

## Peril on the Sea

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It was Sunday, January 18th, 1953 and Crew Seven of VP-22 was in a P2V Neptune at 1,000 feet patrolling off the China coast heading toward the Formosa Strait. They were to make a single photo pass over reported Red Chinese anti-aircraft emplacements in the vicinity of Swatow. The crew was about to break out the box lunches when all hell broke loose. Ground fire from ashore struck the Neptune behind the cockpit on the port beam.

The port engine was aflame and losing fuel and the port wing was on fire, its flaps gone. The radar was out, a main landing wheel gone, the vertical and horizontal stabilizers air-conditioned by one and two large holes, respectively. The crew now sought any friendly field on Formosa. But the port engine quit, emergency procedures did not arrest the fires which had been sucked into the after station and at 1230 the crew issued an SOS and said it would ditch the P2V. The radio transmitter key was tied down.

The second engine began smoking, the left wing was about to fall off and the fires were still burning. LT Clement R. Prouhet prepared to ditch as the waves rose to 15 feet in the 30-knot winds with crests running every 200 feet. Water temperature was estimated at 62F. The aircraft slammed onto the sea fifteen minutes after it was hit by ground fire. All 13 crewmembers managed to get out as the patrol plane sank.

Only one burned and partially inflatable, eight-foot, seven-man life raft was launched. AT3 Byars, wounded by the AAA and ENS Angell, the navigator, deathly seasick, were placed in the raft. PH1 McClure and AD2 Smith were last seen being washed toward shore. The remaining crewmembers clung to the raft, trusting their Mae West's to keep them afloat.

Another VP-22 P2V, patrolling a different sector, diverted to the ditching position, eventually sighted the survivors, radioed for help and dropped a raft that could not be retrieved due to the rough seas.

A U.S. Coast Guard PBM Mariner based at NS Sangley Point, Philippines arrived at the crash site at 1630. The pilot, LT John Vukic, assessed the sea and wind state as darkness approached. The survivors had been in the water for nearly five hours.

Vukic landed successfully between crests and taxied toward the raft, ensuring the propellers weren't endangering the survivors. The third effort at securing a rescue line worked. Survivors of Crew Seven were hauled aboard the Mariner and wrapped in blankets. Many of the Coast Guard

crewmembers removed their Mae West's to provide medical and other assistance more effectively to the injured Navy personnel. The PBM taxied in the cresting waters for 30 minutes but failed to locate Smith and McClure. The swells began to increase as night descended upon them. Vukic decided to take off.

The PBM lifted off and the pilot actuated the JATO bottles to enhance climb-out. But the starboard engine suddenly quit. The dipping right wing was caught by a swell which swept into the hull, heaved the plane upwards and caused it to cart wheel. The PBM exploded and struck the water, burning. All hands were blown from the Mariner into a burning oil slick. Those who had removed their Mae West's had extra difficulty. Only ADC J. Miller and Radioman French recalled exiting the aircraft, French, vividly, to this day. Killed by the impact were copilot LTJG Stuart, ATC Hammond, AOI Bridge, AT1 Tornell and AD3 Tracy Miller of the PBM crew. Missing were Angell, AN Beahm, Airman Morley and Byars from Crew Seven.

Two more P2Vs arrived and dropped a raft each to the survivors. An Air Force Albatross from Clark Field and a British Sunderland from Hong Kong joined the vigil. Throughout the ordeal, rescue aircraft were fired upon by shore batteries as well as by enemy aircraft. LT Vukic retrieved one raft and was able to pick up AD 1 Ballenger and A03 Brown. J. Miller and AM3 Hewitt retrieved the second raft which accommodated Prouhet, Varney, Ludena, McDonald and French who was badly burned. The rafts never did join despite courageous efforts.

Ships were dispatched to assist. Patrol aircraft continued the watch and were relieved by fresh crews after 10 hours of flight time. The destroyer, USS Halsey Powell, traveled at flank speed to the site, arriving when the downed flyers had been in the water for seven and a half hours.

A second Coast Guard PBM arrived after dark and dropped 34 one-million candlepower parachute flares to assist the destroyer in navigating through the Chinese coastal waters. Squalls increased in intensity and visibility was now less than 700 feet. The survivors in one raft had used all but one of its few signal flares. The last one successfully signaled their position for the destroyer. Eventually, as the ship approached, two swimmers from Powell proceeded to the raft and secured a line. As the raft was being towed to the destroyer, it broke. A third attempt at securing a line succeeded. Stripped to his skivvies, an Ensign from Powell swam a line to the raft with French on board who was unconscious and delirious. This raft was tethered to the ship. The survivors were pulled aboard and provided blankets, hot coffee, food, sedatives and medicinal brandy.

Meanwhile, the first raft had drifted to within 200 yards of Namoy Island. Powell found itself in less than six fathoms of water, navigating over uncharted barrier reefs. She had to back off from a near grounding. The skipper, demonstrating superlative seamanship, maneuvered the destroyer around the reef so that the ship sailed parallel to the coastline with less than 200 yards margin for

error. The three men in the first raft were finally rescued from the treacherous shoals just before midnight. The search went on for the missing well past that.

Coast Guard survivors were returned to Sangley Point. The Navy crew was taken to Naha, Okinawa. Of the original 21 men, 10 survived, three Coast Guard and seven Navy. Six men were killed in the two crashes. Five were missing. Two of the missing were believed to have made it to the island. Rumors had them in Canton in February 1953. A press report claimed that two were captured and taken to Swatow and eventually killed.

All Coast Guard personnel involved in this episode were awarded the Gold Life Saving Medal. The enlisted members of both crews were inducted into the Enlisted Combat Aircrew Roll of Honor aboard USS Yorktown in Charleston, South Carolina in November 1997.