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NIGHT AND DAY BATTLE WITH SEA

When a Coastal Command Catalina was recently forced to alight on the Atlantic the crew, after the ordeal of a night and day battle against rough seas, sea-sickness, and engine trouble, eventually succeeded in flying their aircraft back to its base at Gibraltar.

The captain of the flying-boat was F/Lt. D.A. Briggs, D.F.C., the Coastal Command pilot whose sighting of the German battleship, Bismarck in the Atlantic two years ago, led to her destruction by the British Navy.

For many hours after they alighted on the sea the Catalina crew struggled to preserve their aircraft from the force of the high seas running at the time, while the fitter repaired the engines, seasickness added to the difficulties and the crew prepared themselves to abandon the aircraft instantly as there was constant danger of its sinking.

Despite the high seas, a take-off was finally achieved without mishap, although the aircraft bounced three times on the crests of the waves.

The Catalina was escorting a convoy in the Atlantic and while flying at night at only 800 feet, both engines suddenly stopped. By quick action, the fitter restarted the engines after the aircraft had lost height to 500 feet, but a few seconds later the engines cut again and the captain found that a forced landing on the rough sea had become inevitable.

Hastily transferring to the 1st pilot's seat, the captain obtained wind direction from the navigator, turned on the landing lights, lowered the floats, and succeeded in carrying out a stall landing on the waves.

While the Catalina was losing height the wireless operator sent out an S.O.S. and when the aircraft alighted distress signals were fired. One member of the crew scrambled on to the mainplane and flashed an S.O.S. on an Aldis lamp, but failed to attract the attention of the convoy.

"We kept the air power unit running," said the captain, "to enable us to use the wireless and to pump out the bilges, which were making water. The fumes from the air power unit, combined with the movements of the sea, made most of the crew ill.

"Meanwhile, the floats were being subjected to a severe buffeting from the waves and it looked as if we might have to abandon the aircraft. All precautions were taken in case that happened. The dinghies were inflated ready for launching and the rations were divided up.

"The wireless operator was maintaining contact with Coastal Command bases in Britain and Gibraltar and a report amplifying the S.O.S. was sent. The air power unit could not be kept running continually because of overheating, so arrangements were made to listen out every half hour.

"Daylight came - and with it the waves grew higher. By this time some of crew were hors de combat. Despite their sickness, however, the greater part of the crew kept going, as there was a fair amount of work to be done. The air power unit had to be kept serviceable and the wireless operator had to be constantly on watch.

/"During the morning

"During the morning the fitter, at intervals between being sick, sought to find the cause of the engine failure. The trouble was at last discovered and after a struggle to restart the air power unit the dinghies were brought in still inflated, and the engines were started.

"The waves were now even higher and it appeared too rough for a take-off. However, I taxied slowly into the wind while the engines were thoroughly run-up and continued taxi-ing, awaiting a chance to take off. The crew were warned for a take-off at any moment if a calm patch of sea should appear.

"By noon the sea was still increasing, and as no sign of help was evident I opened up to full throttle. The aircraft gathered speed. Three times we were flung off the sea by the waves before we finally remained airborne. We then set course for base, where we arrived safely."