

A scene from Saturday's rescue



Photo courtesy of Depoe Bay Fire & rescue

# UP in the AIR



**T**here were four of us on the little plane flying back from a press trip to an island off the coast of Australia.

The pilot sat in front of me. Arlyn, a writer from the James Beard Foundation, was beside me and behind us was a woman from China who had given herself the American moniker Belinda Sunshine. It was growing dark, nothing but water below us. Suddenly, Arlyn grabbed my arm and turning to me, demanded in her New Yorkese, "Whata matta with the pilot?"

"What do you mean, what's the matter with the pilot," I asked.

"He's slumped over the wheel," she said. I leaned forward and sure enough, it appeared she was right. In that instant, I felt a terror like I'd never known as I grasped the reality that there was no one going to walk on that plane and rescue us.

We were on our own. Me, Arlyn and Belinda Sunshine. I have never felt so helpless in my life.

Helpless. It's a good word to describe how many are feeling on the Central Oregon Coast these days since the U.S. Coast Guard announced it will close down the Newport Air Station Nov. 30 — the day before the start of crabbing season, a season that often sees the loss of at least one fishing vessel and the call to rescue others.

With the closure, helicopter help will be at least an hour away. By then, it will likely be recovery operation rather than a rescue.

And it's not just the fishing fleet that will be imperiled. Barely a week after the announcement, the helicopter crew plucked five tourists from the rock at Fogarty Creek. If they'd had to wait an hour, the surf no doubt would have already washed them away. And consider this note posted on Facebook from



Two Coast Guard HH-65C Dolphin helicopters in flight

a man who identified himself as a retired Coast Guard helicopter rescue swimmer:

"... I've spent many nights at that facility, responded to boaters in distress, pulled men with broken bones out of the surrounding forests and at the base of cliffs. I have friends that have been lowered into Devil's Punchbowl to rescue a surfer that couldn't have held on the time it would take to respond from North Bend. I've looked into the faces of family members of victims that may have been survivors if I had gotten there sooner."

The air station in Newport opened in 1987 — thanks to the Newport Fishermen's Wives and others in the community. That effort came after three fishermen died when the F/V Lasseigne went down. Ginny Goblirsch, former president of the Newport Fishermen's Wives, told me the call for help came at 7:33 am. By the time the helicopter arrived, it was 8:33 am. Two men were dead of hypothermia; the third was never found.

It took an Act of Congress in 1986 to open the air station.

"The city donated land," Goblirsch said. "The fire truck was deployed for every take off and landing."

The community did whatever it needed to do to accommodate them."

There's another word for what this community is feeling — deceived. As recently as April, the community was assured that closure of the air station was off the table. And then, without so much as a warning, no public meeting, no input from the community, surprise ...

Of course, now that thousands from over the U.S. have signed a petition to keep the air station open, now that our Congressional delegation, state legislators, county and city officials are raising hell, suddenly they want to hold a meeting — no doubt to sell us on the idea that this move to save \$6 million annually really is a reasonable idea.

I'd say, save your breath. It's ignorant, it's insulting and it seems to ignore the fact that every year, the helicopter crew saves a half a dozen or more lives and on an average is dispatched close to 50 times.

I was lucky that evening in Australia. Reacting purely on instinct, I grabbed the pilot's shoulder and demanded, "What's the matter with you?"

He turned slowly in his seat, "I was writing in my log book," he said, none too happily. We landed safely with a nervous laugh and a story to tell.

I like to think this story, too, will end on an up note, and in the future we'll share our own tale of the little town that could — and did.

On the other hand, nearly 30 years ago, it took an Act of Congress. Works for me.

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