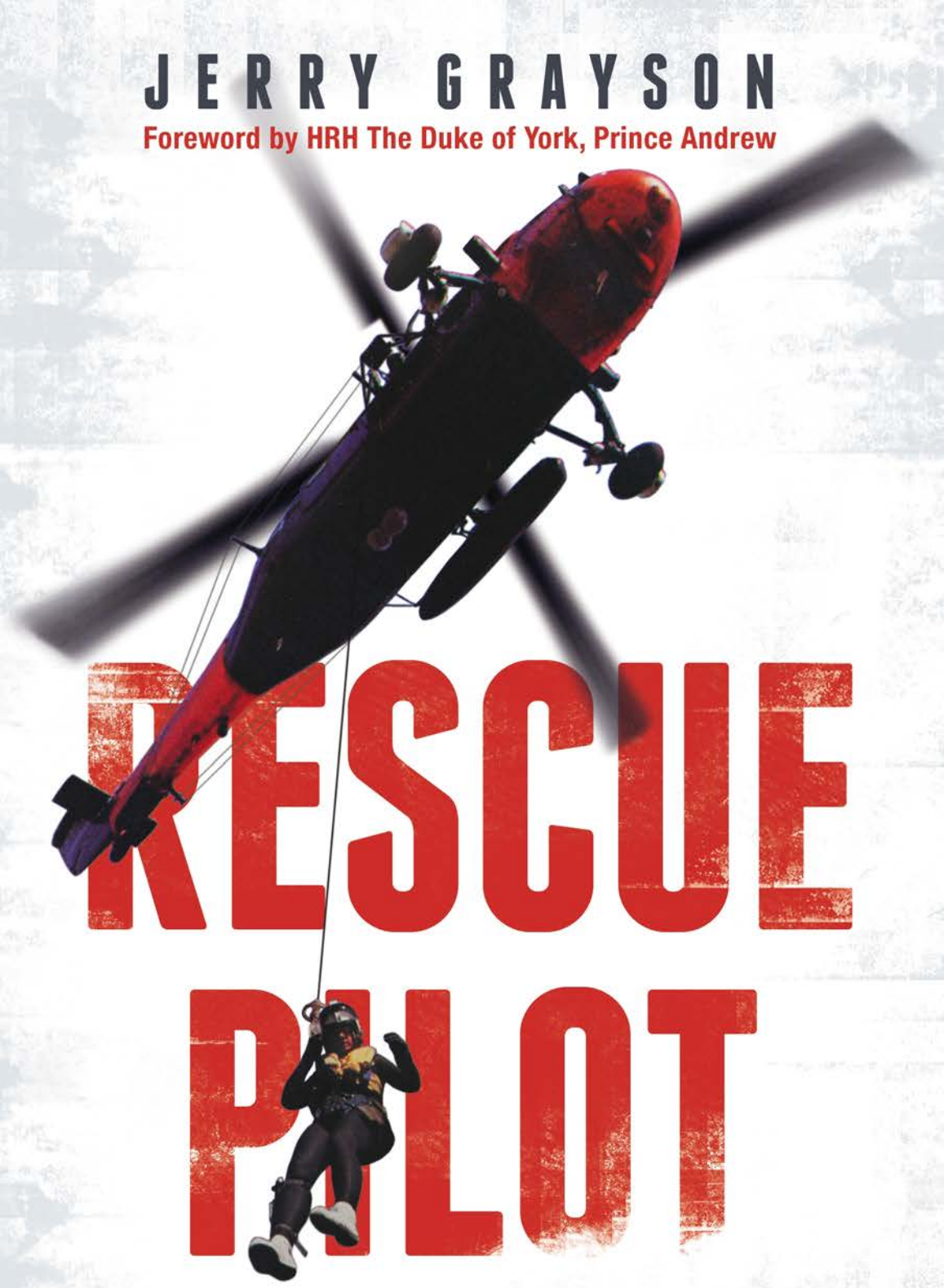
JERRY GRAYSON

Foreword by HRH The Duke of York, Prince Andrew



RESCUE PILOT

CHEATING THE SEA

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CHEATING THE SEA

JERRY GRAYSON, AFC

ADLARD COLES NAUTICAL

BLOOMSBURY

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Dedicated to the memory of John Carpenter, a superb helicopter engineer who taught us all the true meaning of bravery.

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BUCKINGHAM PALACE

This book by Jerry Grayson, who became the youngest Search and Rescue pilot at the age of just 17 and went on to have a remarkable aviation career within both the Royal Navy and also in the film industry, acts as a reminder of the bravery and selflessness of the crews who put their lives at risk to save others.

Leadership, teamwork and training are the key to success in many fields of endeavour and Search and Rescue flying is just such an endeavour that requires these skills and I know from my own service the importance of all three in creating an effective helicopter crew.

Reading this book I am also reminded of the undeniably strong camaraderie of aviators as well as the wonderful sense of humour that arises in the face of adversity. In recording and celebrating this invaluable work of Search and Rescue, I am certain that this book will be an inspiration for the next generation of pilots.

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PROLOGUE

I WAS BORN IN A FOREST near the ancient southern English castle town of Arundel. My mother hadn't known she was pregnant until the day my father delivered me on the table of their modest home, our caravan *Toad Hall*. School was no fun at all; there were so many more interesting things happening just beyond the gates of what I perceived to be a prison. My mum cried when JFK was shot. My dad drove in the Monte Carlo rally. The Rolling Stones were arrested in the next village for some misdemeanour; I didn't understand what the story was about, and I certainly didn't appreciate that we were living through a period of sex, drugs and rock and roll that would change the world forever. All I knew was that everybody else was having a lot of fun while I struggled at school with trigonometry and hormones.

By the time I was twelve I knew I wanted to fly. By the time I was fifteen my maths teacher had regretted admitting that he had a passing interest in aviation: 'Grayson's application to the syllabus can be variable; his discourses on three-dimensional air-traffic systems are a bit much for me at eight o'clock in the morning.' I must have been the worst kind of nerd as I sat for many freezing hours at the end of Gatwick runway glued to the speaker of a little transistor radio, listening to the airliners being seamlessly sequenced to the ground.

By sixteen I had applied to the Royal Navy to fly helicopters. Walking through the doors of Dartmouth Naval College in 1972 might have been a culture shock for the other fifteen officer cadets, most of whom had already lived a bit of life. For me it was just a natural continuation of the schooling process, except that it was designed to end in a cockpit and was therefore worth taking seriously. By seventeen I was able to quote the old self-deprecating military joke: 'Just last month I couldn't spell pilot and now I are one.'

For eight happy years, until 1980, I wore a naval uniform as part of the Fleet Air Arm. I learned how to use a helicopter to chase submarines, and then how to use one to save lives. I entered Civvy Street still with a helicopter on my back. These are my stories. They don't always stick to a strict timeline, because memory doesn't work like that. I've never been one to sweat the dull stuff first; there are too many exciting moments in life that have to be chased down right away. If aviation has taught me nothing else it has taught me that sometimes those highlight events chase *you* down, and often at times when you're least expecting them.

01

A GREEK PLAY

GOING TO WORK WAS BOTH A THRILL and an ordeal. It was only about a seven-minute ride from home but there was always a feeling of adventure. I would scan the skies as I drove along for an idea of what the day might bring. By the time I'd reached the airbase perimeter track I could make a pretty good guess at the type of work ahead of us. The ordeal came from having to crawl out of my pit in darkness. We had to be in, dressed and ready to go by dawn, which was no small feat in the middle of summer.

Ten days before Christmas 1979 it was very obvious what type of work would come our way. The drive in took much longer than usual as I skirted fallen trees, bits of shed and various other obstacles, some of which were still airborne. Anybody at sea was going to have a very hard time today.

I should explain that 'work' for me consisted of flying a large helicopter with 'Royal Navy' in big letters down the side. It was painted in dark blue with a wide orange dayglo stripe around the

tail and an Ace of Clubs high up the side of the main airframe. This colour scheme and logo denoted the helicopter as being one of thirteen similar aircraft, all part of 771 Squadron, responsible for Search and Rescue (SAR) duties around the coast of Cornwall. Our base was the Royal Naval Air Station Culdrose, the biggest helicopter base in Europe, just outside the small town of Helston, deep in the heart of the West Country.

When wearing formal uniform, which I rarely did, the two gold rings around my sleeve denoted the rank of Lieutenant, Royal Navy, and the proudly worn wings placed me as a pilot. Today I was in jeans and sweatshirt, easy garb to throw on in the dark. I would be changing into flying clothing as soon as I reached the squadron office block.

Culdrose was in an appalling state. The airfield was dominated by about a dozen huge oblong hangars. Each hangar could hold about ten big military helicopters and they still looked quite new and shiny – or they had the day before. Overnight the winds had risen to storm force, torn little openings in the roof of each hangar, then systematically set about ripping them to pieces. The walls were still intact but many of the roofs were being peeled back, sheet by sheet. I couldn't believe the size of the corrugated rolls of metal sheeting steadily marching across the grass, down the runway and off into the woods nearby. Each one must have weighed more than a ton.

Our own two hangars had fared better than the rest of them. Our squadron nestled a little way down a valley and was slightly protected by the other squadron hangars further up the slope, but this did mean that we were being bombarded by bits from all the other hangars as they broke up. I chose to break all regulations and park my car in the hangar.

Putting the duty SAR out on the apron was out of the question. It would have been destroyed in minutes. So we prepared it under the big eerie sodium lights inside while the metal-upon-metal

sound of the storm raging outside was amplified in the cavernous building.

We didn't have long to wait before the call came in. A Greek cargo vessel, the *Skopelos Sky*, had radioed for immediate assistance: *In position three miles North of Trevose Head. Listing badly. 15 crew members on board.*

Dick Harvey, our coastguard officer, continued listening to the radio as we tried to work out how we were going to get airborne. The Padstow lifeboat was in the process of launching but I didn't fancy their chances of achieving anything in these winds. The waves were likely to be enormous up on the north Cornish coast, a place where, in previous centuries, regular shipwrecks had provided unexpected bounty for the local communities. I had no idea what was on this particular ship and didn't much care. There were fifteen lives at stake and, assuming we could pick them up, we could only carry about seven at a time.

I decided to start up in the hangar. This would be dangerous and would require a good deal of preparation. The big Wessex rotor blades had a diameter of 56 feet and created their own local storm once they were up to full speed. Anything loose in the hangar had to be tied down or moved away. We set about agreeing a series of hand signals from the guys on the ground to coordinate getting the aircraft out of the door and airborne before we were poleaxed by low flying tin.

There were two good reasons for wanting to start in the hangar. The first was obvious: it would reduce the time we'd have to spend on the ground with metal raining down around us. The second has to do with not chopping your own tail off. A helicopter rotor blade is a very carefully made component; it must be both strong and incredibly flexible. When the rotor is turning at full revs each blade gets a good deal of its strength from the centrifugal force, but at low revs it's a different story. At the front of the helicopter very strong

gusts have been known to blow the tip of a blade right down to the ground. Rotor blades don't like tarmac – and the feeling seems to be mutual. However, the damage is nothing compared to a blade that's blown upwards at the front. In that event the blade whips back down as it travels round to the rear of the helicopter and smartly chops the whole tail section off. This sends bits of helicopter travelling off by themselves at very high speed, at which point the safest place to be is in the machine rather than anywhere within about a half-mile radius.

While we vacillated over how far out of the hangar we wanted to be before attempting a take-off, Dick Harvey called on the radio. Two RAF helicopters had arrived on scene and were starting to winch up Greek crewmen. This was all the impetus we needed. About 90 seconds later we had cleared the bomb site that used to be Culdrose and were happily being blown towards North Cornwall.

The 'friendly rivalry' between the Navy and the RAF would be better described as 'restrained antagonism'. It goes back a very long way and it's regularly reinforced. The Navy, the Marines and the Army all get on pretty well together. It's something to do with all living in cramped, cold and often wet, dirty and uncomfortable conditions.

The old jokes – such as how the rest of us have traditions but the RAF has been around for less than a century and therefore has only habits – continue to be told from generation to generation. Not many people are aware that there were naval aviators flying from the decks of ships long before anybody had thought of having an air force. An aeroplane was just seen as being another piece of the ship's weaponry.

The wariness with which the Navy regarded the RAF was particularly bad in the mid-1970s. At government cabinet level the senior Crabs (I'm still not sure why we called RAF officers 'Crabs', but we all did) had convinced our lords and masters that aircraft

carriers could be phased out and the RAF could henceforth provide the air cover in any theatre of war. Big funding was therefore going their way and we were shortly to be denied our best assets. It's interesting that this was first put to the test five years later in the Falklands, which were so far away from anything that the RAF could fly from that it rather proved the Navy's point. The Crabs were forced to hang around at the mid-Atlantic staging post in the Ascension Islands while the other three services sailed south to get on with the job. At some point the Crabs decided they could help by bombing Port Stanley airfield, at that time in control of the Argentinians. Thirteen big aircraft fuelled a single Vulcan bomber, and then each other, in a complex leapfrog dance to enable them to fly that far, until the bomber reached the target and delivered one of its bombs into the middle of the runway. If only we'd still had the earlier generation *Ark Royal* with her Phantoms, Buccaneers and Gannets to complement the fantastic job done by the Harrier jump jet boys (some of whom, to be fair, were Crab pilots on exchange to the Navy). Thankfully the lesson was learned – it was obvious to those of us at the coalface all along – and has since been partially rectified with the new *Queen Elizabeth* returning to the original concept of a full-sized aircraft carrier.

It was in this context that we headed north to Trevose Head. The Navy SAR basically covered everything around the Cornish coast and sometimes strayed into Devon. The RAF from Chivenor covered most of North Devon and Somerset, and another RAF base at Brawdy covered the south-west peninsula of Wales. Brawdy had sent their bright yellow Sea King with all its sparkly new gear, while Chivenor had sent their dear old Whirlwind, a venerable lady of the skies even older than our Wessex. The Whirlwind wasn't really up to the task in these conditions and soon went home. Once on scene we bowed to the superior Sea King and settled down to watch the fun. A chopper uses far less fuel when it's sitting on the ground with

its rotors turning than it does chugging around the sky so we picked ourselves a nice spot on the clifftop and just sat there… and sat there, and sat there. We couldn't stop our rotors in the 70 mph winds; even if we'd survived the shut-down we'd never have got the blades going again without chopping the tail off. So we sat and watched.

Pretty soon there wasn't much to watch. The Crab Sea King had pulled ten seamen off and the Greek vessel's master had decided that he and four others would stay on board to try to save the ship. The Crabs, therefore, went home for breakfast while we watched the *Skopelos Sky* motor up and down the bay. She was certainly listing and I didn't envy the boys left on board. Every wave was a giant one and with each traverse of the bay it seemed she was coming closer and closer inshore.

Two and a half hours went by, then the Sea King came back from breakfast and relieved us on the clifftop while we went for some fuel at RAF St Mawgan. On our approach to the airfield I emphasised my call sign, '*Rescue* Two One,' and reiterated the request I'd made as we set off. I wanted a fuel bowser positioned on the runway, clear of any buildings, with its hose laid out and its engine running ready for my arrival. I then wanted a rotors-running (hot) refuel, followed by a bucket of water to throw down my engines. This last request was to clear the thick build-up of salt on my turbine blades, which I knew was happening because my instruments had been showing a steady increase in the internal temperature of the twin Rolls Royce jet engines.

The controller at St Mawgan politely informed me that RAF regulations clearly stipulated that this was contrary to airfield standing order number blah blah blah. I tried another tack: 'St Mawgan, this is *Rescue* Two One. Request the name of the officer taking personal responsibility for the loss of five lives in the event that you refuse to fulfil my requirements.' Miraculously the bowser was waiting for me as I started my approach to the runway and,

of course, the man on the ground with the truck was more than happy to do all he could to speed us on our way.

We arrived back at the Clifftop Camp Site For Resting Helicopters and offered to relieve the Sea King. He had, after all, done a great job in picking up ten survivors and I had yet to earn my supper. We received a very kind offer from the Sea King in return: 'Would you chaps like a coffee before we go?' Not half! It was now early afternoon and we'd been scrambled at 0920.

'Thank you, we'd love one. Would you like my crewman to come and get it?'

'No problem. We'll just prepare it and I'll send one of our chaps over with it.'

Prepare it? I had thought he meant he was going to leave his spare thermos behind, but, no, this new beast apparently had some form of catering facilities on board.

After about five minutes of glancing across at this huge 10-ton yellow machine running on the clifftop beside us we saw its big rear door slide open and an RAF crewman jumped to the ground. A colleague carefully passed something down to him and he began the extraordinary task of struggling through storm-force winds balancing a tray on his arm. We couldn't believe it. The surreal nature of the event was compounded when he arrived at our own cabin door. Not only had he successfully brought us four cups of freshly brewed coffee, but there were also four individually wrapped chocolate Club biscuits.

We thanked the Sea King, who duly departed and we settled down for a long afternoon.

Usually we were a crew of three: pilot, diver and crewman, but on this occasion we'd brought the duty doctor with us as well, Sub Lieutenant Waugh. Together the four of us sat, munched, and watched the *Skopelos Sky* continue her fight in what must surely be a losing battle. I was lucky. Not only did I have some of the best

professionals on the job with me, but they were also very good company. My diver was Dave 'Wally' Wallace (of whom much more later) and my crewman was Detlef Wodak – on exchange from the Federal German Navy. They'd both been in the job a lot longer than me.

When two or more sailors are gathered together it is decreed that they shall tell stories to each other. I had tears rolling down my face as one story followed another. Through all this I couldn't even see them as I was high up in the pilot's seat holding on to the controls and the other three were way down beneath me in the main cabin under my seat.

Finally, after about five hours sitting in the vibrating seat, the coffee had worked its way through and I was dying to relieve myself. As a procedure carried out in a helicopter, this is not an easy thing. For a start you're dressed in an all-encompassing dry suit, or 'goon suit' as it's universally known. Tight rubber seals surround the wrists and neck, with little rubber booties that fit inside your flying boots. It's an unpleasant garment at the best of times, but after five hours it begins to feel like torture. You can't leave the controls while the rotors are turning; you have to 'fly' the aircraft on the ground. Thankfully the designers had thought of this, even if they hadn't made it easy.

First you have to extricate the required bodily part from the confines of the goon suit, then you have to join it to the pee tube, which is clipped just beneath the pilot's seat. If you use the pee tube the rule is you have to clean out the collection bag yourself when you get back to base. This was not regarded as a fair task to give to the engineers on return. As a result, the pee tube wasn't often used if it could be avoided, but I had no choice.

I undid the horizontal zip and, with something of a struggle, achieved part one of the procedure. Next I unclipped the pee tube and brought the metal contraption up on to my lap. It resembled

the old speaking pipes from ancient war-time movies, with a huge stainless steel lid secured with a catch. Meanwhile I carried on the conversation. If the others suspected what I was up to they would have put the on-board camera to good use and I'd never have heard the last of it.

Finally the preparations were complete and all the pain disappeared as I relaxed into the pee tube. Three seconds later an ear-splitting scream came across the intercom followed by other screams, this time of merriment. Mid-conversation the unsuspecting Hauptbootsman Wodak had experienced a hot wet feeling down the back of his neck, then all over the top of his helmet and visor as he struggled to extricate himself from his seat belt. The other two were, of course, clutching their stomachs too hard in mirth to be of any use to him at all. I later learned that a slightly unfortunate sequence of events had led to an engineer declaring: 'We haven't got a replacement pee bag but it won't matter because the pilots never use it anyway.'

Once we'd all settled down again we started to do a few calculations. It would be growing dark before long and there was no way we would be able to lift the five remaining Greeks off in darkness. I'd be putting Wally at too much of a risk. We nipped off to St Mawgan for another quick suck of fuel, having told the Greek captain that we'd be back shortly to begin picking up him and his crew. He couldn't possibly want to stay overnight; it had become increasingly clear that *Skopelos Sky* would be on the rocks before morning. We flew back to the ship and began a bizarre and fragmented conversation over the radio as we tried to convey the seriousness of the circumstances. The conversation went on for a good half hour and so I landed again on the clifftop. We felt uneasy. Whatever we said to the captain, he kept asking for just a little more time to try to save the ship. The rapidly approaching darkness and the difficulties we were undoubtedly going to have in getting them off would sucker us into a set of circumstances in which we'd either lose one of us or several of them.

We tried increasingly blunt statements, but to no effect. I didn't blame him. I was more worried that something was getting lost in translation and I wasn't getting the message across. In the end I resorted to bluff. We took off from the clifftop and I said my farewells to the captain over the radio. 'We wish you great luck and, if you're still afloat in the morning, we'll come back again.' No response. I asked Wally and Detlef to wave from the back door of our aircraft as I flew past the ship one last time. We kept going towards the mainland and held our collective breath. Sure enough, as we crossed the foaming coastline we heard *crackle, crackle, crackle*, 'Rescue Two One we come off now, we come off now please.' I hauled the aircraft round in a tight turn and put the nose down. It was time to go to work and we would have to move fast.

The winds had abated a little. We'd seen them gust to over 110 miles per hour at various stages during the afternoon but they were now down to about 75 mph. In itself this is not a problem for a helicopter; it's just like flying forwards at that speed and not moving across the ground. The problems come from the turbulence, the waves and particularly the various bits of steel that extend upwards from the deck of any ship. The turbulence wasn't too bad as the wind had come round to north-westerly and therefore wasn't hitting any lumps of land before it hit us. The waves were pretty impressive, though, and were throwing the stricken vessel in all directions. With each plunge into a trough the ship would also roll quite viciously, causing the obstructions to flail about as if trying to swat us down from the sky.

I began an approach, wriggled my bottom around in the seat to get comfortable and settled myself into a position where I would be able to keep my body still for the next half hour. Hovering over a ship in a storm is a peculiar activity. Everything around you is moving; the only bit you've got any control over is yourself, so you sit very still

and don't move your head. In this way there's no fluid moving in your ear canals and you can rely on yourself as a primary reference point. Beyond that your eyes take in all the other movements that are going on around you and your brain tries to arrive at some sort of conclusion from the information coming in. The waves are going up and down – no problem, let it happen. The ship is going up and down, and side to side – try to anticipate it and go with it, but don't chase it. The horizon is moving – this is very bad as it means the aircraft is changing its attitude (meaning nose up or down) and will shortly therefore change its position.

Amid all this you are about to lower a man at the end of a thin cable on to the deck of the ship. The deck is the one bit of the ship that you can't see because it's directly beneath you, and this is where the teamwork comes in. During the final stages of the approach the crewman starts talking to you – continuously. He's giving you a steady flow of information about your height (which should be reducing), your speed (which should also be reducing) and your position in relation to the bit of the ship that you want to hover over. Once you've arrived in the hover he must keep up the flow, otherwise people are going to get hurt. The crewman's voice replaces your eyes as the primary information source and you sit very still, turning words into pictures in your head before then translating those pictures into tiny movements by each of your hands and by both of your feet; all of which are on the controls. Try it at home: swing a yo-yo around over a spot on the floor and try to keep up a continuous chatter about where the yo-yo is in relation to the spot. Now keep it up for thirty minutes. Oh, and by the way, remembering where Detlef had come from – try it in another language.

We lowered Wally to the deck, me maintaining a hover and Detlef operating the hydraulic winch while all the time keeping up his chatter: 'Height's good, you're drifting forward, come back three, come back one, steady, come up two, you're drifting

left, come right two, one, steady. Hold that height, the diver is secure, he's at the door, raising the winch, lowering the winch, come back slightly and come up three feet, diver's going down, move forward three to avoid the crane, the diver has ten feet to go, move forward two and left one, five feet to go, hold your height, hold your hover, the ship is coming up now, holding the winch and the diver is three, two, one feet, he's on the deck.'

Now is the most dangerous bit. If you move at all you've got a big problem. If the cable goes taut you'll pull the diver off his feet and probably smash him against some steelwork. If the cable goes slack it is controlled entirely by sod's law which says that it will wrap itself securely around the ship's steelwork. The only way out of this is to immediately cut the cable with an explosive bolt. Do that and you've probably said goodbye to all the people you were trying to pick up, plus your diver (and he's usually the one who is going to cook the supper, so you really don't want to do that).

So, once on deck, Wally immediately released himself from the cable and Detlef called for me to come up and back as he rapidly raised the winch. We could now relax a little and watch Wally clutch his way forward across the heaving deck towards the door at the base of the bridge. Every second or third step he had to hunker down as another big green wave came boiling at him. Eventually he reached the door and… couldn't get it open. He wrenched it, he kicked it, nothing. I called on the radio for them to let him in – nothing, no response at all. I descended lower alongside the ship to try to attract the attention of the crew on the bridge but we couldn't see anybody. Wally was now starting to suffer as wave after wave came crashing along the deck towards him. The divers are all as fit as athletes but they soon tire in the cold and Wally had a lot of work ahead of him. We decided to pick him back up and try to put him on the bridge wing, a tiny balcony that sticks out either side of the bridge and enables the captain to see back down the side of his vessel.

Back into the hover, lower the winch, up came Wally and down again he went as I tried to give Detlef the best chance I could of getting him on to the right spot. He did it and we backed away once more. Wally set off into the bridge and came back with his arms outstretched: he couldn't find anybody. It was getting darker and, with nobody at the wheel, the ship was starting to come around towards the south – in which direction lay the cliffs. For the next part of the saga I have to rely on how Wally told it. He didn't want to venture too far into the ship for fear of getting lost. After a couple of minutes the first sailor appeared on the bridge carrying two suitcases. He handed them to Wally and, astonishingly, ran off to finish his packing. By this time Wally's endless patience and good humour was being severely stretched, but at least he was prepared. As the next sailor appeared on the bridge Wally graciously accepted the suitcases, tossed them over the side into the sea below, grabbed the sailor by the collar and clipped him to the harness. A few moments later he was on his way up the wire towards us. He might have to make a little trip to Marks and Spencer later, but at least we'd got him.

Over the next thirty minutes we managed to save four out of the five remaining crew members. The subsequent Coastguard report reads:

> *With the onset of darkness the rescue of the fifth man was abandoned after three attempts when the RAF Sea King with superior hover, flood and winching lights returned to the scene. The Wessex recovered to Royal Naval Air Station Culdrose after a total of 7 hours and 25 minutes of continuous operation. Approximately half an hour later the Sea King winched the Captain off and returned to base.*

What the report fails to mention is that the Sea King's crewman suffered quite badly when the ship rolled that little bit too much and

he slammed against the vessel's side before finally managing to haul off the last man. Not a bad day's work for all of us.

Five years later we were all gathered together again at the Greek Consulate in London's Holland Park to receive medals that had never before been awarded outside of Greece. This was much appreciated, but we had to get special permission to wear a foreign medal. The letter in my scrapbook reads:

Buckingham Palace

Sir,

I have the honour to inform you that the Queen has been graciously pleased to grant you unrestricted permission to wear the Nautical Medal, 1st Class which has been conferred upon you by the Government of the Hellenic Republic in recognition of your services.

I have the honour to be, Sir,
Your obedient servant.

It was to be another ten years before we finally met one of the survivors when *This Is Your Life* honoured Wally with a well-deserved episode. There was much hugging and crying and I still have no idea if the uninterrupted flow from the Greek sailor's mother was in thanks for her son's life or whether she wanted us to go back and find his suitcase.