



U.S. Coast Guard History Program

THE CRASH AND SINKING OF PBM 699

By

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The Martin Mariner PBM-5, tail number 699, Coast Guard rescue seaplane, was doomed to failure, but not what the pilot expected as he carried his orders to his aircraft. It was the morning of Tuesday, August 27, 1946.

As at most Search and Rescue (SAR) stations, the Coast Guard in the latter WWII years, was provided the newest and most powerful of the Martin PBM seaplanes. The turrets and armament were removed and the aircraft was configured to carry survival equipment in the bomb bays. The jet assist take off (JATO) attachments were on the waist hatches and its hull strengthened. This was no left-over WWII bomber but the Navy's latest final version of the patrol surveillance plane, suited for a number of missions, in the Coast Guard SAR being primary. Its only limiting factor was the unknown; the suitability, each time, either landing or take off, in seas that would not cooperate. Rough weather and storms was the aviator's ultimate problem.

This day's San Diego crew had an additional benefit, for the station's commanding officer, CDR D. B. MacDiarmid, had studied, demonstrated and taught rough sea landings and take offs, an ultimate compendium to finish the British rescue work, famed for its heroic WWII SAR teams. PBM 669 pilot and crew knew their mission.

On the ramp the tractor slowly floated the huge seaplane, when bow line and beaching gear were cast off the seaplane buttoned up in preparation for departure. A channel controlled by NAS North Island signified a clear take-off. Full power advanced, PBM 699 swiftly found the step, was airborne and climbing. With an easy turn away from Point Loma, she left San Diego on a course set to rendezvous in the open sea with *Rum River*, a tanker about 350 miles to the West. By early afternoon the Coast Guard's SAR flight made directly to the tanker. This writer was a crew member, one of two survival specialists (a modified aviation ordnanceman) seated in the waist as the approach was made from a cruising altitude of about 5000 feet. It had been a bumpy, stormy ride but there was good visibility, the seas looked well made up, the landing appeared no worse than some done in practice.

Touch down at the scene, from this observer's perch in the waist felt normal when suddenly a heavy thump was experienced back in the tunnel, then the plane nosed up with a lurch followed by a nose down hard stop. Without seating restraints (that was one thing lacking in those early days) the sudden stop threw the waist crewmen forward into the bunk area but luckily all the sharp aluminum fittings and uprights were clothed in mattress padding. Still the head-on stop caused a short minute of mental confusion until the other (bow) ordnanceman, Frank Hucks, came back with bad news. Frank reported that the bow had failed and opened to the sea. The forward hatch was restraining a flooding bow but the seaplane was sinking slowly. He thought the engines were water stopped and parts of the twin rudders and elevators were missing. All hands, shaken but looking good. The aircraft was going nowhere.

The ordeal began. The seas were much rougher and higher than reported, surface winds gusting to high levels and varying directions. It was now a lost mission but under the conditions, the pilots did a magnificent job, no injuries of note. The plane stopped sinking when the wing floats came into play. It was still impossible to get a dingy away as the wind and the sea trapped the light rubber inflated raft blowing it from the waist hatch to under the wing. The tanker's boat came near with the ailing crewman but was informed that the aircraft would not fly.

The boat returned the patient to the tanker and then returned to the plane to pick up the crew. It was impossible to come alongside with the aircraft's gyrations in the rough seas. The ordnanceman rigged a line between the port waist snubbing post and the boat asking the boat crew to back off and keep the line taut. The inflatable rubber dinghy was attached to the stretched line and the crew one at a time hand over hand made their way to the boat. At the civilian tanker RUM RIVER after a successful Jacob's ladder climb and some dry clothes, there was the welcome invitation to the cold-cut table for sandwiches and coffee. Food in hand, the crew was back on deck to watch if the seaplane could withstand the storm. As the darkness progressed nothing changed at the damaged seaplane, after a hearty evening meal, the aviators worn out and disappointed, sacked in.

Wednesday was gloomy with a chill wind blowing, the seas 4 to 8 feet, a rough state 4. Enroute were USCGC *Diligence* to pick up the patient and USCGC *Hermes* to assist in salvage operations. A damage assessment crew was mustered and with the help of *Rum River* returned to the PBM to check the possibilities for a tow. Otherwise, with the amount of fuel on board a fire could soon send it to Davy Jones Locker. It appeared towable. A call had been made to the Navy who had available in the Port of San Pedro in California USS *Albemarle*, one of its best aviation tenders.

Preparations were begun and a tow established with *Hermes*. Possible interception was ahead as the Navy agreed to send its tender. Early Thursday with the seas somewhat calmer, *Hermes* began to tow the plane stern first on a long line, the distance paying respect to the high octane fuel still on board the PBM. As the day progressed the seas began to build again and were a rough sea state 5 by the time the rendezvous with the Navy tender, *Albemarle*, was made.

Albemarle's crew was outstanding; the most efficient and seaman-like team a crew member and former sea-going marine had ever seen! The two vessels took the action needed to bring the water-logged PBM to *Albemarle's* starboard side. *Hermes* enjoyed the first respite in its day as being in the lee of the *Albemarle's* huge hull the small cutter experienced some comfort from the storm.

The Navy crew climbed onto the towed PBM, brought down the special lines for lift, hooked on the hoisting system lifting eye located in the wing center section and began to lift the plane from the water. Bad luck intervened as just when they had lifted the aircraft enough to start a drain *Albemarle* caught a heavy roll that lifted the water-logged over-weight PBM clear of the water, breaking the wing's main spar, returning the airplane to the sea, making it impossible to lift a second time.

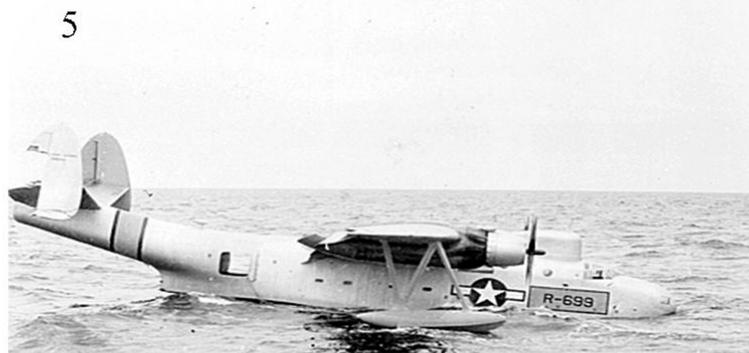
The stalwart 699 stayed afloat, a tribute to its rugged build, joining the lonely *Hermes* to resume the boring task of a slow tow.

Friday dawned bright and clear with rolling seas, the PBM faithfully wallowing astern as the *Hermes* crawled along at 4 to 5 knots. That day perhaps a hundred miles made good with probably another 150 or more miles to go. It looked like we would make port Sunday at the latest unless there were more handling problems as we continued the San Diego course.

As an old *Hermes* seaman, (the author sailed in her at the beginning of the war), it was interesting to note the comfortable facilities on the tanker compared to what this old 165-footer presented. But it had been home, and the skipper, one of those chief petty officers commissioned at the beginning of WWII, was a friend. Sort of old times, it was good hours on the bridge, bad coffee and swapping sea stories.

Early Saturday morning, before the sun was up, the stern watch sounded the alarm that PBM 699 was sinking. The bottom of the plane had probably ruptured as she quickly began to sink. The Captain ordered the tow line severed, by the time the crew was up for one last look there was nothing to see.

Sunday, the 1st of September, brought the air crew to the station dock, with little to take ashore but dirty clothes. CDR Johnson, the executive officer, not known for being friendly when things went awry, was there to meet them. He looked meaningfully at the scroungy survivors, asked in his best official voice, "couldn't find a razor?"



- (1) Copilot.
- (2) Rigging rubber dinghy for evacuation.
- (3) Tanker's life boat handling line from plane.
- (4) View from waist hatch to tanker, note rudder damage.
- (5) PBM 699 down at the bow, note missing parts to rudder.



San Diego
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Photo

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Vessels Reach Damaged Plane

The navy seaplane tender Albemarle rendezvoused late yesterday with the coast guard cutter Hermes at a point 175 miles west of San Diego to salvage a Martin Mariner seaplane damaged on a mercy flight Tuesday, but rough seas were expected to delay further operations until dawn today, the Coast Guard Air station reported.

The plane's bow was smashed by waves in a landing made near the tanker Rum River to take off a critically ill passenger. Lt. Comdr. B. F. Engel, pilot, and eight crew members escaped injury. The Hermes, one of three cutters sent to the rescue Tuesday night, kept the plane in tow yesterday until the Albemarle arrived from San Pedro shortly before dusk.

The coast guard cutter Diligence was due at San Pedro at 3 a.m. today with the stricken passenger, taken off the Rum River.

Plane Salvage Attempt Fails

Efforts to salvage a coast guard Martin Mariner seaplane which smashed its bow in an ocean landing Wednesday 200 miles west of San Diego failed when the craft sank yesterday 15 miles from here while being towed to port by the cutter Hermes, the coast guard air station reported.

The \$250,000 plane was damaged badly while on a mercy flight to the tanker Rum River. Lt. Comdr. Ben Engel, pilot, and eight crewmen were uninjured and removed to the Hermes.

After efforts of the navy seaplane tender Albemarle to hoist the craft aboard failed Thursday, the plane was towed tail-first toward San Diego.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

This eyewitness story is told to provide the Coast Guard historian with information the author believes was not available in official files. The intervening 68 years has practically destroyed even the memory of such an event. The Coast Guard had returned to the Treasury Department at January 1, 1946, to resume its service as both one of the five Armed Forces of the United States and also the many tasked service of the Treasury Department. The large WWII expansion of the Coast Guard, then the sudden downsizing, caught the service shorthanded, there was a dearth of exploits during that war that did not make its way to journals, logs, or even reports.

I discovered no official files in my research of this crash or rescue. The log of CGC *Hermes* was not available for that period. It may have contained tow information as well as CGC *Diligence's* log could have had information of transporting the critically ill tanker crewman. Checking with *Albemarle* crew via email turned up no knowledge of the incident.

The *San Diego Union's* archived information provided most of the details of the event and was most helpful with providing the exact dates. If it were not for Master Chief Gunners Mate Bill Wells, USCG (Ret.), adjunct professor at a Southern University, who found the *San Diego Union's* account of the event, this story would have been totally guesswork. The photos below were by the author taken at the time of the accident. In fact, finding the negatives while cleaning old files is what gave this story life. The shaving comment by CDR Johnson was real.

Although this story is about an aborted rescue it was one of few, as the Coast Guard and Captain MacDiarmid demonstrated the ability of seaplanes to successfully perform the most difficult rescue missions.

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