



ARMED FORCES: And Then There Were 13

It began as a routine rescue operation. Within 24 hours after an Air Force C-47 disappeared over Greenland's bleak south coast, search planes spotted the crash, 100 miles north of the Air Force base at Blue West One. Supplies were parachuted down and a B-17 was ordered in from Goose Bay, Labrador to pick up the seven uninjured crewmen. But from then on Greenland's treacherous flying weather began sucking in rescue aircraft and men like a snow-whipped whirlpool.

In terse, cautious messages, the Air Force pumped out the bare details of one failure after another. Battling 100-m.p.h. winds and 40-below-zero temperatures, the rescuers could not even get started for three days. When they did, the B-17 swerved out of control as it swooped down on to the rutted icecap, nosed over into a snowbank and marooned its two crewmen with the others.

Four days later a C-54 tried again, this time releasing a glider and two-man crew for an air-ground pickup. Twice the tow plane managed to snare the glider on a pickup line. Both times the glider broke through the icy crust and bogged down in the snow; the pickup line snapped. The glider's crew joined the nine stranded men on the icecap. More food and clothing were dropped, along with heaters, fuel and a collapsible plywood shelter. The shivering airmen burrowed into the snow, rigged a canvas roof overhead as protection against the gale. The days dragged on.

On the third rescue attempt the glider was safely loaded and picked up. It lifted 50 feet into the air before the towline snapped. A week later it, happened again with a new glider. Two more airmen were left stranded. By Christmas Day, the C-47 survivors had been down for 16 days, and the original seven-man group had swollen to 13.

This week, with no rescue yet in sight, the Navy joined the operation, sent the carrier Saipan north from Norfolk with three Piasecki ("Sagging Sausage") helicopters, each capable of carrying eight passengers. The red-faced Air Force ordered up ski-equipped planes and called in famed Arctic flyer Colonel Bernt Balchen, who had commanded the Air Force's first successful glider rescue in Alaska fortnight ago.

* Along with Blue West Eight, a wartime code name for the Air Force's Greenland bases. In the same area, during the war, six P-38s and two B-17s were forced down in one day.