

Coast Guard crews receive awards in Egg Harbor Township, NJ

Story and photos by Petty Officer 3rd Class Jonathan Lindberg, video by Petty Officer 1st Class Mike Lutz



Dec. 23, 2010 is a day Petty Officer 3rd Class John Opsal will remember the rest of his life. As an aviation survival technician at Coast Guard Air Station Atlantic City, N.J., Opsal trains to save people in distress everyday. But on this day, two days before Christmas, he was able to put that training into practice and give somebody the gift of having their life back.

Opsal was part of a four-person MH-65 Dolphin rescue helicopter crew that was honored on March 8, 2011, at Air Station Atlantic City along with other Coast Guard units who responded to a distress call coming from a 63-foot boat, the Sea Wolf, with two people aboard taking on water seven miles off the southern coast of Cape May, N.J.

“We spotted the boat off the right hand side and marked the position but could not see anyone in the water,” said Opsal.

The position was then given to the 47-foot Motor Life Boat crews from Coast Guard Stations Cape May and Indian River, Del., so they could arrive on scene and give assistance.

They radioed back saying they could see two people in the water and there is too much debris to get to them, said Opsal. Then the rescue boat crews requested that the rescue swimmer get deployed.

As Opsal was getting lowered down, he could see two people in the water and one of them was holding on to the life raft. The man holding on to the life raft was Eric Hopkins, 42, of Washington, D.C., the lone survivor, who Opsal was able to pull from the wreckage.

“I got him free of the raft and signaled that I was ready for pickup,” said Opsal.

The signal tells the helicopter crew to lower the rescue basket.

Opsal could not bend Hopkins’ legs to get him into the rescue basket because Hopkins was too hypothermic. Opsal removed Hopkins from the basket and communicated to the helicopter crew that they are going to have to use another method to get Hopkins aboard the helicopter.

“At that point, the helicopter had pulled away and I could see the rescue boat coming right at me,” said Opsal. “I knew right away we had a change of plans and we were going to the boat.”

Opsal swam over to the rescue boat crew with Hopkins and handed him to a couple crewmembers to bring him aboard.

To get Opsal and Hopkins off the rescue boat a double hypothermic lift was used, which hoists both Opsal and Hopkins into the helicopter at the same time.

Once Opsal and Hopkins were aboard, the helicopter crew realized they had little time to get back.

“At that point we were at bingo and were low on fuel,” said Opsal. “We went to the closest airport and the bravo helicopter crew met us there.”

The helicopter crew had to land in Wildwood, N.J., to transfer Hopkins to another helicopter.

Opsal and the flight mechanic on his helicopter, and the swimmer and mechanic on the other helicopter quickly made the switch.

“All four of us grabbed him out of the helicopter and took him from one to the other,” said Opsal.

The second helicopter crew transported Hopkins to AtlantiCare Regional Medical Center in Atlantic City.

The Coast Guard small boat crews tried to rescue Greg Arlotta, 62, of Florida, the other man aboard the Sea Wolf, but he was unresponsive and was reported to have sunk with some of the debris.

To express his gratitude, Hopkins wrote a thank-you letter addressed to Opsal and the rest of the helicopter crew saying how grateful he is to be alive.

The letter was given to Opsal so he can have something to remember the first life he saved in the Coast Guard.

“I will keep it as my first case and first legitimate life saved,” said Opsal.

To view or download video of the ceremony click [here](#).

###