

Air Ministry News Service

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PIGEON IN BEAUFORT'S RESCUE

A R.A.F. crew of four whose Beaufort was forced down into the North Sea recently owe their prompt rescue to "Winkie" a tough little carrier pigeon which belongs to a master plumber in Broughty Ferry, Dundee.

The Beaufort was making an offensive patrol of the North Sea and Norwegian coast. On the way back it developed engine trouble and was forced to alight in the sea.

"My wireless operator had time only to send out our call sign and then we were down in the drink", said the captain. "We were all thrown into the sea, and the dinghy, which had inflated, broke loose and began to drift away. I went after it and caught it.

"Just before the aircraft sank - it was only afloat for about a minute - the wireless operator got out the pigeon container and swam over to the dinghy with it. One bird had broken out of the container as the aircraft crashed and she took off before we were able to fix a message to her. That was 'Winkie' - bless her little heart! We wrote a message for her companion and sent her off but apparently she didn't make it - at least she hasn't reported yet.

"The sea was fairly calm and we all sat in the dinghy through the night hoping for the best."

Back at the base aerodrome, the operations room staff were working out an area of sea to search at first light next morning. The weak call sign which the wireless operator had sent out just before the Beaufort crashed had been picked up, but it was not strong enough to give more than the vaguest indication of the position of the aircraft.

It would be necessary to search an area of the North Sea roughly 70 miles square in any part of which the dinghy might be found. To locate such a tiny object in such a large area would require a great deal of luck.

Before dawn the next morning aircraft were on their way to the search. They had been in the air less than an hour when the telephone bell rang in the operations room. The controller answered it; the caller was Mr. James Ross, of 88 Long Lane, Broughty Ferry.

"One of my pigeons which you were using has come back all wet and oil stained", he reported.

"There was no message on her, but I can give you her code number".

The controller checked the number with the pigeon records kept at the station, and found the bird had been in ~~Coastal Command~~ ~~Coastal~~ aircraft. It had been supplied from Mr. Ross's loft and was one of the team of pigeons which are carried in Coastal Command aircraft on every operational trip for release in emergencies.

The station navigator thought it might be possible by using a knowledge of the bird's "cruising speed", to obtain a rough cross-check on the distance from land it had been released.

/Mr. Ross

Mr. Ross said the bird would not fly at night and in his opinion she had just managed to reach the coast of Scotland before it was dark. This narrowed down the area of search by about half, and wireless messages were sent to the several aircraft then over the sea directing them to concentrate in the more likely area. Within twenty minutes, a crew of the Royal Netherlands Air Service in a Hudson aircraft found the dinghy just where the station navigator thought it might be, and wirelessed his position back to base.

A spare dinghy containing extra provisions and comforts was dropped beside the crew. Later in the morning a Walrus aircraft alighted on the sea near them and, although unable to pick them up because it had not sufficient accommodation, ascertained that they were well and cheerful and gave them the news that they would soon be picked up.

At two o'clock in the afternoon a R.A.F. high speed launch took them on board. On their way back to the coast they heard how the pigeon had been instrumental in securing their rescue.

Back in the loft, "Winkie" was given a special feed and her feathers were cleaned of the oil which she had picked up when the aircraft crashed.

"She's a tough little bird", said Mr. Ross. "She was No. 1 in the National Pigeon Service 1940 Breed, and although she's been on a few training flights, this was what the R.A.F. would call her first operational trip. She must have plenty of stamina for she had crossed about 100 miles of sea in a dirty and wet condition. I have a lot of faith in her because she was one of the three survivors out of 17 which the R.A.F. put through a number of rigorous tests. I am delighted that one of my birds should have done such a good job and know it will be very heartening to pigeon fanciers all over the country who have lent their birds to the R.A.F."

To commemorate her part in the rescue of Squadron Leader ~~Chiff~~ and his crew, "Winkie" has been presented with a small bronze plaque which shows a pigeon flying over the sea. The plaque, which was made by an armourer in Squadron Leader ~~Chiff~~ Beaufort Squadron, has an inscription expressing the squadron's thanks to the gallant little pigeon.

"Winkie" was taken by her owner, Mr. James Ross, Broughty Ferry, to the aerodrome for the presentation ceremony last night. She strutted proudly in the large wicker basket while officers were saying nice things about her, and at the end of the speeches everyone raised their glasses to the toast "Good old Winkie".

The plaque was handed to Mr. Ross by the station commander.

Mr. Ross said he would cherish the plaque more than any cup or trophy won by his pigeons, and he hoped that Winkie's part in the rescue of Squadron Leader ~~Chiff~~ would increase the confidence of the air crews in the ability of carrier pigeons to help them in difficulties.

A silver beer tankard was presented to a squadron of the Royal Netherlands Naval Air Service in appreciation of the accurate navigation and skilful flying of the crew of the Dutch Hudson which located Squadron Leader ~~Chiff~~ and his crew drifting in the North Sea in their dinghy.

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N.B. Pictures available from B.I.P.P.A.