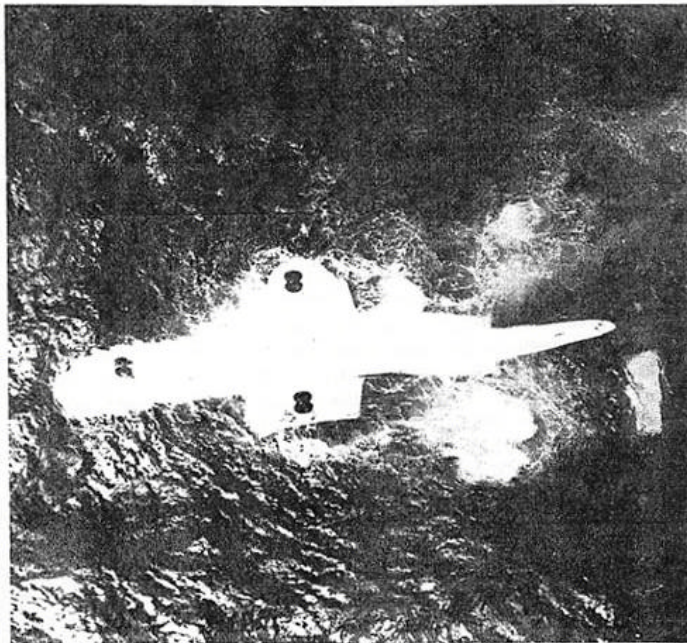




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A first-person account. A crewmember tells of his experience in a major aircraft accident.

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In the summer of 1977, a crew of rescuers became rescuees when their Jolly Green suffered a mechanical failure that necessitated a water landing. Lieutenant Larry D. Shepherd was the CH-3's copilot during the emergency. Our thanks to Lieutenant Shepherd for sharing his first-person account of the mishap with us.—Ed.

I had been with the rescue detachment at Tyndall for about two months when the accident happened. We'd started off the day with an alert-crew briefing by Major Knitter, our AC. I hadn't been out of flight school too long and I was glad that he thoroughly briefed the drone recovery and SAR procedures.

I hung around the det for several hours working on my additional duties. About 1315 the crash phone rang; in a few seconds someone came running down the hall yelling, "We've got a mission, scramble the Jollies!" I couldn't believe it was real—I honestly thought the guy was kidding.

We picked up some sketchy information from the SOF before going to the aircraft. A Marine F-4 crew had punched out over the Gulf of Mexico. Last known position was the Tyndall tacan 141 radial at 71 DME; there was an F-106 orbiting the crash site.

We ran to the Jolly Green.

I strapped in fast and started the scramble checklist. In a minute we were taxiing to the pad for a hover check. Major Knitter made the takeoff at 1325, ten minutes after the phone rang.

We climbed to 500 feet and turned toward the Gulf. I set up radio contact with rapcon and the aircraft orbiting the crash scene. We picked up a few more details: both F-4 crewmen had ejected, but only one parachute had been spotted. Major Knitter briefed ditching procedures and swimmer deployment and completed the presearch, smoke-drop and hoist operator checklists. He then asked for another Jolly to help us with the search.

We started losing the tacan signal so we climbed to 5,000 feet. As we approached 71 DME, the AC put the aircraft into a descending right turn. We were passing 3,000 feet when Sergeant Stalzer, our flight mechanic, spotted the survivor's red smoke.

The Major ordered a smoke marker dropped. We continued our descent; by the time we reached 500 feet the smoke was completely dissipated. The winds were blowing about 20 knots and the seas were churned to seven to nine feet by Hurricane Anita. We soon spotted the survivor about half a mile away in his one-man raft. We dropped another

smoke near him and came around to deploy Sergeant Rosler, a pararescuer. I had a hard time keeping the survivor in sight because his black life raft and dark flight suit didn't contrast with the rolling ocean. His white flight helmet helped some.

We dropped more smoke for reference and hovered over the downed pilot. Sergeant Rosler was lowered to the survivor but had trouble getting him into the rescue hoist because of the high seas. In a few minutes, a thankful Marine was aboard. We spotted an oil slick and some debris nearby and began our expanding-box search pattern for the back-seater.

"I smell smoke," the Major noted.

The flight mechanic replied, "Just lit up a cigarette."

In about five seconds Sergeant Franklin, our other PJ, told us that heavy smoke was coming from aft of the transmission area. Major Knitter immediately directed smoke-and-fume-elimination procedures and turned the chopper north toward land. We tried opening the personnel door and pilots' windows to clear the smoke, but it didn't work. Sergeant Stalzer suggested lowering the ramp and closing the cockpit windows. The AC approved; I opened the ramp with the cockpit control and the smoke disappeared rapidly.

I set the transponder to emergency and called Jolly 09, who was approaching the rescue site. Major Knitter discussed the possibility of a tail rotor failure with the other Jolly Green pilot. The flight mech said he thought the smoke was coming from the intermediate gearbox. I started the planned-ditching checklist and transferred control of the ramp to the cabin.

Things went from bad to worse. The master caution light came on, showing impending gearbox failure, but no other warning light illuminated to tell us which was the problem gearbox. Sergeant Stalzer and I checked the gearbox-chip-detector lights and circuit breakers. After the second system test, the intermediate-gearbox-chip-detector light stayed on. Major Knitter started a minimum power descent for a water landing.

I ran the gear-up before-landing check and we told Jolly 09 to get ready to come pick us up. The AC turned the helicopter into the wind and landed it smoothly from a 15-foot hover.

In the water, we kept the engines running while the pararescuemen brought the life raft to the per-

sonnel door. The H-3 was rolling quite a bit so Major Knitter ordered the gear put down and the anchor thrown out to help stabilize the helicopter. Sergeant Stalzer lowered the ramp and checked the tail pylon while Sergeant Franklin stepped out onto the loudhailer to look at things from the personnel door. Both confirmed that smoke was coming from the upper tail rotor gearbox cooling vent. The area around the intermediate gearbox was scorched. The flight mech closed the ramp to keep the water out.

In a couple of minutes I felt high frequency vibrations; the gearbox was about to fail. Major Knitter ordered us to abandon ship and I started the APU and shut down the engines. In the back, the PJ's and flight mechanic put the raft in the water and got the survivor aboard. As I was leaving my seat, the AC applied the rotor brake. The helicopter lurched to the left. I hung on. Major Knitter reapplied the brake and the blades stopped. I was the fourth person out of the aircraft; Sergeant Franklin and Major Knitter weren't far behind. As I swam, I looked back at the chopper and saw that it was rolling with the rough seas—enough for the main gear to come out of the water with each wave.

Jolly 09 was on the scene and picked up the men in the water as they swam toward the raft. Within eleven minutes, we were all safely aboard our brother Jolly Green and on our way back to Tyndall.

The story of the Jolly Green doesn't end with the crew's recovery to Tyndall. A few hours after the ditching, heavy seas rolled the helicopter inverted. Drone recovery boats were severely hampered by the squalls fostered by Anita and couldn't reach the belly-up chopper till the next day. Immediate salvage was impossible because of the rough seas and poor weather. The next morning the helicopter sank. Ships and planes returned to their bases to wait out the hurricane.

Six days later the submerged H-3 was located by using special sonar equipment; it was raised from the ocean floor by the USS Escape and taken to NAS Pensacola for analysis. Teardown revealed a failed intermediate gearbox.

Thorough preflight preparation helped the aircrew handle the in-flight emergency effectively.

As the accident board stated in its report, "The skill and flight discipline exhibited by the crew during the emergency contributed to preventing injury or loss of life to those on board."—Ed. ✪