HMS Bounty Survivors: Crew of Ship Sank During Hurricane Sandy Speak of Lost Shipmates

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Crew members from the HMS Bounty, who were rescued as the tall ship sank off the coast of North Carolina last week, are speaking for the first time about their experience as they weathered Hurricane Sandy and the loss of two of their crew mates.

The dramatic sinking of the Bounty and harrowing rescue of its crew last Monday created some of the most enduring images during Hurricane Sandy. In an ABC News exclusive, the ship's 14 surviving crew members are opening up about their rescue after they tried to weather the storm.

They described the chaos as they abandoned ship and the Bounty was slammed by a giant wave. The 14 survivors, still together a week after the disaster, are still chiefly concerned with honoring those who didn't make it -- their captain, Robin Wallbridge, and deckhand Claudine Christian.

For first mate John Svendsen the call to abandon ship was one of the toughest he'd ever made.
The surviving crew of HMS Bounty speak with... View Full Size

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"We determined a safe time when we knew the ship would still be stable and we could get everyone on deck and change our focus from saving the ship to saving every life," said Svendsen, who credits Capt. Wallbridge's endless drills and preparation for the 14 lives that were saved.

But the ship's leadership lost all control once a giant wave broadsided the ship, knocking some of the crew -- already in their survival suits -- into the rolling sea.

"It was [like a] washing machine in an earthquake ... while going down a giant slide," crewmember Laura Groves told ABC News.

The crew says their unexpected adventure began on October 25, as the ship set sail from Connecticut. Captain Wallbridge wrote on Facebook that with Hurricane Sandy on the move, "a ship is safer at sea than in port." But three days into the voyage, the crew found themselves in the middle of the ferocious storm, with heaving waves three stories high.

"The weather was so bad and we had so little control," said Douglas Faunt.

"It took every ounce of my strength to focus through to survive," said first mate Svendsen.

Winds were tearing at the crew at 70 mph, and by the fourth day the ship, which was constructed for the 1962 film "Mutiny on the Bounty" and later featured in "Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest," had been taking on water for 24 hours.

Crew members on the Bounty had trained for rough weather countless times, they said.

"We been through two other hurricanes," Daniel Cleveland said. "We were literally launching the life rafts, and she went over."

The ship was thrown on its side, tossing crew members into the waves. They wore red survival suits designed to help them float.

"At that moment I couldn't be sure who the red suits were around me," Cleveland said.

Hours after being thrown into the water and clambering into the life rafts, they began to hear the beating rotors of Coast Guard helicopters. But they were far from safe, with the weather uncertain and one of the most daring Coast Guard rescues in memory underway.

"When the helicopters showed up, I think everyone in the life raft just started hooting and hollering," Cleveland said.

Suddenly a Coast Guard rescue swimmer launched himself from a chopper and swam toward them -- popping his head into their raft and heaving himself in.

"I was immediately filled with a huge sense of relief, and he asked, 'Who's ready to get out of here?' And we were all about to say 'Yeah,' and then the..."
raft just gets crushed with this wave and knocks him pretty good,” said Cleveland.

Svendsen was the only survivor not in a raft. He swam to a floating beacon, which had been devised by Capt. Wallbridge.

“So I give my life to Robin, and to his ingenuity, to his leadership, that I’m here today,” Svendsen said.

Those who were pulled out alive had no idea who else had survived.

“When we got up there everybody cheered each time we saw a new face come into that helicopter,” Joshua Scornavacchi said.

But not everyone made it home. Claudine Christian was one of the Bounty’s newest crew members, and was already part of the ship’s family.

“She was having the most fun ever on the best ride ever. She was so happy,” Doug Faunt said.

Christian’s last text to her mother read, “If I do go down with the ship & the worst happens... just know that I am truly genuinely happy!!”

The Coast Guard found her body hours later, and couldn’t revive her. The body of Capt. Wallbridge has not been recovered. For the 14 who made it survival is bittersweet.

“[I’m] going to miss them the rest of my life,” said Faunt, wiping away tears.

Today the entire surviving crew is still mourning and in shock, but grateful.

“After this, I’m never going to have another bad day in my life,” said Faunt, and the rest of the 13 survivors nodded.