

BATTLEFIELD BOMBERS

DEEP SEA ATTACK



MARTIN W. BOWMAN

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AVIATION

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Prologue

Task For Coastal Command

Hector Bolitho

The newspapers give too much space to the glory and heroics of war and not enough to the misery; the days of slow starvation in dinghies, the horrors of mutilation and the cries of men being burned. The mass mind fights shy of these things, naturally preferring the heroism. There is too much limelight on the gallantry, which encourages war and not enough on the despair and pain, which might put a mute on the trumpeters who cry, 'He died a hero.' That he was a hero is merely incidental to the fact that he died in pain, that he was robbed of life and that he is lost to his generation. There is glory in living for an ideal as well as in dying for it.

'The times when the aircraft should return from their night patrols seem to become fixed in my mind and I find myself waking from sleep in a state of wordless prayer. There is no adventure in the war for those who sit on the earth like this, with the fear of being called in the morning and told that another aircraft has been lost in the Channel. It means the sudden obliteration of ten men; men with whom I have walked along the beach, or shared pints with at 'The Travellers' Rest.'

The aircrews themselves are resilient when the bad news comes, but they are also vindictive. Their hatred of the German is not emotional. It is terrible with purpose. They go about their business hoping that next day will give them the chance of revenge but knowing that the crop of deaths among themselves is inevitable. My older heart starts when I see the dismal ritual; the disappearance of faces from the mess table, the packing of the dead man's possessions, the pile of his luggage in the hall; and the new man, fresh from his training, walking up the stairs to occupy the empty room.

The professional service man pretends that he has conquered these feelings. Perhaps he has developed a crust of hardness which helps him. But five years of life on the edge of the service, of crossing so many names out of my loose leaf address book that it becomes more simple to start a new page for each letter, have left me as vulnerable to grief as I was in the beginning. Only two of the eleven pilots who ate my birthday lunch with me before the war are now alive.

This loss dismays me, of a generation mown down before they have

known the richness of summer, before they could ripen and feed the world. They are so unmean, so just and so kind. I sat in the mess last night with three of them, talking of the dullness of the mess food. We each imagined the dinner we would like to eat and I whispered, 'Twelve oysters, the breast of a roast duck with apple sauce, new potatoes and peas picked an, hour before they are cooked, followed by a fresh peach which you could peel in one piece, like taking off a vest.'

One of them said, 'Oh, that's cruel. I am hungry, let's make hogs of ourselves.'

They all went to their rooms and brought back tins of food which we took into the kitchen. Between the four of us we ate a tin of sheep's tongues from New Zealand, spread on slices of thick toast and crowned with mustard pickles. Then we shared a tin of honey, also spread on buttered toast, a tin of peaches, two tins of cream and a cold pudding. It was their hoard of gifts, saved for several weeks and we ate them in sheer vicious greed.

We all felt rather sick afterwards, like the man who said, 'I'll tell you what I had to eat, if I can.' We went to the edge of the cliff for air and my wretched conscience made me think of poor children who would have loved my share of the peaches. We sat in the moonlight and belched, looking down to the sparkling waves and watching the aircraft coming home. Then, for some reason, truth was released and I sat with my head in my hands, watching the three faces in the moonlight and listening to them talk without a hint of self-consciousness.

All three of them have had horrible experiences. One was shot down over the Mediterranean and he saved his aircraft and some of the crew in circumstances that won him the DSO. One had a fight against six Ju 88s and the other, who is a generous, good creature behind his noisy toughness, told us of a time when he switched on his torch in an aircraft and the light fell on what had once been a human face. These are the experiences which affect their thoughts, not the opportunities for glamour. Each one of them admitted that he finds himself recalling his horrible experience as he lies in bed. And each one of them admitted the menace of fear.

I think the popular picture of the aircrew dying for their country in the flash of heroism is false. It is a bad seed to sow for the future. I do not believe that they fight for nationalism or for that old carrot dangled before their nose in the name of freedom. They know that nationalism is a defunct aim and that freedom cannot be won with swords -it can be bred only within each man by the development of his integrity.

The real heroism of the aircrews of Coastal Command lies in their patience; in their capacity to survive the dark hours of vigilance. They loathe the false light that is shed on their occasions of victory. I saw this so clearly the other day when the broadcasting man brought his van here to make one of them speak. As a writer I felt that it was my duty to help the broadcasting man, but as a member of the service I knew it was my instinct to hold back. The pilot was not merely indignant. He was sick with confusion.

I am often alarmed when I hear Australians and New Zealanders talk anxiously of their chances when they return home. They seem suspicious of government promises that they will be cared for and taken back into commerce and industry. Also, Australians and New Zealanders seem unconscious of their value; of the store of experience and judgment they will take back with them, not only because their courage has been proved but also because of the widening of their mental horizon. Those who have been here three or four years realize that however independent the new countries have become, their roots lie in Britain. Some of them yearn to go home soon because they are poor travellers and unwilling to learn, but most to whom I speak realize that their language, their civic consciousness, their democratic intentions and their integrity owe a debt to the English system.

When they arrive here they are critical of the foibles of English life. One Australian was peeved when his host in Scotland scolded him for shooting a brace of grouse sitting on a fence and another was perplexed when he shot a fox and stretched the skin on the barn door; perplexed when his host begged him to bury the skin quickly before the neighbours saw it. Foxes are shot in Australia and it is no crime to kill sitting birds. These superficial differences cause embarrassment 'at first, but this passes as the visitors realize that England still has some lessons to teach the world. 'The English know how to live,' they say. 'They are not as restless as we are.'

After four years here they learn more than how to fly and fight. They are going through an intensified education, feeding their new country vigour on the old wine of England's experience. They are growing rich, through action and thought and when they go back to their dominions they will be ten times as valuable as when they came away.

English pilots and aircrews are no less enriched and the problem for their employers after the war is not, 'How can I fit them in?' but, 'How can I translate the value of what they have learned into terms of civilian life?'

I thought of this again yesterday after a meeting which had an amusing beginning. I wished a few days ago to find out something about the migration of Huguenots to this country and as there are no books of reference in the mess I went into Newquay in search of a library. There was none so I tried a bookshop. 'Have you any book of reference that would tell me the early history of the Huguenots in England?' I asked. The poor girl answered, 'You want a *Who's Who*.' I came back defeated.

A little time afterwards I went up to the aerodrome and met a pilot, Flight Lieutenant Gilbert Potier, of 53 Squadron, who made an attack on a U-boat two or three weeks ago. Within five minutes I found that he comes from Huguenot stock and he was able to tell me all that I wished to know. Two weeks after D-Day Potier was on his third operational patrol with 53 Squadron when he contacted a U-boat, at night, three miles away; too close for him to get down from 500 feet and home accurately. He flew on until the contact was astern and then he lost it. It was in 'the quiet loneliness just before dawn.' He turned directly towards where he thought the target was but still there was no contact. Suddenly, after passing astern of the

supposed U-boat, the contact was picked up again, at short range. The Leigh Light¹ was switched on to reveal what he called 'a fat, juicy U-boat,' dead ahead. The crew drill of the months of training went like clockwork and he did not have to give an order. The bombs were dropped and Potier flew over the spot many times, but neither bodies nor wreckage appeared. Four hours after, they again flew over the scene of the attack and there was a big patch of oil on the sea. The ambiguous judgment of the attack is, 'Insufficient evidence of damage,' but this does not mean that the U-boat got away unharmed.

A few notes should be written on the Americans fighting with Coastal Command. They began their contribution in the summer offensive against the U-boats in 1943 when United States Army Air Force squadrons hunted and sank U-boats with us, from a base in Cornwall and later in Devon. Then three US Navy squadrons took their place, quickly fitting into the pattern of the U-boat war in the Bay. The American Wing is operated under the direction of the RAF Group Headquarters but there are two fundamental differences in their background: first in the length of their operational tour which is 800 hours for RAF aircrews and thirty sorties or about 300 hours for the Americans; second, in their training. They have had no equivalent of our Operational Training Unit and new American crews have therefore trained and operated at the same time. It is a tribute to the spirit which the Americans bring into the fight that just before the invasion it was possible for them to check out about thirty new crews in a few days, so that they could take their place in the D-Day sorties.

Each of the three American squadrons has been able to operate six aircraft a day and recently seven, over the South-Western Approaches. The crews had to fly ten and a half hour sorties every other day to achieve this high average.

It is often chance that places a U-boat across the path of an aircraft and the Americans have not always been lucky. Their persistence has been all the more admirable. Of one hundred U-boats seen by the Group in June, the Americans sighted sixteen. June was their great month. Lieutenant Koskinen sighted a surfaced U-boat in the Bay and it is possible that he damaged it; certain that his attack sent it under and delayed it from its task. On the 13th, Lieutenant 'Champ' Johnson attacked a U-boat and stayed long enough to see the escape of high-pressure air making a foam bath about 50 feet in diameter; enough to suggest that this U-boat had also been damaged.

It has always impressed me to arrive at Dunkeswell and see the way in which the Americans throw themselves into a corner of the war which must seem very remote from their own troubles.

This has been a long list of exploits for the laymen to read and one cannot hope that he will follow the details of these continuous attacks with the interest of a trained U-boat killer. But what matters is the effect of such a terrific experience of war, over an entire hemisphere, on a pilot who once saw his horizon within the pages of a ledger.

He will go back into peace with something of great value, if only the big

business man will be far-sighted enough to use it. But perhaps the sight of the world and the maturing of his heart and mind will make Potier restless with the idea of adding up the fortunes of others and he may prefer, when it is all over, to go into the spaces of the world and make his own.

It is not whimsical nonsense to say that I love my pen. Any writer who cares about good paper, good ink and a quiet, smooth pen must understand what I mean. I enjoy a page of clear, patient writing, but to achieve this I have struggled with many belligerent or dreary pens, that spluttered with the crossing of t or leaked disgusting smears on fingers and paper. About a year or more ago I was standing in the hall of the Savoy Hotel when a ferry pilot bought one of my books from the stall. The clerk, an old friend of mine, said to the pilot, 'There is the author. I am sure he will sign it for you.' I happen to like autographing books. It is a pleasant fillip to my vanity so I took the ferry pilot's pen and wrote something in the book. The pen was a Sheaffer and it stroked the white paper as gently as a moth's foot. I said to the pilot, 'This is a beautiful pen.' This story throws a bouquet at myself, but it must be told. After I had autographed the book the pilot said, 'Will you have a drink?'

We parted at one in the morning, after dining and gossiping the night away. He had flown the Atlantic many times. He was a kind, trusting American with photographs of his wife and son in his pocket. Next morning, he had returned to his base, but he had left a parcel for me. In it were the Sheaffer pen and a note, asking me to accept it as he had liked my book so much. He had read it all the way through before he went to sleep.

I went off to the Air Ministry, purring with vanity and with the pen next to my heart. It has been there ever since. The pen has flown fairly high and it has seen the coast of France. It has never failed me. I can truthfully say that it was the first pen that made the act of writing a pleasure to me. Yesterday, I dropped it on a concrete floor and chipped the end of the nib. When I tried to write with it, it demurred and threw a dozen minute blots over the paper. I felt as a violinist might feel if his fiddle broke into pieces in the middle of a phrase. I took the pen to one of the RAF instrument makers. It seemed hopeless for one half of the nib was beheaded and I thought it would never write again.

The instrument maker is a craftsman and he re-shaped the nib, making it dumpy, of course, but out of the wound he made a new point which writes as perfectly as before. Again the pen purrs in my hand.

I am writing this because I love craftsmanship and hate moulded plastics and things made out of stuff never intended of them. I don't want a chair made out of petrified cheese and cups made out of dehydrated carrots. I want objects which show signs of a craftsman's talent and devotion. For this reason I wish to bow to Mr. Sheaffer and to the RAF instrument maker who repaired my pen and made it whole again.

This morning, lying in bed, I felt so miserable that I decided there was no joy in thinking, so I had a cold shower and went down to the kitchen for a cup of tea. The mess servants were just arriving so I sat with them and talked as they stoked up the fire and made the tea. But it was no escape

from my inwardness because one of them, a quiet, kind man, began to talk of the crews we had lost. He has been in private service for many years and he said that working in the mess has taught him the value of gratitude. He said that the aircrews make less demands on the servants than anybody else he has ever worked for. 'They are always grateful,' he said, 'and for people doing a job like ours, gratitude is a very nice thing.'

I suppose this is why the servants here are so much kinder than any I have met in houses or hotels. I feel a little conscious of my wingless state as I enjoy the privileges that should belong to the aircrews alone. One's clothes are pressed and garments are taken away, washed and ironed and put back in the drawer without a word being said. Yesterday a waste-paper basket appeared without my asking. The batman said he imagined that authors should always have a waste-paper basket - I didn't tell him that he was guilty of a piece of very penetrating literary criticism.

Footnotes

1 Very early in the war Coastal Command had realised that its anti-submarine aircraft would need something more reliable than the quickly consumed flares they were using at night to illuminate U-boats during the last mile of the approach when ASV metre-wavelength radar was blind. As a result, in 1940 Squadron Leader Humphrey de Verde Leigh a personnel officer in Coastal Command was encouraged by the then Chief of Coastal Command, ACM Bowhill to develop the idea of an airborne searchlight. A pilot in WWI, Leigh had flown many anti-submarine patrols and had experienced the frustrations of searching for the elusive underwater craft. Locating the U-boat had become considerably easier since the introduction of ASV radar; nevertheless, the difficulties of the last mile or two of the approach remained. The target simply dropped off the radar screen, leaving the aircrew literally in the dark. Despite early difficulties, Leigh had his prototype installation ready by January 1941. The Leigh Light went into production but eighteen crucial months had elapsed between Leigh's original suggestion and the first use of the device on operations.

Chapter 1

Saviours of Shipwrecked Men At Sea

Lifeboats found at sea - poignant evidence of the U-boat terror - increased in numbers ever since 1939. Saviours of shipwrecked men, protectors of merchant ships and the scourge of German submarines - such are the giant Sunderlands which roar away each day at dawn to go about their lawful occasions. By the time they pick up their moorings at dusk they may have sunk a submarine, flown a thousand miles on convoy patrol or saved from death some of the victims of Hitler's foul submarine campaign.'

'Action stations! U-boat attack! Our ship is struck by two torpedoes. She splits in two and sinks in less than two minutes. There were very few survivors.' So said Kenneth Cooke GM LM, who on 18 March 1943 was a carpenter on board the newly-built tramp *Lulworth Hill* homeward bound from Mauritius via Freetown with a cargo of 413 tons of rum and no less than 11,000 tons of sugar. It was a pleasant tropical evening - nearest point of land 950 miles west of Loanda, in Portuguese West Africa off the starboard bow. There were no ships in sight; none had been seen for a few days, so it seemed that they had the ocean to themselves. But they had soon found how wrong they were. The Italian submarine *Leonardo da Vinci* commanded by Capitano di Corvette Gianfranco Gazana-Priaroggia had surfaced and the *Lulworth Hill's* guns had opened fire, driving him down. At 0340 Gazana-Priaroggia's second attack succeeded. The tramp had sunk in 90 seconds. Captain W. E. McEwan and 42 men were killed.

How long Cooke was in those dark depths of the sea he had no idea but he thought it was the end. He remembered saying goodbye to all at home. At the point of giving up hope he suddenly shot up to the surface. He felt himself being drawn down again and attempted to swim away; but it was a losing battle. This time he was sure his last hour had come, but he fought for his life by swimming under the water. After what seemed ages he found himself on the surface. The *Lulworth Hill* had disappeared. He saw a red light so he knew someone else had managed to avoid being sucked down. He reached him and found it was one of the ship's gunners. They swam around looking for a lifeboat or raft when suddenly the sea was lit up all around them by a powerful light. It was the enemy submarine and it very soon had them spotted in its light. They swam toward it, the gunner ahead

of him. When Cooke got alongside he heard an enemy officer asking questions. He spoke little English and they had a hard time making themselves understood. Cooke naturally assumed that he was German and that he was captain of a U-boat but he was the SS liaison officer, temporarily assigned to the submarine to stiffen the Italian crew's resolve, which at that stage was showing signs of crumbling. Cooke answered his questions truthfully. Name of ship; where from; what cargo, how much, where bound, how many crew and where is your captain? What is your rank on board?

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Cooke said: 'Carpenter.' The gunner replied: 'Gunner.' This might have been his undoing, as he was immediately taken aboard and Cooke was left to his fate. The *Leonardo da Vinci* started its engines and made off. Cooke was washed off by the water which almost broke his arm and he was half-drowned by its wash. Suddenly the submarine stopped and he swam toward it. He got close by and could see some men on an upturned lifeboat. The submarine liaison officer was waving his arms and shouting 'Now you shall drown because your Air Force has killed many people in Germany.' The submarine then made off and turned off its lights. It was very dark now and Cooke failed to find the men in the lifeboat. He called out many times, but got no reply. He was now all alone and feeling very sick from swallowing fuel-oil. He swam around as best he could, still calling out.

So began fifty days of hell. It was the kind of hell that hundreds of shipwrecked crew men were fated to endure after being sunk by enemy submarines. Sometimes aircraft such as the *Sunderland* came to the rescue before the men drowned or slowly died of thirst.

The *Sunderlands'* work of mercy started in the war with the rescue of the crew of the *Kensington Court* which was lumbering home with 8,000 tons of grain, on 19 September 1939. An SOS from this torpedoed tramp

steamer which was seventy miles from the Scillies brought three Sunderlands to the scene just before she went down. The position of the sinking ship had been accurately given and the three flying boats converged upon her almost simultaneously. Flight Lieutenant John Barrett on 204 Squadron piloting L5802, had commenced anti-submarine search at 1215. At 1337 the crew intercepted a signal from the *Kensington Court* - 'gunned by submarine' 100 miles away from aircraft's OR position. It was learnt that a submarine had opened fire on the *Kensington Court* without giving a warning. Barrett made for the ship's position immediately and found *Kensington Court* down by bows, with one Sunderland on 228 Squadron from Pembroke Dock waterborne half-a-mile from the ship. There were 34 survivors in two ship's boats. While two of the Sunderlands flew round to hunt for the U-boat, Flying Officer Thurston Meiggs Wetherall Smith, the captain of a 228 Squadron Sunderland, alighted safely on the surface and taxied up to the ship-wrecked men. A shuttle service of rubber dinghies was established and twenty survivors were put aboard Smith's flying boat. By skilful handling he succeeded in taking off again, despite his heavy load, whereupon Flying Officer John Barrett alighted and picked up the other fourteen men in the boat, while the third Sunderland kept guard above. The promptitude with which the call for help was answered and the skilful way in which the Sunderlands were navigated to the spot, led to the rescue of every member of the crew of the *Kensington Court*.³

That same month the SS *Blairlogie*, under fire from a U-boat, sent out an SOS. A Sunderland went to the rescue. Four and a half hours after leaving base and 300 miles from the nearest land, the Sunderland found not the ship, which had sunk, but the crew in the boats. The aircraft brought an American vessel to the scene and stood by until the rescue had been made, returning late in the evening after a flight of more than 1,300 miles. These rescues were the first of many similar errands of mercy which the Sunderlands carried out as the war progressed. On 2 December 1939 a Hudson sighted seven people adrift on a raft over a hundred miles from the East coast of Scotland. In fog and mist it guided a Danish ship to the spot. A little later a Hudson found six survivors of the Swedish ship *Listor* clinging to its cargo, a quantity of timber, strewn over the surface of the sea. The Hudson and subsequently its relief remained above them for five hours until a destroyer arrived to pick them up.

The SS *Domala* (*Empire Attendant*) of the British India Line bound from London and Antwerp to Calcutta on 2 March 1940 was attacked by a Heinkel bomber in the English Channel, 20 miles from St Catherine's Point and set on fire. Four bombs struck the *Domala*, causing heavy casualties and the German aircraft then strafed her with its machine guns. On board, apart from her crew, were 143 Indians who had been repatriated by the Germans, her total complement being 295. The captain was killed, along with 36 members of his crew and 63 of the Indian passengers.⁴

The *Domala* was taken in tow for Cowes while the Dutch steamship, a Royal Navy destroyer led by an Anson to a raft, the only one of four with

anyone on it and boats from the shore, picked up survivors from the water and the few lifeboats and rafts that had been launched.

On 2 July 1940 a Sunderland was dispatched to find the survivors of the *Arandora Star* which barely two months earlier had been converted into a troopship. The *Arandora Star* was torpedoed 75 miles west of the Bloody Foreland, County Donegal by the U-47 under the command of Günther Prien, who on 14 October 1939 had entered Scapa Flow and sunk the *Royal Oak*. The *Arandora Star* was proceeding without escort and was carrying German and Italian internees and prisoners-of-war, in addition to her crew of 174 and a military guard of 200 men, for internment in Canada. Thirteen lifeboats packed with survivors were picked up soon after 1100 hours. Nearby, scattered over a wide area, were rafts, pieces of wood and other wreckage to which survivors were clinging. 'Of these there were many score,' reported the Sunderland, which dropped Mae Wests, first-aid outfits and packages of food. Two hours later it found the destroyer *St. Laurent* of the Royal Canadian Navy and brought it towards the lifeboats. The Sunderland then flew round and round for more than three hours guiding the destroyer's boats by means of flares to where the survivors were floating. A total of 805 people lost their lives. Of the enemy aliens, 243 Germans and 470 Italians perished. In addition 37 soldiers and 55 members of the crew died, including her master.⁵

On Monday 15 July Sunderland P9063 on 10 Squadron RAAF, Mount Batten, captained by Flight Lieutenant H. M. Birch, while on convoy protection patrol at 1430 hours, south of Bishop Rock sighted a ship being attacked by five He 111s. Birch climbed the Sunderland up to 2,000 feet in an attempt to interrupt the attack, but was unable to do so. After completing their attack the Heinkels turned to the Sunderland whose front gunner opened fire causing one of them to turn, exposing its underside to further fire before reached the safety of cloud. The other Heinkels came in to attack the flying-boat, but were discouraged by fire from the four guns in its rear turret. They retired to a safe distance and shadowed the Sunderland for about ten minutes before leaving the area. While the Sunderland had suffered no damage one of the ships in the convoy, the 1,359 ton motor vessel, *City of Limerick*, sank later as a result of the Heinkels' attack. RAAF men took part in their first rescue of survivors of a U-boat attack on 28 July 1940, when Flight Lieutenant Birch, who was later awarded the DFC, brought his Sunderland down beside four lifeboats full of survivors from the 13,200-ton motor vessel *Auckland Star*, which was sunk by U-99 commanded by 30-year old Fregattenkapitän (senior commander) Otto Kretschmer. Birch offered to pick up any injured survivors and then, finding there were none, directed a trawler to the lifeboats.

It was nearly two hours since Kenneth Cooke had been cast adrift after the *Lulworth Hill* had been sunk that he heard someone call back to him. He made his way toward the cry and found one man on a raft which had broken adrift when the ship went down. This man helped him aboard and he found it was 21-year old Able-seaman Colin Armitage. A few minutes

later they picked up the Chief Steward Herbert Thornton who had been in the water for three hours, had swallowed a great deal of oily water and was in bad shape.⁶At daybreak they saw much wreckage around them; also another raft with no one on it. They rowed toward this raft and managed to grab hold of it. Thornton got aboard just as it was torn from Cooke's hand by the sea. They quickly drifted away, leaving Thornton on the other raft. Next a cry of 'Help!' was heard and they saw Basil Scown the Chief Officer not many yards away. They rowed to him and picked him up. He was violently sick with the oil and sea-water he had swallowed. Cooke too, was sick, but felt much better afterwards. After two hours' very hard work they managed to reach the other raft and lash it to their own. They rested and decided to let one raft go. After removing food and water they cast it off. They now searched for the men on the upturned lifeboat. After two hours they spotted them, which meant that there were fourteen men on the raft. The raft was built to carry twelve men. That night all were very tired, cold and wet. One of the young boys talked in his sleep and called for his mother. This made Cooke feel very miserable and downhearted as he thought of home and parents. He dropped off into a fitful and exhausted sleep.

The second day on the raft everyone was suffering from the cold night and hunger. All were very thirsty, so they decided to have some of the precious water. Chances of making land or of being picked up by a ship was discussed. Then they raised the sail and set off on their long voyage - not knowing of the hardships and deaths that were to overtake this band of brave men.

After a week everyone was suffering from thirst. Salt-water boils were beginning to break out on their bodies and feet from the chafing of the brine-soaked clothing against their skin. One young man started drinking sea-water. Hunger had almost left them: all that was desired was water. Already the members of the crew were looking very gaunt. Second Engineer Eric Ledger's feet were very bad (gangrene) and he could only moan and curse when someone accidentally knocked them. It was very depressing to see fine youngsters suffering from thirst and hunger. Six were under nineteen years of age. The ninth day on the raft Cooke was feeling ill and weak; his throat was terribly parched; his lips cracked and bleeding. He had many salt-water boils which caused him much irritation and restless nights. Thirteen long days adrift; the Chief Officer had almost lost all reason. He wanted his knife to cut his throat and end his suffering. He raved wildly until his last bit of strength was used and he fell unconscious. Four men were drinking sea-water quite often. One young boy was looking very ill and had not the strength to sit up. During the night Basil Scown called Cooke. He talked quite a lot and said he couldn't last much longer. He gave Cooke his ring, saying if he got through he had to give it to his wife. Also a message, which he had to repeat to her.

Eighteen days and death paid its first visit. Basil Scown passed away and ended his terrible sufferings. A short ceremony was held and then two of the crew slid it over the side fully clothed. The body floated astern -

sharks had not been following them for nothing. All bowed their heads to avoid seeing the ghastly spectacle which followed. The rest of the day the survivors sat in gloomy silence.

Twenty days on the raft and conditions were terrible. Everyone was covered with large salt-water boils, lips split and blackened, finger-nails turning black from lack of blood. Three men were now very ill; all having taken to drinking the deadly sea-water, knowing it would mean their deaths. Faces were getting thinner, the bones standing out in bold relief, eyes sunken and glazed. Sharks were with them again. Rescue now looked hopeless and the survivors were asking each other who would be the next to go. Everyone's will-power was weakening.

Twenty-four days had now passed; days of living hell. Four of the little band had passed away. The last two days the youngest boys, Deck Boy Fowler aged seventeen and eighteen year old J. Arnold an apprentice, known and loved by everyone of their late ship's crew who went by the name of Little John, passed away. No living man could describe the terrible sights they faced daily. Faces were covered by uncut beards, hair unkempt and matted with brine. Men lost their reason. Eyes glassy and glazed, always staring out to sea looking and searching the horizon for the ever-expected ship of rescue. Men were suffering terrible and indescribable agonies, losing all hope of rescue and faith. Unable to overcome the lure of the salt death four more died. Eric Ledger passed away after suffering unbelievable agonies from gangrene. One took his own life by drinking sea-water and going over the side where he was soon pulled to pieces by the ever-waiting sharks. The other two slowly choked to death from thirst. On 22 April only Cooke and Armitage were left; their minds tortured in delirious moments by the return of the dead - who they could hear moaning and moaning in agonizing death. Most of the day Cooke and Armitage were unconscious, but returned to sanity in the cool of the evening.

On the 41st day they saw an aircraft and they fired a flare. On Sunday 2 May another aircraft was right on their course and dropped four packages, they were so weak they could only retrieve two of them; one of which contained a wireless. They used this for the first time on 4 May and sent an SOS. Next day, after 47 days at sea a RAF seaplane spotted them and dropped many packages of food and water. Finally, on 7 May Cooke and Armitage were rescued by the destroyer *HMS Rapid*.⁷

A rather unusual case in which a submarine and a Sunderland were both involved was the rescue on 3rd and 4th September 1940 of the Norwegian crew and the crew of the British steamer *Haxby* from the Norwegian steamer *Tropic Sea*. The *Haxby* was sunk by a German commerce raider three months earlier and the survivors of her crew were placed on board the *Tropic Sea* - which had been captured eight days out from Sydney - on which the Germans put a prize crew and ordered the Norwegians to carry their precious cargo of wheat to Germany. But the submarine *HMS Truant* was on guard off Cape Finisterre. Lieutenant Commander H. A. V. Haggard signalled the *Tropic Sea* to stop, which made the Germans scuttle her by

exploding mines in her before they took to the boats. The commander of the *Truant* took on board all the British survivors of the *Haxby* and the captain of the *Tropic Sea*, with his wife, but owing to the limited space in the underwater craft it was impossible to pick up any more without jeopardizing the safety of the submarine and all on board. However, the commander of the *Truant* notified the position of the other boats to base so that a Sunderland could be sent out to pick up the remainder. As the sea was flat calm, there was no immediate risk for the men in the boats.

Before dawn on 4 September, the crew of a 10 Squadron RAAF Sunderland (P9603) captained by Squadron Leader 'Hoot' Gibson made ready to depart. Rifles and revolvers were served out to them in case the Germans should cause any trouble and while it was still dark the Sunderland took off, climbed to 1,000 feet and settled down on her course to the south-east. The second pilot, Flying Officer 'Vic' Hodgkinson RAAF saw Eddystone Lighthouse slide by underneath. The life-boats had sails and the Sunderland searching for them had a difficult task, for in the twelve to fourteen hours that had unavoidably elapsed the lifeboats could have travelled far.

As it grew light several small sailing ships, flying the French flags with white flags above them were noticed. In the course of the morning the Sunderland came to the point in the Bay of Biscay where the *Truant* had left the survivors. The seas were empty, so the Sunderland began a square search and after a time saw three lifeboats bunched together with brown sails set. Coming up with them, those on board the Sunderland noticed that one of the boats was towing a raft which was painted grey. They kept on sailing when the flying boat swooped low over them and no attempt was made to lower their sails so the front gunner was ordered to fire a short burst across their course of the leading boat. They immediately hauled down their sails and the crew put down their oars. Taking a good look at the boats as he circled round, Gibson decided to alight. From a thousand feet the sea seemed quite calm but by the time the flying-boat was down on the surface the captain found there was a confused swell. On completion of the landing run Gibson was 60 yards from the smaller boat.

Moving over to the boats, Gibson ordered the drogues to be thrown out from the Sunderland to take the way off and steady her; after which he switched off two of the engines and left the other two ticking over. Beckoning one of the boats to approach and finding out the men were Norwegians the captain of the flying-boat ordered them to lower the mast to prevent damage to his tail planes and then told them to throw a line. In a few minutes the ten Norwegians in the boat were taken on board through the rear hatch and after placing them so as not to upset the balance of the aircraft, the captain got away and about six o'clock that evening landed the Norwegian seamen in Plymouth harbour. A call was made later at the police station and two boxes of handcuffs were borrowed in case the Germans should prove truculent when they were picked up next day. But by the time the Sunderland arrived, there was no sign of the other boats to be seen. During the night a strong breeze had arisen and there is not much

doubt that, the Germans took advantage of it to reach the Spanish coast.

Perhaps one of the most dramatic rescues effected by means of Sunderland flying-boats was that of the survivors of the Ellerman Lines flagship *City of Benares*, which had departed Liverpool in convoy OB.213 on 13 September 1940 bound for Montreal and Quebec. Aboard the steamer, which before the war had sailed between Liverpool and Bombay via the Mediterranean, were 199 passengers, of whom 90 were evacuee children and a crew of 209. At that time British Government policy was to encourage the evacuation of juniors to the apparent safety of North America and South Africa for the duration, under a scheme managed on their behalf by the Children's Overseas Reception Board. On the night of Tuesday, 17 September 1940 when she was about 600 miles out into the Atlantic, only a matter of hours after the convoy's Royal Navy escort had been withdrawn, the *City of Benares* was torpedoed during a gale by the U-48 under the command of 31-year old Captain Heinrich 'Ajax' Bleichrodt. Of the nine grown-ups who worked hard to get their charges into the boats, seven lost their lives. One boat full of boys got away singing Roll out the barrel. But the rough seas and hail storms took grievous toll and the Havant class destroyer HMS *Hurricane* which came on the scene next day could only find 115 survivors scattered about on the rafts and in the boats.⁸ Two out of the nine children picked up were too weak to survive. One boat was not picked up until 10 days later, on 29 September, when a Sunderland on 10 Squadron RAAF captained by Squadron Leader W. H. Garing sighted the lifeboat containing six children, two nurses and thirty-eight Lascar seamen. Garing dropped a note saying help was coming and marked the location with a smoke float. The survivors were picked up by a destroyer and landed at Greenock. In all, 258 of those aboard the *City of Benares* perished, including 77 of the 90 children. In fact only 57 of her passengers survived the attack. Immediately after this tragedy the Government terminated the child evacuation programme to prevent similar disasters.

An extraordinary thing was that on the night of Wednesday, September 23rd Mrs. F. Steels dreamed that her son Harry was safe in a boat, although all hope of further survivors had long since vanished. Her dream was true. Her son was safe. One day perhaps science may be able to reveal all the wonders of the human brain and the mystery of telepathy. Anyway, on Wednesday, September 25th a Sunderland flying-boat which had been on convoy duty far out in the Atlantic and had just been relieved by another Sunderland was starting on her homeward flight when a boat was sighted.

'Through my glasses I could see the people in the drifting boat were pretty well exhausted,' said the captain of the flying-boat afterwards. 'As I watched, a little chap who was lying down amidships suddenly stood up and began waving his arms. Then he picked up something white, probably a handkerchief and began to wave that. I could not understand it at first. Then it dawned on me that he was signalling, '*City of -*'. Weak as he was that kid signalled the ship's name, which told us the whole story. That was enough. We were off right away to get help.' Which they did from the Sunderland and a warship guarding the convoy they had recently left.

From that boat, with forty-six survivors in all, were picked up six more children to fill the hearts of their parents with joy. But there was nothing to lessen the sorrow of Mr. J. E. Grimmond, five of whose children were lost. The night before these children sailed, their London home was completely destroyed by a bomb, but the shelter in the garden saved them and their parents. The first reaction of Mr. Grimmond, who suffered the brutalities of the Germans in the last war, was to rejoin the army and in a message in the *Sunday Dispatch* he said: 'Many thousands of people have already had their loved ones killed in the war. They have the right to fight on until we have avenged them. I have never been a cruel man. I did not want this war or the one before it. All I wanted was a home, a family and a job. I think most people in this country felt the same. But the Germans would not leave us in peace. They are not peaceable themselves. I know them. I was taken prisoner in March 1918. Now I want the Germans to suffer. I want them to suffer as my children suffered. And what my children suffered and what my wife and I have suffered will give you an idea of the treatment we could expect if we gave in to Hitler.'

On 16 October 1940 a rescue of survivors of the *Stangrant* who had been in life boats on the open sea for three and a half days was made. Two days before, a lifeboat with 21 men in it had been seen by a Sunderland, which dropped a container with food and cigarettes, for the condition of the sea made it impossible for the flying boat to alight. Two days later the Sunderland set out again. 'It was still dark,' said the pilot, 'when one of my gunners reported a red light on the sea some miles away. Soon we could see the outline of a boat below us. We flew round for about a quarter of an hour waiting for daylight. I discussed landing with my co-pilots. We decided that it could be done and came down on what appeared to be the flattest area of sea in the neighbourhood.' The flying boat landed safely, reached the boat and took off the men. On the way back they were given a hot breakfast on board the Sunderland.

On 26 October a Sunderland helped naval units to pick up survivors from the *Empress of Britain*, one of the largest liners to be placed on the Southampton to Quebec service before being taken over as a troopship. She was returning to the United Kingdom from Canada after a long voyage that had commenced in Cape Town, when a long-range German bomber attacked her about 100 miles north-west of the Irish coast. She was hit by high explosive and incendiary bombs and left damaged and burning. She was abandoned by all but a small party of her complement of 643, the survivors being picked up by naval escorts. During the operation three Blenheim fighters gave protection from enemy air attack. The Polish destroyer *Burza* took the *Empress of Britain* in tow but on 28 October she was hit by two torpedoes from the U-32 commanded by Leutnant Jaenisch and blew up. The loss of life in the two separate attacks is variously put at 45 or 49. She was the largest British merchant ship lost in the Second World War. A few days later, on 3 November, a Sunderland gave similar protection when all the survivors from the *Laurentic*, a Cunard White Star Line passenger liner converted to an armed merchant cruiser, patrolling the

Western Approaches, were picked up. She had gone to the aid of a sinking ship and was torpedoed and sunk by the U-99 off the Bloody Foreland, County Donegal. Three torpedoes sent her quickly to the bottom with the loss of 49 lives.⁹

'Bruce Sanders' wrote *Bombers Fly East* for the Air Ministry in 1942 and he detailed some ASR operations in a chapter called *In The Ditch*. 'The men who go down to the sea in aircraft have to be ready to face anything in the way of adventure. The crew of one Sunderland, after being shot down into the Mediterranean, arrived back inside the British lines with a company of Italian prisoners. The adventure reads like something out of a sensational novel. ['Bruce Sanders' was the pen name used by Leonard R. Gribble, a thriller writer of such works as *The Scarlet Widow!*]. It was way back in December 1941 when the flying-boat was attacked over the Mediterranean by a couple of Messerschmitts. One German plane was shot down and the other was damaged before it made off. But the cost of victory to the Sunderland was its starboard, engines. Both were knocked out. One gunner was killed and another member of the crew wounded. Land was in sight, but the Sunderland could not make it. The captain had to put his aircraft down on a rough sea. The flying-boat ricocheted twice, bouncing forty feet the first time and came to rest with one float broken off. But for two and a half hours the Sunderland remained afloat, drifting in a fresh breeze towards land. However, the flying-boat was fast breaking up. The captain decided that he and his men must swim the remaining distance to shore. The wounded man was put into the only serviceable dinghy and, two at a time, the others slipped into the water. The second pilot was all but drowned as a strong undertow caught him, but the captain, who was a powerful swimmer, reached him in time. All got ashore.

It was noon and they found themselves on a rock-strewn beach, as they estimated somewhere not very far west of Apollonia. While they were taking stock of the situation - they were well behind the Italian lines - a score of armed Italian soldiers appeared from behind a ridge of rocks. The Sunderland captain went forward to surrender, for his party were without arms. He walked towards the Italian soldiers with outstretched hands. To his utter amazement the nearest soldier lifted his rifle above his head and threw it as far away as he could.

Before the truth of the strange situation could be fully understood another party, of Italians arrived. These were more truculent and gave the British to understand that they were prisoners. A stretcher was constructed from the dinghy's oars for the wounded man, who could not walk and then, in a long, straggling procession, the party moved off along the rocky beach. Three of the British party were without boots and it came on to rain. Then darkness fell and in the wet night the British were without provisions or blankets and the Italians would not allow a fire to be lit. They were afraid of Arab sharpshooters. Dawn brightened the east and another start was made, but the procession had not gone far when it was accosted by another party of Italians, this time twenty officers. They were very angry officers. Their allies the Germans, they said, had stolen their vehicles and told them

to get to safety as best they could. Now there were more than a hundred Italians and the tired, weary crew of the Sunderland - or, rather, what was left of the crew.

The Italians proposed an amazing offer to the Sunderland captain. No less than a gentlemen's agreement, whereby, in return for the Italians' aid, the Italians themselves should receive favoured treatment in the event of the party being overtaken by the advancing British. At this stage another group of Mussolini's army arrived, fifty men with an Italian major in command. He was a middle-aged man with a face tanned and wrinkled like a piece of old leather. In his belt he had, stuck a cat-o'-nine-tails, which he used as a fly-whisk, but when one of the British airmen complained that an Italian soldier had stolen the wounded man's flying-boots the cat-o'-nine-tails was laid across the thief's back with a will.

The strange company moved on and towards the end of that day the wounded airman died. The Italian major at once set about preparing a military funeral and burial. When the dead airman was lowered into his last resting-place on the rock-girt African shore the major burst into uncontrollable tears.

Eventually they all reached the Arab settlement of El Hamia, where food was purchased. The British bought macaroni and coffee; and for a two-shilling piece and a wrist-watch secured three eggs - not very large ones. An Egyptian pound bought a bag of dates' in that rather blacker than usual black market. One of the Sunderland's crew had an idea. He told an Arab that if he would take a note to the British, who apparently were only fifteen miles away, he would get a substantial reward. The Arab was agreeable and when night came disappeared with the note. But when morning came the major sent for the Sunderland's captain and said he proposed to set out for Benghazi. However, he did not know who held the town - British or Axis troops. The discussion ended in a side-bet between the two leaders and the major agreed to press on with his troops, while leaving the British airmen with the Arabs.

The Italians started off. Some while later the Arab sheikh produced guides and pack-horses to conduct the British to their own lines. They too set off. After an hour they overtook some of the major's men who were straggling badly. The Italians, nearly thirty of them, hailed the appearance of their erstwhile companions with cries of delight and without more ado surrendered themselves and joined the trek towards the British lines - wherever they were. And in due course the few Sunderland airmen arrived inside their own lines, with their bag of prisoners and one of the most incredible stories of the war began to circulate.

The motto proudly used by one of the RAF's Air-Sea Rescue squadrons was 'By Searching We Save.' Since 1 January 1942, when that particular squadron was formed, until the time of the launching of the first airborne lifeboat, the squadron had searched for and saved nearly a hundred bailed-out airmen in the ditch. Most of them had been Allied personnel, but some had been enemy airmen. The squadron's commander, Squadron Leader A. S. Linney of York, had been one of the RAF's gallant band who covered the