

U.S. Coast Guard Series

Sentinels and Saviors of the Seas

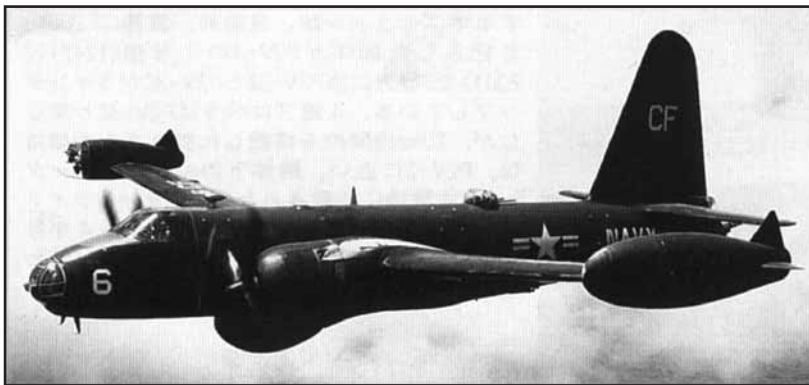
by Adam M. Grohman

Each month an interesting aspect of the world's oldest continuous maritime service will be highlighted. The men and women of the United States Coast Guard follow in the fine tradition of the brave mariners who have served before them. As sentinels and saviors of the seas, the United States Coast Guard proudly continues its commitment to honor, respect & devotion to duty to maintain their vigil - Semper Paratus.

The 13-man crew of the U.S. Navy Patrol Squadron VP-22's Lockheed Neptune had been tasked with an important mission. The captain of the surveillance flight, Lt. Clement R. Prouhet, eased the controls forward and the aircraft descended clear of the cloud bank. Operating from NAF Kadena in Okinawa, Japan, Prouhet had to lower the aircraft so that his camera crew could prepare to gather their photographic evidence of possible ship movements in the Formosa Strait.¹ As the lieutenant swung the plane into position approximately 1,000 feet from the waters below, the air was shattered by anti-aircraft bursts. Prouhet held the controls tightly as the Neptune was struck by the rounds and began to shudder from the shattering explosions. Calmly, Prouhet asked his flight crew to report any and all damage to the aircraft. As the men aboard fought fires and assessed the damage to the aircraft, Prouhet looked out of his cockpit window. It did not look good.

Below, enemy waters appeared and left Prouhet with a feeling of dread as the situation was clearly bleak. Both engines had suffered damage, parts of his flaps and his landing gear had been sheared off in the blasts, and large holes riddled the fuselage. Fire continued to spread throughout the cabin. Prouhet knew that the aircraft was going down. He looked down at the rough seas. He ordered an SOS message be transmitted and told his men to hold on tight. They were going down and would have to ditch in the water.

With 15-foot seas and a 30-knot wind, coupled with a seriously damaged aircraft, Prouhet began his descent into the torrents of the Formosa Strait. His men, one of whom was seriously hurt from the anti-aircraft fire, held on tight as the aircraft began to skim along the tops of the wind-swept waves. Finally, Prouhet set the Neptune down into the water. Relying on their extensive training, and despite the damaged plane's quickly being swallowed by the icy water, all of the crew were able to get free from the sinking aircraft. The crewmen, donned in their Mae West vests and flying gear, dove into the water. Only one of their inflatable rafts had survived the crash, and though it was partially burned from the fire, the men were able to partially inflate the floating respite from the water. Prouhet and his men placed two of the crew, including the one airman who had suffered injuries from the anti-aircraft batteries, and a severely seasick crewman into the raft. The rest, with the exception of two, held on tight to the raft. Buoyed by their inflated Mae-West vests,



A Lockheed Neptune on a recon flight.

the men clung to the floating device as the waves and situation overcame them. Two of the crew, however, had been swept clear of the raft. Despite the efforts of Prouhet and his fellow men, the two other crewmen were soon lost from view.

As Prouhet worked to save his men, another aircraft from their squadron that had been diverted to the site of their crash circled overhead. Unable to provide any direct assistance because their aircraft was unable to land in the water, they dropped another inflatable life raft to the survivors. Despite the efforts of the men in the water, the life raft drifted from their grasps. The crew of their sister aircraft watched helplessly from above as their brethren bobbed in the enemy waters. The pilot reached down and with his pen made a notation on his leg-strapped notepad of the position. He noted the date – January 18, 1953. The pilot radioed the position and continued circling, offering the only possible hope to the downed crewmen.

Meanwhile at Sangley Point, in the Philippines, the SOS message had been received by the attentive ears of radio communications personnel of the Air-Sea Rescue aviation detachment of the United States Coast Guard. Almost immediately, Lt. John Vukic and his crew of Coastguardsmen sprang into action. Minutes later Vukic pulled back on the yoke and the PBM-5G Mariner lurched into the afternoon sky. Lt. Jg. Gerald Stuart, his co-pilot,



A U.S.C.G. Martin Mariner rocketing from the water with JATO.

Photo courtesy U.S. Coast Guard.

made notations in his log book and continued to complete the checklists for the flight. The rest of the crewmen were busy throughout the aircraft preparing their gear to provide any and all necessary first aid to the downed crewmen. The Mariner

slowly banked and took up a heading toward the site of the crash. It was 12:30 p.m. and as Lt. Stuart completed the computations, he determined it would take approximately four hours to reach their destination. The Mariner, its two 2,100 horsepower R2800 Pratt and Whitney engines humming loudly, sped toward the survivors. Time was of the essence.

Meanwhile, the men in the water, though they had survived the harrowing ditch, had only just begun their perilous ordeal. With each passing moment the men contemplated their proximity to the coastline of China and the possibility of being captured by the enemy. The men scanned the horizon for salvation. Minutes quickly turned to hours and their bodies, immersed in the cold waters of the Formosa Strait, began to succumb to hypothermia.

At four-thirty in the afternoon, Vukic swung the Mariner in low to locate the drifting air crew and their raft. He circled the position and paid particular attention to the dangerous sea conditions. Landing in rough seas and then taking off was an art that the U.S.C.G., through experimentation and experience, had made "safer – not safe – but safer."

Though Vukic was aware of the dangers of attempting the rescue, he was also keenly aware that rescue via a surface asset was still hours away. The coastline and possibility of capture by the enemy also streamed through his thoughts. Vukic decided to take the risk.

The Mariner circled in low and began its approach. Moments later, the downed airmen's flying salvation softly landed between the swirling swells. After maneuvering the floating behemoth to the raft and the survivors, the crewmen of the Mariner began pulling aboard the eleven drenched airmen. For thirty minutes, Vukic and his crew, after they had been informed that two of the crew had drifted away, continued to search the surrounding waters for any sight of the lost men. The search, sadly, was in vain.

With waves crashing and the wind howling, Vukic knew that he had to remove his aircraft, crew and passengers from the rapidly deteriorating conditions. As he and Stuart timed sets and prepared the aircraft for liftoff, the 11 survivors shed their Mae-West vests, were covered in warm blankets, and placed in bunks for take-off. Other members of the crew prepared the JATO or jet-assisted takeoff equipment that would give the Mariner a boost of lift into the sky. Vukic, informed that all preparations had been completed, radioed to his crew that he was making his run.

Increasing the throttles, the Mariner began

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skimming faster and faster through the trough of the swells. The timing of the firing of the JATO bottles was vital and Vukic watched the controls, sea state, and speed to determine when to give the order to his crew to fire the JATO equipment. The Mariner gained additional speed, and at 50 knots he ordered the JATO fired. The Mariner broke free from the icy waters and began to gain altitude.

Suddenly, something went terribly wrong with one of the engines. The starboard engine failed and the wing dipped and clipped a wave. The Mariner, with its crew of 10 men and with the 11 rescued survivors, cartwheeled and slammed into the water with a tremendous explosion. The damaged and sinking aircraft began to burn. "My seat broke and that's the last thing I remember," Lt. Vukic later commented. "The next thing I knew I was in the water. My left eye was full of blood and my right eye was blind." Vukic and two other



Lt. John Vukic

men, Chief Aviation Machinist's Mate Joseph Miller, Jr. and Aviation Structural Mechanic 3rd Class Robert F. Hewitt, were able to get clear of their sinking aircraft and were soon aboard an inflated raft.

Above, the terrible ordeal was witnessed by a circling contingent of aircraft, including two sister squadron Neptune aircraft, a United States Air Force Albatross, and a British Sunderland, and though the aircraft were able to drop life rafts, due to the sea conditions no additional landings by the water-landing capable aircraft were attempted. The men in the water would have to wait for a surface vessel. The downed aviators, some of whom had crashed twice in one day, awaited another attempt at a rescue.

While the aviation assemblage continued their overhead vigil for the two downed crews, Admiral Thomas R. Williamson, commander of the U.S. Navy Task Force 72, the force "charged with defending the Formosa Strait from the communists," ordered his

flagship, the destroyer *U.S.S. Halsey Powell* to the scene to assist in the rescue effort.² While the destroyer made full speed toward the location, the men bobbed in the frigid waters watching the circling aircraft that seemed so close, but were unable to offer any assistance from their plight.

With each wave, the rafts and their occupants drifted closer and closer toward the shoreline. The second crash had plunged all of the men into the water, and despite efforts of both rafts, the two groups of survivors were unable to stay within visual contact. The men, along with the other men who had been able to escape the sinking and burning rescue aircraft, bobbed in their rafts, chilled to the bone not only from the icy waters, but at the thought of being captured by the Communists. For seven and a half hours the men languished in their misery. Suddenly, the dazed and struggling Coastguardsmen believed that they sighted a surface vessel on the horizon. Vukic, despite the danger of alerting the enemy of their position in the raging swells, ordered one of the raft's flares fired into the darkened sky. The flares did not bring any rescue vessels toward their position.

Vukic and his men remained undeterred. They continued to fire their flares periodically to draw attention, but they realized that their chances of rescue were drawing perilously slim. The raft, unable

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to be maneuvered in the savage seas by the Coastguardsmen that only had been provided a wooden paddle, drifted across a reef toward shore. The airborne spotters, despite pot-shots from ground anti-aircraft batteries along the shoreline and an unverified aerial attack by an enemy fighter, maintained their watch and radioed the rafts' various positions to the surface fleet in their efforts to coordinate a successful rescue of the two crews of downed airmen.

Vukic, Miller, and Hewett realized that they had only one last chance. "We were down to our last one," Vukic commented referring to their flares. "I decided to try to set the destroyer on fire if necessary to let them know where we were. Then someone dropped a flare about 50 feet from us and we knew we were sighted."³ Suddenly, out of the dark came the bow of the destroyer *U.S.S. Halsey Powell* slipping through the reef. Vukic and his men were quickly pulled aboard, where they were informed that seven of the other airmen had already been plucked from the icy waters. In all, ten men from the two aircraft crews of 21 men had been saved. Eleven men, Coastguardsmen and naval airmen, had been lost despite the heroic efforts of Vukic and his crew of Coastguardsmen.⁴

The attempted rescue of 11 downed airmen from the bitter clutches of the Communist enemy in the Formosa Strait on January 18, 1953 was only one of the many daring exploits of the U.S. Coast Guard during the Korean Conflict. With experience gained by thousands of surface landings and rescues utilizing water landing-capable aircraft during the Second World War and in the early years of the Cold War, the United States Coast Guard maintained a constant vigil throughout the Pacific region. These airmen, in conjunction with their surface fleet brothers of the service, remained on duty and on alert to offer assistance to their fellow brethren who found themselves bobbing helplessly, either from a downed aircraft or sunken vessel, in enemy-patrolled and controlled waters.

Though every rescue attempt was not completely successful, the brave and courageous men like Lt. Vukic and his crew, who, despite the dangers, risked their own lives to rescue others in the true spirit of those Coastguardsmen who came before them. Like the Coastguardsmen who navigated their surfboats through the raging waves to save those in need, the Coastguardsmen who served in the

Korean War, either on surface vessels or aloft in aircraft, remain fine examples of the longstanding dedication of the servicemen and women of the United States Coast Guard to those in need. Though the Korean War has long been referred to as the Forgotten War, it is ever important to remember those who risked their lives and made the ultimate sacrifice in the Cold War-whipped wintry waters of the Formosa Strait. The crew of Coastguardsmen who landed and attempted to pluck their fellow servicemen from the wintry waters on January 18, 1953 truly exemplify the time-honored traditions and tenets of the United States Coast Guard and will forever be remembered as sentinels and saviors of the seas.

¹ As outlined by Lieutenant Commander Rick Burgess, U.S.N. (Ret.) in his article "Patrol Squadrons in the Korean War," from the July-August 2002 issue of *Naval Aviation News*, the U.S. Navy's Seventh Fleet had the important mission of keeping the Communist in check while U.S. and United Nations forces battled the North Koreans. "Although the U.S. Seventh Fleet's carrier task forces were committed to the Korean area of operations, the fleet still was charged with the protection of Formosa. The fleet was able to maintain routine surveillance of the Formosa Strait with patrol aircraft, which made it impossible for the Communist Chinese to launch a surprise invasion of the island."

² *The New York Times*, 21JAN1953

³ Vukic's statements were recounted in an article in *The Los Angeles Times* on January 22, 1953.

⁴ Lost in the tragedy were U.S. Navy personnel Ensign Dwight C. Angell, co-pilot; William F. McClure, photographer's mate; Lloyd Smith, Aviation Machinist's Mate; Paul A. Morley, Aviation Electronics Technician; Clifford R. Byars, Aviation Electronics Technician; Ronald A. Beahm, Aviation Electronics Mate. From the U.S.C.G. Mariner, the following men were lost: Lt. Jg. Gerald W. Stuart, co-pilot; Winfield J. Hammond, Chief Aviation Electronics Mate; Carl R. Tornell, Aviation Electronics Mate; Tracy W. Miller, Aviation Machinist's Mate; and Joseph R. Bridge, Aviation Ordnance Mate. The Coastguardsmen were posthumously awarded the gold lifesaving medal for their heroic efforts.



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