

## Honorable Mention, 1978 MAC Flying Safety Writing Contest

**Y**ou couldn't ask for a nicer, more beautiful afternoon. The sun had been out all day and the clouds weren't due to roll in until after dark. It was on days like this that Second Lieutenant Charles R. Ellison was glad that he was the owner—along with the bank—of a beach-front home. It was a perfect day, with little to do but enjoy the sunshine.

"Beep, beep, beep! Alert crew report to rescue ops. You are scrambled at this time. Verify message by telephone. Rescue ops clear," chirped the pocket pager.

Charlie grabbed his books and beach gear and headed for the house. His wife, Julie, met him at the door. "Crew rest is over, Honey," he called. "Phone the squadron and tell 'em I'll be there in ten minutes."

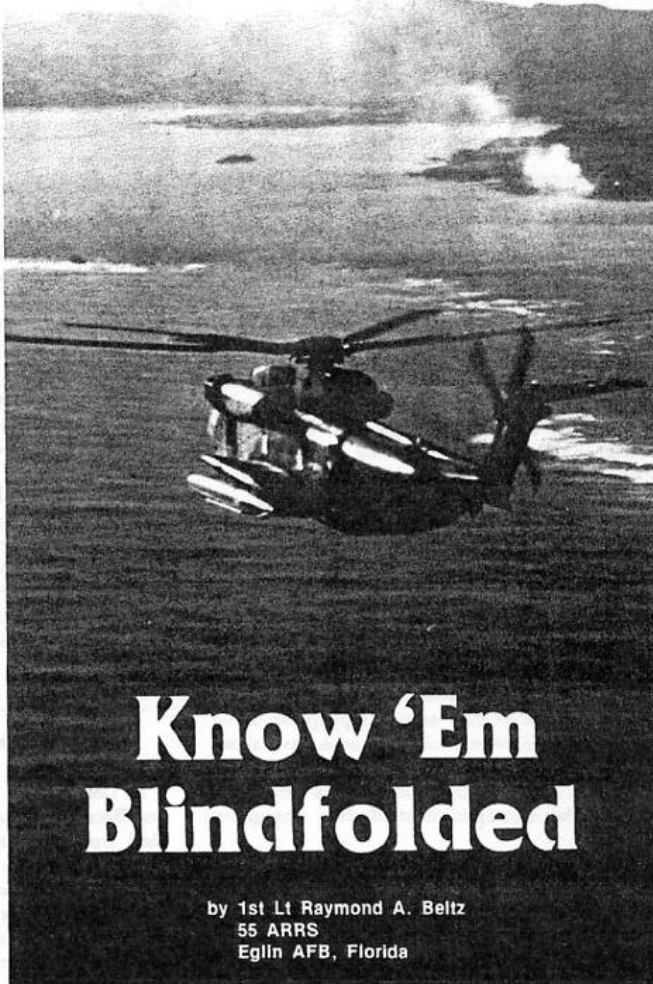
Before Julie hung up the phone, Charlie was out the door and in his car. Being the newest lieutenant in the unit, he was very excited—this was his first turn on alert.

Arriving at the squadron, he headed downstairs to rescue operations. It was now 14 minutes since the alert call.

In short order the aircraft commander, Captain Ed Fuller, the flight mechanic, Sergeant Milton Balke, and the pararescue specialist, Airman John Serchik, arrived. Lieutenant Colonel Clifford stepped to the podium and opened his information folder.

"Captain Fuller, we have a request to send a chopper up into the mountains to pick up a mother and her premature baby," charged the colonel. "After takeoff, you will fly over to the base hospital and

**If Charlie was going to live to see his wife again,  
he had to get out of the sinking aircraft.**



# Know 'Em Blindfolded

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pick up two medical people to assist in the evacuation. As soon as you have the passengers aboard, you'll fly them to Capital City Muni. There, an ambulance will meet you and carry the mother and baby to the University Medical Center."

When Charlie arrived at the H-53, the medical gear had already been secured and seconds later, Captain Fuller hustled out after making a final weather check. Quickly the crew ran the checklists, started engines, called for the clearance and were on their way. It was a short hop to the hospital where a doctor and med tech boarded with a portable, self-contained incubator.

The journey to the mountains took about an hour. As they entered the landing area, the low level maps were unfolded, and the checklists and briefings were completed. Ellison navigated the H-53 to the cabin.

As soon as the wheels were on the ground, Airman Serchik and the medic grabbed the stretcher with the incubator attached and headed for the cabin. The doctor had already sprinted to the rustic house. Some 15 minutes later they returned with the baby and mother. As soon as the incubator was secured and the mother placed comfortably on a litter, they were ready to take off.

The flight to Capital City Muni was uneventful once they had safely departed the mountain clearing. It was well after dark when they landed from a VOR approach to the main runway.

On the ground, the medical team accompanied the mother and child to the hospital while the crew waited. The local flying service people seemed to know what they were doing as they helped Sergeant Balke refuel the Super Jolly, so the officers retired to the snack bar for a bite to eat and a call to Flight Service to check the weather for the trip home. The doctor and medic returned about an hour later with good news. The patients were doing well.

Charlie finally relaxed a little. The flight home was along a Victor airway that paralleled the coast. Only the lights outlining the shore were visible as the copilot flew the H-53, trying to keep everything centered and looking forward to getting home. He now had a real rescue story of his own to tell.

Suddenly, an explosion reverberated through the Jolly Green. The first bang was followed by two lesser blasts. Charlie instinctively lowered the collective. He glanced at the engine instruments and saw that all the number-two indicators were winding down. The realization hit him with sudden force—they had just lost an engine. He swung the helicopter toward the shoreline.

"I have the aircraft." Captain Fuller stated calmly as he began calling out bold-face procedures, "Throttles—full forward."

Seconds later, the left engine started to surge. The instruments jumped wildly as the turboshaft whined and banged. Before the AC could roll back the throttle on num-

ber one, it popped and flamed out. Now the crew was locked in a race with gravity as the captain began an autorotation toward the coast.

Passing 2,000 feet the right-seater punched off the aux tanks to lighten the descending helicopter. Charlie called out 500 feet and made a last call to center, "Mayday, mayday, mayday! Rescue 476 is ditching at the Softown 067 radial at 29 miles. Six souls on board."

Watching the radar altimeter, the AC flared the helicopter, reducing the airspeed to near zero. Now the Jolly Green followed a near-vertical path downward. The rotor rpm increased until the collective was pulled in. Captain Fuller leveled off a few feet higher than he had intended to. The big chopper held a hover momentarily and then dropped into the ocean like a rock.

The helicopter hit the water with enough force to blow out the right and left chin bubbles. The transmission cover broke loose and slid forward over the cockpit. A section of the number two engine EAPS came off and struck the crew compartment door. Water rushed into the Super Jolly.

"Is everyone okay? Sergeant Balke, is everybody all right in back? Charlie, how are you?" Captain Fuller yelled above the din. Affirmative replies came from the back. The crew and passengers were shaken but uninjured.

"We're taking on too much water to float for long. Let's get out of here. We'll meet at two o'clock off the nose,"



the AC ordered. "Sergeant Balke and Airman Serchik, see to our passengers. Any quest — ." At that second, the power failed. They had no interphone communications and very little light.

The aircraft was filling rapidly and settling deeper into the ocean. In the cargo compartment, Sergeant Balke pulled an emergency light from the cabin wall and assisted the passengers toward the rear of the Jolly Green. The two crewmembers opened the top of the cargo ramp. Water had already reached that level and the brine flowed into the cargo compartment. They pushed out the 20-man raft and pulled the inflation handles.

Only a foot of airspace remained in the cabin. Instinctively, the medic inflated his LPU, and instantly bobbed to the ceiling. He began to struggle to free himself but the water wings kept him pinned. Serchik saw that he was panicking and swam to him. The man twisted and turned in a desperate attempt to free himself. The P.J. grabbed him from behind, pulled his knife and cut open the LPU. The airman then guided the shaken medic from the copter to the raft.

In the same few seconds, Captain Fuller and Lieutenant Ellison were also getting out. Charlie felt as if he were watching a movie, seeing the action in slow motion, but unable to do anything. Fuller pulled the handles on the escape hatch and hoisted himself out into the water. The lieutenant was just beginning

to react; his seat harness was still on and locked as he turned to open the window. In the darkness with the water swirling around his shoulders, he became disoriented. He couldn't even remember where the quick releases were! One thought kept running through his head: it didn't happen this way in training—it didn't happen like this!

In desperation the copilot began to pound the side window. He then heard the other crewmembers calling his name from outside the aircraft. A vision of Julie flashed through his mind. Then recollection of a page in the Dash One showing escape exits. He began to calm down. Like fog had lifted from his mind, he quickly knew what to do. He grabbed the escape handle and pulled. He swam outward and upward, away from the sinking helicopter. When he broke the surface, he saw the most welcome sight of his life, a hand reaching out to help him.

The crew and passengers of Rescue 476 spent only a short time in the water before they were picked up by a pleasure boat. But during that brief period, Charlie had time to reflect on what had happened to him.

Later the mishap investigation proved that a mechanical malfunction had torn apart number two engine just before contaminated fuel caused number one to flame out. The crew received lots of attaboys for a job well done.

As for Charlie, whenever he's asked about the accident, his tale sounds more like a safety briefing than a

war story. He speaks of the lessons he learned, "In any kind of water emergency, before it's over, you're going to be in or under the water. If it happens at night, you'll have difficulty seeing—if you can see at all. Add panic and the possibility of the aircraft being inverted, and you are set up for a fatality—maybe yours. Know your emergency exists. Know where they are and how they work. And know 'em blindfolded!"



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lieutenant Raymond A. Beltz, a native of Johnstown, Pennsylvania, graduated from the University of Pittsburgh in 1975. While at Pitt, he was the editor of the Air Force ROTC monthly paper. He entered Helicopter Undergraduate Flight Training at Fort Rucker, Alabama, in April 1976. While in flight school, Lieutenant Beltz experienced an engine failure and forced landing. He graduated in December 1976 and is currently assigned to the 66th ARRS, Eglin AFB, Florida, where he is additional duty ground safety officer.