

Real-life 'Castaway' rescued by USCG Auxiliary Air Crew off Florida

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For a Coast Guard Air Station Clearwater Auxiliary aircrew flying out on August 17, it was anything but a routine patrol, part of their regular Maritime Observation Mission (MOM) flown along Florida's shores.

The Piper Aztec PA23-250 twin-engine six-seat prop plane took off from Fort Myers' Page Field en route to Dry Tortuga, the Marquesas and the Florida Straits with a crew of four USCG Auxiliary Air (AUXAIR) Crew members. In command was Pilot Marc C. Miller (070-09-06), aircraft commander; Co-pilot John C. Landon (070-11-10), aircraft commander; AUXAIR Crew Kevin S. Wilcox (070-08-04), AUXAIR Coordinator; and Air Observer Moises Escolastico (070-09-03). All four hail from AUXAIR Clearwater, Florida.

After landing in Marathon, FL, for fueling and a lunch break, the crew headed to the Cay Sal Bank and then Cay Sal located 30 miles north of Cuba.

Upon arrival in the vicinity of Cay Sal Island, the crew observed a 30- to 40-foot sailboat with no sail visible anchored about 100 yards from shore on the northwest side of the island.



(L to R) Pilot Marc C. Miller, co-pilot John C. Landon, Air Observer Moises Escolastico and Kevin S. Wilcox, AUXAIR Coordinator. (U.S.C.G. Auxiliary photo.)



"Our air observer, Moises Escolastico, called out that he had a sailboat offshore," said Miller. "He noted that a flare was spotted and I looked down and I saw a red aerial flare as did the other crew members."

AUXAIR crew member Kevin Wilcox was maintaining radio contact with U.S. Coast Guard Sector Key West, according to Miller. "It looked to him like the flare might have come out of a porthole on the vessel but we couldn't be sure where it came from," added Miller. "Moises thought possibly that it came from shore."

"As we continued to circle looking for people on board, Moises was trying to raise them on (VHF) Channel 16 with no result," said Miller. Channel 16 is designated as the national distress, safety and calling frequency. All vessels should monitor this channel while underway. "We had been at 1,000 feet and we were climbing up to 3,000 feet because communications with Sector Key West were marginal in that area so we were going up in altitude to get better radio coverage."

What occurred next was right out of the Tom Hanks' movie—Castaway—where a survivor swam ashore on a deserted isle in the Pacific Ocean and was later rescued.

"As we were climbing up, Moises first spotted the S.O.S. in the sand," said Miller. "And he saw a structure about 30 yards inland. We noted that there didn't appear to be a mainsail on the vessel. We speculated that it looked like the shelter on shore was fabricated using what remained of the mainsail."

The AUXAIR crew circled the sailboat, with a blue bimini and flying a Bahamian flag, to gather information and tried making contact with the sailboat on channel 16 to no avail.

"We didn't see any person onboard," said Miller. "But, we were informed by other boaters on channel 16 that the sailboat was taking water with a single man on board." The crew radioed their observation to U.S. Coast Guard Sector Key West watchstanders, who, in turn, contacted Air Station Miami advising them of the situation.

After 1 hour on scene, Sector Key West asked the AUXAIR crew to stay one more hour but they could only stay for 30 more minutes, due to weather deteriorating in Fort Myers. They were released from the scene at 1712 HRS and returned to Marathon for fuel and departed for Fort Myers within maintaining their eight-hour round-trip allotted mission flight time.

The U.S. Coast Guard deployed an HC-144 Ocean Sentry aircraft with crew to Cay Sal and dropped supplies



including food, water and a radio to establish communication with the man. He notified the Coast Guard crew he'd been stranded for three days after his vessel became disabled during his voyage. Later, the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Paul Clark rescued him off Cay Sal and transferred him to the Royal Bahamas Defence Force.

"We're proud to have saved this man's life. This case serves as a perfect example of why you must have the proper safety equipment on your vessel," said Petty Officer 3rd Class Dev

Craig, a Coast Guard Sector Key West watchstander. "Without seeing the flare, the case may not have had a successful outcome."

Miller said the AUXAIR qualification, though a lengthy series of steps, is intensive and one that benefits both the boating public and the Coast Guard by helping to patrol and identify occurrences like this one in their ongoing efforts to save lives. It is a qualification earned by members of the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, a uniformed all-volunteer civilian component of Team Coast Guard. Founded in 1939 by an act of Congress, the Auxiliary has units in all 50 states, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, American Samoa and Guam. Under the direct authority of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security via the Commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard, the Auxiliary's internally operating levels are broken down into four organizational levels: Flotilla, Division, District and National.

"Routine" patrols such as the one in this article also allow aircraft crews to be pre-staged in the air to be quickly dispatched for other search and rescue events that may occur.

"It's a rewarding experience," said Miller about the AUXAIR program. "It takes six months to a year to become qualified. Sometimes it's hours of boredom interspersed with moments of excitement. This happened to be one of those. You can go for two or three months without finding anything and, all of a sudden, one pops. That's just the way it happens."

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