

2D EMERGENCY RESCUE SQUADRON
APO #719

"Home is the Airman, Home from the Sea"
by Lieutenant Laurence B. Craig

Although very few flier's families realize it, the term "Missing in Action", has in recent months, been shorn of much of its heart-breaking innuendo. In fact, this term itself, as well as the term "Killed in Action" are enjoying less frequent usage. This happy turn of events is not due to the diminishing of enemy action, since our air losses must necessarily rise somewhat in proportion to the ever-increasing number of aircraft employed in our operations against the Japanese. However, in most cases it is only the aircraft that is lost, not the crew.

In July of 1944, the Army Air Force sent its first Air-Sea Rescue Squadron into operations in the Pacific area. It did not, and does not operate directly against the Japanese. Its most immediate and most inexorable enemy is the Old Man with the Scythe. This squadron is known officially as the 2nd Emergency Rescue Squadron, and unofficially, as the "Snafu Snatchers." It enjoys the unique distinction of being one of the few military combat units whose work consists in saving life rather than destroying it. Since the beginning of their operations, the Army's Air-Sea Rescue Squadrons have brought home over a thousand fallen airmen, who would otherwise have been listed as "KIA" or MIA."

I remember how, back in the United States, the brand new B-25 and P-38 pilots used to guffaw where they discovered that I flew a PBY amphibian. What, that ugly egg box? They'd chorus. How fast do you cruise? My answer of 100 Knots,

invariably brought on a new peal of laughter. They commiserated with me. Now, in the combat zones, attitudes have changed. The PBY is no longer an ugly egg-box, which in defiance of every aerodynamic principal, creep through the air at a mere 100 knots. In the eyes of the same bomber and fighter pilots, the PBY has become a tower of strength, a symbol of security, and a venerable guardian angel. To a cold, wet and hungry airman, sitting in a rubber dingy in enemy waters, 600 miles from the nearest friendly base, and 600 yards from the nearest enemy installation, the PBY is a breathtakingly beautiful sight, such as would have left Robert Browning speechless. The happy airmen sees not only the great white flying boat. He sees more. He sees his friends, and his wife, and his parents and children. He sees food and warmth and safety. He sees ----- home.

The PBY is not a glamorous aircraft in itself. It does not possess the speed, maneuverability and the clean lines of our fast fighters and bombers. True, it is grotesque, slow awkward to handle. It has little armament, and no armor. It is generally understood to be a clay pigeon for flack and a cold turkey for fighters. Airmen do not clamor to fly them, nor does the Army compel them to. The men who serve aboard them are volunteers who have been carefully selected and thoroughly trained. Each of these men is equipped not only with intelligence, courage and knowledge, but a firm moral resolve: "No man shall die because I failed." There is not one instance on the records on the Emergency Rescue Squadrons, in which a ditched aircrew was lost due to the failure of the rescue crew. If the position of the aircraft in distress is known, the rescue of the crew is virtually a certainty, and it is extremely rare that an aircraft goes down without making its position known. In the event of radio

failure, there is nearly always the remainder of the flight which will see and report the position of the ditching. Fuel permitting, at least one of the flight will circle the survivors, keeping a watchful eye on them until the rescue plane arrives, which is generally in less than twenty minutes.

At least one rescue aircraft tags along on every bombing mission and fighter sweep, and, while the action is in progress, it circles a few miles from the target. With two pairs of binoculars and three radios, the rescue crew keeps a constant vigil over their comrades. Should one of our aircraft be hit by flack, its pilot has merely to pick up his microphone and say:

"Playmate 37 from Hepcat 5, Snafu 27 Kilowatt 43."

Then he ditches the aircraft, the crew breaks out the dinghies, climbs aboard and sits tight. They know that "Playmate," which is the army's designation of its rescue aircraft, will do the rest. It hasn't failed yet. Sometimes, although his aircraft has been badly hit, the pilot feel that he can possibly take the battered aircraft home on one engine, if necessary. He will nevertheless call "Playmate", and Playmate will follow him home, just a few hundred yards away - just in case. It is a great consolation to the crew of the stricken bomber to see the PBY tailing them. Put into words, their thoughts are, "If the plane holds together, well and good. If it doesn't, we'll be home 15 minutes later. I hope we're not late for chow."

Over Balikpapan, an oil center on the east coast of Borneo, Lieutenant Cox of the 18th Fighter Group had his

right engine shot out by a Jap 40mm. Shell. He called "Playmate" immediately. So did the colonel, commanding the group. So did every yank pilot for miles around. They were making sure "Playmate" responded promptly and ordered everyone off the air so that the stricken P-38 pilot could get a word in edgewise. The air became quiet, but one could still sense 20 pairs of ears listening intently. A moment's silence, then: "Lester Red 3 to Playmate 37, 47 Ragtag 22. Right engine gone. Will try to make home on single engine, over."

"Playmate 37 to Lester Red 3, 47 Ragtag; hold 4000 feet, steer zero four zero. We will follow you." - "Lester Red 3 to Playmate 37. Roger. Thank you."

The navigator of "Playmate 37" runs one finger across and another finger up the Flight Grid Chart and finds that "47 Ragtag 22" is a position one mile off the Borneo coast, about 15 miles away. As the PBY swings around, the pilot opens the throttles wide and the engineer puts the engines on "auto rich." After nine minutes, Playmate has passed the designated position, steering zero four zero, the P-38 is seen in the distance. A wisp of smoke trails behind it.

"Lester Red 3 to Playmate 37; my left engine is overheating badly. I can't make it. Where are you? Over." - "Playmate 37 to Lester Red 3; we are two miles behind you. We see you."

"Lester Leader to Playmate 37; good show!" - "Playmate to Lester Leader. Gettahelloffthe air ----- sir!"

The smoke from "Lester Red 3 grows in volume.

"Lester Red 3 to Playmate 37, this is it. Should I ditch or bail out? Over".

"Playmate 37 to Lester Red 3. Bail out, bail out."

The P-38 rolls over on its back, a speck falls from it; and from the speck, a parachute blooms!

Playmate's nose goes down, the power is gradually eased off as the wing floats lower. The aircraft is secured for landing, and the crew stands ready at their stations. The "38" hurtles into Makassar Strait and explodes upon impact. Minutes later, the fighter pilot is lying on one of the PBY's four bunks, smoking a cigarette while the flight surgeon examines him for injuries. The PBY lifts off the water, headed for home. Overhead, the 18th Fighter Group circle with singing hearts. At the beach, a mile away, a Japanese assault boat shuts down its engine. As rescues go, Captain Bentley's was what might be termed a "lead-pipe cinch." It was carried out under ideal conditions, good sea, unrestricted visibility, no enemy action, and a sky full of P-38's. However, circumstances are usually vastly different, the rescue of a B-25 crew inside the harbor of Tarakan, one of the enemy's strongest installations on Borneo.

Late in the afternoon of the 7th of April 1945, an aircraft of the 42nd Bomb Group was disabled over the target by heavy anti-aircraft fire. The right engine burst into flame and the fire was spreading rapidly. There was no time for thought. Each man acted by instinct - an instinct born of long hours in the classroom and innumerable "ditching drills." In a matter of seconds the flaming airplane struck the water, its right engine a molten mass of white-hot steel,

its wing a blackened memory. It is incredible; yet, in those few seconds before the plane hit, flack suits, guns, and other loose gear were thrown overboard, and each man occupied his assigned ditching station. Overhead, another B-25 circled, its crew watched the crash-landing. They saw six dots emerge from the smoking wreck as it sank. They saw two yellow rubber dinghies materialize among them. The telegraph key chattered. Minutes later, Playmate 37, homeward bound from Balikpapan swung its bow toward Tarakan, (Borneo). The circling B-25's signal lamp blinked to the drifting airmen, "Playmate coming, Stay off shore."

It was dark when "Playmate 37" arrived. The crew peered down into the inky blackness, but they saw nothing. The men in the dinghies heard the drone of the engines above them. They were expecting Playmate, but it might have been a Zeke, or a Rufe, or Betty. No lights were shown, and the sound of the engines faded slowly into the night. Except for the lapping of the waves and the sighing of the wind, there was silence. It began to rain. For a long time, nobody spoke. They huddled together as they passed the last cigarette around, carefully shielding it from the rain...and the Japs. Someone made a feeble attempt at a joke. Nobody laughed, silence again. Six shivering, hungry, tired and miserable men bunched together to wait for the dawn, and for the PBY which it would surely bring. Surely, the Japs knew they were in the harbor, but, strangely, no motor launches came out after them. Maybe it was the storm; maybe it was zero visibility, maybe - who knows? Anyway, no matter what the reason, they didn't come. That was the important thing.

It was 4 A.M. when the storm abated. Searchlights swept the sky, colored signal lights flashed, still no one came. As

the rain stopped, a large pier loomed in the darkness 150 feet away! With the strength born of desperation, the men paddled frantically against the wind and current. They all crowded into one of the dinghies so that the other might be cut loose in order to reduce the drag. So they struggled for two hours, until their wracked bodies could do no more. Five hundred yards from shore, they lay exhausted. At an American base, hundreds of miles away, a command car rolled onto the strip. As it turned and stopped, its headlights revealed a PBV, its engines idling. Seven men alighted and clambered aboard the large white flying boat. The engines revved up and she started rolling toward the runway.

A Japanese radar antenna rotated slowly against the brightening sky; below, a green dot showed on the screen. A field telephone jangled at headquarters. An officer picked it up. "Sir", said the voice at the other end, "The American flying-boat we were expecting has just been located. It is now 60 miles away; speed, 120 knots. It will arrive in 30 minutes." There were no sirens. There was no need for them. They knew that the PBV carried no bombs, it would not strafe, and they had nothing to fear. The gun crews had been on the alert for hours. They had merely to wait. A big, lumbering PBV, un-escorted, defenseless, and probably under 1000 feet - ----- cold turkey ----- couldn't miss. The dull throb of engines stole through the gray stillness of the morning. In the dinghy, a head lifted turned to the north. In a moment the airman was on his feet, shouting, "Here it comes, right on schedule! Boy, ain't it beautiful!" There were tears, and cheers, and laughter, as ten more eyes searched the horizon. "There, over there!" he yelled, and his finger pointed skyward. On shore, twenty 40 millimeter guns also pointed skyward. As the drifting airmen waved and screamed themselves

hoarse, the artillery men of the Imperial Marines calculated ----- altitude, 600 ---- speed, 122, -----track, 192. They were confident, they were ready, they were marksman, ----- and they knew it.

A new wave of wild cheering went up from the dinghy as the lumbering PBY turned into the harbor ----- it was short-lived. The massed artillery opened an ear-splitting barrage. Chunk flew from the wing and tail of the "P-boat." It reeled drunkenly for a moment, then its bow dropped. In its aft compartment, the radar operator lay sprawled on the gun platform, and the surgical technician stared dumbly at his own blood gushing from two severed arteries in his face and neck. "We've got her!" yelled the Imperial Marines, as the ship dove toward the water. "They got her." Muttered six broken hearts. Then ---- miracle of miracles ---- the wounded planes bow lifted, she leveled off ---- the wing floats were lowering! She was coming in ----- she was smashed to hell --- -- but she was coming in! The furious flouted Japs once again began throwing up all the flack they could muster. The air was black with smoke and red with tracers as the awkward flying boat ducked, and dodged, and wove through the barrage ----- but she kept right on coming! Aboard her, there was feverish activity. The navigator had gone aft, and with the aid of the wounded surgical tech, had carried the radar man forward to one of the bunks. He was now standing by the blister hatch, coiling a heaving line. The surgical tech, half-blinded by his own blood, was bandaging the radar man's chest and abdomen. The co-pilot was preparing another line in the bow, the engineer checked the hull, and the radio operator clouted out the news while the pilot made the PBY behave like a P-38. No word was spoken, no order issued. Each man knew his duty, and he did it ----- well.

The P-boat was skimming the water now. In a matter of seconds she would touch down. With a wrenching screech a hot slab of metal tore through the aft station smashing the hatch inches from the navigator's head. The big boat touched down.

A great geyser of water streamed through the broken hatch, knocking the navigator sprawling to the catwalk. In a moment he was standing again, line in hand.

Swiftly, the flying boat bore down upon the dinghy with its cargo of hysterically happy men, their arms outstretched for the line which was thrown from the bow. It was a good heave, and twelve eager hands clamped on simultaneously. No sooner had the dinghy drifted under the now idle port engine, than the huge propeller started to turn again. The line from the blister was no less eagerly caught, and the navigator hauled the dinghy alongside. A whooping, shouting mass of soaking humanity came tumbling through the hatch, tearing clothes, barking shins, sliding head first to the gun platform ----- but delirious with joy. "Look," cried one of them, "look at the fish jumping around." "Yeah", griped his exasperated buddy, "50 caliber minnows. Get aboard, you dumb bubby!" In an instant, the fish fancier, aided by his side-kick, slithered swearing on the catwalk. Amid shouts of "Get offa my goddam neck!" and "Nuts to you, Sukiyaki!" the PBY began to pick up speed. The water about her was whipped white by machine-gun fire as she charged forward. A muffled cry, scarcely audible above the roar of the engine came from the sea, below the hatch. Four hands clung desperately to the slippery edge of the hatch, two struggling bodies flapped and slapped in the foam. The navigator seized a wet wrist, but couldn't hold it. In desperation he leaned over the side and clutched the man's pistol belt, and with one heart-busting heave, the man lay on the gun platform. He turned to the

second someone in the blister, he didn't notice who, was already pulling for all he was worth. Together, they hauled him aboard as the PBY broke from the water. The navigator looked at his assistant, dazed, trembling, blood-drenched, -- ---- the surgical tech.

The starboard wing dragged, part of the elevator was shot away. The heavy P-boat clawed for altitude as a final, angry burst of tracer hemstitched the rudder. She was off! She raced for the mouth of the harbor as fast as her hot, laboring engines would take her. She cleared it, her bow swung around, and she limped off to the north, battered, bloody and shredded ----- but airborne. After 10 minutes in the air, all excitement had subsided. The rescued crew sat about, swathed in blankets, smoking cigarettes, grinning at the world in general. The PBY crew settled down to their routine tasks, only vaguely disturbed by the sporadic departure of bits of the wing from the whole. There wasn't much that the radioman could do; every frequency was jammed by the enemy. The news of the rescue was still unknown to base. The radioman hung up his headphones and busied himself in the galley. Presently he emerged with six steaming trays - ---- steak, potatoes, peas, corn, fruit salad, pie and coffee. The hot food was nearly as welcome to the rescued airmen as the old PBY herself. Although every means was tried in an effort to stop the surgical tech's bleeding, they were to avail. He was losing blood rapidly ----- far too rapidly. The navigator went to his charts, scribbled a few figures, and handed the pilot a new course for another base, which was 45 minutes closer than his own. The air cleared just long enough for the radio operator to contact the field, tell them the general story, and to call for ambulances.

Two ambulances and two Marine Corps doctors waited at the end of the runway as the big amphibian came to rest. In less time than it takes to tell, wounded were speeding toward the base hospitals, blood plasma needles sticking in their arms. The base engineering officer came out to assess the damage. He counted 163 holes, and gaps where pieces should have been. He poked his finger into a bullet hole in the gas tank. He scanned the tattered wing. He pursed his lips and shook his head. Old "83" (SerNo 44-33883) never flew again ---- but the 13 who were aboard her, did.

Yes, the Army's Air-Sea Rescue squadrons have established a splendid record and are universally loved, but still the army does not rest on its laurels. New and improved rescue facilities are being provided almost daily. B-17 bombers now carry 32-foot lifeboats, which may be dropped by parachute to a ditched crew, even in a precipitous sea. These boats are equipped with two engines, capable of running the boat for 600 miles. A mast and sail are also provided to make the cruising range of this unsinkable self-bailing, boat unlimited. Stowed inside the boat, are warm clothes and blankets for 10 men; food and water for 30 days; a water still to maintain water supply; medical supplies, navigational equipment; a "Gibson Girl" radio; signaling apparatus; fishing tackle; cigarettes, playing cards; and complete instructions for everything. The manifold serves admirably as a stove. The only thing lacking, is a nightly concert on "A" deck. Uncle Sam has spared no expense in giving his airmen the best in training and equipment. He also spares no expense in insuring that they return to their families.

The Air-Sea Rescue service does not confine its activities solely to the rescue of airmen down at sea. Its PBY's have evacuated wounded from the beachheads of Leyte, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa. They have flown supplies to beleaguered guerrillas and needy Filipino civilians in enemy occupied territory. They have shepherded fighter Squadrons home through un-flyable weather. They have landed rescue parties on enemy shores, to hack their way through swamps and jungle to rescue injured airmen. They have also done odd-jobs of all sorts. And so they go, by day and night, through storm and fog, constantly under threat of enemy flack and fighters, ceaselessly toiling so that yet another life may be saved. Day after day, the army's lumbering work horse glide down out of the sunset with their precious cargoes. Home is the airman, home from the sea.