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Air Ministry News Service

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R.A.F. PINNACE IN 1,000-MILES RESCUE ATTEMPT

Forging their way for nearly one thousand miles in a stormy sea, eleven men in a Royal Air Force sixty-foot pinnace, made one of the most hazardous Air/Sea Rescue attempts yet known in an effort to save the crews of the Coastal Command Flying Fortress and the United States Navy Catalina, recently adrift in the North Atlantic after the Fortress had sunk a U-boat.

As already reported, the Fortress itself crashed into the sea and sank in 90 seconds. The aircraft's crew of eight took to a dinghy and four days later were picked up by a Coastal Command Catalina.

The U.S. Amphibian Catalina had flown to their rescue from Iceland on the day the U-boat was sunk, but was struck by a huge wave when it alighted near them and soon disappeared in the sea. The American crew of nine clambered into two dinghies, but only one of the men survived.

Part of the voyage of the pinnace was made across a minefield, and during the outward trip most of the crew were almost completely overcome by sea-sickness. They carried on with their duties, however, as the small craft ploughed through the high seas.

Altogether they travelled 942 miles, in a sailing time of 82 hours, 18 minutes, and an unceasing watch had to be kept by navigators, pilots and engineers in their search for the dinghies far out in the Atlantic.

Answering a sudden call, the Pinnace's crew set out one night at 2 a.m. from a northern base, heading into the aftermath of an Atlantic gale.

Waves lashed the small craft. The master, P/O. G.L.P. Hewitt, of Leigh, Worcester, and the C.O. of the Air/Sea Rescue unit, F/Lt. H.G.L. Roberts, from Ceylon, maintained a constant watch, neither of them eating or sleeping for the first 26 hours, as their combined efforts were needed to keep the Pinnace on her course.

When a little over half the outward journey was completed they learned that the crew of the Fortress had been rescued by the Coastal Command Catalina. But there were still the Americans to be found, for they had been sighted and their position pin-pointed by a patrolling aircraft. So the Pinnace continued on her course.

During the second night the sea was calmer, but the weather squally, with visibility only one to two miles. As the Pinnace neared the position of the Americans, preparations were made to take aboard the survivors, bunks being made up and hot drinks prepared. Then, at 5.5 a.m., came a message, intercepted from a patrolling R.A.F. Catalina, reporting that an American Naval escort vessel had picked up the sole survivor from the wrecked U.S. Catalina, taking him to Iceland. His dinghy was then only twenty-three miles from the Pinnace.

The master swung the wheel over - and headed for home, hundreds of miles away.

"It's all part of the job", was the comment of F/Lt. Roberts, back at his base.

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