

Navy Helicopters' Great Job In Tragic N.S.W. Floods

Last month the nation watched with awe and pity while furious floodwaters devastated towns and communities in New South Wales. Police, civilian volunteers, and members of the fighting Services performed heroic rescue and relief work in this tragic period. This is the story of the Navy's part of that great effort.

ON Thursday afternoon—February 24—as the rumbling muddy torrent spilled over the Hunter's banks, the Navy received its first call for help. The call was for helicopters.

Within half an hour of that call a Navy helicopter, piloted by Lieut.-Cdr. Gordon McPhee, had taken off from the Naval Air Station at Nowra and was making for the Air Force Station at Williamstown—in the flood area.

Although warned by air traffic control at Mascot that flying conditions were very bad—and deteriorating—McPhee decided, in view of the seriousness of the flood situation, to try to get through.

The flight, of about 180 miles, was very trying. The wind, fortunately a following one, was rising to gale force. On arriving at Williamstown, McPhee found that visibility was practically zero and he was forced to use ground control approach to land.

It is believed this is the first occasion in Australia that a helicopter has used this method of landing.

At first light on Friday the helicopter was again air-borne on reconnaissance and rescue duties. Near the Singleton railway station the pilot rescued two men who were clinging to a telephone pole. Then he flew to rescue a man who was being washed down the flood-stream. But the man disappeared beneath the swirling water before the helicopter could reach him.

McPhee then flew to the West Maitland signal box in which a group of men were marooned. The box collapsed just as he reached it.

Two men grabbed a wire suspended from the helicopter and were hoisted clear of the water, but the proximity of high tension wires made manoeuvring the helicopter extremely difficult. The men lost their grip on the wire and were killed.

The change in equilibrium caused the helicopter to stall into the water. The pilot was rescued by an Army duck five miles down stream and the observer was picked up a mile further away.

A second Navy helicopter took off from Nowra at first light on Friday and reached Dubbo, a flight of nearly 200 miles, at 11.30 a.m.

Perilous positions

The pilot, Lieut.-Cdr. Farquharson, took off again as soon as he had refuelled and by night-fall had rescued ten people from very perilous positions. The fact that the country is very flat assisted the pilot in locating and rescuing operations.

Talking of his experiences, Lieut.-Cdr. Farquharson said: "One of the things that impressed me was the philosophical way in which the people of this district took their misfortunes. Some were undoubtedly prepared, but others were not; for instance, the first man we rescued was dressed in a pair of shorts, the second had

on a pyjama coat and a pair of trousers, the third and fourth, however, were fully dressed and even had suit cases. Looking back it seems rather humorous, for one man put on the harness, picked up his suitcase and signified that he was 'quite ready to go, thank you'."

Grandmothers, babies

The biggest rescue carried out by this helicopter was of fifteen people who were sheltering in the grandstand of the Dubbo racecourse. With the water only about a foot deep, the pilot brought the "chopper" to within a few feet of the ground and the people, who ranged from grandmothers to a three-week-old baby, were lifted straight into the cabin.

Perhaps the most dangerous rescue Farquharson attempted was when he had to go down between a tree and a water tower to rescue a family with five children, all under five. The father was winched up and after discussing the position with him, it was decided not to attempt to take the family out in the "chopper" but to bring back a rubber dinghy in which they could row to safety.

This was done and the family rowed to the nearest dry land, the helicopter hovering over them until the voyage was completed. One of the helicopter blades was dented by a branch of a tree during this operation.

During the four days that the

helicopter was in Dubbo area it rescued 36 people and carried out many other flights with medical supplies, post office technicians and local relief officials.

A third helicopter, which was undergoing maintenance at the Naval Air Station, Nowra, was ready for flying by Saturday morning, February 26, the maintenance men at this station having worked continuously from Thursday night to achieve this.

The pilot for this aircraft, Lieut. J. Ferguson, was flown ashore from H.M.A.S. Sydney on Friday. He went by air from Melbourne to Mascot and then immediately by car to Nowra. He flew the helicopter to Williamstown and during Saturday rescued seven people.

Late on Friday, the Minister for the Navy, Mr. J. Francis, directed, in view of the serious nature of the floods, that the two helicopters carried in H.M.A.S. Sydney should be flown to the area as soon as possible.

The Sydney, which was en route to Fremantle from Melbourne, returned to the vicinity of Melbourne at full speed and flew off her two helicopters, which reached the R.A.A.F. Station at Laverton late on Friday.

Taking off at 7 o'clock the following morning, they reached Williamstown ten hours later.

Lieut.-Cdr. McPhee, who had recovered from his immersion, immediately took off in one of the helicopters and rescued two people from the roof-top of a house that was in danger of being washed away.

On Sunday, a fifth helicopter, which was being overhauled at the Bristol works at Bankstown, was ready for service as a result of intensive all-night work by the employees. A pilot was flown from Williamstown and returned there in the helicopter 'by midday. During the afternoon, the four helicopters in the Maitland area were employed on reconnaissance, dropping medical supplies and food, and rescuing people from trees and roof-tops. They rescued 15 people.

The helicopters also directed Army "ducks," surf- and police-boats to the rescue of many hundreds of other marooned people.

One of the helicopters received a call to take a woman with a 12-hours old baby to hospital at Muswellbrook. The moment the woman entered the aircraft she became hysterical. However, she soon recovered and when leaving the plane told the pilot that the flight had been a marvellous experience.

Night at farmhouse

An old gentleman thought the same thing, apparently. He was rescued by the novel method of sitting in the strop. When he reached dry land he was very loath to leave his comfortable seat, so liated in fact that he had to be assisted by the local police constable.

Two of the helicopters returning from Muswellbrook with a passenger ran into very bad weather nine miles from Maitland and were forced to put down near a farmhouse for the night. The farmer and his wife made them very welcome. Their passenger, a very influential gentleman who was organising flood relief, was not so

happy, however, for the farmer proceeded to tell him, in very strong language, just how the floods must and should be controlled.

Another helicopter picked up a family of ten stranded at Aberglassyn. The aircraft landed in the garden and lifted them three at a time to a safe point. The children enjoyed the trip and so did the parents until mother discovered on leaving the helicopter that she had been sitting on her best hat.

The smartest rescue was effected by a helicopter on the Sunday when a report was received that two boys were adrift in a boat in the Stockton area. Taking off at 6 p.m. the helicopter returned to base at 6.15 p.m. having located the boys and directed a police boat to them.

On Monday the work went on, helicopters taking off from 6 a.m. on reconnaissance and dropping of food and medical supplies. One helicopter was directed to take drugs to a seriously ill woman in the Morpeth area, but no one knew where she lived. The pilot solved the difficulty by dropping in on farmhouses en route until he found out.

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NEWS OF THE WORLD'S NAVIES

In the meantime the R.A.A.F.'s supply of storepedoes (in which they were dropping foodstuffs to isolated localities) was dwindling seriously. Helicopters were asked to pick up any storepedoes and parachutes which they could locate. They averaged 50 for each helicopter on Monday.

By Monday afternoon, the position was easing in the Maitland-Singleton area; but a fresh danger had arisen in the Narrabri district. Two of the helicopters were therefore sent to this area and by night-fall had succeeded in rescuing ten people.

On Tuesday, these two helicopters were again fully employed on rescuing people and in dropping supplies. While engaged in reconnaissance, one pilot saw a notice in large white letters "Copter, vet, sulphur, pen."

The pilot dropped a note to the isolated farmer which read "Presume you want a veterinary surgeon with sulphur drugs and penicillin." On the receipt of a very enthusiastic "Roger" sign from the

farmer, the pilot returned to base to obtain the requirements.

Maintenance and supplies of fuel were proving very difficult in these outlying areas. The naval Dakota, which is normally used for the training of observers and airmen, was pressed into service to carry maintenance personnel, spare parts, and fuel for the helicopters.

During the first five days this aircraft was in the air practically the whole of the daylight hours. In addition, it carried supplies of clothing, whenever the space would allow.

Round-the-clock flying

Wives and families of the personnel who were based at the Naval Air Station, Nowra, in the first two days of the flood, supplied 100 lbs. of babies' clothing, 300 lbs. of childrens' clothing, and 600 lbs. of adults' clothing. The Naval Wives Association in Sydney were also busy, and in the first two days had collected five large cartons of clothing.

At Narrabri on the Wednesday the position was still very dangerous. To keep up fuel supplies for the helicopters—which were flying practically continuously all day—Fireflies were equipped with 45 gallon drop-tanks on each wing, decanting the contents on arrival.

When the power failed at the Narrabri hospital and it appeared that supplies of drugs in the hospital refrigerator would be ruined, an urgent request was broadcast for a kerosene refrigerator. When one was located at the Narrabri State School, a helicopter flew across, lifted it up on the winch, flew across the flood and landed it in the hospital grounds.

By Thursday, the position had eased sufficiently to enable the helicopter at Dubbo to be withdrawn for maintenance. The helicopter landed at the Bankstown works of the Bristol Aircraft Co. and the civilian employees, by working overnight, had the "chopper" ready for service again by 8 o'clock the following morning. It was flown to Williamtown.

By Saturday, the position had eased sufficiently to enable the withdrawal of two helicopters to the Naval Air Station at Nowra. The two in the Narrabri area, which were assisted by an R.A.A.F. helicopter, continued, however, to drop supplies and medical stores to isolated homesteads in that area, and on Sunday, March 6, proceeded to the Walgett area to stand by in case the floods broke into that town.

Although the flood position eased considerably in the next week, two Naval helicopters and the R.A.A.F. helicopter were left in the Walgett area and carried out many sorties with medical and food supplies.

In the first four days, the five Naval helicopters flew 90 sorties in all three areas. In the first four days they rescued 70 people, of which 36 were in the Dubbo area, 18 in the Narrabri area, and 16 in the Maitland area.

Stores carried included medical supplies, yeast, food, milk, blankets, and radio equipment—a total weight of approximately 8000 lbs. of general stores.

Among the passengers carried on relief missions were doctors, nursing sisters and chaplains.

Four Firefly aircraft constantly supported the helicopter and also carried stores and were engaged in reconnaissance duties.

Naval trucks which were in Newcastle for the "Meet the Navy" Exhibition also contributed to the rescue work. One five-ton and three three-ton trucks were used daily during the first week in transporting stores and Army personnel into the Maitland and Singleton areas.

Amongst other Naval stores supplied to the distressed areas were six hundred inflatable life-belts, one fogging machine for spraying insecticide, five hundredweight of chloride of lime, and 200 pounds weight of pyrotechnics.

In addition to the collection of clothing for the distressed areas, an East Australian Area Naval Flood Relief Fund has been opened. Donations to this fund had reached £1,500 by March 10, 1955.

Steam catapult installed

The first operational installation of the new steam catapults which are being produced and developed for the Admiralty by Messrs. Brown Brothers & Co. Ltd., of Edinburgh, to launch the fast and large aircraft of the future from aircraft carriers, is in H.M.S. Ark Royal, states the U.K. Information Office.

It is the intention to replace with steam catapults the existing hydro-pneumatic catapults in all other operational carriers of the Royal Navy. They will also be installed on the new carrier Melbourne, building for the Australian Navy.

The old hydro-pneumatic unit, situated below the deck, transmits its power to the aircraft by means of flexible steel wire ropes passing round pulleys. These wires are attached to a small trolley, which pulls the aircraft along the deck by means of a towing bridle.

With the increase in the weight of aircraft and higher launching speeds, larger and heavier power units and heavier wires and pulleys were required. For this reason, catapult experts in the Admiralty and industry sought to find an entirely new launching method, and have succeeded in applying their team to the launching of aircraft.

The system incorporates slotted cylinders in which there are free pistons. Arms projecting through the slots transmit the steam power within the cylinder to the aircraft, an ingenious sealing device having been introduced to prevent the steam escaping through the slots.

Small submarines to be named

The Board of Admiralty has decided to give the names of the smaller denizens of the waters to the new class of small submarine which, as the First Lord of the

Admiralty, Mr. J. P. L. Thomas, said in his Navy Estimates speech, would start to come into service soon.

The second of this class, named Shrimp, was due to be launched at the Barrow-in-Furness yard of Messrs. Vickers-Armstrongs, Ltd., on December 30. The first of the new small submarines, launched at the same yard on October 1 and designated the X.51, is to be named Stickleback.

Minesweeper for the French Navy

H.M.S. Frettenham, the first of a group of 15 minesweepers to be completed in British yards under the U.S. Offshore Procurement programme, was officially transferred to the French Government at a ceremony at H.M.S. Diligence, the Royal Navy's commissioning and equipping base at Hythc, near Southampton, in December.

The transfer was made in the presence of the Flag Officer Commanding Reserve Fleet, Vice-Admiral J. W. M. Eaton, C.B., D.S.O., D.S.C., formerly Flag Officer Commanding the Australian Fleet.

Navy's interest in fibre-glass

The Admiralty is continuing experiments with fibre-glass boats. For some time a 20 ft. motor dory has been undergoing sea trials. A more complicated boat—a 25 ft. ship's motor boat—was completed recently and arrangements have been made to test the boat in a sea-going ship.

The technique of construction and the basic materials are in the early stages of development.

R.N. base suggested in Australia

A former Parliamentary Secretary to the Admiralty, Mr.

James Callaghan, M.P., has suggested that part of Britain's Reserve Fleet should be stationed in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand.

Mr. Callaghan made this suggestion in the House of Commons on March 3 during the debate on the Navy Estimates. He was Parliamentary Secretary to the Admiralty in the Attlee Labour Government.

Mr. Callaghan said that Britain's reserve ships were scattered in crowded harbours and anchorages around Britain where they might be exposed to the full force of a hydrogen bomb.

Major bases could be set up in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, he said, supported by the immigration of skilled British fitters and tradesmen to maintain the heavy aircraft carriers and other major ships there.

The establishment of reserves in other parts of the Commonwealth would be an alternative to extending dockyards at Portsmouth and elsewhere in Britain, he added.

Navy plane to carry atom bomb

The First Lord of the Admiralty, Mr. J. P. L. Thomas, said in London last month that a new jet aircraft which the Navy is developing could carry an atom bomb if required.

The aircraft—tentatively called N113—is to be a twin-jet, swept-wing carrier-borne fighter. The First Lord said it would have exceptional performance.

It would have a "phenomenal" rate of climb and would be equipped with air-to-air guided missiles for air combat.

No more 13-year-olds for R.A.N. College

The Australian Minister for Defence, Sir Philip McBride, has

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