

‘A huge wave hit the boat and I found myself looking eyeball to eyeball with John before he vanished down again’

There was an attempt to take him off his boat duties but he pulled strings and was allowed to continue working on his boats for the last two years of his service – albeit in civilian clothes in civilian boatyards. There, he helped develop the high-speed launches that were to save the lives of many aircrews forced to ditch in the Second World War.

Mae West

Despite the development of these craft, the RAF was a long way behind the Germans in the organisation of a rescue service. The Luftwaffe had set up its Seenotdienst, equipped with small boats and He59 twin-engined float biplanes before the war. The Battle of Britain demonstrated the superiority of the Luftwaffe equipment. British pilots shot down over the Channel had only their Mae West life-jackets to support them and relied on other pilots guiding boats to them.

The German pilots had inflatable dinghies, flares, brilliant yellow sea dye

and a yellow inner helmet to enable rescuers to find them. In October 1940 the Germans also established a line of floats in the Channel containing bunks, blankets, dry clothes, food, and water sufficient for four men. These floats became havens for shot-down pilots from both sides and were visited by RAF launches as well as German boats and the He59s.

However, Winston Churchill ordered that the seaplanes, despite being painted white with large red crosses, should be shot down. He wrote: ‘We did not recognise this means of rescuing enemy pilots so they could come and bomb our civilian population again.’ It was also believed that the rescue planes were being used for reconnaissance. The Luftwaffe sent Me109s to protect the He59s and dogfights developed when Spitfires and Hurricanes attacked them.

Group Captain Al Deere, the New Zealand fighter pilot, took part in one of these whirling mauls. The He59 was riddled and later towed into Dover but Deere collided head-on with a Me109. With good fortune and great skill he managed to nurse his Spitfire to a crash landing near Manston airfield where he punched his way out of his jammed cockpit before it caught fire. Another well-known fighter pilot, Peter Townsend, was less lucky. His Hurricane was hit by return fire from a Dornier and he parachuted into the sea 20 miles off the coast where he was rescued by a trawler, which sailed into a minefield to reach him.

Grateful survivors

The loss of fighter pilots to the Channel, sometimes only a short distance offshore, became so grave at the height of the battle that the RAF began to emulate the Luftwaffe. Pilots were issued with flares and bright dye and 12 Lysanders were borrowed from Army Cooperation Command to work in coordinated searches with the RAF launches and Royal Navy vessels. A Directorate of Air Sea Rescue was established and the survival chances of aircrew improved considerably.

From February to August 1941, 444 men were rescued out of the 1200 who ditched. In September of that year four special air-sea rescue squadrons were formed. Spitfires, Defiants and Ansons patrolled to find survivors, Ansons and Lysanders dropped packs containing dinghies, food and first-aid supplies and Walrus flying boats picked the grateful survivors from the water.

With the switching of the RAF’s main role from fighter defence of the UK to the heavy bomber attack on Germany, Air Sea Rescue changed its emphasis from looking for single fighter pilots in the Channel to picking up seven-man bomber crews from the North Sea. New equipment and fresh methods were needed for crews, which still relied on pigeons to carry the navigator’s estimate of their position to base.

Fighter Command remained responsible for offshore rescues but Coastal Command with its long-range





aircraft took over the ‘deep search’ rescues. Airborne lifeboats were developed, which were positively luxurious when compared to the old dinghies. Dropped by parachute from Coastal Command aircraft, among them Warwicks, Barracudas and Hudsons, these 27-foot boats had petrol-powered engines, radios, homing devices, and equipment for distilling fresh water from the sea. Crews survived for days in these craft before being picked up by Catalina or Sunderland flying boats.

The arrival of the vast fleets of American bombers meant greatly increased trade for the rescuers. Over two days in September 1943, the Air Sea Rescue Service picked up 118 American airmen. To cope with their larger crews the USAAF developed a bigger lifeboat, which they dropped from Flying Fortresses.

On the offensive

By the end of the war Air Sea Rescue had become a large, well-organised part of the war effort. The Americans had established a patrol line of submarines in the Pacific to pick up downed fliers – including George Bush Snr. The RAF’s Marine Branch had not only saved 13,000 men from the sea, thus earning its motto ‘The Sea Shall Not Have Them’, but had gone on the offensive with its well-armed high-speed

launches taking part in landings and clandestine operations.

The end of hostilities saw the rapid cutback of this global network but the core of the service was retained and in 1953 No. 275 Squadron was equipped with Bristol Sycamore helicopters to provide rescue cover over the North Sea. The introduction of the helicopter changed the nature of the work because, of course, they were able to rescue not only at sea but on mountains as well and so the Air Sea Rescue Service became Search and Rescue.

Swords into Ploughshares

Today, SAR comprises the RAF’s Sea King helicopters of Nos. 22 and 202 Squadrons, the Royal Navy’s Sea Kings of 771 Naval Air Squadron and the HMS Gannet SAR Flight, and the Coastguard’s chartered Bristow machines. A Nimrod is on permanent standby at RAF Kinloss to act as on-scene coordinator and five RAF Mountain Rescue Teams are also on call. Between them they provide year-round 24-hour coverage from the Faeroes to the English Channel and from halfway across the Atlantic to halfway across the North Sea.

Standing watch over this huge area is the RAF Aeronautical Rescue Coordination Centre at Kinloss, which acts rather like a Second World War



Left: Mission accomplished Above: The yellow Sea Kings are a welcome sight to those in distress

fighter controller directing an attack on enemy bombers. The rescue helicopters ‘scramble’ some 2000 times a year and aviators, seamen, mountaineers, oil-rig workers, even a sick passenger lifted from the QE2, have cause to feel grateful to a service that was born in the early days of aviation and came of age during the darkest days of the war. Here we have a perfect example of turning swords into ploughshares.