

Pedro Fifty-four, Where are You?

by
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"THE TOWER'S on the phone, looks like we've got a hot one."

I charged into Ops and grabbed the receiver from Dave. His voice betrayed the excitement of his first rescue mission.

"This is Sergeant Sams in the tower . . ." said the calm voice of a man used to handling unusual situations unhurriedly. . . "A Navy P-3V at sea just contacted us on Guard. It seems there's a sailor with acute appendicitis on a small ship out there. He wants to know if you can

pick him up. The P-3V is south of the base at about 70 miles."

"No reason why not," I thought, as I quickly added up the pro's and con's of taking the mission. I realized I was pretty excited myself since this was our first possibility of a save in over six months. "Get the position of the aircraft and ask him if he can cover the mission and lead us to the ship." I shouted at the crew who were clustered around the Ops desk, "We got one! Break out the LPU's. Call the standby crew to pull our alert. Get the

rescue basket aboard. Be sure we have the right maps!"

While everyone hustled to comply, I returned to the telephone. "Sir? You still there?" the tower operator came back.

"Roger," I answered, "what did he say?"

"Sir, he says he'll lead you right to the ship, he has a TACAN bearing of . . ."

I quickly interrupted, "Negative TACAN on the chopper, ADF only." I wondered if I ought to tell him that the ADF was out, but

cided against it. We never used the damn thing anyway.

"Roger . . . standby . . ."

"Sir, he says he is 70 miles out on a heading of 170 degrees. He will contact you on FM frequency 50.90 MC."

"Negative FM on the chopper, only UHF," I cut in again.

There was another short wait while Sgt Sams passed this information to the Navy pilot. "Sir, the Navy pilot says to come up on 364.0 when airborne. Squawk IDENT on your parrot, and he'll pick you up on his radar."

"Tell him negative parrot on the chopper."

"Standby . . . Sir? He says if you have an engine and a rotor, to crank up and meet him on UHF frequency 364.0."

"Roger Sarge." I could hardly suppress my sudden dislike for this unseen and unknown Navy jockey with his terrific wit. "Tell him our sign will be PEDRO FIVE FOUR and we'll be airborne momentarily."

As I ran out of Ops, the wind hit me. "Must be blowing about 25 knots right out of the north. I'll have to figure on a long trip back." I found myself talking under my breath as I struggled into the LPU. Dave's excited voice cut into my thoughts:

"We better hurry, sir, or Detachment 2 will beat us there."

Damn! I hadn't thought of that! Our arch rivals had beat us out of the last save by five minutes and they were closer to the ship than we were this time. They might already be on their way. "Well, let's get going then. Is everything ready?" "How about it, Sarge? Ready to go?" Denkins, the hoist operator, just grinned.

I had a sudden second thought and ran back into the hut where our clerk sat alone. "Airman Nichols, wait about 10 minutes, then contact Det 2 and ask them to help us. We'll be on 364.0 working a Navy

plane with the call sign Bulldog 3. OK?" I headed back to the bird, feeling better knowing that we would be covered if anything went wrong, and we could still beat them to the ship. Boy! Would I rub it into old Bud the next time he flew up on a rescue mission. "Hey Bud! Hear about our mission last week? The ship was actually closer to you, but they must have known how unreliable you are so they called us."

I took a last look around and crawled in the right seat. We went through the scramble check list, engaged the rotor and took off, heading straight out to sea.

"Dave, what was that heading again?" I asked.

"One Seven Zero."

"Oh, hell! I had forgotten the heading indicator doesn't work." We had been keeping this bird in commission to fly local orbits and I hadn't even looked at the indicator all week. "This is the price we pay for trying to keep two helicopters in commission." I thought about the maintenance officer's precious in-commission rate and cursed the paper work war under my breath.

"Well, it's still 'no sweat' if we can get ahold of that Navy many motors. He's got everything to get us there. He told Sgt Sams in the tower that all we needed was a rotor and an engine and he'd handle the rest. Let's see how good he is." The chuckles that greeted this were somewhat strained, but I could see that Dave reflected my satisfaction in a good beginning to the mission.

Dave switched frequencies.

"Bulldog 3, Bulldog 3, this is Pedro 54, over."

"Pedro 54, this is Bulldog 3. We have a radar target leaving the base on a heading of 180 degrees. We'll be joining you in about 10 minutes."

"He sounds competent enough," I thought. "If he has us heading 180, we better adjust 10 degrees left. Look at that mag compass swing in this wind."

I could see that even though the white caps were small, we were rocketing along at a great rate. "With a wind like this, we'll be over the ship in 45 minutes." Dave was working with his computer, but I wasn't sure he really knew what he was doing.

"How can you tell our ground-speed with no landmarks and no radio fix?" I asked.

"Well sir, just making a good guess."

Fifteen minutes after takeoff, I saw the Navy plane overhead. "Pedro, Bulldog has you in sight. Just relax, the pathfinder will lead you there . . . Say, that's a funny lookin' machine. What's the extra rotor for?"

"That's for the copilot in case mine gives out," I replied. "By the way, you're five minutes late." It was obvious the Navy pilot had never escorted a chopper before. He kept losing sight of us as he overflew us and then had to turn around and fly back.

"How's about cranking up that second rotor so you can keep up?" The voice in Bulldog 3 suggested a face that never stopped smiling.

"If you're having difficulty, suggest you zig zag, Bulldog." I hoped he caught the hint of sarcasm in my voice.

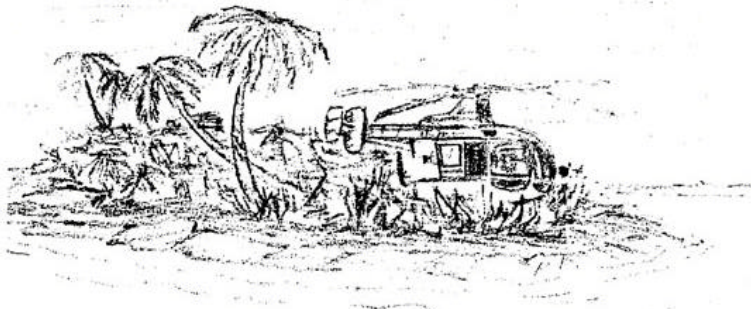
"We'll try it, thanks."

About 30 minutes later he was just getting used to the zig zag pattern when we unexpectedly lost him in the suddenly overcast sky.

"Bulldog 3, we have lost sight of you, do you have us on radar?"

"Negative, Pedro. The ship is now about 25 miles at 200 degrees. Our radar is bent and we are over a cloud deck but we should still be able to direct you right to him."

The way the mag compass was swinging back and forth, I was beginning to have doubts, but I wasn't about to tell him that. The turbulence seemed much worse now, but maybe it only seemed that way because we were alone. The engine



seemed to be gulping fuel at a terrible rate, too, but I shrugged it off as pure anxiety.

Twenty minutes later the solid overcast and semidarkness turned the sea from blue to steel gray. As I let down a few hundred feet to a better search altitude, I glanced at Dave. His face mirrored my anxiety as he alternately watched the sea below and stole furtive glances at the fuel gage.

Ten minutes later . . . "Pedro, this is Bulldog, our radar appears to be completely inoperative now, but you should have the ship in sight."

"Negative ship."

The frustration had tinged my voice with anger and Dave glanced at me apprehensively before turning his attention back to the sea and the fuel gage.

"Pedro, transmit a tone and I'll get a bearing on you."

"Roger . . . Pedro transmitting . . . one . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . . Pedro out."

"Head 360 degrees, you must have passed the ship." Now he sounded mad. I turned the bird around and thought dark thoughts about Navy pilots, overcasts, heading indicators, ADF's, and unpredictable winds.

"Bulldog, if we can't find him in 10 minutes, we'll have to head back for fuel."

Dave's voice sounded loud in my ears after listening to Bulldog. "Sir, I figure we should head back NOW. If we wait for 10 minutes, we'll be lucky to make shore."

The radio interrupted . . . "Understand your fuel state Pedro, just keep looking, you're bound to see him."

"We're LOOKING!" (What the hell does he think we're doing?) All heads craning, eyes smarting . . . nothing.

"Pedro 54, Pedro 54 this is Pedro 33, where are you?" Bud's voice sounded faint but clear.

I keyed the mike: "Hello Pedro 33, this is fifty-four. We're in the area but we are having difficulty finding the ship. Where are you?"

"Pedro 54 this is 33, we're about 50 miles out heading toward you, I got a good bearing from your last transmission. Do you need any help?"

"Please, Mother, I'd rather do it myself!" My own banter surprised me. How in the world could I be flippant at a time like this? Dave kept punching the fuel gage test switch every 30 seconds and it was driving me nuts, yet I knew we should have headed back.

"Bulldog 3, do you have us on radar yet?" I angrily slapped the mike button.

"Negative Pedro, give us another count."

"Roger." This is ridiculous. Even

if we found the ship we couldn't possibly make a hoist pickup now.

"Turn to heading 180 and keep looking, you must be right over the ship." Bulldog no longer sounded mad, just disgusted. That made me even more determined to find that stupid ship.

"Sir, we have to be heading back!" Dave was almost begging now.

"Just one more swing, and then we give it to Pedro 33. Now everybody LOOK!" I almost sounded as desperate as I really was. I felt like I was boxed in and all the walls were slowly closing, leaving me no place to go.

We looked and looked hard . . . Nothing.

"Bulldog 3, can you give us a vector to the nearest land? We're getting low on juice."

"Sir, we'll be lucky to make shore with the fuel we have." Dave echoed my true thoughts exactly. I looked out at the ocean but I could see very little movement over the waves. I consoled myself by remembering how hard it is to judge ground speed over the water. Seconds like minutes . . . minutes like hours . . . ticking away.

"Pedro 54, this is Bulldog; head 290 for nearest shore, over."

"Bulldog 3 or Pedro 33, can you escort us to shore?" There was nothing flippant about my tone of voice now.

"Pedro 54, this is 33, give us a count."

"Roger . . . one . . . two . . . three . . ." Even the numbers sounded desperate.

"Fifty-four, this is 33. We still have you ahead of us. We'll turn toward shore and try to intercept you. How much fuel do you have?"

"Almost 300 pounds." I tried to sound confident but inside my helmet a voice was screaming: "Tell them . . . TELL them . . . you're down to 200 pounds and the engine has turned into a fuel gulping monster." I looked out again at the wave patterns slowly passing astern and an almost overwhelming feeling of helplessness engulfed me. Still no land . . . now we were down.

150 pounds. With a sigh of resignation, I keyed the mike. This was REAL. This was happening to ME.

Pedro 33, this is 54. We now have only 150 pounds of fuel and I think we might have to ditch!"

"Roger 54, (now he sounded worried) give us another count."

The countdown went out over the radio like a countdown to disaster. My disaster.

"Pedro 54, this is 33, according to our needle you have hardly moved. What is your heading?"

"We're heading 290, but we don't seem to be making much headway." (That was an understatement) "Listen 33, it doesn't much matter now which way we head, we are going to ditch, repeat DITCH, over." There it was, I finally said it, and it didn't seem to matter much how many people heard it, or what they thought about it.

"Roger 54, we can keep heading for you for another 15 minutes, then we'll have to go back for fuel ourselves."

Denkins' voice over the interphone was so calm that at first his

words didn't register... "Sir, there's a shadow at two thirty that might be an island."

"I see it! There it is! We can make it easily!" My voice came over the interphone in almost a shout. The feeling of relief that engulfed me almost made me lose control of myself. There it was! A lovely, beautiful green island. Right smack dab in the middle of an ocean where there weren't supposed to be any islands.

"Bulldog 3, this is 54. We have a large island in sight. We'll be landing there. Pedro 33, can you bring us out a few barrels of fuel?"

Anyone listening to my voice would have thought it was the most common and expected thing in the world to have an island suddenly appear out of an empty ocean.

"An island? PEDRO FIFTY-FOUR WHERE ARE YOU?" Bud was as incredulous as I was.

"I don't know, (the truth for once), but I'm approaching an island with 1... no... 2 villages on it." There were a few minutes of pregnant silence while Bud digested

this information, then...

"Pedro 54, we have an island on the next map. You are about 30 miles further south than we thought. We'll head back now for fuel and see you in a few hours."

EPILOG—ONE

WEEK LATER

"Sir, Detachment 2's bird just landed."

"Oh Boy!, here it comes!" I had been dreading this encounter with Bud ever since he'd brought the fuel to the island. Well, I might as well face the music. It can't be any worse than what the Colonel gave me... here it comes."

"Say, did you hear about our mission last week? Well, there was this chopper pilot who got lost, see? So he sent out an SOS for the best chopper crew in Rescue. Naturally, we ended up saving the chopper pilot's tail. We flew all around the ocean calling 'PEDRO FIFTY-FOUR WHERE ARE YOU?' And guess where he was?"

I held my head and tried not to listen. It was going to be worse than I thought.

