

B.D. Boukie
Wing Commander Lerew reports as follows:-

Encl 10A.

Hudson A16 - 91 in company with two other Hudsons, (one captained by Flying Officer Graham Ian Gibson and the other by Flight Lieutenant Pedrina) set out to attack enemy shipping in the harbour at Gasmata.

Hudson A16-91 was captained by Wing Commander Lerew as first pilot. At 0430/Z was making a masthead attack on merchant ship when second pilot reported that the aircraft was on fire just as the aircraft passed over a ship. Second pilot did not say and Wing Commander Lerew does not know if the fire was caused by anti-aircraft fire from enemy destroyers which were in the harbor and well within range, or from fighter aircraft. There was a number of enemy fighter aircraft (type 4B) in the air. These were not actually seen by Wing Commander Lerew, but Flight Lieutenant Pedrina (captain of Hudson which returned safely) reported this on return to base.

Wing Commander Lerew handed second pilot the fire extinguisher. Second Pilot broke window and applied extinguisher to fire.

In the meantime Wing Commander Lerew was taking avoiding action at low level.

The fire suddenly increased in intensity and Wing Commander Lerew gave order to abandon the aircraft.

The crew disappeared towards the rear door of the aircraft.

Flame and smoke poured into the pilot's cabin. The aircraft had made some height (now about 400 feet) and was over the land.

Wing Commander Lerew attempted to climb out through the pilot's window, but could not get up, tried again grabbing parachute at same time, got stuck and as aircraft was now diving almost vertically towards land he had to stand on control column to reach pilot's window. As aircraft was diving too steeply climbed in again and pulled nose up with control column, pulled it back with foot, and kicked the trimming tab up as well. Using control column as a step he managed to force himself through the window. Could hardly see for smoke, but got through pilot's window, jumped sideways, shielding head from the tailplane.

Wing Commander Lerew tumbled over and over but could not reach rip cord as 'chute was right out in front of him and was reversed. Eventually found rip cord and stopped with a bump. He caught sight of another Hudson being pursued by three fighters.

He landed in trees and managed, although exhausted and nearly choked with "Mae West", to struggle up to higher bough of tree and relieve pressure of "Mae West".

He did not see other members of the crew actually bale out, only saw them move towards rear door. Difficult to see anything owing to smoke. Did not see anyone parachuting while he was coming down.

EXTRACT FROM WING COMMANDER LEWIS' DIARY FOLLOWS:-

Heard twigs breaking beneath me and almost resigned to being taken by Japs. Turned out to be wild pig.

Found rip cord still firmly grasped in right hand.

Lumps on my head, too, so I couldn't have missed the tailplane!

Determined to make big effort to avoid capture. Climbed gingerly down 100 ft. tree to ground. Lost lots of skin and landed in dense, dark jungle. Heard twigs breaking. Hid behind tree. Another pig.

Wednesday, 4 p.m. - Walked on north west course until I became thoroughly confused. Sat down and waited for stars, then set off through jungle again. Checking again, found I had turned north-east.

Sat down. Very thirsty. Only two matches in box and striker not much good. Mosquitoes nearly drove me mad, and wild pigs getting on my nerves. By licking leaves kept myself going till I found puddle.

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Drank cold water which made me feel sick. Found track leading west, struck mosquito-infested swamp. Drank more water, then climbed up bank and lay down. Awake all night killing mosquitoes. Began to feel weak and sick.

Thursday. - Started again at dawn and walked for hours.

Followed dry creek towards coast, but time after time got cut off by impenetrable sword grass.

Climbed back up steep mountains and cliffs. Only water cupped in leaves and pockets of fallen trees. Forced to go north-west for hours, climbing over fallen trees, up steep banks, very high hills, and steep gorges. Made about six attempts to reach sea, but always blocked.

Sun got too high to judge direction, so sat down and rested. Feeling weak from emptiness. Thought about the dangers of scratches turning into tropical ulcers, of malaria. I had to stop every half hour in a lather of sweat. Always thirsty. Made determined effort to follow small creek of stagnant water holes to sea, irrespective of direction.

Heard sea, a long way off.

An hour later - Am not sure whether it is the sea I hear, or wind in the trees.

Am thinking of crew and hope, if they were killed, it was instantly.

Reach sea at last.

Took off clothes and lay in water. Perfect. Carried clothes and walked naked along beach. Came to wide river.

Reached native village. They gave me bananas, paw paws and water. Got very feverish and sick in the stomach. Natives frightened to help me.

Thursday, 6 p.m. - Set off again. Reached another village, very tired and sick. Got three tabs of quinine and set off again. Climb up and down steep track. No water. I get hotter and hotter. Every time I stop I lie down before I fall down -- feeling very dizzy. Stagger on. I sucked a few leaves. Am all aches and can only just stop vomiting. Push on for hours.

Thursday, 10 p.m. - Find small puddle and stagger down and drink. Find it full of pig marks but can hardly prevent myself lying down beside it and staying there. Twice I decide I must lie down and go no farther. But struggle on.

Reach beach and find Japs are in possession. Hurry back into jungle until I can go no farther. Lie down and shiver until morning.

Friday. - Reach white man's hut but no white man in it. Pillow torn up and bed up-turned. Hundred yards on find white man in cave. So I meet Bill --.

Bill looked after me all day. Fed me on coffee and marvellous soup. We celebrate Friday the thirteenth, and wish the Japs an unlucky day. We discuss prospects and he says he is going to stay -- may be able to help other airmen.

We meet Harold -- and discuss getting out. A Hudson comes over and drops flares. Try to signal with flash which is hardly any good. Jap. destroyers have landed troops in these parts, and we are all a bit jumpy. We set out in Harold's pinnace. Keep sharp lookout for Jap. ships which, Harold says, have been operating here since before Christmas.

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Monday. - Meet another white man, who gives us a bottle of beer -- his last -- and a sumptuous meal and a bath. Life seems grand again. Weather continues unfavourable and I feel like giving it a go in a dinghy with oil drum flotation lashed in.

Tuesday. - Walk a mile to visit another white man. He is alone. We talk to him about his schooner and spend some time camouflaging it.

Wednesday. - It is now just a week since life seemed so desperate swinging in that tree in my 'chute. We have worked all day leading the schooner. Near dusk we begin to move. The wind is blowing hard and the crossing threatens to be hazardous.

Thursday. - The crossing is hazardous. Seas break over us and it is difficult to hang on. There is a lot of water in the black hole of Calcutta we call the engine room. I am black with oil. The pumps won't work and we begin to bail. Water seems to be gaining. Weather seems to get worse.

Friday. - Dawn, and there is no sight of land.

Friday, 1 p.m. - Sight land. A pinnace rushes towards us. They might be Japs. But no, whacko, I can see Aussie hats. They point Tommy guns at us. We look so much like bushrangers they won't believe us. No wonder, I've got eight days' beard. Then we speak and they're satisfied.

Their first words are "What about a long cold one?"

Oh boy, what about one?"

The diary then explains briefly how he was taken in a fast launch back to the base from which, nine days earlier, he had set out on his reconnaissance flight.

Wing Commander Lerew thinks there is a very slight chance of survival of other members of the crew - at first he said there was a very slender chance but then pointed out that the crew had as much chance as he had himself.

Wing Commander Lerew knows nothing about the crew of Flying Officer Gibson's aircraft other than that it may have been that seen attacked by three enemy fighters.

He did not see either his own or the other aircraft actually crash, and as the jungle was dense it was impossible to look for wreckage.