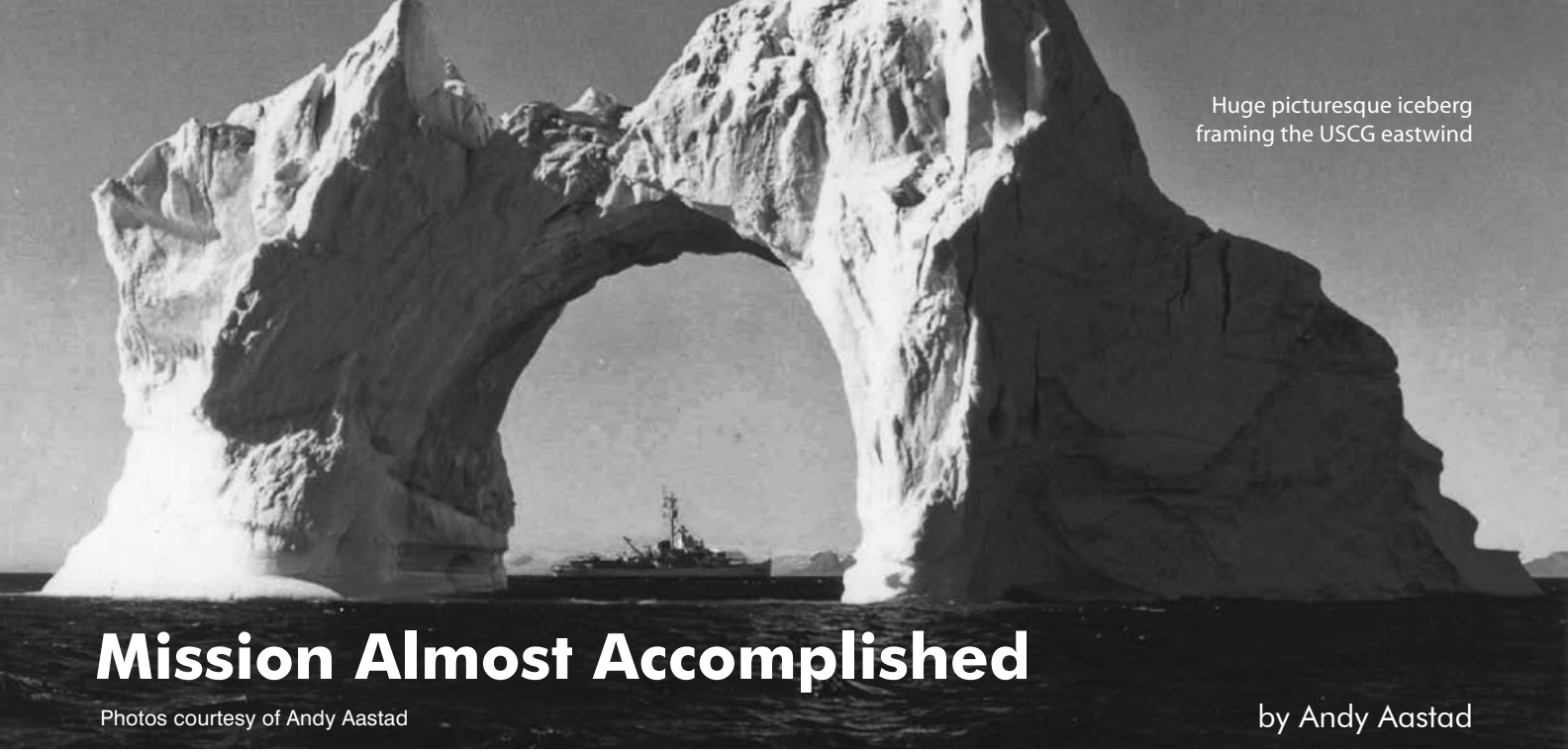


Huge picturesque iceberg framing the USCG eastwind

Mission Almost Accomplished

Photos courtesy of Andy Aastad

by Andy Aastad

It happened a long time ago, but the gripping helicopter side of the story has never been adequately told. In the mid 1950's the Disney Studios initiated a new program of short story films in a series called "People and Places." In 1954 one of these stories took place in the Arctic using helicopters for a majority of the filming activity. The film produced was called "Men Against the Arctic" and was based on the challenging experience of a Coast Guard icebreaker in the extremely difficult Arctic environment.

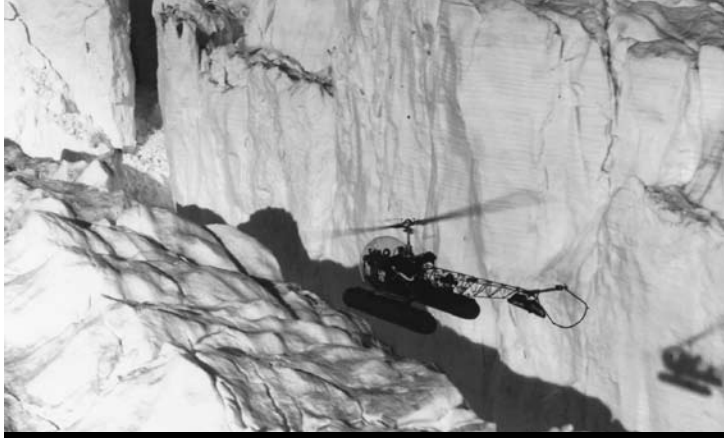
As luck would have it, in 1954 I was stationed in Lakehurst, New Jersey at the Naval Air Base. Assigned to Helicopter Squadron Two (HU-2), I had just returned from a tour of duty flying plane guard for the carrier Valley Forge and thus available for a new assignment. On May 17, 1954 my orders arrived with instructions to report to the USCG Eastwind which was programmed to conduct ice breaking duty off the west coast of Greenland. Another helicopter pilot, Lt. Jg. Henry L. Cassani, and a maintenance crew of four completed the Navy component assigned to the Coast Guard icebreaker. We would be operating two Bell HTL-4 helicopters on floats powered by the early 178HP Franklin piston engine.

The Eastwind was a 6,515-ton ship, 269 feet in length with a 44-foot beam designed originally as an icebreaker. There were four cutters built for the Coast Guard in 1944 including the Eastwind, Westwind, Northwind and Southwind all ultimately destined to support an Air Force base in Greenland. In 1953 construction of Thule Air Base was completed on the west coast of Greenland at a point midway between New York and Moscow. Thule is locked in by ice nine months of the year, so June, July, and August essentially are the only available months for cargo ships to get through with necessary supplies. In 1954 both the Eastwind and the Westwind were responsible for opening shipping lanes to Thule.

But the Eastwind's more important mission was to deliver supplies to the Dew Line weather station (scuttlebutt called it a radar station) located on Ellesmere Island in Canada called Alert. Well north in the Arctic Circle, Alert is located less than 500 miles from the North Pole. The Eastwind was loaded with about 100 tons of supplies and equipment, which was the requirement for a full year of operation in 1954. Alert depended on the Eastwind for its regular supply.

The story begins when the Navy crew boarded the Eastwind in the Boston Harbor on or about May 20, 1954. We met the Skipper, Captain George H. Bowerman, and were surprised and pleased to learn that in addition to ice reconnaissance duty we would also support the Disney photographer, Bill Fortin, on board to collaborate with the United States Coast Guard (USCG) in the filming of "Men Against the Arctic." He was accompanied by LCDR. Robert C. Cannon, United States Coast Guard Reserve

Navy Helicopter Crew on helipad of the U.S. Coast Guard Icebreaker The Eastwind



Fortin photographing Wolstenholme Glacier in Northeast Greenland

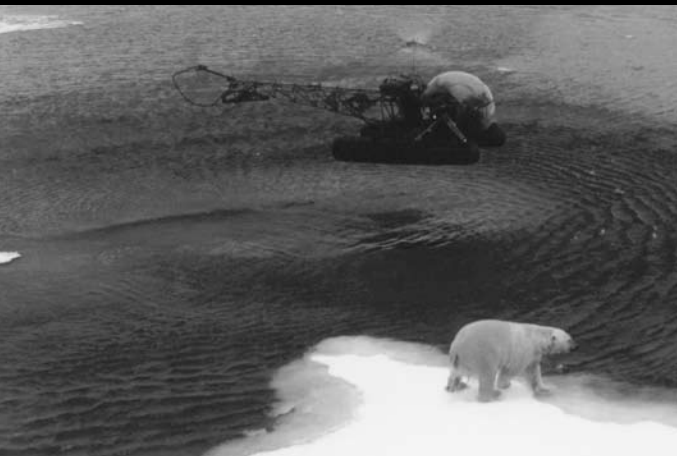
(USCGR) whose function was liaison between the Coast Guard and Disney Studios. However, Bill Fortin and the helicopter team were directly responsible for staging the photography.

On departure from Boston the first challenge for the helicopter crew was mounting the camera tripod in the limited space of the HTL-4 helicopter. This was a first for installation of a 16mm cinemascope camera in the HTL. With Fortin's agreement the crew removed the starboard door and then mounted two legs of the tripod outside on the float longerons. The third much shorter leg was fastened to the cabin floor. This arrangement allowed Fortin the freedom to swing the camera as necessary for optimum flexibility while sitting in the right seat. The location of the camera was actually outside of the cabin, which seemed a little unprofessional, but it worked. This might have been the first time a major movie production was successfully conducted from a helicopter.

The first productive filming from the helicopter occurred about a week after departure from Boston and covered icebreaking activity off the west coast of Greenland. In addition to extensive footage of the Eastwind plowing through the ice field, Fortin would occasionally want shots of the ship from a stationary position on the ice. We would land a couple of hundred yards forward of the ship's path at Fortin's direction. He would then set his tripod and camera on the ice and shoot while the ship was breaking ice. One of the reasons for success of the movie was the daring resolve of the photographer and the spectacular results. The danger of Fortin's position on the fragile ice field was the below-freezing temperature of the Arctic Sea. The human body can survive only a few minutes in that environment without a protective exposure suit.

For the next few weeks the operation was routine and successful in clearing a way for cargo ships en route to Thule. However, when an opportunity for an interesting scene developed, we would take advantage of it while the second helicopter conducted ice reconnaissance. One particularly exciting incident happened while we were chasing and photographing an enormous polar bear. Notice in the picture that the bear's rear end was about as big as the bubble cockpit of the helicopter.

This polar bear did not enjoy having his picture taken!



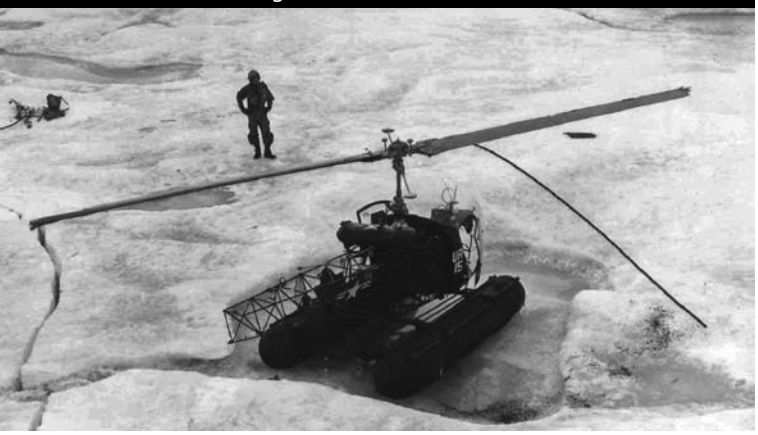
At first the bear was frightened of our constant pursuit. Finally we ran out of film, so we landed on the ice a few hundred yards from the bear. In those days it was necessary to cover the camera and the photographer's head to change film. While Fortin was under the hood, I vigilantly focused on the bear and realized he was running toward us. I said to Fortin "He is coming — hurry it up." Changing the film seemed to take forever. The bear kept getting closer and at the last moment I yelled, "Bill, I've got to take-off." As I pulled collective for the lift-off, the polar bear was up on his hind legs in the attack mode. Thank goodness that old 178HP Franklin engine responded at that critical time. I have heard stories about polar bears destroying small helicopters in the Arctic.

But our real problems were still to come. While working in the area around Thule, we were asked to transport the Governor of North Greenland to a small Eskimo village about 100 miles north of Thule — probably the northernmost Eskimo village in Greenland. The Eastwind departed Thule with the Governor onboard. On arrival only a few miles from the village we took off in the helicopter. However, shortly after takeoff we lost the fan belt for engine cooling necessitating a landing at sea. Fortunately the sea was relatively calm, and we were in no real danger, as we would have been flying over the Wolstenholme Glacier the day before. The Eastwind launched a small boat to rescue us, and we were slowly towed back to the ship. Since we did not have an engine replacement we were down to just one operational helicopter. It was not a serious handicap — just an inconvenience.

Forced down by a cooling fan belt failure in Baffin Bay off E. Greenland

By then it was early August and the sun was beginning to dip down below the horizon for just a few moments. Time was growing short

Loss of the second HTL-4 helicopter terminating ice reconnaissance service



to deliver supplies to Alert before the annual freeze which normally begins in late August. Captain Bowerman headed the Eastwind north proceeding between Ellesmere Island and Greenland breaking through heavier blue polar ice as directed by reconnaissance flights. On return from one such flight with observer Ensign Gordon Robbins, we approached the Eastwind after a run flying at an altitude of about 50 feet over the ice in preparation for a landing a few hundred yards ahead of the ship to wait for it to catch up as was customary. At a speed of about 40 knots just before landing we experienced a very violent vibration. Flaring immediately to stop forward speed, we dropped vertically from about 20 feet, having completely lost lift. It was a sickening feeling to pull collective and find no lift response. Luckily, we hit flat on a smooth piece of ice though the surrounding ice was craggy and cushioned by the floats, we were able to walk away with no injuries. However, as you can see in the photo, the helicopter was a wreck.

Witnesses and following inspections revealed that the tail boom longerons sheared allowing the tail rotor section to swing gradually up into the main rotor. The metal leading edge of the wooden main rotor blades separated but happily did not wind around and through the bubble as experienced in the past. The rotor blades held up long enough to stop forward motion, which was probably a lifesaver.

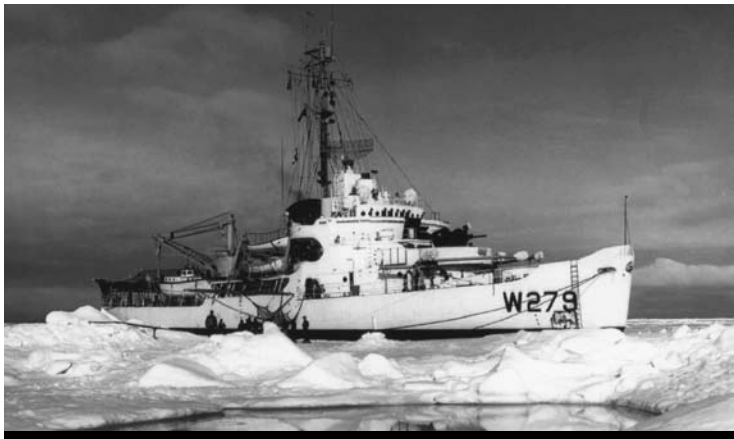
On later inspection of the sheared longerons, severe internal corrosion was found in the longeron tubes most likely due to salt water exposure in several previous tours at sea. A Coast Guard report suggested that an earlier fatal accident of another HTL that took place while flying at altitude for the USCG Westwind in the Arctic could also have been caused by tail boom failure. The Westwind's fatality included both the pilot and the ship's executive officer lost at sea.

Now without the support of helicopter reconnaissance the Eastwind's progress through the ice field was slow. However, a few days later we experienced a phenomenal change in the environment. Miraculously the ice pack moved east away from Ellesmere Island opening a clear passage to our destination. We became optimistic that we would make it to Alert completing our mission even without helicopter support. Our positive expectations were short lived, however, and shattered after just a couple of days when the ice pack decided to move back to Ellesmere Island. In those days it was impossible to predict movement of the ice field.

This was a disaster. The ice pack forced the ship back to Ellesmere Island nearly beaching it. The Eastwind struggled to move away from the beach by pounding the extremely heavy ice. Constant battering over the next two days began to take its toll. One of the ship's two screws was completely lost and the second was damaged to the point of uselessness. Then, despite the fact that the hull of an icebreaker is doubly reinforced in the impact area, it had been split open by the ice and two forward compartments were flooded.

Having fought its way into the ice pack, the Eastwind was now a helpless prisoner subject to the whims of the gigantic enemy. Worse yet, pressure of the ice pack increased and began to force the ship out of the water. However, the icebreaker is designed with healing tanks carrying twenty thousand gallons of water on each side which when pumped side to side rocked the ship back down into the water in a level and settled position.

There we sat locked in the ice pack with no control of our destiny. Depending on the movement of the ice, we might have ended up in the Arctic Ocean closer to the North Pole. Surprisingly there was no anxiety or panic in the ship's crew. As is typical in an Arctic assignment, supplies on board were abundant so food and heat was more than adequate. While the press at home expressed concern about our predicament, the crew was relaxed and often disembarked out on the ice for games and entertainment.



USCG Eastwind trapped and immobilized in a dominant Arctic icepack

But despite the positive attitude of the crew, we were in a precarious position. It was now past the middle of August nearing the time when the Arctic begins to freeze solid again. However, Lady Luck decided to smile on us, and one morning we awoke to find that the ice pack was breaking up allowing the ship to float freely. We had gotten to about 30 nautical

miles from Alert floating in the Kane Basin close to Ellesmere Island. However, we were still adrift, helpless, and unable to complete our mission.

The Coast Guard was well aware of our condition, and the rescue operation had already begun several days earlier. The Westwind, which had been working in Thule Bay, was on her way to help. Since the ice pack had opened up she was able to reach us with relative ease. A towline was attached and the Westwind slowly brought us back to Thule Bay with our tail between our legs. Our mission had failed — the Arctic was victorious.

On return to Thule the helicopter flight crew was ordered back to HU-2 at Lakehurst, NJ ending our tour. Supplies and equipment from the Eastwind were immediately loaded onto the Westwind for another try to reach Alert. Bill Fortin, the Disney photographer, and his Coast Guard liaison companion transferred to the Westwind for continuation of the filming operation. Unfortunately it was now the end of August and despite another valiant effort to reach Alert, the ice pack asserted its authority and the Westwind was not successful. Emergency supplies for Alert would have to be airlifted. They would have to do without the heavy equipment needed for that year.

Though the mission to supply Alert by icebreaker was a failure in 1954, the story was a success. Disney Studios produced "Men Against the Arctic" at the end of 1955. The movie was nominated for an Academy Award and won as the Best Short Subject Story on March 21, 1956. Without fanfare, helicopters played a pivotal role in production of the movie in addition to providing critical support in the difficult task of clearing the way for delivery of cargo to Thule Air Force Base.

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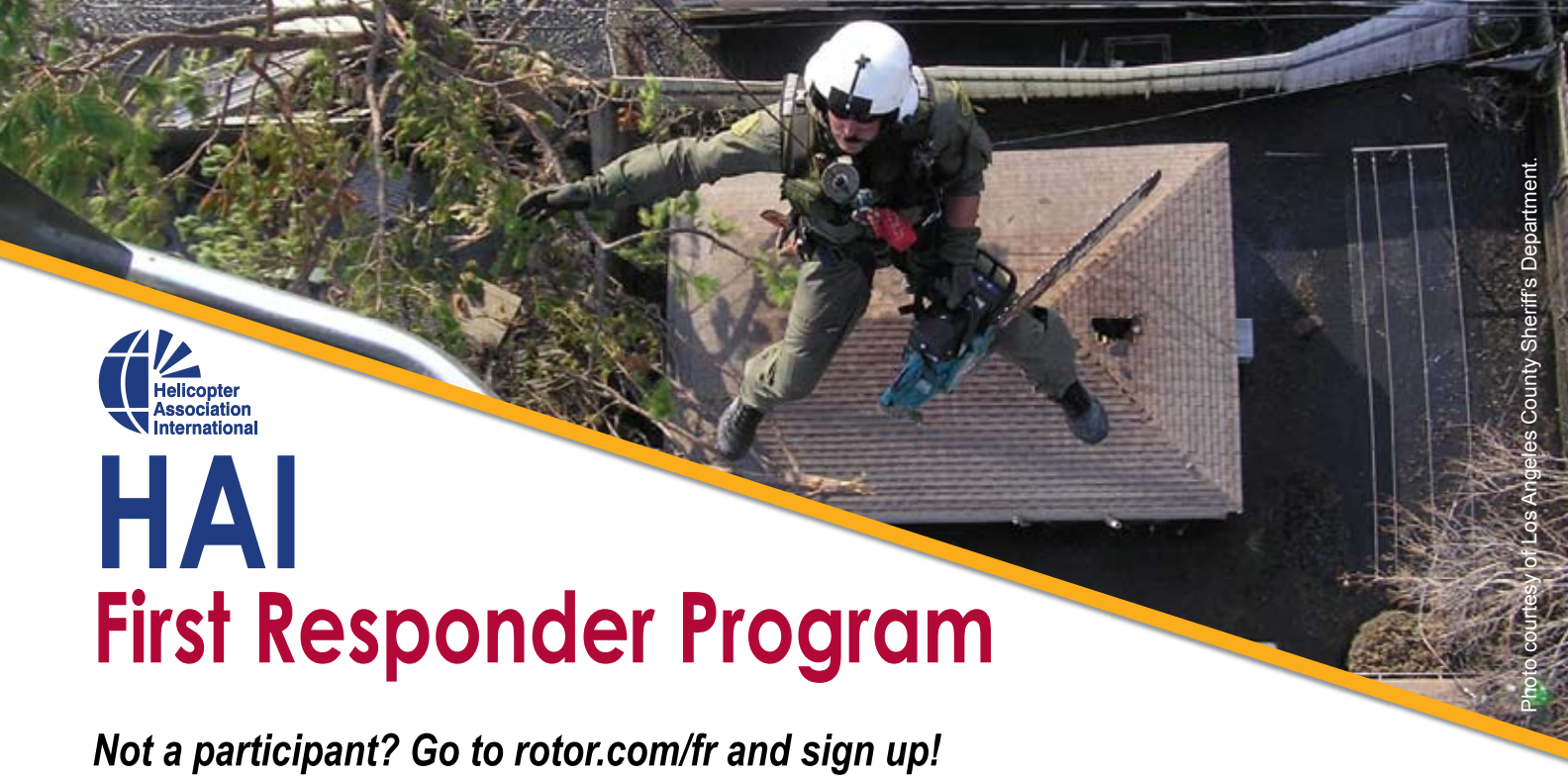

Photo courtesy of Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.

Helicopter Association International

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"If a man is in need of rescue, an airplane can come in and throw flowers on him, and that's just about all. But a direct lift aircraft could come in and save his life."

Igor I. Sikorsky

Questions about the First Responder Program can be sent to:

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