

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

"Rescued from the Sea"
by Unknown 2d ERS crewman

The pilots and crew sit tense with suspense, strapped into their seats inside the giant flying boat. The landing will be slightly across the great swells of the ocean but straight into the wind. The wings are level, the ball centered, no drifting slip will catch a float and trip them into a diving water loop to the bottom. Their past experiences in air sea rescue has ingrained in them a terror of the risk of landing in the open ocean. The boat hangs suspended, its white hull just a few feet above the white caps. Tension overwhelms the ten men who dread the imminent happening, some quietly curse, some silently pray. They wait...

The duties of each man on the rescue team are critical to their own survival as well as to the lives of those many they came to save. The water was warm and smooth when they began their early training in big flying boats on a quiet sound along the Gulf of Mexico. It was a seaside vacation with a giant GI toy when they first played at buoy shots. The tropic sea is still warm but the now open Pacific's great swells are topped by wind-blown waves. Their boat is now loaded with fuel and survival gear. The vacation ended when they arrived in New Guinea a year ago. The practice buoy shots on Pensacola Bay began with a pass over the buoy to determine its position so a landing pattern could be planned. They could only see the small object in the water while the plane circled it at low altitude. As soon as they finished circling it disappeared behind the tail. Now the buoy is a man in a life raft and the smooth bay a rough open sea. The raft disappeared in the waves thirty seconds after the navigator clicked his stop watch and gave the pilot a heading. The clumsy flying boat covers miles of ocean during its approach and landing. They must be within sight of the downed pilot when the landing run is over. The plane leaves no visible trace as it draws its timed pattern over the unmarked sea.

With a sigh, the wings stall and the boat settles into the sea. The anticipated crash drives the crew into their seats, their attachment to the sky is abruptly cut. The plane becomes a mammoth speed boat sailing through the rough sea at seventy miles an hour. Safety belts bite and hold them in their seated stations as the forces of wind and water strive to test the seaworthiness of the plane.

The PBY hit the backside of a great wave with the force of fifteen tons of engine driven aluminum. Despite the force of its arrival the sea rejects it and the plane is batted back into the air. The seaplane hangs again for a moment above the waves. Another crushing splash into the sea and again it slaps the boat back into the air refusing to accept its violent arrival. The pilots struggle to keep the wings level and the course straight, but at the slow airspeed the controls have little effect. The strength of the two men is needed to hold the control column all the way back, to keep the nose high, lest the flying boat dive nose first to the bottom. Finally the crashing sounds blend into a roar of rushing water as the plane settles and runs through the waves unable to keep its nose up as the drag of the water slows its speed. The wings have lost all their lift and the controls all their ability. The cockpit windshield is covered with green water when the bow is driven under the sea in the final stop of the landing run. Salt water runs in through the cracks around the overhead hatches and baptizes the pilots with a cold shower. They are no longer flyers, they have been transformed into sailors on an ungainly ship.

Half airplane and half boat, it squats on the rolling surface like a pelican rising and falling with the swells. In the aftermath of landing, the white faced crew search around them for signs of structural failure and leaks. Rivets have popped in the navigation compartment and sea water is squirting up like a small inverted shower. The crew chief crawls down from his station between the engines and starts the auxiliary power unit to drive the bilge pump and rid the bottom of deadly weight of water that poured through the bow turret and the cockpit escape hatches in the final halting dip, and now runs in from the leaks the hull suffered in the beating of the landing.

The landing run covered miles of water, the pilot in his one man raft was out of sight during the approach and bouncing landing. This is their final test of the critical timing of the buoy shot. The raft stood only a foot high with its pilot's hand waving less than three feet above the bobbing surface. An error of a thousand feet could mean the landing was futile. The flying boat cannot stand the beating of the sea would give it in a surface search. If the pilot did not pop into sight quickly they would have to take off and go through another air search and risk another landing.

Their eyes explore the waves for signs of the pilot whose life is the reason for this open sea landing. The navigator runs aft to the blister compartment, where he can see through the Plexiglas domes and help in the search. His regular station has only two small windows. He endured the landing staring at the back of the pilot's seats. His feet were the first to get wet and he suffered with the pilots the deluge of the last dive of landing.

The yellow raft and the blue and white flying boat are specks, bobbing on the vast green ocean. No land is in sight to give reference to their position or protection from its forces. A yellow form rises on a swell on the horizon then disappears and rises again. It is the downed fighter pilot paddling and waving anxiously as the rescuers drift toward him. The plane's engines are barely ticking, provided just enough thrust to maintain headway, its prop tips clear the waves by only a few feet. The distance between the raft and the plane closes carefully as the pilots maneuver the boat so the raft passes between the whirling props and the wingtip float. A side blister hatch is raised and the crew shouts as the raft drifts within reach of a crewman's boat hook. Shaking with relief, the rescued pilot is lifted from the raft, helped over the side to be welcomed aboard. The empty raft is left as the only mark of the site where he jumped out of his lost fighter to start the story of his ocean rescue.

The medic gives the retrieved flyer a quick physical as he is wrapped in blankets and strapped in a bunk by his rescuers. The wet and apprehensive crew check his safety belts and hurry to their stations to strap themselves in for take-off. Their anxiety hints that his adventure has another

episode. The rescue is not over. All must be lifted back into the air and flown to dry land to complete the mission. The pilots call back to make sure that everything is secure, take a deep breath, reach forward and pull the control yoke against their chests. The mood is one of fearful concentration as they deliberately shove on the power. Salt spray blasts the whole plane aft of the propellers. The boat surges through the waves and over the top of the first giant swell then surfs down its sloping back. Running too fast to climb the next swell, it drives straight through it. The whole bow is buried in the sea. Green water covers the windshield and the tips of the props roar as they taste salt water. The pilots ignore the brine that again rushes in around the hatch above their heads.

The nose rises as the powerful engines pull half the hull out of the water, but it sinks back as the surge of the takeoff is partially stalled by the drag of the sea. A pounding, rushing roar fills the hull as again and again the boat fights its way out of the water and is sucked back by the waves of the sea. Finally it flies off the top of a wave, but bangs into crest the next, as it lifts and skips across the ocean, halfway between flying and floating. The air is too weak to fully support the plane while the sea slowly loses its hold. The sound inside the plane crashes as the hull beats its way through the ocean and into the air. More rivets pop under the navigator's seat as the structure is strained to hold together against the sledge hammers blows of the sea. The crescendo becomes more violent as the speed increases and the interval between bounces gets longer. One last hard smash then nothing but the even sound of the engines is heard. For a second the crew awaits another blow, but none comes. The airplane has won, they are safe in the air.

The crew sit stunned by the beauty of the sea that is the arena of their searches and gives thanks for the strength of their gruesome goose. The fear of open sea landings grows each time they test their flying boat's hull against the power of the great swells and waves of the unbounded ocean. This terror washes away the gratification of the rescue. Their souls are limp, wiped clean of any emotion in the even balance of terror and elation that wrestle in their beliefs.

The rescued pilot shivers in the bunk, his ordeal is over. He suffers from withdrawal of the adrenaline that has driven his every move since his plane was hit over the target. He whimpers uncontrollably for an instant before his pride makes him ashamed of this expression of his deep fears. When reason returns, he reviews the order of his survival. He wonders which was worse...the trauma of being shot down, or the violence of his rescue.