**ADAK, the Rescue of Alfa Foxtrot 586**

By Andrew C.A. Jampoler

Alfa Foxtrot 586, a U. S. Navy P-3C ocean surveillance and anti-submarine plane on patrol over a slate-gray slice of the North Pacific, flew effortlessly even with one of its four turboprop engines deliberately feathered to save fuel. The plane and the 15 men aboard had departed the Adak Naval Station in the Aleutians that morning - last October 26. In four hours they had found only a couple of surface vessels to track and photograph for intelligence.

The weather was getting worse now, with winds to 43 knots, and senior pilot Lt. Cmdr. Jerry Grigsby decided to fire up the idle turbine on the left wing. Flight engineer Harold "Butch" Miller watched the gauge showing the prop's revolutions per minute as it edged up to 103.5 percent of normal. Miller yanked an emergency handle. The engine stopped; the propeller did not. It was out of control, whipping faster and faster in the onrushing airstream. The gauge showed 110 percent, then 120, then 129.9, the highest it could record. The crew's fear was that at that velocity centrifugal force would wrench the 1200-pound prop from its mount, sending Alfa Foxtrot 586 into a crash from which there could be no survivors.

Grigsby was a superbly trained aviator, with thousands of flight hours. Coolly riffling through his options in this emergency, he initiated a climb to slow the prop by slowing the airplane. But at 11,000 feet, the maximum altitude he felt prudent, rpm's were still 115 percent, critically high.

All checklist procedures for halting a rogue propeller proved futile. Grigsby had to face the gnawing possibility that to stop the prop before its blades ripped loose, he might have to ditch in the open sea, near where the Aleutian trench sinks for 26,000 feet. No such ditch by a P-3C, he knew, had ever yielded survivors.

Fire Aboard! Through a porthole ten feet behind Grigsby, Lt. (j.g.) Matthew Gibbons, the flight's tactical coordinator, saw the prop's dome beginning to wobble. Gibbons sent a message reporting the situation to Alaska's Elmendorf Air Force Base. At 1:37 p.m., Elmendorf queried whether the plane was declaring an emergency. "That," replied Gibbons, "is affirmative."

The runaway prop was getting touchier, as co-pilot Lt. Edward Caylor could see. Grigsby and Caylor chopped speed to 130 knots, where Alfa Foxtrot 586 was perilously close to a stall. Adak was still 800 miles away - a distance they clearly couldn't make. They decided to veer east toward the Air Force base on the island of Shemya, 337 miles away.

At Grigsby's order, the crew put on life-preserver vests and ‘QD-1's, survival suits with tight rubber cuffs to keep out water. At 1:42, a blaring alarm suddenly went off, signaling a fire. Engineer Miller at once pushed a button to dump fire-fighting compound on the over-heated engine, snuffing out the flames. But the runaway prop was certain to cause fresh fires, and there was precious little firefighting compound left.

To be nearer the water in case of explosion, Grigsby brought his crippled plane down to 1000 feet. And suddenly the alarm horn burst into life again. It was 1:52 p.m. when Gibbons radioed Elmendorf: WE ARE DITCHING! DITCHING! DITCHING! ONE FIVE SOULS ON BOARD. THREE ORANGE LIFE RAFTS.

The news spread quickly. Because of the intelligence-sensitive area in which Alfa Foxtrot 586 was operating, the National Security Council and the departments of State and Defense in Washington were informed at once. At Adak, another P-3C, commanded by Lt. Patrick Conway, made ready to fly to the wounded plane. And Coast Guard 1500, a C-130 Hercules prop jet, was diverted to help. At Moffett Field near San Francisco, home base for Grigsby's crew, the squadron's skipper, Cmdr. Byron Powers, learned of Alfa Foxtrot 586's plight. Knowing the North Pacific's killer seas, he could not believe anyone would survive a ditch in the raging hellhole.

"That Is It!" Aboard Alfa Foxtrot 586, the last of the firefighting compound had doused the second fire. Anxious to be even closer to the water, Grigsby descended to 500 feet, where the plane limped along, bobbing in the turbulence but at least momentarily under control. Bibbons radioed Elmendorf: CONDITION HAS STABILIZED AGAIN. WE'RE GONNA TRY TO, AH, DRAG IT ON IN TO SHEMYA.

Airman Richard Garcia, the radar operator, sought to locate a ship so that Alfa Foxtrot 586 could set up a ditch leading to quick rescue. A tiny speck appeared on his radar screen - possibly one of the ships they had passed earlier. Grigsby headed for it as Gibbons notified Elmendord.

But now fire alarms went off again, and clouds of smoke shot from the stricken engine. "This is it!" shouted Gibbons. "We're going to do what we are trained to do."

Out his porthole, Gibbons saw the ocean rising. "Twenty seconds to ditch position," he called. He radioed Elmendorf the plane's exact location, then added: THIS IS FIVE EIGHT SIX. OUT... As massive swells rose 25 feet to meet them, Grigsby strove to slide his plane onto the water on the upside of a trough between two big waves. Like a stone skipping across the water, the plane nudged, rose, smacked down harder, rose again. The right wing tore off. Fuel tanks ruptured. Engines exploded in steam balls as cold sea water met hot metal. Near the tail, the underbelly of the 116-foot fuselage cracked open. Water thundered in. But finally Alfa Foxtrot 586 barreled to a bone-rattling stop. Against impossible odds, Grigsby had landed the plane.

Last to Leave. Engineer Edwin Flow popped out of the flight deck's overhead escape hatch, followed by Caylor, then Grigsby. But Grigsby didn't join the other in the water. Instead, on hands and knees atop the fuselage, he watched his men exiting from the left and right escape hatches.

In the cabin, something had clobbered navigator Lt. (j.g.) Bruce Forshay on the back, leaving him crumpled, head down. Gibbons pulled him up. Radarman Garcia opened the right hatch and unclasped and pushed out two rolled-up lift rafts - one large, one smaller. Then ground technician Gary Hemmer, Gibbons, Forshay, Master Chief Garland Shepard and Lt. (j.g.) John Wagner exited in turn.

In the aft of the plane, ordnanceman David Reynolds had been buried under debris. Clearing it away, he plodded to the left hatch, where crewmen Howard Moore and Randall Rodriguez were struggling to free the plane's third raft. It refused to release from its clasps, and Moore, Reynolds and Rodriguez scrambled into the ocean without it.

 In the fuselage's far aft, Lt. (j.g.) John Ball, another navigator, had plunged his left foot through the jagged edges of a hole in the floor. God! He wondered. Am I going to be trapped in here? Untangling his foot, he waded forward another five yards searching for an escape hatch. Then, miraculously, the fuselage rolled slightly, lifting enough to reveal the left hatch. He dived under and out. Surfacing, he saw Grigsby still astride the fuselage. With Ball in view, Grigsby slipped into the water on the other side of the plane. Ball figured that Grigsby had been up there, counting his men, disregarding marrow-deep drives for self-preservation, until he could be reasonably sure he was the last to leave.

 Inflating his life preserver's air lobes, Ball swam to the large raft. With Moore and Reynolds, he pulled Gibbons on board, then spotted Grigsby trying to swim to them. After vainly throwing Grigsby the raft's sea anchor, Gibbons pointed to the second raft. For a few seconds it appeared to be within Grigsby's reach; then rising swells blocked sight of him. "Dear God," Ball cried, "please save this man!"

 Grigsby got within 25 feet of the other raft. Flow heaved him a rope-anchored emergency radio, hoping to pull him in with it. It fell five feet short. Men slid into the water again, trying to tow the raft to Grigsby. But the icy current had too much muscle for them. In minutes, Grigsby's helmet and left-preserver lobes were only a dot vanishing in the cruel sea.

 Flash of Orange. Gibbons, Ball, Reynolds and Moore were in the large raft, built to hold 12. Adrenalin flowing, Ball shot off pencil-gun flares. Then he and Gibbons extended the 15-foot antenna of their survival radio beacon to signal aircraft. Together, the four men zippered the raft's tarpaulin cover, it spared them the worst of the constant, smashing breakers.

There were nine men in the smaller, seven-man raft. Caylor and Forshay were at one end, Hemmer and Shepard at the other. Wagner, Garcia and sonobuoy technician James Brooner lined one edge, facing Flow and Rodriguez. Flow asked if anybody had seen Miller, Nobody had. Seven-man rafts don't have tarpaulin covers. Thus the mountainous swells threatened to swamp the tiny craft within minutes. Wagner, Rodriguez, Flow and Brooner began to use the raft's metallic survival blanket to scoop water overboard, and exhausting effort. And nobody noticed that their jostling had loosened an air valve on the raft.

 AT 4:05 p.m., a Strategic Air Command reconnaissance jet, re-routed from a classified intelligence mission out of Shemya, reached Alfa Foxtrot 586's last-known position. No rafts were sighted. Pilot Capt. Clifford B. Carter curled his RC-135 into a search pattern of ever-expanding circles. The weather was frightful: low scud clouds, rain, strong winds, and limited visibility. At 4:18, Carter's co-pilot caught sight of a flare two miles away. They overflew that spot. No raft. Another overflight. This time the men picked up a flash of orange - one raft. A very strong beacon signal was reported from the left side. All eyes went left. There it was, the second raft.

"Waah! Waah." Euphoria fleetingly touched the men in the rafts, in any search and rescue, the toughest job is finding the survivors. Hearing the plane, Caylor figured its crew would alert the ship they had noticed prior to ditch, which meant that rescue was almost surely at hand. What he did not know was that the ship had its radios off, could not be contacted by the plane's crew, and was, in fact, ignorant of the ditching.

Elation faded in the biting cold and pelting rain. After hours on the heaving sea, fighting continuous nausea, the men were losing their coordination and acuity. For a long time those in the seven-man raft didn't even notice that they were riding ever lower in the water. Then Wagner exclaimed, "The raft is going slack! We have to be losing air!" The shock of his words galvanized the men into searching for a leak. Rodriguez found the loosened valve and closed it.

Within an hour of sighting the rafts, the reconnaissance jet was relieved by the Navy P-3C from Adak. This was an emotional mission for Pat Conway and his crew - all had friends on Alfa Foxtrot 586. Yet emotions had to be shunted aside, keep track of the rafts with night coming on.

In the small raft, Hemmer had been aware for some time that water was penetrating his QD-1. He found it hard to keep his eyes open. A hand clapped his helmet. Shepard would not let Hemmer doze.

 Brooner, one of those who had gone overboard to help Grigsby, was also exhausted. Gradually, he slid under the raft water until only his head was visible. Heart, lungs and chest were progressively chilled. He moaned. Caylor pulled him up. Forshay suggested that they all sing. Brooner could only wail: Waah! Waah! Waah! Caylor, Forshay and Wagner talked to him, shook him, and slapped his face. His reactions were minimal.

At 8:38 p.m., Coast Guard 1500, piloted by Lt. (j.g.) Bill Porter, tucked in behind Conway's P-3C to bird-dog the rafts. The P-3C climbed to 2000 feet to search for ships on the radar-scope. Astoundingly, there was one, 28 miles west. The P-3C (without marine-radio capability) flew to it, but none of the standard patters for directing a ship to trail an aircraft were understood. The P-3C's lights blinked in Morse code. Still the ship didn't respond.

Low on fuel, the P-3C had to depart for Shemya, leaving Coast Guard 1500 to alert the ship. And now, finally, its radioman answered. He said he was the Soviet fishing vessel MYS Synyavin. Was the plane in trouble? "No, no," said Porter. "Men in water. Course 090 at 25 miles. Please go."

"Who in water?" At this question Porter hesitated. If he said U. S. Navy, would the Russians go?

"Friends in water," he equivocated. "I understand," said the Russian.

"Ship Coming!" It was after midnight when the Synyavin, finally in sight of the rafts, turned on all its lights and foghorn. "We got a ship!" Wagner exulted. "We got a ship!" Shepard rapped Hemmer on the helmet. Flow, Forshay and Caylor continued to shake Brooner. "Ship coming!" said Caylor. "Ship coming!" Brooner did not react.

Canny seaman, the Russians hung their lives on the line in rescuing Americans. After maneuvering the Synyavin into position as a wind barrier, they lowered a 30-foot, motorized whaling board. Lighter than the waterlogged rafts, and riding higher, the little craft nearly capsized in the cross-sweels. As it approached the large raft, a loudspeaker suddenly blared forth strange-sounding words. "Uh-oh" said Gibbons, "we're going to Russia." "Who cares?" said Reynolds. "They get us out of here and I'll never say anything bad about them again!"

In the blaze of strong searchlight, the Russians grappled the four-Navy men from the large raft aboard the whaler, plopping them onto the floor and giving them coats. When they reached the small raft, they found the men so paralyzed from squatting that they could be little help as they were hauled into the whaler. They also found the dead-Rodriguez, Garcia, and Brooner. As for the raft, it sank from sight before the Russians could latch onto it.

Final Testament. The ten survivors (it was later determined that Miller must have gone down with Alfa Foxtrot 586) were moved to the Russian port of Petropavlovsk, flown to a hospital, transferred to Japan and from there returned to Moffett Field, arriving on November 4.

One day late last fall, in the Grigsby home near Moffett Field, Grigsby's wife and parents met with Cmdr. Peter Cressy, executive officer of Grigsby's squadron, to learn about their Jerry's last moments. (The family has a tradition of giving its own to the nation: in each of the last four generations, at least one Brigsby has died in military service.) Cressy told them of Grigsby's heroism: "Ditching that type of aircraft successfully in those seas, under those circumstances, was something never before done. And Jerry waited until he could be sure he was the last off his plane. . . ." Here Cressy paused, clearly near tears.

Grigsby's mother, white-haired, weather-beaten from life on the mid-western plains, saw and understood. "Son," she said to Cressy, "let me tell you about Jerry. Twenty-four years ago, when he was 12, he about drowned in a pool. We got him out and revived him. And we have had 24 good years of life with him, 24 years of helping him get ready for this one moment when he had the opportunity to save the lives of ten others. We can't get to upset about that, can we? It hurts a lot. But we have gained, too."

Last spring, the Navy presented Air Medals to all members of Alfa Foxtrot 586's last flight, and to Conway's crew. In addition, Matthew Gibbons received the Navy Commendation Medal and Edward Caylor the Meritorious Service Medal. Posthumously, Jerry Grigsby was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, one of the military's highest peacetime medals, for "extraordinary heroism and professionalism above and beyond the call of duty."