

# Woodbridge unit saves 32 lives

by A1C Matthew Warner  
Public affairs

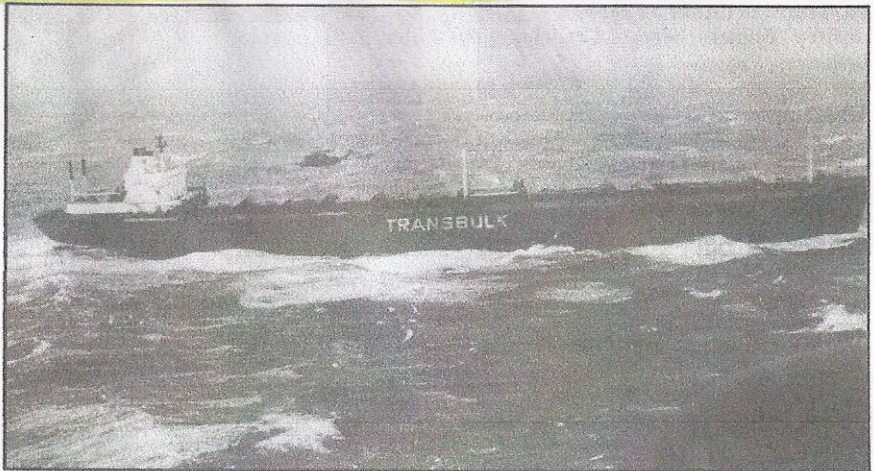
**D**ESPITE high winds, low clouds and waves of up to 30 feet, crews from the 21st Special Operations Squadron at RAF Woodbridge rescued all 32 people from the 42,000-tonne bulk carrier "Yarrowonga" Jan. 14. The damaged ship was nearly 240 miles off the west coast of Ireland.

This was the first rescue for the 21st SOS (formerly the 67th Airspace Rescue and Recovery Squadron) and their MH-53J PAVELOW helicopters.

Two helicopters were launched early Saturday and refueled several times in-flight by two HC-130 Hercules aircraft of the 67th SOS at RAF Woodbridge. One of the aircraft had been on temporary duty at NAS Keflavik, Iceland, when called upon to support the rescue effort.

A helicopter and one of the HC-130s had been launched the previous night but, "because of the severity of the weather we weren't able to conduct the mission. It would have taken eight hours to get from Woodbridge to the ship," said Col. Robert Rossi, deputy vice commander of the 39th Special Operations Wing, parent unit of both the 21st and 67th SOS.

The mission was an international effort. Rescue operations coordinated and supported by the Irish Rescue Coordination Center at Shannon International Airport. Royal Air Force Nimrod reconnaissance aircraft flew "top cover" and monitored the



U.S. Air Force photo by Capt. Matthew J. Shozda

**An MH-53J "PAVELOW III" helicopter of the 21st Special Operations Squadron, lifts people from the 42,000-tonne bulk carrier "Yarrowonga," which is breaking up in heavy seas and taking on water through a large hole in its side.**

weather while RAF "Sea King" helicopters acting as back-ups to the U.S. Air Force aircraft conducting the actual rescue.

"One of the HC-130s was the first of our aircraft to make visual contact with ship," said Colonel Rossi. "A helicopter later went into a 50-foot hover above the deck, and a pararescue specialist from Detachment 4, 1730th Pararescue Squadron, was lowered onto it to get the people there organized.

Using penetrators capable of lifting three people at once, the first helicopter loaded 17 members of the ship and the second helicopter hauled in the other 15 before returning to Shannon.

"The weather was the key difficulty," said Maj. Ken Stafford, assistant mission commander, who worked with Lt. Col. Bill Goodwin, mission commander, at the Rescue Coordination Center in Shannon during the effort. "The weather and the distance worked together, in that the distance involved made refueling mandatory — and it's more difficult to accomplish that in bad weather."

Nonetheless, both Colonel Goodwin and Major Stafford agreed the mission was a smooth success. "We didn't have so much as a hiccup in the whole operation," said Colonel Goodwin, "and teamwork was the key. That starts with the 667th Consolidated Aircraft Maintenance Squadron maintainers who make sure we have aircraft that work and are capable of completing the mission, and the support people who rarely get thanked for their part in these efforts, but without whom we could never get the job done. I saw the people we pulled off the ship as they stepped off the helicopter and they appeared truly grateful to be stepping on the ground again. The joy in

their faces was enough to give us thanks for a long time.

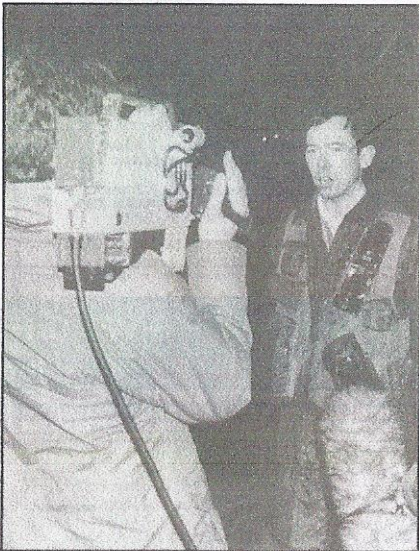
In helicopter 431 were: Capt. Dennis M. Jones, aircraft commander; Maj. Charles R. London, co-pilot; Maj. Bobby L. Hunt, co-pilot; Sgt. Donald D. Wheeler, flight engineer; SrA. John P. Lucas, flight engineer; Sgt. Stephen B. Elson, pararescue specialist; and TSgt. Cordis D. Blackwood, aerial gunner.

In helicopter 976 were: Capt. David W. Freeman, aircraft commander; Capt. Richard D. Headrick, co-pilot; Capt. Matthew J. Shozda, co-pilot; SSgt. Leroy E. Parris, flight engineer; Sgt. Mario M. Roiz, flight engineer; TSgt. Emilio Jaso Jr., pararescue specialist; Sgt. Jack Vanlue, pararescue specialist; and Sgt. William H. Taylor, aerial gunner.

In HC-130 aircraft 820 were: Lt. Comdr. John R. Odom III, USCG, aircraft commander; 2nd Lt. Randolph S. Lawson, co-pilot; Capt. Bruce D. Frank, navigator; SSgt. Ralph R. Lawrence, flight engineer; MSgt. Thaddeus P. Pikora, communications specialist; TSgt. Brian A. Brech, loadmaster; SSgt. Bryan K. Coats, pararescue specialist; SSgt. George A. Hewitt Jr., pararescue specialist.

In HC-130 aircraft 823 were: Maj. Steven W. Weiss, aircraft commander; Capt. Kevin G. Young, co-pilot; Capt. Robert B. Dudley, navigator; TSgt. Richard W. Todd, flight engineer; TSgt. John O. Thomas, communications specialist; TSgt. Ricky J. Wells, loadmaster; SSgt. Robert R. Sheets, pararescue specialist; and SSgt. Michael E. McFee, pararescue specialist.

Two flight surgeons from the 81st Tactical Fighter Wing Clinic at RAF Bentwaters were also on board the helicopters. They were Lt. Col. (Dr.) Henry A. Litz and Maj. (Dr.) Richard L. Neel.



U.S. Air Force photo by Sgt. Kenneth Sheppard

**Capt. David W. Freeman, a pilot with the 21st Special Operations Squadron, talks to reporters on his return from the rescue. Captain Freeman was aircraft commander of one of the two helicopters that took part in the mission.**