

WRITTEN HISTORY – LCDR Paul Ibsen AvNumber 1493

Airframe – HH-52A 1455 (sidebar – same a/c that I had my first HH-52 flight in at AVTRACEN Mobile in 1970)  
210 – USCGC Courageous

Date of rescue – Saturday, May 17, 1980

Deployment Members

LCDR Paul Ibsen

LT Bob Hallock

Crew (sorry, I don't have their ranks/rates)

Ken Marks

Chuck Sookne

Keller Newton

Deployed from AIRSTA Savannah on May 12, 1980 to meet USCGC Courageous at Port Canaveral and proceed on a routine drug patrol in the Bahamas. Two days later we were diverted to assist with a SAR case for the M/V Flamingo in the Bahamas. The vessel had been strafed by a Cuban MIG and was aground. The day before, an H-3 out of Puerto Rico had been buzzed by a MIG. We had air cover from an AWACS while we were on this mission. Nothing really developed. The next day the Courageous was diverted to operations off Cuba in response to the developing evacuation of refugees out of Mariel. The Mariel boatlift had begun.

On May 17, I was on a routine patrol with Ken Marks as crew and an HM (sorry – don't have his name) from Courageous as a ride along. Our mission was to patrol the Florida Straits in international waters offshore from Mariel to monitor the overloaded boats heading towards Mariel. We were returning to Courageous from an uneventful patrol. At 11:03 AM, Marks saw the bow of a boat sticking out of the water at what appeared to be a number of people in the water. The boat was the *Olo Yumi*. At about 8:00 that morning, one of its engines had quit, everyone had moved to the stern to look and the next thing they knew, the 6 to 8 foot seas swamped the boat. When we arrived two or three people were clinging to the bow of the boat and there were people all over the place in the water. We saw people with life jackets, some hanging on to pieces of wood and one man who had lashed himself to a butane tank. The gasoline from the boat was on the water. We started hoisting. Marks was as steady at the hoist as he was during practice hoist back in Savannah. I told him that we would continue to hoist as long as we had enough power to hover. I radioed Courageous, explained the situation and asked for all the help that they could divert to us. When Marks got the eleventh survivor to the cabin door, the hoist burned out. Three other helicopters were arriving by that time and we proceeded to Courageous to land with three crew and eleven survivors. Marks told me that the survivors had skin peeling off from being in the fuel in the water. By now Courageous was near the scene along with CGC Vigorous. Both had launched their boats to continue the rescue operation.

That afternoon we started to ferry the survivors from Courageous to the USS Saipan. We made three sorties to Saipan, the first with the five most seriously injured. The second sortie we moved another 15 (a few round trips). On the sortie, we moved three that did not survive. Out of 52 people on *Olo Yumi*, there were 38 lives saved, 10 deceased and four were never found. A long day.

The next day our hoist was replaced in Key West and the day after that we were back flying patrols.

Much of the above is from an article in the Savannah News-Press written by a reporter sent to Key West to report on our deployment. In Mirta Ojito's book *Finding Manana – A Memoir of a Cuban Exodus*, Mirta mentions the *Olo Yumi* –

“On May 17, the day the Gulf Star reached Key West, an overloaded, thirty-five-foot pleasure craft, called *Olo Yumi*, sank in the Florida Straits with 52 people on board. Coast Guard swimmers managed to rescue 38 people and recover 10 bodies. A fifteen-year-old girl lost her entire family, including both parents, her two sisters, and a grandparent.”

Mirta did not know that there were no Coast Guard swimmers back then, but she got the name and numbers right. I often wonder if we could have rescued some others that day if the hoist had not burned out. Maybe the girl's family.

Paul Ibsen