

Moral Courage

Cold, windy, rugged, and incessantly pounded by the sea, Alaska's Kodiak Island is just one of the areas patrolled by the United States Coast Guard. Conditions were just as described on December 28, 2012, when Coast Guard commanders got the call that an icebreaker chartered by Royal Dutch Shell, *MV Aiviq*, had lost all engine power and was unable to control its tow lines with the floating, oil-drilling platform *Kulluk*. The 18-man crew aboard *Kulluk* had radioed the Coast Guard Air Station, pleading for a helicopter rescue because *Aiviq's* crew had no means to rescue the stranded workers.

Strike One

Taking off in their MH-60T *Jayhawk* helicopter, Coast Guard Lieutenant Adam Spencer and his aircrew were the first would-be rescuers to respond to the distress call. They knew from the snow squalls and turbulence during the one-hour flight to the scene that any rescue would be challenging.

When they reached their destination, about 85 miles from their base and 40 miles from the nearest land, they were met by 30-foot swells, a 300-foot ceiling, and less than a quarter mile of visibility. The

seas were so rough that waves were inundating the helicopter landing pad that in normal conditions is 60 feet above the waterline. Compounding the challenge was the fact that the drilling rig's 160-foot mast was swaying violently because of the waves. Gusts had created crosswinds as high as 45 knots beyond maximum landing allowances. In addition, cranes, piping, and rigging covered the platform everywhere beyond the landing pad.

After surveying the situation, Spencer and his crew determined that not only was landing on the *Kulluk* impossible under the current conditions, but hoisting people from the platform was too dangerous as well.

Strike Two

Taking off an hour after the first helicopter had departed Kodiak, Lieutenant Commander Thomas Combs and his crew arrived on the scene in separate rotorcraft. They were briefed on the situation and assumed command as Spencer and his crew returned to Kodiak.

For the next hour, Combs and his crew monitored the situation and hoped for a break in the



Kulluk on December 31, 2012, the day before its grounding. The pad that the Coast Guard attempted to land on during the aborted mission is to the left of the mast.

Photo courtesy of U.S. Coast Guard

weather. It never came. Eventually, Combs realized that a rescue was impossible. He made the difficult decision to abandon the attempt, realizing that he was leaving 18 men to the mercy of the sea. Combs also knew that *Aiviq* would likely have to cut the tow lines, and *Kulluk*, loaded with 150,000 gallons of oil and diesel fuel, could run aground and break up on the rocky coast of Kodiak Island.

Home Run

This situation marked the first time Combs and Spencer could not complete a rescue during a search-and-rescue mission. However, once back at Kodiak Island for refueling, the Coast Guard crews considered the possibility of helping to fix the tow ship's engines. After receiving an exact description of the mechanical problem, the crews loaded parts for the repair of *Aiviq's* propulsion system. Departing Kodiak at 3:30 a.m. the next morning, they executed the new plan to lower parts to *Aiviq's* flight deck. The successful delivery of parts to the tow ship allowed *Aiviq's* crew to restart the vessel's engines and re-establish control of the rig long enough for the crew of *Kulluk* to be rescued once conditions had improved.

For their actions in recognizing the reality of the situation and not recklessly risking their aircraft

and crews with a hoist rescue attempt, the U.S. Transportation Safety Institute, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, and the Helicopter Association International (HAI) Safety Committee presented the *Jayhawk* commanders a Moral Courage Safety Award during a ceremony at Heli-Expo. The Moral Courage Safety Award recognizes crew members and organizations who make difficult decisions that ensure safety and promote a positive safety culture. In the Kodiak Island situation, Combs noted that "the risk of conducting a hoist rescue would have exceeded the risk to the crew remaining on board."

TSI's D. Smith said the Coast Guard's actions set an important example. "Recognizing the aircrews and leadership of Air Station Kodiak sends a message that employing sound risk management principles saves lives and ensures continued mission accomplishment."

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To nominate someone for the Moral Courage Safety Award, call 405-954-2913 or email d.smith@dot.gov.

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