

ADRIFT FOR SEVEN DAYS IN DINGHY

Adrift for seven days in a rubber dinghy in the Bay of Bengal, members of the crew of an R.A.F. Wellington bomber have been rescued in dramatic circumstances from one of the islands in the Sunderbunds.

During their ordeal the airmen were buffeted by winds and tides and at any moment they expected their frail craft would be swamped.

The Wellington was on patrol over the Bay of Bengal. Suddenly the port engine caught fire and the aircraft dived into the sea. There was no time to send out a distress signal. One of the crew was trapped in the sinking bomber and perished. The five others struck out for the floating dinghy which had been released from the aircraft.

They were Sgt. Alex Gee of Nottingham, who captained the aircraft, Sgt. Arthur Tenneson of Palmers Green, Middlesex, formerly an accountant, who was second pilot, F/O Robert Jones of Morden, Surrey, formerly employed by a London shipping firm and who navigated the bomber, Sgt. Earnest Baldry of Suffolk, the rear-gunner and a 22-year-old Flight Sgt. from Montreal, formerly with the C.P.R., wireless operator of the Wellington.

Taking stock of their position they saw the Japanese-occupied shore 15 miles away. "We decided that it would be much better to take a chance and make for Allied territory", F/O Jones said later, "rather than fall into enemy hands. We reckoned that with the current drift and the wind in our favour we could reach friendly territory in about 14 days. The little food we had was part of the dinghy's equipment. To conserve supplies we ate nothing until the evening of the second day. During this period of hunger and thirst the monsoon rains were bursting and we refreshed ourselves by drinking the rain-water from the cupped palms of our hands.

"It was a hopeless task trying to steer a circular dinghy. We had to depend entirely on drift. In an effort to replenish our diminishing rations we attempted to hook a fish or two with a safety pin.

"We had to work at high speed baling out the dinghy.

"On the sixth day we spotted an aircraft. It came down low and circled round us and we knew that a rescue attempt would follow. Luck was against us, for not long after another storm broke and visibility became 'nil'. Later we were blown off our course. In the interval, however, other aircraft came on the scene and located us.

"Then we sighted land. We made desperate attempts to 'paddle' the dinghy shorewards but they proved fruitless. Then at last a large transport aircraft loomed up in the distance, circled over us, and dropped a bottle attached to an improvised parachute but it failed to reach us. Towards dusk further supplies were dropped by parachute and we managed to pick up three of the packages. We soon abandoned our daily ration of one biscuit and two malted milk tablets for a feast of dates, chocolates and biscuits. About two o'clock the following morning the dinghy beached on one of the small clusters of islands in the Bay of Bengal."

Crawling from the dinghy the navigator and the wireless operator walked to an Indian farmer's hut where they were given goat's milk. The captain of the aircraft was ill through exposure and bruises. The rear-gunner stayed with him while the other three, weary and weak, made their way to a ferry. Grim and red-eyed, unshaven and covered with sores, they eventually reached the mainland where medical treatment, warmth, comfort and food were quickly given. The other two reached safety and shelter later.

Sgt. Donald G. Dick of Evanton, Alberta, who was the first to sight the dinghy when he was out on patrol, said: "When I spotted them I signalled back to base and received a reply to lead other aircraft to the spot. Bad weather blew up, however, and it was a couple of hours before we saw the dinghy again."