

USCGC Southwind (WAGB 280) Arctic East 1969 & 1970 By LTJG/LT Stephen E. Goldhammer, USCG

I reported aboard Southwind as a LTJG on 24 June 1969 at Curtis Bay, MD with LT (later RADM) Rudy Peschel, LTJG John Carroll, ENS Ray McFadden, and the 10 enlisted members of the aviation detachment. I was assigned a forward stateroom with ENS Eckhard (Ed) Magsig. I was thrilled to be an HH-52A Aircraft Commander flying all around the Arctic at the age of 24, and getting paid for it! I kept a daily log of the flights of HH-52A's CGNR 1379 and 1360, the aviation detachment activities, and the ship's itinerary. 12 July was Arctic Circle crossing initiation day. On 31 July, we flew both helos up a long fjord about 60 miles to Sondstrom Air Force Base to pick up mail. We had a 40 knot tailwind flying up the fjord and that's the fastest ground speed I've ever experienced in an HH-52, 130 knots! Before we departed Southwind, we filled a mailbag full of newspaper. We returned with six pounds of three-week old mail. As I flew by Southwind to show the crew the bag of mail, it suddenly fell from my crewman's hands into the water! The crew was aghast! Fortunately, it was the bag filled with newspapers, and the crew fell for the little trick that we played on them. Since we also had some real mail, the crew wasn't too unhappy with us.

One of the most eventful things that happened on the cruise was the grounding on 15 August. We were doing depth soundings of uncharted waters in position 75°56'N, 61°15'W off the west coast of Greenland with ENS Bob Glynn as OOD. We drew 28 feet and we found the top of a pinnacle 25 feet under water at 1945Q. The noise along the bow sounded at first like we were passing over a large chunk of ice. We were in 200 fathoms until 20 minutes before grounding. The depth decreased to 160 feet and the last recorded depth was 85 feet before we struck. There were no other shoals or reefs in the area. We were pitched up 12 degrees. We flooded two compartments in bow motor shaft alley and tore a 32 foot hole in the hull. We also flooded all of our toilet paper. The helicopters immediately took off from athwartship to lighten the load. That didn't work. We secured from General Quarters at 0120Q. Northwind arrived the following morning and lent us four cases of toilet paper. We finally worked ourselves free at 0030Q on 17 August and continued normal operations before arriving at Thule Air Force Base on 29 August. Southwind's divers surveyed the hull damage and drew a sketch of it. The engineers built a wooden patch on the flight deck, lowered it over the port side, secured it with lines around the hull, and then pumped out the two flooded compartments. When the compartments were dry, the engineers filled them with concrete. After the concrete dried and the divers did an inspection, we departed Thule and continued normal operations for two more months. Since we were in uncharted waters at the time of the grounding, there was no disciplinary action against any of the crew. The ship's Engineering department won a Coast Guard Engineering award for their innovative solution to repair the hole in the hull and permit Southwind to continue its mission. The only unhappy people involved in this whole evolution were the workers at Curtis Bay who had to remove the hull plates and the concrete when Southwind returned.

I learned how to play Bridge on this trip by watching other people play in the Wardroom. On the way home in the open ocean, we found out that the bell on

Southwind's bridge would ring by itself at 52° of roll! That was quite an experience. Luckily, she was designed to roll to 80° and back. The two helicopters departed Southwind on 29 September and returned to Mobile, AL.

I traded icebreaker trips with a friend of mine in Mobile, and passed up an opportunity for a trip to Antarctica, so I could sail on Southwind to Europe in 1970 with the same great CO, Ed Cassidy, that I served with the previous summer. Our XO on Arctic East 1970, LCDR Bob Nelson, was a future Chief of Staff of the Coast Guard!

I reported aboard Southwind on about 11 June 1970 with LCDR Ralph Giffin, LT George Ellis, LTJG Fred Kent, and the enlisted members of the aviation detachment. My roommate was LTJG Mike Macie. I kept a daily log of the flights of HH-52A's CGNR 1356 and 1395, etc. as I did the previous summer. We visited Goose Bay, Labrador Air Force Base on 24 June and made an abrupt departure the next day. We were asked to leave after some dubious behavior by one of Southwind's crew. We struck bottom as we were leaving Melville Bay on 25 June but didn't run aground. GQ wasn't even sounded!

On 9 July, I almost spent an unplanned night ashore with CAPT Cassidy. We flew him to do an ice reconnaissance in the vicinity of Kap Seddon, Greenland. We were about 10 miles northeast of Southwind when we noticed a fog bank approaching Southwind from the south as she was steaming south through the ice. We decided to return to Southwind before she entered the fog bank. The fog bank won the race to the ship. We had Southwind come to all stop. We then made an approach to the edge of the fog bank in Southwind's wake through the ice. We air taxied about 500 yards into the fog bank in about 125 yards visibility while following the wake and were glad to finally sight the stern. We then made an uneventful landing on the flight deck.

I was promoted to LT on 29 July. I held my "wetting down" promotion party at the Thule AFB Officer's Club. Mixed drinks at Happy Hour were 10 cents! I brought an electric blanket with me on my first Southwind trip, but I didn't need to use it. I left it home for my second trip to save some space in my footlocker for other things. Of course, both of our boilers broke down at once on the second trip and we had no hot water or heat for a week. It was 40° in our living spaces! During that same week, we lost excitation to the starboard shaft, cracked two cylinder casings on #1 main engine, and burnt up the generator on #4 main engine. Our longest time at sea on this trip was 31 days straight.

On 15 August, exactly one year after our grounding off Greenland, we reached 83° 01'N, then a record for northernmost penetration of the Arctic Basin. A few of the hearty souls aboard went swimming, in wet suits, to commemorate the occasion. The water temperature was 31.9°F. We also lowered a Nun buoy in place that LTJG Ken Riordon had found earlier in the Barents Sea. It said "8/15/70 CGC Southwind 83° North." Attached to it was a watertight container with our sailing list and a Coast Guard pennant. One of the crew tried to attach a Confederate flag to it but the Captain declined and told him to save it for when he had to blow his nose.

While we were operating north of Russia in the Barents and Kara Seas, we were 'escorted' for quite a while by a Russian icebreaker 'Vladimir Kavraysky.' On 22 August at 0355, she collided with us! She drifted down on us dented and our hull on the port side where it joins the main deck and also bent two railing stanchions with her bow. There was no internal damage. We secured from GQ after one hour and 15 minutes. **One of the aviators had donned his wetsuit; he was ready for anything.** I never heard of any news coverage or formal complaints between countries about that event.

On 5 September, we began one of the most amazing experiences a person could ever have, a visit to Murmansk, Russia for two nights in the middle of the Cold War! CAPT Cassidy had requested permission from the U.S. State Department for the port call. The request was granted because it was a homecoming for Southwind! How can that be? After World War II, the U.S. had a 'lend lease' program with our ally, Russia. Southwind, then U.S.S. Atka, was lent to the Russians as part of that program and homeported in Murmansk. It was returned to the U.S. several years later and eventually given to the Coast Guard. Following are excerpts from my log of that visit:

0740 Russian pilot aboard. No more pictures allowed until arrival Murmansk. Two Russian 'liaison' officers aboard who will be aboard almost all of the time, 0900-2400. We must station a few guards, without guns, at the gangway. Manned the rail and passed a Russian naval and seaplane base on the way in the channel. There were burlap screens erected to prevent us from seeing their submarines. We had to wear our uniforms on liberty.

1050 Arrived Murmansk. Very quiet city; lots of people on the dock. Docked at coal pier just forward of a ship from London.

1400 Departed on a bus tour of the city. Only 34 of us went in two buses; the Russians expected five busloads. The city is mostly old apartment buildings and many outlying slums. There was no restriction on taking pictures/movies in town. Toured a museum. A young student approached us in the museum and was very inquisitive about our activities here. He seemed very interested in us and said he was happy to be talking to Americans. During evening chow, Bob Glynn said he was walking along a street this afternoon when a drunk guy approached him and said in broken English that he had been to America and was glad to see Americans here. He wanted to shake Bob's hand and then a policeman came along and pulled him away from Bob. Bob said he's convinced that the Russian people are friendly, but that they live in a police state.

1900 Went by bus to the Seaman's Club party. Saw movies on Russian life, collected some free propaganda books, enjoyed the dance band and master of ceremonies. Had a sing-along and there was much camaraderie evident. The girls, mostly good looking, were mostly from the local institute where they are studying English. Some of them spoke very well; others not. Talked to Irina Sergoya, one of our lady tour interpreters from this afternoon. She was very nice and friendly and enjoyed the opportunity to practice her English. I was talking to a girl through an interpreter and asked him to tell her that she should come down to see our ship tomorrow afternoon if she wanted to. He said she couldn't because 'she didn't have enough certificates.' He said many people wanted to see the ship, but they could only let a certain number come in organized

groups. Bob Gravino said that this afternoon the Russian liaison officer asked him if the ship was ready for open house. Bob said yes, the Russian made a phone call, and five minutes later a group of about 100 people came marching down the dock. I wonder if they volunteered. I was talking with an Army Lt. Col. up from Moscow for our visit. He said that all of these activities were arranged especially for us and it was a very special occasion to have an American ship here. He said that when a Russian wants to buy a car, he pays for it, gets on a list, and then gets delivery about three years later. There are only two types of cars made in Russia and one costs about \$2,500.00.

2300 Returned to Southwind.

Sunday, 6 September

1110 Went on a walking tour of the town with some shipmates. Looked in shop windows. Shopped in souvenir store and bakery. Took pictures. Several kids approached us for chewing gum. Some other guys were approached for American dollars. The Russians were offering up to 10 Rubles for one dollar. One Ruble equals about \$1.05. Returned to Southwind at 1430.

1900 Departed for party at House of Culture. Same type of affair as last night. Lots of girls there; some with the same dresses they had on the night before. Some of the girls were dancing together and holding hands; not too unusual, but some of the Russian guys were doing it too! Watched movie of a Russian singer performing. Left at 2100 and went to a hotel bar. When we first walked in, they thought we wanted to use the head, but we finally conveyed that we wanted a table. We got that; the next problem was how to order. We were pondering that when a guy at the next table said hello to us in Russian. Since we didn't speak Russian, we finally found German as a common language. He ordered for us. He was a seaman who was leaving the next day for Capetown. He gave us each a round of vodka and cognac and also bought us a bottle of champagne! The bar was very nicely decorated and had a band playing. Arrived at Southwind at 2355, five minutes before liberty expired, after a great evening.

At 1800 Sunday evening, we took aboard a practice NASA space capsule that the Russians had found somewhere. It looked like a dummy Gemini capsule. The Russian TV news had said that one of our reasons for coming here was to pick up the capsule.

Monday, 7 September

1245 Walked downtown with some shipmates to shop and mail post cards.

1808 Underway with all hands on board.

The two helicopters departed Southwind on 15 November and returned to Mobile, AL. I believe that Arctic East 1970 on Southwind was one of the best cruises an icebreaker ever had! Besides the usual Greenland re-supply escort duties to Thule and Sondstrom Air Force bases, Southwind set a latitude record, searched for a missing Russian aircraft bringing earthquake relief supplies to Chile, and got to visit Copenhagen, Denmark, Tromso, Norway, Murmansk, Russia, and spent a week in Portsmouth, England! My wife met me on the dock when we arrived in Copenhagen. She was the only girl on the dock, and all of my friends were kidding me for bringing a sandwich to a banquet. However, it was a fabulous sandwich, and we're still married after 41 years (as of 2010).

Sometime in the late '70's when I was stationed at Air Station, Brooklyn, NY, I was flying a Port Security Patrol around New York harbor and vicinity looking for oil spills.

While flying in Newark Bay, I looked down at a shipyard and saw two Coast Guard icebreakers being cut up for scrap metal. A few weeks later, I drove over there and found out that the breakers were Eastwind and Southwind. Southwind was too far gone to go aboard and the superstructure of Eastwind was gone. I got aboard Eastwind and retrieved many items of memorabilia including two hammock clues, silverware, a battle lantern, a telephone directory sign, and numerous other signs identifying fittings and spaces. I now have them posted around my house: Officer's Toilet and Shower, Dry or General Stores, Stateroom One, Stateroom Two, Stateroom Three, and Watchstanders. I was really lucky to get them before it was too late, and I'm really lucky to have a wife who appreciates Coast Guard memorabilia almost as much as I do.

I retired from the Coast Guard in 1996 as a Captain after 31 years.