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**SURVIVAL**

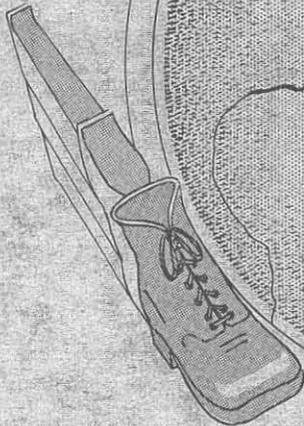
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*A TRUE  
SEA SURVIVAL STORY*

# B-50 SURVIVOR DESCRIBES EXPERIENCES

The press carried many columns about the USAF B-50 that was shot down by the Russians in international territory last July; but, few papers carried the lone known survivor's story of his experiences from bail out to rescue.

Since the details of this episode dramatically emphasize many points made daily by survival training and personal equipment personnel, the Headquarters Far East Air Forces press release, dated 9 September 1953, is being printed in its entirety. The sketches are based upon USAF photographs.

Hq. FEAF, TOKYO--The only crewman known to survive the destruction of a U. S. Air Force B-50 by the Russians over the Japan Sea last July 29 was formerly a survival equipment officer who taught other fliers to use just such equipment as that which saved his own life. Captain John E. Roche, co-pilot of the downed B-50, is a man with an intimate grasp of air rescue equipment and survival techniques. His experiences on the morning of July 29 and until his rescue almost 24 hours later emphasize the importance of that equipment and those techniques.

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Captain Roche, 4905 Deal Dr., Washington, D. C., was rescued from the sea after his B-50 was shot down by Russian fighter planes. The attack, 40 miles off the Soviet Coast, occurred shortly after 0615 on July 29, 1953, two days after the truce signing at Panmunjom.

While the press and radio poured out the story to the world, one element of the nightmare for Roche has gone untouched. That is his battle for existence while awaiting combined Navy and Air Force rescue.

### IN FLIGHT

On a navigational training mission over the Japan Sea at the time, the B-50 was over a water area considered by all nations as international. Roche, piloting the aircraft at the time, said later, "I was completely unaware that a fighter was starting to make a firing pass at us. The first pass and the one that followed came from the rear without warning."

Number one engine was hit and disabled and on the next run cannon shells from the enemy jet set fire to number four. The fire on number four became uncontrollable despite feathering and fire procedures by the flight engineer and pilot. The aircraft commander prepared his crew for bail out, and when number four was hit he gave the command. At this time, fire on number four had weakened the wing to such an extent that it sheared off.

With the sudden change in lift, the aircraft veered to the right and violently pitched. The tremendous force created by the unusual attitude of the ship propelled Roche across the cockpit, against the aircraft commander's instrument panel, and on into the nose.

The lurch was of such force that it ripped Roche's safety belt loose and he sustained multiple lacerations and bruises. With the urging of his aircraft commander, Roche extricated himself and bailed out to safety. As he left the nosewheel hatch the plane began to disintegrate.

### BAIL OUT AND SURVIVAL

He experienced no difficulty in his descent and suffered no injury from the chute's opening impact. It was from the time of this bail out until the rescue was actually effected that Roche's survival training paid off.

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Formerly a personal equipment officer at Hunter AF Base, Georgia, he knew his emergency gear and procedures inside out. He had been given refresher courses at Ramey AFB, Forbes AFB, and his Japan TDY station during the year prior to this emergency. During the previous summer of 1952, his crew had given an ocean survival demonstration for Lt. Gen. Joseph H. Atkinson at Ramey AFB. General Atkinson commands the Alaskan Command. Here, then, was the situation which Roche had taught both himself and others to meet. His survival now depended to a large degree on himself.

Describing his bail out and those moments after his chute opened, Roche commented later in an interview, "I smelled smoke and looked up to see if my canopy was on fire. It wasn't, but before I could look down I hit the water. When I landed, I noticed I was approximately 50 to 75 feet from burning gas and oil. I quickly cleared my chute and started swimming on my back away from the flames."

After leaving the region of the fire, he inflated his "Mae West."

The parachute was discarded because the attached dinghy had been torn loose in the aircraft. Having only the life jacket, he thought it best to leave the chute since the added drag would hamper his escape from the spreading flames. A deep cut across the leather covering gave him a momentary start, but on inflation a quick inspection proved the bladder to be untouched. Checking further, he discovered his Mae West was completely equipped, with the exception of the signal light, which had ripped off in the aircraft.

So it was that Roche found himself in the water with a Mae West and two M-75 two-star flares. He had carried the flares on his own initiative and later was very thankful that he had.

## SEARCHING AND SIGNALING

Roche relates, "I looked around for material for a raft and found a mattress from a survival kit and four oxygen storage tanks. With these I attempted to fashion a crude float, but was unable to do so since the mattress had partially burned."

Searching for about an hour, he came across his aircraft commander and they joined forces in a search for more material. Nothing was found, so the two men clung together, using the oxygen tanks as floats.

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As the morning receded into afternoon, the sea became rough and white caps appeared. When it was obvious that further exertion would seriously impair their ability if their wait proved long, the two men relaxed as much as the growing seas allowed. Meanwhile, air rescue operations by Navy and Air Force units were under way. In the late afternoon, an SB-29 of the 37th Air Rescue Squadron was spotted by Roche.

Quickly, he took one of his waterproof flares from a pocket and fired it, and spread sea marker dye taken from one of the Mae West pockets. The two men separated at this time in their efforts to spread the marker dye. Crew members of the SB-29 recognized the distress nature of the flare and sea marker dye and prepared to drop an A-3 lifeboat. Roche and his aircraft commander continued to drift apart in the rough seas, despite efforts to stay close.

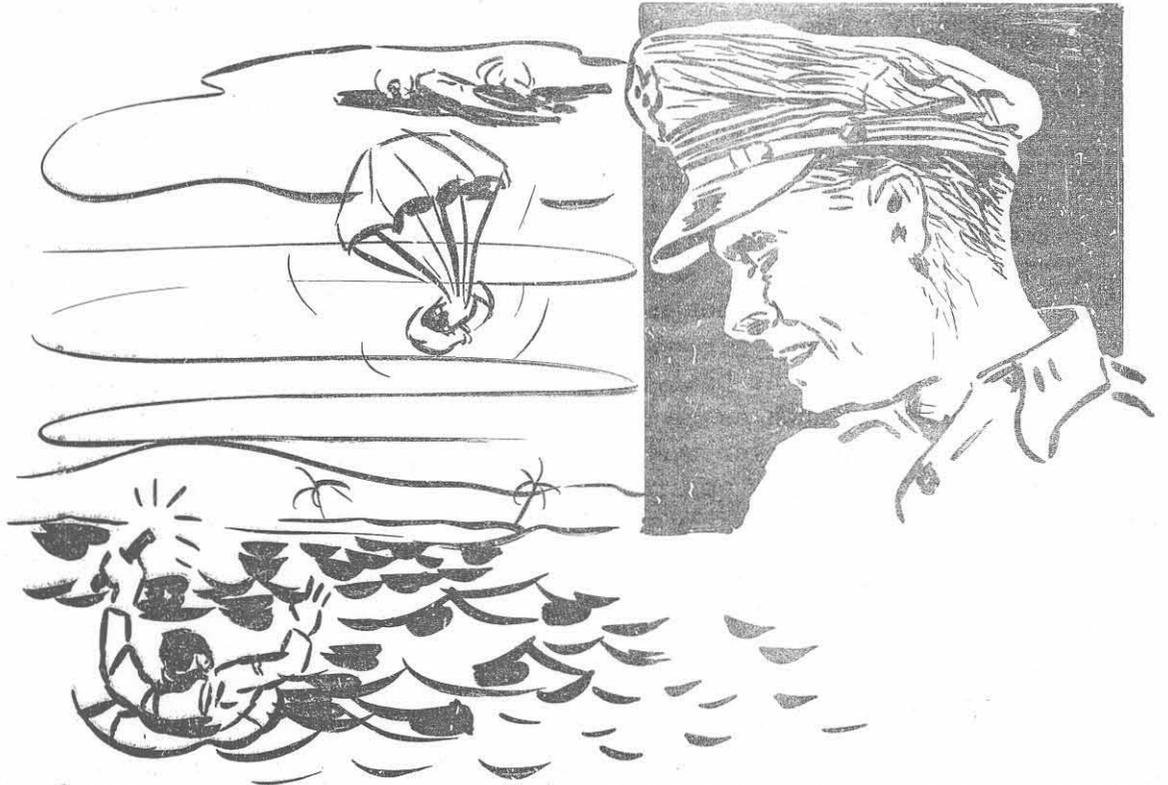
The drop was excellent--the boat landed approximately 75 yards from the men and upwind from their position. Fog was intermittent and the sky was cloudy. Roche began to swim to the boat and made it in about 20 minutes. He estimated his companion to be 150 to 200 yards from the small craft, but Roche could not follow the other man's progress because of the condition of the water. When he reached the boat, fog and darkness settled over him, making further observation almost impossible.

## IN AN A-3 LIFE BOAT

Ill with cramps and vomiting blood when he climbed aboard, he rested long enough to catch his breath. Then he worked fast trying to start the engine. The battery had just enough current to turn the engine over several times, then rapidly gave out. Too exhausted from the swim and the long immersion in water to start the engine manually, he began to inspect the boat's complement of equipment. Checking into the medical kit, he found the tablets recommended for persons suffering from bleeding and swallowed four of them. They stayed with him about five minutes and he took no more, thinking it best not to upset his stomach further. He then checked the parachute that was attached to the boat on the drop and made sure it trailed over the gunwale to act as a sea anchor.

Briefed prior to flight on a SSW wind condition and noticing the direction from which the boat was dropped, Roche ascertained that prolonged drifting would put him close to the Russian coast. He felt certain that by hanging on, no matter what the condition of the A-3

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lifeboat or his own person, Air Force or Navy rescue forces would eventually pick him up

Having climbed aboard the lifeboat at about 1800, with fog coming in to increase the darkness, his search of the equipment was carried on under difficult conditions. He came across the URC-4 radio wrapped between blankets and underwear, but was unable to make contact with the airplane circling overhead. Putting the switch on "Tone," he placed the set on the side of the deck, hoping that the set was sending, although he was getting no reception.

That night the boat-borne survivor was relatively comfortable and rested as much as he could. He lay down, wrapped in blankets, until water came over the side of the small craft. A portion of the inflatable righting apparatus leaked air slowly and the flotation gear collapsed gradually over him. When water began to come over the side he noticed the leak and changed position to the bow where he remained sitting for the rest of the long night.

## RESCUE

At about 0400, he noticed two clear lights in a vertical position on the horizon at an estimated distance of ten miles. He said, "I located the Very pistol, fired one shot into the air and waited five to ten minutes. Then I saw a green light appear to the left of the two vertical lights, at which time I commenced to fire flares regularly. A short time later a ship approached and lowered a launch which came alongside."

Roche was taken aboard the USS Picking, one of the destroyers crisscrossing the area. Transfers to the USS Princeton, USS Boxer and finally to an air base in Japan were effected.

## TAKE NOTE

In the light of Roche's past experience with emergency equipment and his successful escape from drowning in ocean waters, certain observations result:

- On his own initiative Roche carried two flares, one of which could possibly be credited as a primary factor in his rescue. This can be construed as

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personal resourcefulness and a guide to other airmen flying over water areas.

- Despite the shock and lacerations received from his severe buffeting in the cabin and subsequent loss of valuable equipment, the survivor retained his presence of mind.
- He conserved energy that later meant the difference between reaching the lifeboat or facing an unknown outcome on the vastness of the open sea.
- While Air Rescue authorities attested to the inspection of the A-3 lifeboat and its vital equipment four days prior to its drop, further modifications and actions were considered imperative. More powerful batteries are being added to prevent a similar mishap. The URC-4 radio will henceforth be put in a metal case (See article in next issue) and insulated from extreme shock by packing material. In this condition it will be wrapped in blankets and clothing for still more protection. It follows that users of URC-4s are cautioned against improper handling that would alter the proper crystal arrangements.
- Lights fastened to Mae Wests or any other equipment fastened to the outside of clothing can be torn off in a violent condition. Dinghy cases should be tested for rough usage and eventual modification.
- A Mae West is a precious piece of gear and its durability is dependent on its handling. While it will on occasion be subjected to infinite stress, it must be handled with proper respect. It is recommended that users inflate the life vests and allow them to remain blown up overnight to check for leakage.
- Roche felt he could have used a survival suit as the water was approximately 50 degrees Fahrenheit. Immediate bail out from the aircraft brought on by the loss of the wing precluded the removal of the suit from the aircraft. Similarly, the sudden exit was responsible for his inability to jettison the E-1 kit or fasten it to his parachute harness. Though both items would have proved valuable, they weren't essential in this instance.

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- Salt water did not affect the cuts suffered by Roche.
- Individual intelligence, physical condition and will-power, when prompted by even the slightest chance of survival, can combine to turn a seemingly impossible situation into one of hope.
- As Capt. Roche himself says, "Don't ever for one moment think that Uncle Sam won't be out there looking for you."

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GOOD PACKING PAYS OFF TWICE

A token of gratitude is handed A/IC Irvin W. Woodard by Captain Roche, whose life was saved by a chute Airman Woodard packed and inspected.

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*DESERT SURVIVAL AND RESCUE*

**BAIL OUT  
AND  
SURVIVAL**

**IN THE SAHARA**

By Lt Dean F. Rea  
8th Air Rescue Squadron

The Associated Press dispatch dated 10 August was headlined,

"ALL ABOARD JUMP SAFELY

IN C-119 DESERT CRASH"

But there was more to the story of the 24 men who were passengers and crewmembers of the Flying Boxcar.

The Wheelus Air Force Base Sultans were dejected as they flew toward Tripoli, North Africa. That day--Saturday, 8 August--just hadn't been their day. They had lost 7-4 to an Army ball team at Trieste that afternoon. They were now two hours out of Udine, Italy, en route for home in a C-119.

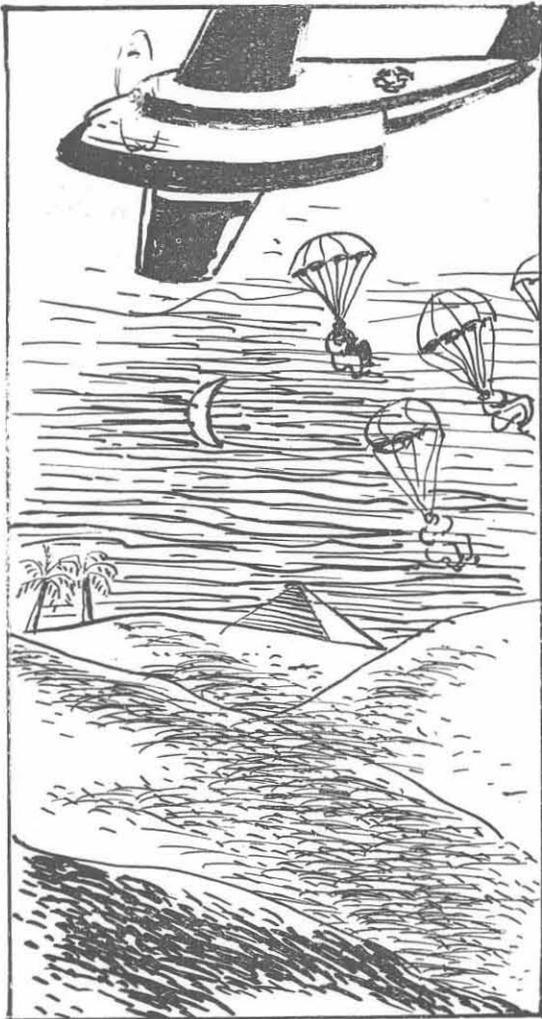
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Then the electrical system of the aircraft developed trouble and the 18 passengers—all members of the Sultans ball team—were cautioned that they might have to bail out. The same fate also awaited the six crewmembers. No one anticipated a night bail out over the Mediterranean with any pleasure.

Anxious faces were turned toward the crewmember who had made the announcement. Third baseman A/2C D. E. Blair said later, "I didn't figure we'd have to jump. We thought they'd get the trouble fixed and everything would be all right." Others, too, figured that it wouldn't be necessary to jump, but some were not so sure.



The electrical difficulty persisted and the navigator briefed them all how to use the parachute, Mae West and dinghy. The dress rehearsal seemed a prelude to the real thing and by now everyone seemed fully aware of the reality of the situation. The plane droned on into the night.

"An hour later," according to Airman Blair, "we were told to prepare to jump, that we were running low on fuel and the electrical trouble prevented them from switching to the other fuel tanks. Time was running out. Up to then I hadn't thought much about the possibility of having to jump; but, when they took the doors off, I began to shiver and it wasn't just because I was cold!"

The C-119 had crossed the coast of North Africa and village lights were visible below. Wheelus Air Force Base could be neither seen nor contacted.

## PREPARATIONS

Few of the passengers had had any survival or parachute training or experience; however, they checked chutes and tightened straps. After checking Mae Wests, they sat back in their bucket seats and waited. Many of the 24 crewmembers and passengers were openly praying--all passengers seemed nervous.

Crewmembers were busily strapping chutes to eight bundles of survival equipment which were to be pushed out one door at the bail-out signal. Everything was ready for the big moment, but the Sultans' chief concern seemed to be, "Will these chutes open?"

Airman Monan A. Lovell says that much doubt was dispelled when the aircraft commander spoke individually with each passenger, telling him what to expect. The A/C's words and actions seem to have given them all much confidence.

The C-119 was banked and flown in a circle. Everyone was tense. This was it! Airman Blair estimates their altitude as 9,700 feet. It was 0228 hours, Sunday.

## BAIL OUT

Blair continued, "As soon as the first man went out, we all followed. We had been briefed for both over-water and over-land bail out. As it turned out, we were about 60 miles south of Garian and due south of Tripoli."

Pitcher A/2C Edward Montes said he almost had to run to keep up with those bailing out ahead of him. Shortstop A/2C T. P. Pouk added, "We weren't scared after the first man bailed out. I saw one fellow with his arms and legs apart as he left the aircraft and I found out later that he had a hard time grasping the rip cord ring."

The Sultans assumed various attitudes as they left the aircraft--some folded into compact cannonballs, others stood straight. Airman Montes said he took a flying leap and tumbled several times before his chute popped open.

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Moonlight illuminated the area but those floating down under the chutes didn't know that rocky hills awaited them below. Airman Blair says, "We kept our Mae West flashlights on as we went down and after we had landed. We must have looked like a flock of lightning bugs."

Airman Montes explained that as soon as bail-out was accomplished, everyone's nervousness seemed to be gone. "We shot the bull with one another as we came down. I could almost shake hands with the guy next to me."

Since the pilot had banked the C-119 into a circle during bail out, almost everyone was descending within a five-mile circle. Despite their relaxed mood, danger waited below for the survivors.

"Many chutes oscillated," explained Montes, "and we didn't know how to control them. I got a riser burn on the left side of my face when my chute opened and another fellow landed face down among rocks."

## DOWN IN THE DESERT

The only person injured was Airman Blair. He describes his descent thus, "It seemed about seven minutes between the time I left the aircraft and the time I hit the ground. I sprained my ankle upon landing but after a short rest could walk on it."

Many survivors of other emergency bail outs have told of losing low-quarter shoes and of articles being torn from pockets from the opening shock of their chutes. Surprisingly, everyone of the 24 survivors of the C-119 was wearing low cut shoes and not a one was lost. The only item torn away was a cigarette lighter. Sultan team manager, Captain F. E. Field, recovered his lighter on the ground later that night. The good fortune of these men in this regard may be largely due to their having time and using it wisely to adjust their chute harnesses to a close, individual fit prior to bail out.

Once on the ground, the survivors followed their briefing instructions and started to re-assemble. Most of them had landed in valleys and none were isolated any great distance from at least one other downed man. As they gathered up their chutes, one by one the men spotted each other by the Mae West lights. Three groups-- numbering three, eight and eleven men each--waited out the night.

The other two crewmembers were picked up by Arabs and they sent a note back by natives saying that they were heading north to the coast for help.

## SURVIVAL AND SIGNALING

To ward off the chill for the rest of that night, the men inflated their dinghies and placed them in the center of their chutes. Using the dinghy as a bed and the chute as covering, the men slept. Sultan catcher, A/1C R. E. Boglirsch, said they later found sleeping bags but not enough of them. By separating the liner and the outer bag, each unit served as cover for two men.



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The sun rose early that Sunday in North Africa. By 0800 hours all three groups had contacted each other. Captain Field assumed command of his re-assembled crew and passengers; however, little supervision was required since, as one Sultan player explained, "The gang did a fine job of cooperating on everything including rationing drinking water and other supplies."

Small teams were sent out to recover the E-1 kits and two cases of canned water which had been dropped by chutes from the C-119. Arabs came on camel back bringing to the survivors tea, water and farina, a barley cereal. On Monday morning, Arab police brought the survivors additional food.

Meanwhile, the survivors divided themselves into two groups. One set up a Gibson Girl radio at some Roman ruins a mile and a half from the aircraft and started transmitting. The other group remained at the aircraft wreckage.

Airman Blair, the only casualty, wrapped his sprained ankle with a strip of rubber. He strongly advises against this, especially in warm climates. "The heat seemed to shrink the rubber 'bandage' until it almost shut off circulation in my foot," he explains.

## SEARCH AND RESCUE

As the survivors collected E-1 kits and cranked out messages on the radio, search parties in C-47s, SA-16s, helicopters, crash boats and a destroyer, were scanning the Mediterranean for them. Orange crates floating on the surface and large turtles in the water apparently deceived the searchers. Meanwhile, the two crewmembers from the C-119 made their way to Tripolitanian police who contacted Air Force officials.

Soon two SA-16s flew over the survivors and a helicopter landed with a doctor. Fortunately, little medical attention was required. Rapidly cars, trucks and ambulances arrived and 38 hours after bail out, the weary Sultan ball players and the C-119 crew were back at Wheelus Field.

## OBSERVATIONS

Later four of the survivors made the following comments.

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● Bailing out at night was not as difficult as it might have been during the day. Going out of the aircraft at two o'clock that morning seemed much like stepping through a door into a dark room.

● Avoid panic prior to bail out. A few members of our group were uneasy and restless but all cooperated to make an orderly bail out.

● Much of the nervousness built up in waiting through an in-flight emergency, is released the moment your chute opens.

● Keeping calm and having a plan once we got on the ground were important elements in our survival.

● Small ace-type bandages should be included in emergency first-aid kits. We found the large compresses much too bulky--although admittedly our need for medical supplies was slight.

● Losing a ball game was bad enough but jumping out of a doomed aircraft--in the first jump of your entire life--is infinitely worse.

Friendly assistance by the Arabs contributed greatly to these men's quick rescue and relatively easy survival. As Airman Montes says, "The Arabs helped us immensely. First they brought us food and water. Later a herdsman gave us eggs to eat and the police assisted us in numerous ways. The Arabs deserve most of the credit for our rescue."

Twenty-four airmen--most without any previous jump or survival training--bailed out and survived in the Libian desert from the wee small hours of Saturday night until Monday afternoon. Their team work and cooperation under able leadership paid off in even richer rewards in this survival situation than it had just previously on the ball diamond. But with that attitude the Wheelus Sultans should have many sporting victories ahead of them. And the crewmembers of the C-119 have every reason to be proud of the way they briefed and otherwise prepared their passengers to so successfully meet the emergency.

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