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AIRMAN DOWN IN HOSTILE DESERT

RESCUED BY FLYING BOAT

Four British airmen, the crew of a British aircraft, were forced down in Vichy French territory, on the desert that slopes down to the shore of West Africa.

They lacked sufficient food and water. They were surrounded by a group of nomad Arabs. Their best hope seemed to be internment in a French prisoners camp.

They were rescued within a few hours by the daring of a crewman of a Sunderland Flying boat of the R.A.F. West Africa Command. The rescue entailed alighting by the surf of unknown waters, rowing ashore in rubber dinghies over heavy breakers, and taking off again from the sea in darkness.

The aircraft was flying off the West African coast when trouble developed. Inland lay nothing but desert, some wandering Arabs perhaps, a march of several days to the nearest settlement, and Vichy French territory at that.

The Captain at once radioed a message that he might have to make a forced landing.

This message was received by a Royal Air Force unit stationed some hundreds of miles away, on another part of the West African coast.

When it came to the operations room, a white walled hut by a rough wooden jetty, the commanding officer turned to the captain of one of his Sunderland flying boats (F./Lt. J.M. Ennis) and ordered him to take off at once, saying that he would receive his further orders after he was airborne.

F./Lt. Ennis hastily collected his crew, some rations and some extra dinghies and started his flight towards the rough position of the aircraft in trouble. The Sunderland was actually in the air before the aircraft forced-landed about a mile in shore on the desert beach.

Had it been any later, darkness would have prevented the rescue.

After some hours the flying boat made landfall near the spot where the aircraft had landed, and started a systematic search of the hinterland, receiving instructions from base wireless.

Meanwhile the captain of the aircraft had made a successful forced-landing on the desert. He and his crew climbed unhurt from their aircraft, and began to survey the position.

Around them was nothing but bare desert, sloping about a mile away, the other side of some sand dunes, to the surf breaking on the shore. According to their maps, there was an old caravan trail somewhere near, but the closest civilised point was at least four days' march away - and they had two days' water. As they had been in radio touch with the R.A.F. in another part of West Africa they supposed there was some slight hope of rescue, but looking at the desert around them, they decided it was slender indeed. So they made a petrol fire and burnt all their documents.

Not long afterwards they were surprised to see a figure approaching them on foot across the desert. As it came nearer, they saw that it was an Arab. He approached them, said something in a debased French they could not understand and then went away again.

Shortly afterwards he returned with 14 other Arabs, some of whom could speak fluent French. They offered them four camels, but the difficulty was that the airmen had no French money, and they thought it unwise to proffer British.

Not revealing their nationality, they told the Arabs that an aircraft was probably coming to pick them up, but that if it did not arrive they were to bring the camels back next morning. That way, they thought, led at least to safety, even if it were only the safety of interment camp.

The Sunderland flying boat was now searching along the coast line for the damaged aircraft, the captain glancing anxiously at his watch, for night was not far away. They flew over a few Arab tents, with some camels tethered near them. Then, the other side of some sand dunes, they spotted the crashed aircraft with 15 to 20 people gathered round it.

The Sunderland circled, and signalled to the men below to get down to the beach. F/Lt. Ennis then flew out to sea, jettisoned his bombs and studied the surface of the water. There was a considerable swell, but he decided it was possible to alight, and he did so, just outside the breakers.

The crew of the crashed aircraft were by then on the beach, the Arabs still gathered round them, all that separated the rescuers from them was 200 yards of surf.

P/O M.P.L. Wall, second pilot of the Sunderland and Sergeant M.D. Cawthorne, the first rigger, volunteered to row ashore and pick up the aircraft crew. They inflated two triangular rubber dinghies, each taking one, and in spite of the unwieldiness of their craft brought them safely over the breakers to the beach.

Joking and laughing, but with immense relief, the four men clambered into the dinghies and set off back to the flying boat.

It was no easy journey. Although they had abandoned all the luggage to the Arabs, the breakers nearly swamped the dinghies several times. Moreover, it was already practically dark, and the Sunderland was only a shadow beyond the whitecaps of the surf. Every delayed minute increased the danger of the take-off, in the darkness on the open unknown sea.

The dinghies reached the Sunderland, and the men hurried aboard. The sea was rough enough to break the crown of the Sunderland's anchor clean off as it prepared to leave. Darkness had fallen, and there was only the dimmest afterglow in the west to indicate the horizon.

F/Lt. Ennis accelerated his engines, and, straining his eyes towards the streak of dim light that remained, made a perfect take off.

The rescued men stripped off their soaked clothing in the ward room, drank cups of hot tea, and thanked their rescuers. The flying boat brought them safely back to its base.