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Air Ministry News Service

Air Ministry Bulletin No. 7954

70 HOURS IN TROPIC SEA

After 70 hours, spent partly in dinghies, but mostly in the sea, nine members of the crew of a Sunderland flying boat have been rescued by a British destroyer off West Africa. For the first part of their ordeal the crew had only a damaged and water-logged dinghy to cling to. They were bitten by dog-fish and stung by jellyfish and during the nights they were glad to remain covered by the sea which was warmer than the air.

Shortly after midday on a Sunday the Sunderland ran into a storm and was forced to alight on the sea. A heavy swell was running which broke the back of the aircraft as it struck the water. The captain, Flight Lieutenant J.M. Ennis, A.F.C., injured his back in the crash but was able to crawl out on the wing with all the other members of the crew except one man who was killed.

The air observer, Warrant Officer D.T. Shakes, and Sergeant Prior, went back into the Sunderland which was rapidly filling with water and freed a dinghy. It inflated, but later the air container of one of its sides burst and subsequently was only half afloat.

The crew helped their injured captain into the dinghy and, swimming beside him in their life-jackets, pushed and towed it away from the Sunderland. They expected the aircraft to sink at any moment, and knew when that happened its depth charges would blow up. When they had laboriously covered about a mile, they rested and watched the tail of the flying-boat settle steadily. Air in the petrol tanks kept the wreck afloat for about six hours but when it finally went down the depth charges were detonated by the increasing pressure of water and blew up with a tremendous explosion hurling pieces of the Sunderland back into the air.

All through Sunday night, Monday, and Monday night the crew clung together. Flight Lieutenant Ennis's back injury was obviously serious. He was paralysed from the waist downwards and quite helpless. The others kept handholds on the sides of the dinghy and took it in turns to sprawl in it besides their captain two at a time in half hour spells.

Because of the captain's injury, one of the other pilots, Flight Lieutenant Alec Espley virtually took charge of the operations.

"He set us all a grand example and put up a magnificent show," said Flight Lieutenant Ennis. "Time and time again he gave up his rest period on the dinghy to other members of the crew who, he said, were more in need of it, and eventually I had to order him into the dinghy so that I could massage his legs. Out of the first 48 hours we were in the sea he spent 45 hours in the water, most of the time swimming beside us supported only by his life-jacket to relieve the downward drag on the dinghy.

"We kept each other cheerful as much as we could. Dog-fish came flipping into the water-logged dinghy and bit me on the chest, and some of the other chaps as well. The dinghy was so low in the water that I was sitting in it up to my neck most of the time. Some of the fellows were a bit anxious about sharks.

/I didn't

I didn't know anything about it, but I told them it was the wrong time of the year. Then I remembered that one of our other crews in a dinghy had had a shark nosing round them quite a bit. But we were lucky and didn't see one."

At times on Monday night, the men heard the noise of aircraft seeking them, but they had no means of making known their presence.

At midday on Tuesday they were found by a Hudson whose pilot circled and dropped four one-man dinghies and emergency rations. They fell a short distance away from the Sunderland crew. It seemed that the crew might be unable to pick them up for it was an ordeal for any of them, in their weakened condition, to leave the comparative safety of the dinghy and swim away. But Flight Lieut. Espley and F/Sgt. P. Hewitt, swam over to the new dinghies and supplies and brought them to the others.

The Hudson pilot could not afford to stay too long with the crew because his fuel was running short. He wirelesslyed their position and the search was resumed by other aircraft, but night was coming on and they were not found again that day. During the night, the searching aircraft dropped flares which were seen by the survivors, who, however, were unable to signal their position.

Early on Wednesday morning one of the sergeants who had swallowed a quantity of sea-water during the night, became delirious and died. As daylight grew the Hudson piloted by the same officer who had found them the previous day, returned and again located them. A Sunderland also arrived but the sea was still too rough to allow it to alight and pick them up. It remained circling them while a destroyer of the Royal Navy came up and lowered boats which picked up the crew and took them aboard.

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