

By: Jan Huisman, Kodiak Daily Mirror. Sept. 12, 2008

Kodiak rescue swimmer to be recognized for heroism

Petty Officer 1st Class Wil Milam was awarded the 2007 Gold Medal last month by the Association for Rescue at Sea. Milam is an aviation survival technician – better known as a rescue swimmer – at Air Station Kodiak.

Milam received the award for his part in the perilous rescue of four men from the fishing vessel Illusion. Shortly after midnight on Feb. 10, 2007, Milam and three others took off in a rescue helicopter from Dutch Harbor in search of the distressed vessel stranded in Makushin Bay, near Unalaska Island.

“I wasn’t too keen on flying,” Milam said months after the incident, according to a Coast Guard press release. The crew was heading into 50 mph winds, horizontal rain, low clouds and pitch-black darkness, and distress signals received by the Coast Guard are often a false alarm.

Not this time. The rescue crew found four men huddled in a life raft, soaked in frigid Bering Sea waters. Milam was lowered into the water and swam to the raft, which he often lost sight of in the 15-foot waves.

The men were hypothermic, disoriented and combative as Milam tried to make them put on survival suits, get back in the water and climb into the rescue basket. When Milam jumped into the water to retrieve the basket, he realized he might soon need rescue himself.

Icy water was pouring in through a tear in his suit. Within minutes his legs were hypothermic, yet Milam continued tending to the four men. By the time the last man was safely aboard the helicopter, Milam was hypothermic and drifting in and out of consciousness.

Milam credits the flight crew with saving his life. They lowered the basket right beside him in the water, enabling him to climb aboard despite his condition.

“Me, the flight mech and the pilots were responsible for saving four lives that night,” Milam said. “But the pilots and flight mech, they get five lives in my book.”

The Gold Medal is not the first accolade awarded to Milam for his heroism that night. He previously received the prestigious 2007 Coast Guard Foundation Award for Individual Heroism.

Milam was nationally recognized for his bravery when he was seated beside the first lady and her daughters during President Bush’s 2008 State of the Union address in January. Milam was not available today for comment.