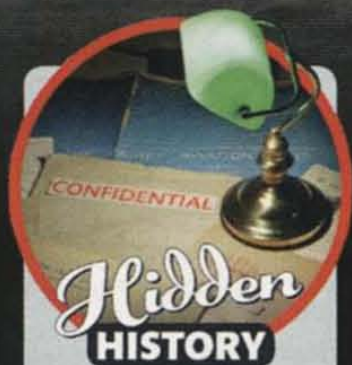




CLANDESTINE

In February 1945 LIEUTENANT-COLONEL PAT SPOONER MBE(Mil) was and survival kit for downed Allied airmen off the coast of Burma, to be



THESE FEATURES aim to bring lesser-known historic aviation stories to a wider audience through the pages of *Aeroplane*. If you have such a story to tell, get in touch with us!

E

ARLY IN 1945, during the final stages of the campaign to drive the Japanese out of Burma, the RAF decided

to lay dumps of food, water and other survival kit on a number of remote uninhabited islands off the coasts of Burma and Malaya.

The purpose of these dumps was to provide the crews of Allied bombers and fighters, hit by Japanese anti-aircraft

fire or enemy aircraft en route to or from their targets, with a convenient "half-way house" where they could make a forced landing on an island beach, having first signalled their position.

Nearby, hidden in the undergrowth, in stout wooden boxes, would be a cache of canned food and water, first-aid kits and signalling devices. Thus equipped, the downed airmen would then have a sporting chance of being rescued by an RAF flying-boat operating from India.

My involvement

I was the British officer assigned to the task of laying the first of these dumps. A regular officer commissioned into the 8th Gurkha Rifles, at the start of the war, I was at that time seconded to "E" Group, a combined-services clandestine organisation (a branch of MI9), the primary roles of which were to rescue Allied personnel from behind enemy lines, contact Allied POWs in camp and brief the three Services on how to evade capture and what to do if taken prisoner.

ECATALINA

tasked with creating secret dumps of food, water buried on jungle islands supplied by flying-boat

The dump-laying scheme was a novel idea, never before attempted. Our "E" Group HQ in Calcutta, working closely with RAF HQ, decided that the area to focus on would be the Andaman Islands, located in the Bay of Bengal and forming the western perimeter of the Andaman Sea. The 572 islands of the archipelago are swathed in thick forest. It was known that only 36 of these islands were inhabited (still true).

Following the fall of Singapore, the Japanese had occupied the Andamans, previously

under British control. Post-war they briefly returned to British control before becoming part of the newly independent state of India. On the basis of information then available, it was decided, in the first instance, to select Narcondam, Preparis and Foul Islands.

The first, an extinct volcano rising to 2,600ft, is situated some 80 miles due east of the northern tip of North Andaman Island. Preparis Island lies 120 miles NNE of North Andaman Island and about 80 miles south-west of the mouth of the

ABOVE A Catalina in Far East markings surveys a tropical beach during a typical wartime sortie. The first RAF Catalinas to arrive in the Far East were those of 205 Sqn, based at Seletar, Singapore, from April 1941.

ANDREW HENDRIE COLLECTION VIA DAVID LEGG

ABOVERIGHT The author as a Captain in 1945.

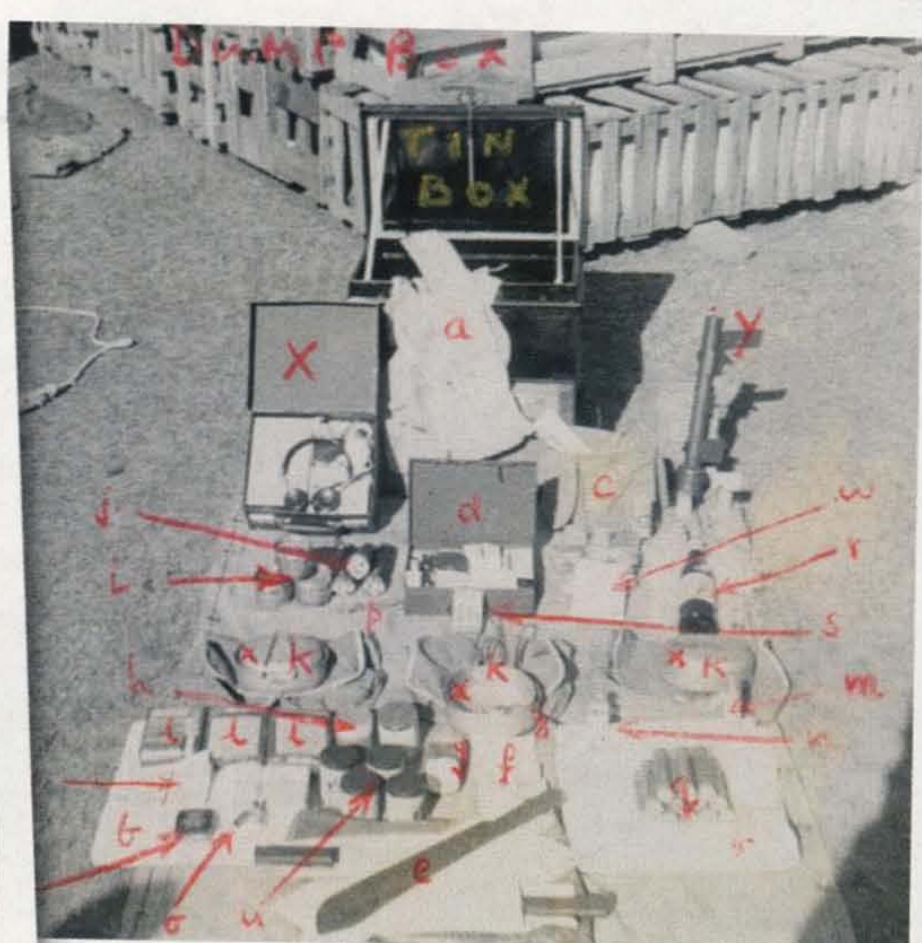


Irrawaddy River in Burma. Foul Island is located about 15 miles off the coast of Burma, to which it belongs.

The provisions

Having selected the islands, the question arose as to what provisions would be required, and how they were to be transported. It was decided that each cache would need to contain, in sealed tins, enough food and water for six men for eight days, allowing for three meals a day. With careful rationing, however, there

TOP SECRET WARTIME OPS



would be sufficient for eight men to survive for three weeks.

In addition, the dump boxes would contain a first-aid kit, two identification groundstrips, three heliograph mirrors, flares and flare pistol and three heavy-duty torches for signalling purposes, as well as maps, solidified fuel and petrol lighters.

It was agreed not to include a W/T (wireless/telegraph) set since it was known that there was a Japanese radar station some 56 miles away from Preparis Island and 80 miles from Narcondam Island: to attempt to use W/T in any form would be dangerous and likely to compromise any rescue attempt.

Likewise, the salvaging of signalling equipment from the abandoned aircraft would serve no useful purpose.

Enter the Cat

The aircraft best suited to this operation was the versatile Consolidated Catalina flying-boat (see *Database*, January 2008 *Aeroplane*). It was decided to use the headquarters of the Catalina Flying Boat Squadron based at Cocanada (now Kakinada) on the east coast of India as our base, albeit some 800 miles from Narcondam, the nearest island.

There I spent ten days' intensive training with the men assigned to me, an Indian VCO (Viceroy's Commissioned Officer), two Troopers loaned by 42 Royal Marine Commandos, an Indian NCO and a Corporal wireless operator, all experienced in clandestine operations.

Between us we established procedures, on a trial-and-error basis, for loading the two deflated rubber dinghies and the dump boxes on to the Catalina, inflating

the dinghies on a wing and launching them into the water under varying sea conditions.

Then came the tricky task of loading the heavy dump boxes into the dinghies, and fixing the outboard motor on to the lead boat. The party would then board the dinghies and motor as fast as possible towards the shore, careful to avoid being swamped in the often heavy surf. The landing drill was practised relentlessly; those few moments after landing on the open beach

ABOVE LEFT
Training at Calcutta with Catalina IVB JX325 of No 212 Sqn, the unit that undertook the Special Duties flights to the Andamans.
ABOVE RIGHT
The contents of the dump boxes – sadly the key to the individual items is lost.

in broad daylight were critical: the boxes had to be offloaded, the dinghies deflated and all equipment hidden in undergrowth with lightning speed.

Preparations are made

Training completed, the party flew back to Calcutta to prepare for the ensuing operation. The original estimated date of departure from Bally, Calcutta, was the night of February 18–19.

Owing to bad weather conditions at Narcondam reported by the Met Dept, the operation was delayed at the eleventh hour. By noon on February 20 the conditions had become favourable.

The party, consisting of myself, Troopers Sage and Golder, Corporal Lewis (W/T operator), *Jemadar* (equivalent to Lieutenant) Saidbaz and *Naik* (Corporal) Gul Mohamed, left HQ at 2130hr. The stores and miscellaneous kit had been previously stowed in the Catalina. We boarded the aircraft at 2330hr and were airborne at 0030hr.

Conditions on board were extremely cramped. Catalinas were not designed to accommodate six additional bodies plus their equipment, four heavy wooden crates, digging tools and two deflated dinghies, plus a crew consisting of a pilot — in this case a New Zealander, Sqn Ldr Cedric Harrod — a copilot, a navigator and a flight engineer. For the take-off, the captain ordered my men to move as far forward as possible, I myself



MAP BY MAGGIE NELSON © 2009



“For seven long hours I lay curled up, while the Catalina, a sitting duck cruising at no more than 110 m.p.h., made its way to the target area . . .”

standing between the pilot and copilot, giving me a ringside view of the take-off procedures.

For seven long hours I lay curled up under the navigator's table, unable to sleep, while the Catalina, cruising at no more than 110 m.p.h., made its way to the target area, a sitting duck for any Japanese aircraft patrolling the area.

The island

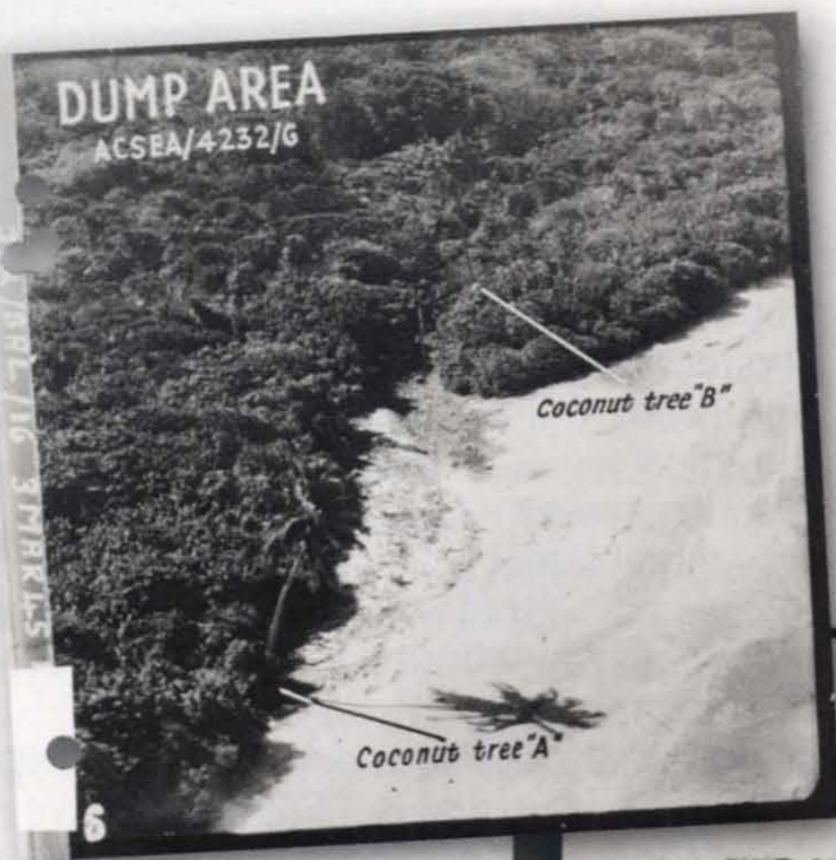
We reached Narcondam at 0715hr on February 21, where weather and sea conditions were found to be too bad to land. It was overcast and there was a heavy swell. Harrod decided to fly on to Preparis Island where weather conditions were slightly better, although the swell was still bad.

The Catalina circled the island at low altitude and alighted successfully 300yd off the west coast at 0845hr. Rain and swell made the inflation and loading of the dinghies extremely difficult, but the co-ordinated efforts of all concerned won out eventually. Both dinghies were loaded up and ready to move off by 0915hr.

The heavy swell helped to carry the dinghies into shore, where the surf was negligible, and a successful landing was made on the beach at 0930hr. Corporal

Lewis signalled the letter "B" to confirm that we were safely ashore, and then the letter "K", giving the aircraft the OK to return home.

While the dinghies were beached and unloaded, I made a quick recce and found a small clearing in the jungle opposite our landing point. All stores, equipment and dinghies were carried to the clearing and dumped. There were no signs of any "foreign bodies", and as it was still raining hard the first problem was to find a dry place for the stores.



ABOVE Catalina IVBJX431 of 205 Sqn overflies the Ceylon coast in 1945. The unit that undertook the Andaman sorties, 212 Sqn, was disbanded and renumbered 240 Sqn at Redhills Lake, near Madras, on July 1, 1945.

A small space was cleared under some trees in the jungle. Both dinghies were turned upside down and suspended about 10ft above the ground, thus forming a reasonable waterproof shelter.

Recce and tea

At 1130hr the party split up for a quick recce to make sure that the area in the immediate vicinity of our HQ was clear of Japanese or locals, and to find possible places for burying the dump.

The Jemadar remained at HQ to act as guard and ensure that all stores were kept as dry as possible. In case of trouble the alarm would be given by firing three rounds of ammunition in rapid succession.

At noon the two parties returned to HQ. There had been no sign of people, nor any suitable place for the dump. Thick jungle was encountered in the interior. At 1230hr two of our party brewed up tea. One 24hr emergency ration tin was issued between each pair. At 1330hr Golder and I set off on a recce of the beach north of our HQ, while the rest prepared the dump stores for the move to the chosen spot.

About 500yd along the beach



ABOVE Photo-reconnaissance pictures of the islands used for the dump-laying operations; top left is Narcondam and above shows markers on Preparis.

TOP SECRET WARTIME OPS

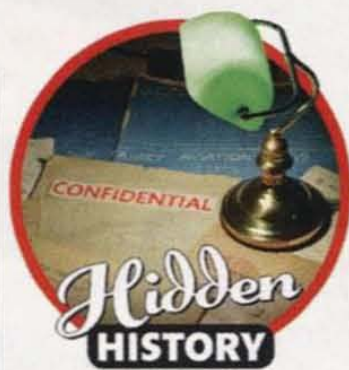
we came across two coconut trees on the fringe of the jungle at the entrance to a dried-up riverbed. I chose a suitable place for the dump near the second tree. We also found a pool of water, tested it and found it brackish but drinkable. I sent Golder back to HQ with orders to keep within the fringe of jungle off the beach and to return with the carrying party the same way.

Setting up the dump

An hour later the party arrived with the first load plus digging tools. Golder reported that, owing to the density of undergrowth, it had not been feasible to return through the jungle and they had been forced to use the beach. The weight of the boxes had made it hardgoing on the soft sand. The party returned to HQ for the remaining stores and we started digging the dump trench.

At 1600hr the party returned and some of the boxes were lowered into the prepared trench (the rough dimensions of which were about 4ft deep, 6ft long and 3ft wide). The spaces between the boxes were filled and the whole lot was then covered with a 6in layer of soil.

We placed five medium-sized stones on top of the mound and re-covered the area with dead leaves to blend in with the locale. Finally, a branch about 6ft long was cut from a tree, and one end of the branch was embedded in loose soil under the centre rock with the other end resting diagonally in the fork of a tree stump to one side. The distance of the dump from the second coconut tree was 16 paces in a direct line away from the riverbed into the undergrowth.



BELOW A photograph taken while transporting the dump boxes to their new home on Preparis.



RIGHT Loading and unloading the boxes to and from the Catalina into and out of the dinghies required a great deal of practice, patience and skill, as seen here during training.

BELOW Members of the team bring the dump boxes ashore during training at Calcutta – on the islands the heavy surf proved one of the biggest obstacles.

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS FROM AUTHOR'S COLLECTION

We all returned to HQ at 1800hr. The W/T operator reported that no signals had been picked up between 1600hr and 1800hr. (Arrangements had been made before leaving No 1 Advance HQ "E" Group, Calcutta, that any important messages would be transmitted from HQ between these times).

Staying the night

Preparations were then made for

the night. After a meal, jungle hammocks were slung between trees around the improvised shelter of upturned dinghies.

A sentry roster was made out to cover 1900hr to 0530hr. The night passed without event, and the next morning, after a mug of scalding tea, all stores and kit were packed up and No 2 dinghy deflated. The other dinghy was taken down to the beach and loaded up. This was completed by 0700hr.



Half an hour later, I sent two of the party off south along the beach on a quick recce of the dump to see whether it had been disturbed during the night. Accompanied by the W/T operator and Golder, I did a recce

of the beach to the north. Both parties were to return immediately if the returning aircraft was sighted and recognised. It got to 0800hr and there was still no sign of the aircraft, so I decided to carry on round to the east side of the

island and inspect an abandoned vessel identified in aerial photos.

Exploring the island

We reached the wreck at about 1100hr, boarded it and carried out an extensive search. It was a medium-sized fishing vessel, seemingly blown on to the beach in a severe storm. Like the *Marie Celeste*, there was evidence of its crew having abandoned the ship at short notice, leaving everything untouched. There was, however, no sign of arms or ammunition. I realised that the crew might well be hiding somewhere on the island, awaiting rescue, possibly by a Japanese naval ship.

We would need to be extra cautious and keep a sharp lookout for them on our way back to the dump area. In the event, we saw no sign of the fishermen. Maybe they had been swept off the boat in the storm before it was hurled up on to the beach.





Members of 212 Sqn's Calcutta detachment relax in the sun on the nose of a Catalina during training for the Andaman flights. The detachment was employed mainly on air-sea rescue duties from Calcutta.

That night passed peacefully enough, and after breakfast, kit was repacked and No 1 dinghy loaded up, ready for the return of the aircraft, which was due to arrive between 0700hr and 0730hr. It was decided that, with all our equipment, a double trip to the Cat would be necessary.

Return of the Cat

At 0700hr an aircraft was heard in the distance, everyone taking cover in case it was an enemy machine. As soon as the Catalina was recognised the letter "C" was signalled ("We are returning to aircraft"). There were no clouds and little wind, but the swell was very heavy, and the Cat had great difficulty in alighting.

Leaving the rest of the crew on the beach, the Jemadar and I embarked on No 1 dinghy and set out for the aircraft. The dinghy was badly swamped getting it through the heavy surf. Once beyond the surf the motor was started up, but the safety line became entangled in the propeller, and had to be cut free. On nearing the aircraft I noticed that it was a different Catalina with a different crew — but was greatly relieved to see Harrod. Several abortive attempts to come up alongside were made before success was finally achieved.

The dinghy was made fast and all stores were offloaded into the blister. I reported to Harrod, who said that he had received a Met report the previous evening giving indications of bad weather in this area. He elected to bring one of the other aircraft down to the island and drop food and water in containers, along with a message explaining the situation. On arrival he saw the signal flashed from the beach and



decided to risk putting the Catalina down, despite the adverse conditions.

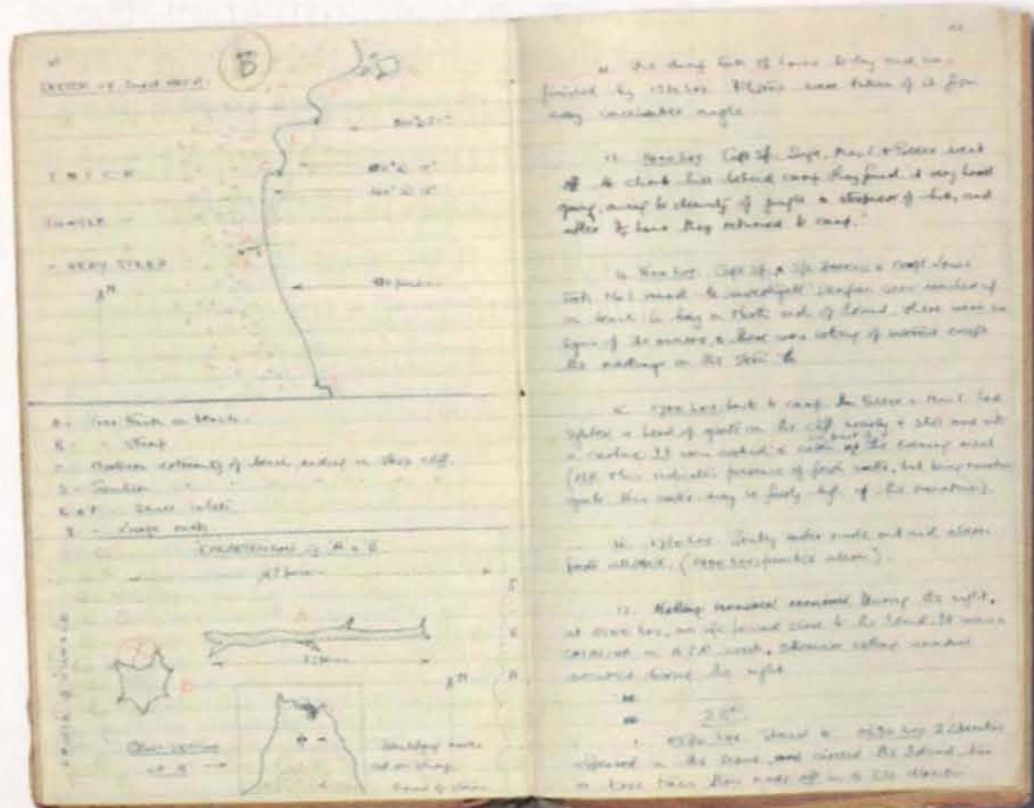
The final trip

Harrod volunteered to accompany me on the return trip to the shore, so, leaving the Jemadar on the aircraft, we went back to pick up the remaining personnel. By this time the surf had worsened and the dinghy was swamped time and again, filling it almost completely with water.

When the time came to return to the aircraft the dinghy's motor refused to function, which meant having to row. With great difficulty the dinghy was manoeuvred up close to the port

ABOVE Battling the surf during training. Narcondam and Preparis Islands were both provided with secret dumps, but Foul Island was deemed too close to Burma to risk it, and so was abandoned.

Aeroplane would like to thank Duncan Simpson for his invaluable assistance with the preparation of this article



ABOVE Pages of the author's journal kept during the Andaman sorties, including map sketches of the dumps.

blister, a line was thrown and the dinghy was hauled up alongside. The aircraft, meanwhile, had drifted dangerously close to the shore. To avoid any risk of it fouling rocks, it was taxied out to sea, but the wash caused by so doing swamped the dinghy, which all but capsized. After much effort the dinghy was hauled up on to the blister and stowed away.

An anxious moment

At 0830hr the aircraft taxied round to the leeward side of the island where the swell, although heavy, was not so great. There was an anxious moment for all when the aircraft moved forward for the take-off, slowly rising up on to the step. As we gathered speed the Catalina bounced heavily across and at right angles to the rollers until sufficient speed was reached finally to get us airborne. Harrod told me later that it was touch-and-go, and had he not managed to gain enough airspeed, forcing the stick back by using every ounce of his strength, "the Cat would have nose-dived into the drink, and it would have been curtains for all of us".

The aircraft set course for base and Coconada was reached safely at 1500hr on February 23. To the best of my knowledge, the stores laid on the island were never used — and are still there to this day!

Indian Ocean Catalinas

The Indian Ocean Flying-Boat Association was formed in 1988 to keep alive the memory of the vital work of the RAF's flying boats during World War Two. For more information contact R.M Rodgers, 14 Court Crescent, Kingswinford, West Midlands DY6 9RL; telephone 01384 295194