

TAYLOR

# THAT OTHERS MAY LIVE

The Aerospace  
Rescue and  
Recovery Service

THAT  
OTHERS  
MAY  
LIVE



DUTTON

by L. B. TAYLOR, JR.

## 4 □ A PROUD HISTORY

The history of rescue is as old as the brotherhood of man.

No matter what era, area, or circumstance is involved, rescue has always been one of the great human interest stories. Be it a man trapped in a cave, a survivor drifting aimlessly on a life raft in the ocean, or a lone pilot lost and injured in the enemy-thick jungles of Vietnam, there is no saga quite as inspiring, as exhilarating or as dramatic as that of man risking serious injury or death itself to help his fellow man in trouble. Rescue is a compelling, all-encompassing human instinct. In crises people pull together as never before, often performing deeds far beyond their normal capacities when a life is in the balance. So it has always been and will always be. Such is the nature of man.

The first known aerial rescue occurred in 1870, thirty-three years *before* the Wright Brothers flew their plane at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. It happened in Paris during the Franco-Prussian War. To escape the bombardment of Bismarck's guns, the French used observation balloons to evacuate by airlift 160 wounded soldiers who otherwise would have died or been captured by on-charging troops. The same principle of moving injured men is being used by ARRS throughout Southeast Asia, although the tactics have been refined and the means of transportation revolutionized.

Almost before the Wright Brothers landed, following their historic, twelve-second flight, farsighted men were considering the rescue potentials of the airplane. U.S. Army personnel, as early as 1909, visualized the swift movement of their wounded from battlefield to hospital. But, again, it was the imaginative French who first put the theories into practice.

In 1915, during World War I, the French Air Service successfully evacuated patients from Serbia by air, although, in those perilous, early days of flight there was nearly as much chance of being injured en route as there was on the battlefield. Three years later Americans were stripping rear cockpit seats out of single-engine Jennys and modifying them to serve as "flying ambulances"; but before the concept of military aerial rescues could be proven, the war ended.

Little happened over the next quarter century to

change things, although in 1926 the French once more improvised ambulance planes to fly wounded soldiers over the Atlas Mountains during the Riffian War in Morocco. The British also were experimenting with converted transports, but in America plans to use aircraft for rescue work received a serious setback when a test plane crashed, killing seven people. The unfavorable publicity that resulted was somewhat offset in 1928, when stranded storm victims were airlifted from Rock Springs to San Antonio, Texas.

The Germans were quick to capitalize on the brightening possibilities of aircraft rescue work. During the Spanish Civil War in 1936 they flew casualties home across the treacherous Alps. And at the outbreak of World War II, in 1939, they ferried thousands of wounded men to hospitals from the bloody fronts in Poland and, later, in Russia.

When the German bombings of England began, thoughtful generals realized crippled planes might fall short of the French coast while returning from runs over London, so they set up a welcoming party of rescue aircraft and boat launches. Heinkel-59 float planes carried collapsible rubber rafts, blankets, medical stores, and two-way radio communication gear; and from the air, pilots directed the swift motor launches to downed flyers in the English Channel.

So heavy were the cross-Channel bombing missions, and so many planes were being shot down, that the

Germans went a step further by introducing the sea rescue float. These large, buoy-type floats were spaced at strategic intervals across the Channel and were fitted with bunks, blankets, clothing, food, water, distress signals, and lamps—almost all the comforts of home. All a downed airman had to do to save himself was reach one.

In the early days of World War II, Allied flyers learned a lot about rescue techniques and equipment from the Germans. For instance, every Luftwaffe plane, fighter or bomber carried inflatable dinghies and dye markers, and most crews also had portable radio transmitters.

In Vietnam when a pilot is shot down, his chances of being rescued—within minutes—are very good. In 1940 when a Royal Air Force flyer had to ditch his plane, he had the proverbial two chances of survival: slim, and none at all. In one three-week period that year, 220 airmen were killed or reported missing. The situation was desperate. Never before had the need for an organized rescue operation been so tragically emphasized.

The British therefore set up a local recovery service off the coast of Dover, using borrowed Lysander amphibian planes, light naval craft, and high-speed launches. The chances of a downed pilot living to fly again began increasing almost immediately.

But the growing pains started all over when the

United States entered the war late in 1941. More planes filled the skies and more pilots were hit and grounded. Worst of all, the Americans had no planned organization to help their flyers in distress. Survival equipment was meager, and the men themselves knew little about actual operations. It was soon agreed, however, that since the RAF had already set up a rescue operation, the United States, instead of beginning one of their own, should join hands with the British.

As the war dragged on, Allies set up extensive training sessions for their aerial crews, teaching them first how to ditch a plane, then how to get out and make proper use of survival equipment. The practice paid quick dividends. In 1943 only 28 per cent of Eighth U.S. Air Force men who went down were saved. In less than a year the figure rose to more than 40 per cent, and by September 1944, nine out of ten airmen forced down in the North Sea, the English Channel, and other waters around Great Britain were successfully recovered.

Similarly, rescue service in the Mediterranean Sea also improved immensely during the latter part of the war. The first American unit assigned specifically to pick up downed pilots in this area was activated in North Africa in 1943. On July 17 of that year they carried out their initial mission—by finding and rescuing a British airman who had been adrift in the Mediterranean for eight days!

A month later one of the most dramatic recoveries

of the war was made, following the ditching of three disabled B-17 bombers. A twin engine OA-10 amphibian—the famous Catalina—rushed to the area and sighted ten survivors in a life raft. The seas were too rough for landing, but the “Cat” pilot went down anyway, and tore off the plane’s right wing float when he smacked the water. The ten men were picked up, but a takeoff was now impossible, so the OA-10 turned toward home and began taxiing, bucking huge waves. From above, a British Spitfire radioed sighting ten more survivors and directed the Cat to them. Waterlogged, weather-beaten, and overloaded with twenty passengers, the plane struggled desperately in the rough seas and was in danger of sinking. By four in the afternoon, though, seven hours after the initial landing, a motor launch arrived and towed the sick aircraft and its precious cargo to shore. The next day three more B-17 survivors were recovered.

In the Pacific, aerial rescue operations suffered the same organizational troubles as in the Atlantic, only compounded, because there were such vast stretches of ocean to span between the islands. In the English Channel or in the Mediterranean a downed pilot was always within a hundred miles or so of Allied territory. In the Pacific he might be many hundreds of miles from *any* point of land, Allied or enemy!

Also, in Europe the British had helped in setting up rescue bases and operating them. Americans were on

their own in the Pacific. And whereas the bases in Europe were pretty well fixed for the duration of the war, the ones on the other side of the world had to be mobile. They had to be advanced with each island-hopping step United States forces took in their long, embattled march toward Japan.

From the first, rescue was a disjointed, sometimes hazardous, and often a frustrating and fruitless business in the Pacific. There was no single service assigned for recovery of downed airmen. Each individual unit was responsible for its own people, and when a flyer ditched or bailed out in that enormous ocean, he knew there would be little chance of anyone finding him, especially early in the war. The air was infested with Japanese planes, and searchers frequently ran into high winds, rain squalls, and heavy overcast—all of which cut down visibility. And when one was looking for a man in a life raft in the Pacific Ocean, it was a nearly impossible mission even under ideal conditions.

Still, lives were at stake and supreme efforts were made—thanks largely to the dedicated work of such men as Major John H. Small, Jr. Realizing the need for rescue service and the problems that must be surmounted, Major Small began by drawing up a jungle survival book and distributing it to U.S. air crews, so if they ditched near an island they would at least know how to live off the land. Through persistence and diligence he organized a small recovery unit, based out of



When General Nathan Twining's airplane went down at sea during the early part of World War II, a number of men, ships, and planes were diverted from their operational missions for five days—until life rafts were sighted. This helped point out the growing need for a separate rescue service. (*U.S. Air Force*)

New Guinea. With only four Catalinas, his men saved 455 downed airmen by the end of April 1944.

His work, and the spectacular, highly-publicized, at-sea pickup of General Nathan Twining, did much to point out the importance and never-ending need for rescue operations. On January 27, 1943, Twining, then commander of the 13th Air Force, went down in a B-17, along with fourteen others, in the Coral Sea. For five and a half days they drifted in life rafts while a full-scale operation—using Air Corps, Navy, and Marine planes and Navy vessels—searched for them. On the sixth day, crew members aboard a Navy PBY sighted them off the New Hebrides Islands, landed in the water, and made the save.

All planes and ships deployed in the search had been pulled from operational fighting forces, and the mission emphatically underscored the necessity for an independent rescue service. As a direct result of the Twining episode, an emergency school was formed in the spring of 1944 at Keesler Field, Mississippi. By July, the 2nd Emergency Rescue Squadron had completed its training and was assigned to the Fifth Air Force in the Pacific. Within six months, the fledgling crews saved three hundred airmen from death or capture—an average of 1.6 saves per day.

A recovery equally as famous as Twining's occurred August 1943 in another part of the Far East.



*Brigadier General Nathan F. Twining comes ashore from a Navy PBY flying boat which rescued him after his B-17 plane had been forced down in the Coral Sea. General Twining had been given up for lost until crew members aboard a "Flying Fortress" piloted by Lieutenant William H. Bailey sighted his life raft. (U.S. Air Force)*

