

### 63. Decisions Under Stress (3:03)

When I was Captain of the fast response cutter Forrest Rednauer from 2020 to 2022, I had an unusual search and rescue case off the coast of Catalina Island in southern California. We arrived on scene amid 8 to 10 foot breaking waves as well as 30 to 35 knot winds about 80 nautical miles offshore. The distress vessel was a Panga style vessel - which is an open top - with more than 20 illegal migrants - that had become disabled. The conditions were well out of parameters for our small boat but during the case I had significant external pressure to launch based on safety of 'Life at Sea' concerns.

I was very close to launching but my Chiefs and Lead Coxswain took me aside and basically said, "Skipper we can't do this. This is way too dangerous and if we lose our small boat we can't help these people anyway." Some of my more junior personnel were pretty energetic and they wanted to go for it. But I took the advice of my Chiefs and said maybe we can come up with another idea. Eventually, we convinced two of the helos that were on scene to eventually begin rescuing people.

But they were hesitant to start due to the risks involved. Our assessment was the craft was in no immediate danger so we all decided to wait until the storm could subside slightly. After several hours and due to hypothermic concerns, the helicopters began pulling the migrants off the vessel one by one. However, the vessel had now drifted towards another island and we assessed that it was less than 45 minutes until the vessel would go into the surf and potentially capsize which would mean almost certain death for the person's remaining on board.

The conditions had improved to the point of being borderline for a small boat launch but we felt we had no choice. So we launched. We successfully rescued all the remaining migrants but embarking them was extremely dangerous involving timing the waves and essentially throwing the hypothermic migrants - who could barely stand - up to the deck crew. Once that was complete, we recovered our small boat but the seas were still so bad we nearly lost our small boat. Only a well-timed swell surging the boat into the cutter's 'notch' allowed us to recover.

The danger of this operation even in a moderately reduced sea state indicated to me that if we had launched in the beginning when I thought to go for it, the results more than likely would have been catastrophic.

This taught me four things.

FIRST - Sometimes your instincts to render immediate aid are not the best practice. Waiting and assessing the situation further might give you a better solution.

SECOND - Know your people. Your junior people might be gung-ho but if you know that's their normal tendency, then you can wait appropriately given the circumstances.

THIRD - Listen to your Chiefs. You might disagree, but if they are determined - then there's something that you're not seeing.

FOURTH - And, finally, know yourself. If you know what you're likely to do in a moment of stress or fatigue you can weigh it more appropriately and be open to alternative courses of action which might be safer or more successful.

### **Related Primary Leadership Principles**

Ability to Embrace Change

Accountability

Authority of Position

Responsibility

Active Listening

Capacity to Care

Continual Learning

Courage

Decision-Making

Drive to Achieve

Effective Use of Resources

Feedback

Inspiration

Military Core Values

Political Savvy

Stress

Team-Building