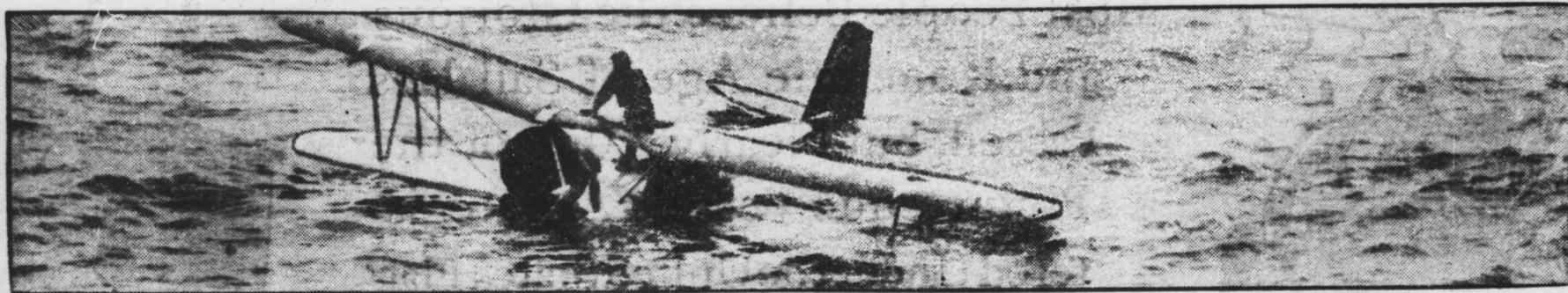


Five Days Adrift in a Rubber Boat!



A Navy plane after a forced landing at sea, with flotation gear inflated.

—Official Photograph, U. S. Navy.

While 135 Naval Vessels and 200 Planes Searched for Him, Chief Pilot Verne Harshman, U. S. N., Faced a Thousand Deaths on a Rubber Raft in Mid-Pacific—The Account of His Battle for Life Is a Thrilling Record of the Navy Department.

BY JOSEPH S. EDGERTON.

THE story of a naval aviator, forced down in the Pacific Ocean, who drifted for five days in a little rubber life raft, harassed by sharks and dolphin and endangered by a tropical sun which threatened to melt the rubber of his frail craft and sink it, will enter Navy records as one of the most stirring epics of the men who go down to sea in airplanes. Fighting off sharks with a short oar, pouring water over the rubber of his raft to cool it and making a patch with rubber cement to stop a hole in one of the flotation cells which was perforated by the sun, stand out in the story of the pilot's heartbreaking struggle.

For five days he drifted helplessly after his plane had gone down, bearing up under the blow of seeing one steamer pass him by, unseeing, at close range and a flying boat passing him, before he finally was picked up by a steamship. During this time 135 naval vessels and 200 planes were making an intensive search for him.

For the five days he was without food and obtained water by catching it in a silk scarf and permitting the tiny trickle to run into a canteen top.

The first full account of the adventure, which occurred during the Spring maneuvers of the battle fleet, has just been received by the Navy Department from the victim, Chief Aviation Pilot Verne W. Harshman, then one of the pilots of a Navy Curtiss Hawk fighter squadron, VF Squadron 2, U. S. S. Langley. Harshman has just been sent to the U. S. S. Lexington, aircraft carrier, at San Diego, Calif., for assignment to Scouting Plane Squadron 3, Battle Force.

IN his report, a thrilling drama despite the simplicity of its style and the evident lack of any effort at heroics, Harshman says that his squadron was carrying out the duty of protecting observation planes which were spotting battleship gunfire on a cloudy Tuesday morning when his epic adventure began. He was flying in his position as leader of the sixth section of the squadron and had been in the air about two hours when the squadron started through a cloud bank, which was closing in all around.

"When a man has to fly through a cloud," Harshman reported, "it is necessary that he follow closely the planes ahead, in order to keep them within sight. We had just got well into a cloud when my auxiliary tank supply of gasoline ran out, with the result that the motor cut out and I lost some altitude and sight of the rest of the squadron.

"I got my motor to running again by switching to the main tank. Because of the fact that I had seen the squadron climbing, I climbed up through the clouds. The ceiling of the clouds was about 7,000 feet. When I got up there I looked around and made a circle to make sure that I saw in all directions, but I did not see any one. I then made a fast spiral down through the clouds into the clear below. The ceiling was between 2,000 and 2,500 feet."

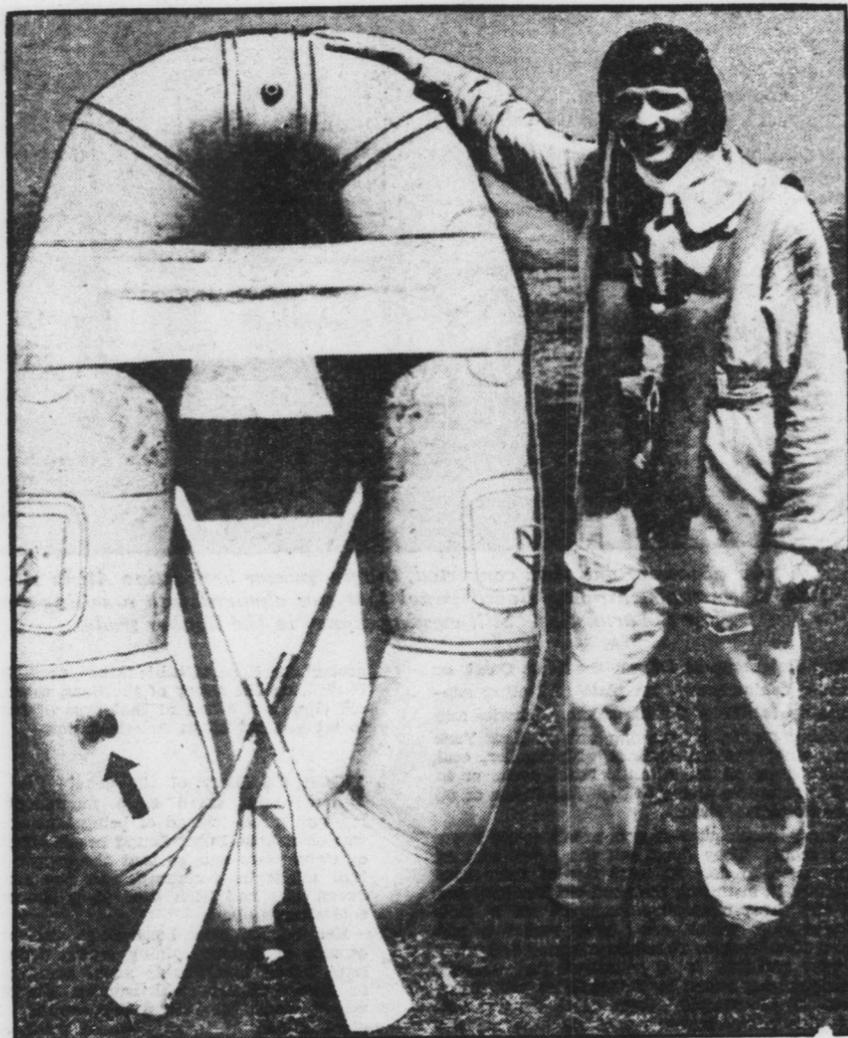
There follows a gripping account of his realization that he was lost, alone at sea, and of his search for his squadron or of some boat or plane which could help him to safety.

Coming out beneath the clouds, with only the vacant sea below and gray sky around, Harshman circled, straining his eyes for boats or planes which were not there. He set about making careful scouting circuits, trying to return each time to his starting point where he had last seen the squadron, hoping they might return to search for him.

His first circuit was a square in which he flew five minutes north, five minutes east, five minutes south and then five minutes west by watch and compass. He did not see anything on this circuit and so made a larger square with legs of 10 minutes each.

The weather was growing steadily thicker when he started a third circuit. By the time this was done the weather was so bad he had to drop to 1,000 feet and was unable to see more than 2 miles. His gasoline supply was getting low and he made up his mind to land in the open sea while he had power enough to prevent a "dead-stick" landing. He turned his plane into the wind, blowing from about due west, and after flying a few minutes landed in a running sea, shortly before noon.

Despite his stress of mind, he made a good landing and did not hurt the plane or himself. He set off the flotation gear, compressed air



Verne W. Harshman, chief aviation pilot, U. S. N., with the rubber boat in which he remained adrift for 5 days, from March 17 to March 22, after being forced down in the Navy Boeing fighter of which he was pilot. Harshman was sighted and rescued by the Hamburg-American line about 40 miles west of Cape Marzo, Colombia. The two black spots on the side of the boat (to which the arrow points) are patches made by Harshman after the sun had melted the rubber at these places.

being used to blow up two large flotation bags on each side of the fuselage. The gear worked well and both bags inflated to their full capacity.

HERE begins the story of the real adventure, told in Harshman's own words:

"I then broke out from my baggage and tool compartment my rubber boat, canteen, Very pistol signals, red flags, a pair of pliers and a piece of white line about 4 fathoms long. I laid all this gear on the top wing of the plane.

"About a half hour after I landed, it started raining very hard, and rained almost continuously until after dark. About an hour after I landed, I thought I detected a slight leak in my left flotation bag, so I inflated my rubber life boat. About 6 p.m. it deflated and the left wing sank, leaving the right wing sticking out at about a 40-degree angle. I launched my boat, got the gear I had laid on the wing, went aboard the boat and tied up to the tail of the plane.

"I wanted to stay as near the plane as possible as long as she was afloat, and as long as I was tied up to the plane it kept me from drifting so fast.

"About 2 o'clock in the morning, the right wing bag deflated. I was warned by a kind of sighing noise the plane made that she was sinking, so I cast off.

"During the night, when it cleared enough for me to see a few stars, which occurred at intervals, I fired a red Very star. I fired four altogether that first night. I did not see any lights or ships the first night.

"Wednesday was overcast and raining quite a little, most of the day. I did not sight anything that day. I estimated my general drift

to be in a northeasterly direction, and about two knots per hour. Sharks started bothering me this day, but I managed to keep them away from the boat by using my oar like a spear and hitting them with it. They would come up under the boat, hit it with their tails and spin me around several times when I did not see them coming up and get a chance to hit them first. I also saw numerous spotted dolphin. These fish were most playful and seemed to take a delight in rubbing their sides against the bottom of my boat, in the same spirit, I think, as a horse rubs against a fence or tree. During the day I saw several schools of porpoises. Because it is so quiet out there, they would blow and sound very loud. I also saw a couple of black fish, but none of them paid any attention to me except the sharks and dolphin. They were a constant source of trouble, because they insisted on striking my boat.

"During the morning of this day I thought out an idea to catch water to drink, as I wanted to save my supply in the canteen as long as possible. I took my scarf, which was made of parachute silk, tore it in such a manner as to get the greatest surface possible exposed to the rain. I then secured the metal container of my canteen to one of the oar locks; with the scarf secured to my neck; I extended it with both hands in a horizontal position and placed my pliers in the center. This formed a kind of funnel, through which the rain water dripped into my canteen container. This method proved sufficient to cover my water supply during the entire five days. I did not touch my regular canteen water until I was positive that I would be picked up by the Cerigo, on the fifth day.

"Thursday: Much the same as Wednesday, as far as the weather and so forth was concerned. I did not sight anything.

"Friday: Same as Wednesday, except it cleared up a little more. There was a period Friday when the sun was out about three hours. I saw the moon twice for just a little while. Fifteen or sixteen times a day sharks would come around. They did not bother me so much at night. They would always come one at a time. I could see their wakes at night by the phosphorus caused by their passing through the water. When the sun came out it was very hot. I had to pour water on my rubber boat to keep it cool, for, if I did not, the rubber became so hot it got soft and started sloughing. About noon Friday I heard a hissing sound and discovered a leak on the right-hand side of my forward air chamber. I finally managed to get the leak patched, but had a lively time preparing the rubber to receive this patch while holding the air in at the same time. All rubber boats are supplied with a patching outfit and a hand pump. This leak was caused by the rubber expanding, due to heat from the sun. I found that if the sun hit this cement which I used to make the patch it would melt. I kept this spot wet and covered with a signal flag.

"Nothing happened for the rest of Friday or Friday night, except the constant appearance of sharks and spotted dolphin.

"Saturday: It cleared up some and there was fair visibility during the day. About 8:30 Saturday night I sighted a masthead light of a ship. About 10 minutes later, I could make out both of her running lights. She came fairly close at hand, port side to, headed in what I estimated to be a southerly direction. She was close enough for me to hear her machinery clearly. It was a small coastwise steamer, with a Diesel engine. When she got to a point which I thought would be the closest one I fired my two remaining Very stars, but these were unnoticed. I then threw my Very pistol away, because I had no more ammunition and it was useless weight.

"I later found that this ship was bound for Buenaventura, Colombia, from Balboa. I met her captain ashore the following Monday. He shook my hands with tears in his eyes and seemed very glad to see me.

"On the night that I had fired my last Very stars he had a colored native seaman on watch. The next morning the seaman reported to the captain that he had seen 'two falling stars, and thought it queer that they were red.' The captain stated that if he had found me, he would have turned right around and taken me back to Balboa.

"I saw nothing further Saturday night.

"Sunday: The weather cleared. I sighted a plane about 8 a.m. He was flying low and too far away to see me. I later found out that this was one of the Pan-American Airway planes making its Sunday trip from Buenaventura to Panama. At about 11:30 or 11:45 Sunday I sighted land for the first time, which I think was Cape Marzo, Colombia. About 12:15 I sighted a ship and began rowing so as to place myself directly ahead of it. As the ship came closer I waved my red flag, trying to attract their attention. The captain of this boat stated later that he and his first mate had seen this flag, but took it to be a cormorant sitting on a log, flapping his wings.

"When I was certain they saw me I took a good, big drink of water from my canteen. I was picked up at 12:30 p.m. by the S. S. Cerigo of the Hamburg-American line, Capt. Kari Manitius commanding. The captain and his first officer had just finished getting their noon position, shooting the sun, which was latitude 6 degrees 21 minutes north, longitude 77 degrees 57 minutes west, which is approximately 38 miles off Cape Marzo, Colombia. The ship maneuvered to get close to me and lowered her accommodation ladder. I was helped up the ladder by the first and second officers.

"The act of rowing to place myself ahead of the ship had made me very weak. As a matter of fact I almost passed out. I was given a large sized glass of some kind of schnapps. This is a distilled German drink of a high alcoholic content. When this schnapps reached my stomach it pretty nearly blew the top off my head. I was under this feeling for five or ten minutes, when my head cleared. I found out that the ship was bound for Buenaventura, Colombia, and due in about 10 o'clock Monday morning.

"I then tried to send a radio to Commander Carrier Divisions and to my own commanding

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