

ML.82.We Are Ditching! Ditching! Ditching!

Chances of surviving a crash landing in the frigid waters of the raging North Pacific were close to zero. But for the 15 men aboard Alfa Foxtrot 586, there was no other choice.

– *Reader's Digest, Drama in Real Life, September 1979, p113*

On 26 October, 1978, Alpha Foxtrot 586, a Navy P-3C out of Adak Naval Station, AK, was tracking and photographing surface vessels in the North Pacific. To save fuel they had feathered one of its four left wing turboprop engines. As the weather worsened, they restarted it but quickly saw an uncontrollable runaway prop, despite all attempts to manage it. Their only option was to ditch – in 25-foot swells – before the prop disintegrated. Before touching down 586 radioed Elmendorf their exact location, and “We are ditching, ditching, ditching, one five souls on board, three orange life rafts.’

When the experienced pilot, Cmdr Jerry Grigsby, crash-landed, the plane was intact but badly damaged, and 14 of the crew escaped. Grigsby, staying with the plane to the last to ensure his crew made it out, was lost at sea, but the 13 others made it into the two life rafts that the crew had managed to free from the wreck. Then came the long, frigid wait.



The distress call had alerted the NSA, and at 1605 RC-135 Cobra Ball 663 out of Shemya, AK, rerouted from its mission, reached AF 586's last known position about 250 NM west of Shemya. At 1618 the co-pilot spotted flares and the RC located the two rafts. Within an hour a second P-3C from Adak relieved the Cobra Ball. The P-3C stayed 3 more hours until low on fuel, and was then relieved by Coast Guard 1500, a C-130 SAR aircraft. The P-3C had located but was unable to contact a surface vessel, so Coast Guard 1500 successfully raised the Russian fishing vessel, MYS Synvarin. The Synvarin reached the rafts at midnight and brought the 10 survivors – 3 had died of exposure – to the Russian port of Petropavlovsk, from which they were flown to a hospital and transferred to Japan. They returned to Moffett Field on 4 November.

There is, of course, more to the story, from the RC-135 crew perspective:

The Ball had to fly below low clouds, at 1,300 feet radar altitude, and flew in a circular pattern expanding from the center, in a constant right turn to utilize the windows on that side of the aircraft. Coordinating with the approaching second P-3C for safe separation, the Ball ATS operators through max use of their equipment guided the Navs toward the life raft beacons.

Once the rafts were sighted and tracked by the second P-3C, the Ball climbed to 34,000 feet to conserve fuel and continue coordinating the rescue operation. Loiter time was extended by a hastily planned air refueling using a KC-135 from Eielson. While at altitude, the Cobra Ball

continued to act as a communications relay bird between the rescue aircraft and various JCS and Intelligence agencies. This was accomplished using the recently installed AFSATCOM equipment, a first for any aircraft in the USAF.

In the event, the Ball had missed an important ICBM launch near Kamchatka (its original mission) and there was temporary angst at SAC until the Navy made it clear how much they appreciated the rescue of the surviving crew.

Members of the Cobra Ball included A/C Cliff Carter, CP Bob Rivas, N1 Bruce Savaglio, N2 Gordie Alder, TC Al Feldkamp, R1 Rick Scotts, R2 Greg Cummins, R4 Bruce Carson, MT Lees, PT Tom Youngblood, ET Dennis Grundhauser, AMS Antonik, AMT Alexander, OP4 Miller, OP2 Swank, R1 Bud Irons, R2 Bob Carlson, and SR4 Ron Hood. Larry Mitchell was the 24th SRS commander.

[This mission had to be among the most rewarding in the history of the 55th. This Memory Lane entry was edited from the Reader's Digest article cited, the 55th Wing Newsletter, the official after-action report, and discussion with 55th members. -ed]

P.S. In 2003 the P3 survivors presented a glass eagle statue to me on which is written 'to Scone 92 (the Cobra Ball's call sign). Thank you for giving us life!' The statue was kept in the 45th heritage room, but lost to unit memory until reminded in 2019. A copy of Andy Jampoler's book 'Adak, the Rescue of AF 586,' signed by the ditching survivors, was also kept in the 45th heritage room, but has unfortunately disappeared. Every 5 years the survivors and rescuers have a reunion on 26 October in Colorado Springs, CO... next scheduled for 2023.

- Al Feldkamp

