

CHAPTER 23: WECKBACK AND NEWHALL

Still dazed from the backdraft explosion, Newhall drifted in and out of consciousness. Lying on the top deck, he was bitterly cold.

He came up topside, Argueta Urias testified. We heard a really loud shout and he fell forward on his stomach. I went to see who it was. I saw it was him and he was face down.



Smoke engulfs the top deck.

Weckback tried to help him.

He had really wet clothes on and he was freezing, she said. He was screaming because he needed a suit. He didn't look good and he was just freezing. He was pale. He didn't really know what was going on when he first got up there.

Weckback and Argueta Urias helped him don one of the survival suits Shoemaker had raised from the foredeck. She pulled him to safety each time smoke shifted in their direction.

He couldn't move, she testified. I would have to like drag him out of the smoke because he was just sitting there.

After Shoemaker's fall, Newhall was senior officer on the top deck. He periodically roused himself and shouted an order to other crewmembers, then seemed to lose touch with his surroundings. He never saw the raft tethered to the stern, or witnessed people jumping.

As she tended to Newhall, Weckback watched the blue flame erupt from the ammonia vent at the top of the exhaust stack.

It was like this blue-black, like a butane lighter almost, she said. I remember when that happened, somebody's like, 'Oh that's not good,' and I think that's actually when people starting jumping.

I was kind of waiting for my turn. I'm polite and I didn't realize it at that point, but I guess there were a few people that weren't going to jump. So I was waiting. And then I realized they weren't going to jump,

Pigott shouted at her from the raft. Karn shouted from the railing.

I heard Mikey screaming for me to jump and George told me that I had to climb over the railing and jump. I was like, 'I can't leave Ryan,' because Ryan couldn't really stand up at that point.

The others insisted she leave Newhall and save herself. Someone said he would take care of the deck boss; she thought it was Karn.

Ann, you have to jump, Casal shouted. *You have to have babies!*

Weckback climbed over the rail and prepared to jump. Suddenly Karn clambered over the railing alongside her and plunged over the side. Rather than leaping for the raft like the others, Karn stepped off sideways, crossing his legs for protection in case he landed on debris, shielding his head with his inboard arm. It was the technique recommended in the training movies screened at the beginning of every trip aboard the *Galaxy*.

Weckback watched him miss the canopy and hit the water with a huge splash. He momentarily disappeared beneath the surface, before the buoyancy of the survival suit boosted him back into daylight. She watched him struggle toward the raft, making no progress against the current and inhaling mouthfuls of seawater. She was shaken by what she saw.

I was all freaked out, she testified. *George was in the water and I was screaming for them to help George because he didn't jump on top of the life raft like everyone else. He did like the proper jumping procedure. It left him fairly close to the life raft but not directly on top of it. I remember seeing Raul.*

The chief was trying to help Lino.

Weckback screamed at him, *'Raul you have to help George! He doesn't know how to swim!'*

Weckback testified that she saw someone cut the painter as Karn entered the water. As the raft drifted rapidly away, she climbed back inside the railing. Three of the men remaining on the top deck had chosen not to leap. Newhall was too disoriented to choose. Weckback had made the decision to jump for the raft, but Karn's peril convinced her she had waited too long. The survival craft now seemed out of reach.

There were still like six of us on the boat, she said. *I don't understand why the line was cut at that time, unless maybe it was going to melt because the fire was getting bigger or something like that. But I don't know.*

The raft drifted rapidly away from the stern. Weckback, Newhall, Argueta Urias, Montoya and Casal remained stranded on the top deck. Lino dangled helplessly above the punishing seas. On the bow, Shoemaker, Slawinski, Taylor and Rau huddled in the shelter of the bulwarks

That's why I didn't jump, she told investigators. *The raft drifted aft and George drifted like starboard. I decided that I would just hang out on the vessel until I had to jump because I wasn't going to jump in the water to just float away. I directed my efforts on trying to get José back on the boat.*

Weckback and the others made another attempt to lift Lino to the top deck. Even pulling together, they didn't have the strength to raise him.

José was a large man, she testified. *It was dead weight.*

Weckback turned toward the bow and saw a menacing ring of fire.

The flames were maybe two feet away from us, she said. *I knew that if the wind changed I probably would be burned alive, so I told Ryan, like, 'Dude, I am going to jump off of this boat. I*

think that it is our best bet. We'll have a better chance in the water.'

The deck was so hot Weckback's shoes began melting.

Plus, it was so smoky, she said. You couldn't even breathe and I knew that if we jumped in the water, we would be able to breathe a lot better. I couldn't stay on the boat anymore.

Weckback helped Newhall climb over the railing. She turned to the other three.

Do you want to jump with us, she shouted? Montoya and Argueta Urias were already on the mast. They screamed at Casal, urging him to join them there.

They didn't want to jump, Weckback told investigators. I didn't want to jump either, but I didn't want to die in the fire.

She and Newhall stared at the churning water.

Let's jump on the count of three, Newhall shouted. He immediately started counting.

One, two...

At two, Weckback closed her eyes and leapt into space. She wore a rain jacket, flannel pajamas bottoms and a pair of rain gear pants someone had given her. She gripped an LD3 buoy, which was tied to her waist. The red cylinder, just over a foot in diameter and three feet long, would keep her afloat as long as she could cling to it.

Though Weckback was already brutally cold, immersion in the Bering Sea was a violent shock that stole her breath away and nearly stopped her heart. The plunge propelled her deep under water. She broke the surface gasping for air. Her hiking boots were pulling her down and she kicked them off.

He said, 'Let's jump on the count of three,' and I jumped at two, Weckback said. I guess he saw a life ring out of the corner of his eye, as he was about to jump, so he grabbed that and put it around him. Then he jumped and he met me down in the water five seconds later.

Red

Still prostrate, Newhall saw flames punching holes in the deck a few feet away. He heard Weckback shout that it was time to jump. He pulled himself upright.

I just remember she is screaming at me, he testified. I saw Marco. I think he was trying to climb up the mast. I kind of have my back turned, because I am trying to think, 'How fast is this fire getting to me?' And it is coming to me fast.

We have got to jump! Ryan, we've got to jump!

Newhall heard Weckback shouting. He turned and looked at her.

She doesn't have a suit on. She climbs over the rail; she has a buoy in her hand. When I looked over the back, before we were gonna jump, the raft was gone.

She jumped, and I remember I had turned around for one more look before I jumped and I mean the fire was probably three feet from me, coming towards me. There are already holes where the fire is coming through. The fire was like basically right on me.

There was a life ring lying near the deck edge. Newhall reached down to grab it and fell into space. For the second time that day, the deck boss plunged into the Bering Sea.

So now I am in the water and I remember somebody from the mast yelling at me, he said. They are going, 'Red, Red!' I don't even know who it was, but they were pointing to Ann. I swam to her. I got to her and then I see the life raft.

Newhall implored Weckback to swim to the raft. Cresting, 20-foot waves battered them. Wind drove the raft toward the bow on the port side of the *Galaxy*. The current carried the swimmers in a different direction.

We were trying to swim toward the life raft, according to Weckback. I can totally swim. I

used to be on the swim team, but I couldn't swim with what I was wearing, and with the waves the way they were and just with how cold I was. I am trying to hold on to that LD3.

She couldn't swim in that cold water, Newhall told investigators. I was thinking 'We are going to die if we don't get to this life raft.' I just remember yelling at her, 'You have got to swim! You have got to swim!' And she is screaming at me, 'I am trying! I am trying!'

At first, Newhall clutched the life ring and Weckback clung to her buoy. Although she was tied to the LD3, Weckback struggled to keep it underneath her as she fought the waves.

We don't go through a lot of knot training in observing, she testified. This crappy knot that I have was the only thing keeping me attached to this buoy, so I didn't really want to let it out from underneath my arm. And Ryan said, 'Do you think that maybe if I gave you this life ring that you could swim?' So he gave me the life ring and immediately when I put the life ring on, my LD3 just floated away. The knot came undone and basically it was gone.

Newhall lunged for the buoy, just two feet away, but the current swept it out of reach.

Everything was floating in different directions, according to Weckback. It was so weird. The life raft would go one way. We were going another way. The buoy went another way.

Can you swim now, Newhall shouted?

Yeah, let's go.

His vigor renewed by adrenalin and the will to live, Newhall swam strongly through the turbulent seas. He chased the raft using a crawl stroke as the wind battered his face with spume. He turned to look for Weckback. She was already far behind.

Swim to the raft! Weckback shouted. Save yourself. You can make it!

Without hesitation, Newhall reversed direction and came back to her. He began to rescue-swim on his side, pulling the observer with him. It was yet another selfless act by a *Galaxy* crewmember.

I grabbed the life ring and I tried to do a one-arm swim, pulling her to the life raft, Newhall testified. I tried for the longest time, I am telling her to, 'Kick it, kick, kick, kick,' you know, and I am trying to do a one-arm swim and it just wasn't working.

It was probably about a half an hour at that point in time, Weckback said. I was like, 'If you think that you can make it to the raft you should probably go. But if you don't think you can make it, then we should probably stay together. Then we can talk to each other and you know, just keep each other more alert.'

And then we just floated for a long time.

The raft shrank into the distance.

I can still see it, Newhall testified, but it is just a lot further than it was to begin with. I knew that we were not going to make it to the life raft, and I knew that she was just burning up all of her heat that she had in her, so I stopped. I just held on to the life ring with her and we just started drifting.

Weckback grew weaker. Barely conscious, she kept slipping through the hole in the life ring until only her head remained above water. She wrestled with despair, moaning, *'What are we going to do? What are we going to do?'*

Newhall's voice was her only lifeline. Sometimes stern, sometimes playful, he struggled to keep her mind alert and focused. He talked about going to the coffee shop for lattes when they got back to shore, and teased her about who would pay the bill. He talked about going dancing. Alternately, he comforted her and barked when she slipped low in the water.

Ann, get up, he shouted repeatedly! You have to get in your life ring!

Each time, she responded momentarily. Each time, she slipped back through the ring.

Suddenly in the gathering twilight, Newhall saw lights on the horizon. He recognized them. They were the powerful sodium lights that Bering Sea fishing vessels use to illuminate their decks for night operations. It was the first of the good Samaritan vessels responding to Shoemaker's mayday.

I saw the first set of sodiums coming over, and I say, 'Hey Ann look at this.' I said, 'Don't worry, there is help on the way.' I said, 'We are going to be fine, someone is going to get us.' We started laughing and I told her how she owed me a cup of coffee for doing this and we are going to be drinking it in 15 minutes on that boat.

For a time, the sodium lights got larger. Then, they started to recede before disappearing over the horizon.

Well, that boat didn't see us, and the second boat didn't see us, Newhall said. I don't recall if there was a third boat, but every time we would see a boat, I just remember how excited we would both get.

Newhall had forgotten about the small emergency light fastened to the breast of his survival suit, a flashing strobe. When they heard an aircraft, he realized he had a visual distress signal he could use to attract attention.

The helicopter came and that's when it dawned on me about my flashlight, and I said, 'Hey, look at my chest,' because I didn't want to let go of the life ring. I said, 'Look at my chest and tell me if I have a flashlight,' and she looks and she says, 'Yes.'

See if you can undo it.

Newhall held the life ring and watched as Weckback fumbled unsuccessfully with the clasp. Deeply hypothermic, her fingers were cold and lifeless. Newhall grasped the light and tried to work the catch, but had no feeling through the bulky survival suit gloves.

I was getting frustrated because I couldn't get it off so I just ripped it right off my suit, he testified. And I said, 'Ann can you hold the top of it while I turn it?' because I didn't want to let go of the life ring. She tried. She was just too cold. By this time she is turning blue, so I put it in my mouth.

Using his teeth and one hand, the deck boss twisted the top, the procedure that activated the light. It started flashing. He waved it in the air as the helicopter passed close overhead.

I mean it's right there and I am trying to aim it exactly at him, Newhall said.

The light momentarily renewed their sense of hope, but the helicopter offered no sign of recognition as it passed overhead. When it dwindled in the distance, the surge of elation turned to despair. Weckback's strength continued to ebb. She started to babble. Newhall's nerves were frayed. Two, maybe three boats passed in the distance. They were running out of time.

I was trying to think of some way to get us out, you know, something, anything that I could possibly do, Newhall recalled. I remember she just kept talking and kept talking, and I was just like, 'Hey, shut up. Let me think. Shut up!' And she did. She just went quiet.

That was for a good five or six minutes and that's when it really dawned on me that we were gonna die. She was telling me the whole time like, 'We're gonna die, we're gonna die,' and I was like, 'No, we're not! Quit saying that!' But it dawned on me then, no one was ever gonna find us.

Weckback started hallucinating. She looked at Newhall strangely. She thought his face was the same color as his survival suit.

His face was orange when we were in the water, she told investigators. Maybe that was in my mind, but it was like totally bright orange to me and it was freaking me out. Almost like when babies are born orange. Like that color orange.

She kept falling down in the life ring, according to Newhall, nearly exhausted himself. I kept

grabbing her and trying to pull her up, and I would wrap my arms up underneath her to where I was trying to make it impossible for her to fall through. She looked at me and she goes, 'You look funny!'

I said, 'What do you mean?'

She goes, 'Your face is orange.'

And I said, 'Well, your face is purple.'

Then she just kind a put her head on my shoulder and I put my head on hers, and we were just floating. Every time she would go down, I would just lift her back up again and hold on.

Weckback slowly lost consciousness.

It wasn't painful, she said later. Just like going to sleep.

She could have died and likely would not have known the difference. Cold-water immersion not only incapacitates an unprotected human body, it dulls the senses, quelling the fear of the unknown.

Newhall lost hope of rescue, but not his will to live. He was furious at the helicopters and fishing vessels that passed by without coming to save them.

I remember I looked up one time after a wave hit us, he testified. We were hit by every single wave out there. I caught a glimpse of some sodium lights, and I just put my head right back down.

I was so mad, I was just like, 'Screw you, man!'

A couple minutes later, I looked up and there it was again, a little bit closer, and I put my head back down like, 'No way.'

He turned to look for the *Galaxy*. The smoking hulk was barely visible on the horizon. No rescue units were in sight and Newhall experienced a wave of despair as he regarded the enormous expanse of ocean.

I put my head back down again, he said. I wasn't going to let Ann know about the boat. I didn't want to get her hopes up again over something that is just going to pass us.

Newhall closed his eyes but couldn't quiet his mind. He had a strange sensation and raised his head to scan the horizon. There was a light in the distance.

I was starting to kind of feel something now, he testified. Usually when I would see a light coming towards me, it wasn't. It was going at some other, different angle. This one just kept getting brighter and bigger and brighter and bigger.

I remember the third time when I looked up. It was like, coming right at us.

Weckback was semi-conscious. Newhall didn't rouse her. He didn't want to have her hopes dashed yet again. He reached high in the air and waved the strobe light. The boat was so close he could count the men who ringed the deck, scanning the water. There were others on top of the wheelhouse, and a man on the mast. They seemed to look at everything except the two swimmers.

I remember the boat turning sideways a little bit, and I was thinking they were going to turn and get out of there. I started yelling.

Weckback lifted her head and opened her eyes.

What are you doing?

There's a boat!

Newhall looked down as he shouted at her. When he looked up, he stared directly at the bow of the *Clipper Express*.

It was facing right at me, he testified. I remember I was waving my light, and I see a guy up on the mast wave back. And boom, they came around and circled us and picked us up.

Weckback doesn't remember being rescued.

Take her first!

Newhall shouted at the deckhands above him. He tried to raise Weckback as he felt himself being lifted. He lost his grip and the observer fell back into the water. The chief engineer from the *Clipper Express* quickly tied a line around his waist and jumped into the Bering Sea to save her. He wore no survival suit. It was yet another act of heroism.

According to Weckback, *I guess as they were trying to get me on the boat, somehow my hand grabbed a net and like, it took three people to pry my hands off of this net because I just wouldn't let go of it for anything.*

As the *Clipper Express* crew raised her to the deck, Weckback brushed the leg of a deckhand and wrapped her arms around it in a death grip. The man had to remove his boot to escape.

Captain Lone and his crew knew the protocol for treating hypothermia. Weckback suffered an extreme case, demonstrating the classic symptoms: Pale, clammy skin, shivering, confusion, fatigue, and slow pulse and respiratory rates. It was astonishing she was still alive.

To save itself, her body had closed off circulation to her arms and legs in an effort to maintain the critical temperature of her vital organs: Her brain, heart and lungs. She had to be rewarmed gently, gradually. If she was mistakenly immersed in a tub of hot water and rewarmed too fast, her brain might be fooled into restoring circulation to her extremities too quickly. If that happened, cold blood from her arms and legs returning to her torso could cause an *after drop* in her core temperature, and kill her. Proper treatment technique meant covering her with warm blankets, and using body-to-body contact.

They cut all my clothes off and I guess I was flopping around, she said. I was screaming at them but I don't remember any of it. They put blankets on me. They changed my blankets every 15 minutes. They kept putting blankets in the dryer so they'd be warm, but not like hot. And they took me upstairs and put me in a rack, and then people lay naked with me to warm up my body.

Weckback regained consciousness about 10 p.m. A nude *Clipper Express* crewman lay beside her. She was startled and sat bolt upright, but quickly realized this was proper protocol for a hypothermia victim. She was still cold.

I got to meet them all in the morning, Weckback laughed.

Shoemaker later reflected on their remarkable story of support and survival.

He kept her alive by promising that when they made it back to land, that she owed him lattes, she owed him dancing. She lost consciousness three different times and he would literally pull her head out of the water and say, 'Annie, you promised me! You promised me you owe me that latte! We're going dancing! Don't you leave me!' And then she would start laughing, just because of his presence of mind.

Think about his decision. 'Do I swim to the raft, because I can; I have a survival suit? Or, do I swim to her and not know what's going to happen?' Ryan Newhall thought about it for about a second and swam directly to her, got ahold of her, put the life ring over the top of her and held on to her as they drifted out to sea.

Here is the courage of a professional fisherman in saving the life of another person, putting his own life in jeopardy. When you think about decisions that were made, you think about Calvin Paniptchuck with Raul Vielma running down and leaping to the raft it hopes that he would hit it. You think about the heroic behavior that took place between Ryan Newhall and Annie Weckback. They were in the water for an hour and 45 minutes. She defied all the laws of exposure, but she lived.

Weckback and Newhall survived together in the Bering Sea for between one and a half and two hours. That her unprotected body endured the ordeal defied all of the odds. It ranks among history's great episodes of cold-water survival. *Together* is the operative term. She wouldn't have made it without the deck boss; nor could he have survived without her. Weckback had selflessly given her own survival suit to Tory DeNuccio, someone she judged to be more in need. When she could have jumped for the raft, she remained behind to care for Newhall. She put him into one of the only survival suits available to the crew on the top deck, when she could have donned it herself. Like so many others, both were heroes that day.