



CLIPPER

A publication of the Pan Am Historical Foundation

Volume 3, Number 1 — Summer 1997

'All saved!' The story of a rescue at sea

The following article is condensed from a 43-page report on the sea rescue, written by Commander William K. Earle. The Commander has given copies of the report and photos to the Pan Am Historical Foundation.

The date was Oct. 16, 1956. The time was nearly 0300 hours. Captain Richard Ogg was piloting his Pan American Stratocruiser high across the Pacific Ocean on a routine flight from Honolulu to San Francisco.

Thousands of feet below, Commander William K. Earle was patrolling a lonely spot in the ocean with the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Pontchartrain.

Within minutes of these two vessels passing in the night, the Captain and the Commander would become responsible for

planning the rescue and safety of 31 souls on board Clipper "Sovereign of the Skies." Here's how it happened:

It was just a little after 0300 when the nighttime silence was shattered by an urgent communication on the ship's radio receiver. "This is Clipper 943! We are having emergency engine trouble! May have to ditch! Please alert your crew and stand by to assist us!"

The stunned night watch leaped into action, but not before responding: "Roger your message, Clipper 943. Will give you continuous beacon. Our crew is being alerted."

Even though the ship and its crew were fully prepared and intensively trained for a "ditching," the dreaded D-word rang an ominous tone. The phrase "All Hands on Deck," was coined for just such

an occasion and in no time, the ship was awake with activity — each man to his station.

Another communique: "This is Clipper 943! I'm losing altitude fast! I'm coming in on your beacon and will try to make it to the ship! Can you give me a recommended ditch heading?"

According to Commander Earle, the most important factor involved is the ditch heading. The ditching course must be selected with great care, after a detailed study of the wind and swell conditions. The optimum is for the plane to land up wind and across a swell.

The calculations were quickly computed and the heading was set for "245 degrees true." A previously prepared "ditch check-off list" was fol-

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Pan Am Flight 943, as it landed in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. (Official U.S. Coast Guard photo)

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lowed in a flurry of organized activity — with only minutes to go before the ditching was to take place. The ship indicated the suggested landing path by dropping water lights overboard and releasing star shells.

Meanwhile, Captain Ogg was doing his own calculations as he orbited over the cutter, now beaming its beacons upward. He determined that because he still had a large amount of fuel on the plane and that its altitude could be held without too much difficulty, he would try to postpone the ditching until daylight. Landing a plane on the ocean under any condition is terrifying, but at night, with only artificial illumination, it would be doubly so.

Now, there would be more time for both the Pan American and the Pontchartrain crews to review and be ready for every possible contingency. The Captain and the Commander kept up continuous radio conversation, going over the procedures again and again.

The passengers aboard the

Clipper had been kept fully informed of developments. They were told to don their life jackets and remove their shoes before being moved up to the forward section of the airplane. It was a tribute to the seven Pan American crew members that there was no sign of panic in the passengers, who numbered 24, including three small children.

'How do you like your eggs?'

Because of the new schedule, new calculations had to be made for the ditch heading. So at first light, Commander Earle radioed Captain Ogg: "Good morning, Captain. It's a beautiful day down here. The easterly swells have increased a bit and I suggest we now shift to 330 degrees as a heading. We are prepared to mark out a landing path on this new heading with fire extinguisher foam whenever you want it."

Captain Ogg responded "We're all ready up here. My gals have done a great job and the passengers are quite calm. I think I'll wait until my gasoline is almost gone to reduce the chance of fire.

This will probably be in about an hour but I'll give you plenty of advance warning." Commander Earle advised the Captain that they would be having breakfast together before long and then asked how he liked his eggs.

Finally, full daylight arrived. With his gasoline nearly gone, Captain Ogg circled to begin his last run. The Pontchartrain got underway and at full speed laid a two-mile-long foam path on the ditch heading as men began piling into boats, hauling rubber life rafts up to the rail, and flopping Jacob's ladders over the side. Swimmers and deck rescue details were standing by. All preparations had been made. This was the real one.

Commander Earle's last radio words to Captain Ogg were: "You just set her down nice and easy, as close to us as possible, and we'll have you out in no time. Good luck and God bless you!" Captain Ogg replied "We have full confidence in you."

At 0815, after nearly five hours of preparation, the plane touched down on the makeshift runway of water. It hit, bounced, hit again. The bow went down and the tail came up and then broke off. Miraculously, survivors began climbing out onto the wings and launched life rafts. Charging up at full speed, the Pontchartrain launched her boats.

The first boat began picking up passengers within seven minutes after the plane touched down. After checking the sinking fuselage for other survivors, the second boat took aboard the occupants of the life rafts. As the rescue boats were slowly picking their way through the crash debris, the Commander and his crew were ready to receive the survivors.



Passengers and crew were safe aboard the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Pontchartrain 20 minutes after ditching. (Official U.S. Coast Guard photo)



Within minutes after ditching, passengers began climbing into life rafts. (Official U.S. Coast Guard photo)

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The first motor boat arrived with 14 passengers — six men, six women and two children. The second boat was returning and the magic number was 17, which should include another small child. "Please God," prayed Commander Earle, "let there be 17 aboard!"

It seemed an eternity before the boat tied up to unload its precious cargo. As the men and women climbed up the ladders, the ship's crew began yelling out the count. "Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen," and finally, "seventeen!" A great cheer went up from the men on deck.

Within 20 minutes of the ditching, the plane crew and passengers were aboard the cutter, none with serious injury. Commander Earle went to the Public Address system and choked out the words "All saved! All saved!"

Meanwhile, the whole world was waiting for word of the rescue. Once the thumbs up sign was given, congratulatory messages to both the Captain and the Commander poured in from such people as the Secretary of the Treasury, Pan American executives from all divisions, friends, family and colleagues.

A United flight passing overhead transmitted: "The captain

and crew of United 73 wish to be one of the first to offer their sincere gratitude and congratulations on your rescue today." Then came a barrage of requests from newsmen and radio commentators for personal accounts and interviews.

An invitation to dinner

Shortly after the survivors settled in with warm clothing, food and minor medical attention, the Commander and the Captain met. "We are all mighty grateful to you and your men," said the Captain. According to Commander Earle, "though we had a great deal to say to each other, this was not the time. We talked briefly about the condition of the passengers and I invited him to join me for dinner that night."

While there would be plenty of time for talk during the three-day trip to San Francisco, there also were many details to square away. Reports had to be written and a complete critique of the operation had to be developed.

As the Pontchartrain drew near San Francisco, another cutter met the ship and dropped off Coast Guard and Pan American officials, who brought along appropriate clothing for the survi-

vors. Because they had lost everything in the airplane, they had been wearing Coast Guard-issued clothing.

Just inside the Golden Gate Bridge, the Pontchartrain was met by fire boats spouting their water hoses, ships blowing their whistles and hundreds of small boats carrying welcome home signs. As they headed for the dock, a band struck up a lively tune and a great crowd surged forward amid popping flashbulbs and panning TV cameras.

When the excitement had died down, the Commander received a letter from the Pan American Captain. It read, in part: "I think you and your men are entitled to an unabashed feeling of deep pride as you contemplate your part in the episode. So I say again — thanks so much. Thanks, also, for the autographed picture of the Pontchartrain. This picture will remain a permanent and cherished part of my home." Captain Ogg's letter was framed and posted in the Pontchartrain's Recreation Room.

Commander Earle, now retired and living in Florida, advised that he and Dick Ogg remained friends for years. Captain Ogg died several years ago.