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Headwinds

We value the individual supremely, and nature values him not a whit.

—*Annie Dillard*

We'd left the storm behind on the way out into the North Atlantic. Now, as we returned in the December cold and darkness, with one nearly dead Ukrainian sailor in the passenger bay, we flew back into it. Suddenly, ferocious headwinds hit the helicopter and yanked the controls nearly out of my hands. The helicopter turned into a berserk rocking horse, its nose pitching violently up, then slamming down. Rain drove against the cockpit glass. It found the openings in the windscreen seals and invaded the cabin, where avionics control boxes, radios, and circuit breakers were all getting wet.

I was wrung out. I'd been flying since before dawn that morning, with almost no sleep the night before, on a mission to rescue the crew of a sunken freighter, *Salvador Allende*, 820 miles at sea south of Newfoundland's Grand Banks.

The aircraft's vibration had worked its way into my hands and feet. Now it was drilling its way into my brain. I didn't know whether I was shivering from my cold, wet flight suit or from the helicopter's shuddering. But we were headed home. We'd taken our last fuel from one of the tanker planes flying overhead and we were bearing down on the coast of Nova Scotia in formation with a second helicopter.

Back in the bay, the pararescue jumper who'd fished the sailor from the ocean was trying to keep the sailor, huddled in a sleeping bag, and loose rescue gear from crashing around the cabin in the turbulence. The flight engineer sat behind us on the jump seat straining to hear sounds of trouble from the jet engines and the transmission that channeled the engines' power to the slashing twenty-six-foot rotorblades. *Jolly 14*, like every MH-60 helicopter, was supposed to get major maintenance after ten hours in the air. We'd been flying for thirteen.

Jolly was the universal call sign for all air force rescue helicopters, followed by the last two of the numbers on its tail. Jolly originated as a nickname; the MH-60's predecessor, the HH-3E, was a big, blunt bird with an engaging roundness, and the air force models all were painted a dull green. Somebody called it a Jolly Green Giant, and the name stuck.

We'd expected as many as seventeen survivors, according to the briefing we'd received before we left that morning. We found just one that day. He'd been in the water almost forty-eight hours when we picked him up seventy miles from where his ship went down. He spoke enough English to tell us the water had been warm. The Gulf Stream had kept him alive, but it had killed his crewmates. The sharks just hadn't gotten to him yet.

It made me sick to see them, the predators tearing at the bodies in the water, and I knew those men were dead because we hadn't gotten there in time. Rescue was like that. I'd been elated at saving one victim and crushed at the same time because we hadn't saved more. There wasn't a man in our crew who wouldn't remember the sight of the sharks attacking the bodies in the water.

Another gust hit. The helicopter shimmied, then dropped two hundred or three hundred feet before I could level it. "Hold your altitude, sir." The copilot's voice came through my helmet headset over the cacophony of rotor and transmission noise and engine whine. I looked at the altitude gauge among the dozens of instruments I had to scan constantly on the control panel and

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reflected how I'd never gotten used to the feeling when the weather takes the bottom out and you're falling through space in eleven tons of metal with no idea of where or when you're going to stop.

It wasn't just the drop. I was becoming frightened. We had been awake for nearly forty hours, and I was fatigued, almost to the breaking point. Can't show your fear, though. Fear's contagious and it can be fatal. It was important to keep focused for the crew and for our families.

I forced my hands to stay light on the controls and slowly climbed back to an altitude of about 500 feet.

Jolly 14 labored and lurched into the headwind, jerking us against our harnesses. The rain kept finding a way in, joining and forming lines of moisture that trailed away from the edges of the windscreen. The severe turbulence we'd hit forced us to fly low. Above 500 feet, the rain changed to sleet and blowing snow, creating the possibility of rotor icing.

We flew for half an hour without speaking, each of us lost in his own thoughts. Mine were of the thrill I always got from taking human beings out of harm's way—more than 250 so far by a rough count—and of the end of my career. It was 1994, I was forty-seven years old, and I'd flown rescue missions for nearly twenty-five years. I sensed that I was nearing the point where I would have to leave the cockpit. I hated deskwork, pushing papers. But I owed it to my wife, Jean, and our two sons to get out before my skills deteriorated—to walk away and not be carried. Too many of my friends and colleagues had lost their lives in helicopter rescue. It is one of the most dangerous jobs there is.