



CAPT. WILL HELMANTOLER (right) of Wood River, co-pilot of Snafu Snatchers, Catalina flying boat that staged a record rescue of 17 airmen off Zamboanga.

Wood River Man Co-Pilot on Record Rescue of 17 Airmen

HEADQUARTERS, 13th Army Air Force, Philippines. — The big Catalina flying boat, Snafu Snatchers, flew out of her Dutch East Indies base with eight men and came back with 25. And thereby hangs the tale of the biggest rescue ever made by a 13th AAF plane.

Eight were the 'Cat's' crew, which included Capt. Willis L. Helmantoler, 550 George street, Wood River, Ill. The other 17 were bomber crewmen, shot down in a "jungle air force" strike at enemy gun positions at Zamboanga, southern Philippines, and picked up by Snafu Snatchers.

Snafu Snatchers brought them back alive after an 11-hour trip. During part of the time, she sat on the water like a helpless duck while Jap artillery and machine guns fired at her.

"We were loaded down like a boom town bus," said the Catalina pilot, 1st. Lt. Frank Rauschkolb, Freewater, Ore. "Men sat in the tail compartments and the gun blisters. Others were sprawled all along the flight deck."

Four hundred gallons of gas and every round of ammunition were thrown overboard. There was an anxious moment when a radio message warned of a Jap plane nearby. Cheers broke out in the crowded Cat when the plane came into sight. It was a friendly fighter.

Snafu Snatchers began her 11-hour rescue mission at 5:15 a. m. The clumsy old lady of the air got first word that three 13th AAF B-25s were downed as she neared Zamboanga.

"Control tower told us 17 men were floating around there," said S./Sgt. Clarence E. Friestad, radio chief, 8979 S. E. Division, Portland, Ore. "I could not believe it. They checked and confirmed. So we began looking around, wondering how we'd get them all into the ship."

Rauschkolb and his co-pilot, Capt. Helmantoler, set Snafu Snatchers down a mile off the

Zamboanga shore when the first crew was sighted.

Half a dozen Jap barges, firing machine guns and 20-millimeter cannon, moved out to attack the rescue plane.

Pfc. Robert W. Logan, the radio operator, 3200 Second avenue, San Diego, sent a quick call for help to four 13th AAF B-25s circling the area.

The Mitchells came in low. Five strafing passes silenced every gun on the barges.

Half an hour later, the Catalina picked up the second bomber crew. The fliers were on a raft, trying to paddle out of range of Jap shore batteries that fired continuously at them. A few damaged the Catalina with near-misses as the men clambered aboard.

At 10:30 a. m., an hour after the first survivors were picked up, Snafu Snatchers received the radioed position of the third crew. The men were also on rafts, but 15 miles away.

A water take-off and landing with that heavy load was dangerous, so Lt. Rauschkolb taxied the 15 miles. Water leaked through the Cat's flare holes. The gun blisters and rear compartments were flooded.

1st. Lt. John M. Reeves, the navigator, 2450 A West Hadley street, Milwaukee, Wis., and S./Sgt. James B. Standrilge, jr., 1731 Belmont, Parsons, Kan., formed a bucket brigade.

A few minutes after the third crew was picked up, raising to 25 the number of men in the plane, Snafu Snatchers headed homeward. It was a perfect water takeoff.