

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" Prevette, 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!

Our first effort on the water was to pick up the body that was floating a distance from the life rafts. We slowly approached what we now knew to be a woman. She still had on a life vest and I seem to remember it was inflated. Don Whitlow was manning the boat hook at the bow hatch along with several of us who were providing assistance (and advice). There were some fairly good wave actions and it took a bit of maneuvering, but Don finally managed to snag the vest she was wearing. We were all concerned with showing her proper respect, so we carefully hauled her aboard and laid her on the deck in the galley compartment. The lady we recovered had an injury to her head, but we heard that her demise was due to a heart attack or some such thing. Instead of keeping her in the raft they elected to cast her loose.

We then turned our attention to the rafts. The Coast Guard had already loaded some people on their aircraft, but there were far too many survivors to fit on an UF-1. As we approached the rafts, one man stood up and with a line of some sort, he did a pantomime of someone fishing. This was our introduction to the Captain of the Northwest flight crew! The pilots positioned the aircraft and got the rafts along the port side. We fastened the rafts to the aircraft and we then started bringing people aboard. I was surprised at the number of elderly ladies in the raft. They later told us that they were with a group of schoolteachers who were going on a round-the-world trip. Most were terribly seasick but even then, we got a lot of smiles and thanks from these brave souls. There were a few who seemed to be in shock and we kept a close watch on those people.

I should mention at this time the actions of the head stewardess. She was a petite, young woman from Thailand. She was all over the airplane, reassuring and comforting, even though she was every bit as sick as those she was attending to. Later I read of her being officially recognized for her bravery and professionalism throughout the entire ordeal. Seeing her in action that day on Four Boat really impressed me.

With everyone onboard we cast off the life rafts and they quickly drifted off. I think we punctured them with our survival knives, but I can't be sure about that. By this time U. S. Air Force SA-16s (UF-1) from Clark Air Base were flying overhead. We were quite surprised and upset when they radioed that they wouldn't land with the sea state as it was. It sure didn't bother the Coast Guard who flew the same type aircraft! Because of the Air Force decision we set out to water taxi approximately 20 miles to some islands where the Air Force decided they could land. Before we left the area the Coast Guard made an attempt to take off but due to fouled spark plugs they had to abort the take off. This was after they had already fired their JATO (a very noisy operation), so the survivors on that airplane got another "treat" I'm sure they could have done without!

While we were taxiing, we tried to make the people as comfortable as possible, but as those who served on Marlins know, Martin didn't have comfort front and center when they designed the P-5M. There was one old guy who seemed ready to have a heart attack for lack of a cigar. AO3 Kimbrough came up with one and we put this guy back in the tail section next to a hatch and "lit him up." I'll tell you, he was one happy camper! The Northwest Captain was moving around a lot trying to cheer people up. When we picked him up from the raft all he was wearing was a shirt and boxer shorts. Well the boxer shorts were pretty loose fitting as well as being wet, so you can imagine the show he put on. He wasn't the least bit fazed, however. We looked around and soon we came up with a flight suit that provided him a little more cover. The old ladies had reached the point where all they could do was dry retch. As sick as they were when we asked, "How are you doing?" they would reply, "Fine!"

We finally reached the shelter of the Polillo Islands. By this time VP-40s Skipper, CDR Cockcroft, had arrived on scene and had taken over the rescue effort. Another plane from VP-40 had laid down smoke flares to mark a sea-lane and to show the wind component. After all these things were done, our brave comrades on the SA-16s finally came to rest on the water. There were too many people on Four Boat to take off with, so we started transferring people to other airplanes. Additionally, we had to get the people off the Coast Guard UF-1, as they had to do maintenance on the engines. We used life rafts to execute the transfers, and it was during this time that I became separated from my crew on Four Boat. I was manning a MK7 (?) life raft with someone else, who I can't remember. It may have been a Coast Guard guy. Anyway, towards the end of the

transfer we had just put some people on an AF SA-16. We started paddling back to Four Boat but paddle as furiously as we could; we actually went in the opposite direction as the wind was now blowing pretty hard. There was a P5M on the water taxiing and they saw our dilemma. I can't remember the aircraft number but the Plane Captain was AD2 Al Silva and I remember him with a headset on standing at the port entrance hatch. I guess they figured if they secured one engine (port) they could taxi close to us and throw us a line and then they would tow us back to the vicinity of Four Boat. This is what they did and as they came by Al threw me a line, which I caught on the first try. For the briefest of time, I thought we were on our way back to Four Boat. The line came taut and instead of the raft skipping over the waves, the nose of the raft dove into the ocean and by the time I could let go my partner and I were almost flipped into the sea.

It was at this time that I think there was some radio traffic telling Four Boat to head for home and the remaining Pig Boat would somehow get my raft mate and me. I watched with a great deal of pride as Four Boat made its takeoff run and lifted off, heading back to Sangley. The airplane tasked to pick us up then went down wind from us (a considerable way) and secured both of their engines and deployed their sea anchor. From this point it was easy as all we had to do was follow the wind and steer towards the airplane. Al helped us aboard, and I remember him giving us a hearty pat on the back.

The flight back to Sangley was uneventful and as I sat in the after-station I contemplated what we had accomplished in the short time since we were asleep in the barracks at Sangley. On our arrival, we were unceremoniously pulled up on the ramp as all the people had already been taken away.

Crew Four was given the rest of the day off. The next day we mustered at the aircraft, which had been secured from the following day. There was a pretty strong smell in the aircraft, which we determined was from the body fluids that had leaked into the galley bilge from the lady we had picked up. Knowing that clean up of this sort was a job for Navy Corpsman, we called sickbay and told them we needed their assistance. In a short time, a jeep showed up with two corpsmen in white jump suits. They went into the aircraft and quickly came out. Their comments were, "No problem, Just clean it up with soap and water." They got back in their jeep and left!

I left VP-40 in April of 1961 and was discharged at Treasure Island, CA. After 90 days in the civilian world I reenlisted and my first choice for duty was patrol seaplanes. That was not to be; instead I went to AEWBARRONPAC in Hawaii. I flew as flight engineer on Super Constellations there and later I went to VQ-1 in Japan where I spent a total of eight years in two tours. My last tour of duty was with VXE-6 as Maintenance MCPO. In that capacity I was on four deployments to the Antarctic. In June of 1979 I retired as AFCM with 21 years total service.

I recall a few things about some of the members of Crew Four. I saw LCDR Hite in Quonset Point, RI in the late 60s. He was at the Naval War College and he came to Quonset to fly our proficiency aircraft. LTJG Cipperly made Plane Commander in VP-40 and I flew with him as Plane Captain of Crew Six. ENS Graff also made Plane Commander before I left VP-40 and I had a few flights with him. I saw CDR Graff in Moffett Field in the early 70s where he was CO of a squadron. AD2 Wayne Gowan and I crossed paths once in awhile. I learned of his passing a few years ago. AE2 Whitlow was a career sailor and I saw him at Cubi Point in 1971. He was a Chief Electrician with a squadron in one of the carriers. I think AM3 Kaiser and AO3 Kimbrough both got out of the Navy and went back to the Midwest. In writing this I felt bad that I couldn't remember their first names. In the crew Kimbrough was "Kimbroogie" and Kaiser was known as "Shaky". I believe AT2 Tom Trufant stayed in the Navy. I have no knowledge of Harvey or AT2 Clark.

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