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352ND BOMBARDMENT SQUADRON (H) AAF  
Office of the Operations Officer

3 April 1944

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF EMERGENCY DITCHING AT SEA ON 26 MARCH 1944

Due to bad weather we turned from our primary course to a secondary target which I assumed to be Udine. Our altitude was approximately 22,000 feet. I noticed flak puffs at about two o'clock in line with our lead squadron. Our position was low left. Lead squadron started evasive action and in a turn to the right I clearly heard the flak hit our ship. The No. 1, 2 and 4 engines were hit. The left wing at its outer tip had four or five holes the size of a fist. The tail had been hit and there was a burst of smoke in the radio room. I feathered No. 1 engine, we could not feather No. 4 engine as oil pressure was down to zero. Oil was spread over the entire nacelle of No. 4 engine and it was smoking slightly. I glanced out at No. 2 and noticed a hole on the bottom side of the engine. However the No. 2 engine gauges indicated that there was nothing wrong so I was of the opinion that I still had two good engines. While all this was going on I gave the order to prepare to abandon ship which was followed by the order to the bombardier to get rid of the bombs. This was complied with and by this time we had lost approximately 5,000 feet. I had the ship in a gradual turn to the left headed out to sea and when I determined we had two good engines decided to make it back for friendly territory. At this point I gave the order to prepare for ditching and the men began to clear the ship. Our altitude was not less than 15,000 feet at that point however we were now out to sea and I decided to lower my altitude to 5,000 feet flying an approximate course of 165° due to the danger of No. 4 engine catching on fire. We were able to hold altitude well and some miles north of Ancona I noticed that the oil pressure on No. 2 had dropped to approximately 47 lbs. I asked the co-pilot about it and he said it had been there for some time. We passed the point at Ancona out at sea because of previously briefing of flak positions at that point. I intended to try to make it for the next outlet which was about fifteen minutes flying time and in friendly territory. Approximately five minutes south of Ancona No. 2 gave out with a burst of smoke. I decided to get down on the sea and sent the Navigator and Upper Turret man back to get the crew ready for landing at sea. I could not contact the radio operator. The co-pilot and I fastened our safety belts and I proceeded to land the plane. Before landing I told the co-pilot to feather No. 3 and to call out the air speed. The last speed I heard him call was 120 MPH. But we did not hit at that moment. A few seconds later the tail hit, still holding the wheel back the entire plane hit the water. The sensation I felt was of a strong pressure pulling me forward, there was no jar or sudden shock on landing. It seemed that before I unfastened my safety belt the co-pilot was outside already. I was out of the plane in about thirty seconds. At this time the nose was down in almost a thirty degree angle. When I was out of the plane I attempted to go back but the life raft slipped forward and I was soaked already. I grabbed the life raft pulling it in front of the nose. It seemed that the heavy flying clothing was going to pull me down. I struggled with the raft to keep it away from the slight suction pulling toward the nose. The plane was now at about a sixty degree angle broken behind the radio room.



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A glance shows me the co-pilot off to the right of the plane who seemed to be watching, probably shocked. Also heard calls for help, I answered and told them to stand by a minute. The calls continued. The lower turret man and navigator were now in front also and I told them to help me keep the raft away from the plane. They did. In about five minutes time the plane disappeared with the radio hatch last to go under. We were exhausted now and I had the strength to get on the raft first and then helped the lower turret man and navigator to get on. After we boarded the rafts we looked about for the co-pilot and called out but he had disappeared, we began to get at the life raft equipment among which were an air pump, patches and plugs for the raft, some emergency rations, three oars, a tarpulin and a few other items. But among which there was no water rations.

We could see land about twenty miles off shore and we attempted to row towards it but the sea was so rough that it appeared no headway was made. So we rigged up a sail as best we could. At about two thirty, a long P-38 passed to the shore side of us, we fired a flare but evidently he did not see us. After darkness came we decided to send up the flares at an interval of two minutes. When we were brought to shore the Air-Sea Rescue station reported seeing our flares and had gone in search of us but had not gone far enough north. We passed the rest of the night huddled in our life raft under the tarpulin. Every half hour or so we had to get our bail out bucket and bail out water, gotten in by the high waves. At night it seemed that the waves were very high but none broke on us to any great extent. At approximately 7:30 in the morning we saw what appeared to be a Beaufighter heading south, he was low and near shore. We fired a flare and about five miles south of us he flew directly at us. The plane was an ME 210, he made three circles around us and then continued on his easterly course. A short time later there were eight ME 210's racing northward close to shore followed by this lone ME 210 east of us. Almost fifteen minutes later fourteen P-38's came racing northward and went about 20 miles north of our position. They had not as yet seen us. They turned south and all had passed us but one who was headed directly at us about 100 feet above the water. He saw us and I believe called the others. Seven of them circled low and seven went up to about 10,000 feet. Soon the planes at altitude left and the next time I saw them they were escorting the English Walrus Seaplane along with three Spitfires. The Walrus landed in the face of a still rough sea, he was unable to take off and had to taxi back to Ortona. From the time the P-38's spotted us to the time we were picked up an hour had elapsed. We were picked up at 0825 AM.

Although the men had about an hour to prepare for ditching, their positions in the radio room were such that they were not braced well enough for the landing of the plane in a rough sea. One man not braced in the radio room could take two or three others along with him. In addition the right life raft did not come out. I'm of the opinion that if the plane landed as well as it did in such a rough sea the B-17 can safely make an emergency landing at sea with all men safely getting out if proper ditching procedure is followed. A calm head at such a time is of the utmost importance. Our appreciation of the P-38's that circled us and the English pilot who landed in the rough sea to pick us up cannot be expressed in words. Their cooperation was wonderful.

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From my past experience I can advise others to do the following things.

1. To practice on definite and clear method of ditching.
2. To make the utmost effort to pull both life rafts loose before leaving the plane. In a sea of any turbulence whatsoever I don't believe the Mac West will be of much help after a period of time.
3. After climbing out of the plane I'd suggest that the man if possible stay on top of the plane or wing for a few moments. This way they can clear their minds that if any help can be offered to any men in the radio hatch, they would be able to aid them.
4. The calmness and leadership of the Navigator and Bombardier will greatly increase the chances of a successful ditching.

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