

1944 ?

We huddled together in the rocking dinghy; seven very scared, very wet, & very much at sea, airmen. We watched, with a sense of loss, the large ^{starboard} wing of good old A-Able sinking lower in the water until it disappeared from sight. She had carried us safely through our last 15 ops., & now she was going down into the depths of the North Sea, leaving us on the surface, crouched miserably in our all too small dinghy, still only half realising our predicament. It had all happened very quickly, one minute we were happily venturing our way homewards, 5000 ft, 175 on the clock & the contented feeling of another job successfully completed. It had been a tough one, with four ^{separate} attacks by a persistent rocket firing night fighter,

& we had been very very thankful when we crossed, safely as we thought, the Dutch coast, & headed out to sea.

Suddenly, for no accountable reason, ~~the~~ A-able swung round in a semi circle & headed East again. "Whats wrong skipper" - why - where - ? Suddenly the Flight Engineers voice quieted the babble on the inter comm. "Starboard ~~of~~ outers & inner packed up Skipper." "See whats wrong Geoff." "Fuel tanks empty skipper, we must have been holed after all." -

A few minutes elapsed while the engines struggled with cross feeding from the remaining tanks. Another engine cut & we were left facing the prospect of a wet night. The skipper's voice came quietly to us over the intercomm.

"Prepare to ditch". A few minutes while everyone collected their remaining wds about them & ^{made} their respective preparations.

3

I hastily fixed our position & passed it in message form to the W/ops, who had immediately commenced distress signals.

(I remember that taken time to convert the G feet to latitude coordinates & Fred returned it to us)

All too soon came the dreaded order "Ditching stations!"

We took off our harnesses, inflated our Mae Wests & scrambled back to our crash positions, & if we prayed mentally we did it unawares. "Escape hatches off" - "1000 feet", "500 feet", "200 feet", "prepare for impact" - we braced ourselves for the smack! Crash - other oblivion!

When I scrambled to my feet, the water was up to my knees, & Snow the Bomb aimed was thrusting the dingy packs into my hands. Automatically in the pitch blackness - I stumbled to the upper escape hatch & thrust them up to the awaiting hands. Dingy & radio followed then I scrambled

4

up ethrough the hatch, I breathed a
 sigh of relief as I saw the skipper
 crawling along the top of the cabin -
 good old Nick - were we all out
 then? A quick scramble - to the
 wing already awash, - & then into
 the dinghy - steadying it to help
 Nick aboard - (she was already
 floating) - "all present?" Jack?
 Geoff? Johnny? - all correct! -

"O.K. - cut the line" - momentary panic
 as A-Able heeled over on her nose,
 & stood threateningly above us - a huge
 mass in the darkness ~~there~~.

"Paddle, - Paddle for Gods sake!"

It seemed hours until we ^{worked} pushed
 our way ~~along~~ ^{by pushing on} with the wing protruding
 off from the ^{clear} wing tip & then we were
 left, watching her go down - our
 trusty old kite - damn Jerry anyway.

Slowly, we ~~quieted~~ quieted ourselves & tried to take stock. Thank God we were all out anyway - "Hullo - Nick's face is a mess", dimly we saw that he was bleeding freely and was a bit dazed. So Laneau searched for the dinghy pack & began to fumble for the first aid kit. Then we realised there was more water in the dinghy than we would like. Another search began for the bales. - Too slow - "bale with something" - "Try your flying boot someone" - "no - no use" - "Here use this" - Snow - good old dependable Snow - pulled off his boot & we started to bale. Surely we were making water - "Hell - there's a leak here" - where's the stoppers? Another search to locate them - then we had them & screwed on into the hole in the bottom. "Keep on baling" Gradually we got the bottom a little drier.

Sick - feeling sick - lean over the side & try to vomit, but its nose - just a squeamish rotten feeling that made us all helpless for a while.

Eventually we got organized - found everything, bandaged Nicks head, found the bales & used it as a ^{support} continually from then on.

(There was a heavy swell on, but the dinghy rode beautifully & that was one worry less. The occasional wave broke over us & soaked us all to the skin & soon we were cold & miserable & feeling very sorry for ourselves. It was an effort to do anything.)

(1973 cont'd)

Fred - the W/P organized us on rigging the actual mast for the portable radar transmitter - unfortunately the top part of the mast got broken somehow & it was non-effective as we found out afterwards but we kept the handle turning hopefully in speech from then on. Tho the signals were never picked up. ^{at least} at any time.

Toward dawn we heard the sound of a/c engines. They approached from the west & fled away toward the lightning eastern sky, well to the Sth & we sank into our apathetic stupor again - Conversation was sporadic - from time to time one or other of us passed a remark baled for a spell or cranked the radio handle. Dawn came slowly, as the sky was overcast, but eventually it was light & we were able to see around us. Not that there was much to see - several yards of mullen grey sea when we were down in the trough of its waves, & a wider view when we rode a crest. -

Again we were roused by the sound of engines & saw well to the south low, below cloud, two P.R. aircraft speeding eastward - ironical we thought they were probably going to photograph whatever damage we had done the previous night. It brought renewed hope that someone would spot us soon. Again we cranked & baled, baled & cranked.

Time dragged by until yet again we heard engines & eagerly scanned the sky. This time we spotted a single heavier a/c. It watched it drone across the horizon below cloud, well to the Sth again. Miserably we watched it turn away Sth, & disappear from view. Later we heard it again approaching from the Sth & I fumbled for the very pistol which I had tucked inside

my battle dress. We watched as it came nearer then saw it turn ^{east} again still some distance south of us & I raised the pistol & fired off a cartridge. The a/c carried on & we sank back into our seats. They hadn't seen it! Then as we watched it turn yet again southwards it dawned on us that it was an air sea rescue kite doing a square search; & immediately our hopes were raised. Perhaps our signals had been picked up & they were looking for us. I reloaded the pistol and waited expectantly. Later it reappeared headed north and I waited until it appeared near enough before raising the pistol & firing off another cartridge. Again the a/c swung off to the East & we sank back, hopes again dashed. This time it seemed only seconds before it reappeared heading so it seemed straight for us. Had they spotted the very place? I reloaded hastily & fired again and this time there was no mistake they had spotted us. Scrambling up we cheered & waved as the a/c banked & flew over us. Then came the blink of an aldis lamp & they signalled that they would drop a lifeboat dinghy & supply packs to us. We watched as the aircraft dropped a smoke

float to gauge wind speed & direction & waited while they got positioned, opened bomb door for the drop, & flew steadily across & we saw the packs descend from the open bomb bay & land with a series of splashes ^{some distance} to one side. Hastily we drew in the sea anchor we had out, & paddled towards the large dinghy which had inflated on impact, & climbed aboard. Unfortunately the line had snapped between the first second packs and the packs drifted away beyond our reach, but that didn't bother us much as we were sure we were safe now, & would soon be picked up. It was wonderful the lift in morale, once we felt safe.

The a/c kept station above us & signalled that help was on its way. Some time later it headed away east, then swung round towards us again & soon after we saw the bow waves of a naval launch approaching. When it arrived we were helped aboard, given dry clothing & a large mug of naval rum. Never had a drink been more appreciated, & I remember little else till we docked at Plymouth later, having been in a deep sleep.

The Skipper & I spent a couple of nights in hospital and then were driven to the nearest airfield and flown back to East Kirkby, where the rest of the crew had already arrived. We learned that the base had lost 11 aircraft that night morale was low, so that our arrival had brought a great boost to the station as a whole, & I can well appreciate the hopes raised by our return.

Later we learned that the rescue aircraft had not been looking for us (our signals not having been received at all) but that they were looking for an airborne lifeboat which had been dropped the previous evening to the crew of an American daylight op^{rate}, which had ditched earlier ~~before~~ ~~we~~. So we had been very, very, lucky to have ~~got~~ been rescued so quickly after only some 12 hours afloat in "the drink".