

101 Airmen Saved from the Sea - David Gray

The Newspaper headline on July 30th 1943 read:

‘101 AIRMEN SAVED FROM THE SEA IN 50 HOURS – 200 PLANES IN DAY & NIGHT SEARCH.’

In what was described by the Air Ministry as “The greatest air-sea rescue operation of the war”, 101 British and American airmen were rescued from the North Sea within 50 hours and landed at different points in England. All of them had been forced down into the water through damage to their aircraft in the heavy, day and night bombing raids on Germany.



Above: *Left*, a B17 Flying Fortress crew have left their damaged plane and have taken to their dinghy. *Centre*: An airborne lifeboat has been dropped, and the crew, having transferred to it, take the dinghy in tow. *Right*: An air-sea rescue launch completes the rescue operation and more valuable lives are saved.

July 1943 saw the devastating **Operation Gomorrah**, a massive Allied bombing campaign against **Hamburg**, Germany, featuring intense night raids by the RAF and daylight strikes by the USAAF, creating horrific firestorms that destroyed vast areas and caused tens of thousands of casualties, marking a shift from previous Ruhr attacks to more destructive urban warfare.

Key Events:

- **July 24-25:** RAF Bomber Command launched the first massive raid, using "Window" (chaff) to confuse German radar, followed by USAAF daylight bombers.
- **July 27-28 & 29-30:** Further devastating RAF night raids created massive firestorms, leading to mass civilian evacuations and immense destruction.
- **Targets:** Hamburg was a crucial port with U-boat yards and oil refineries, making it a strategic priority for the Allies.

On Sunday July 25th, following Bomber Command's massive night assault on Hamburg, United States Fortresses raided northern Germany and 19 were reported missing. The First S.O.S. from these Fortresses was received by a Coastal Command group flying control officer in the late afternoon. As the attacks on industrial Germany continued on a vast scale – Bomber Command raided Essen on the night of Sunday-Monday (25th/26th), and American Forces raided Hamburg in daylight on Monday 26th – more reports of 'ditched' aircraft came in, and rescue operations soon became intensified.



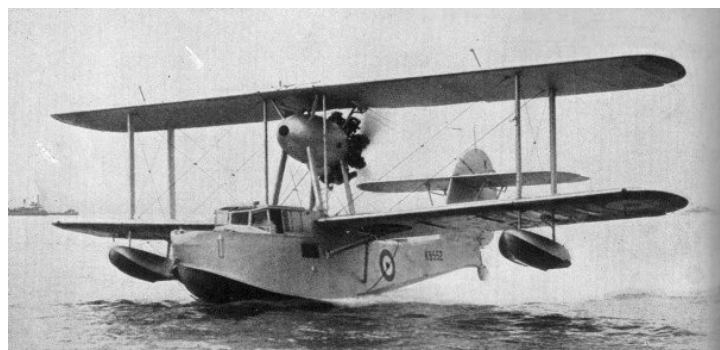
Left: United States B17 Flying Fortresses silhouetted against the smoke of Hamburg during one of the attacks on the city as part of **Operation Gomorrah**.

Top right, in the picture, and far behind the bombers, a German Focke Wulf 190 fighter is giving chase.

The R.A.F. and the United States Army Air Force between them had made seven attacks on Hamburg since July 24th.

Airborne Lifeboats

High-speed launches (*below left*), Walrus amphibians (*below right*), lifeboats, trawlers and fishing-smacks cooperated in the search for survivors, while airborne lifeboats carried by air-sea rescue aircraft were twice dropped in one day and once subsequently to aircrews nearly 200 miles apart. More than 200 aircraft from Bomber, Fighter and Coastal Commands, as well as aircraft of the U.S.A.A.F., also took part in the operations, searching by day and night and guarding the dinghies, lifeboats, launches and Walruses from possible enemy interference.



Most of the rescues were more than 100 miles from England, about half-way across the North Sea. A few airmen were seen by the Royal Observer Corps and rescued within sight of the English coast. But one crew of nine Americans were saved when an airborne lifeboat was dropped by parachute approximately 200 miles from England and only 60 miles from the Dutch coast.

On Sunday evening (25th July), when the rescue work began, reports of 'ditched' aircraft were continuously being received by a Coastal Command group flying control organisation, which occupies a long narrow room with walls covered by charts of the North Sea.

"I've never known anything like it," said the group senior flying control officer. "On the second afternoon alone, we had as many as 50 reports about dinghies which had been sighted. Positions

poured in – from the ‘ditching’ aircraft, from aircraft flying over the North Sea, from radio stations and launches, from R.A.F. stations and commands.”

Aid of W.A.A.F.

Members of the W.A.A.F. (Women’s Auxiliary Air Force), recorded the messages, and, after careful analysis, ‘fixes’ were obtained and the W.A.A.F. on duty at flying control helped to plot the exact positions. Then the comprehensive rescue machinery was put into operation.

Bombers were directed to search one area to look for a certain crew, American Air Force H.Q. was asked to search another area, and Fighter Command provided air over. Sometimes a high-speed launch was considered adequate to pick up a particular crew, sometimes a Walrus aircraft was sent out. On three occasions Coastal Command aircraft carrying an airborne lifeboat were assigned the rescue task.



At one period more than 70 aircraft were in the air at once – Fortresses, Halifaxes, Stirlings and Beaufighters (*above*). Distance, weather, possible enemy action, relief for aircraft reaching the limit of their endurance, and many other factors, required constant attention. An airborne lifeboat was first dropped shortly after noon on Monday (26th), when the commander of an air-sea rescue squadron, Wing Commander B. G. Corry, D.F.C., saw a Fortress which had just ditched in the sea about two miles from his aircraft.



“The crew had clambered onto the wings and were getting into two dinghies,” he said. “Three men were in one dinghy and another was in the water. When the dinghies started drifting apart, I decided to drop the lifeboat (*left*). It was quickly boarded by the aircrew, and as I left it was chugging back to land, with another aircraft providing air cover. The survivors could not have been in the water for more than a few minutes.”

Later in the afternoon of the same day it was reported that a Fortress had ditched 60 miles north of Borkum. An airborne lifeboat aircraft was immediately dispatched, as the area was known to be sown with mines and it would have been dangerous for surface craft to attempt the rescue. “We dropped the lifeboat without difficulty,” said the flight-lieutenant pilot of the aircraft, “and the American boys scrambled aboard it. There were nine of them, and we gave them air protection until darkness.”

R.A.F. "Persuasion"



About noon on Tuesday (27th), it was reported that a foreign trawler had stopped the lifeboat, had taken the airmen on board, and was heading towards enemy territory. A British Halifax aircraft, however, swept over the trawler and persuaded it to turn about and proceed towards England.

Left: Airborne lifeboat being dropped to the crew of a ditched B-17 Flying Fortress.

An Anson (*below left*), with Spitfire escort, sighted a Ventura bomber (*below right*), circling over 10 men in a dinghy and pinpointed the position for two Walruses of the same squadron, which immediately flew to the spot. They came down on the water safely and took aboard the 10 American airmen but the heavy swell made a take-off impossible, and they had no alternative but to begin to taxi back to an East Coast port. For an hour they struggled through the heavy seas until a launch met them and took aboard the rescued men. One Walrus was then able to take off, and it flew back to base. After more than eight hours of taxiing, the other Walrus reached port safely.

