

Patrol Squadron Forty (VP-40) Rescue at Sea

In August of 1960 I was a crewman (2nd Mech) on a Martin Marlin (P5M-1) that participated in the rescue of 58 passengers and crew on a Northwest Orient DC-7 that crash-landed at sea off the eastern side of the Philippine Island of Luzon.

I was in Crew Four and we were just finishing up our 24-hour alert crew duty. It was quite early in the morning when we got a call to launch the alert aircraft. Our initial thought was that the normal patrol was returning for some reason and we were to go in its place. We soon found otherwise!

The alert duty was 24 hours in duration, so the entire enlisted crew had spent the previous night in the barracks. At Sangley Point, this barracks was just a short way from the launching ramp. When we got the word to go we quickly went to our aircraft (QE-4), which was parked, on a spot back a ways from the ramp but in a straight line to the ramp. We quickly moved the aircraft forward to the head of the ramp and in a very short time the aircraft was rigged for going over the side. I seem to remember loading extra JATO units (Jet Assisted Take Off) but I can't be sure on that. The pilots arrived and we then learned more of our mission.

The crew on that day was as follows:

Crew Four

LTJG P. R. Hite PPC

LTJG R. H. Cipperly PP2P

ENS D. T. Graff PP3P/NAV

Wayne R. Gowen, AD2 Plane Captain

Allan "Putt Putt" Prevet, AD3 Second Mech

Tom Trufant, AT3 First Radio

? Harvey, AT3 Radar

Donald Whitlow, AE2 Flight Electrician

D. Kaiser AM3 Crew Metalsmith

? Kimbrough, AO3 Ordnanceman

There may have been a second radio named Clark, AT2 aboard, but I'm not sure on that.

We had done a through preflight when we assumed the alert duty and that included a engine run up and check of all systems. QE-4 was our crew airplane and we knew her inside and out. I think everyone was confident as we went over the side that she would do well for us. After some quick checks on the water we were airborne and on our way in a very short time. The pilots had a fairly good estimate of the area of the crash and ENS Graff quickly set up a search pattern that was coordinated with the Coast Guard UF-1 Albatross from the Detachment at Sangley. All hands not on an active station were manning hatches as lookouts. I was on a headset in the after-station at the starboard door, which I had opened. We hadn't been up long when the Albatross crew radioed that they had rafts in sight. We immediately set a course straight for the location and we were soon overhead. We could see people in three life rafts and we were all tremendously relieved to see that many had survived. Sadly we saw one body floating in the water a fairly good distance from the rafts. We did not know at that time that the body we saw was the only fatality. I personally expected to see more victims.

We were on scene just a short time when the Coast Guard radioed that they were preparing to make an open sea landing. I watched as the Albatross splashed down and I mean that literally! When they hit the water there was a huge splash that completely enveloped the aircraft. Soon it taxied out of this cloud of water as nice as you please. I can't remember if we cheered, but we were sure elated that they were on the water safely.

Then it was our turn! Mr. Hite asked the crew if there were any who thought we shouldn't make an open sea landing. We all said, "Let's go!" Looking back at that I'm sure we would have landed regardless. The Plane Commander asking gave us all of a sense of ownership in the rescue and as a result we were ready for anything. We started preparing the aircraft by securing gear in the after station and rigging the flight station web netting around the electronic equipment (something I had never done up to that day). I think we may have jettisoned fuel as we took off from Sangley with enough fuel to fly a ten-hour patrol. I remember the open sea landing was pretty "solid," but I was party to worse on the "calm" sea-lanes in Manila Bay. LTJG Hite was a very gifted pilot!

