

NORTHWEST FLIGHT 292 RESCUE

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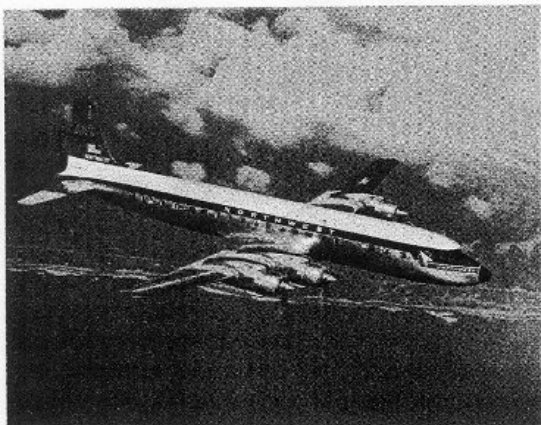
"... NW292 WE HVE OUR NR2 ENG RUNAWAY ... "

By Captain Carlton W. Swickley, USCG (Ret.)

In the relatively quiet, wee hours of the morning of 14 July 1960, Mr. E.R. Lizada was on duty at the Manila Radio Station. Over the last hour, he had received several routine reports from Northwest Airlines Flight 292, a Douglas DC-7 inbound to Manila from Okinawa and Tokyo. All semblance of routine was shattered for Lizada at 0325 local time when the following exchange of messages took place between himself and Captain Dave Rall, pilot of Flight 292.

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NW292 WE HVE OUR NR2 ENG RUNAWAY UNA REQTG LWR
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Captain Rail was letting the world know he was having trouble with number two engine. He had tried to feather it but was unsuccessful, and now had a very dangerous runaway propeller situation. He requested a lower altitude, and at 0340, declared an emergency. Lizada immediately relayed the message to JRCC (Joint Rescue Coordination Center) at Clark AFB that in turn requested assistance from Air Force, Navy and Coast Guard resources.

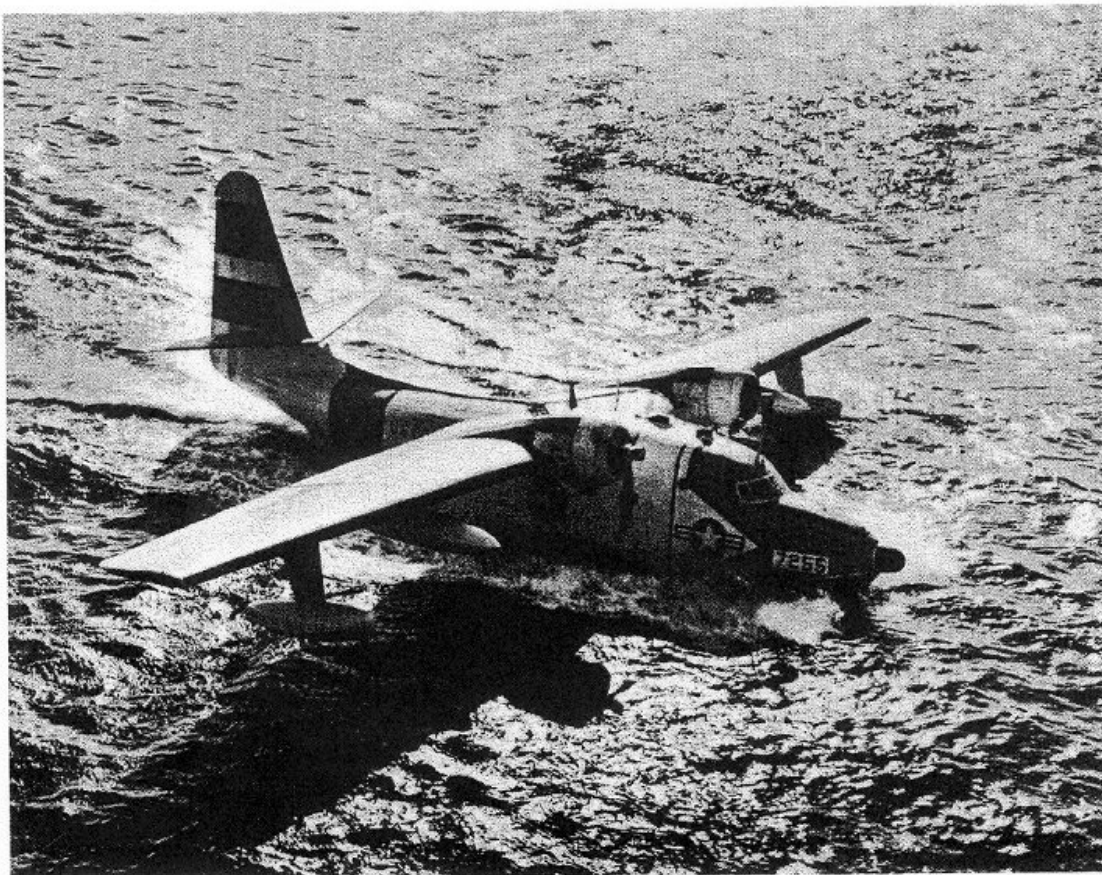


DC-7 like the one flown by Captain Rall and crew. Photo courtesy Vince Doyle.

Thus began one of the greatest SAR missions I had the privilege of personally witnessing. Captain Rail's situation was serious, but his problems were just beginning. With a propeller overspeeding, the danger was that the engine could overheat. Overheating might lead to any number of precarious conditions including fire, or engine seizure. If an engine seized, the prop would more than likely shear and sail off into space, possibly colliding with other parts of the plane. Captain Rail and his crew executed the prescribed emergency

procedures and requested an intercept - a rescue plane to escort them - as NW 292 descended to 9,000 feet and altered course from airways, proceeding directly to Manila. As a precaution against the propeller separating, passengers were moved away from the seats in line with the propellers.

Suddenly, a bright, red light glared on the instrument panel—the fire warning light for number two engine. Firewall shutoff valves were closed and the fire extinguishing system activated. The fire warning light went out, but the sense of relief lasted for only a moment. With a loud THUMP, the runaway prop separated from the engine, and on its way to oblivion, punctured the fuselage. Then a new fire flared up in the engine nacelle. But the fire extinguisher had already been expended, and the crew was unsuccessful in dousing the blaze. With the uncontrollable fire threatening to burn the wing off, Captain Rail lost no time in making a decision to ditch in the dark ocean below. At 0420 he started an emergency descent while transmitting the international distress call—MAYDAY! Dropping through clouds and rain squalls, and with his vision out of the cockpit blinded by the dazzling white glare from the magnesium-fed engine fire, Rail asked his copilot to watch for the water and advise. As they passed through 500 feet, the copilot yelled, "There's the water—pull up!" Rail reacted by calling "Full flaps!" and flaring for landing. After several impacts and a final, severe jolt, the DC-7 came to rest and began sinking. Fifty-eight passengers and seven crewmembers immediately evacuated the plane into large, 20-man inflatable rafts. Miraculously,



USCG Albatross like the one flown by the crew of 7234. Grumman Aircraft Engineering Corp. photo.

The only loss of life occurred when one person drowned after the successful evacuation.

Meanwhile, the Coast Guard, Navy, Air Force, and civilian authorities were mounting a rescue effort. Flight and ground crews rushed to their aircraft while command personnel sorted out the sketchy information and developed search plans. At 0549, the first rescue plane, Air Force 7141, an SA-16B (Grumman Albatross) from Clark's 31st ARS took off. Navy P5M, *Four Wiseman*, from Sangley Point, followed at 0613. At the Coast Guard Air Detachment, UF-2G 7234 (USCG designation for the Grumman Albatross) sat loaded for an anticipated logistics mission. While the pilots planned their search, the crew reconfigured 7234 for SAR, topping off main and wingfloat fuel tanks, mounting four JATO bottles, and loading additional two-man and four-man inflatable rafts for dropping to possible survivors. At 0620, 7234 was airborne with LCDR Jack Lyon, aircraft commander, LT Bill Russell, co-pilot; AO1 Melvin Sheppard, ordnance man; AM2 Joseph Jendrysik, flight engineer; AD3 Richard Moore, flight engineer; AL3 Richard LeDoux, radioman; and PH3 Paul Gilly, a Navy photographer.

At 0720, Lyon assumed the duties of on-scene-commander, having control of Navy *Four Wiseman*, Air Force 7141 and Air Force 7143 (another SA-16B that had joined the search from Clark). Morning twilight gave way to a gloomy dawn over the Philippine Sea as Coast Guard 7234 flew over Polillo Island, 15 miles off the east coast of Luzon. On their first search leg along Polillo's north coast, the alert crew sighted four life rafts among the rain showers that crowded the area. The first pass over the survivors revealed a body floating in the water and several motionless figures in the bottom of the rafts. From the air, there was no way of determining the extent of injuries. Things looked grim, and with no ships nearby to render assistance, the situation called for an immediate landing.

As required by Coast Guard regulations, Lyon radioed Coast Guard Sangley requesting permission to make an open-sea landing. But he found himself on the horns of a dilemma. (Command and control problems associated with getting a quick response from the Fourteenth Coast Guard District, thousands of miles to the east were formidable. This time lives were at stake and time was of the essence.) Lyon saw the need to land as soon as possible, but knew if he did so, he would be breaking regulations. If anything went wrong, he'd be hung from the nearest yardarm! When the Air Force SA-16s arrived on scene, it looked for a moment like Coast Guard 7234 might be off the hook. After all, it was the Air Force that had primary responsibility for SAR in the area. But after a lively debate via radio about the need for someone to land, and what is more important, who was going to do it, the Air Force refused and the Navy didn't volunteer. Responsibility fell to 7234 by default. Impatiently, and with a growing sense of urgency, the UF continued circling the rafts, evaluating sea conditions for landing, and waiting for a response as the minutes dragged by. Back at Sangley Point, CAPT Davis found himself pinned on the horns of the same dilemma. From 7234's radio reports, he was fully aware of the urgency of the situation. He had to weigh the need to

get help to the survivors quickly versus the risk of losing 7234 and its crew. An open-sea landing was an extremely hazardous thing for a Grumman *Albatross* to attempt. He also knew time was critical, yet regulations did not give him authority to make the decision either. Finally, and at no small risk to his future career, he decided to wait no longer for instructions from Honolulu—he authorized the open-sea landing.

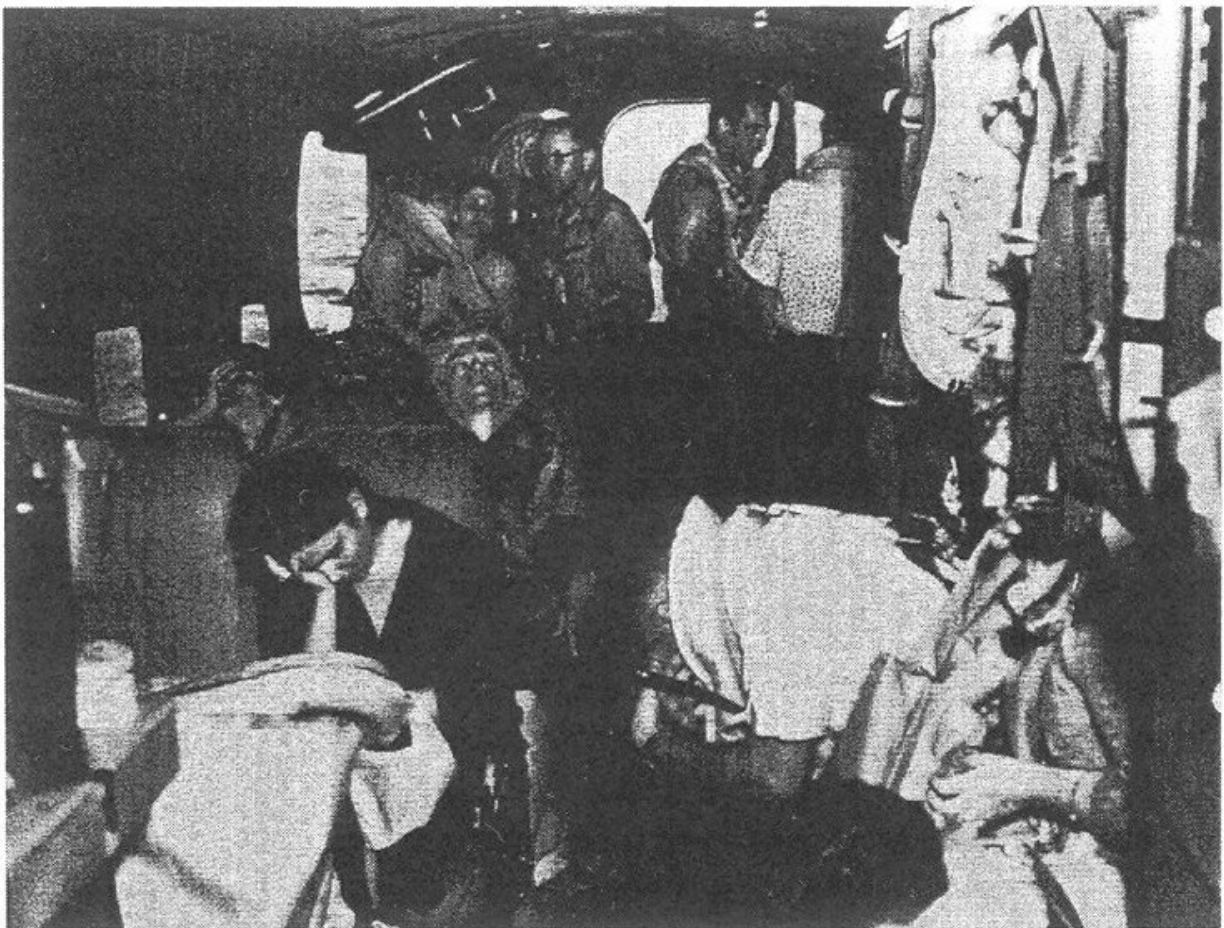
Meanwhile, the crew aboard 7234 was getting anxious. A vigorous intercom discussion, with copilot Russell pressing for a decision to land, gradually died away as the crew awaited guidance from aircraft commander Lyon. Were they going to land or not? If so, which pilot was going to be at the controls? AD3 Moore broke the pregnant pause and reinjected a sense of urgency into the situation by calling on the intercom, "Sir, we are getting nervous back here. Let's s___ or get off the pot" While not in the same league as other famous quotes such as 'Don't give up the Ship,' or "I have not yet begun to fight," Moore's plea had the comparable galvanizing effect. Russell made the perfect response and decision. "Roger. Landing next pass. Everybody strap in!"



AD3 Moore transfers survivors from 7234 to other waiting aircraft. U.S. Coast Guard photo.

Russell set the Grumman down in 15 knots of wind on rolling, four-foot swells. The official report recounts the landing this way: "CG-7234 landed in position one-half mile south of the survivors, using full flaps, full stall, and reverse pitch of the propellers after

the second contact with the swells. The aircraft was in control throughout the landing, contacting the water about four times prior to final settling, only two contacts of which were considered hard, but none of which were hard enough to damage the aircraft." Years later, Bill Russell recalled the landing. "I had been well schooled by 'Muddy' Waters at CGAS San Diego ... PBM and P5M offshore work off Point Loma was required. Landing off Baja, Mexico and San Clemente were routine operations. The UF offshore was unknown to me. While my sea evaluation showed conditions favorable for P5Ms, I was anxious about the landing. Twice in my flying career I have experienced 'tunnel vision' - once during and after an Alaskan water landing and this mission. It happens to me when I concentrate so fully on a task at hand that the peripheral world to my left and right fades and seem to be in a tunnel of concentration. Once I got on the water - the bumps and water deluge aside - I was disoriented ... didn't know the way to land, much less where the rafts were. Jack, however, had his bearings and helped me back so I could make an approach to the rafts."

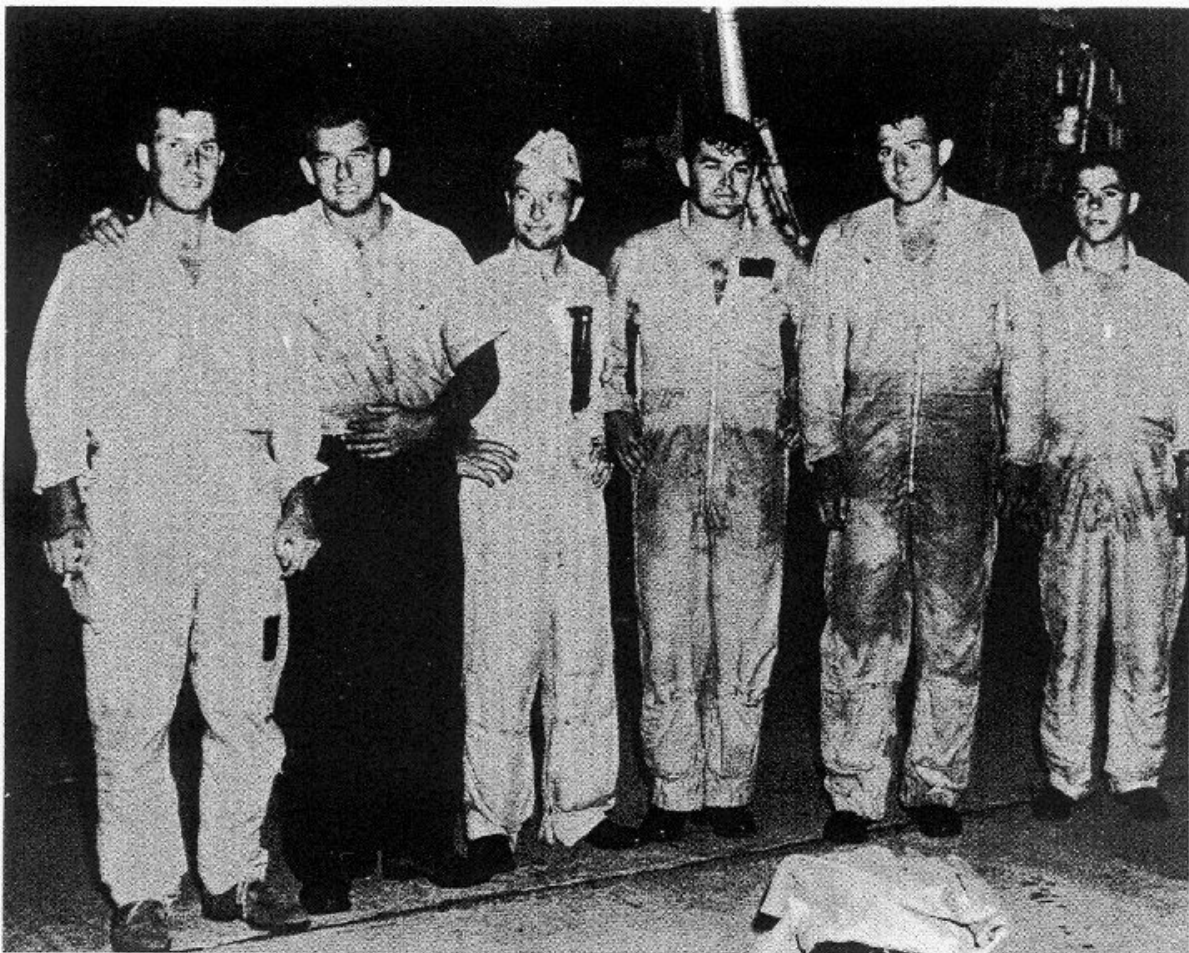


Survivors safely aboard Coast Guard 7234 recover from their harrowing experience. U.S. Coast Guard photo.

After a short water-taxi to the rafts, Russell shut the engines down and brought aboard

23 survivors which included women and some passengers in shock. Navy Four Wiseman landed a few minutes later and the remaining survivors were divided between the two planes. Both planes then taxied 20 miles, a trip of more than two hours, to the sheltered waters of Anibawan Bay on the east side of Polillo Island. There, more Air Force and Navy planes landed to help transport survivors to Manila. Then Coast Guard 7234's luck ran out. First, stray voltage was found in the JATO system when a check was done before hooking up the four JATO bottles. JATO could not be used. Next, the port engine failed to develop the full power needed for takeoff - three takeoff attempts were unsuccessful. With neither takeoff power nor JATO available, 7234 was unable to get off the water.

To the utter dismay of the 7234 crew, their survivors had to be transferred to other aircraft. While the Air Force and Navy planes departed for Manila and the joyous, tumultuous reception that awaited them, 7234 remained forlornly behind.



The crew of UF-2G 7234 : (left to right) AL3 Richard LeDoux, AM2 Joseph Jendrysik, LCDR Jack Lyons, LT Bill Russell, AD3 Richard Moore and PH3 Paul Gilly. U.S. Coast Guard photo.

To be deprived of the opportunity to share in the celebration and accolades, which the 7234 crew so richly deserved, was one thing. But to see the other services' public relations staffs beat their chests for the job done by their planes and take all the credit, as actually happened over the next few days was a bitter pill for the Coast Guard to swallow.

Nevertheless, the 7234 crew got to work and analyzed their engine problem - fouled spark plugs from the long water taxi. After changing plugs (not an easy task on the water), 7234 got airborne and headed home, though not without further excitement. The starboard engine ran rough all the way as its plugs were also fouled from the water operations.

Upon arrival at Sangley Point, 7234 declared an emergency, just to be safe and to get the crash trucks alerted. It then landed without incident after 12 hours of intense - and at moments extremely hazardous - flying. This was a tremendous rescue. For their heroic performance of duty, the Coast Guard decorated the entire 7234 crew. Lyon and Russell were each awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, while all other crewmembers received Coast Guard Commendation Medals.

The exemplary performances by the Northwest Flight 292 crew, the crew of Coast Guard UF-2G 7234, and the crews of the other aircraft participating in the rescue operation all played a part in one of the great feats of civil aviation history.

CAPT Carlton W. Swickley, USCG (Ret.), is a graduate of the U.S. Coast Guard Academy. He entered flight training in Pensacola, Fla. in 1956 and was awarded his wings in 1957 in the seaplane program at NAS Corpus Christi, Texas.

In addition to duties as a search and rescue pilot, Swickley specialized in aircraft maintenance. His assignments included a tour as C. O. of Group/Air Station, Port Angeles, Wash. He also served a tour of duty as Southern Area Maintenance Representative. He retired from his 26-year career in 1980 at Coast Guard Headquarters.

After earning an MBA from George Mason University, he changed careerfields to education, working first at Northern Virginia Community College, then moving on to George Mason University as Assistant Director, Physical Facilities. From 1987 until his recent retirement, Swickley served as Director of the EAA Air Adventure Museum in Oshkosh, Wis.

