

SERGEANT AIR GUNNER'S ESCAPE

Baling out of a damaged aircraft nearly twenty thousand feet above the ground with a tangled open parachute bundled in his arms a South African sergeant air gunner had a dramatic struggle to release himself from the folds one thousand feet from the ground. This was his thrilling adventure when a Glenn Martin Maryland bomber aircraft of the South African Air Force was attacked by six Me.109's over Cyrenaica.

"We were on our way back from attacking an enemy aerodrome" said the pilot "when one of my gunners reported 'fighters are on us' and then almost immediately afterwards 'they are opening fire'.

"I turned to meet the attack head on and gained speed, making for land. Then we were hit. The aircraft caught fire and I gave the order to bale out and circled around to enable the crew to jump.

"One gunner had been badly wounded at the start of the engagement and couldn't bale out. The other gunner lifted him up only to find that the guns were in the way. The wounded man's harness caught in the gun sight and the other gunner had to lift everything clear and drop the guns and the wounded man through the hatch.

"The injured man had just sufficient strength to pull the rip cord. While he was helping his comrade the other gunner's parachute caught on some projection and opened out inside the aircraft.

"With only seconds to spare, the sergeant gathered the billowing silk and cords in his arms, wrapped them around himself and, clutching on to them as tightly as he could, dropped himself through the hatch.

"Wrapped up in folds and cords he had a terrible time trying to free himself as he hurtled towards the ground. He was struggling all the way down until at last, with only one thousand feet to spare, his parachute opened out.

"The shock when the parachute jerked clear was severe, and one of the shrouds still entangled round his right arm pulled his shoulder from the socket.

"The observer, two gunners and myself all landed within a mile and a half of each other.

"The two injured men are doing well in hospital while the observer and myself suffered only slightly. The gunner showed great presence of mind and bravery."

-----