

WWII & Korean War Air Rescue

During World War II, “emergency rescue squadrons” usually referred to specialized air-sea rescue and combat rescue units created to recover downed aircrews. They became especially important as long-range bombing campaigns expanded over oceans and enemy territory.

United States Army Air Forces (USAAF)

The USAAF formed dedicated **Emergency Rescue Squadrons (ERS)** beginning in 1943. Their mission was to:

- locate downed bomber and fighter crews,
- drop survival gear and lifeboats,
- land flying boats on the water when possible,
- coordinate rescue by ships or submarines.

Key units included:

- 1st Emergency Rescue Squadron
- 2nd Emergency Rescue Squadron
- 5th Emergency Rescue Squadron in England
- later Pacific-based squadrons supporting B-29 raids against Japan.

Aircraft commonly used:

- Consolidated PBY Catalina
- Boeing SB-17 Flying Fortress
- Martin PBM Mariner

These aircraft often carried:

- inflatable rafts,
- medical kits,
- smoke markers,
- airborne lifeboats dropped by parachute.

The rescue aircraft were nicknamed “**Dumbo**” missions in the Pacific.

World War II

In the [Pacific Ocean theater](#), the first purposely assigned rescue aircraft, a PBY Catalina, was given the mission of plucking downed airmen from the ocean in January 1943. From January to August, such rescue flights based at [Guadalcanal](#) saved 161 aviators.^[32]

Beginning in November 1943, during the [Gilbert and Marshall Islands campaign](#), American submarines were tasked with the rescue of U.S. Navy and [Marine](#) airmen downed during [aircraft carrier](#) attack operations.^[33] Submarines were often vectored to a rescue site by aircraft providing coordinates, but too many layers of command slowed the cooperation considerably. Long-range naval patrol aircraft were fitted with extra radio equipment to allow direct contact with surface and underwater units. By the end of 1944, some 224 airmen had been rescued by submarine.^[33]



An SB-29 "Super Dumbo", a variant of the [B-29 Superfortress](#), with an air-droppable [EDO A-3 lifeboat](#) rigged underneath

In the last eight months of [World War II](#), Dumbo operations complemented simultaneous [United States Army Air Forces](#) heavy bombing operations against Japanese targets.^[33] On any one large-scale bombing mission carried out by Boeing [B-29 Superfortresses](#), at least three submarines were posted along the air route, and Dumbo aircraft sent to patrol the distant waters, and listen for emergency radio transmissions from distressed aircraft. At the final

bombing mission on August 14, 1945, 9 land-based Dumbos and 21 flying boats covered a surface and sub-surface force of 14 submarines and 5 rescue ships.^[33]

Korean War

Toward the end of World War II, several B-29 bombers on each large-scale bombing mission were emptied of ammunition, filled with rescue supplies and rotated through Super Dumbo patrol duty as their squadron mates lumbered off filled with bombs. Following that conflict, 16 B-29 bombers were converted to full-time air-sea rescue duty and redesignated [SB-29 Super Dumbo](#).^[45] The SB-29 served throughout the [Korean War](#) and into the mid-1950s.^[45] The SB-17 began serving in Korea, but dropped only a few lifeboats to save several lives before being phased out in late 1951—there were enough SB-29 Super Dumbos and [Grumman SA-16A Albatross](#) flying boats to satisfy the need.^[4]

Other air-sea rescue aircraft used in the [Sea of Japan](#) and the [Yellow Sea](#) include the [PB-1G](#) land-based [maritime patrol bomber](#) and the [Sikorsky H-5](#) helicopter, and later the [H-19](#).^[46] Rafts were often dropped which inflated upon impact with the water. Operating in coordination with the U.S. Navy, the USCG painted their air-sea rescue assets white.^[47]

Shortly after the Korean War, some Douglas [C-54 Skymasters](#) were converted to air-sea rescue work and redesignated SC-54; the type quickly replaced all of the remaining Flying Fortresses and Super Fortresses still in service. The SC-54 sometimes carried an airborne lifeboat and could carry more rescue supplies over longer distances.