

## Survivor Meets His Hero 39 Years Later

Story by PA3 Sondra-Kay Kneen, PADET St. Petersburg, Fla.

Almost four decades after their initial encounter, Keith Barnett, 53, originally from Freeport, Bahamas, finally met face-to-face with the man who saved his life.

In June 2005, Barnett came across a letter addressed to his father from the commanding officer of Coast Guard Air Station Miami. The letter was dated July 18, 1969, and it stated the names of the Coast Guard crewmembers who rescued Barnett after he was stranded for two days in the Atlantic Ocean 39 years ago. Shortly after reading the letter, Barnett made a phone call to the Kamenar residence.

On April 8, 2008, Barnett and his “hero”, James S. Kamenar, 59, of Barberton, Ohio, sat across from each other for the first time during breakfast at a rented vacation home on Anna Maria Island, Fla. Both men sipped coffee as they took turns telling their version of the event that was still vivid in their memories.

“It’s like it was yesterday,” said Barnett. “I’m positive someone was looking out for me.”

Barnett took another sip of his coffee and began telling his story. On May 23, 1969, Barnett was sent home from high school for not wearing the proper uniform. During the short walk from school to his family’s beach-front home, Barnett decided that he would take the family boat offshore to look at fish traps in the Freeport Beach area.

Without giving notice to family or friends, Barnett set off in the 12-foot skiff for what was supposed be just a few hours at sea. Barnett was not only unaware of what would come next, but also dangerously unprepared.



*Barnett, left, shakes the hand of his “hero”, James S. Kamenar, for the first time since their initial encounter 39 years earlier. In 1969, Kamenar spotted Barnett floating in his skiff after two days of being lost in the Atlantic Ocean. Photo by PA3 Sondra-Kay Kneen*

“I didn’t think I’d be gone that long,” said Barnett. “I went out all the time and never kept safety equipment onboard.”

Barnett anchored about one-mile offshore when the boat’s engine unexpectedly lost power. After several unsuccessful attempts to restart the engine, Barnett drifted several miles out into the ocean. Aboard the small vessel, Barnett had no protection from the sun and wore only a pair of shorts. He was stranded without food, water, a lifejacket or any other type of safety gear.

“I wasn’t scared yet though, and I had faith that my parents would find me,” Barnett remembered.

That evening, Barnett’s father reported his absence to local authorities, and a land search of the area began. Some hours later, the family’s maid confirmed that Barnett had left on the boat that morning. The Coast Guard was immediately called.

“You should have filed a float plan,” joked Kamenar from over the top of his coffee cup. In 1969, Kamenar was a 20-year-old Petty Officer 3<sup>rd</sup> Class at Air Station Miami.

The first day’s search involved two Grumman HU-16 Albatross aircraft from Air Station Miami and another HU-16 Albatross from the U.S. Air Force 301<sup>st</sup> Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron at Homestead Air Force Base, Fla.

“Each crew came back with no results, not even a sign that he was still out there,” said Kamenar.

Barnett’s boat was painted bluish-green on the outside and white on the inside, strongly resembling a wave; a wave amongst the ocean’s many whitecaps.

“It had almost been 48 hours, and planes just kept passing over me,” said Barnett. “Not one of them saw me.”



*Barnett, then 14, steps out of an HH-52A Seaguard helicopter May 25, 1969, after being hoisted into the aircraft from his 12-foot skiff. Barnett had spent two days lost at sea without food, water, a lifejacket or any other safety equipment. (Photo courtesy of Keith Barnett)*

The 14-year-old boy was “lost at sea” and his chances of survival were slim.

His skin was scorched from the sun, his throat was painfully parched and his stomach rumbled with fierce hunger as he lay in the bottom of the skiff without an ounce of hope left. He regretfully went over the events of the last two days in his head. “If I would of just changed my shirt and went back to school,” he thought to himself.

Any expectations that he might have once had were now gone and

the reality of impending death began to overwhelm him.

“I just remember giving up. I lied in the bottom of the skiff and no longer expected to be found,” said Barnett. “Amazingly, out of nowhere, a bird landed on the edge of my boat! A bird! That was the first sign of life I had seen for two days, and it brought a strange sense of peace over me...it calmed me,” Barnett said through a veil of tears.

On the second day, after an extensive search of the area, efforts were doubled in an attempt to locate Barnett. Kamenar’s HU-16 Albatross crew was told to head to a different location to look for Barnett. On the way to the new coordinates, they flew over a previously-searched area.

“I remember it was hot that day and I opened up the side door of the cabin to let some cool air in,” said Kamenar. “I looked down and saw Barnett, just like that. I just saw him there, waving his arms.”

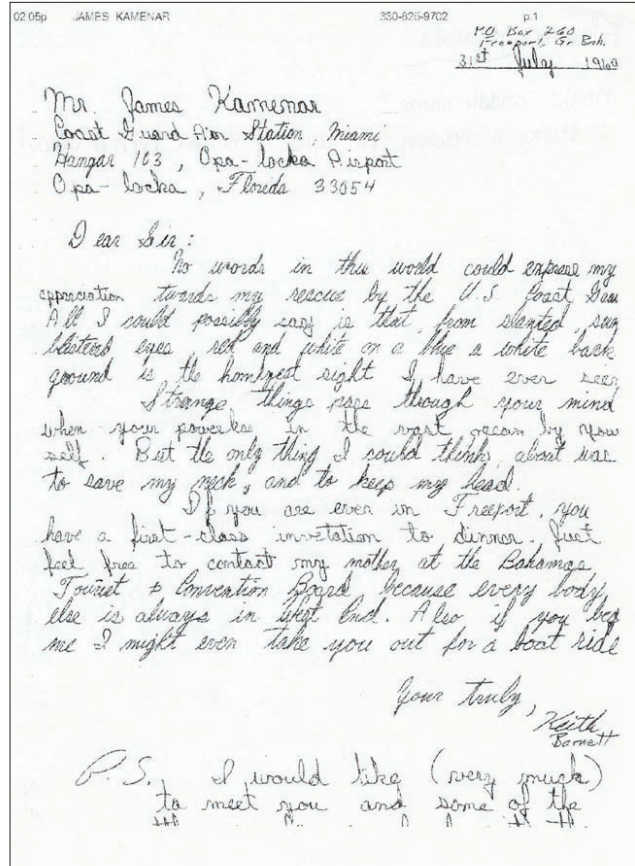
Kamenar and the other crewmembers from the HU-16 Albatross immediately dropped flares to mark Barnett’s position. Within minutes an HH-52A Seaguard helicopter was launched from Air Station Miami to hoist Barnett.

The HH-52 Seaguard lowered a rescue basket above Barnett’s head. With the last bit of energy that remained inside him, he hung onto the basket as they hoisted him to safety.

“I remember my feet swept the water as I clenched my fingers around the basket,” said Barnett. “I struggled to climb in and I remember thinking that it wasn’t a coincidence that a “bird” helped rescue me.”

Barnett was grateful to the crew that located him, and especially to Kamenar. A month after Barnett was rescued, he wrote a letter to Kamenar thanking him and requesting to meet him one day.

“It took 39-years,” said Barnett, “but I wouldn’t have been able to see these years if it wasn’t for James. I owe my life to him, and he will always remain my hero.”



Shortly after the rescue, Barnett sent Kamenar the above letter thanking him for his efforts in saving him. After inviting Kamenar to dinner, the 14-year-old Barnett added, “...if you beg me I might even take you out for a boat ride.” (letter courtesy of James Kamenar)