



**Coming Back Alive: The True Story of the Most  
Harrowing Search and Rescue Mission Ever  
Attempted on Alaska's High Seas**

*Spike Walker*

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## Coming Back Alive: The True Story of the Most Harrowing Search and Rescue Mission Ever Attempted on Alaska's High Seas Spike Walker

When the fishing vessel La Conte sinks suddenly at night in one-hundred-mile-per-hour winds and record ninety-foot seas during a savage storm in January 1998, her five crewmen are left to drift without a life raft in the freezing Alaskan waters and survive as best they can.

One hundred fifty miles away, in Sitka, Alaska, an H-60 Jayhawk helicopter lifts off from America's most remote Coast Guard base in the hopes of tracking down an anonymous Mayday signal. A fisherman's worst nightmare has become a Coast Guard crew's desperate mission. As the crew of the La Conte begin to die one by one, those sworn to watch over them risk everything to pull off the rescue of the century.

Spike Walker's memoir of his years as a deckhand in Alaska, *Working on the Edge*, was hailed by James A. Michner as "masterful . . . will become the definitive account of this perilous trade, an addition to the literature of the sea." In *Coming Back Alive*, Walker has crafted his most devastating book to date. Meticulously researched through hundreds of hours of taped interviews with the survivors, this is the true account of the La Conte's final voyage and the relationship between Alaskan fishermen and the search and rescue crews who risk their lives to save them.

## Coming Back Alive: The True Story of the Most Harrowing Search and Rescue Mission Ever Attempted on Alaska's High Seas Details

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# **From Reader Review Coming Back Alive: The True Story of the Most Harrowing Search and Rescue Mission Ever Attempted on Alaska's High Seas for online ebook**

## **Shruts says**

This is a harrowing story of a death-defying rescue by the Coast Guard of a fishing boat crew who deliberately took excessive risks against Nature, and lost the bet. They had absolutely no business being there in that place at that time in their substandard boat.

The Coast Guard crews, 13 men and three helicopters, put their lives at risk to go for these foolish fishermen, and almost made their own wives into widows, and children orphans.

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## **Judy Churchill says**

Horrrifying and beyond imagination. I couldn't put this real life Alaska ocean rescue story down. Being a pilot, I understood viscerally that the conditions were way below flying weather. I found myself tense along with the pilots trying to make the rescue. There is no doubt that we have heroes among us - those who go beyond all reasonable expectations to save another human being. This was well written and extremely well researched which undoubtedly led to its complete credibility. It's non-fiction that reads better than any fictional adventure story I've read.

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## **Donna says**

I enjoyed Walker's 1993 book *Working on The Edge* (about Alaska's king crab fishing industry), but this book felt not only overwritten (with so! many! exclamation! points!), but oddly padded. Once one gets into the meat of the book - about a third of the way through Walker finally gets to the S&R event in the title - the pace picks up, but there's a lot of extraneous detail to wade through first.

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## **Darren Rippy says**

A tale of selfless heroism. The Coast Guard are the unsung, everyday heroes of the military.

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## **SP says**

One major survival story, wrapped up with a couple of smaller ones. It begins with an old Coast Guard saying: "You have to go out, but you don't necessarily have to come back." Think of it as basically being about what happens when *Deadliest Catch* goes really, really wrong. And when things go badly, the Coast Guard is there. Well written, and with some interesting vignettes about life along the coast of southeastern

Alaska.

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**Jill schubert says**

**Couldn't out this book down!**

What a story! I couldn't finish it fast enough.

The men and women of the USCG are heroes and deserve a special place in heaven!

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**Dave says**

**Fantastic and amazing**

A rollercoaster ride. I couldn't stop reading this unbelievable true story. Such hero's make me proud. One of the best books i have read!

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**Steven Lomelino says**

It gives you respect for the men and women women of the USCG. Detailed accounts put you on the scene with them. Honest portrayal of the people makes you rejoice with them after improbable triumph and mourn at the loss of one though none should have survived.

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**Cropredy says**

I'll start by saying this is better than 'A Perfect Storm'. Think of this book as 'Into (very) Cold Water' or 'Into Gale Force Winds' or both.

The author does a good job of grabbing you with a rescue mission in the first chapter, then, lays the background of the Coast Guard's air-sea rescue units. Equal attention is paid to the fishing culture of Alaska. Before you are too lulled by the scene setting, Walker throws in another harrowing rescue mission before concluding the first half of the book.

The second half is a detailed drama of one particular 'all hands on deck' rescue attempt in January. What makes for compelling reading is the foreshadowing of the previous two rescue vignettes that occurred in the recent past along with multiple characters (i.e. real people) in the distressed fishing vessel. Does everybody make it? Does nobody make it? You will read past your bedtime to find out.

Do I have any criticism? It would have added to the book if the author was able to include an analysis taken from the action action reports / lessons learned. But, I only say that because you, the reader, want to know more about these stories once you've unfrozen your extremities and lowered your heart rate.

Well-paced, with excellent portrayals of individual airmen and seamen, and a keen grasp of the Alaskan

weather and seas. Highly recommended.

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## Eric\_W says

\*\*\* Contains multiple spoilers. \*\* Walker celebrates the Coast Guard SAR (Search and Rescue — not to be confused with SARS) teams that operate in Alaska's forbidding winters. These people risk their lives to save those who have usually made some really dumb decisions. Flying at any time in Alaska is difficult because of the terrain and sudden weather changes, but virtually no one flies at night. SAR teams are often called out at night and usually in the worst weather. Sensory deprivation is common, especially in the whiteout conditions of blizzards, when pilots can only depend on their fluorescent radar screens and instruments to keep them from "a controlled collision with terrain." The other members of the team, a flight mechanic, a rescue swimmer, and a navigator often make the difference between life and death. One such team was returning to base after having successfully rescued the survivors of a plane crash. The pilot was a newcomer to the area and had just made a ninetydegree course correction when "his navigator, who was seated behind him, suddenly inquired, 'Hey, is there a reason we're flying at only sixteen feet?'"

About half the book is dedicated to a truly extraordinary rescue. A fishing boat with five crewmen had been caught in a fierce, very fierce winter storm. (The crew had warned the captain to leave the area earlier, but he wanted to collect as much of his fishing gear as possible and ignored their warnings, a decision that would cost him his life.) Soon their boat was being tossed around by one-hundred-foot seas and nasty rogue waves that could come from any direction. The wind chill approached 100 degrees below zero. The boat soon foundered, but the men were able to don their survival suits, and to tie themselves together to the EPIRB, a floating emergency beacon that had a strobe light and radio transmission that could be picked up by satellite. They struggled to stay alive in the freezing water until the first SAR chopper arrived. It was pitch dark, and only the strobe light of the beacon helped the SAR team to find them. The Coast Guard team maneuvered for almost two hours, fighting against tremendous winds and waves that would occasionally tower over the helicopter, forcing them to rapidly rise before being inundated. The basket kept being blown toward the back of the chopper at risk of becoming entangled in the tail rotor blades. Finally, low on fuel and with the flight mechanic, whose job it was to control the metal basket they were trying to lower, suffering from hypothermia, they were forced to turn back. A second rescue chopper was dispatched to no avail. The waves were so high and the wind so strong that getting a basket anywhere near those in the water was impossible. Again they were forced to return to base. By this time, the men had been in the water for many hours and one man had slipped off the rope and died. The boat's skipper was unconscious, being held up by one of the crewmen, ironically a former coast guardsman, someone familiar with survival techniques. By the time a third chopper arrived, the situation was desperate. A C-130 was flying high overhead to relay messages, since the atmosphere was so turbulent their signals could not get through. This SAR team, benefiting from the insights gained information relayed by the first rescue crew, brought extra flares and an extra crewman to help with the winch. The base commander, the only other available pilot, was flying in the co-pilot's seat. After seeing how difficult things were for the pilot to try to maintain position, he hit upon an inspiration. He would manipulate the collective, the device that controls the helicopter's altitude, while the other pilot flew the machine. It went against everything they had been taught and trained, but was precisely what was needed. It relieved the pilot of one extra duty, and he could now concentrate on the directions of the flight mechanic. Tragically, as they lifted two of the survivors from the water, the skipper, who had regained consciousness and was being held on to the side of the basket, fell off and drowned. His body was recovered later by a rescue swimmer from yet another chopper. Three men were saved. The story of the rescue and the odds against it was spellbinding. I could not put the book down.

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### **Sharon Leigh says**

There were parts in this book when I could not stop reading. There were moments of great hope and of deep despair. For those reasons, this book deserves 5 stars. But there were moments, too many in my opinion, of scenic descriptions that I felt were necessary to a degree, but ended up to be page fillers and that is why I gave it only a 3-star review.

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### **Steve says**

Quick read. Jaw-dropping accounts of emergency rescues in Southeast Alaska. Especially relevant for me since I visited nearly every location mentioned in the book, by boat during this summer (2008).

My dad picked this book as part of our ongoing father/son book club while we were up in Alaska together and it was a page-turner. Highly recommended for anyone who has spent time in Alaska or who is at all fascinated by the last great frontier.

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### **Sean Hopkins says**

Enjoyable story of the rescue of the La Conte by the Coast Guard during a fierce Alaska storm in January of 1998. The numerous Coast Guard members involved in the dangerous rescue mission demonstrated a complete willingness to risk their lives to rescue the crew as the floated in freezing waters with 100 foot waver and 100 mph winds.

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### **Chris says**

First off - you need to know that this is actually two books in one. He doesn't actually get to the real story until book two halfway through the book. I almost gave up on it at page 50. I am so glad I didn't. I have never read a book that I was on the edge of my seat like I was with this one. Overall, it was an intense book. It was good.

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### **Val Wilkerson says**

Wow...this is the true story about a search and rescue in Alaska by the Coast Guard out of Sitka Alaska. I have lived in Juneau Alaska and spent several months in Sitka so I know what the weather can be like. This Coast Guard Rescue story had my heart beating for sure. These guys are right up there with navy seals in my book. I was also pleased at the end of the book to see my dear friends in Juneau, Roger and Betty Stidolph mentioned.

