

 **A View from the Top**
Chief of staff addresses current issues

Airman

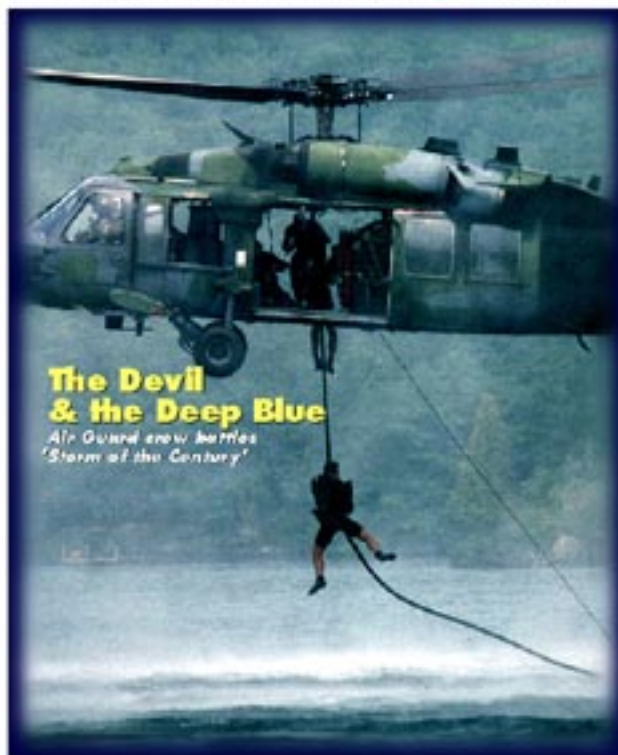
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Airman

The Devil & the Deep Blue

Adrift in a raging sea, N.Y. Air Guard crew struggled to survive the 'Storm of the Century'

Battered by a howling gale, the HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopter shuddered and shimmied while it skimmed over a swirling sea that boiled like a witch's cauldron. Inside the chopper, pararescueman Tech. Sgt. John "Mickey" Spillane stared at the bubbling broth and thought, I'm sure glad I'm up here and not down there.



Little did he know. ...

At around 3:30 p.m. on Oct. 30, 1991, the crew of Jolly 10 – a five-man Air Force combat search and rescue team – lifted off from the Francis Gabreski Air National Guard Base in Westhampton Beach, N.Y. The mission: Save a lone Japanese yachtsman foundering in rough waters 270 miles southeast of Long Island's coast.

During the three-hour hop, the chopper sucked down several thousand pounds of fuel, gassing up twice in flight from an HC-130 Hercules. On the return trip, the helicopter would need to “hit” the tanker twice more.

[CONTINUE . . .](#)

by Tech. Sgt. Pat McKenna

photos by Tech. Sgt. Ken Wright



Pararescuemen from the 102nd Rescue Squadron fastrope into Lake George, N.Y., during "waterworks" training. Such training is invaluable when it comes to real-life rescue missions, as the crew of one HH-60 Pave Hawk learned.

Arriving on scene, the crew quickly surmised that any rescue attempt would be nearly impossible. Seventy-foot seas, 80 mph gusts and darkness made diving into the drink a risky venture for Spillane and fellow pararescueman Tech. Sgt. Arden “Rick” Smith. Furthermore, in the lashing wind, flight engineer Staff Sgt. Jim Mioli didn’t think the aircraft’s winch and 200-foot hoist cable could compensate for the quickly rising and falling waves.

The crew decided 45-year-old Mikado Tomizawa stood a better chance in his 35-foot sailboat riding out the storm than leaping into the churning Atlantic for a rescue. So they scrubbed the mission, directed the HC-130 to drop Tomizawa a raft and survival gear, and both plane and helicopter wheeled about for home.



[Click here for caption](#)

Although Spillane felt certain they’d done the right thing (a Romania-bound freighter picked up Tomizawa the next morning), he still didn’t like retreating. In his business, you never leave a man behind. His comrades shared this sentiment, embracing the search-and-rescue motto: “These things we do that others may live.”

Spillane, an athletic man with piercing blue eyes, lived an adrenaline-charged life, and as a citizen-soldier, worked full-time as an NYPD scuba diver. Nothing fazed his unflappable partner, Smith, a brawny, professional “PJ” (short for pararescue jumper), who doted on three young daughters. Mioli, the bachelor of the bunch, recently left the active force as a crew chief so he could fly with the Guard. Up front, Capt. Dave Ruvola, a former enlisted PJ and expert pilot, silently commanded the respect of the other men. In the seat next to him, co-pilot Capt. Graham Buschor, a stocky, one-time Merchant Marine, kept the crew laughing with his wisecracks.

Riders on the storm

Immediately after aborting the rescue attempt, the thirsty Pave Hawk refueled a third time, and the crew of Jolly 10 scheduled a fourth and final rendezvous that would top off the tanks and ensure safe landfall. Soon, the visibility and cloud ceiling began to drop. And 10 minutes before rallying for the planned pit stop, the copter plowed into a brick wall of wind.

Unbeknownst to the fliers, they'd run smack dab into a freak storm spawned from three colliding weather systems, including the remnants of Hurricane Grace. The nor'easter not only ambushed the airmen, but also caught the entire East Coast off guard, even surprising weather forecasters, some of whom later dubbed the tempest the "Storm of the Century."

At the chopper's controls, Ruvola and Buschor, both wearing night-vision goggles to see in the pitch-black night, wrestled to keep the "Jolly Green Giant" straight and level, while in the back, the three enlisted men strapped in and buttressed themselves for what Mioli called "Mr. Toad's Wild Ride."

Fighting a headwind of 80 knots, the helicopter inched along at a ground speed barely equaling 40 mph. Without warning, the craft would plummet 300 feet straight down from turbulence, which created negative G's. Maps, papers, clipboards and anything else not battened down floated around the cabin. Helmeted heads banged off bulkheads, and several airmen suffered their first case of "air sickness."

"The aircraft was doing things without input from the controls," said Ruvola, in the deadpan, understated manner of military aviators.

Mioli, however, put it another way. "We were getting the [tar] beat out of us."

Soon, however, the herky-jerky ride would become the least of their worries. When Ruvola pulled in behind the HC-130 to refuel, he gaped in disbelief at the plane's 81-foot gas hose as it whipped around like a severed, sparking powerline. Normally, the veteran pilot popped the helicopter's probe into the funnel on the first or second try. Not tonight, though. For nearly an hour, Ruvola attempted to connect with the 3-foot-wide basket, flying high and low in search of smoother air, but to no avail. The pilot would've had a better chance threading a needle on

the back of a mad bull than linking up with the lashing hose.

Ruvola offered his co-pilot the controls, but Buschor declined, saying, “Are you kidding me? If you can’t do it, there’s no way I am.” To make matters worse, on several occasions the aircraft’s drogue threatened to entangle the Jolly Green’s rotor assembly, which, in Buschor’s words, “would’ve dropped us out of the sky like a rock.”

In the back of the helicopter, the three men exchanged worried glances. “I didn’t need anybody to tell me we were in trouble. We were two hours from land with only an hour’s worth of fuel left,” Mioli said.

“Things were going sour fast,” Spillane said. “When a half-dozen tries turned into a couple of dozen, I knew we had a big problem. We needed that fuel. Either we got it or we were going in.”



Running on empty

With 20 minutes of fuel left, Ruvola waved off the tanker and peeled away, making the call to ditch. Flying at 5,000 feet above sea level, the pilot didn’t like the prospect of flaming out in the clouds and free-falling a mile to Earth. He liked his chances better in a controlled descent.

As Ruvola swooped downward, racing against the clock, Mioli scanned over the ditching procedure checklist, which he eventually abandoned to ready the life raft, while Spillane and Smith calmly and methodically inspected their survival gear.

“We didn’t have time to think about dying,” Ruvola said. “When you’re in a situation like that, you’re focused on the next second, the next minute, the step-by-step procedures you’re going to take to get yourself out of the situation you’re in. We didn’t have time to worry about anything else.”

In the meantime, Buschor began issuing a mayday over “Guard,” a radio channel reserved for distress calls, relaying the helicopter’s coordinates to anybody who’d listen. More than 15 miles away, the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Tamaroa heard the airman’s SOS, replying, “Sit tight. We’re coming to get you.”

Thirty seconds after Ruvola brought the helicopter into a hover, the left engine wheezed, coughed and flamed out. “What a disheartening sound,” Buschor said. Ruvola knew the remaining No. 2 engine, sputtering on fumes, wouldn’t last much longer, so he ordered his crew to abandon ship, “Get out! We lost No. 1!”

Radar altimeter readings seesawed between 10 to 90 feet off the deck, which meant some of the waves towered 80-feet high. Buschor flipped on his night vision goggles, so he could time his jump to land in a wave crest, and then leaped. In the back, Spillane sidled up next to Smith, who sat in the left door, legs dangling over the edge and staring down at the void below, darker than the inside of a coffin.

“I’m sure he was trying to size up the waves, but all we could see was blackness,” Spillane said. “I put my hand on his shoulder, wanting to tell him, ‘Let’s stick together,’ but then he jumped, and I followed.”

That’s the last time anybody would see Smith.

Meanwhile, Mioli pushed the raft overboard, it inflated, and then he watched it disappear into “this black hole – the abyss.” He slowly backed away from the door and sat back down. “I couldn’t bring myself to jump in, not after what I saw,” Mioli said.

At about 9:30 p.m., Ruvola – believing the helicopter empty – cut power to the lone, fizzling engine and crashed into the waves, 60 miles from the coastline. Frigid water rushed in, flushing Mioli out a rear door, while in front, Ruvola quickly unbuckled himself, pushed open his own door and clawed his way to the surface. After emerging from the deep, the pilot inflated his “life preserver units,” small air bladders underneath the arms of his survival suit, and shortly thereafter, he



spotted Mioli. The sergeant, relatively new at his job, had forgotten to put on his Mustang survival suit, an insulated coverall that protects against the elements. In the 55-degree waters, Mioli might not make it through the night. Recognizing the NCO's predicament, Ruvola relinquished his hood and gloves to the airman so he could better retain body heat. The pilot then tethered himself to Mioli with parachute cord and told the flight engineer to wrap his legs around Ruvola's waist.

“Not wearing my survival suit was a big mistake, one that almost killed me. And it's one I won't make again,” Mioli said. “When I saw [Ruvola], my spirits picked up. And after I got my legs around him, I wasn't going to let go.”

Nearby, Buschor witnessed the sea swallow up his helicopter in one big gulp like the Biblical sea dragon, leviathan. Soon after, tsunami-size waves swept him away from his companions. Every 20 to 30 seconds thereafter, an eight-story breaker would crash over him, sucking him down to unfathomable depths. In the murky maelstrom, he tumbled and thrashed like a bug in a blender.

But it wasn't long before he and the others got the hang of the ocean's tortuous ebb and flow. The routine: Take 10 breaths or so, hold it, brace for a mountainous wave to engulf you, flail under water for 30 seconds or more with bursting lungs, swallow a bellyful of saltwater, resurface, retch, gasp for air and then get set for the next round. Even on the surface, the airmen never drew a clean breath of air, as a constant cross-fire of ocean spray strafed their faces.

In deep water

A few swells away from Ruvola and Mioli, Spillane writhed in excruciating pain. When bailing out of the copter, the PJ lost body control in midair and awkwardly fell, as he says, “a long, long way down,” maybe 100 feet or more. The impact cracked four ribs, fractured both wrists, broke a lower leg bone, bruised his pancreas and nearly burst a kidney, which later ballooned to the size of a football. For several minutes, the disoriented New Yorker didn't know the who, what, where, when or why of his situation, only that he was in dire straits. “Because of my training, I automatically kicked into survival mode,” the sergeant said.

Then he caught sight of the life raft and paddled to it. He tried righting the capsized raft several times, but gusts kept snatching it out of his hands. Finally, a cold blast picked up the rubber raft and kited it away. Not much later, the PJ spotted strobe lights bobbing off in the distance. Although he knew the flashing beacons belonged to his crewmates, he hesitated to swim toward them. “In my condition, I’d have only been a burden to my friends and weighed them down,” Spillane said. “But again I remembered from survival training that there’s strength in numbers. Joining them ended up being the best decision of my life.”

Spillane, a certified paramedic, immediately recognized the shivering and shaking Mioli was suffering from the early stages of hypothermia. Mioli said, “In the beginning, I didn’t really have a lot of time to think about being cold, because we were getting pounded so bad. Then later on, I don’t remember much, because I was slipping in and out of consciousness.”

Around midnight, more than two hours into the ordeal, a small Coast Guard jet, an HU-25 Falcon, got a “good tally” (pilot-speak for spotted) on four strobes in the water: Buschor’s and those belonging to the pod of three airmen. Twenty minutes later, a Coast Guard HH-3 Pelican helicopter arrived. But the Pelican pilot faced even worse conditions than those of the Jolly 10 crew. When the helicopter crew, based out of Cape Cod, Mass., tried lowering their hoist basket, the wind shot it straight back toward the tail rotor, and it was quickly retracted. For 40 minutes, the Pelican hovered over the struggling Guard crew, but it too ran low on fuel, had to surrender to the storm, and return to the safety of land.

“While I could empathize with the pilot and knew he’d never be able to rescue us, my heart still sank when he left,” Ruvola said.

Said Spillane: “The helicopter was a glimmer of hope. When it flew away, I thought, ‘That’s it. There goes our last chance.’ ”

But Ruvola, a former ocean lifeguard, marathon swimmer and PJ who once swam the sound from Connecticut to Long Island, tried to buoy up the spirits of his men, encouraging them to hang on.

“There was no whining and no crying,” Ruvola said. “We only spoke of survival and what we were going to do next to live. I made a conscious effort to say nothing negative, everything was positive. I told them we would get picked up.”

Buschor, on the other hand, didn't have a support system. Almost a mile away and alone, he had a chance to mull over his fate. “Your mind isn't blank for six hours,” Buschor said. “You think about things like, ‘Am I going to make it until tomorrow morning?’ and ‘How much life insurance do I have?’ and ‘What are my two kids going to wear for Halloween tomorrow night?’ ”

Then at around 1 a.m., Buschor saw lights slowly approaching him. At first, the co-pilot – his eyes glazed and salt-rimmed – thought he was dreaming, but it was searchlights from the cutter Tamaroa. In the storm-tossed seas, the 205-foot, 1,600-ton ship pitched and rolled like a rubber ducky in a fat man's tub. As the airman alternately sank in troughs and rose in crests, he'd look up at the bottom of the ship's hull for an instant, and then, peer down at the deck the next. Buschor thought, “How in the world am I ever going to get on this ship?”

The “Coasties” on board had the answer. In unison, they started yelling, “Swim! Swim!” Says Buschor, “So I swam like my life depended on it, because it did.”

After several tries to reach the Tamaroa, Buschor finally made it beside the cutter, but now he needed to get up. At one point, he scudded toward the bow, got sucked underneath, popped up on the other side of the ship and then got pinned against the hull by the wind. Coast guardsmen tossed over a cargo net, which Buschor grabbed. Then, a dozen men reeled him in, fishing the captain out of the water he'd been chilling in for almost five hours. His body core temperature had dropped to 94 degrees.



“I heard on the intercom: ‘Survivor recovered, survivor recovered,’ and then everybody screamed,” Buschor said. “It was quite a feeling.”

5 went in, 4 came out

Buschor's crewmates, however, continued their battle to survive nature's wrath. When Ruvola spied the Tamaroa's searchlights on the horizon, he began shooting pen flares into the sky to signal the ship. The cutter pulled along broadside to the men and stopped dead in the water. Again, the Coasties draped the cargo netting over the side, drifted down on the airmen and began shouting, "Swim! Swim!" But Mioli, weary and delirious, and Spillane, busted up and bleeding internally, couldn't muster the strength to draw near to the ship. And Ruvola wouldn't desert his men.

Finally, a wave brushed them close to the starboard side of the ship and the trio seized the netting, but as the seamen began hauling them up, the exhausted Mioli lost his grip, fell backwards and pulled the still anchored Ruvola into the water with him. Spillane, who had released his armlock with Ruvola, hung on and made it over the gunwale onto the deck.

Once back in the water, the pair washed backwards toward the stern of the ship and its grinding propeller. Said Ruvola, "I thought, this can't be happening! We can't go through all this just to end up hamburger meat. Luckily, the Tamaroa had a very disciplined crew that notified the deck to neutralize the propeller."

After sloshing around the stern to the ship's port side, the pair snagged the netting, which the seamen tossed to them, and wrapped their hands and fingers around the mesh. Then Ruvola turned to Mioli and screamed in his face, "Jim, you don't get second chances often in life. This time you hold on! You don't let go! Understand!?!?" Mioli obeyed his orders, clinging onto the net as the Tamaroa's crew heaved them aboard. The rescuers were rescued at nearly 3 a.m., more than five hours after their ordeal began. Mioli's core body temperature had plummeted to 90.4 degrees, and the other two airmen fared only slightly better. The following day a Coast Guard helicopter medevaced Spillane to the Atlantic City Medical Center, where he spent a week in intensive care.

The other three men stayed out to sea with the Tamaroa, because their mission wasn't finished. You never leave a man behind, and Smith remained missing. For three days, the Tamaroa scoured the seas for the Air Force NCO, until the skipper had to put his ship ashore to rest his tired men. Meanwhile, the Coast Guard, Navy, Air Force and civil authorities joined forces to mount an intensive search

that covered 33,000 square miles. After 10 days, they found nary a trace of the airmen and the search was suspended. Smith was presumed lost at sea.

“We’ll never really know what happened to Rick,” Spillane said. “I think about him and what might’ve happened to him often. Considering the extent of my injuries, I think he died when he bailed out and hit the water.”

Said Buschor: “I still don’t understand why. Of all people, why Rick Smith? He was the toughest PJ I knew. Why did I make it and not Rick? I was the runt of the litter.”

Shortly after the incident, an investigation board cleared the crew of any fault, and the airmen subsequently received medals for their actions. Today, all four surviving crew members still serve and fly with the N.Y. Air National Guard in Westhampton Beach. The surviving four men, who share an unspoken bond, have never considered finding a safer, less stressful line of work.

“The Guard does more than just meet on weekends and drive around in big trucks,” said Spillane, 41, now a master sergeant. “When the authorities call, we’re the last hope for many, and we take that very seriously. Sometimes, it’s dangerous work, and Rick and I and the others, we all know the risks.

“But we think it’s worth it. We save lives.”

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