

Above & Beyond: Man Overboard!

Air & Space Magazine

Keith Monroe

At 9:30 in the morning on May 15, 1941, I stood in a crowd on a San Diego sidewalk, staring transfixed at the sky. We watched an R2D-1 transport circling, trailing a queer whirligig below its tail. The airplane, the Navy version of the Douglas DC-2, was marked "U.S. Marines." The whirligig was Marine parachutist Second Lieutenant Walter Osipoff. The drama that was about to unfold would be the talk of the town for weeks.

The lieutenant had been finishing up a routine practice drop. As jumpmaster, he had sent his 11 chutists and a cargo pack through the hatch, and was about to dump another cargo pack of rifles and ammunition and step out the hatch himself. As he attempted to push the 150-pound cargo container out, his rip cord got fouled with the rip cord of the cargo pack. When Osipoff's chute billowed open, he was yanked out of the transport. The weight of the cargo pack, together with the weight of the lieutenant and the pull of his parachute, put such a strain on the aircraft's static cable, which automatically opens the chutes of jumpers after they exit the aircraft, that the attachment bracket and bracing were torn off the transport. That ripped open the cargo chute, which billowed out the door and got tangled with Osipoff's parachute. Osipoff hung by his feet a hundred feet behind the transport in a net of shroud lines, static line, cable, silk, and harness.

Pilot Harold Johnson first knew there was trouble when a hammer blow hit him in the solar plexus. It was the control wheel. Johnson, wheezing, fought the controls as the transport's nose tilted up. The airplane felt so tail-heavy, he told me later, that he needed all his strength to push the nose down. Soon he realized why: Something—or someone—must have snagged on the tail. Johnson had no radio with which to call for help. But he could at least alert someone on the ground.

Flying as slow as he dared, 110 mph, he began circling gently over the Marine field at Camp Kearney, then over nearby Camp Elliott, and finally over the big naval air station at North Island in the harbor. At an altitude of a few hundred feet, he saw plenty of upturned faces. But what could anyone do?

Meanwhile, the five people left in the R2D tried valiantly to haul Osipoff back in. But progress was infinitesimal. All without parachutes, they too were in danger of slipping out the doorway.

Beneath them, twirling in the hurricane of the slipstream, Osipoff kept his eyes squeezed shut against the blast. A cargo hatch handle had torn open his left arm and shoulder. The shroud lines burned and lacerated his face and body. He was badly bruised all over and in shock from internal injuries. But Osipoff did not know any of this. He just knew he hurt all over. He kept his arms folded and legs crossed against the wind.

At the naval air station, Lieutenant William Lowrey was strolling toward a hangar when he glanced up and saw the R2D. "At first I thought it was one of those parachute dummies that were used to test parachutes with," Lowrey's fellow test pilot John McCants later told a military panel. Lowrey told McCants to gas up a small Curtiss SOC observation-scout biplane. Then he picked up a phone and called the control tower to explain his plan (the SOC had no radio either).

McCants signaled that the scout was fueled and started the engine. Lowrey sprinted toward it. From the barracks, Marines were sprinting too, knives in hand. "Cut his shroud lines," they yelled, tossing the knives in the cockpit.

The two Navy men took off and angled up toward where Osipoff was bouncing and flipping. The crew aboard the transport had by then managed to pull him a third of the way back in.

Suddenly Osipoff felt a wrenching smash. Something banged his aching back and shoulders. Then he was twirling again. Cautiously, he opened his eyes. Below him was the wing of another airplane.

From the ground, I could see that Lowrey had maneuvered the biplane under Osipoff, but the aircraft was whipped in the transport's slipstream and Osipoff twice got dragged across the wing. Lowrey then flew alongside the transport and signaled Johnson to try climbing to find calmer air. Soaked in sweat, Johnson let the nose come up again. He had enough fuel for another 10 minutes.

Time was shortening for Osipoff too. Being jerked through the hatch had broken his chest strap, and his leg straps were hanging on his ankles. "We could see that he was in pretty bad shape because there was blood dripping off the helmet," McCants later said.

At 3,000 feet Lowrey tried another pass. With McCants standing up in the rear cockpit, Lowrey got Osipoff lined up with the biplane's left wing and edged in, fighting to keep the propeller away from the jumpmaster's head. Then Osipoff was above the aircraft, almost close enough to reach. Ahead a little more. Up a little. McCants and Osipoff grabbed each other's waists and held on. Osipoff's head went into the rear cockpit. But he was still enmeshed in the lines, and try as he might, McCants couldn't make room for more than Osipoff's head. The cockpit was too small.

Osipoff lay on top of the fuselage, propped in a machine gun crotch aft of the second cockpit, clinging to McCants. Both were hampered by the shroud lines that were tangled in the static cable. Knife in hand, McCants sawed hard to cut Osipoff free. Each second counted—the two aircraft could not stay precisely in position for long.

Then a gust flung the SOC up. With a grinding scream, its propeller sliced 12 inches off the transport's tailcone fairing.

Lowrey told me later, when I interviewed all the players for a magazine article, that the impact dizzied him for an instant. He realized that by some miracle he was still flying, and so was the transport, a safe distance above him. Osipoff was still horizontal on the top of the biplane's fuselage. The parachute swirled behind, caught in the SOC's tail.

The collision might have been guided by angels. When the biplane's nose came up, the shroud lines fell across its upper wing, and the propeller neatly severed them when it sliced into the R2D's tailcone fairing.

Johnson glided the transport to North Island and landed safely. But Lowrey was in trouble. Part of the parachute jammed the biplane's rudder, leaving him with almost no rudder control. Clutching each other against the slipstream, Osipoff and McCants waited, hoping Lowrey could bring the airplane in.

Lowrey managed to bounce it onto the strip at North Island, chute and all, and was immediately surrounded by cheering crew.

Osipoff, who had endured 33 minutes of being dragged around the sky in a 110-mph wind, was promoted to first lieutenant after his release from the hospital. Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox presented Lowrey and McCants with the Distinguished Flying Cross for "extraordinary heroism...[in] one of the most brilliant and daring rescues within the annals of our Naval history."