

From File Air23/1953, PRO, Kew

This transcript is from a publication called IOGROPS, Vol 1, No.1. It describes the ditching of FL911 from 160 Squadron.

Ditching of a Liberator

At 1710 hours on the 6th May, 1944, a Liberator was engaged in a depth charge dropping exercise 30 miles west of Puttalam. The weather was good and sea moderate. After dropping a smoke float as a target, the aircraft turned and ran in at 50 feet. Two depth charges were released and almost immediately afterwards two explosions were heard by the pilot. The nose of the aircraft was flung violently, upwards and the combined efforts of both first and second pilots, were required to right the aircraft. The captain shouted to the wireless operator, who had been flung against the back of the second pilot's seat by the explosion, and he managed to switch on his transmitter and send "S.O.S." followed by a long dash. This signal, in a corrupt form, was picked up by R.A.F. Station, Ratmalana, which notified N.A.O.R. of the bearing, but were unable to confirm that the signal was an "S.O.S."

The pilot of the aircraft found that he could maintain a straight course by the use of full power on his port engines and reduced power on the starboard engines. Full starboard rudder was required to do this as elevator and rudder trimmers were inoperative. Height was gradually being lost and the pilot had no option but to ditch the aircraft. It was not possible to give ditching orders as the captain who had both hands on the controls, could not use the hand microphone. There were two impacts, the first one throwing the pilot (who was not strapped in) against the instrument panel. The second impact, which was not so violent as the first, appears to have rendered the pilot momentarily unconscious, as he next remembers being just below the surface of the water. He scrambled out through the broken cockpit roof and swam to the mainplane. The forward portion of the aircraft, which had broken away at the trailing edge of the mainplane, had come to rest in an attitude where the mainplane was almost vertical. There were no signs of the rear portion of the fuselage.

The wireless operator, who must also have been momentarily rendered unconscious, remembers nothing of his efforts to get out of the aircraft—he was, however, seen by the pilot to be standing on the mainplane with another member of the crew. One of the passengers, of whom there were four, was also clinging to the wing tip of the mainplane. The pilot observed dinghies floating in the water about fifty yards away, and asked if any of the others could swim to them. They replied that the distance was more than they could manage. He, therefore, swam over to the dinghies only to find that they were badly torn, presumably having caught on the jagged edges of the fuselage on being released from their stowages.

Meanwhile, the wireless operator had slipped into the water (or the mainplane had sunk beneath him) and found one of the other survivors swimming beside him. The wireless operator then got hold of a parachute bag from which he extracted the Mae West it contained. This he put on and the other survivor asked if he could find a Mae West for him. While swimming around looking for another parachute bag, the wireless operator found another man in a Mae West, obviously unconscious. He tied the tapes of the Mae West, which were undone, as best as he could and then swam back to where he had last seen the man who had asked him to find a Mae West, but there was no sign of him. The W/O now found himself alone in the water—A 'K' type dinghy which he found was torn and unusable. Shortly afterwards the pilot swam up to him, supporting himself by hanging on to a parachute bag. The pilot had not realised until now that it contained a Mae West and the two of them commenced to swim in what they thought to be the direction of the coast. The wireless operator suffered from burns on his chest and leg and was at times compelled to hold on to the pilot for support. Nevertheless they kept on swimming, being afraid of becoming cramped. They found the water quite cold after a few hours immersion. Small fish occasionally attempted to nibble the wounds of the wireless operator but he found little difficulty in keeping them at bay.

About 2200 hours the sound of engines was heard and the steaming lights of a launch came into view but passed out of sight to the westward, heading north. Just after dawn on the 7th May, an aircraft was seen to the westward also heading north. As there were no aids on the Mae Wests, such as floating torches,

fluorescine, whistles or distress Signals, no attempt could be made to attract attention although the two survivors, as is usual, shouted loudly when both launch and aircraft came in sight.

High speed launches had been sent out from Colombo, one at 1900 hours and the other at 2225 hours on the night of the 6th May to search the area indicated by radar plot and the bearing of the distress signal. A pinnacle had accompanied the second high speed launch. These marine craft searched all through the night and it was probably the pinnacle, manned by a volunteer crew, whose lights were seen by the survivors.

A Walrus, 1 Harvard and 2 Wildcat aircraft searched an area up to 20 miles west of Puttalam before darkness set in on the 6th May, but saw no signs of wreckage or survivors.

On the morning of the 7th May, the Air Sea Rescue Walrus at Ratmalana was ordered to the search area,, and arrived there about 0430 hours. Two flights, each of six Beaufort aircraft stationed at Ratmalana,. were ordered to search an area 3600 square miles in extent around the search position, on the morning of the 7th May., Thunderstorms interfered with the Beaufort search and, at times, lowered the visibility -to such an extent that visual contact was difficult to maintain. The Fleet Air Arm Walrus from Puttalam carried out combined searches throughout the day with the A.S.R. Walrus, both aircraft returning to Puttalam for refuelling.

At about 1120 hours on the 7th May, the Pinnacle, which was searching the southern portion of the area, found an " H " type dinghy, which was picked up. The C.O.2 bottle of this dinghy was not discharged and this would appear to indicate that the dinghy was released on impact and the retaining cord severed before it could operate the cylinder. The pinnacle then combed this area thoroughly, finding several pieces of wreckage. It was not until an hour later that two survivors wearing Mae Wests were sighted; one of them frantically waving his underpants. A member of the pinnacle crew swam to the pilot and helped him to the side of the boat. Both survivors on board, the search continued for another hour. The two appeared to have suffered little from thirst or exposure and, in fact, the W/Op asserted that he could have kept going for several hours longer. The master of the pinnacle nevertheless became alarmed at the feeble state of the wireless operators' pulse, and decided to return to base.

The high speed launch whose fuel was running low, returned at the same time and a nursing orderly was transferred from this launch to the pinnacle in order to attend to .the two survivors. Base was reached at 1600 hours on the 7th May and the survivors were soon in medical hands. .

A relief high speed launch had been. despatched to the area to continue the search in co-operation with the two Walrus aircraft, and she continued this search all through the night of the 7th May. On the 8th May searches were continued by the Walrus aircraft, but no further survivors were picked up or wreckage sighted. The search was called off at last light on the 8th May, 1944.

Comments

As far as can be ascertained, .none of the crew or passengers of the Liberator were wearing Mae Wests at the time of the accident. Had the four survivors of the ditching who were not picked. up, been wearing Mae Wests, they would have stood a better chance of being rescued.

No additional aids were attached to the Mae Wests. These, if carried, would have made the task of the searching surface crafts more easy, for the light from a floating torch signal might have been seen by the pinnacle.

If search aircraft had been laid on when the " S.O.S." was received, an hour's daylight would still have remained and the aircraft could have searched into the night with a good chance of spotting visual signals. It was not known that no additional aids were carried on the Mae Wests.

Fluorescine would have assisted in the location of the survivors. Men in Mae Wests alone are very small targets for which to search.