*INSIDE VIEW:*

# DEALING WITH EMERGENCIES AT SEA

## A CONVERSATION WITH ROBERT CAMBY STAFF CAPTAIN OF QUEEN MARY 2

by

**Richard H. Wagner**

On the third day of an eastbound transatlantic crossing in August 2009, Queen Mary 2 diverted from her course and ran full speed northwest throughout the afternoon and into the night. Some two hundred miles off the coast of eastern Newfoundland, a Canadian Hercules military transport airplane began dropping flares around the ship. A giant helicopter then appeared over QM2's highest open deck (Deck 13). Two Canadian Coast Guardsmen came down a line and working with QM2's crew, placed a critically-ill passenger into a wire basket. In a series of lifts, the patient, his wife and the two Canadians were winched into the helicopter. As quickly as it had appeared, the helicopter disappeared into the gloom. The next day, Commodore Bernard Warner announced that the passenger was resting comfortably in a Newfoundland hospital.

The officer directly in charge of this dramatic rescue was Staff Captain Robert Camby. Camby is a young officer with substantial credentials including serving on P&O's legendary Canberra and Princess Cruises' first Royal Princess (now P&O Cruises' Artemis). In his 15 year career, he has advanced rapidly through the officer ranks working on every class of Princess ship and all of the P&O ships except Arcadia. Most recently, he was Staff Captain on P&O's Aurora during her world cruise.

The highpoint in his career thus far was his appointment to Queen Mary 2. "I have a real love for this ship. I fell in love with it within the first ten minutes of being onboard back in 2005, instantly. I like the Cunard brand, I like the way we have all the cocktail parties, the passenger integration. I am used to doing that - - cocktail parties, dinner parties - - since I was very small with my family. It is something that comes quite naturally to me; it is a part of this job that I enjoy. Having it more regimented and formal is the method that I prefer."

Camby's shoreside lifestyle is consistent with the glamorous style of his ship. As a young boy, he won a scholarship to study piano and violin at the British public (*i.e.* private) school St. John's. Both of his grandfathers had been professional violinists and his maternal grandfather, Johnny Douglas, was a successful composer and

the musical director of RCA's Living Strings series. Indeed, his family owns a record company that still releases albums of Douglas' work. This musical background gave Camby entry into the world of West End and Broadway Theater. As a result, when he is on leave, he attends opening night parties and "meets up with Sir Cameron Macintosh once or twice a week just to catch up. I usually go up and down to London on several occasions to see his four shows or something to do with the shows."

In addition to being involved with entertainment charities he is a member of The Lord's Taverners, cricket's number one charity. In 2007, he became a Freeman of London and more recently was inducted as a Chevalier into the Orde Des Coteaux de Champagne.

With such a background, one naturally wonders why he chose to go to sea. "When I was young I never really had the passion to play the violin or the piano professionally. Even though I went through the grades and did the qualifications, it was never really something that I looked at as a career. I had a lot of nine-minute wonders. I wanted to be an undertaker, a removals man, and, of course, an airline pilot. Then, my family went on the Canberra for holidays in the early 1990s. I went on the bridge as a young boy, saw all the chaps up there and thought 'I quite like the look of that."

*Staff Captain Robert Camby*

Although dramatic, the evacuation of passengers from cruise ships by helicopter is becoming increasingly common as communications and aeronautical technologies advance. Nevertheless, they are complex operations that require extensive planning and coordination.

Queen Mary 2 has a large medical center with doctors and nurses. In fact, the ship has been diverted in order to bring medical assistance to the sick and injured on other vessels. Why then would the ship ever have to do a helicopter evacuation? "The facilities onboard are second to none for a ship but they do not equate to some of the facilities that you have at a land-based hospital, including the ability to operate. We don't have an operating theater onboard. Some of the guests that we have disembarked medically by helicopter needed surgery. That decision is often made between the doctor and the captain, whoever is in command at the time."

The first step in the decision-making process is a determination by the ship's doctor that a passenger (or crew member) needs land-based care and must have it before the ship can reach port. "The ship will do whatever it can. Safety of life comes above anything including the voyage. We will temporarily postpone the voyage to get the passenger off and then proceed with the passage afterwards."

The next step is for the doctor to call the bridge. Although the technology keeps improving, a helicopter's range only extends some 200 miles out to sea. Thus the ship's navigator, who reports to the staff captain, must determine if the ship can come within helicopter range within the time that the doctor believes is critical for the patient.

This calculation does not entail just determining whether the ship would come within helicopter range if it doubled back towards its port of origin. Instead, more remote lands are considered. For example, in one instance, Cunard's former flagship Queen Elizabeth 2 was mid-Atlantic when it was determined that a passenger had to be evacuated. Instead of going east or west, the ship sailed due north to rendezvous with a helicopter that was


based in eastern Canada but which flew to Greenland to refuel and which then flew due south to meet the liner.

Helicopter medical evacuations are not without a significant economic cost. A ship burns much more fuel running at full speed than it does at its normal cruising speed. Not only does the ship usually have to run at full speed to make the rendezvous but in order to get back on schedule "we have to go full speed across the Atlantic for three and a half days. Rather than 25 knots or 24 knots, we have to do 28, which is a huge increase in cost. We obviously have to tell the company [home office] about that. Safety of life - - you can't put any price on a life. I don't think anybody on this ship or in this company shoreside would question a decision concerning the safety of a person onboard."

Once the ship's commanding officer determines that a helicopter evacuation is necessary and is feasible without placing others at an inordinate risk, the staff captain becomes responsible for executing the operation. On a transatlantic crossing, this usually involves working with the British or Irish coast guards if the ship is in the eastern North Atlantic and the Canadian or United States coast guards if the ship is closer to North America. "I phone the coast guard station [for the area] that we are in and tell them it is a go. We will then communicate with them every 30 minutes to tell them our position, course and speed. We give them updates of weather conditions - - the cloud cover, how high the cloud is, visibility, wind, barometer, whether it is rising or falling, whether there is a storm coming. They give us an update on whether the helicopter has taken off and what range we can get to it."

"At the same time, I invite all of the heads of department up here - - we have a meeting on the bridge, which I conduct. I tell them to refer to the ship's specific response to helicopter operations [i.e. written procedures]. The ship has a very detailed regimented response, which includes: the evacuation of certain cabins; it includes the clearing of all the balconies of all debris; it includes clearing of all open decks; it includes the manning of all open decks by security. Every single open deck door has to be manned."

The reason that doors have to be secured and cabins and balconies evacuated is that there is always some risk involved when the ship is in close quarters with a helicopter. For example, a sudden down draft when the helicopter is hovering low over the deck could cause it to crash into the ship. Accordingly, the preparations include "setting up of all the fire teams up on Deck 13. You will have about five fire teams. Some of them will be used as attack teams, some will be what we call 'snap and grab' - - if the wreckage were to come down on the deck, we could pull out parts and drag the bodies out. Then we have some of our rescue boats, our fast boats, manned, so if anyone fell into the sea we would be able to rescue them."

Therefore, passengers are not allowed to come on deck to watch the action. "Unfortunately, some passengers may want to take flash photographs, which can put the helicopter pilot off. At the same time, we have to stop passengers from

waving stuff. We have had passengers in the past trying to wave flags, baseball caps - - if anything like that gets in the rotor blades, down comes the aircraft So you want to keep people off the decks, keep the decks clear. If a helicopter were to crash onto the deck then it would send shrapnel across the top decks of the ship so right away you would have a lot of people in danger. We keep the whole of Deck 12 and Deck 13 completely empty Deck 7 is completely empty because if a helicopter were to go down, it would land on the lifeboats [which are carried just above Deck 7] and [people on] Deck 7 would be in danger. We keep them off the balconies because the helicopter passes very close to the balconies. Plus the fact that the helicopter has its own policies and procedures and if they were to see a lot of people on the open decks, they would not make their approach."

One person, however, does stand on the open deck. "I [am] the flight deck officer and I will co-ordinate the entire operation from the center of the flight deck. I am the only one permitted to stand underneath the helicopter, which is a very precarious position. I communicate directly with the helicopter and the bridge."

The helicopter is often not the only aircraft participating in the evacuation. As noted earlier, there can also be a Hercules military transport airplane. "The Hercules is a traffic plane. He comes over the top and circles. He does all the communication initially with us. He can communicate with the bridge and with me a lot earlier than the helicopter can. He is almost like a reconnaissance plane. If it is at night, he also drops flares, which will give the helicopter almost a runway approach to the ship. So, he does external communications to everybody else, keeps the traffic in areas clear, and monitors the radar so the helicopter can do nothing but concentrate on getting over the ship."

When the helicopter arrives, it does not land on the ship. Although made of steel, QM2's upper decks are jot reinforced to cope with the weight and stresses associated with landing a military helicopter. Therefore the helicopter hovers low over the deck and access to and from the aircraft is by cable.

"They will send down normally two people, both of whom will be paramedics. One will be the main paramedic and the other the winchman. The paramedic and the winchman will be taken straight to, in this case, Stairway A, Deck 13, where the patient is. We cordon that off and secure the area. At that stage, the helicopter moves off and stands by at the side of the ship."

The paramedics transfer the patient from the stretcher in which he was brought up from the ship's hospital to one of their own stretchers.

"Then I will communicate with the helicopter and say that she can make her approach again and we will bring the patient out [onto the open deck]. The paramedic will attach himself to the stretcher and he will go off with the patient. Also, if [the patient is] traveling with a partner and the partner wishes to go as well, we will lower down [another] basket and the basket will go off with the other half and the winchman. They are generally more nervous about the husband or the wife than they are about the patient. The [patient is sedated] and does not know what is going on and will go up quite smoothly. It is usually, the partner, the wife or the husband that is more nervous because they are going up in complete knowledge of what is going on. They will do a lot to protect that person as they are going up in the air. They are absolutely amazing in doing that."

Although this ends the ship's involvement in the evacuation, Cunard has established "Care Teams" to assist evacuated passengers and their families. This can involve providing assistance at the location where the passenger was landed as well as with arrangements to transport families to the scene. "It is a fantastic operation. The Care Team system with this company is amazing. The idea is that you are not left on your own."

In addition to being responsible for helicopter evacuations of individual passengers, the staff captain would also take a leading role in the unlikely event that there had to be a mass evacuation of the ship. "There is no ship that I have ever been on in my 15-year career that is as sea worthy as this. We have to spend a lot of our time convincing the passengers that it is gale force 11 outside and they do not necessarily believe us because the ship is so steady. She was designed for that and we are very fortunate to be on a ship as safe as this. The safety standards on here are higher than on any ship that I have been on, not that the others are not high but this is extremely high. The drills, the training and things like that, we are by far the finest ship I have ever been on."

"The best lifeboat is the ship. So unless

the ship was - - and we would know - - in imminent danger of foundering, we would stay onboard the ship as long as possible. We have food supplies, towels, warmth, and the ability for communication. Even though the boats do have that the best possible place to be on is on here dry. Obviously, when the people go on the boats there is the possibility that people are going to get wet and hypothermia is going to set in. So, you don't want to be in the boats unless you have to and for the shortest possible time."

In the event that a catastrophe required the evacuation of the ship, "we have the ability with the GMDSS equipment to communicate with every living soul on the planet. Even if we were in danger of sinking within minutes, we would have the ability to press buttons on that to send out [distress] signals. If we have time, we would actually type out a message and detail all the information and then send that. We would have somebody with us fairly quickly. Aircraft would arrive fairly fast and they would be able to circle us and drop extra life rafts and supplies before other ships could get to us. Nowadays, the world is very small."

Participants in the lifeboat drills that take place on every voyage invariably think of the Titanic disaster and wonder how their ship would do if she struck an iceberg or was involved in a similar collision. "There are a lot of [watertight] compartments on here. If you were to flood six of the forward compartments, she would stay afloat with that. But they say she is a 'two compartment ship' which is to say that if the two largest compartments on the ship were to be flooded, then she would be in danger of foundering."

Maritime scholars generally agree that it was a mistake for Titanic to try and turn to avoid the iceberg rather than let the ship strike the iceberg bow on. Camby explained that the same would be true with a modern liner. "Turning is not so good, you don't want to make a hole down the side. Your most sensitive parts of the ship are the side, which are the passenger cabins, balconies, passenger public rooms where passengers are most likely to be close, plus the fact that all the lifeboats are there. The forward end of the ship are mostly tanks and a couple of store rooms so you would be able to hit that part of the ship straight on and you would probably do the least amount of damage. You would have the least danger of sinking because you could sustain a certain amount of damage up forward and still be able to float quite easily and you have isolated it to one area where there are hardly any people."

As is pointed out during every passenger lifeboat drill, a more likely danger is fire. Consequently, QM2 has a system of smoke detectors linked to a hydrafog system that can blanket an area in a fire-dosing mist within seconds. In addition, 'we have fire teams onboard that are all qualified and trained by the UK fire training schools, the same as you have for the normal firemen in the UK. All of the officers are trained firefighters and we refresh our ticket every year so we go back to the fire training schools in Hampshire or New Castle. We get put through our paces just like a normal fireman would do. We get trained in the latest equipment."

"We [also] undergo training regularly onboard here. The drills are twice a month but we also do familiarization training for our fire teams about every four days. They will be taken in their normal uniforms up to look at certain areas which are where the fires are more likely to occur if we were to get one - - cooking areas, theater areas where they use pyrotechnics, places like that. Then, we train our fire teams over and over and over again in entry procedures for a fire in that particular area. The idea here is if you gave our fire teams a blank piece of paper and you sat them on the bridge and said to them you have a fire in the Kings Court galley, they would be able to get a pen and draw for you where the fire points are, where the door is, which way it opens all from memory. Without having to go down there or think about it, they know that behind this door there is a red button on the left etc. You drill them to a point where they are so familiar with they are as familiar with each area of the ship as they are with their own home."