

C*O*N*F*I*D*E*N*T*I*A*L

STATEMENT

On 17 April, 1945, Bob Rohlfing and I were told to take one of our new C-47s from Morotai, Netherland East Indies, to Biak, New Guinea, to pick up and return 9 of our crewmembers. They had taken two of our 2nd Emergency Rescue Squadron OA-10's down to Owi Island in Geelvink Bay, just across the bay from Biak Island. The U.S. Navy was installing self-sealing tanks for us at that base. So, while waiting for our passengers, we visited the local PX and bought, among other things, a large carton of cookies, probably 10 or 12 pounds worth.

The story of the flight itself is pretty well covered, so I will skip right to the ditching. With the recent loss of one of our OA-10s in mind, (26 October 1944) Bob and I discussed our ditching plans. That plane had run out of fuel at altitude and attempted a power-out landing in the open sea at night with tragic results. We decided a power-on landing was the only way to go. We wanted to be close to ditching with at least 20 gallons of fuel in each wing tank. After descending from altitude, Bob set up an airspeed of about 65 or 70 knots and a descent of about 300 feet per minute. We broke out of the clouds at about 100 feet, I saw the wind direction from the waves, told Bob and he changed heading into the wind. First contact with the water was the tail wheel which brought the nose down rather abruptly and into a swell. I imagine our deceleration was similar to that of a carrier plane catching a wire. Water came pouring into the cockpit through the overhead escape hatch, which I had opened prior to ditching. Bob and I immediately went back to the rear where we had positioned our rafts and other survival gear near the door. We put the two five-man rafts into the water, inflated them, and began leaving the aircraft. To the first men in the rafts we handed out the food, water, radio, etc. After all were aboard the rafts, we cut loose and paddled away from the plane. We put five men and most of our gear, including a Gibson Girl radio in one raft. Seven occupied the other and were quite crowded with their legs

necessarily entwined. The lights were still visible on the aircraft and for quite a few minutes, maybe 15 or 20, after we shoved off. When daylight arrived we were able to tackle a problem that had been bothering us. The rafts were tied together with a rope with about 8 or 10 feet between them. This proved to be too short a distance as the following raft would come over the top of a swell and dive down to overtake and bump the leader. We let out the line to its maximum of about 25 or 30 feet and had little trouble from then on. We were also able to assess the situation and rearrange some of the gear to make ourselves a little more comfortable. For example, we found that the carton of cookies were waterproof and would float, so we tied a cord on it put it overboard. We had, in each raft, a 5 gallon can of water, flares, paddles, patching material, pumps, fishing gear, etc. By daybreak the weather had cleared somewhat, no longer raining, light wind, overcast, with swells running 8 to 10 feet. We decided to eat and drink nothing for the first 24 hours to extend our supplies as long as possible. After getting settled down to a miserable ocean voyage, we began to work on getting out of this situation. The first thing to do was to try to let someone know we were out there. So, we assembled and launched the box antenna that came with the Gibson Girl radio. With all in order we began taking turns at cranking out an SOS on it. As everyone in the raft was sick, and working the radio crank was very tiring, we changed operators often. And so went the day -- until late in the afternoon a B-24 appeared and dropped a bundle, which we never recovered because we couldn't get to it. At least it was heartening to know that someone knew where we were.

Well before daylight the next morning, we spotted a light on the horizon. As it got nearer something passed between us and the light. Later we learned that it was a U.S. submarine, who would have taken us had not a ship been so close. Then we made out the large red cross illuminated by floodlights, painted on the hull of a ship which had come to a stop just downwind of us. We drifted into its side where a cargo net had been lowered. One by one we climbed the net up the very long way to the main deck. The captain greeted us and announced he would have to have our weapons which, he said, would all be thrown overboard. This unusual

action was necessary to comply with an understanding between warring nations that hospital ships would carry no armament and would be subject to boarding and inspection to insure compliance. They dressed us in hospital garb and entered us on their manifest as patients. We were offered whiskey, but only one man felt well enough to accept it. The ship (a Dutch one named the Maetsuycker) was an American hospital ship bound for the Philippines empty. It had 18 nurses and only us twelve as patients. Our voyage of about a week was very pleasant and ended in Manila. Within a few more days we were back with our unit at Morotai. We learned from the captain of the Maetsuycker that he had been in contact with the submarine we saw. He also said the British fleet had picked up our broadcast while off Java, a distance of about 1500 miles.

A few things have remained vivid in my memory, i.e.

- (1) The very deliberate and well-done job of ditching done by Bob Rohlfing.
- (2) Not having to worry about food or water - at least for a while.
- (3) The really good feeling we got from seeing the B-24 and again when seeing the ship
- (4) The sharks that would rub the bottom and sides of the raft as though they were scratching themselves. We hit them with paddles whenever possible which seemed to discourage them a little.

WARNER A. BRITTON,
Lieutenant, Air Corps,
C-47 Co-Pilot