

Wave-Top Marauder

Historynet

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Hugging the waves, a Marauder from No. 14 Squadron heads for his next target.

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January 25, 1944. My father, Ronald Hadingham, is aboard a troopship bound for his Royal Air Force duty station in the Mediterranean. Ten days out from Liverpool, he decides to retrieve a baggage item from the hold and, unnoticed, follows another passenger down through the huge watertight door. While rummaging around, my father is suddenly plunged into darkness when the other passenger slams the door and turns off the light from the outside. It's pitch-black and no one knows he's down there. The ship is five days away from its destination, Alexandria, and the convoy has already been under attack from U-boats. What will happen, he wonders, if a torpedo strikes? In his wartime diary he later jots down the alarming thoughts that raced through his mind.

Ronald tries banging on the hull with a stray piece of wood, but that proves useless. Finally, he wrote, "after great efforts to think calmly, I hit upon the idea of finding a water pipe, which would carry sounds out to other parts of the ship. After groping in the dark for ages, I found one in the roof, and banged out S.O.S. with my piece of wood. Sure enough, an answering call came back along the pipe after a while, and after another half hour's search, I was located and rescued by about a dozen people, convinced they had found a stowaway!" That incident was just a prelude to the challenges my father would face over the next seven months—challenges he would meet with the same ability to think clearly in a crisis.

Eventually assigned to No. 14 Squadron, RAF, he arrived at its base at Grottaglie, in the “heel” of Italy, at a critical moment in the struggle for control of the Mediterranean. The Allies had invaded southern Italy in September 1943, and now their forces were preparing a massive final push against strongly defended Axis positions at Monte Cassino, south of Rome. The RAF had the vital job of spotting and destroying any enemy ships bringing supplies and reinforcements to the war zone. For 14 Squadron, this meant a particularly risky type of mission: six- to eight-hour patrols flown at sea level to evade radar and fighter attack, often within range of formidable coastal anti-aircraft batteries.

The Martin Marauders flown by 14 Squadron compounded the risk for aircrews. A powerful twin-engine medium bomber, the American-built B-26 Marauder was an unforgiving handful for inexperienced pilots. There was little margin for error: Its landing speed was high, and if an engine failed with the wheels down, the result could be catastrophic. Not surprisingly, the “Widow Maker” was unpopular with training units. Yet in skilled hands it proved highly effective in fending off enemy fighters and dodging flak during the long Mediterranean missions.

As the leader of 14 Squadron’s A Flight at Grottaglie, my father had more than 150 men under his command and led 44 of these high-risk missions. Pathologically modest, in the stiff-upper-lip British tradition, in later life he rarely talked about what he had been through. A postwar business associate described him as “a quiet, pleasant and unassuming individual; rather a small man, totally lacking in ostentation, his modest demeanor totally belied the capability which existed behind the facade. It was a long time before I discovered that he had been a squadron leader in the RAF.”

Once, my mother let slip the fact that his squadron nickname had been “Hell Hadingham,” which seemed utterly at odds with his quiet personality and calm demeanor. I wondered how he had managed to lead his men through the traumatic experiences of war. It was not until after he died that I came across the diary with a faded blue cover he had kept throughout his seven-month tour of duty in Italy. As I read the entries—neatly penned in blue ink nearly every day, even after six-hour missions—I began to understand what had been a mystery to me during my father’s lifetime.

Still getting the hang of the Marauder after a six-week training course and facing his first mission, he had arrived at Grottaglie in unnerving circumstances. The squadron was suffering heavy losses, he wrote, “of a somewhat mysterious nature, since in practically every case the aircraft has simply failed to return, without radio or any other clue as to what has been happening.” The risks became clearer as Ronald began his first patrols along the northern Adriatic coast. Low-level flight for hour after hour presented a huge hazard: On a calm day the glassy sea often blended with the sky, so a pilot could easily lose track of the horizon. After one pilot just back from a mission complained about how rough his engines had been running, it was discovered that the tips of all eight propeller blades were bent back from contact with the sea—a close call indeed.

Patrolling the maze of small islands, some of them held by the Axis, others by partisans on the Allies' side, involved other risks. It was crucial for the British airmen to keep track of these shifting territories to avoid accidentally attacking the partisans or exposing their aircraft to enemy groundfire along the coast. Moreover, innocent-looking merchant vessels—even hospital ships marked with the Red Cross—might turn out to be heavily armed and carrying supplies to the Italian forces. Ronald noted of a typical encounter with one such disguised ship: “As we went up to it to note its type and size, a storm of ack-ack was let loose at us from at least half a dozen guns on it, easily the worst we have experienced yet, so I turned violently to avoid getting too unhealthily close, and took violent evasive action, climbing up, skidding, diving on to the water, and turning to right or left with the crazy flight of a bat.”

It didn't help that their bombers were plagued with mechanical problems. “How unlucky I have been on Marauders in small things!” he wrote after one mission in which both generators had failed, requiring him to fly without radio contact. “I have had failures of almost every item of ancillary equipment at various times. Two burst tires, broken hydraulic system, failure of all instruments just after take off (fuse blown), air locks in petrol causing engine cuts, and now faulty generators! And most people have never had anything go wrong!” Yet he put a positive spin on these incidents, viewing them as learning experiences that “help one to understand the aircraft, and feel confident one could cope with a similar situation next time.”

The worst mishap of all came on his third mission, hundreds of miles from Grottaglie, when he suddenly noticed there was zero pressure in the hydraulic system, which operated the landing gear, flaps and brakes. His copilot clambered into the bomb bay and found it swimming in hydraulic fluid. One of the main lines had broken—serious news, since it meant their emergency hand pump would be of only limited use. During the long flight home, Ronald led a thorough discussion with the crew, assigning each of them a job in handling the emergency gear. Over the airfield, he began circling at 2,000 feet while they worked on the hand pump. They managed to get both the nose wheel and left wheel down and locked, but even after strenuous pumping the right wheel still refused to budge. At that point their situation was dire indeed: A one-wheel touchdown was far more dangerous than a belly landing, but it was impossible to retract the left wheel. “So with one final effort, plus violent rocking of the aircraft on my part,” he wrote, “the wheel suddenly unlocked, and down she came. The relief was terrific...we still had to land with only partly working flaps, and no brakes, which had its dangers, but all went well.” Once again, he concluded, “we shall know what to do next time.”

By his ninth mission, Ronald's growing confidence and familiarity with the coast posed its own hazard: “I got a little too close in shore, and a hail of splashes around us and tracer was sufficient reminder to keep a healthy way out...a false step like this reminds you there is danger there.” For his crew, however, it was apparently not the first time their captain had shown overconfidence. To his dismay the following day, the crewmen confronted him with a serious complaint. After comparing notes and photos with other crews, they were convinced

Ronald was piloting closer to ships and the shore than anyone else, exposing them all to unnecessary risk. Shaken by this challenge to his judgment, Ronald confided in his diary that night: "Perhaps I have been going slightly close because I have not wanted to appear timid to them or 'half do' the job of identifying vessels. Now that I know how they really feel, we shall from now on keep a mile or two out to sea instead of half a mile, and view ships from a more healthy distance."

But even at a range of five miles, a well-operated shore battery could bring down a Marauder. Patrolling at this seemingly safe distance in September, Ronald's aircraft was hit by a "clap like thunder," as ack-ack shells burst a few yards away from its wings and tail. "The sea all around us was churned up with shrapnel," he wrote, "and the whole aircraft literally gave a shudder, and the concussion was terrific. Gene called out, 'I think we are hit,' and as I pulled the aircraft up in a violent evasive turn I glued my eyes on the instruments looking for engine troubles, and anxiously felt the aircraft responding normally to the controls....We were certainly badly shaken, and all felt that this was a really narrow escape!"

The crew's diligence was finally rewarded in early September, when they made a spectacular sighting: the Italian luxury liner Rex. At 880 feet long, it was the world's fourth biggest ocean liner and had broken records for the fastest transatlantic crossing during the 1930s. When war broke out, Rex was first laid up at Bari, in the Adriatic, and then towed to Pola, where it disappeared from aerial photos in early September. Allied intelligence thought the Germans might be towing the liner to Trieste, where they could scuttle it at the entrance to the harbor to create a formidable barricade. Ronald's A Flight had been given the mission of finding Rex before that happened.

On September 6, as my father's Marauder flew past Trieste, his navigator spotted a suspicious object close to the cliffs. Since it was hard to see in the twilight, Ronald turned the bomber around and roared into Trieste Harbor under full power. Still unsure of what they were looking at, he repeated the run, expecting a storm of flak from Trieste's defenses. As he pulled up sharply, all doubts vanished—they could clearly make out Rex's rakish lines and twin funnels. When my father turned tail to make his escape, "all hell was let loose at us, and we paid for our view of this prize target by experiencing three minutes of pretty hair-raising flak. Dirty black puffs would suddenly appear in the air ahead, to one side or above us, and a sudden kick against the tail told me that they were bursting close behind us as well. The sea all around us was speckled with small and large shrapnel from the fragmentation. And all the time, with both engines full out, I was putting the aircraft into every type of dive, climb, and turn imaginable. We eventually passed out of the danger area completely unscathed, flushed with excitement. We got a great kick from sending our radio message—sighting a 51,000-ton vessel!" Stormy weather intervened after that sighting, but three days later Bristol Beaufighters attacked the liner, pummeling it with armor-piercing rockets until the great ship caught fire and eventually rolled onto its side.

Rex's sinking marked a dramatic end to the enemy shipping threat in the Adriatic, which 14 Squadron and other units had played a vital role in neutralizing. Less than two weeks after the liner was sunk, the squadron was ordered home to "Blighty."

Ronald was clearly lucky to have survived. Between November 1942 and September 1944, No. 14 Squadron lost 30 aircraft—18 in combat and 12 in accidents—an average of more than one Marauder a month. This was a much higher casualty rate than seen in any other Marauder-equipped RAF unit, due largely to the squadron's perilous mission of flying low-level patrols.

But there was obviously more to my father's survival than luck. His calm determination and ability to think clearly in a crisis often figure in his diary's blue-inked pages. In our family we have a new saying: If in doubt, "remember to knock on the pipes," and things will probably turn out all right.