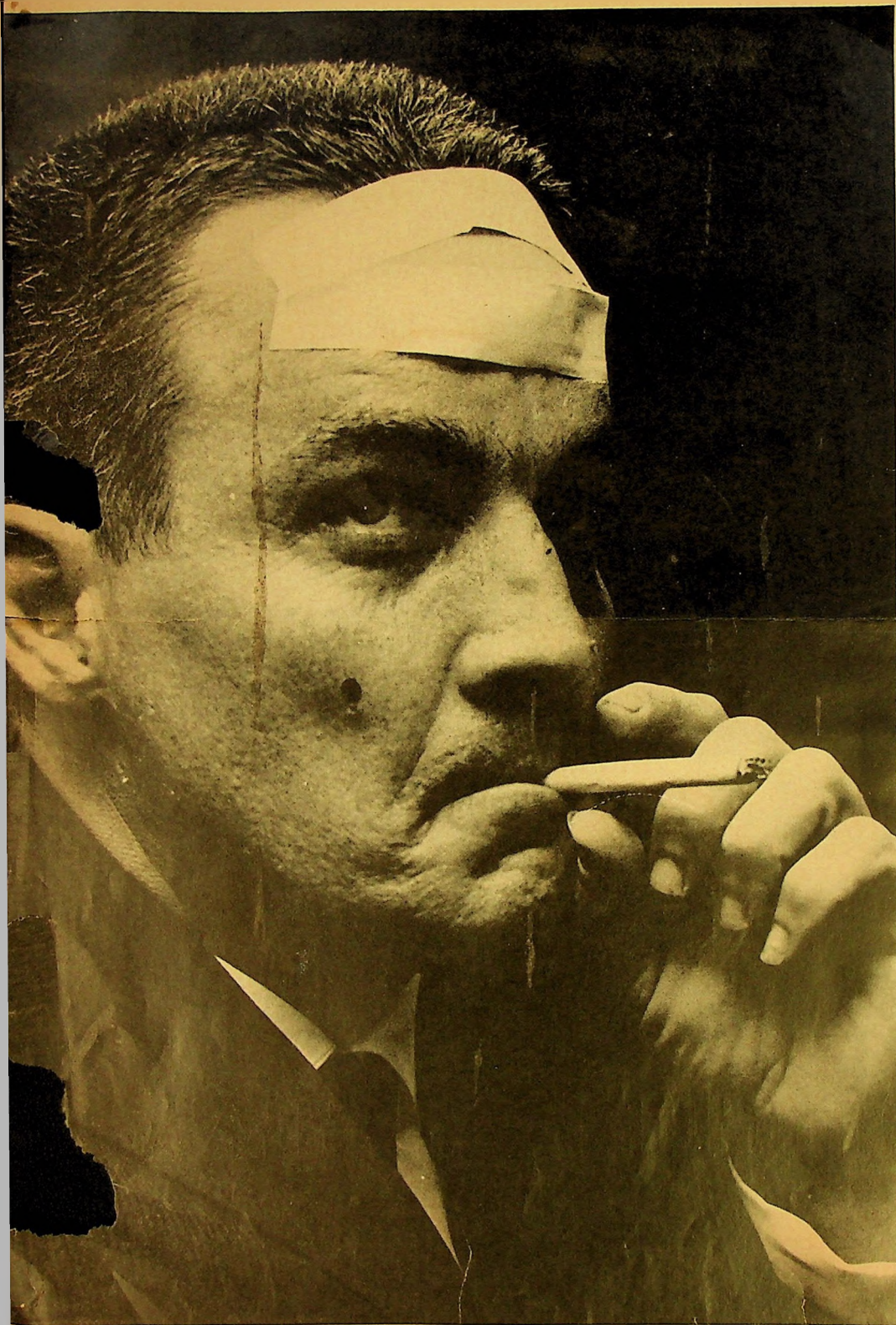


“WE DITCHED AT SEA”

The Ordeal of Flying Tiger 923

Battered by wind and waves, adrift hundreds of miles from the nearest land, a raftload of Americans fought to survive in the angry Atlantic. One of the survivors tells the dramatic story. • BY SENIOR MASTER SGT. PETER A. FOLEY

"When the second engine stopped, the plane gave a slight shudder. I knew we were in trouble. Everybody else aboard knew it too."



Pilot John D. Murray, who had "never been up against a situation like this one," was injured during ditching. Captain Murray was the last survivor pulled into the raft.

We were three hours out of Gales, heading across the Atlantic on one of the four engines on the big Flyz Tiger Line Super-H Constellation suddenly gave out. "Something's gone wrong with one of the engines on the right side," said another passenger behind me, Specialist Fourth Class John Groves. "It's been feathered." I got up from my seat by the left wing to see for myself. He was right. Engine No. 3 had stopped dead.

As I glanced around the plane, no one else seemed aware that anything was wrong. It was getting dark, and most of us were waiting for the supper that the stewardesses were preparing.

When I returned to my own seat, I realized that the pilot was now having trouble with the No. 1 engine. It's on the extreme left—engines are numbered from left to right. I was an aircraft mechanic during World War II, so I know how engines should sound. I could tell that the No. 1 prop was spinning out of control. I saw it gradually slow to a stop, and the plane gave a slight shudder. We were flying on only two engines. I knew we were in trouble, and by this time everybody else on the plane knew it too.

We didn't know how bad the trouble was, though. We didn't know that these were the last hours left to Tiger 923. It had left McGuire Air Force Base, New Jersey, on a Military Air Transport Service (MATS) contract flight, at eight o'clock that morning, Sunday, September 23, 1962. It was bound for Frankfurt, Germany, with a civilian crew of eight and 68 passengers, mostly young paratroopers on the way to their first overseas assignment, along with a miscellaneous assortment that included officers on vacation, enlisted men being transferred, and a few dependents.

And I was headed back to my wife and five kids at our home in Darmstadt, Germany. I'm a reporter for the *Stars and Stripes*, the military newspaper in Europe, and I had just completed an assignment in the States. But the engine trouble that was beginning now was to bring us all down in the stormy darkness of the North Atlantic. Out of the 76 of us aboard that plane, only 48 came out alive. I've talked with a lot of them, and *Post* editors interviewed some of the other survivors. We have added their recollections to my own, trying to piece together the way it all happened.

First Warning of Fire

The failure of the two engines meant that our lives depended on every decision of the pilot, Capt. John D. Murray of Oyster Bay, New York. "I'd been flying for 24 years, but I'd never been up against a situation like this one," Murray recalls. "We were at 21,000 feet when we got a fire warning on No. 3 engine. Garrett (flight engineer James E. Garrett) shut the engine down, then discharged a bottle of fire extinguisher into it, and the fire went out. Then an overspeed condition developed on No. 1 engine, and we had to shut it down."

Murray began descending to a lower altitude and altered course toward the nearest airport, Shannon, Ireland, more than 900 miles to the northeast. He called

"The waves buried me a couple of times. . . . I kept telling myself not to panic. Once you panic, you've had it. . . ."

the chief stewardess, Betty A. Sims, to the cockpit to brief her on the situation. She was a slight, pretty girl of 31, with 10 years' flying experience. She had been married two weeks before and had given notice that this was to be her last trip.

We all looked up anxiously at Miss Sims as she emerged from the cockpit and walked swiftly down the aisle. There was no sign of concern on her face. We watched her pick up the public-address-system microphone. She relayed the captain's message that there was no immediate danger, that Super Constellations are built so they can fly on two engines. She explained that the reduced power made it impossible to heat our dinners, but that cake and coffee would be served in a few minutes. Then she asked us, as a routine precaution, to get the life jackets out of our seat pockets. Miss Sims and her three assistants, Carol Ann Gould, Jacqueline Brotman and Ruth Mudd, helped us into the life jackets and led us through ditching drills. Miss Sims was still wearing the dark-blue pinafore she had put on to prepare dinner. She kept telling us that this was just practice and that there was no emergency. I doubted it.

Some Nervous Joking

"A few of the paratroopers were kidding around," recalls Carol Gould of Lyndhurst, New Jersey, who had been summoned from a day off for this flight. "They were picking Jackie, Ruth, Betty or me as their choice to be stranded with on a raft. We tried to joke back."

The stewardesses collected our shoes and all sharp objects, and put them in bags. They told the women passengers to remove their stockings and tie them around their waists—this would give rescuers a handhold if the women needed help in the water. Anything loose that might fly around the cabin was stowed away. Even the door to the cockpit was taken down and placed in the coat compartment. Pillows and blankets were distributed for cushioning.

Miss Sims placed a stewardess or military man in charge of each of the four emergency exits by the wings. The navigator, Samuel Nicholson of Dallas, Pennsylvania, took a seat by the large cabin door at the rear. Miss Sims said that four life rafts were kept in compartments in the wings. A fifth raft would be available for launching at the cabin door. Nicholson sent two passengers forward to get the folded-up raft, take it out of its container, and place it near the door.

Every once in a while flight engineer Jarrett came back to peer through the windows at engines No. 2 and No. 4. Everything seemed OK, and we were making pretty good speed. We were flying at an altitude of 3,000 feet, and it looked as though we were going to make it to Shannon, then not much more than 700 miles away. Light, fluffy clouds were going by. I could see some stars.

The atmosphere in the cabin was surprisingly calm. In the back, Lt. Col. George H. Dent of Fredericksburg, Virginia, was playing cribbage with his wife Elizabeth. "I was winning the Championship of the North Atlantic," recalls Dent.

Nearby, another officer and his wife were playing gin rummy. Pvt. Joe E. Hofer of Birmingham, Alabama, kept reading a paperback novel. In the rear the stewardesses helped a Hawaiian woman, Mrs. Rachel K. Hoopii, put life vests on her two young daughters. They were quiet and well-behaved kids. I doubt mine would have been as quiet. But the German wife of Specialist Groves, the man who had first spotted the trouble in Engine No. 3, was weeping softly and mumbling, "I know we're going to fall down, I know it."

We'd finished our third or fourth ditching drill when I began to feel the power being pulled on and off an engine. I looked out my window and thought I saw a ball of fire between No. 1 and No. 2 engines. Colonel Dent, too, recalls seeing the No. 2 engine "emitting hunks of carbonized fire, some of them the size of a fist." Then I heard bells. It sounded like the fire warnings on an engine. A few minutes later No. 2 stopped with a thud you could both hear and feel.

Within seconds Captain Murray's voice came over the loudspeaker. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said calmly. "This is the captain. We are going to ditch."

The lights were off so our eyes would be used to the dusk. Betty Sims hurriedly ran through the ditching instructions once more. "Be sure your seat belt is tight and your seat upright. Keep your head down on your knees, your arms crossed over your head, holding your elbows, and brace against the seat in front."

Although we were losing altitude fast, the stewardesses went along the aisles for a final seat-belt check. "I gave a short prayer," says Private Hofer. "Dear God, take these people into thy hands. . . ." One of the men hollered to the girls: "Sit down, sit down before we hit."

An Engine and a Prayer

"As I took my seat," says stewardess Carol Gould, "I remembered I hadn't had time to take off my stockings. I pulled up my skirt, but when I realized all those guys around me were looking, I just couldn't do it. So I fastened my seat belt and braced myself, and then I was praying. There's a friend of mine who was killed in an accident. I was talking to him. I don't know why."

On the one remaining engine, 590 miles from his goal, at Shannon, Captain Murray slowly turned the big Constellation into the wind. Tiger 923 dropped lower and lower. In those few minutes, the pilot had only instinct to guide him. There was nothing in his experience that told how to bring a land-based plane down safely at night into an ocean of 15-foot waves whipped by 35-knot winds.

"I started a right turn into the wind," explains Captain Murray. "But with full power on Number Four the airplane didn't want to turn right. So I ended up turning to the left, the long way around. I could see the water very clearly in the landing lights because of the whitecaps. I got down a little below 110 knots, picked an oncoming swell, chopped Number Four and dropped the plane to hit what appeared to be a relatively level spot between swells."

We hit. People were thrown forward as some of the seats broke loose. My seat stayed put, and I braced for a second impact, which we had been told to expect. But it never came. I realized I was unharmed, so I unbuckled my seat belt and started to think about getting out of the plane. All I could see were shadows. It was dark, really dark. People began struggling out of their seats. Water was already pouring in from the bottom of the plane. I could sense an undercurrent of terror, but no one panicked. There was a little bit of talk: "Keep calm . . . keep it moving. . . don't get excited."

Raft Almost Gets Away

Captain Murray had been thrown forward on impact. "I bashed my head against the glare shield or wheel—I don't know just what," he says. But he came back into the cabin, along with the copilot and flight engineer, and they all took up ditching stations. Navigator Nicholson was already opening the rear door and pushing out the life raft that had been readied earlier. "I watched for it to inflate automatically when the lanyard pulled taut," Nicholson remembers. "But the rope snapped or came loose or something. I jumped into the water and swam. After the uninflated raft, I caught up with it about twenty-five yards from the plane and pulled the lanyard to inflate it. Then I got in and started pulling people aboard." Back in the plane Captain Murray suddenly remembered his flashlight, which he might need. He hurried back into the cockpit and got it.

Another soldier and I yanked out the escape hatch next to us and dropped into the water. I tried to get my life vest inflated, but I couldn't. I was carried by waves toward the rear of the plane. It had sunk so deep that my head was level with the top of the fuselage. I decided not to waste any more time on the life jacket and began to swim. The waves buried me a couple of times. People were all around me. There were cries of "Where are the boats?" But no rafts were in sight. It was dark and windy, and giant waves were pitching us around.

I thought I felt a wing under my feet. It was the tail. Then a wave slammed me against the antenna. It's strung from the top of the forward cabin to the top of the tail. I threw my left arm over it. I scraped the arm and it hurt. I thought it was a good time to rest for a moment. I kept telling myself not to panic. Once you panic, you've had it.

After a few moments I realized it was calm. I kept waiting for a wave to break over me. Then I realized the plane was sinking and I was under water. I let go and swam slowly to the surface.

I was tired, dead tired. How easy it would be to quit fighting the sea and get it all over with. It would be so easy to die. Just stop fighting for half a minute. I shook my head, realizing this was a hell of a way to go.

Then I spotted a raft. It was just a shadow and it seemed a long way off. I managed to swim over to it and held on to a rope. I got my head up far enough to see inside, but I couldn't get in. I asked for help. Someone said he didn't



Lt. Col. George H. Dent lost his wife. "The moment I saw her I knew that she was dead."



Carol Ann Gould used her half-slip to bandage Pvt. George V. Brown. "We both prayed."



Pvt. Brown in convalescence. "I felt blood all over my face but I kept hauling people in."

"Bail! Bail! Bail if you want to live!" cried the navigator as the waves sloshed into the raft. And we had nothing to bail with."



Captain Figueroa-Longo (rear) and his wife debark at Antwerp.



One injured survivor had to be carried to a hospital in Ireland.



Another survivor gets an embrace from his brother, who burst into tears at the reunion after the crash.

have the strength. Then he grabbed my arms and somebody else pulled me in by the seat of my pants.

The water was full of people. One of these was Pvt. George V. Brown of Oshkosh, Wisconsin, who had been badly gashed on the head during the ditching. "A woman grabbed my shirt-front and my life preserver and started pulling me under," he recalls. "I got free and shouted to her to take it easy. Suddenly there was a raft. When I got onto it I felt blood all over my face. I started hauling other people in."

As more people were dragged into the raft it became a tangle of arms and legs. Somebody was across my ankles and somebody else was across my thighs. I had my back to the rim with my head level with the top, but I couldn't move.

Ten or twelve inches of water had already covered the bottom of the raft, and one woman was holding a man's head up by his hair to keep him from drowning. The water was up around our shoulders. The raft was jam-packed when Captain Murray and a woman reached the side and held onto the ropes.

"There's No More Room"

"Can't you find another raft?" somebody shouted. "There's no more room."

"I've got a woman," Murray gasped. Somebody pulled them in. Captain Murray was the last one to get on. He was bleeding from a deep wound on his forehead, and he could hardly see. Many of the others were injured or in shock. Colonel Dent called out to his wife Elizabeth. She was only six feet away but hidden from his view. She answered weakly that she was all right and asked how he was. He replied, "fine," and tried to encourage her. Some of us looked for other rafts or survivors in the water.

There was an Air Force medical officer on the raft; Capt. Juan Figueroa-Longo, but he was so hopelessly wedged beneath other people that he could only give advice. He said to use anything we had as compresses to stop bleeding. He also said to cover our mouths with our hands and breathe warmer air. I tried with one free hand, and it worked.

This was not just a raft out in the cold, though. It was a horror. It was hard to realize at the time, because we were so numb with shock and fear, but remember that this was a 15-foot-wide raft designed for 25 people, and there were 51 of us in it. It was a cold, clear, starry night, and we were about 500 miles from land, with no idea how soon anybody would find us. And we were being tossed around by huge waves. There were groans as the raft went up a wave, spun crazily around, and came down almost vertically. Some people were vomiting. We were jammed so tightly that every time the raft moved somebody would be rubbing against somebody else. There were cries of pain as the soggy clothing chafed and burned the tightly packed survivors.

The biggest waves kept sloshing water into the raft, and it soon was dangerously near sinking. Navigator Nicholson kept urging, "Bail, bail! Bail if you want to live." But we were so jammed together it was almost impossible to move at all. And we had nothing to bail with. "We

started bailing with an overseas cap and a wallet," says Nicholson. "It was hopeless. Then someone remembered that several of the paratroopers had stowed cigarettes in plastic bags. We got those out and used them to scoop out enough water to remain afloat."

We heard a plane circling overhead, but it couldn't find us. Nicholson said that it was another MATS flight that had been alerted to our position before the ditching and was standing by to guide rescue ships.

Everyone started asking where the nearest ship was. "The only thing I knew for sure was that a U.S. weather ship was ten sailing hours away," says Nicholson. "But I didn't want to discourage the people on the raft, so I told them it should reach us in four hours or so, and there might be other ships even nearer."

When we heard that, Private Hofer asked if anybody had a flashlight. I don't know why nobody thought of it before. Captain Murray said he had a flashlight, but he couldn't move enough to get it out of his pants pocket. The people surrounding Murray managed to shift enough so he could retrieve the light.

Hofer flicked on the switch. It worked. He pointed it toward the sky, and flashed it off and on to guide the plane overhead. A few minutes later a four-engine MATS C-118 plane swooped down and dropped a bright red flare to signal our position.

"Over here! Over here!" yelled one of the men, trying to stand up and wave.

Carol Gould remembers the eerie glow of the flare: "When the first flare dropped it was like daytime on the raft. It was good—but also it wasn't. I could see everyone around me and they were bloody. And the water in the raft was turning a sickening red. George Brown was bleeding so badly from the big gash in his head that I knew something had to be done. I looked around for something to make into a compress. Then I thought of my slip—it was only a half-slip. I took it off and made a compress out of it and put it on his head. Then a wave washed it off. The only way to keep it there was to hold it. He blacked out a few times. We both prayed."

"Is There a Doctor?"

As the night wore on, Carol and Joe Hofer, from their respective sides of the raft, tried to keep our spirits up. As an extra-high wave would swoop us up and then drop us suddenly, Hofer would come up with some remark like "Anybody want a cup of coffee?" or "Wouldn't a hot shower go good now?"

Once Carol piped up with, "Is there a doctor on the raft?"

"Yes, I'm a doctor," replied Captain Figueroa-Longo, in all seriousness.

"Hiya doc," chirped Carol. We ground at the old vaudeville gag.

Carol decided it would be a good idea to try to get some songs going. She started out singing "Glory, glory hallelujah." When she started on "I ain't got a barrel of money," some of the others joined in. I didn't. I just didn't feel like it. But it didn't last long. We were all shivering. I've never been so cold. Someone led us in the Lord's Prayer. And Nicholson and Hofer tried to keep every-

"The searchlight hit us and we shouted for joy. I could feel that light. And I saw that the water was red with blood."

body calm. Hofer kept signaling the planes, four or five of which were now circling the area. Occasionally the planes dropped flares to mark our position.

One of the paratroopers kept pointing eagerly every few minutes saying, "I see a ship, I see a ship." Other people kept telling him to shut up. It always turned out to be a flare fading out on the horizon or just a mirage.

Suddenly several of us saw a light on the horizon. We watched hopefully, then sank back in disappointment when we realized it was only the moon coming up.

Every once in a while somebody would give in to discouragement and insist that it was hopeless—we would never be picked up. The rest of us would talk him out of it, pointing to the reassuring sound of the planes circling up above. Nicholson kept insisting that a ship was on the way. But our endurance was wearing thin. People were babbling, saying whatever came into their heads. Yet there was no panic.

Navigator Nicholson was the first to spot our rescue ship. "After we had been in the water about three hours, I saw a constant light on the horizon," he recalls. "I kept it to myself for a while. I hated to say it was a ship and get a lot of hopes up falsely. But the light was underneath one of the stars in the lip of the Big Dipper. When it continued in the same place, never flickering, I was sure, and I told them that a ship was coming."

A Glow on the Horizon

All of us stretched and craned to see the ship. All we could make out was a steady glow, and it seemed far away. But this time we knew we weren't seeing a mirage, and there was a feeling of excitement all over the raft. The nervous joking stopped, and there was tense quiet as we tried to keep that precious light in view. Sometimes, as the raft careened down into valleys of water, we would lose sight of the light altogether.

After what seemed like hours we began to see the ship. It was still a long way off, but we could see searchlights poking around in the water, looking for us. Hofer, who had been babying the flash-light, preserving the weakened batteries as long as possible, now flashed it on and off to help attract the ship.

Finally the searchlights hit us. The ship fixed us in its lights, and we shouted for joy. I could feel that light. And I saw for the first time that the water in the raft was red with blood. Then the ship began to back away.

"It's a Russian ship and they aren't going to pick us up," somebody cried.

But as we watched, the ship maneuvered around until it was between us and the wind. Then it moved in closer and closer until its great friendly bulk was right alongside. It was the Swiss freighter *Celerina*, which means "The Fast One."

I don't know where we found the strength, but we waved and cheered so much that the skipper didn't realize anyone on the raft was hurt.

With waves now up to 20 feet high, the sea was too rough for launching of boats, so the sailors threw out a line. But we were a tough target, lurching around on the waves. It was a few min-

utes before someone finally managed to catch the rope and hold on. We were made fast to the side of the *Celerina*, and three rope ladders were lowered.

The waves were so high that one minute we'd be looking at the crew on deck, and the next moment we'd be below the ship's water line. A few soldiers had enough strength to catch the rope ladders, however, and they climbed up to the rail. Captain Murray grabbed a ladder, but fell back into the sea. A sailor came down and hauled him back into the raft. Other sailors started helping the rest of us up the ladders.

It took more than an hour to get everyone off the raft. When about 20 people had been taken off it, Colonel Dent was finally able to reach his wife. He lifted her up, spoke to her and tried mouth-to-mouth artificial respiration. "It was too late," Dent later said. "I don't know how you know these things, but the moment I turned around and saw her, I knew she was dead. Dead people are dead."

Two of the sailors lifted her body into a hammock which was raised to the deck. The lifeless forms of two servicemen also were lifted to the ship. No one had been aware that these three people had died during our five-hour ordeal on the raft.

It was early morning, but still dark, when a sailor pulled me onto the deck. I said I was all right, then fell on my face. Somebody caught me and helped me into the crew's mess, where I was given warm clothes and a jolt of whiskey. I couldn't pick it up. A sailor poured it down my throat. It felt wonderful.

Although I had only a few minor burns and bruises, the others had more injuries than any of us had realized. Some had broken bones and internal injuries. Nearly all of us were suffering varying states of shock and exposure. Many had second-degree burns aggravated by the constant chafing of their clothing as the raft buffeted them about.

Three Rafts Were Empty

Captain Figueroa-Longo, the medical officer, ill and barely able to see without his glasses, began treating the injured as best he could. Carol Gould took on nursing chores. The wife and daughter of the *Celerina's* skipper, Capt. Domenico Lugli, seemed to be everywhere at once, giving comfort, administering medicines and generally mothering the whole crowd. The *Celerina's* crew slept in chairs so that we could have their bunks.

We waited in vain for reports that other survivors had been found. Three other life rafts were picked up by ships searching the area, but all of them were empty. Seven bodies were recovered from the sea near where we had ditched—four servicemen, stewardess Jacqueline Brotman, flight engineer James Garrett and copilot Robert Parker. Another 18 persons were never found. Among them were the Hawaiians, Mrs. Hoopii and her two little girls, Specialist Groves and stewardesses Ruth Mudd and Betty Sims.

When the *Celerina* finally docked at Antwerp—five days after we had left the States—the Air Force offered to fly the military survivors to Frankfurt. All of us agreed we had no objections to flying



Mary Foley and swarm of young Foleys, ranging from 1 to 10 years, give the author a warm welcome on

THE END