



< Photo taken 1969 in San Juan >

## U.S. Coast Guard

### Sikorsky HH52 Sea Guard

**1461**

Manufactured in 1962 as **Serial No. 62-140**



**1461** transferred from San Juan to Mobile, Alabama for ice duty in 1974 (1 tour)

**1461** (MSN 62.140) w/o 29feb76 approx 0130 experienced compressor stall at approx. 200ft agl. Successful autorotation to water off Cape Beale, Barclay Sound, Vancouver Island, BC. Crew and one survivor of Canadian F/V Bruce I rescued by Canadian CG. Helicopter dashed against rocky coastline, destroyed

**1461** transferred from Mobile, Alabama to U.S.C.G. Air Station Port Angeles, Washington

Destroyed Feb. 29, 1976



## Cape Beale rescue 'one for history books'

Bamfield resident, former coast guard member recalls mission full of surprises

Every Leap Year until his death a decade ago, Reid Dobell was sure to leave a message on the answering machine at Bamfield Coast Guard Station on Feb. 29.

Clifford Charles told an audience at Echo Centre last week that Reid, a Vancouver resident, never forgot the crews that came to his rescue twice in one night off Cape Beale.

A hereditary Uchucklesaht chief, Charles is a retired Canadian Coast Guard seaman with 37 years of service based out of CCG Station Bamfield. He was invited by Port Alberni Maritime Heritage Society to talk about the station and a rescue mission with more than its share of unexpected twists and turns in a village where lifesaving tradition dates back to 1907.

Longevity of service and father/son succession are part of the history of Bamfield rescue station. Clifford followed his father Martin into the service, and they were both on duty the night of Feb. 29, 1976. While attempting to retrieve his dog, the lighthouse keeper spotted a light offshore. *Bruce 1*, a commercial herring seiner, was foundering.

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Together with Capt. David Christney and fellow seaman Bob Amos, the Charleses set off from Bamfield in a lifeboat with a rigid inflatable in tow. They soon spotted a pair of men in a raft.

“We immediately discovered they were super hypothermic in a very bad way,” Clifford Charles said.

The pair was unable to move or speak. That meant rushing them to Bamfield for medical care as the crew fought to raise their body temperatures. After recovering sufficiently, one managed, “Where’s Reid? Where’s Rusty?”

With that critical information revealed, the vessel swung around and headed full speed back to Cape Beale. They searched a perimeter around the lighthouse, including a line of debris, all that was left of the wreck, before a closer scan of the shoreline using the inflatable. They spotted another survivor, Dobell, washed ashore and clinging to a rock, 10 metres up.

“There was no way we were going to get this guy off the rock,” Charles recalled.

“Just hang on, we’re going to get you,” they hollered to the man reassuringly.

Shortly after, the U.S. Coast Guard radioed from Port Angeles, Wash., with an offer of assistance. A USCG helicopter arrived an hour later, retrieving the survivor from the rock before searching for the fourth victim using a high-powered searchlight.

At that point, the airborne rescue went awry. The Bamfield crew got another call: The chopper had crashed in high winds in front of the lighthouse. Christney full throttled to

the crash site to find the machine still afloat. Using the inflatable again, they rescued the chopper crew and their passenger, Reid Dobell.

“Reid crashed twice, once in the boat and once from 200 feet in the air in a helicopter, but he’s OK,” Charles said.

CCG Comox completed the search and recovery for a fourth man, the captain, who was the only one lost in the sinking.

“It became one for the history books,” Charles said. The crew and their American counterparts were later honoured with silver medals of bravery by Governor General Jules Leger.

The U.S. Coast Guard later recovered most of the downed chopper, aside from a door, which they left as a souvenir for Bamfield station.

Charles spoke of his former colleagues, “a great bunch of guys,” with reverence. He remembered his late father as a hero, one who braved countless gales to save many lives. Fittingly, the CCG vessel *M. Charles M.B.* — a Hero class mid-shore patrol vessel based in Sydney since 2015 — is named after Martin Charles. The M.B. stands for Medal of Bravery.

“We had some rough calls; we had some nice easy calls,” Clifford said. “I’ve been very confident on the water as are most Bamfielders.”