

2D EMERGENCY RESCUE SQUADRON

"The Rescue" by Colonel Bill Helmantoler

In March of 1945 I witnessed the most breathtaking act of courage I have ever seen in my life. As a result of the incredible bravery of Technical Sergeant Jones in that battle against the Japanese, 25 American airmen's lives were saved including mine.

We were involved in an air/sea rescue mission off Zamboanga in the southern Philippines. Lt. Frank Rauschkalb and I were the pilots and Sergeant Jones was the flight engineer on our Catalina flying boat. We were circling about ten miles offshore when eighteen of our B-25 twin-engine bombers roared down a nearby mountain and struck the airfield and docks of Zamboanga. The Japanese anti-aircraft gunners threw up a curtain of bursting shells and knocked three bombers out of the sky, sending them crashing into the sea.

Frantic calls of "Mayday! Mayday!" broke the silence on our radios. The commander of the bomber group directed us to the nearest downed aircrew. We soon sighted two life rafts about a mile off the docks. All eight of us aboard the Catalina held our breaths as we put down near the rafts. Shrapnel from Japanese shore guns splashed all around us.

Five wet, frightened crewmen scrambled aboard our seaplane from their life rafts. I could see the sixth, the co-pilot, still in his seat in the plane, just below the surface of the water. He had become entangled in his harness and hadn't gotten out. He was dead.

At that moment we took our first hit from a shore-gun. It made a fist-sized hole at the waterline of our hull. Seawater rushed into the compartmentalized hull. The distraught pilot of the B-25, whom we had just picked up, scrambled forward to our cockpit and yelled, "Let's get the Hell outa here!" I told him that two more crews were out there in the water. His hysterical response was, "Screw 'em, let's get outa here!"

The bomber commander flying overhead told us the next crew was located about a thousand yards in toward the docks. The seawater in our hull forced us to taxi rather than fly, and the shells from the shore-guns were landing all around us. Our engines were overheating, and eventually one of them quit.

It was then that my personal hero, Sergeant Jones, did the most courageous thing I have ever seen a man do. He climbed up on top of the wing, and with shells whizzing all around him, cranked that engine and started it. In my mind's eye I can still see him, lean and brown, wearing nothing but cutoffs and shoes, silhouetted against the bright blue sky, cranking that damned engine. I still cannot understand how he survived that ordeal.

We made our way slowly and agonizingly around the harbor to pick up the other two crews, under fire all the way. I thought I recognized a man in the second crew as someone we had rescued before. I called back to him, "Is that you Zimmerman?"

He replied affirmatively and let everybody know that this was the third time we had picked him up after he had been shot down. He also swore he would never get off the ground again if we would just get him home this time.

The Japanese guns hit our seaplane several times during the two and one-half hours we were on the water. We now had 25 people and a lot of seawater aboard our plane.

After a ten-minute takeoff run, we realized that we were too heavy to get off the water. We asked Sergeant Jones to dump all of the gasoline he could spare and still leave us enough for the four hour flight back to our base. With only gross guesses to measure the amount of fuel he was dumping, Jones turned the dark blue ocean water into an oily pale green patch of sea. We sweated bullets that a spark might turn us into an inferno.

Another ten-minute takeoff run through rougher water got us airborne. In my memory's ear I can still hear the cheers that went up from the B-25 guys when we finally struggled into the air.

We made the flight back and landed without incident. Most of the generals and colonels on the island were assembled to welcome and congratulate us. They had to wait longer than expected because we ran out of gas on the taxi strip. I remember saying to Sergeant Jones, "You cut it a little close, Sergeant." He grinned and gave me a big wink. He was awarded the Silver Star for "gallantry in action."

