

HURRICANE!



THE FIRST THING I NOTICED WAS the wind. It was clammy and restless, and flicked up my apron as I went from the galley to the walk-in freezer in the pre-dawn darkness. On the way back I stepped to the edge of the platform and looked down at the waves surging and churning around the pylons of the rig. The Gulf was a mass of skittish whitecaps dancing all the way to the black horizon. Something was up. You could feel it in the air. By late morning the order had come in from the oil company's office in Houston: "Evacuate the rig!" There was a hurricane moving in from the east and we were right in its path. It was definitely time to leave.

The galley was the gathering place on our little metal island. As the resident cook, I was the unofficial host as the men crowded in out of the storm to wait for their helicopter ride ashore. Someone shouted, "Hey Cookie, how 'bout some fancy snacks for the trip?" Another one agreed, "Yeah, I could go for a *feelay mee-nione* on a bun!" Everyone laughed; there was the usual rough and tumble camaraderie amongst the crew, but with an underlying tension today. We all knew that a hurricane was no laughing matter.

We were told we'd be evacuated in alphabetical order, so I was ready to leave with the first group. But the chopper came and went and nobody called my name so I went to see the tool pusher, the boss of the rig. He explained: "Tool pusher's the last man off the rig. Electrician's gotta stay with

By Tony Beckwith ©2003

him in case of any last minute electrical problems. So the cook's gotta stay too, in case we get stranded and have to ride out the storm." He grinned. "It's in the fine print of your contract." I wanted to tell him that people who sign up for this kind of "Foreign Legion" job don't usually read the fine print on anything. But there was no point, so I let it go and made my way back to the galley. The wind was howling around the little cluster of prefab buildings now, and although it was barely past noon the light was fading fast. The dark waves were running high and strong and I started wondering what it would be like to be stuck on this rig when the full force of the hurricane hit. My little refuge from the world now looked puny and I suddenly felt scared.

When all the roughnecks and roustabouts were gone, the tool pusher, the electrician and I sat in the galley drinking coffee, huddled around the company radio. A small helicopter was trying to get back out to fetch us, but the headwinds were almost too strong. We listened to the roaring wind and the crackle of the radio, and waited for what seemed like forever.

At last we heard the whirring of the chopper as it landed on the helipad. We turned off the lights, secured the door, and headed up the stairs. The tool pusher yelled, "Don't let go!" I nodded and gripped the rail as if my life depended on it. Once on the pad we crouched down, held onto each other, and scuttled over to the helicopter, the blades beating the air just above our heads. Getting the door open against the gale was a struggle, but then we were inside, and the pilot was revving his engines. "Buckle up and hang on," he shouted. "When we lift off it'll try to dump us in the water!"

With engines screaming, the pilot took off. The little egg-like craft was immediately hurled to one side and

sucked downwards. I pushed down hard with my boots against the floor as we plummeted toward the wild waters beneath us. Waves broke over the runners, spraying the window beside me with a staccato spatter of drops that sounded like machine gun fire. The chopper drifted towards the platform, shaking and shuddering and tilting desperately in the opposite direction. The muscles bulged in the pilot's forearms as he fought for control, his khaki shirt dark with sweat. I held my breath and watched in horrified fascination as we slowly—slowly!—pulled away, rose up and headed for Louisiana.

The hurricane was now blowing at very close to full strength and the helicopter was like a little mosquito in the wind. We were battered and bounced from side to side, and thrown up and down, lurching and plunging every inch of the way. The pilot battled non-stop to keep from being forced down into the terrifying waters of the Gulf. I never loosened my grip on the arms of my seat, and even though I braced myself as firmly as I could, the sudden violent movements slammed my head and shoulders against the side of the cabin every few minutes. We flew in a murky, gray-green rainy darkness under low, angry black clouds and I'm sure we all wondered if we'd ever make it home.

But we did. After two exhausting hours the helicopter landed in Lafayette. We sat in the darkened cabin as the blades gradually stopped whirring, each of us lost in our own thoughts. I looked out at nothing in particular—the raindrops sliding down the window, the sign over the office door swinging in the wind, and the lights of the town. We stepped down onto the tarmac and the ground had never felt so good. Nobody seemed to know what to say and we suddenly, spontaneously all shook hands. The tool pusher grinned and said, "Did you read in the fine print that the cook has to buy drinks for everyone if we make it to shore safely?" ★

