


by Sgt. Craig Pugh
illustrations by Nick Jaros

Hoping against hope to ride out the storm, the captain of the Taiwan vessel *Ta Lai* gave the order to heave to and drop anchor in the raging storm. But, with thunderous waves pounding mercilessly, the anchor cable snapped and the ship, blind in the night, was then driven perilously eastward until its bow was savagely rent by unseen underwater rocks that then held the ship in a death grip 38 miles off the coast of South Korea.

It seemed as if the 28 seamen aboard would be swallowed alive by the Yellow Sea. The international distress call — SOS — was

transmitted in desperation from the *Ta Lai* to Korean shore stations, which hurriedly forwarded the plea for help to the U.S. Air Force's 314th Air Division rescue center at Osan AB. There, Det. 13, 33rd Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron, operates five H-3 rescue helicopters used to support in-country flight operations and, whenever possible, to respond to civilian distress calls.

At Osan, then-Maj. James E. McArdle Jr., now a lieutenant colonel, and his alert crew were wrapping up their normal crew duty day when the SOS came in. Forget the time!



A storm at sea, a
foundering ship, and
away went A.F. Rescue 709.

SOS From the *Ta Lai*

"I tried everything," said McArdle, "right cyclic, left pedal; left cyclic, right pedal. I was, in fact, trying to bend the entire airplane — putting a torsional load on the side of the rotor shaft. The wind simply wouldn't allow us to attain proper hover-control authority."



When the weather drew its first calm breath, McArdle in Air Force *Rescue 709* was away and headed out to sea, vectored by both American and Korean ground radar sites.

As McArdle requested, his copilot, then-1st Lt. Van J. Leffler, now a captain, switched to ultra high frequency radio after they had been airborne for more than an hour and began talking to a Republic of Korea air force C-123 aircraft that had located the *Ta Lai*. As the Americans approached the stricken ship, the airmen aboard the C-123 dropped white illumination flares attached to little parachutes. The flares floated down upwind of the freighter.

A boat is a boat . . . but this? The crew of *Rescue 709* was dumbstruck. This was no junk, no small fishing craft that had been caught by surprise. The Americans were confronted, instead, with a 160-foot, 3,000-ton freighter, complete with masts and cargo booms and yards of communications wiring strung over the length of the ship.

Eerily, it still had electrical power, which lit the freighter's little multicolored rigging lights, giving the bizarre illusion of a string of Christmas lights bobbing in the wind.

Then, too, smoke was puffing from the smokestack. It was a sight seen only in a nightmare. Kafkaesque but real.

Having seen how the *Ta Lai* was fitted out, Maj. McArdle knew that getting in close enough to pick up the seamen would be especially difficult. And there was yet another immediate consideration — too much fuel. Flight engineer Sgt. James E. Coker read the exact amount of JP-4 the helicopter had and began pumping a portion of it overboard. That way, when the helicopter brought up the seamen, it wouldn't be overburdened with too much weight and fall out of the sky. Coker's figuring had to be precise. If he dumped too much, well . . .

McArdle slowed to 40 knots and began nudging the helicopter in closer to the *Ta Lai*. Below, illuminated in the searchlight, were seven seamen waving frantically, joyously from the wheelhouse deck on the stern.

It was almost midnight and, by the calculations of the ship's captain, the *Ta Lai*, taking on water through the bow, should have gone under by now.

Twice Maj. McArdle circled the freighter, surveying the situation. Although the storm that had wedged its bow on the rocks had passed, 20-foot waves still crashed against the ship, pushing it back and forth like the wagging tail of a dog. At the same time more waves smashed against the stern, making for a wrenching, rocking motion that caused the sheet steel in the hold to shift treacherously.

Above, Sgt. Mark Zitzow was lost in his own thoughts. The primary pararescueman on the mission, he had volunteered to ride the rescue hoist down to the ship, and here he was, dangling on the end of a 3/8-inch steel cable outside the aircraft waiting for Sgt. Coker to turn on the hoist motor that would start

him on the 50-foot descent to the deck.

Maj. McArdle edged the helicopter in closer to the *Ta Lai*, having faced the aircraft into the northeast wind to give the rotor blades something to bite into. Now directly above the ship, he tried turning the helicopter sideways and inching it in between two 70-foot-high cargo booms. No such luck! The helicopter just wouldn't fit. Then, assisted by 1st Lt. Leffler, he maneuvered the chopper to a point just above the booms.

It wasn't an easy task. The two pilots had to maneuver the aircraft back and forth with the motion of the ship to keep the helicopter from being struck by the rigging. *Rescue 709* had become an aerial cradle of sorts, but nobody aboard was being lulled to sleep. Certainly not Maj. McArdle, who will never forget that smokestack. It was right in front of him, literally blowing smoke in his face and into the helicopter. Visibility was lousy.

No matter. Flight engineers on a rescue helicopter have the best seat in the house anyway. They can see all the action through the open doorway in the passenger/cargo compartment and direct the actions of the pilots.

Sgt. Coker, secured only by his nylon gunner's belt, was on his knees and leaning halfway out the door to see the whole picture. Coker's voice, ever calm, was on the interphone to the cockpit: "Down three . . . left ten . . . up eight . . . back off . . . in five."

Maj. McArdle can smile with appreciation at the professionalism. "That's how Jim Coker was telling me that cargo boom was about to punch us out of the sky!"

Sure enough, just as *Rescue 709* was in a good position to begin the rescue effort, a huge wave crashed into the ship and pitched the stern upwards. Maj. McArdle reacted instinctively. In the twitch of an eye he and the others could be dead.

He snapped back the stick in his right hand and the collective lever in his left, adding instant power to the rotor blades. Meanwhile, Sgt. Zitzow, dangling 50 feet below, was swinging wildly through the air. He had to be stopped before he was bashed against the ship.

Reacting quickly, Sgt. Coker leaned his full weight out the door against his gunner's belt and put both hands on the cable 2 feet in front of him. As Zitzow, below, swung back, Coker pushed forward; as Zitzow swung forward, Coker pulled back. It worked.

With Zitzow steadied, *709* once again pressed toward the ship. Finally, with a menacing cargo boom just five feet away from the helicopter's rotor blades, the pararescueman was lowered aboard the *Ta Lai*. It was 10 minutes short of midnight. The five helicopter crewmen had been on alert since noon that day and now, almost 12 hours later, their work was just beginning.

With the fatigue and all, it was a battle of nerves just to keep a straight head. Concentrating on the ship was little help. Still being buffeted by waves, it was bathed in black most of the time, the light from an

occasional flare the only relief.

There was a job to do, though, and McArdle was all business. With Zitzow aboard the ship, he backed his helicopter off while the pararescueman tried to communicate in sign language with the *Ta Lai*'s captain. Thankfully, there were no injured seamen.

Sgt. Zitzow strapped two seamen and himself on the hoist's penetrator, a bullet-shaped device on the end of the cable that opens out into three seats, and the three were reeled 80 feet up to the helicopter. Once they were on board, SSgt. Tony Carlo, the second pararescueman, took care of the two Taiwan seamen, securing them in the passenger/cargo area.

Maj. McArdle remembered thinking just then that he was just a little bit nervous and told himself to settle down. "Even though we had worked hard, it wasn't a big deal because rescue missions are always hard work. And besides," he added with a foreboding grin, "we hadn't flown our second sortie yet."

Four more times the penetrator would go down and then up with seamen and the indefatigable Zitzow on it; four more times Sgt. Coker would lean out the cabin door and direct his pilot and copilot while all the time pushing and pulling the hoist cable to stop its wild gyrations as the men below clung to it for life.

At one point, high winds drove the 6-foot-2, 200-pound Zitzow, swinging on the penetrator, into an iron deck railing that luckily was not anchored solidly. He smashed through it—knocked it right down!—but could tell no one until the mission was over.

Miraculously, he wasn't hurt badly. Doused with sea spray, ignoring the bone-chilling wind that whipped salt and spume against his body, he struggled on the slippery, pitching deck to keep his footing and place the seamen on the penetrator.

Finally, at 15 minutes after midnight, 709 had its weight limit of seamen on board. Sgt. Zitzow elected to remain on the *Ta Lai*. Maj. McArdle peeled away, heading east to the mainland.

Thirty-two minutes later the helicopter landed at Kwang-Ju, a Korean air base with a small detachment of Americans, and scores of service members from both nations were on hand to help.

On the edge of the runway, away from the glare of floodlights and the crowd of people, McArdle paused to clear his mind and gain a precious moment of relaxation. He was bone-tired; yet so much work remained. And he knew, because of other commitments, that he and his crew were the only ones available from his detachment. On the way back to the ship, the major asked 1st Lt. Leffler to fly.

At 1:45 a.m. the H-3 was back at the *Ta Lai*. The winds had shifted and were coming from the north this time, right into the stern of the freighter and causing it once again to buck like a bronco with mean on its mind. And, of course, 709 was catching it, too, the wind bouncing it here, there, and everywhere.

Maj. McArdle put an "unbelievable amount of left pedal" into his hover, trying to avoid striking the

smokestack with his helicopter's 29-foot rotor blades. They were whirling just inches away. With 25,000 foot pounds of torque on the tip of each of the five blades, a strike by any one of them would spell disaster.

After repeated positioning attempts, McArdle and Leffler finally put the aircraft in a sideways, crosswind hover, a maneuver not recommended by anyone in the helicopter business. But it was the only way.

"I tried everything," said Maj. McArdle, "right cyclic, left pedal; left cyclic, right pedal. I was, in fact, trying to bend the entire airplane, putting a torsional load on the side of the rotor shaft. The wind simply wouldn't allow us to attain proper hover-control authority."

At last they were able to lower SSgt. Carlo down to the ship to check on Zitzow and the seamen. Carlo then had three more seamen on the penetrator when the overworked hoist motor failed.

Dangling 50 feet below *Rescue 709*, those three Taiwan seamen got the ride of their lives, two miles through the night sky to the nearest island. On the way back to the ship, Sgt. Coker found the hoist motor had cooled off and was operable again.

As the helicopter approached the *Ta Lai*, the crew noted that the again-shifting tide made a portside recovery necessary. On the surface, that wasn't a major obstacle but, with a little closer study, it soon became one. Because 709 had to face the northern winds to get a good hover, the ship was positioned below the helicopter in such a way that Maj. McArdle and Sgt. Coker, on the right side of the helicopter, couldn't see the *Ta Lai*.

The high winds made changing cockpit positions precarious at best, thus leaving only one solution: 1st Lt. Leffler would fly and Maj. McArdle would back him up. Soon SSgt. Carlo and two seamen were reeled up, and by 2:10 in the morning only 12 seamen and Sgt. Zitzow remained below.

Again 709 sidled in to pick up three more seamen, but the winds shifted once more and the ship lunged drunkenly at the helicopter. As they had done earlier, the pilot and copilot flew in tandem, many times just barely jerking away from the treacherous *Ta Lai*.

And every time they backed away, Sgt. Coker had to quickly let out more cable. Otherwise the penetrator could have been torn away from the men being strapped to it, perhaps dismembering them or worse. And there was the possibility that the penetrator would wrap itself around the ship's handrailing or rigging and rip the hoist motor off the H-3.

The crew knew the consequences full well, and Maj. McArdle remembered the intensity of his concentration: "My hand was on the stick and Jim Coker's hand was on the hoist control lever and, although I couldn't see him, I knew he was feeling the same way I was . . . anticipating my every move. It was as if our minds blended into one—me, Jim Coker, and the entire crew."

By 2:15 they had gotten another three seamen on board the chopper but not without exacting a

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tremendous toll. Maj. McArdle was trying every flying trick in the book to steady the helicopter as close as possible to the seamen.

But even then he had to reach back for more as the gusty, 30-knot winds forced him to make constant adjustments. "I was just going nuts," he said, "trying to back up Lieutenant Leffler by flying cross-cockpit — leaning to my left and looking over Van's shoulder at the ship."

Sgt. Coker wasn't doing much better. He had gotten on his knees, which quickly turned black and blue, and leaned out his door to look underneath 709 at the *Ta Lai* in order to direct the two pilots.

And so it went into the morning. At one point McArdle thought he needed to interject a word of encouragement. Although his degree reads



engineering, he took enough hours at the Air Force Academy to be considered a psychology major. "I knew we would finish the mission," he said, "but I wanted to let my guys know that I was as tired as they were, that I had the same frustrations."

As 709 hovered away from the ship, McArdle once more called on the intercom, "Crew, I'm not so sure we can go back and keep doing this."

The airmen, stretched to the limit of endurance, were silent. If any of them had the presence of mind to think about it, the statement was indeed startling, coming from a man who had flown his helicopter through enemy gunfire on a takeoff from a "hot" landing zone near Dak To, Vietnam, in 1967. One round had missed his left foot by half an inch, but because he wasn't wounded, he thought little of it.

Then Sgt. Coker, the man who, according to Maj. McArdle, "lives only for rescue missions," provided the vitally needed spark — the catalyst to continue.

"Aw, c'mon sir, we can do it!"

His words did the trick, fanning the flames of determination for the airmen, who began encouraging one another as 1st Lt. Leffler hovered in towards the *Ta Lai*.

Now it was gut work. No excitement. Just simple, solid recoveries. After another trip to Kwang-Ju, the crew of Air Force *Rescue 709* arrived back at the *Ta Lai* for the third and final sortie at 3:25 a.m. Knowing now what to look for, the four men saw that the wind and waves had again shifted, but this time in their favor. Instead of 45 minutes to pick up the remaining six seamen, it only took 10. Sgt. Zitzow was the last man up.

Little did the airmen know then what rewards lay in store for their valor. Lt. Col. McArdle would receive the Mackay Trophy, awarded by the Air Force for the most meritorious flight of the year. He would also receive his first oak leaf cluster to his Distinguished Flying Cross. First Lieutenant Leffler was awarded the Air Medal, and Coker received an oak leaf cluster to his Air Medal. Sergeants Carlo and Zitzow each received the Airman's Medal.

Today, Lt. Col. McArdle is quick to defer the credit he received for his actions to his fellow airmen. "Jim Coker was always making the right decisions. You couldn't program a computer to do what a flight engineer does. Everyone — the pararescuemen, the copilot — they all share the Mackay Trophy with me."

The mission ended at Kwang-Ju at 4:15 a.m. with all hands safe, the crew of Air Force *Rescue 709* having seen to that. Of all the rescued seamen, the only face McArdle saw was that of the *Ta Lai's* captain, who before leaving the helicopter, turned and bowed respectfully to the major — and then was gone. ☞