

Did anyone order a pizza?!

It can't be that long ago, can it? - In January 1980 my mid-pacific evening at the movies was disturbed by a very sick pumpman who stumbled into the saloon and vomited blood all over the Chief Steward's shoes!

The title words above were, believe it or not, the first words spoken by a US Air Force Paramedic as he was fished out of the water by the crew of our port lifeboat. He had just flown over a thousand miles, parachuted out of a "Hercules" aircraft from 900 feet and swum around in the ocean waiting for our little orange boat to pick him up. Surrounded by shark repellent and orange dye, he was not alone as he had two fellow paramedics with him, but they were still swimming.

At the time it was all rather serious - the pumpman was only semi-conscious when we broke off our passage from Panama to Japan and headed for San Diego. This was the nearest port, with Honolulu around two thousand miles in the opposite direction.

The United States Coastguard AMVER organisation had been alerted on the night of January 3rd and had provided us with some medical advice, but on the morning of the 4th the patient's condition had deteriorated and the prognosis was pretty serious. There were no ships on the AMVER computer within 600 miles of us, so a request was made for immediate medical assistance. Superb co-ordination between our Radio Officer, San Francisco Coastguard and the US Air Force Paramedic Organisation produced an agreed rendezvous with a C-130 Hercules and a medical team for the evening of 4th January.

While the paramedics were on their way, we prepared for their reception with a life-raft, scrambling-nets, a pilot-ladder and two lifeboats all being made ready. Shortly before 1700 local time, plans were completed and the ship was stopped. The aircraft was sighted at 1720 and the port lifeboat launched under the command of the Chief Officer, with the Second Engineer, the Bo'sun and a senior seaman.

The aircraft made several circuits of the ship – once to spot us, again to gauge the wind and finally, at 1745, to drop the team and their equipment. The weather was not ideal and it was approaching sunset, but by 1757 everything and everybody had been spotted and hauled aboard. By this time the ship had approached to within 100 yards of the lifeboat, which deftly came alongside and transferred its precious cargo before dropping back to the falls for a rather "hairy" hook-on and retrieval in a significant swell. By 1837 the ship was again making full-speed for San Diego.

The Paramedics immediately began examining the patient while their equipment packs were washed off with fresh-water by willing hands. The medical-pack parachutes and strobe markers disappeared around this time, but so later did the odd company flag, so as regards souvenir hunting it was "honours even" – at least at this stage!

The patient was immediately hooked up to two intravenous tubes and his vital signs radioed to the flight surgeon in the aircraft. Over the next 48 hours a procedure known as "gastric lavage" was carried out, and more than eight litres of fluids were pushed into the pumpman - including serum, saline and lactose solutions. His condition was still giving concern the next morning, so a further air-drop was organised to supply more fluids.

This time it was a Coastguard Hercules which came out, and at 1600 on the 5th January the ship was stopped again, making lots of smoke, to await another parachute. Although we prepared for all eventualities, the aircraft was asked to drop the package with a drogue, and long trailing lines attached. The Second Engineer made a big grappling-hook and, with all hands deployed along the deck under cover of the flying-bridge, we waited for the huge aircraft to complete the drop. After one trial run at 300 feet, she came in from aft to forward and flying into the wind. In a superb demonstration of bomb-aiming she dropped the package to land about ten feet ahead of the ship, from where it was easily grappled and brought aboard together with more souvenirs!

With fresh fluids to keep him going, the patient's condition began to improve and by the morning of January 6th he was considered to be out of danger. Originally it was planned to send a Coastguard Helicopter out to pick him up once we were within range, but this was now not considered necessary.

At 0600 on January 7th our pumpman and his paramedic team were transferred to a Coastguard launch off San Diego, and he was taken to the Balboa Naval Hospital for tests and further treatment for a ruptured oesophagus. We resumed our voyage to Japan and the paramedics returned home to Sacramento.

To the Staff Sergeant and two Sergeants it was "all in a day's work", though it was, they admitted, the first time they had done a medical parachute drop "for real". For the pumpman it meant the difference between life and death, and to the ship's company and perhaps all who go to sea, it meant a heartfelt gladness that such organisations and such people are willing and able to help.

The pumpman arrived home in the UK on January 13th, and the paramedics arrived in Sacramento minus virtually every badge or scrap of braid from their jump-suits. They had in return a company flag, a "Woolly Pullie" each and a framed letter of thanks, signed by everyone onboard.

One evening about a week later I received a rather formal invitation to the Officer's Wardroom. On entering I was confronted by loud music and complete darkness, except for the co-ordinated flashing of several high-intensity strobe lights and a mounted exhibition of a range of USCG and Air Force Insignia. Honours Even? – hmmm!



Phil Messinger

(Phil was Captain, or "Ship Manager" of the British Chemical Tanker MV "Anco Empress" from 1979 to 1981).