



PACIFIC COD

JACOB'S LADDER

AND A
22° ROLL

LIFE ABOARD A COAST GUARD CUTTER

As icy hummocks undulate far out to the horizon, the flight deck of the United States Coast Guard's 378-foot/115-meter High Endurance Cutter Munro pitches and rolls. This makes it very difficult, even for the most experienced Coast Guard pilot who is quite skilled at negotiating difficult situations in the air, to bring the helo (helicopter) in for a landing. If Fire Control Technician Scott Farrell is going to bring this bird in safely, without it slipping off the deck and capsizing in the frigid sea, he knows he must remain completely engaged and sharp-minded. Not an easy task, even for a 15-year veteran of the Coast Guard whose technical aptitude runs the gamut from an onboard 76 mm weapons system to the exhaust system of his 1998 Volkswagen Jetta TDI, a car he's specially equipped with a two-meter VHF ham radio for the ultimate in remote communication, should he hear the call of the open road. Scott is a real Coastie at heart, a term he uses to describe himself and his fellow crew.



Since 1986, when Scott Farrell entered the Coast Guard at the age of 18 just a few months after graduating from high school, he's lived on both coasts and conducted hundreds of hours of training aboard one ship or another as a Petty Officer in the United States Coast Guard (USCG). His tours, which amount to two-month stints, carry him to either the warm waters off the coast of Central America where most operations revolve around chasing go-fasts, the drug trafficker's speedboat of choice, or to the icy waters of the Bering Sea where the ship performs fisheries enforcement operations and occasionally moves in to rescue a trapped and disabled fishing boat chock-full of halibut or Pacific cod. "Our primary focus on a mission up in the Bering Sea is simple: 1) to ensure fishing is not occurring in closed or protected areas, 2) to ensure that the fishing vessel is operating with all appropriate safety gear, and 3) to act as a Search and Rescue cutter in case someone gets injured," Scott added.

Today, in the relatively calm waters and spring air off the coast of Unalaska, part of the remote Aleutian Islands, Scott Farrell is training on deck, mastering the ins and outs of a helo landing. "The line-up line that I initially signal from begins near the deck's edge," Scott explains, going on to describe a rough landing he had to bring in just a few days before he qualified as a Landing Signals Officer.

"The helo took off in the morning for a mission, then returned later and conducted a helo in-flight refueling with us before flying one more mission," Scott said. Over the course of their combined four hours of flight, the seas had picked up enough that the ship was tossing outside of the safe limits for launching and recovering the helo. As Scott puts it, anything more than a seven-degree roll in daylight is considered unsafe.



"I don't know exactly how much we were rolling, but it's safe to say we were exceeding our limits. As I was standing there getting ready to signal, a wave hit the side of the ship, traveled up the hull and blasted me in the head. As the deck on this ship is 25 feet/7.62 meters above the surface of the water, you can imagine it made for quite a soaking. I moved in from the edge of the flight deck and started signaling the helo. The deck was moving too much for their first approach and they aborted. Their second approach was better, and we were able to get the helo on deck. Unfortunately, they missed the grid that allows them to grasp the deck with a talon device that's attached to the helo's belly, so I had to send out my tie-down crew to fasten the helo to the deck by hand. Just as the port straps were in place, the ship rolled to starboard. The helo leaned and pulled the straps taut. It's hard to imagine what would've happened had the helo not been fastened on the port side," Scott concluded. As he later learned back inside the ship, feeling something akin to exhaustion, this had been the "second most hairy" landing in three years.

Such is the life of a Coast Guardsman. It's a career fraught with its fair share of misadventures. Once on a routine fisheries boarding in the northern waters of the Bering Sea, Scott was thrown overboard. "On a typical boarding, most of the fishermen think you're nuts," Scott started to explain. "From their point of view, we're crazy to leave the comfort of our ship, which looks like a luxury liner compared to their boats, and get in what we call a smallboat or RHI (short for Rigid Hull Inflatable boat), which has a fiberglass hull and a multicompart ment buoyancy tube. Inside the smallboat, we'll speed through frigid, 10-foot/3-meter seas for sometimes more than a mile, only to arrive covered in ice to board the fishing boat," Scott continued.

Once aboard these fisheries, the boarding Coasties inspect the bridge, power plant and logs, ensuring compliance with applicable laws and regulations. Upon the mission's completion, Coasties descend a 30-foot/9-meter tall rope ladder (called a Jacob's Ladder), which can be a tricky business. Especially



in rough seas, when the challenge of transferring from the smallboat to the Jacob's Ladder is all about correctly timing the up-and-down movement and catching the ladder at the peak of the swell. "If you don't get on the ladder and move up quickly, you stand a chance of being struck by the smallboat when it comes back up on a larger swell," Scott explained. "Step from too low and the smallboat may strike you. Step too late and you'll fall 20 feet/6 meters down to the smallboat as it rides down the backside of a wave."

"The day I fell in, it was a rough day at sea. As the smallboat reached the crest of the wave, I stepped onto the icy sponson, which is often used as a stepping point to the floor of the smallboat, and slipped, falling about 20 feet/6 meters, all the way from the crest to the trough of the wave." While his feet fell into the bow of the smallboat, his upper body spilled into the icy water. As the crew struggled to pull Scott into the boat, his body was freezing in the 35° F/1.7° C waters. "The person who pulled me into the smallboat said I was icy. My suit was already starting to form ice crystals. Everywhere he grabbed was too slick to keep hold of me, and I continued to slide further into the water. Finally, he reached into the water and grabbed my gun. The pistol grip provided an excellent stronghold until someone else could grab my gun belt."

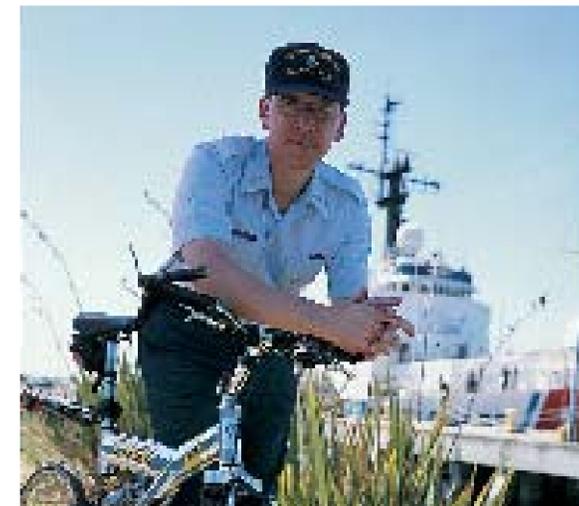
With the heaving waters compromising the smallboat's stability, the driver's biggest concern was making sure Scott wasn't crushed between the smallboat and the fishing vessel. After what seemed like several minutes, crew members were finally able to hoist Scott's body into the smallboat, and they began to inch their way across frigid waters in a race for the ship that was still a few miles away.

"I was rushed back to the ship where it was determined that my fingers, now pink and light purple, were frostbitten. For the next two weeks my fingertips remained numb, and it wasn't until I had a good sense of touch in my fingers that I returned to my boardings," Scott continued. Unfortunately, Scott was no longer able to tolerate being in the freezing temperatures of the transit between vessels or the -30° F/-34° C temperatures of the fishing boats' freezers.

"Luckily, my tour was nearly complete and I had already served the ship well." Lucky indeed.

SCOTT FARRELL: FIRE CONTROL TECHNICIAN, USCG

Scott Farrell is a Fire Control Technician in the United States Coast Guard and an avid bicyclist and Volkswagen enthusiast. When he's not riding a bike, he can be seen tooling around in his 1998 Volkswagen Jetta TDI. If you're a Volkswagen Driver with an interesting job, hobby or pastime, we'd love to hear from you. Write us at editor@vwdriver.com.



Scott Farrell has been traveling into the wild for as long as he can remember. As a kid growing up in Pasadena, Texas, he was introduced to what would become the three loves of his life: bicycling, ham radios and later on, cars, the Volkswagen turbo diesel engine, TDI, to be exact. While he doesn't believe that Volkswagen models are the fastest cars on earth, he does believe they're very underestimated. "Diesels are definite underdogs, but much quicker than people expect. They're very tunable and can be quite fun and spirited to drive," Scott boasts.

If his love for his 1998 Volkswagen Jetta TDI, a car he affectionately refers to as Stealth, is any indication to just how deep his passion runs, it may be accurate to call him a true enthusiast. Not one to be single-minded, Scott's enthusiasm for biking is also unbridled. In fact, when we caught up with him at port in Unalaska, he was taking advantage of some free time to go for a ride over the island.

In addition to the trail riding he squeezes in whenever (and wherever) possible, Scott's also looking to become more involved in an event around the San Francisco Bay area that teams up a blind rider with a sighted one to compete in tandem races. As if that's not enough, he also finds time to care for a pet python, three turtles and a tank of South American fish.