

My grandfather, Peter May, was a navigator in 192 (SD) squadron in the RAF. On Friday the 5th of August 1943, him and the rest of his crew were told of a flight to be made that night in the hope of recovering information about German Radar, which was at the time a relatively new invention and very secret. They took off from RAF Feltwell, quite near to Cambridge, and stopped off at RAF Chivenor for fuel. They were flying a Wellington V. LN349.

At 1:45am on Saturday the 6th August, for some reason never discovered, one of the two engines stopped, and the pilot was unable to keep the plane under control. He realised he would have to crash land on the sea and issued the standard order:
'DINGHY, DINGHY, PREPARE FOR DITCHING'

As they were flying low, there was little time to prepare, however the Wireless operator did just have time to transmit S.O.S. The weather was stormy, and the sea was very rough, the plane crashed right into a wave and immediately started to fill up with water. Peter managed, with great difficulty, to get out through one of the escape hatches, which was already underwater, so he had to swim up to the surface. There, he could just make out the dinghy in the gloom, and he swam towards it only to find that it was upside down.

As he was holding on to it, the pilot, bomb aimer, rear gunner and special operator appeared and together they managed to get it the right way up, and all get in. It was then that they realised the Wireless Operator was missing. He had stayed too long at his set, transmitting S.O.S, and was unable to get out. He had lost his life saving theirs, though they did not realise it yet.

After spending a miserable night soaked through and freezing cold, the next day brought with it some sunshine. It was then that they found the emergency pack, attached to the dinghy by its cord, and floating a few feet away in the water. This contained water, tablets made of Horlicks, and some flare guns, and they all gave a cheer when it was discovered. They worked out that they had enough food to last for about three or four days. They had also found floating in the water, bags containing a special substance that dyed the water around the dinghy bright orange to catch the attention of any rescue planes passing. The crew accidentally managed to cover themselves in this dye too!

That afternoon they heard aircraft engines but were wary as they were not yet sure if the plane was British or German. They fired a flare gun, but to their horror, the plane passed over and away into the distance. On Sunday, they heard another plane, this time a much bigger one, a Liberator with four engines. It had come from Thorney Island after hearing their S.O.S. It circled over them for six hours before another came to 'look after' them.

Around 10:00 that evening, they saw to their delight a ship approaching. This was an Anti-Submarine Sloop, and it came alongside the dinghy and picked them up. They were given a proper meal and proper beds to sleep in. 'Bliss' is how Peter remembers it. They arrived safely at Portsmouth harbour, and were all given special leave for two weeks. Peter returned home to his parents, who rejoiced at seeing him, as they had received the dreaded telegram about their son - missing, presumed dead.

Information courtesy of grandpasgirl