

12/12/42 - No. 10

NOT FOR PUBLICATION, BROADCAST, OR USE ON CLUB TAPES
BEFORE 0030 B.S.T. (i.e. FOR MORNING PAPERS) ON

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 13, 1942

THIS EMBARGO SHOULD BE RESPECTED OVERSEAS BY PREFACING
ANY MESSAGES FILED WITH THE EMBARGO

Air Ministry News Service

Air Ministry Bulletin No. 8680

73 SAVED FROM THE ATLANTIC

One of the greatest air-sea rescues of the war has just been successfully concluded. Seventy three passengers and crew of a merchant vessel which was torpedoed and sunk 500 miles out in the North Atlantic, are now safe and well in this country. To accomplish this feat, aircraft of Coastal Command flew over 55,000 miles and the Royal Navy swept hundreds of square miles of sea using corvettes, destroyers, sloops and tugs before the final signal flashed the message "operation completed."

As he stepped ashore, the last to be rescued, the veteran captain of the ship said: "Thank God for the Navy and the R.A.F. Thirteen days in an open boat in the Atlantic in winter does not improve one's health. Though some of us were very tired and suffering from boat feets, we stood as one man to cheer those R.A.F. aircraft when they found us."

It is a story of grim determination, perseverance and co-operation by the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force.

The captain was torpedoed three times in the last war.

On his last voyage a few weeks ago, he was attacked by an enemy U-boat at night when 500 miles from land. He ordered the boats to leave his blazing vessel and had only just left himself when a second torpedo sank his ship.

Before submerging, the U-boat captain, who spoke perfect English, interrogated the passengers and crew as to their cargo and destination, and then left them to their fate. The four small boats, each in command of a ship's officer, attempted to keep together but by morning they had lost touch.

Aircraft of Coastal Command were dispatched in relays to search in ever-widening sweeps the vast stretch of sea. Navigational experts worked ceaselessly on tides, strength of wind and the possible course set by the small boats, to give the searching pilots as much help as possible. For four days no success was obtained, but on the fifth day a Sunderland spotted in the half light of early morning a small object which kept disappearing in the trough of the Atlantic rollers.

Then, in Morse from a hand-torch, came a message to say that it was one of the missing boats.

"We thought they would be hungry after at least four days and nights at sea," said P/O. Robinson, the Sunderland's navigator, "so I filled a Mae West with some of our emergency rations - milk, orange juice, chocolate and food extracts and dropped it overboard. We saw it picked up."

The officer in charge of the boat, when he eventually got ashore, described how he had heard a plane flying round from midnight to 4 a.m. but he was afraid to signal for fear it might be a German. Then, in the half-light, he was able to see the aircraft and risked sending the message. The hurriedly scribbled note in the dropped supplies telling them that help would soon be on the way was a great comfort. A merchant vessel contacted the boat later in the day and eighteen survivors were taken on board.

Meanwhile the search continued. The net result of two more days' patrols was the sighting by a Sunderland and a Catalina of an empty lifeboat. The next day, however, brought more success. A Sunderland of a Canadian squadron spotted a boat with a red sail. Seven hours afterwards a Fortress, after hours of intensive searching reported a second boat roughly 60 miles to the north of the other.

/The Navy

The Navy switched a destroyer to the area and the following morning another 38 men were safe. A young American airman in one of the boats, impressed by the accuracy with which supplies were dropped, declared: "If that guy up there drops bombs as well as he throws us biscuits, I'd hate to be a Jerry."

There was only the captain's boat now to be found. More days of fruitless searching by Sunderlands, Catalinas and Fortresses. At last Warrant Officer Gamble, piloting a Fortress, sighted a boat and by signal discovered that it was the captain's boat and all were alive and well. He had flown a thousand miles before spotting the boat, but he calculated his position and gave it so accurately that another Fortress was able to rendezvous with him and continue the watch over the open boat. From that moment until a destroyer was brought to the scene, a constant watch was maintained and food, water and medical supplies dropped by a shuttle service of aircraft.

"Luckily for us," said the captain, "the Atlantic was in one of its kinder moods, and though we smashed our mast and had to improvise one with two oars, we made fairly good progress. No aircraft came near enough to us to signal until the seventh day. Then we were seen but lost again in the darkness. It was four more days before we were seen again. We cupped our hands to signify we were thirsty and from the sky cascaded food, drink, cigarettes and medical supplies."

"That night it was like dining in the Waldorf. Cheered by the many notes written by the pilots above, we fed in splendid style. For cocktails we had orange juice, food concentrates for the meat course, chocolate for the sweet, and we washed it down with water that tasted like wine. For soft lights and sweet music we had the comforting drone of the aircraft above us and the half-hourly flares. We toasted the R.A.F. again and again, and one American whose birthday it was declared there would never be a greater moment for him than the sight of the Fortress guiding the rescue ship towards them."

The navigation of the captain had brought his little boat to within 150 miles of the Irish coast.

Note to Editors:- Photographs available from B.I.P.P.A.