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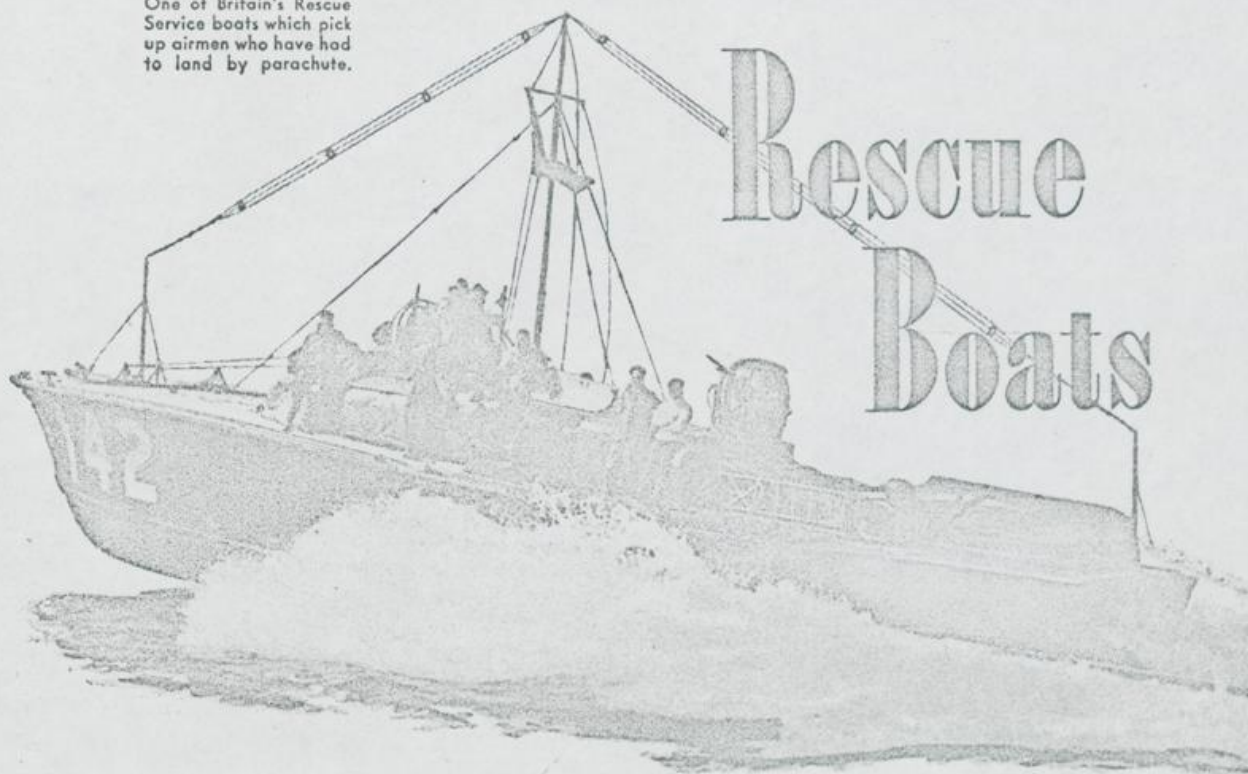
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Liberty, Oct. 25, '41

One of Britain's Rescue Service boats which pick up airmen who have had to land by parachute.



A flyer falls, a green circle spreads
on the sea . . . What does it mean?

BY ERIKA MANN

whom Liberty has sent to England as its special correspondent. She is a daughter of Thomas Mann, the eminent novelist who left Germany in 1938.

READING TIME • 15 MINUTES 55 SECONDS

LONDON.

★ IT rained so hard, one could hardly recognize the outlines of the landscape. Clouds looked like mountains, cornfields like choppy yellow lakes, and the poor dwellings alongside the rails—crippled, most of them, by recent blitzes, yet strangely beautified by the fog—looked like medieval ruins.

It was early in the morning. There hadn't been any breakfast in the hotel, and there was no dinner on the train, either. I had found a few cigarettes, though heaven knows what stuff they were made of. They were not easy on an empty stomach.

"Mist in the Straits of Dover," I read in the Daily Mail. But I knew this to be one of those understatements the British are so fond of. The weather must be disastrous in the Straits when even here, two hours from the sea, a nasty, irregularly blowing wind whipped thick strings of rain into a chaotic mess.

I hadn't been to Dover for quite a time. What was the place going to look like? Though there hadn't been any major raids, shelling was going on constantly, and I knew from the days in Madrid what even shelling can do to a city. Besides, shelling was really more annoying than bombing; one wasn't given the slightest warning

and no time whatever to take cover.

What was I journeying out for, anyway? I wasn't going to see a thing, and should get nothing but a cold. Quite aside from the weather, I had a certain apprehensive feeling with regard to the "authorities." Would they let me pass? Granted, I carried my nice neat Air Ministry permit in my pocket. I was definitely entitled to "visit the Naval Base." But did that mean I could go out in a rescue boat and really see what was going on?

The Rescue Service—that much I knew—was run by both the navy and the air force. Headquarters *—* all round the coasts of these islands in every port and harbor were constantly being informed regarding the number and position of aircraft engaged in their respective sectors, and their boats were always ready at a moment's notice to go out and fish up any airman who had made a parachute landing in the water. Members of the Observer Corps, coast guards, and Home Defense volunteers were sitting on the tops of lonely cliffs keeping watch over the sea.

There was Dover, and there was even a cup of coffee with bread and a butter ration which could be easily recognized as such without a magnifying glass. I was very pleased.

Dover looked all right. Nothing

* Deleted by censor.

really serious had happened to the good old place. A few squares and streets were wrecked, of course, by bombs apparently, but the ugly new bank houses in the business district looked rather better now with a few edges chipped off and a few honorable scars interrupting the dull regularity of their tiresome facades. It was still raining. I got a small bottle of brandy, although I couldn't quite picture the moment when I would dare to open it in the presence of H. M.'s forces. "It's going to be hellish cold," I decided, "and rough besides; some one might get seasick." Some one?

Needless to say, I was by no means welcome on board the rescue boat, and as a matter of fact I was on the point of giving way, of agreeing "just to stick around here talking to the boys and listening to their stories," when I realized that the whole thing was not a question of civilians, of reporters not being admitted, but of women being refused. "There's nothing for females out there—and we've never taken one." That was what I couldn't possibly stand. I put up my best fight, emerged victorious, and was presently on my way to the docks.

There were four boats going out this afternoon, two R. A. F. boats and two of the navy's *—* Mosquitoes. The little fleet lay below, at anchor. No sort of steps or slope led to it. There was only a wall some three

(Continued on page 40)

(Continued from page 30)

stories high, and a narrow wet, rusty fire escape, under which one had to crawl. The mere sight of it made me feel giddy and I suffered from a second attack of that what-on-earth-am-I-doing-this-for reluctance.

But once one has managed to get one's feet over the edge and has grasped the top rung with one's hands without looking down into the abyss, things work out quite smoothly.

I approached the one of the four officers who seemed to me the most enterprising. He was very young but with the aid of a neat nautical beard managed to give the impression of a mature, indeed almost a martial air. His eyes, too, were very promising: blue and friendly, with a tendency to peer into the distance, under the bold high brow, as he spoke.

"It's the navy you are with," he said; "or would you rather be with the R. A. F.?"

I said I'd rather be with him, and besides, "When at sea, stick to the navy!" He liked that. He was twenty-two years old, so he confessed to me finally, an undergraduate from Cambridge; now a lieutenant.

Our powerful engine *————* roared like a Clipper taking off.

★ AT forty miles an hour the boat cut through the waves, scarcely rocking at all, and with hardly a tremor. It was a curious zigzag course that we made, in obedience to the instructions given by our lieutenant captain through the megaphone to the man at the wheel. He had no map in front of him. He knew his mine fields in detail and by heart.

The crew consisted of eight persons, including the radio operator. They were quite young lads, wearing thick white jerseys with roll collars, and no caps; their hair was blowing in the wind. The gunner's name was George. He sat behind his huge machine gun as if fastened to it, swinging himself in his automatic turret. His head flung back, he sought out enemy airplanes in the skies.

How many pilots have been saved here since the captain took over? Nine in nine weeks—not so bad!

Some distance away from the coast there was a float—Rescue Float No. 10. The small red-and-yellow barge with the cross of mercy painted all over its deck was readily visible. Pilots who were shot down without being noticed by the guardians would paddle to one of those floats moored in various parts of the Channel. Their tiny rubber dinghies filled with air would carry them there; they would stay on the float till one of the rescue boats came to fetch them.

"I don't think we'll find a soul on Noah's Ark today," the captain announced. "We were out this morning and nothing has happened since."

Well, it was interesting enough to see the Ark. In fact, it was interesting enough even to be on this boat, which, with the haughty self-assurance of a

battle cruiser, steamed ahead toward a hostile coast.

It was not at all easy to get from the boat to the float, which seemed to dance crazily on the waves, but we managed it eventually. Her cabin was empty. It was a good thing that all her furniture and equipment were fixtures. I was not, and consequently flew from one of its corners to another, accompanied by and colliding with the captain, which was rather painful. When I had finally got hold of something reliable, I felt the place to be quite cozy. There were four berths, a radio set, a neat white gas oven, warm dry clothing, one closet containing first-aid materials, another filled with food and thermos flasks. Some ropes and tools were fastened to the walls, and there was a notice at the heads of the berths welcoming the guests. "Although your hosts cannot be present," it read, "they hope you'll feel comfortable in Rescue Float No. 10 and your stay won't be an extended one. They wish to congratulate you on your arrival and assure you that they'll do their utmost to get you out of here soon."

This must make cheerful reading for any one who has just fallen from heaven wondering whether he was not going to hell. A Nazi welcome would sound differently: "The N. S. Rescue Service salute you in the name of the Führer. You are to swim home and report for duty. Heil Hitler!"—or something of the kind. I was told, though, that there hardly existed any Nazi rescue service worth mentioning on the other side of the Channel. Many a Nazi airman had been picked up and saved by H. M.'s boats. "That's why Fritz does not, as a rule, shoot at us," the captain explained; "there is always a fair chance that he would kill one of his own gang."

★ WE had done our best in acrobatics and returned to our ship. George, behind his gun, gave his captain a skeptical glance. "Not as a rule," he said, "but now and again."

The coast of France was about as clearly visible now as were the white cliffs of Dover. We were in mid-Channel. "That's Nez Blanc over there," I was told, "and this is Calais; you'll see it better in a few minutes."

And on we went, full speed ahead. There was not a sign of enemy activity anywhere. The German shore batteries were silent; no Nazi ship patrolled this Nazi coast. This was indeed the British Channel, at Calais no less than at Dover.

Calais—it gave you a strange feeling in the stomach. There she was. There were her houses and spires; there was the harbor; and there was a tiny train moving toward the city—a Nazi train moving toward a city stolen and subdued by the Nazis. But thousands of Frenchmen would be waving to us; they would be chalking the V—our V—on their Nazi walls; they would be singing and whistling for us—the victory melody of Beethoven's Fifth—if only we got close enough. How close were we now?

We were four or five miles from Calais.

It was no longer raining; in fact, the sun was blazing blindingly in a dramatically gashed sky. If only it had kept away! We could have done nicely without it—but didn't know that then. None of us did when, from out of the Calais air, the Messerschmitts leaped at us.

There were two of them. They came down in a horseshoe swoop. Their crosses and swastikas could be easily distinguished. Their pilots were leaning over the side, faces bent toward us. They could have recognized any one on board. They might recognize me! I thought, but didn't move from my spot near the captain, behind George the gunner. Over our deck they swept, at 300 feet, and up toward the sun, and down on us again.

★ GEORGE, behind his gun, was aiming. There was scarcely any doubt that he could "make" them—one of them, at least.

"You are not to open fire!" The captain's voice was hoarse. "George, do you hear me? You are not to open fire. This is an order!"

George, his eyes fixed on the planes, followed their diving, climbing, circling movements; his swinging figure seemed to be one with his gun. Behind me the young fellow at the steering wheel swore softly but audibly. "What the hell are we waiting for?" he said. "For Jerry to take the first shot? And he will, too. It won't be the first time, either!" George seemed to feel the same way. Sitting very erect, holding his breath as well as his gunfire, he looked like a man in pain.

"I am sorry, George," the captain said. "God knows, I'd love to shoot; but we mustn't shoot, George, we mustn't!"

There he stood, holding the telescope to his eyes with both hands, and stared blinking into the sun, apparently without paying much attention to the two attackers.

There—the devil knows where they came from—suddenly there they were: two more Messerschmitts at our back, at George's back, rushing toward us, the air full of that buzzing crescendo which the screen has made so familiar to all of us. *————*

The situation was far from cozy. *————* Our captain, however, seemed fully satisfied, almost relaxed. "Ecco," he said, and "That's why, George." He smiled as though all were well now. "I know their tricks."

All was well now. To my baffled surprise, the enemy withdrew.

"There is nothing new under this annoying sun, as far as Fritz is concerned," I heard the captain saying. "He'll repeat himself over and over again. Now, this was his good old decoy performance. Those two fellows who arrived first were to draw our complete attention. We were to concentrate on them, to aim at them, even to shoot at them. In fact, he wanted us to shoot. For, while he is not supposed to attack a rescue boat, he'd be only too happy to do so, given

* Deleted by censor.

the slightest reason. If we had shot, those two sunny birds would have finished us up from the rear like that." He snapped his fingers.

Even George seemed content. The helmsman, a former bus conductor, turned his wheel. We flashed around and were steaming homeward.

"Are you satisfied with your trip?" the captain wanted to know. "And wasn't it a handsome show?"

"It sure was." I was cold now after the excitement, which as a matter of fact had not seemed like excitement at the time. One is surprisingly calm at such moments and it is only later that one realizes how hazardous things have been.

"Well, if we don't hit a floating mine now," said George, "the fun will be over for today."

It was not, though. We were already approaching the British coast when we heard the sound of an air engine cutting out. At some distance behind us a fighter plane came down in a vertical dive and crashed into the water, black smoke pouring from its tail.

A tiny white spot appeared in the sky, high up, far away; became larger, took shape—the shape of a man dangling from a parachute, but visible only through a powerful telescope.

"Turn, full speed ahead!"

★ WE turned toward the shifting object. So long as it was shifting all was well. But hardly had it reached the water than the waves seemed to suck it down; nothing was to be seen behind the swirling foam.

I was on the verge of tears from excitement. Where should we make for now? We should never be able to find him, the man who—somewhere or other—hidden from us and lost, was struggling for his life. Was he wounded? Had he been able to release himself from his parachute? I knew that it was easy to be caught up and entangled in the thing before one could unscrew the opening of the rubber dinghy and fill its slack form with air. The plane had fallen not far from us, but the lad had drifted with the wind. Where was he now?

Apparently quite calm, the captain gave orders in a clear voice. He could not know that they were correct.

Then the great noise began—the terrific roaring noise. It spelled deliverance! Planes—lots of them, ten, fifteen planes—appeared over our heads. Our planes, Spitfires! The R. A. F. was there to show us the way.

I stood at the rail, overcome by the mighty noise ringing in my ears like the sound of some heavenly orchestra. Never before had I heard such music; all was glory.

Two of the planes dived down, stopping short only a couple of yards above the sea. They described circles, diminishing circles, round a tiny point which they seemed to touch with their wings. Others buzzed around us, flew away from us and then toward us, accompanied us, until at last we saw and recognized our goal—our living, breathing, exhaustedly smiling goal.

The water round about the boy and his dinghy was a poisonous green. From above, even at a considerable height, this little colored lake would be easy to distinguish.

"Are you all right?" Our captain, despite beard and dignity, looked like a nineteen-year-old, so delighted was he.

"Cold," said the boy, his teeth chattering. He held on tight with one arm to his tiny boat. Evidently he had not had the strength to haul himself on "board." But he did catch the rope we flung to him.

"Steady, steady." And there he was. We'd got him. He was safe. He was young, slim. Wet dark hair fell over a fair, clever, and open brow. He kept his eyes closed as, only half-conscious, he leaned against the cabin door. He was very pale. From his jacket—the jacket of a sergeant—flowed a blood-red stream, making a hideous puddle at his feet.

But he seemed not to be in pain; he was merely cold, "hellish cold."

My brandy! Thank heaven I had brought it along. "There." He drank it greedily.

Two of our lads stripped the wet clothes from his body, pulled his shoes off, dried his hair. I was anxious about his wound. Ought he not to be kept lying down, I thought, and not moved?

Gunner George had put the rescued boy's arm round his shoulder, propping him up while two others undressed him. For a second he stood

there with the upper part of his body exposed. He was not wounded.

It was explained to me that all our pilots carry at the belt a small bag filled with some chemical substance which is dissolved in the water and turns the sea green for a hundred yards around. Nobody flying overhead could fail to notice the spot. When the drying air got to it, it turned red. It was nothing but the remains of this magic powder which made the boy look as if he were exuding a stream of blood from his jacket.

I sat down where I was, *——* and looked on while they brought him a warm brown cloak and laid him down on a mattress opposite me.

And now we began to question him. Where had he been? What had they been up to, he and his comrades? Who had shot him down? Was it the first time he had bailed out?

They had flown out to attack a convoy near the French coast, and had been successful, so it seemed. Then his plane had been hit. *——*

"But I still thought I could make it," he said, "when I was suddenly losing height in a hopeless manner." No, he had never before had to bail out. "And, honestly, it gave me a funny feeling. Two thousand feet may not seem much from down here, but from up there it's a lot of air to fall through. May I have my wallet?"

I held the wet and shabby little pigskin object in my hand, with a

boy's wrist watch. George had given them both to me.

The watch had stopped. It registered ten minutes past four, the time the boy had bailed out. It was now four twenty-five. But an eternity lay in that fifteen minutes.

"There." I handed him the wallet.

"Imagine," he said, "it's quite dry inside. Not even the writing is spoiled."

He showed me his treasures. A few letters, two photos. One of them showed him with a blonde girl; the other was that of an older woman, dark-haired and with fine bones, like the boy who carried her photo.

His mother. How terrified she would have been, and how overjoyed, if she could have sat here in my place!

"How old are you?" I asked. "What's your Christian name?"

"Twenty-one," he said. "Robert." He bowed slightly, just as if we were meeting politely in society.

There was the coast. It was black with people who wanted to see Robert land. He stood up, swaying a little on his bare feet. He looked now like a young monk on a pilgrimage; his narrow fair face seemed almost transparent against the brown of the cloak.

He went round shaking hands with us. In front of the captain the sergeant-monk put on a military air. "Thank you," he said; "thank you very much."

The captain said, "Don't mention it."

* Deleted by censor.