

CAN I GET OUT NOW PLEASE PO? By Phil Henry

The subject of this dit is our ships helicopter GONZO, but it should really be GONZO 2, as our flight original helicopter was swapped for HMS GLAGOWs' in May 82 when we were with the Task Force off the Falklands. You may remember that GLASGOW took a bit of a smacking down South with bomb damage and a few cannon shells through her funnel resulting in her being sent home for repairs. Her helicopter was Sea Skua capable, whereas our GONZO wasn't, so we inherited GLASGOWs' helicopter along with 4 Skuas, a couple of GPMGs and a pile of ammunition to go with them. *(This actually was a bit like coals to Newcastle for the flight as on the way down the SMR had done a good job of liberating half a dozen GPMGs and a shed load of ammunition from the container city at Ascension Island. It also resulted in us being directed to share some of our goodies when we sent our ammunition return to the Task Force weapon coordinator when they realised that we had almost more small arms and ammo than the RFAs!)* So GONZO was really GONZO 2.



Anyway moving the story on to 30 September 82 we were deployed to Faslane as FCS1. My escape tunnel was finally dug and I was due to leave the ship to go to 815 as the EWI, I had returned all my CBs and crypto, more or less completed my leaving routine my bags were all packed. However, fate still had a card or two to deal and would you believe it I got a phone call to tell me that my relief was delayed by 2 weeks and I would have to stay onboard till he arrived. Out of the blue we suddenly got a signal ordering us to deploy to a position some 90 miles to the North West of the Outer Hebrides where a Sorum Russian Tug and a suspected ALPHA class submarine (*brand new in 82*) were operating. As we sailed the weather started to deteriorate and the forecast was not particularly great (*deep joy*), the plan was that we were to join up with a Nimrod who was already on task monitoring the Tug and trying to get contact on the submarine. We were planned to launch when we were about 40 miles from the tug with the ship closing to contact.

We weren't sure what to expect so we decided to fly with a crew of 3 so Fez Parker joined Al Bucknell and myself (*Phil Henry*) to give us lots options. The brief was fairly straight forward we were to close the Datum and get whatever photographs or other information on what the Tug and submarine were doing. Having returned all my crypto I needed to draw some from Charlie Branson but ended taking the months worth instead of just the page of the day (*It was close to the end of the month so it seemed a good idea at the time, got it wrong didn't!*).

So off we went, the weather didn't seem too bad (*I suppose flying down south for the previous 5 months in conditions that were marginal at best for most of the time coloured our judgement*) and even though it was supposed to hold for the time of our flight we didn't know what was coming. We had no difficulty finding the Tug as the Nimrod gave us her position and she stood out on our radar. We started to close and we noticed a slight smell of burning and 2 of our 3 hydraulic gauges fell to Zero. No big deal as we still had one left, but the problem is that there is no mechanical connection from the flight controls and the hydraulic systems provide the link.

Fez noticed that smoke was coming into the cabin from the rear of the cabin so he quickly ripped down the sound proofing and fired the fire extinguisher into the void of the roof. We turned towards Mum (*she was about 35 miles according to my radar*) and put out a PAN call (*I think my voice came out squeaky but got the message out*) telling the world that we had a partial loss of hydraulics, a smell of burning and were returning at best speed, the ship and Nimrod both acknowledged and turned towards us. The next call we got from the Nimrod really made my day as he called that he had us visual and that we were on fire. We had a very short discussion about what to do and decided that we would go for a controlled ditching as we had no guarantee how long we could stay airborne before we lost the final hydraulic system and therefore complete loss of control and an uncontrolled ditching. Al and I had discussed this situation along with all the other possible emergencies that might arise so we had a plan. Nobody had ditched a Lynx at this point and all the videos of the trials that were done indicated that the aircraft would roll to the right and not stay afloat for long. So the plan was that we would come to a low hover Fez would open the starboard cabin door and after deploying the life raft would jump. I would jettison my door and jump clear followed by Al moving clear of us and carrying

out a controlled ditching positively rolling the aircraft to the left ensuring that he would have a clear exit.

I transmitted a Mayday giving Mum our position and stating our intention to carry out an emergency power on ditching. So we started to execute our plan and Fez opened the door and deployed the life raft and as was the practice at that time the lanyard which was attached to a strong point in the cabin floor caused it to inflate as it fell. *(However what I nor Al knew was at that time the sea anchor did not automatically deploy and when it hit the water the wind which had got up to about a Force 5 sent it barrelling away so Fez was left with just his immersion suit and life jacket to protect him and keep him afloat.)* I got out of my seat and on the way out decided to take a look at the roof of the aircraft *(this was partly because I would have to fill out an A25 (accident report form) if we walked away from this one and partly out of curiosity)* and got the shock of my life as the Nimrod had not exaggerated the fact that we were on fire. The whole of the cabin roof from the front of the sliding canopy to the rotor mast was actually alight with bursts of blue flame as the resin in the composite structure boiled out. I sat back down onto the door sill and plugged in my helmet to the intercom *(it had pulled out when I first started to exit)* I told Al 'The fire is a lot F*****G worse than we thought it was and to put the aircraft in as soon as I go!'

I threw myself backwards from what I thought was a height of 20ft but turned out to be nearer 40ft as a trough rolled through just as I started my jump. At this point the adrenalin really kicked in and time seemed to elongate. I can remember the fall seeming to last forever and then the sudden impact and cold of the water (42°F) with the spray from the helicopters downwash as it moved over the top of me. I had inflated my lifejacket as I fell from the aircraft so turned towards the aircraft so see how Al was getting on and to see if there was any help that I could give. I saw the aircraft hit the water and almost immediately it rolled to its left and the blades impacted the swell and seemed to explode into numerous little pieces. I turned away to protect my face *(but what good that would have done if I had been hit by any of the high velocity bits of shrapnel I don't know)* almost immediately I turned back around to see the aircraft on its side and sinking rapidly with Al coming out of the door like a rocket. I could see that his lifejacket was inflated and he set about getting his life raft inflated and thought about doing the same. At this point the sea state made its presence felt as height of the swell became obvious having got up to between 20 or 30 feet and I felt decidedly queasy. The swell also made it difficult to inflate the raft and even harder to actually get into it but the adrenalin helped overcome the problem. The first thing I did after I got into the raft was to look around for Fez expecting to see him in his luxury flat of an MS10 life raft but could not see him or the raft. I swallowed an anti-seasick tablet and then read the label that said they were to be placed under the tongue and allowed to dissolve. I decided to try to bail out the life raft to try to close-up on Al to raft up so started to bail out when the title of this piece came to mind 'Can I get out now PO as I've completed the drill' *(at least the 3 month pool drill made the whole process automatic as looking back I must have been in a certain amount of shock and certainly hyped up on an adrenalin buzz)*. With the raft a little less full of water I paddled as best I could towards Al with him trying to get to me, after what seemed like forever we joined up and after confirming that we were both alright we looked around for Fez and he appeared alongside without his raft. It was only at this point that Al and I realised that the life raft and blown away and that we only had the 2 rafts between the 3 of us. At last we were all together and we had the chance to take stock of the situation. People knew where we were which became obvious as the Nimrod did a slow pass over the top of us and Mum knew our position as I had pushed it out in our Mayday ditching report. At this point we must have been in the water for about 10 minutes and knowing that Mum was about 30 miles away when we ditched and the weather was worsening we reckoned on being in the water for at least another hour before she could get to us. The sea seemed to be getting rougher and both Al and I were being thrown out of the rafts even though we were being stabilised by Fez lying across the top of us to try to keep him out of the water. The Nimrod did another pass over the top of us and deployed a large life raft and with an upwind and downwind buoy joined to the raft by a long lanyard. It wasn't a bad shot but was about 100 yards short and we spent some time trying to get to it but with no luck. *(As an aside unbeknown to us the Nimrod had told the ship that they could only see 2 survivors as Fez's suit was the same colour as the top of our rafts and they missed him until a later pass when they were able to pick him out.)* After about 30 minutes Al swapped places with Fez with him lying on top of the rafts but in truth the 3 of us spent as much time in the water as we did out as the waves kept throwing us out every 2 or 3 minutes. After what seemed like an eternity *(as we had lost track of time as our fantastic aircrew watches had all got water logged and stopped working after we had been in the water for about 30 minutes)* Mum suddenly appeared on the horizon. We fired off some flares and smokes and got really elated when she turned towards us. She seemed to be going at a heck of a speed with a massive bow wave and just slicing through the water with hardly any pitching. Now that all the ship had to do

was get us back onboard which was easier said than done with the swell and wind increasing with every passing minute. The ship launched the sea boat and they did a sterling job of getting us onboard and then to be honest the next thing I really knew we were all standing on Ambuscade's deck and being taken to sick bay for a check-up.

The ship looked after us very well stripping off our immersion suits and putting us into a warm bath which they gradually warmed up to get our circulations going again. Before I got in the bath I got a glimpse of myself in a mirror and I couldn't believe the colour I was, I virtually merged with the grey of the passage way bulkheads. Once we were warmed up we got a quick check up and were turned in to recover from the ditching to being back onboard was about 1 hour and 45 minutes but it had seemed like an eternity.

Once in my bunk I listened to the SRE and was very surprised to hear the 11:30 BBC news telling the world and our families that Ambuscade had lost her helicopter and were not sure of the fate of the crew. I got up and went to the MSO to put an urgent call through to my wife and asked her to let everyone know we were all ok. That done I went back to bed but soon got fed up and phoned Al and asked him if he felt like opening the bar, 'Do bears S**T in the woods!' was a rough translation of his reply, so quick as a flash it was open and a bottle or 2 of whiskey later we were definitely feeling no pain. I understand that Fez was being similarly looked after down below.

Something else which may have had a bearing on the ditching was the nature of the flying we were doing during the Falklands war we were flying continually at our maximum all-up weight and for long periods (*I guess everyone else was too.*). But even though the flight team worked long hours and increased the amount of preventative maintenance on the aircraft I'm sure it had a bearing on the ditching