

**NARRATIVE
NONFICTION**
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DISASTER AT SEA

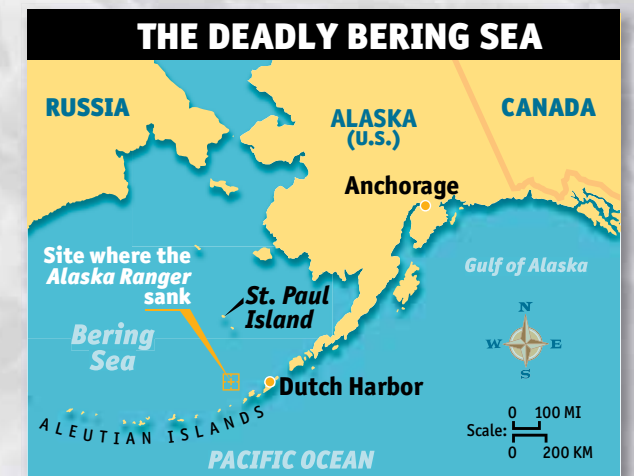
BY SEAN MCCOLLUM

Commercial fishing boats like this one take their crews into some of the most dangerous waters on Earth. In the past decade, hundreds have died on the Bering Sea.

ON MARCH 23, 2008, A DEADLY SHIPWRECK SENT 47 PEOPLE OVERBOARD INTO THE FREEZING WATERS OF THE BERING SEA. AS POUNDING WAVES CRASHED OVER THE SURVIVORS, THEY WONDERED: WOULD HELP ARRIVE IN TIME?

March 22, 2008, had been an ordinary day for 25-year-old Evan Holmes and his crewmates on the fishing boat *Alaska Ranger*. The weather was bad, but when isn't the weather bad on the Bering Sea? In this area of the northern Pacific Ocean, halfway between Russia and Alaska, floating ice, pounding waves, and sudden blizzards are constant threats. For commercial fishermen like Holmes, danger is just part of the job.

Most of the crew was still awake at 2 a.m. Holmes was watching TV. Others were relaxing or playing card games.



What nobody knew was that down below, in the ship's dark lower levels, water was gushing in. By the time someone noticed, the ship was flooded. Engineers worked frantically to pump out the water, but the *Ranger* was doomed.

At 2:40 a.m., an officer ordered everyone to put on survival suits, head-to-toe rubber suits designed to protect them from freezing water and keep them afloat. As a member of the *Ranger's* emergency crew, it was Holmes's job to launch one of the ship's three life rafts. This was not an easy task. The *Ranger* listed badly to the right, sending men sliding across the ice-encrusted deck. The ship's lights had failed, and Holmes struggled to see. Finally, he got the life raft into the water—but then watched in horror as the waves quickly carried it away.

As the *Ranger* began to sink, Holmes and the men with him had just one choice: They had to jump into the sea.

Holmes gasped as he hit the frigid water. Within seconds, it was clear that his survival suit was damaged. Freezing water trickled in. He shivered violently. He managed to link up with two of his buddies, Kenny Smith and P. Ton, forming a human chain that would make it easier for rescuers to spot them.

"I'm not gonna make it!" Smith shouted, as 20-foot swells dragged them mercilessly through the ocean.

"Yeah, you are!" Holmes yelled back. But the situation was dire.

As he reassured his buddies, Holmes made one modest wish:

"One more sunrise," he prayed. "Let me see the sun just one more time."

"Mayday, Mayday"

Just before 3 a.m., the *Ranger's* first mate transmitted a distress call: "Mayday, Mayday. This is the *Alaska Ranger*. We are flooding."

About 200 miles away, at a small Coast Guard base on St. Paul Island, Alaska, a rescue team mobilized. Within minutes, pilot Steve Bonn, co-pilot Brian McLaughlin, flight mechanic Robert DeBolt, and rescue swimmer O'Brien Starr-Hollow were inside their Jayhawk helicopter, speeding over the pitch-black Bering Sea.

They expected a routine rescue. Life rafts are sturdy enough to withstand violent seas. People can survive for hours—even days—on these rafts. Bonn and his team would help anyone injured, but most of the survivors would be picked up from their rafts by the Coast Guard ship *Munro*, which was 40 miles away.

At 5 a.m., when Bonn and his team arrived on the scene, they stared in shock. More than a dozen people were not in rafts—they were floating loose. Bonn knew his team had to get them out of the water as fast as possible. The *Munro* was still hours away. The survivors would not



The Coast Guard has saved more than 1 million lives since it was created in 1790. In 2009 alone, it saved 4,500 people.

last that long in the freezing water.

Bonn positioned the helicopter above one of the survivors. Hollow hooked himself to the chopper's cable. For each rescue, DeBolt would lower Hollow, like a worm on a fishing hook, through gusts of wind and snow. Hollow would swim to the survivor, loop a harness around the person's chest, then hold the person steady with his legs as DeBolt winched them into the helicopter.

The team had to do their jobs with incredible precision. One mistake and they could all be killed. The cable could tangle around Hollow. The fuel could run out. A wave could knock the helicopter out of the sky.

After some maneuvering in the waves, Hollow finally reached the first survivor. Fifteen seconds later, both men were pulled into the chopper. Bonn moved to the next man, and Hollow went back into the

water. Over the next 45 minutes, the team rescued 10 people.

"Get Him First!"

Meanwhile, Holmes helplessly watched these rescues, his body

almost completely numb. How many more people could fit in the chopper? His buddy Smith was in terrible shape, barely conscious. P. Ton wasn't much better. When Hollow finally appeared above them,

Holmes pointed to Smith.

"Get him first!" he yelled.

As Hollow disappeared into the helicopter with Smith and then with P. Ton, Holmes waited nervously. When Hollow came back, Holmes shouted: "Do you have room for me?"

"I've got room for you," Hollow said. "You're my last guy."

Relief flooded through Holmes as he was lifted from the frigid water. He and 12 others were taken to the *Munro*. Crewmembers on the *Munro* cut away Holmes's suit and wrapped him in hot blankets. The *Munro* launched its own helicopter to pick up more survivors. Another ship, the *Alaska Warrior*, arrived and pulled those in the rafts to safety.

Soon, people around the world had heard about the rescue of the *Ranger* crew, one of the greatest missions in Coast Guard history. But the story is in fact a tragedy. Five crewmembers died, including the captain. The *Ranger's* owners had violated numerous safety requirements on the ship, which likely contributed to its sinking. The crew had been in danger from the moment they left port.

For years, experts have been calling for safer commercial fishing boats and better emergency training for crewmembers. Yet laws have been difficult to pass. Nearly three years after the *Ranger* sank, commercial fishing remains the most dangerous job in America.

As for Holmes? He decided to take a break from commercial fishing. He moved to Missouri. The sunrises are especially beautiful there. ●

It's a Life-or-Death Job

On every mission, rescue swimmer O'Brien Starr-Hollow (below) risks his life. Sometimes he is lowered from a helicopter in violent weather, swinging wildly over rough seas. Other times, he has to jump from the chopper, careful not to get sucked into its blades. When he reaches a survivor, he must be strong enough to hoist that person to safety, even if that person is panicking. Check out the gear he uses on his daring rescues. It's some of the most specialized gear in the armed forces!

HERO GEAR



US COAST GUARD

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