

Citation for
THE ASSOCIATION FOR RESCUE AT SEA
Gold Medal

To: Abram A. Heller
Aviation Survival Technician Second Class
United States Coast Guard

Petty Officer HELLER is cited for extraordinary achievement while participating in aerial flight on the morning of 23 March 2008 while serving as a Rescue Swimmer aboard Coast Guard HH-65C helicopter CGNR 6566. Early Easter morning, the F/V ALASKA RANGER, a 192-foot catcher-processor with 47 persons on board, sank 125 miles west of Dutch Harbor, Alaska.

Arriving on scene amidst blowing snow and 30-knot winds, the aircrew of CGNR 6566 witnessed an epic scattering of blinking strobe lights that stretched for as far as the eye could see across the cresting waves. Knowing that the mariners' survival time was waning rapidly in the icy waters, Petty Officer HELLER immediately deployed into the 15-foot seas and recovered three survivors.

Continuing his search, Petty Officer HELLER carefully picked his way through the treacherous debris field, locating two additional crewmen completely entangled in the sunken vessel's fishing gear. Working tenaciously beneath the dark and icy waters, Petty Officer HELLER disentangled the survivors from the netting and placed them in the helicopter's rescue basket. Fully recognizing that his recovery of the fifth survivor would leave no room in the helicopter for himself, Petty Officer HELLER courageously remained behind in the wind swept seas.

With CGNR 6566 now perilously low on fuel, the cabin completely full of survivors, and more distressed mariners in sight, Petty Officer HELLER requested the helicopter's crew raft for use in the water. As CGNR 6566 departed into the darkness and blowing snow, Petty Officer HELLER, alone and undaunted, utilized all of his physical strength, instinct and experience to assist three severely hypothermic fishermen into the life raft.

Over the next hour, Petty Officer HELLER worked doggedly to keep the survivors conscious. As another rescue helicopter arrived, and despite being severely hypothermic himself, Petty Officer HELLER returned to the frigid waters and placed the crewmen, one at a time, into the basket for recovery.

Petty Officer HELLER's actions, aeronautical skill and valor were instrumental in saving eight mariners from certain death in the Bering Sea. His courage, judgment, and devotion to duty are most heartily commended and are in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Coast Guard.