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Atmospheres



**Coast Guard Rescues at Sea: The Perfect Storm**

Stephanie Watson  
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In late October 1991, two storms collided over the Atlantic Ocean, creating one of the most monstrous meteorological events in recorded history. The impact of two storms merging into one was so unusual, National Weather Service meteorologist Bob Case dubbed it 'The Perfect Storm.'

**The ones who were lost**

As the forces moved into place for this spectacular event, a commercial fishing boat named the *Andrea Gail* left Gloucester, Massachusetts and headed out into the Atlantic on a swordfish run. The boat and its six crew members had no inkling of the storm they were destined to face. On their way home, they ran full-on into gale force winds and 50 to 100-foot seas.



The Andrea Gail

There was no call for help, no dramatic rescue at sea. The boat simply disappeared into the storm. The *Andrea Gail* and her crew were never heard from again.

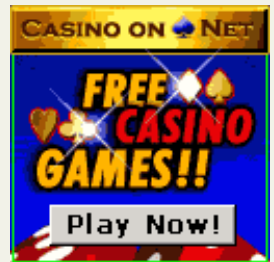
**The ones who were saved**



Also caught out in the storm was a thirty-two foot sailboat, the *Satori*, bound for Bermuda. The Westsail sloop cast off from Portsmouth, New Hampshire on October 26 with experienced sailor Karen Stimpson at the helm. A day later, the *Satori* found herself in the middle of a building wind and restless sea. By then the boat was too far off the coast of New England to turn around.

By Monday the 28th, a gale was blowing at full force and the small sailboat took a beating amidst 20-foot high

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swells. Stimpson's fear began to show. Finally, on the 29th, the battered *Satori* had had enough. As furious white capped swells leapt around them, the three people on board made a desperate mayday call. After several attempts, their plea for help was answered.

A Coast Guard helicopter and the cutter *Tamaroa* were sent out to rescue the floundering vessel. But once they arrived on the scene, rescuers knew there was no way they could lower a basket to the boat with winds whipping as fast and furious as they were.



"We decided the best course of action was to have these people slip into the water," remembers Lieutenant Commander Kristopher Furtney, operations officer on the *Tamaroa*. "They [a rescue team] were going to lower a rescue swimmer from the helicopter. He would assist them into a basket-type design and hoist them one by one into the helicopter."

Veteran rescue swimmer Dave Moore plunged from the helicopter into waves 50 to 60-feet tall. An excellent swimmer, Moore was nonetheless tossed about in the massive swells. It took a monumental effort to reach the three *Satori* crewmembers bobbing nearby. One by one, he helped them into the basket, which was then lifted into the hovering aircraft. The crew of the *Satori* was safe.

The Coast Guard had successfully completed its mission, but there was still another rescue ahead that night. In the midst of the *Satori* effort, the Air National Guard District One Command Center in Boston received a distress call from a Japanese sailor stranded 250 miles out in the Atlantic. Only a National Guard H-60 helicopter, which can be refueled in flight, would be able to make the journey.



Copter controls

When the H-60 arrived on the scene, the wind was blowing so hard that it whipped the helicopter back and forth in the sky. The wind and rough waves made any rescue attempt too dangerous. The H-60 turned back for base, planning to return in the morning when seas and sky hopefully had calmed.

By then, the helicopter was running low on fuel, and needed to refuel in mid-air to make it back to base. Pilot Dave Ruvola lined his aircraft up with the tanker and moved in. The storm was blowing the two aircraft around wildly, and after three or four attempts, Ruvola knew he couldn't tackle the delicate maneuver. The only option was to abandon the helicopter.

Three of the crewmembers jumped into the water, while Ruvola and flight engineer Jim Mioli stayed behind to guide the helicopter into the churning sea. Several miles away, the Coast Guard *Tamaroa* picked up their call for help.

"So we put all four engines on the line, brought it up to a full bell, so it would go as fast as it could now that we had the people in the water," recalled Captain Larry Brudnicki, commander of the *Tamaroa*. "And with that, we were able to get about 3 knots. Now you can walk faster than that."

In the ocean, the helicopter crew faced waves 40 to 100-feet high, and sea temperatures a frigid 58 to 60 degrees Fahrenheit. Unless they were rescued soon, they wouldn't last long.

"One of these waves took us so deep and so violently that I remember underneath the wave, while we were getting beat up, my flight boot got sucked off my foot," said Mioli. "And I just remember underneath the wave thinking, 'oh my God, I can't believe that just happened!'"

It took the *Tamaroa* close to 5 hours to travel the 15 miles to where the helicopter crew had fallen. When they arrived, Brudnicki knew it was going to be another round of wrestling with the elements to complete the rescue.

The *Tamaroa's* crew fought to get a rescue net over the side of the boat. Two of the men in the water were able to grab hold, but Mioli and Ruvola were swept away by a huge wave. As the two men drifted towards the back of the boat, the crew brought the propeller to a stop and made another attempt. Mioli, badly battered by his fall, was having a hard time holding on.

"I remember grabbing him and getting right up in his face and screaming to him to tell him that this is going to be our second attempt," recalled Ruvola. "I said, 'Jim, you don't get a second chance at life too often. When you get on this ladder you hold on to it with everything you got.'"

After 6 hours at sea, all but one of the helicopter crewmembers was rescued. The search for rescue swimmer Rick Smith went on for several days, but he was never found.

The 'Perfect Storm' had been a perfect nightmare for those caught out at sea, and those who made it out owed their lives to the valiant efforts of the Coast Guard and Air National Guard rescuers.

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