

Rescue Detail

A tug on my mattress and I was wide awake. A red lenses flash light was in my face. "They need you for rescue detail" "What's going on?"

"A cruise ship has hit a reef and she is going down"

Looking at my watch I saw it was 2:30 AM. I had only been down about an hour.

I rolled out of my rack about four feet off the deck. When I touched down a lightening bolt of pain shot up both legs. I had spent the weekend snow skiing in the French Alps it was my first time on skis and my body was paying the price using muscles I've never used before.

We were anchored out about three miles from Cannes France. The distressed ship was about half way between our ship and shore. We had two LCVPs, a motor whale boat and the captain's gig taking passengers off the sinking vessel transporting them to fleet landing. The cruise ship was listing to port at about thirty degrees when we went aboard with our submersible pumps. The first order the crew chief gave was to remove our life jackets (keeping them on would hamper swimming out in the event the ship rolled over) and to get the pumps below deck to begin pumping water out of the flooding hull.

I was paired up with two of the ships Italian stewards. The P-250 pump was heavy and with suction and discharge hose it took three to handle it. We passed through the ships lounge and one of the stewards held a finger up and said "momento." He then proceeded to break the lock off a cabinet and exposed a treasure trove of liquor bottles most of which tumbled out on the deck. Taking the top off one he took a long draw and offered to me I shook my head hoping this was an international way to say no thank you. They stuffed bottles in their jackets grabbed the pumps and started down a series of stairwells trying to get to the source of the flooding.

We had gone down three levels and could now see the water on the deck below. We dropped the suction hose down into the next stairwell and started back up to get the discharge line when the ship rolled hard to port, the lights flickered and a frightened voice came over the IC, the only words I understood was "attention" and "Capitano." My compadres knew exactly what he said and I guessed it was "abandon ship", cause they dropped everything and stormed up the stairs bottles clinking away. The lights went out and I said the first thing that came to mind "Oh Shit."

I felt my way up the next two ladders and came out on the main deck where the rescue crew stood holding on to anything that would keep them from slipping into the water. We were listing at such an angle that our shed life jackets had long ago slid off the ship. One of the LCVP's was on its way back to us. I could hear it's engines deep growl as it churned away. The men needed to get off the ship before it rolled.

There was one life boat left in its davit swinging out over the water. I jumped for it and pulled my way on board. I found left behind life jackets and began throwing them to the team. Each man put on a jacket and jumped in the water swimming away from the rolling vessel. I felt around for one more for me and found there was none. I said to myself "doomb shies" in a perfect German accent. Amazing how international you become after two years in the Med.

I was ready to leap and swim when my foot drug across the last life jacket. I pull it over my head and stood up on the side board to jump. The LCVP had picked up the sea detail by then and moved in under the life boat. I jumped for the stern sheets and made a perfect three point landing both feet and my butt.

When we got back to our ship I was about half way up the gangway when I saw the officer of the deck pointing at me and laughing. I looked down and saw I had strapped on a child's life jacket with Donald Duck painted on the front. I must have been more afraid than I thought, because I could not get the jacket back over my head and I had to have it cut off me.

The Navy was living up to its "Not Just A Job an Adventure" slogan.