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Rescue from the heart of a typhoon

Crewmen of a downed bomber are saved from a raging sea in a daring feat by nuclear subs fighting 40-foot waves.

by Capt. Charles Barton, USN (Ret.)

Capt. Leroy Johnson, pilot of Cobalt 2, a B-52G of the Strategic Air Command, taxied into takeoff position at Andersen Air Force Base, Guam. It was past 4:00 a.m., July 8, 1972. Two other planes in the flight already were airborne.

Airman Daniel Johansen, gunner and, at 21, the youngest member of the crew, felt the power surge, the runway bumps, then liftoff.

Lights dropped away in the predawn darkness as the aircraft headed seaward above the surf that crashed against Guam's precipitous northeast coast. Crosswinds from local showers burbled over the cliff, tossing the plane, an indication of bad weather throughout the Western Pacific.

Three tropical storms were on or near their flight path. The nearest would grow into Typhoon Rita—a storm they'd come to remember.

As the bomber climbed through 20,000 feet, Johansen's headset came alive. "I've lost airspeed readings." It was the captain.

"It's out over here, too," replied his 25-year-old copilot, Lt. William Neely III. "Johansen, come forward and give us a hand."

The gunner unstrapped and went

With Typhoon Rita building up to a full-scale blow, the B-52G died at 30,500 feet. Six crewmen hit the silk to experience a night of horror.

to the flight deck. The pilots looked worried. Johansen read out corrective actions from the manual. It called for more power. But even when this was applied, Cobalt 2 still dropped behind the other planes.

Capt. Johnson leveled at 30,500 feet, let the aircraft pick up speed in a short descent, and engaged the automatic pilot, with "altitude hold." A few minutes later the plane began to shake. Suddenly the autopilot disengaged and the nose pitched down. The rate-of-climb indicator pegged out at 6000 feet per minute *down*, and the altimeter began to unwind.

Crew must bail out

The pilots struggled for control. Johnson snapped orders. "Everyone to your seats."

Maj. Ronald Dvorak, 35, the electronics warfare officer, watched Johansen climb back in his gunner's seat. "Strap in!" he yelled at him.

The shaking increased violently, and the angle of the plane approached a dive. The gunner struggled to hook up for ejection. His throbbing head and pounding heart muffled the interphone. Then came the order:

"Everybody out! Bail out!"

Johansen armed his ejection seat and saw Dvorak eject. He pulled his own trigger and shot through the open hatch, somersaulting through space. The chute opened with a jolt. It looked small.

He was swinging wildly. The risers which attached the chute to him were twisted. He pulled them apart and his body spun as they unwound. Sharp snapping sounds came from the left, then the right. Fear jolted Johansen. He thought the risers were breaking! He grabbed frantically to keep from falling, but it was only the sound of tack lines breaking free. As he stopped spinning, the chute blossomed. He felt faint.

Aircraft ends in fiery crash

Now he lowered his survival kit on its retaining line so it dangled 10 or 15 feet below and helped dampen the swinging. He inflated his life preserver and looked around. Low in the night sky, he saw the running lights of their aircraft, then a brilliant flash as it struck the sea. The flare lighted the chutes of at least three other crew members below him. He tried to steer toward

Submarines are built to perform submerged; on any surface they wallow. In Typhoon Rita's 40-foot waves, they faced nearly insurmountable odds to save lives.

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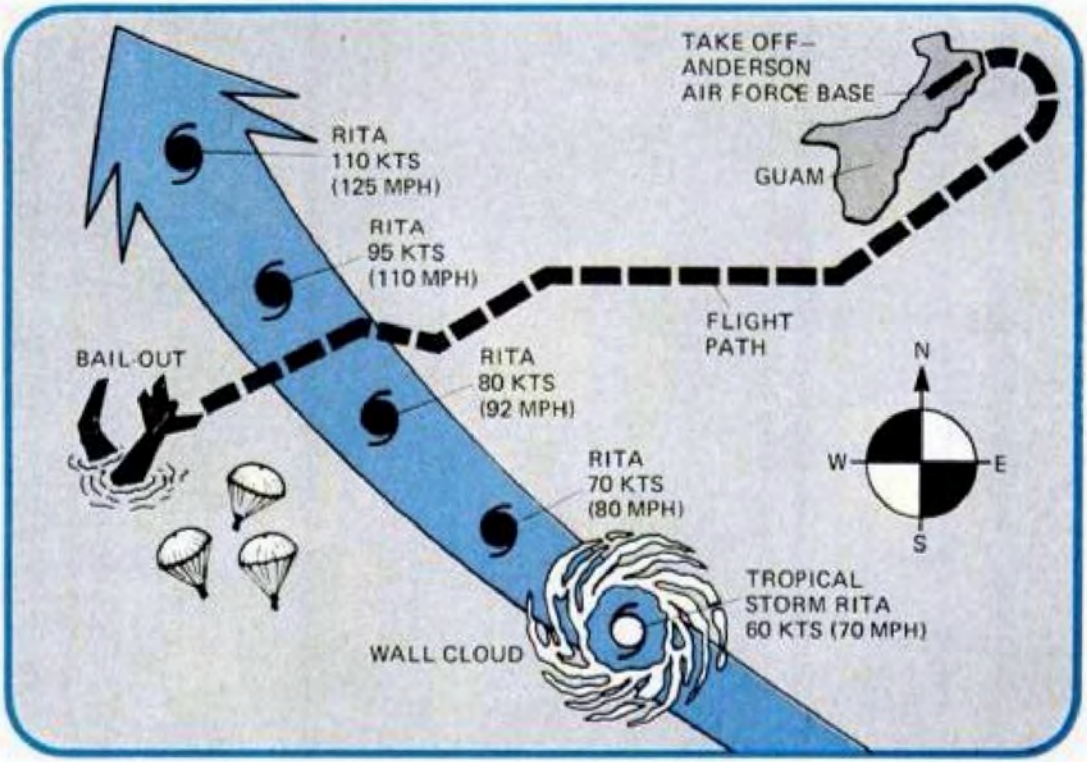
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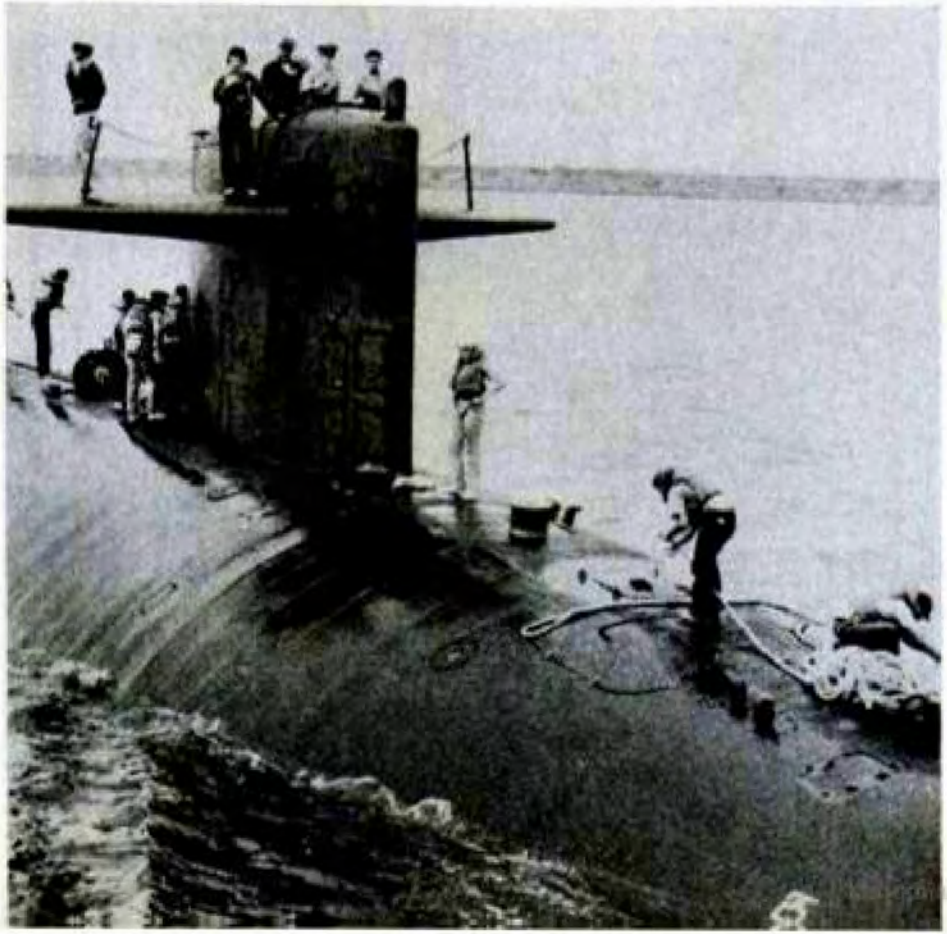


USS *Barb*, arriving in Apra Harbor, Guam. B-52 copilot Neely is on bridge, in flight suit.

Chief torpedoman of the *Barb*, Jon Hentz, receives the Navy and Marine Corps Medal for heroism. He swam a line to survivors.

Chief torpedoman of the *Barb*, Jon Hentz, receives the Navy and Marine Corps Medal for heroism. He swam a line to survivors.

them without success. He blinked his flashlight, but no one responded. At the last moment he unsnapped the covers from the parachute canopy releases and crossed his arms through the risers to prevent falling from the chute prematurely. As he neared the raging sea, he could hear and see huge waves, their crests blown to spray on a stinging wind.

The moment his feet touched the water, he pulled the canopy release rings and plunged feet first beneath the surface. His chute blew free. He surfaced and swam to his raft which had automatically inflated. Once in it he lay back to calm himself. The luminous dial of his watch read 5:25. It would be daylight soon. He felt okay; nothing had broken, and he hadn't swallowed water. But the weather was getting worse.

Troubles plague chutists

Using his flashlight, he opened his survival kit and made several distress calls on the radio. He shot off one flare which made a brief mark in the dark predawn. Nothing happened. He put out a sea anchor and the raft rode better. Patches of plankton fluoresced as each wave broke.

Lt. Kent Dodson, 25, the navigator, was having trouble. The sight of their B-52 exploding in the dark had hypnotized him and delayed his preparation for water entry. Just as he reached for the release rings a strong gust yanked the chute. He hit the water swinging and a great, rolling wave tossed him into his shroud lines, which snared him like a fishnet. Time and again he slipped below the surface.

Luckily, Dodson was a strong swimmer. Struggling for breath, he slashed line after line with his pocket knife and finally fought free. He climbed into his raft and lay panting for an hour, recovering. One line he'd cut was to his survival kit.

With daylight, the sea increased and the wind drove a stinging rain. Dodson could see rescue aircraft, but without signaling devices had no way of making contact. Eventually a C-97 buzzed him. He'd been spotted.

That night the waves, wind and rain built higher. Dodson fought to keep his raft from overturning. He was exhausted. "Good God," he thought, "Is this the end?"

Nuclear subs ordered out

On the morning of July 8, the nuclear fast-attack submarine USS *Barb* was in Guam's Apra Harbor completing repairs on a hydraulic pump prior to a six or seven-week Marianas patrol. News of Typhoon Rita was no worry. The big sub would sail submerged and untroubled below the raging surface. That's what everyone thought.

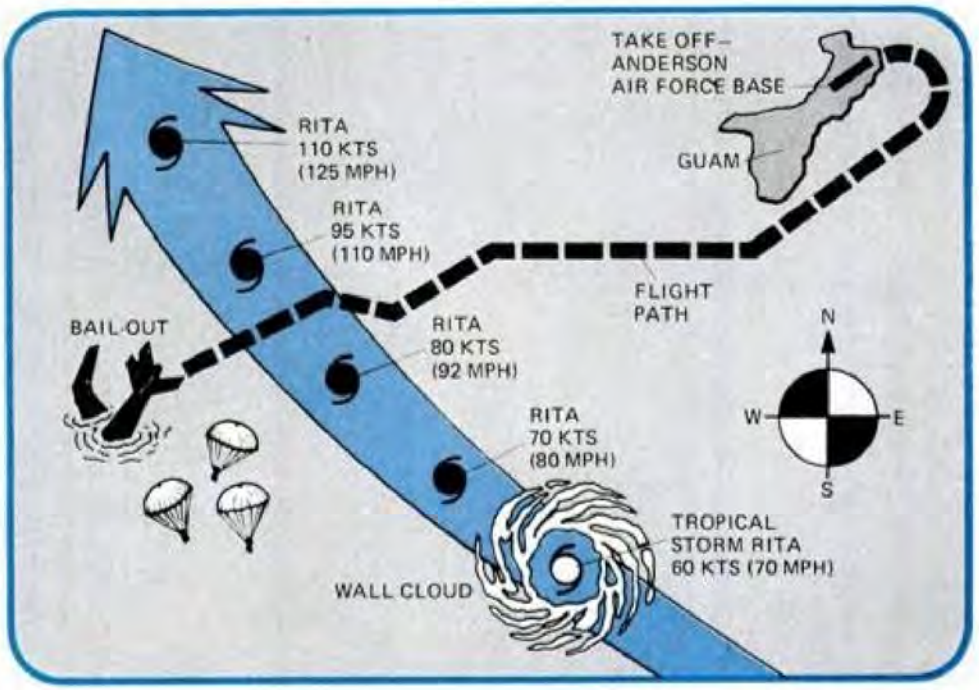
Instead, from the Joint Search and Rescue at Agana, orders were requested and issued to the *Barb*'s skipper, Commander John Juergens: "B-52 down vicinity 12-07 north, 140-20 east . . . three of six crewmen sighted by rescue aircraft . . . Proceed best speed . . ." An hour later a similar "operational immediate" went to USS *Gurnard*, a sister sub inbound from Japan.

Within an hour the *Barb* slipped past Apra's harbor jetty, entered deep water and nosed under.

Lt. Cmdr. Mike Rushing, engineering officer who would be officer of the deck during the rescue attempt, had been up for 36 hours supervising the repairs. Now he slept.

Cruising submerged at flank speed,

(Please turn to page 158)



Path of Typhoon Rita and course of ailing B-52 (dotted line) are shown in map above. The plane went down directly in the path of oncoming storm, which grew as it swept past the survivors who had parachuted into the sea. At left is USS *Barb*, arriving in Apra Harbor, Guam. B-52 copilot Neely is on bridge, in flight suit.