

## 2D EMERGENCY RESCUE SQUADRON

"Happy New Year, Bobby!" by Colonel Bill Helmantoler

In my wildest dreams I never would have imagined that I would find myself in this godforsaken place on New Year's morning, 1945. This godforsaken place was Tarakan, Borneo. At a party back at my base on Morotai Island the night before I had been given a whole roast chicken by a good friend. (That noble bird now rested in a paper bag beside my seat on the flight deck, and I was eagerly looking forward to having it for lunch.) Then we had taken off on this mission at 2:00 a.m. to get to Borneo at dawn. We had wanted to get here before the Japanese gunboats started their day. As the sun rose behind us, the East Coast of Borneo appeared on the horizon. We descended to an altitude of fifty feet above the ocean in an effort to avoid detection by the anti-aircraft guns at Tarakan. Two of our B-25 bombers had been shot down two days before and had been seen ditching in the water just off the coast. We were hoping to find those twelve airmen, pick them up and take them back with us. We were from the 2nd Emergency Rescue Squadron, and that was our job: pick up downed aircrews and return them to base.

As we headed up the main channel between the mangroves, we could see a Japanese gunboat entering the channel several miles in front of us - heading toward us! I realized that we wouldn't have much time for a rescue even if we spotted the downed aircrews soon. And no sooner that that anxious thought had entered my mind a tiny flash of light hit our windshield. Then another. The pilot and I yelled at the same time, "It's them!"

They were signaling us with a mirror from the edge of the mangrove. The pilot cut the power on our seaplane and put it down on the water about fifty yards from the spot from which the signal had come. Slowly, the men began to emerge from the mangrove. Two of them pushed a partially inflated life raft that carried a man lying on his back. Some were trying to swim out to us; others were trudging along in chest-deep water.

The strongest swimmer of the group reached the bow of our boat and struggled to pull himself up out of the water. I opened the hatch above me as he crawled up to the windshield in front of me. Suddenly, and with great joy, I recognized this sunburned, bedraggled airman as my former tent-mate on Guadalcanal. It was Bobby Cohn!

He fell down through the hatch into my lap and began kissing and blessing me. "Bill! Bill! Bless you, Bill!" he

shouted. We were both crying. Meanwhile, our crew was working feverishly to bring the other downed airmen aboard through an opening near the rear of our flying boat. The last survivor to be brought aboard was the man who had been lying on the partially inflated raft. He had a broken back. Our medic was handling him with great care.

We had been on the water almost fifteen minutes when our flight engineer called on the intercom to say that everybody was aboard. It was not a moment too soon. The pilot turned our flying boat into the wind and pushed the throttles all the way forward. As we lifted off the water and turned away from land, I looked up the channel at the approaching Japanese gunboat. In another five minutes he would have been upon us.

Realizing that these men hadn't had anything to eat in more than two days, I reached down beside my seat and brought forth the roast chicken that I had been so looking forward to eating. Handing it to Bobby Cohn, who was standing nearby with another smiling survivor, I said with a great feeling, "Happy New Year, Bobby!"