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Line Pilot Police Air Wing.*

STATES At 3.50 pm on Sunday the 27th December, 1998, Senior Constables David Key, Barry Barclay and myself were working the Police helicopter at the Police Air Wing when we were requested by AUSSAR (Australian Search and Rescue) in Canberra to make our way to Mallacoota. This was due to numerous EPIRB (Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacons) being activated by yachts competing in the Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race. Our assistance was requested along with a number of other aircraft both Fixed and Rotary winged. We were advised that approximately 12 to 15 people may be in the water and required urgent winching due to the weather conditions and that there may be injuries involved.

We departed Essendon at 4.20 pm and arrived at Mallacoota at 6.11 pm after refueling at Latrobe Valley aerodrome enroute. We encountered low cloud and extremely high winds enroute between Latrobe Valley and Mallacoota, including 85 Knots (160 Km/h) of tail wind. These were the highest wind speeds that I have ever encountered in 12 years that I have been at the Police Air Wing. The helicopter cruises at 120 Knots (230 Km/h) and with such a large tail wind our speed across the ground was 205 Knots (390 Km/h). Such winds are incredible and unheard of in Victoria.

I became well aware that we were flying into conditions that I had never imagined before and something that we had never ever been trained in or trained for. As I circled to land at Mallacoota I noticed that the seas were almost white with all the spray and white caps being whipped up by such ferocious winds. We landed at Mallacoota aerodrome and then received a briefing from AUSSAR over the telephone.

We were requested to assist by winching 4 crew members from the yacht 'Stand Aside'. We removed all equipment that we regarded as not required and refuelled for the task given. We then departed Mallacoota to a Latitude and Longitude position that we were given. Shortly after departing we were then redirected to another location to assist with a search for the yachts 'Sea Anna' and 'Business Post Naiad'. I then entered the new position into the Global Positioning System and just as I had completed this we were advised of a new position and that a person had been washed overboard from the yacht 'Kingurra'. We were required to locate this yacht and commence a search for the missing man.

We arrived overhead this position in approximately 15 – 20 minutes where the conditions could only be described as incredible. I have never seen the sea in such a wild and horrendous state. There were rain showers and continuous sea spray and the cloud base ranged from 600 feet to 2,000 feet. We were faced with waves and swell between 80 – 90 feet in height and the occasional wave up to 120 feet high. The winds were ranging between 70 to 80 Knots(135 – 155 Km/h). These conditions demand 110 % concentration when flying because one minor miscalculation could mean colliding with a wave or losing lift if caught downwind with no airspeed. I found myself extremely conscious that I was worried and frightened about conducting a winch and felt that I must overcome this fear and apply my full concentration on the task we had to do. I noted that we were now 65 nautical miles (125 Kilometres) out to sea to the South East of Mallacoota and remember thinking that if we have any problems at all we were alone and would more than likely die before help could arrive.

At this point we could not see a yacht at all and I commenced an expanding circle search pattern. I turned to the North and after a short time turned to the South. As I completed this turn Senior Constable Barclay called out that he could see a distress flare in front of us and I commenced to fly in that direction. This flare appeared to me to be some miles away so I accelerated towards it when it went out and I could only rely on an approximate heading to get towards the area. Within seconds Senior Constable Barclay called out that we were about to overfly the yacht and I slowed the helicopter as quickly as I could in the conditions. I tried to hold some form of hover over the yacht whilst Senior Constable Barclay made radio contact with the yacht who advised us that their missing man was approximately 300 metres to the West of them.

I then flew in that direction commencing to sweep left and right to try to cover as much area in as short a time as possible. Senior Constable Key called out that he had located a life ring and I then maneuvered the helicopter as he directed to more closely inspect this article. There was no person with the life ring. I then commenced to move to helicopter to the left. After a distance of approximately 100-200 metres Senior Constable Barclay called out 'I've got him, keep moving left a little bit more.' Senior Constable Barclay then coned me (talked me into position and in which direction to move) to a position above the person and I applied power to the winch with the mission switch.

Senior Constable Key was then winched into the sea. He had prepared himself enroute to the area and both he and Senior Constable Barclay were prepared for a winch as soon as the missing man was located. Senior

Constable Key was winched into the water whilst I held a 100 foot hover above the man. Hovering was extremely difficult as I had no reference by which to hold the helicopter in position and Senior Constable Barclay was constantly talking me in to position. Senior Constable Barclay advised me that he would have to pay out a large amount of winch cable due to the size of the swell. Whilst hovering I observed a wall of water coming towards us and confirmed with him that there was plenty of cable out because I had to make an urgent climb to avoid being hit by this wave. He advised me to 'go ahead' and I climbed another 50 feet. This wave passed under the helicopter by approximately 10 feet. I am able to state this because the helicopter is fitted with a radio altimeter which displays the height above the ground or water and I noticed that it reduced to 10 feet as I climbed.

Shortly after Senior Constable Key reached the man and secured him into the rescue strop. Senior Constable Barclay then coned me directly overhead as best as possible and then commenced the winch up procedure. Key and the man were winched to the top of the hoist outside the doorway. At this time Barclay advised that we had a winch freeze. The winch had stopped operating and we were now confronted with both Key and the man stuck outside the helicopter and not able to be brought inside. I immediately switched the winch power off and back on again which is the only way to try to reset the winch. This did not work. Barclay asked me to recycle the winch and I again switched on and off. This did not work. I recycled twice more and after that time the winch again worked and the man and Key were brought onboard.

I commenced to move forward and turn into the direction of Mallacoota whilst Barclay secured the winch and closed the rear door. I fully checked my instruments and noted that Mallacoota was 65 miles away on a heading of 298 degrees and that the Global Positioning System indicated a time interval for arrival of 45 minutes. I had 80 minutes of fuel onboard. After flying for 30 minutes I again noted that we had 30 minutes to Mallacoota and that I now had 50 minutes of fuel onboard. I was now becoming concerned as the figures were not adding up and we were not able to see land at all. Continuing the flight it became more and more of a concern to me that we may not reach land with the fuel state available. We eventually sighted land and I was continually trying to calculate what options were available to us. I reduced the power demand on the engines to a point where we maintained our speed but at the minimum power required in an effort to conserve as much fuel as possible. At a point to the South of Gabo Island where I thought was our best use of the prevailing winds I turned to the right using the wind to my advantage to very quickly position us within easy reach of land. At this point we had 10 minutes to Mallacoota and 12-15 minutes

fuel available. I then flew along the coast prepared to land at any point when I felt that our fuel was about to be exhausted. I was able to stretch our fuel to enable a landing at the Mallacoota Football oval at 8.15 pm with approximately 5 minutes of fuel remaining and arrangements were made for an ambulance for our patient who was suffering bad hypothermia and head injuries.

Key, Barclay and myself alighted from the helicopter immediately after I had shut it down and we stood together looking at each other, not saying a word and shaking from the shock and the adrenaline rush we were feeling after such a harrowing and frightening experience. Shortly after the ambulance arrived and we transferred the man, Mr John Campbell of Seattle, Washington, from the helicopter. A large crowd of onlookers had gathered and as we moved Campbell they broke out in cheers and clapping. We did not fly again that night.

The next morning we were tasked by Sergeant Mostard and AUSSAR to assist in the search area which now covered an area of approximately 4,000 square miles (8,000 square kilometers) and involving some 38 aircraft, 5 of which were helicopters, one navy ship and passing civilian ships. We were tasked to an area to search for the yacht 'B52' which was missing and unaccounted for. We became airborne at 6.55 am and headed to our allotted search area which was approximately 60 miles East of Mallacoota. At about 7.50 am we were redirected to the yacht 'Midnight Special' to assist with its evacuation. This yacht was 55 miles to the East of Mallacoota and taking on water. Another helicopter was due to arrive before us and as we were enroute we heard on the radio that they had winched 8 people off and that there were 4 remaining for us to winch. The weather conditions had eased to 60-65 knot winds and a swell of about 40-50 feet. The cloud was now at about 1500 feet and no rain showers.

We located the yacht 'Midnight Special' and immediately went into the winching of the 4 remaining crew who were all aged in their 50's - 60's that were left on board. Senior Constable Key was again lowered into the water. Key had volunteered to continue as the winch crewman again even after the events of the night before.

We were not able to winch from the yacht itself because it had been dismasted and there was a large amount of rigging in the water around it. Again trying to hold a position over the area of the yacht was almost impossible due to the conditions and I was continually being coned by Barclay in to position.

After 3 had been winched Barclay instructed me to fly around and have a break because Key was not fit to again be winched until he had a short break. Key was out of breath and vomiting sea water. I also was beginning to struggle with the hover and needed a short time to relax and regain my composure. At the completion of this circuit we again positioned near the yacht and winched the last male.

As the final winch was completed and the rear door secured I commenced our return flight to Mallacoota. Enroute Key stated that whilst winching up the last male he observed the yacht sink and disappear under the water. All 4 males were suffering hypothermia, minor injuries and facial and hand cuts and abrasions.

At 8.25 am we landed at the community center at Mallacoota oval and all 4 males were treated by ambulance officers and Red Cross personnel. Shortly after arriving at Mallacoota we were again tasked by AUSSAR to search for the yacht 'B52' as an EPIRB signal was being received approximately 40 miles to the East of Gabo Island.

At 9.58 am after refueling and reorganizing the helicopter we departed for the search area. On arrival over this area we assisted the Channel 2 Helicopter from Sydney in the search. I conversed with the Pilot of this helicopter on the radio and tuned an aircraft radio to the distress frequency and attempted to narrow in on its location. Barclay and Key positioned themselves on either side at the rear doors and visually search for any signs, such as debris, the yacht itself, life rafts or persons in the water. The EPIRB signal was very weak and I was able to narrow it down to a very small area of approximately 50-100 square metres. We were not able to sight anything at all and I believed that the EPIRB was just under the surface as we were not even able to sight it. After conducting a very thorough search of the area and advised AUSSAR via radio that nothing was sighted. We returned to Mallacoota as Key was becoming ill and vomiting up straight sea water. He stated that he could no longer carry on as an effective crew member.

On arrival at Mallacoota at 10.44 am we briefed Senior Constable Rim and he replaced Key as the next crewman. We had also received a message from our office at Essendon Airport that a relief Pilot was enroute and he would be arriving at Merimbula Airport at 1.00 p.m. for a briefing and changeover.

At 11.15 a.m. we again departed Mallacoota for a search area which commenced 20 miles due East of Eden and extended out to 50 miles extending to 20 miles to the South. This was a part of a number of search areas being covered by another 4 helicopters in an effort to locate the yacht 'Winston Churchill' which had been missing for approximately 16 hours and had not been heard from. We ran East /West legs of this search area and when we needed fuel I headed for Merimbula so that a Pilot changeover could be carried out at the same time. During this search we observed the yacht 'Business Post Naiad' with one of the two deceased persons lying on the rear deck. We also located a life raft which was unoccupied and partially shredded from the conditions it had been in. Conditions had eased some what to 20-30 foot waves and 20-30 knot winds with clear sky.

We arrived at Merimbula at approximately 12.45 p.m. where I briefed Pilot Constable Jameson on our current task. I then remained at Merimbula and rested whilst the helicopter completed the previous search pattern. At about 2.30 p.m. the helicopter returned to Merimbula and refueled. I then returned to Mallacoota with the crew and enroute we were advised that we were stood down and could return to Essendon. We landed at Mallacoota, refueled, packed up all our equipment and returned via Latrobe Valley aerodrome for fuel to Essendon.

I have found this experience to be very moving yet terrifying. At times I was very concerned for our own safety and in fear of losing our lives on some occasions. I have since had 2 evenings where I have woken in my sleep visualizing the events of those 2 days and coming to grips with the emotional effects. I was a crewman on the helicopter in 1987 when hit by Julian Knight with a high powered rifle. That event still returns to my memory regularly and I am sure that this event will remain with me for a long time and even more vivid than Hoddle Street.