

saving experience in a surf club were flown down and arrived at the drome just after the report came in from the first plane. The raft was close in-shore, drifting towards the mouth of the Mackay River. The river has three bars, and when the weather is in the quarter the sea piles up on the bars and there's not much show of anything lasting. Either side of the river mouth the beach is flat. Aircraft can land on the sand. One of the light D.H.s took the life-saving crowd and a portable radio. They made the beach, and Steve and Lin and I had the Huddy out to sea spotting the raft. The men on the beach waited. That was all we could do, hang about and wait till the sea took the raft into shore.

That morning conditions weren't so bad as they had been the night before. The sea was still running hard on the raft, and as we watched it would go out of sight, then come up again while the water played with it. The four boys lay still. As the raft swept they moved a little. But there was no sign from them that they had seen us. There was nothing to show that we mattered any more.

As the raft drifted in, gulls fell round it and beat at the air above the boys. You saw the flicker of their wings and the specks of their bodies like torn paper blown over the raft and the chop of the waves. The life-saving crew moved along the beach. We flew inland for a bit and then back out to sea. Off the river mouth the long lines of the surf were dirty with mud from the bars.

At nine o'clock it was all over. The raft was close to the beach. It passed the outer line of the bar breakers and washed down towards the second. The sea was too rough for the swimmers. The raft danced up and on the crest. It seemed to stop there a fraction longer than it had stayed on any earlier crest. Then it turned, and as it turned it tipped and the boys went listlessly from it and there was only the glistening raft and the total emptiness of the sea. The breakers swept on. We banked over and the sun came out and the shadow of the kite dropped on the raft and the beach and the swimmers were behind and we headed back to the field.

That was the first time I saw anything like that, and it's the one I remember because there wasn't anything we could do. Maybe we were playing against the sea and didn't understand it. Maybe anything. The only thing that was certain to me, and there weren't any reasons to make you sure of that, was the fact that when we went to look for those boys they were already gone and the one boy left awake was waving to us. But was he really waving to us, or was he already waving us away, knowing then, though he couldn't really have known, that we were no use, that we were helpless as he was helpless, and the only thing at all important was the great aching space of the sea, the wind from the east and the open ocean, and the cloud that hid us when we turned away from them and went back to the field?

