

in a message dated 10/29/2007 4:01:17 PM Eastern Daylight Time, RRbobicard writes:

Dear Christine,

I am LCDR Robert V. Ricard, USCG, (Ret.) who was on the Coast Guard Cutter CLOVER that went to Great Sitkin Island when a Reeve's Aleutian airliner, a DC-4, crashed when approaching the Naval Air Station on Adak Island to land. The plane hit the mountain at the 2,000 foot level. I recall that there were 17 people on the plane including the two pilots and two stewardesses. I believe most of the passengers were military personnel.

Let me begin by extending my deepest sympathies to you and your husband for the loss of his father in that crash.

I was 23 years old at the time. My rank was ensign. My primary duties aboard the ship were navigator and operations officer.

This is what I remember. We were moored at our pier on Adak when we heard a radio transmission from Navy Adak rescue. It alerted us to something unusual because we had never heard the Navy use that terminology before. We then heard radio transmissions between Adak rescue and a Navy seagoing tug that was moored about five piers away from us. The transmissions indicated that a Reeve's Aleutian airliner that had been cleared for landing on Adak was overdue. They were sending Marines to the tug to be transported to an off shore position near the crash site on Great Sitkin. The Navy had located the wreckage by sending one of their planes to look for the Reeve's plane. The Navy plane found the wreckage which was still burning. The Marines were to climb the mountain to bring down survivors and/or bodies. The Navy Protestant chaplain, a LCDR, at Naval Air Station, Adak, was also sent to the tug to go to the crash site.

The Navy tug had no experience in landing personnel on beaches. We had much experience with beach landings because one of our duties was maintaining shore aids to navigation and we got to them by landing our work parties by boats from our ship. In fact, we also landed Marines on different Aleutian Islands on occasion as part of their combat training. We learned later that Adak rescue dispatched the tug because the tug's draft was one foot less than ours and their reasoning was that the tug could get closer to shore than we could. When anchoring off shore to land personnel from a ship's boats, one foot of difference in draft is meaningless, but Naval aviators were coordinating the rescue and none of them obviously had much sea going experience. The seas were choppy which made such a landing more difficult. The tug had two motor cargo boats. When the boats were approaching the beach and close to it, both of them broached and they grounded on the beach almost sideways. All of the personnel were thrown out of the boats onto the beach. Fortunately, none were seriously hurt. Some were bruised and scratched. There were more Marines on the tug to be landed, but both of the Navy boats were stranded on the beach. We were listening to all of the radio transmissions and even relayed some when Adak rescue could not read the communications from the tug and vice versa. We were ordered to proceed to Great Sitkin with more Marines. As soon as all of our Marines were on board, we got underway.

We arrived after dark and the seas were still choppy. "Rough" may be a better word. We had two motor cargo boats. We knew that we could not take our boats all the way into the beach without the danger of broaching. Each of our boats had a junior officer in charge. I was in charge of one of the boats. Although I was only an ensign, the lowest commissioned rank in the Coast Guard and Navy, I had been an enlisted man in the Coast Guard for six years before I went to Officers Candidate School. My enlisted service included being a crewmember and coxswain (operator) of search and rescue boats. After the CLOVER anchored, and before our two boats were launched with the first party of Marines on board, we placed a one man rubber raft and a line (rope) throwing gun in each boat. We approached the beach and anchored at a safe distance to avoid the potential for broaching. After we anchored, we tied two lines to the raft, one at the forward end and one at the after end. We then fired the line throwing gun to Marines on the beach. The end of the line of the line throwing gun was tied to one of the lines on the raft. We put the raft over the side and the first Marine boarded the raft and was towed in by the Marines ashore. (Had there been no

one ashore, we would have put one of our men in the raft to row the raft ashore.) Putting the Marines ashore one at a time took a long time and it was not easy for the Marines. Now and then a wave would break over the stern of the raft getting a Marine wet with very cold water. We returned to the ship to get the remaining Marines, put them ashore, then we went to the Navy tug and got the remaining Marines on that ship. I don't remember how many Marines we put ashore.

After all of the Marines were ashore and climbing the mountain to the crash site, we returned to the CLOVER and waited until sunrise. Once it was daylight, we could see the wreckage of the plane through binoculars. Only the tail section and a small part of the fuselage forward of the tail were visible, and there was still some smoke coming from the wreckage. It was a difficult climb for the Marines and they had still not reached the crash site.

The seas had calmed to some extent so my commanding officer, LCDR Frank Barnett, a brilliant man and skilled seaman, told the other boat officer and myself to see if we could get both of the Navy boats off of the beach. We proceeded to both boats on the beach. Both were partially filled with water so we pumped out as much as we could. It was difficult because now and then a wave would break over the boats. We towed them off which was also a very difficult task because they were pretty much hard aground. We then towed the boats back to the Navy tug and they hoisted them out of the water. The Navy officers were grateful for getting their boats back, but embarrassed.

I do not recall how many hours it took for the Marines to reach the crash site and bring the bodies down to the beach, but it was late at night, probably more than 24 hours from the time we landed the Marines. The seas had picked up again so we anchored our boats off shore and each body was placed in a rubber raft on a stretcher by the Marines and we towed the raft to our boats and lifted out each body into our boats. The Marines had body bags for the bodies that were badly burned. Surprisingly, over half of the bodies were not badly burned. The plane had not hit the mountain directly. It was obvious from the wreckage, according to the Marines, that the pilot had seen the mountain at the last minute and pulled up, but too late.

The plane had pancaked in and many of the people were thrown forward and out of the wreckage away from the fire. Needless to say, it was a grim task and a few of our men got sick. We took the bodies to the Navy tug. (I don't recall why we did not take any to the CLOVER.) After all of the bodies were placed on the tug, we returned and got all of the Marines off the beach taking about half to the Navy tug and half to the CLOVER. Between the bodies and the Marines, we had to make several trips which took a long time. The Navy boats could not be used because their engines had been immersed in sea water and could not be started. I believe that both ships weighed anchor to return to Adak at 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning. I think the bodies were flown out of Adak later that day or possibly the next day.

Several years ago, I sent for copies of the deck log books of the CLOVER for the year I was aboard. All of the deck logs of Navy and Coast Guard ships are kept in the National Archives and can be obtained for the price of copying them. If you would like, I can scan the log entries for that operation into my computer and email them to you. I haven't read the logs in a number of years, but I know they won't contain many details of the operation, just entries such as the time and date of getting underway for Great Sitkin, anchoring time off of Great Sitkin, the name of the Navy seagoing tug involved in the operation, etc. Let me know if you want them. It will take me a little time to find them and scan them into my computer.

We were all saddened by the crash and loss of life. Most of us had flown to Adak on one of the two or three DC-4s Reeve's Aleutian Airways had and we considered ourselves lucky to have not been on that plane. I had met one of the stewardesses on the plane during a flight of that plane or another Reeve's DC-4 from Kodiak to Adak when I was on temporary duty on the mainland of Alaska about two months before the crash. I was single at the time. She was a very attractive and nice young woman from New York. She and I talked quite a bit during the flight which was about 1,000 miles. She said she chose to work for Reeve's instead of a major airline because she thought it would be safer flying in the Aleutian Islands with much less air traffic. She had agreed to be my guest at the Navy officers club for dinner the next time her plane remained overnight on Adak. Her body and the body of the other stewardess were burned beyond recognition.

I never saw the official cause of the crash, but some of the high ranking Navy pilots said the cause was pilot error. The pilot was part owner of the company. When he was approaching Adak, he told the tower that he had the Naval Air Station in sight which meant that he was approaching Adak on VFR (Visual Flight Regulations). Had he not had the air station in sight, he would have had to approach on IFR (Instrument Flight Regulations) thereby burning more gas. It was obvious that he did not have Adak in sight. The ceiling (cloud cover) was at about 2,000 feet. When the plane broke through the ceiling, the mountain was right in front of him. Had he been on course, he would have been okay and missed the mountain, but I believe he was to the south of the course he should have been on and thought he was on.

In seeing pictures of plane wrecks in Alaska on both the internet and elsewhere, I have wondered why there are no pictures of that plane wreckage. I have to believe the wreckage is still there. It would have been very expensive to remove it from that mountain and I do not see a reason why anyone would want to remove it. Although there usually are not any trees in the Aleutian Islands, perhaps some type of growth such as tundra may have grown through the years to obscure the wreckage from a distance. I doubt that anyone would climb Great Sitkin to look for the wreckage since it's one of the uninhabited, forlorn islands in the Aleutian chain.

If I think of anything else about the crash and the operation involved in getting to the wreckage, I will tell you about it.

Although it happened many years ago and I just turned 72 years old, I remember the operation as though it happened last year. Much has changed since then including the Adak Naval Air Station having been closed several years ago. And the CLOVER was decommissioned somewhere in northern California and sunk by Navy gunfire in a training exercise. And I heard that Reeve's Aleutian Airways went out of business a number of years ago.

If you have any questions, please email them to me.

Where are you located? I live in Eastpointe, Michigan.

Was your husband's father in the military when he was on that plane? Once again, please have my sympathy over his loss in that crash.

Best regards,

Bob Ricard

LCDR, USCG (Ret.)