

Zero Saves Over Sachon

Everybody remembers their first rescue as an AC!

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For every helicopter pilot, the first rescue mission as an aircraft commander is a memorable one. You immediately realize the awesome responsibility you've been entrusted with—for your crew, your aircraft, and people in distress whose very lives depend on you. It really gets the heart pounding and the adrenaline flowing. It's a feeling you experience every time you hear the klaxon go off or get that phone call launching the alert helicopter. For me, my first rescue mission as an aircraft commander may have been a little too memorable. Nine years later, I can still remember that mission as if it were only yesterday.

I was a newly-minted aircraft commander. So new that my buddy rides had to wait until my arrival at Osan AB, Republic of Korea. Detachment 13, 33d Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron (now the 38th ARRS) was hurting for aircraft commanders and wasted no time getting me checked out locally. As soon as I was blessed, they put me on weekend alert. That particular weekend, the det was having a BBQ chicken cookout at the Jolly Green enlisted barracks. Cookouts were no small feat in those days. You had to drive to Seoul to buy chicken at the Army commissary and pool ration cards to buy enough beer. Of course, as the alert crew we had to pass on the beer, but it was a warm, summer Saturday afternoon and we were enjoying the cookout, anyway.

We hadn't been at the cookout long when word came to launch the alert helicopter. While we were enjoying warm sunshine at Osan, the southern Korean peninsula was flooded by a torrential downpour from a tropical storm off the Korean coast. The South Korean government requested we assist in evacuating people stranded by the floods. We piled into the alert truck and drove to the hangar. There,

I quickly changed into my flightsuit, leaving my civilian clothes in the office. A weather check indicated we could expect to encounter heavy rains south of Taegu with marginal VFR ceilings. They couldn't tell us much more due to lack of weather-reporting facilities in that part of the country. We were also told we would be under operational control of the Republic of Korea Air Force (ROKAF), who were coordinating rescue efforts.

We planned to fly direct to Taegu then follow the Nakdong River to Sachon AB, a ROKAF base in the flood area. There, we would refuel and receive further instructions. The HH-3E was cocked and ready to go on the hot spot—we were airborne less than 20 minutes after initial notification.

The flight to Taegu was uneventful. The weather was good, much like that at Osan, and we were somewhat amazed that the weather could be so bad just a little further south. As we flew south from Taegu, ominous clouds began forming. As the terrain rose, the ceiling dropped. It wasn't long before we were flying along the river bed at 50 KIAS and 50-100 ft AGL, with steep, rising terrain on both sides of the river.

As I flew, my copilot stayed glued to the map, navigating—no easy task with the mountains tops obscured in clouds and visibility less than half a mile. Fortunately, I was blessed with a highly experienced crew and we were working well together. With low altitude and visibility, we were very concerned about avoiding powerlines. In Korea, powerlines were the greatest hazard we faced. They were strung all across rivers and valleys, just waiting to snare a careless helicopter or low-flying fast mover. What's more, they were going up so fast that many were uncharted

and not in the CHUM. My backenders were scanning the ridgelines for towers. My copilot would announce when we were approaching wires on the maps. We could barely climb over the wires and stay out of the ragged cloud base. If at all possible, we wanted to avoid going IFR. We didn't want to risk flying into severe weather with fuel critical. I asked my copilot to keep calling out emergency safe altitudes for the sector we were in, should we go inadvertent IMC. I told my crew that if anyone felt uncomfortable with what we were doing, to "sing out" and we would get out of there. We envisioned hundreds of people trapped on rooftops needing to be hoisted to safety. We didn't want the weather to stop us from helping them. My crew encouraged me to press on.

About halfway to Sachon, we were confronted with another problem. Up ahead, we spotted an Army UH-1 heading down river, also on its way to Sachon. We established radio contact and advised him we would follow. He was flying slower than us,



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forcing us to slow down, also making power more critical. There wasn't enough room to pass him. Now we had to keep our eyes on him *and* the terrain. Visibility was getting really bad. It was raining so hard the windshield wipers couldn't keep the windows clear. We kept our windows open so we could see outside. I covered my pilot's console with rags to prevent water getting into the Automatic Flight Control System. Suddenly, the Army pilot announced, "I have wires ahead of me and I can't see over them, we're setting down." He started descent toward a sandbar in the river and we had no choice but to continue on. There wasn't enough room for us to land and we couldn't turn around. At our low speed and heavy gross weight, it took all the power we had to climb over the wires. We were passing through the ragged cloud deck as the wires slipped below us. We were barely able to see the ground. I continued straight ahead, thinking I was still following the river, when in fact it was a flooded valley. The river had taken a 90-degree left turn at the wires. My copilot indicated the river was to our left. I said I couldn't see it and passed him the controls to make the turn and stay clear of the terrain. Back safely on the river, I resumed control of the aircraft and he returned to navigating. We felt it was easier for one person to stay on the map rather than switching navigating responsibilities back and forth and chancing getting lost.

As we continued down river, concern over our fuel state and remaining daylight grew. The flight was taking longer than planned because we were forced to follow every bend in the river at low airspeed. We had taken off at mid-afternoon and it was getting late. Darkness was fast approaching, with heavy cloud cover blocking out much of the available sunlight. We had been trying to avoid going IMC, but were now faced with the possibility of having to go IMC anyway to make Sachon with minimum fuel. We didn't have radio contact with anyone at such low altitude, and didn't know what the weather was at Sachon. There wasn't enough fuel to make an alternate; if we went IMC, we'd be committed to land at Sachon. We breathed a little easier when we finally flew past the city of Chinju, knowing we should be able to land at Sachon. Ceilings were improving, although the rain was still heavy.

Flying over Chinju, we didn't see anyone in distress. Our vision of people trapped on rooftops didn't materialize, but from the looks of flooding in the surrounding areas, we figured there were many villages in the countryside flooded or in the path of possible mud slides. We anticipated a busy next day ahead of us. It was too late to attempt any rescue operations—it was nearly dark and we needed fuel.

As we approached Sachon, we could see a ROKAF UH-1D performing some kind of a hoist operation near the base perimeter. Our fuel low level caution lights were blinking as we landed and taxied to the ramp. A lot of ROKAF folks stood alongside the buildings watching us. They were dressed in assorted combinations of uniforms and footwear. The ramp was under a couple inches of water. Sachon AB is on the coast with a seawall off the end of the runway. Rains and high seas from the storm had flooded the base. We jumped out in the pouring rain and began to secure the helicopter, tying down rotor blades, doing the post flight inspection, and refueling. We had to keep a close eye on all the activity around the aircraft. The fuel truck probably would have run into our rotor blades had we not seen him at the last minute and stopped him. During fueling, the Army UH-1 landed—they had seen us clear the wires so decided to take off and follow us about five minutes later. I was glad *we* hadn't had to follow *them* to Sachon. We probably wouldn't have had enough fuel to make it.

The ROKAF commander and Flight Wing Commander drove out to meet us. They said they were setting up sleeping quarters for us and would take us into town for something to eat. We piled into their jeeps and drove off base hoping to find a restaurant still open. The town was partially flooded and without power, but after a couple of stops we found a restaurant able to feed us. The two ROKAF colonels joined us for dinner. There we sat, on the floor, soaking wet, realizing we had very little money and no dry clothes to change into. (In my haste to scramble, I'd left my wallet in my civvies back at Osan.) We had egg drop soup, BBQ chicken, kimchee, and soft drinks. I managed to spill a bowl of scalding soup on my copilot's leg. The dinner was excellent and our Korean hosts picked up the tab.

After dinner, they took us back to base and since

Sachon didn't have sleeping quarters, we were provided with cots set up in one of their classrooms. They also provided towels but after one look at the bathing facilities, consisting of a small, tiled tub in the corner of the restroom filled with cold water from who knows where, we decided to pass. That is, except one of the PJs, who had been in Korea so long nothing fazed him.

We woke the next day anxious to get on with rescue operations. Our flightsuits were dry, if not exactly fresh smelling. Neither were we for that matter, all of us sporting one-day growth of beard. We were taken to the dining hall for a breakfast of fried eggs, rice, and kimchee, the ROKAF colonels once more hosting us. While the flight mechanic (now flight engineer) and PJs readied the aircraft, my copilot and I went to base ops to find what needed to be done. Base ops was nearly bare, with only a couple hand-cranked field telephones behind the desk and some notices printed in Korean. We waited and waited for word to launch. Nothing came. We grew restless. Surely with all that flooding there had to be villages in need of assistance. If the ROKAF hadn't received specific requests for assistance, we suggested we might fly around the area looking for people in distress. The weather had cleared enough for us to fly anywhere. Finally, around noon, we were told there were five people trapped under a bridge at Miryang, northeast of Sachon. Since a hoist was required, we took the mission and launched.

We were excited about finally getting to do something. All the way there, we discussed what we would do once on scene. We were ready. We found the bridge, but no people. The bridge came out right from the center of town. There were many folks walking along the streets or standing along the river drive, waving to us, but none appeared in distress. We searched up and down river from Miryang with no results. Anyone in trouble had long since been rescued.

We decided not to return to Sachon but to fly north to Taegu AB. We figured it would be easier to coordinate rescue activities from there, since it was a joint ROKAF/USAF base. We arrived late afternoon and were instructed to go into crew rest and maybe there would be something for us tomorrow. We checked in at Billeting only to learn there were no rooms available. There was an exercise in progress and all rooms were full. We found rooms at the Han-II hotel, a nice western-style hotel in Taegu.

It took most of the money we had to pay for two rooms for one night. We spent what was left on some fruit and snacks for dinner. We were an odd collection of ragged, weary warriors who strode into the lobby.

At least we could take a hot shower and shave, (my copilot had a disposable razor). We still couldn't do anything about our ripe flightsuits, so we left them standing in the corner. We wondered if we shouldn't have gone back to Sachon. Conditions were grim there, but at least the Koreans had tried to make us as comfortable as possible (and we also didn't need any money there).

The next day was a repetition of the previous day. We waited and waited for word to launch. We weren't being used for anything, yet we hadn't been released. My crew laid out on the ramp by the helicopter, soaking up sun. Finally, around two o'clock, we were released. Disappointed, but glad to be going home, we took off for Osan, bringing our nearly two-and-one-half-day rescue odyssey to an end.

We had flown through terrible weather conditions, in unfamiliar mountainous terrain, and endured personal hardship, all with hopes of being involved in a major rescue operation. As it turned out, we saved no one, but we learned a lot. After that mission, everyone on alert packed overnight bags and carried extra cash. It proved handy more than once.

I was a young aircraft commander, but this mission rapidly matured me. The value of good crew coordination and crew experience was really brought home to me on this mission. *We can't do it alone.* It took a total crew effort to fly, navigate, and scan for obstacles in low ceilings and visibility. I learned how difficult it is to predict weather in remote, mountainous areas, and to always take this fact into account. Always leave yourself an out. We can't always just turn around and go back the way we came. We were lucky. We could have easily ended up under IFR, in bad weather, minimum fuel, without an alternate, after dark. We learned the difficulties of working joint operations and staying alert when operating at an unfamiliar base. We also learned how courteous and grateful Koreans are for our assistance. They bend over backwards to help and try to make the best of a bad situation. They demonstrated this time and time again and we had nothing but respect for them.

About a week after the mission an article appeared in the *Stars and Stripes* about an Army UH-1 rescuing 180 folks stranded on an island. It had to be "our" Army UH-1 at Sachon. We took a lot of good-natured kidding about the mission after that. When I left Osan in July '80, I was presented the traditional brass cyclic stick grip. Along with my name and date was the inscription "0 Saves over Sachon." That memento still sits with pride on my desk, a constant reminder of one of the most difficult missions I've ever flown, and the valuable lessons I learned.