

THE ROAD TO MANADALAY

Early in the morning of 31 December 1965, I got a call at home from the station that the cruise sailing vessel Mandalay had run aground six miles south of Fowey Rock Light in high winds and heavy seas, that there were two helos on scene with Dave Irons in one and Billy Murphy in the other, and they needed one more helo to assist in taking off the passengers.

I drove rapidly in (okay, speeded in-- but only a little), ran up HH-52A 1388 and waited for LT Rick Folker to show up. I was of course musing that he should stop drinking so much, the bachelor scum, or drive faster, or cease whatever it was that was holding him up. Now mind you, I was very fond of Rick, but as I have mentioned several times "Lord, give me patience--But HURRY!" In short, I was fuming. Then a police car pulled up and I feared the worst. Rick was in trouble with the law; not that I was surprised. Bachelors! Rick jumped out of the patrol car and into the helo.

While enroute, the Mandalay, he explained, it seems that he had run out of gas in his trusty VW Beetle (he could no longer afford to pay the insurance on his sport cars due to minor peccadilloes) and started running towards the station in his orange flight suit. He was doing his best imitation of a four minute mile when a patrol car pulled up along side and offered him a ride to the station. It gave Rick quite a turn, because he normally had reason to examine his conscience when the police appear. Surprisingly, I believed his story, especially that part about running out of gas.

Dave and Billy had things well in hand. The Mandalay was hard aground on her keel but was still very lively. There was no way that anyone could have hoisted safely from that sailing vessel covered with rigging. It looked like a big version of a fly swatter, a helicopter swatter actually. Instead, Dave had the vessel's crew stream a rubber raft with four passengers in wet suits out from the vessel using a nylon line to control and to recover the raft. Dave had just picked up his four so I moved into position. The wind was really blowing hard. I could hover using 50% torque with a normal fuel load and three persons on board. I picked up my four persons with no more difficulty than you would expect with 10 foot breakers dashing by. I always used all the lights the helicopter carried, which did make those big breakers look weird. At this point Billy called on 381.8 to say that during his last hoist the breakers had raised and dropped the basket with one person in it and had broken the hoist hook, so would I mind picking up another four people. I said something like "no sweat" and picked up another four.

While we were climbing out, I smelled something that told me we needed barf bags for our passengers -- desperately and at once. When I passed this thought to the hoist operator, he said "no sweat" or whatever, and said that before abandoning ship, the survivors had raided the New Year's booze supply and had tucked bottles into their wet suits, which they were now using most enthusiastically to celebrate their deliverance. Those were easily the happiest people I have ever rescued. You should have seen them wave when they ran away from the helicopter. What did those nice Air Force people think? Boozing on a federal airplane! I wonder if they thought that the Coast Guard really knows how to treat its survivors and how do I get into that outfit?

By the way, I had to keep the collective up a little to load the rotor when I landed at Homestead Air Force Base because that rotor RPM wanted to go sky high. I don't know how much I weighed but I'd guess that counting the bodies, bottles and wet suits, the helo weighed somewhere around 9,100 pounds, which slightly exceeded the normal max gross weight of 8,300 pounds by 800 pounds. In defense, I will say I could have auto rotated effortlessly with that wind .

Billy Ed Murphy checked his log book and it did not show the number of hoists he made but that there were several. He does remember that one of the ladies that he hoisted refused to part with her dog...ditto for her bottle of champagne. One must admire this group of survivors for keeping their priorities straight.

Dave Irons says he recalls, like it was yesterday, that it was his 35th birthday but the rest of it is a little hazy. He wrote, "Actually, I do recall that... swinging mast and no communications. Ended up with (writing on) a chalk board instructions to the vessel to put three people at a time in a raft and pay it out downwind. Then we made the pickup from that raft. I also recall the relief I felt when you and Billy Ed arrived on scene. I remember thinking that just no way was a single helo and crew going to pick up that many people before the ship sank...After picking up one basket (load) and the individual got aboard the helo, the crewman started to lower the basket for another rescue, it fell free from the cable...someone was looking out for us when it held together until the occupant was safely in the helo. I recall the 40 footer arriving on scene and what a spectacular job of maneuvering he performed. Until he arrived, I was certain the helos had performed miracles, then the 40 boat picked up the skipper from the Mandalay and I realized y'all had only performed in a superior manner."