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CRAWLED ALONG SPITFIRE FUSELAGE TO ESCAPE FLAMES

Crawling along the fuselage of a Spitfire to escape the flames which enveloped the cockpit, a sergeant pilot of Fighter Command was jerked to safety by his parachute within a few feet of the sea.

A second later, his aircraft crashed into the Channel, but within five minutes the sergeant was safely aboard a rescue-boat speeding to the shore and to hospital.

That was on Monday, and all that the Air Ministry was able to announce was that a fighter was lost but the pilot was safe.

Today, the sergeant, now out of danger, and with only a few cuts and bruises to show for his adventure, has told the story behind that communique.

He was on patrol with a companion over the Channel when four F.W.190s were sighted at 2,000 feet off Dover.

The first the sergeant knew of their presence was a warning from his companion over the radio telephone. As he turned the three leading German fighters swung into line abreast, and attacked him head-on, firing from about 300 yards' range.

But the sergeant did not take evasive action. He kept straight on at the enemy, flying into their fire and returning it with his own. His plane was hit several times in the engine. It caught fire and dived towards the sea.

"I decided that it was now time for me to get out," said the sergeant. "I released my straps and stood up in the cockpit. Then I pulled my rip-cord, hoping that my parachute would drag me out. It opened but did not inflate. By now the cockpit was in flames, so I turned round and climbed out, crawling along the fuselage towards the tail".

As he hung there the parachute inflated and jerked him clear just before the Spitfire plunged into the sea. He believes that he went 30 feet below the waves before he broke surface and struggled free of his parachute. His "Mac West" kept him afloat until the rescue craft arrived. Meanwhile, his companion had chased the Focke Wulf back to France. The raid had been smashed.

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