

SURVIVAL IN THE SOUTH SEAS

The Story of a Naval Aviator's Twenty Days on a Raft

By Lt. (jg) GEORGE H. SMITH, in the February Information Bulletin of the United States Bureau of Naval Personnel

ON JULY 14 my flight took off from Guadalcanal at 1330 for a routine combat patrol over Rendova and Munda. We were flying Grumman Wildcats. *En route* to Munda we encountered a series of thunderheads that were so well developed that we could neither go over nor under them. We were, however, able to circle the storm to the south, and arrived on station one hour late.

Though our mission was combat patrol, we found it necessary to start home almost immediately, for we had barely enough gas to get us home by skirting the storm to the south as we had done coming in. We decided that it would be best to fly "on the water," following the coast of New Georgia as far as possible, then go "on instruments." Flying through the clouds on instruments, we hoped to break out by the time we got to the Russell Islands.

My compass, unfortunately, was not working, so my only hope was to fly wing on someone whose instruments were all intact. Shortly after entering the clouds at the eastern end of New Georgia, our formation dispersed and every man was on his own. It would have been foolish for me to continue on instruments with a compass I couldn't depend on, so I returned to Rendova. I decided to try to go around the storm to the south and possibly get close to the Russell Islands before running out of fuel and facing a landing in the water. I followed that plan, but the storm had moved farther south, and when I came down in the water at 1900, I was between 50 to 70 miles south of the Russell Islands.

Landing a Wildcat on the ocean is like dropping a pebble on the water. The water impedes its progress, but it continues to go down. After the belly of my plane hit the water, the plane

went forward 15 ft. to 20 ft., then nosed down for Davy Jones's locker.

Fortunately, I was prepared. I had the hood locked open, and I had an extra canteen and an extra emergency kit on my parachute harness. My shoulder straps and safety belt were drawn as tight as I could get them. When the plane stopped its forward motion, I disengaged the safety harness, kept my parachute buckled on me, gave a hard push with my legs and went about 5 feet up to the surface.

My rubber raft was of the small, one-man, seat-pack type that is an integral part of the seat-type parachute.

Once in the water, it took about five minutes to unpack and inflate the raft. It was dark when I landed on the water, but, despite that fact, I finally succeeded in removing and inflating the raft. I dumped my heavy, water-soaked parachute pack into the raft and painstakingly worked myself aboard, being careful all the while not to capsize the raft and run the risk of losing it in the dark. Completely exhausted, I lay athwartships for almost five minutes, vomiting up the sea-water I had swallowed during the struggle in the water. When I was sufficiently rested, I worked myself farther into the raft and assumed the sitting position from which, but for a very few exceptions, I was not to stir for twenty days.

The night air blowing through my water-soaked clothes gave me a chill, but I shivered for nearly two hours before I finally weakened and decided to unpack my parachute for a blanket.

Once unpacked, the chute was so big and clumsy that there was not room in the raft for all of it. I therefore cut off half the shroud lines and stowed them in the raft against possible future need, and cut off the top half of the

