

2D EMERGENCY RESCUE SQUADRON

"The Paddle" by Lieutenant Bill Holbrook

The first mission on the paddle was unique in many ways. It was the only one listed for which the crew was decorated; the only one where we actually saw the enemy and were fired upon; and its story was not concluded until 1986 when the final note of the tragic end of Lieutenant W.C. Springer was written. I was flying co-pilot to my flight leader Kenneth "Doc" Hunter. We had an experienced crew. On long boring missions it was not unusual for us to trade seats, all except the radioman. None of us could read code well enough to put on his earphones.

On this day we were flying back home from a short mission, a couple of hundred feet above the water, several hundred yards from the jungle shore, searching for anything to break the monotony. Doc was back in the blister with the flight engineer, someone else was in the flight engineer's seat above the center aisle, under the wing between the engines, monitoring the fuel gauges and engine instruments. Our navigator had washed out of pilot training. He loved to fly and had even had a couple of landings, not officially logged, of course, and not on the water. He was in the pilot's seat enjoying some flight time. I was in the right seat watching the jungle fly past.

The reverie was interrupted by an urgent call from a fighter pilot less than a half an hour away. He had a buddy in the water that required our services. Doc came forward and said he would supervise the operation at the boarding ladder in the blister compartment. He suggested that I trade seats

with the navigator, that way he could assist in the landing and take-off to get some practical water experience. I reversed course while my navigator co-pilot noted the position of the pilot. He was down in a bay off Jeffman Island which we surmised to be quiet waters for an easy pick-up.

We began to wonder about the operation when the fighter pilot said "They would stick around for cover as long as fuel allowed." We figured he wanted to make sure we found his buddy when we arrived over the bay. We droned on down the coast and around the corner into the bay. I remember seeing people in tan uniforms on the beach as we sighted a lone P-38 circling about a thousand feet directly ahead. The downed pilot was easy to spot. He was swimming away from the shore as fast as he could paddle towing his partially inflated raft. I noticed a series of bright flashes on the beach as we told the P-38 we had his pilot in sight.

The P-38 pilot said that he was desperately low on fuel and had to leave. We would have to watch for him on our way home. He had sent the rest of his flight home while they still had a safety margin of gas. At this moment "Doc" called from the rear to mention the splashes they saw in the water off the side of the plane opposite the shore. Someone commented the obvious, "They're shooting at us!" We made a steep 90° turn as the man in the flight engineer's station lowered the wing floats. Our course was a combination escape route and downwind leg of the required landing pattern. The touchdown was routine. I lowered the landing gear to slow the boat as we neared our quarry. Everyone was too busy doing his job to notice what was going on ashore. Doc and the crew in the blister called to say they had the pilot aboard. The co-

pilot retracted the gear as I returned the ship away from shore and opened the throttles.

I hollered for him to hook his arms under the control yoke and help me haul back on the elevator. The control forces of the Catalina on a quick take-off were more than one man could handle. The man in the flight engineer's station retracted the wing floats the second the ship accelerated to run on the step. We rose off the water and departed the bay well away from the unfriendly shore. We had been too busy to notice if the Japs had continued to shoot at us. If they did they didn't come close enough to bother us.

We called the P-38 and told him his pilot was safe aboard. He replied with a thanks, said he had enough fuel to make it home and would see us when we landed. Doc came forward and we traded seats. He said the pilot was exhausted but otherwise in good shape. I went aft and found him wrapped in a blanket sitting on the edge of a bunk still hyper from his narrow escape. The crew was crowded around in awed quiet, savoring their moment of victory, waiting to hear the story from the lips of the man they saved. The medic sat next to him watching closely for signs of shock.

He told us he was the wingman on a dive bombing run when they were hit by anti-aircraft. The flight leader's ship exploded. That's the last thing he remembered until he was in the water close enough to shore to see the Japs on the beach running as his buddies strafed them to cover his escape. We picked him up almost a half mile from shore. He still had his G.I. shoes on. His .45 was in its shoulder holster. The half punctured one man life raft he had towed behind him was lying in the bilge of the blister compartment. Lt. Springer had

just completed a marathon swim that would have easily qualified him for the Olympics. He did it in fully equipped, heavy shoes and all, towing his raft!

The medic finally got him to lie down. He began to collapse from his ordeal as we helped him down the ladder and into the ambulance after we landed. The P-38 pilot was there to meet him and thank us for the rescue. They were from the 67th Fighter Squadron of the 367th Fighter Group. He told us that Jeffman Island was a heavily fortified Japanese stronghold. We never had an intelligence briefing. The word passed around among the flight crews like a dirty joke whenever any of us ran into something exciting. Jeffman Island joined the "watch out" list.

When I re-boarded the plane to pick up my gear I picked up the paddle from Lt. Springer's raft as a souvenir of my first rescue. This is that yellow paddle. Doc got the Distinguished Flying Cross and the rest of us got an extra Air Medal for what we considered our routine duty. Months later, just before I left the theatre, I heard the sad news that Lt. Springer had crashed while flying to Australia for leave. He had been riding in a "piggy back" P-38, scrunched up behind another pilot in the tiny space created to allow two men to ride in a single seat fighter. By this time our Squadron had developed a very close relationship with the 367th Fighter Group. The Second Emergency had rescued close to half of their original pilots from the waters of the Southwest Pacific seas. In 1986 my daughter Karen gave me the May 12th issue of the New Yorker because it contained a lengthy piece about a forensic doctor and his work identifying the crew of a recently discovered B-24 wreck in the Owen Stanley Mountains of New Guinea. The article

mentioned that the doctor's expertise in his field was first recognized when he identified a Captain W.C. Springer as one of the two occupants of a wrecked P-38 found in the jungle in the late 1970's. The jungles of our war, like those of Vietnam and the morass of all wars, hide the bones of many lost heroes just as the seas cover the remains of lost fleets of heroic sailors.