkable: the masts and ropes towering 100 feet into the air would be a deathtrap for any aircraft. In any case, his C-130 was itself being thrown about by the winds so heavily that three of his crew were suffering from seasickness.

Somehow, news of the sailing ship stranded in the hurricane reached the ears of reporters. Everyone listened and wondered the same thing: What in the world was an outdated wooden sailing ship doing out at sea in the midst of the hurricane of the century?

Some experienced seamen accused *Bounty*’s captain, Robin Walbridge, of trying



The *Bounty* was 120 feet long and had three masts.