

NEW SALES PITCH FOR CAT FOOD: WILD SALMON

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“I DON'T THINK
I'M GOING TO MAKE
IT 'TIL MORNING”

Four souls in the
Gulf of Alaska: They didn't
die ... because they
were prepared to live

Only a plastic life raft separates the
men of the *Hunter* from death.

Sea ice hanging from his hair,
the skipper stumbles aft in a
Coast Guard rescue helicopter.



They should have died. They didn't. Here's why.

This story is most notable, perhaps, for its negatives:

You didn't read that four more fishermen had been lost in the tortured seas of the Gulf of Alaska.

You didn't read that some bodies were recovered, some not.

You didn't read that relatives and friends grieved, some silently, some not.

Instead, this is a story of positives. Men lived.

They're breathing today because they did nearly everything correctly before their vessel sank. That the Coast Guard was able to find an infinitesimally small piece of orange plastic in the fury of the Gulf of Alaska wasn't an accident. It was the legacy of right decisions made months before by F/V Hunter skipper Ron Blake and his crew.

As for the Coast Guard's appearance out of the gray skies, that wasn't an accident either. It was the legacy of planning, training, and plain bravery.

*By Petty Officer 2nd Class
Christopher D. McLaughlin*

The weather was fine on that Friday. Well, fine enough for the Gulf of Alaska.

Four fishermen set out from Cordova on Jan. 5, heading for the rich fishing grounds of the Bering Sea. With a break in the weather, the crew of the F/V *Hunter* saw their window of opportunity and made their move west.

But two days into their voyage the window slammed shut, trapping the captain and crew in the midst of a brutal winter storm. The weather — and their chances of living — went from bad to worse as ice caked the *Hunter*.

From the moment they saw the ice building on the *Hunter* until it sank took perhaps four minutes — maybe 300 heartbeats. But for the crew to make the decisions that ultimately led to their survival, they had only seconds.

The waters of Alaska are some of the richest fishing grounds in the world and lure thousands of fishermen each year. The *Hunter* was one of many boats on its way to fish near Dutch Harbor. The 58-foot longliner, homeported in Cordova, was captained by third-generation Alaska fisherman Ron Blake. At 37, Blake had already spent 18 years fishing in waters ranging from Hawaii to the Bering.



WHY YOU HAVE AN EPIRB

Even the Coast Guard Jayhawk rescue helicopter is difficult to see against the turmoil of the Gulf of Alaska in this shot from a C-130. Can you spot the life raft holding the survivors of the F/V Hunter? Coast Guard photos.

He understood the unpredictability of his profession. He also knew that preparation was the only way to bend unpredictability in his favor. Even so, he could never have predicted that in just two days, the *Hunter* would be lost.

On the morning of Jan. 7, the *Hunter* and its crew were slugging through the Shelikof Strait under increasingly deteriorating weather. Sub-zero temperatures, winds up to 60 m.p.h., and seas of 10 to 15 feet were nothing that the *Hunter* had not faced down in the past.

Then, conditions worsened.

"We probably made 3 inches of ice in two hours, and we were making ice faster, faster and faster," Blake said.

As the ice built, the *Hunter* became top-heavy. Each gust pushed the vessel over, and each time it was slower returning to trim.

Blake roused the crew, and they began to beat the ice off the ship, two men at a time. But they couldn't keep up with the spray, each gust laying a new sheet of ice on an already encrusted *Hunter*. The ice shell thickened and, against the efforts of the crew, stood solid, encasing the *Hunter* in its grip.

"It was minus 6 degrees, and it was getting worse and worse," Blake said. "We were in real trouble. That was as bad of a situation as I have ever seen on the ocean."

Blake looked to his number 2 man aboard the *Hunter*, John Mehelich, who was in charge of taking care of the crew during emergencies. Without direction, Mehelich was already getting everyone in their immersion suits as Blake reached for the radio and called for help.

"Mayday. Mayday. Mayday. This is the fishing vessel *Hunter*, fishing vessel *Hunter*, fishing vessel *Hunter*!"

At that moment, a powerful whirlwind laid the *Hunter* on its side.

A forward hatch was torn free by the wind. Water surged into the *Hunter*.

Blake, with his survival suit half on, gave the coordinates over the radio one last time and ran out of the pilothouse onto the tilting deck, pausing only to hit the emergency transponder button.

When Blake came out of the pilothouse, Mehelich was pulling Charles (Andy) Nipple's face strap of the immersion suit over his mouth. Despite the raging wind, Blake dis-

tinctly heard Mehelich shouting to Nipple: "I'm making sure you're gonna live." Mehelich then put on his own suit.

Despite having their suits, Blake and the crew were still faced with a problem. The ice had not only encased the ship, but also the life raft and the Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon.

The equipment they needed to live was about to sink with the boat.

"I had this overwhelming feeling that I had to get the EPIRB," Blake said.

However, with the *Hunter* laid over, the EPIRB and life raft were at times submerged under 8 feet of water and gripped by ice.

Blake made a desperate attempt to free the survival gear by climbing onto the side of the pilothouse and dropping into the thrashing sea.

"I aimed, and I dropped, and fell under water and kicked the thing. Nothing happened, but I knew I needed to try and get the ice off."

The water was 36 degrees. When hit by the wind, it turned to ice.

From the guy who sank

Fishing in the wintertime in Alaska is a dangerous business. Do your part to stay safe. Do your drills and make sure everybody understands them. Check your survival equipment at least every month and keep it in good condition. Make sure your survival suits fit with the clothes you will be wearing in winter conditions. Don't think it can't happen to you. Take action at first sign of any danger. Remember, seconds count.

We survived because we had the proper survival equipment and a basic emergency plan, and we took immediate action at the first sign of trouble. But, surviving in the extreme weather conditions for any length of time was impossible. The four of us survived because of the quick response of the Kodiak Coast Guard Crew and rescue swimmer.

— Ron Blake

Blake surfaced and climbed back to the mast. Water had filled his survival suit, which he could not close over his many layers of clothes. Looking up, Blake saw a buoy hook that he could use to try to free the EPIRB. But as he was reaching for the hook, a wave hit the boat and the mast shook violently, bending up and down.

Blake pounded between waves and the hull of the *Hunter*.

As the boat rolled and waves swept the deck, Mehelich and crew member John Quinlin were carried into the sea, leaving Blake and Nipple clinging to the *Hunter*.

Blake decided to leave the *Hunter*, to escape the battering he took between hull and wave. But just before he let go, he pulled the pin on the strap that secured the raft to the boat.

"The boat rolled real hard, and the raft and the EPIRB came up at almost the same time," Blake said.

"I grabbed the EPIRB, and Andy went and got the line on the raft."

Quinlin and Mehelich had been blown 100 feet from the raft.

Perhaps no other training was more important than the lesson that guided the next decision: Instinct tells you to inflate the raft, to crawl in, to save your life. Yet, to inflate the raft without all the men in it would mean almost certain death for those left outside. The wind would send the raft skipping across the water, away from the grasp of men lunging for life.

Nipple was about to inflate the raft when Blake shouted to him: "Stop! Everybody needs to get to the life raft."

The men struggled in their cumbersome suits, fighting wave and wind, to gather together.



In sunnier times with a different crew: skipper Ron Blake and F/V Hunter.



In the choreographed chaos of the Jayhawk, rescue swimmer Matthew Thiessen (yellow helmet) pushes a survivor through the door to safety.



John Mehelich, a crewmember aboard the F/V Hunter, is carried to an ambulance after rescue by a Coast Guard HH-60 Jayhawk helicopter crew. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Kurt Fredrickson.

Nipple was first into the raft. His suit, sealed by Mehelich, kept him completely dry, and he easily jumped into the raft.

"The water temperature was about 36 degrees, and it froze everything it touched," Blake said. "My suit was full of water, and I couldn't get in the raft."

Nipple pulled Blake and his water-logged suit into the raft, followed by Mehelich and Quinlin.

"When we were in the raft, we were thinking everything is going to be OK, they're going to come," Blake said.

"Mehelich asked me, 'Did you get a response from the mayday?' and I said no, but I did push the button on the emergency transponder."

As they waited for help, the crew of the *Hunter* began to open the survival equipment in the raft. Among the items they found were emergency blankets.

"I was starting to shiver, so I put it over me," Blake said. "John was really starting to shiver and said, 'Well boys, it's been nice. I don't think I'm gonna make it till morning.'"

"No, no, you're gonna," Blake told him.

After nearly an hour, the four men thought they heard the faint sound of a propeller. Nipple looked out of the raft and strained to listen against the shriek of wind. At that

moment, a Coast Guard C-130 from Air Station Kodiak descended from the ice-laden clouds and flew straight over them.

The men in the raft cheered.

"When you're out there in your itty bitty life raft, and you know they know where you're at, that's a relief," Blake said. "It's unimaginable. They're coming, and everything's gonna be OK."

The HH-60 Jayhawk helicopter crew from Air Station Kodiak arrived shortly after. The rescue swimmer jumped into the frigid sea and swam up to the four men huddled in the life raft.

"They just kind of looked at me with blank stares," said Petty Officer Matthew Thiessen, Coast Guard rescue swimmer. "I asked who was in the worst shape."

Two of the crew immediately pointed towards John Mehelich.

"I got his Gumby suit zipped all the way up and told the other guys to do the same thing.

"I called on the radio and told them that we had all four people in the raft and that everyone was accounted for."

Blake and his crew were safely hoisted into the helicopter and transported to Air Station Kodiak, where they were taken to Providence Kodiak Island Medical Center for further treatment.

"You do your drills every time you start a fishing season; everybody should do it," Blake said. "What saved lives was this: When the situation looked serious, action was taken." ■

Staying alive

Training saved the men of F/V *Hunter*; it can save you

by Petty Officer 2nd Class Christopher D. McLaughlin

The men of the F/V *Hunter* survived because of split-second decisions. Yet the correct decisions were made only because of months and years of training and preparation.

Alaska has nearly 1 million square miles of some of the most dangerous yet plentiful fishing grounds on Earth.

To counteract the challenges of this deadly environment, the Coast Guard and the Alaska Marine Safety Education Association (AMSEA) provide mariners instruction on how to improve chances of survival during a maritime accident.

"The AMSEA program has been offered to fishermen since 1990 because guys weren't coming home," said Steven Campbell, AMSEA Kodiak area training coordinator. "When I first started doing it, many guys didn't know how to operate anything."

The program was slow in gaining interest from the fishing community. Since Campbell began instructing in 1999, he has seen a big change in the number of people doing the training.

"More and more people are getting more and more familiar with their equipment," said Campbell. "They're getting better educated about their equipment, taking care of their equipment, and knowing how to operate it."

In addition to knowing your equipment, Campbell stresses the need for mariners to



Steve Campbell, a Kodiak area training coordinator with Alaska Marine Safety Education Association, shows fishermen how to form up in a group wearing immersion suits during a maritime accident-at-sea drill. Coast Guard photos by Petty Officer 2nd Class Christopher D. McLaughlin

have a plan. Knowing what to do in case of emergency will ultimately alleviate panic — and panic kills. To ensure fishermen know what to do, the Coast Guard provides free vessel safety checks year round.

"We're there for the fishermen and to do the safety checks and decal exams, just to make sure everyone has the right equipment and will be safe out there," said Coast Guard Petty Officer 3rd Class Nathan Christensen, Marine Safety Detachment Kodiak inspector. "We want everyone to go out and have a great season and come back safe and alive to their families."

In addition to Coast Guard exams, AMSEA provides hands-on training to mariners through several different courses. These include Marine Safety Instructor Training,

onboard drills, water-wise instructor, and outdoor survival educator's workshops. Courses can also be customized to meet the needs of boaters and the boating practices of a specific area or industry. Campbell noted that the AMSEA program is also reaching out to rural Alaska.

"We are working with open skiff fishermen to get them the required safety equipment and teaching them how to use it," Campbell said. "It's going to hit everybody. Every commercial fisherman in the state of Alaska is required to have this training, and we're trying to get it to them. It's all applicable, no matter which

side of the fence you're on, whether you're a commercial or recreational boater."

Before AMSEA, the commercial fishing industry in Alaska was averaging a loss of 38 lives a year. Due to the spread of AMSEA, that loss has been reduced to about 11 lives a year for the past five years in Alaska, according to the AMSEA website.

"I've fished up here since 1977, and I've known a lot of people that haven't come home," Campbell said.

"That's my motive. I'd like to see everybody come home." ■

If you want to learn more about AMSEA and its programs, visit www.amsea.org/index.html.