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AIR RESCUE IN PEACE AND WAR

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The Air Rescue Service is the United States Air Force organization responsible for the search and rescue activities concerning military aircraft in distress at points remote from established air bases. This mission is accomplished by searching to establish a known position, rendering aid by dropping supplies, medical attendants, and returning survivors by the most expeditious means.

The experience of World War II proved the tremendous value derived from rescue operations. Never in the history of military activities has so great a human service been provided for those in distress. Its value has been proven by its continuation in peace-time.

Military aircraft are scheduled daily on flights that cover all air routes of the world. Since these routes must be traversed

along these same routes must go the protection necessary for the recovery of personnel should they be forced down at sea or on rugged terrain. Not all rescues are confined to military personnel, however, and frequently the Air Rescue Service is called on to aid in a civilian emergency.

Consciously or subconsciously everyone is interested in the means by which lives will be saved when an emergency arises. The absence of such aid in emergencies could easily lower the morale of potential distress victims. The American people grow up witnessing the prompt response to emergencies by fire departments, ambulances, police, and Red Cross etc. The absence of these "rescue" organizations would create much public clamor. The Air Rescue Service takes its place with the organizations mentioned. The knowledge that an alert and efficient rescue unit is on duty to meet any emergency is a morale booster to any air crew. As an example a mission of World War II and how the crew faced up to it follows:-

The big awkward Catalina rolled over the bomb-pocked airstrip, rose ponderously and headed out to sea. Jap bombing and strafing had held them to the ground earlier, so the takeoff was a little past dawn, and dangerously late.

The crew of the rescue plane had expected to leave about midnight, arrive at dawn at a point in enemy-held territory where a pilot had been reported shot down, swoop in for a quick sea landing, and be away before the Japs could do anything about it.

This rescue - one of thousands accomplished by Army fliers in the Pacific - was being flown from Mindoro only a few days after

the beach-head there.

The crew flew far out to sea and close to the water to avoid Jap detection. Had an enemy fighter spotted them, they would have swung the cumbersome ship to within a few feet of the water to prevent the Jap from getting under it, and to make a dive hazardous for the fighter.

After three hours the Cat came in cautiously toward the coast of Lingayen Gulf, which was then in Japanese hands. As the big ship circled, the crew opened the blisters and the wind beat their faces as they squinted at each speck on the water. They swept the sea for empty miles.

Then the Cat crept in above the narrow beach, flying under the green hills which perhaps concealed ack-ack and machine guns. At one point the crew saw a group of Filipinos waving excitedly. That could mean anything.

They flew on a bit before returning to investigate and the pilot made note of a cove which might come in handy for a landing, since the open sea was too rough.

The only trouble with the cove was that lying along its inner shore were three barges, and on the barges were Jap soldiers.

The Cat rumbled down the coast and by this time the Filipinos had brought a flyer's life raft from the bushes and were pointing to it and jumping up and down and waving wildly.

The crew wondered why, if the ditched flyer was down there, he didn't show himself. The Cat circled suspiciously and the crew put their heads together. It would be a fine note to risk the plane and their necks in a landing only to learn that the

man they sought was dead or captured. Still - he might be alive. They might as well see it through.

The Cat wheeled toward the cove and the enemy barges. The crew got on their guns.

After a quick strafing, the pilot set the plane down and taxied rapidly out to sea away from the barges and toward the spot where the Filipinos had gathered. Then he slowed down and one of the crew crawled out on the forehead of the Cat. He rode there, his hair whipping in the wind as he guided the pilot through the reefs during the 7 mile run.

The man to be rescued was in sight this time. He was in his yellow raft and he had his fin paddles hooked onto his wrists. He waved and the guerrillas pushed him off. He paddled out through the heavy waves toward the wallowing Cat. Someone tossed him a rope from the rear blister.

The man on the raft caught it and held on. Suddenly the crashing waves spun the raft out from under him and flung him 30 feet through the air. He disappeared in the lashing white water at the tail of the plane.

They reeled in cautiously on the rope. There was a tug at the other end, like the pull of a fish. He was still there. The tense crew pulled in carefully and finally the flyer's head appeared under the plane's high-riding tail. They reached down and drew him into the plane. The rescued man's fighter had been shot down by ack-ack from a Japanese ship during a bomber strike. Guerrillas had taken him some distance into the hills to hide him from Jap patrols

and they brought him down to the shore as fast as they could when the Cat appeared. In the meantime they displayed his raft.

The crew put a few slugs through the raft to sink it lest some other flyer see it and report it as another man ditched.

When the Cat swung into the cove, the Japs were all set for them. Slugs sang past one of the crew into the gas tanks in the wing above the right engine, which conked out.

Inside, the gas blew into the plane like rain swept by a high wind. The Japs kept shooting. The engineer looked to the dead engine. The radio operator cut off his radio equipment. A bullet cut the trousers of the navigator.

The pilot taxied the one-engined plane out to sea. To continue into the cove was simple suicide. The plane swung in wide half circles, like a winged duck. There was now a choice; to sit still and be captured by the Japs, or to attempt a takeoff in a sea in which even a healthy Cat would almost certainly be doomed. If the latter, the dead engine would have to be started, which would bring up the danger of that loose gas being set afire. On a Cat, the exhausts are on the top of the wings. One backfire, and the plane and its crew would disintegrate in one big explosion.

They decided to try to get away. The damaged engine coughed a couple of times and started. The pilot throttled it down and depended on the good engine for most of the power. The crippled ship staggered through the pounding waves. Inside the men crouched waiting.

Maybe it was a miracle. Maybe it was nothing but the skill of the pilot's hands at the controls. Most likely it was both, but

the Cat hit a high wave just right and the pilot lifted her up. She groaned, hesitated, and then she straightened up and lumbered off low above the water.

A few hours later the crew got its first laugh. No signal equipment could be used because of the danger of sparks, so the Cat came into an alerted field while gun muzzles far and near followed her course uneasily. But luckily, it was daylight and the gun and the ground crews peering from their foxholes could recognize a tired, beat-up old Cat stumbling home.

As you might surmise, much of the work done by rescue crews was by individual initiative in World War II. Search and rescue had its inception, and probably its period of greatest development then. In peace, the advances made could not have been achieved through normal development to the degree it has reached today.

I believe the Air Forces, Air Rescue Service to be firmly established on a world-wide basis, since its piecemeal beginning. Luckily, for you and me it is not only important to the Air Force but is recognized to be, and proving highly important to civil aviation.

The lack of efficient communications is quite often the deterrent factor which causes much of the delay in prompt rescue. This is reason enough to establish a more positive means of contact with those in distress.

Another thing which might not be as evident as the saving of lives for humanitarian reasons, is the saving of lives because the loss of operational crews from any unit in the atomic age drains the nation of its striking capability when there possibly would be no time left to train effective new personnel.

To properly conduct future operations will require the experience, skill and courage of the highest order.

There is a need for continuing research and development of all phases of search and rescue in the Air Force to solve problems of the future as well as those which face us at the present. The advent of air transportation of airborne armies and the emphasis on flying in the Arctic regions will intensify the need for adequate and speedy rescue of those planes lost or forced down in such areas.

The armed services must undertake to provide some measure of protection of civil aviation in furtherance of the national interest because civil aviation is a part of air power and as such has a bearing on the primary function of the Armed Services to provide protection for the United States. There is a need for the designation of an agency for the United States to control and co-ordinate all search and rescue facilities to achieve maximum effectiveness, and to be responsible for establishing rescue coverage needed for both military and civil aviation where not otherwise existing.

As retrenchments of military forces follow war and less important functions eliminated to bolster essential ones, it is, therefore, essential that rescue be kept in mind as vital to the shortcomings of men and machines. It is as vital to an Air Force as a Fire Department or an ambulance service is to a community. Its future is unlimited in world affairs.