

2D EMERGENCY RESCUE SQUADRON

"First Try" by Lieutenant Bill Holbrook

First Try - (18 November 1944) We were coming back from covering a mission somewhere in the southern Philippines when the radio man picked up a message saying a P-38 pilot was down near the Sanghi Islands. The Sanghis are a group of small volcanic islands about half way between Morotai and Mindanao. If the President hadn't approved the Leyte invasion the Sanghis would have been the next stepping stone on MacArthur's return to the Philippines.

They were almost on our course. We began our search pattern less than an hour after the message was received and spotted the man in his raft within a half hour. There were rain showers in the area. White caps topped some of the waves of the choppy sea. The pattern required for a sea plane to finish its landing run close to its intended goal takes precise timing. The downwind leg begins abeam the point where you want to stop at the end of the landing run. The man in the raft disappeared behind us as we lowered the wing floats and proceeded flying the prescribed pattern. The wind had picked up, most of the waves were white caps as we turned on final.

Landing in the open sea requires all the skill and luck at a pilot's command. The procedure in rough seas called for a full stall landing to touch down at the slowest possible speed. You hang the ship just above the waves to time the touch down on the peak of a wave. Considerable power is required to hold the ship off the water waiting for the selected wave. The moment of silence after the throttles are closed and before the ship slams into the ocean seems like an

eternity. A period of apprehensive quiet created for prayer. Everyone took advantage of the silent moment. It takes great courage for a crewman to sit strapped tightly to the airframe, with no input on the deadly decision. The boat took all the strength and concentration the pilot had to control it during the landing. The crewmen could only sit still, wait - and pray.

Power was cut at the chosen second and the ship fell into the sea with a great crash. The sea enveloped the plane as it hit and violently slid down into the valley between the waves. It crushed into the back wall of the next wave and was flung back into the air with hardly enough airspeed to maintain control. There it again flew silently for seconds while both pilots held the elevator all the way back to keep the ship from diving nose first into the sea. At that instant, Bob Booth, my navigator, yelled into the intercom, "Go around! Go around"! I slammed the throttle wide open and the Pratt & Whitney's earned our eternal praise when they responded with a roar. We smashed back into the sea with all the violence of the original touch down and after a several more crashes and a couple of solid skips, the Catalina hung on her propellers inches above the water as the airspeed slowly accelerated. Booth was on the intercom as soon as the crashing roar subsided. He called for me to come aft and see the damage.

The flying boat was divided into seven compartments. The cockpit was the second, next was the navigation and radio room. As I passed through the radioman said there were a lot of popped rivets and the bottom slightly buckled under his seat just forward of the engineer's compartment bulkhead. I looked down and noted the accuracy of his observation. Their

light created a scattered pattern of stars as it shone through the holes. I hurried past the auxiliary power unit and the galley under the engineer's station through the four bunks in the next compartment and stopped at the open water proof door into the observation compartment with its giant blisters and our only armament, two .50 caliber machine guns.

Booth and several of the crew were standing around a ragged hole the size of a basketball in the bottom of the plane. The hole was the second thing I noticed. First was that the tail of the airplane was crooked. The airplane was twisted at the forward bulkhead of the blister compartment. The keel was a heavy six inch beam riveted of heavy aluminum and heavy angles. It was bent, as were all the stringers that ran fore and aft. Booth said it all happened on the first impact and the hole kept expanding with each wrenching bounce. I called for the flight engineer to come down and have a look. The airplane seemed to fly alright. The ship didn't show signs of coming apart so we decided to find the pilot and drop him a spare eight man life raft. It was all we could do until we went home for another airplane. None of the crew had seen the pilot during our landing attempt. We searched for an hour and could find no sign of him. We began to wonder if we had landed on top of him. Our landing path seemed clear on the approach. There was no sign of his raft. We dismissed this as a horrible dream. But where did he go? It was getting too dark to search when we left the Sanghis for home."

Second Try - (19 November 1944) We reported our failure to Morotai by radio and mentioned the damage to the ship. A floating coconut must have caused the hole. The rough sea landing had twisted the hull. The ship was grounded for a complete inspection and evaluation. We were disappointed and

worried about the pilot we had failed to save. I went along the next morning as co-pilot to show Harry Remington and a rested crew the exact location where we had seen "our" pilot. We didn't have to search. There he was floating in his raft on the smooth tropic sea. The ship barely bounced. We lowered the gear and threw out a couple of set anchors to slow us as we picked him up. We had him onboard within fifteen minutes of sighting. I rushed back as soon as we were on course for home. He told me that he had seen our attempt to land but had drifted into one of the intense rain showers where he remained until dark. It was a good thing he did, for the Japs came out to search for him as soon as we left. He had spent most of the night in the water under his raft, hiding from the searching enemy. They came out again the next morning, but gave up after an hour or so. The rest of his time was spent removing the husk from a coconut he had found drifting past. He had just opened it and cracked the shell when he saw our plane. His rescue was a day late, but otherwise perfect. The coconut was rotten.

Three weeks later, Harry and I, and a full plane load of war weary crews, ferried the twisted ship to Australia. We had to take it to a lake on the Murray River to be rebuilt. Our leave began when we returned to Sydney after the delivery. The ship was restricted to smooth air. We found rough air every time we passed over a likely looking town on our way South. It took us two weeks and twelve towns to get to the repair station. I fell in love with that old bird. Its integrity saved our lives in the rough sea near the Sanghis, and its trip to the rebuild doubled my leave time in Australia!"