

By the outbreak of World War Two, the Luftwaffe managed to field an effective air-sea rescue organisation. **Chris Goss** reviews the air element of this often neglected but essential provision

As early as April 1939, an air-sea rescue service, part of the Deutsche Gesellschaft zur Rettung Schiffbrüchiger (German Maritime Search and Rescue Service), was formed at Norderney in northern Germany and was declared operational by July 1939. It was called Seenotrettungsdienst, usually shortened to Seenotdienst, and was initially equipped with three Heinkel He 59s coded WL-APIE, WL-AHAN and WL-AKAR. Besides national markings on the wings and

tail, the aircraft also carried red crosses on the fuselage. At first, they were manned by civilian aircrew, but in August 1939 the machines were taken over by the Luftwaffe and the unit began to expand. Then part of Seenotflugkommando 1 (SNKdo 1) based at Bad Zwischenahn, He 59s were based at both Norderney and List. At the same time, SNKdo 2 was formed at Pillau. But with war imminent, Seenot 1 moved to Norderney with a detachment at List as part of Seenotzentrale Nord, subordinate to Marinegruppenkommando West. However, SNKdo 2 remained at Pillau as part of Seenotzentrale Ost, subordinate to Marinegruppenkommando Ost.

As several other maritime units were still using the He 59 in both

combat and transport roles, Seenot He 59s were painted overall white with an additional red cross on the nose. In December 1939, the He 59s were joined by similarly adorned Junkers Ju 52s, which would be used for aeromedical evacuation.

Into the sea

For the first seven months of the war, He 59s operated over the Baltic and North Sea, rescuing friend and foe alike. Their work increased in April-May 1940, following the invasion of Norway and Denmark, aircraft from SNKdo 1 moving to Stavanger-Sola in Norway. One of the notable rescues during this time occurred on April 30, 1940 when six RAF Blenheims of 110 Squadron – led by Sqn Ldr Ken Doran DFC – attacked Stavanger.

SALVATION OVER THE V



Messerschmitt Bf 109s of 4./JG 77 shot down Doran and another Blenheim flown by Flt Sgt Ron Abbott. Doran alone survived, rescued 15 miles west of Stavanger by an He 59 seaplane of SNKdo 1, flown by Uffz Helmut Bartmann, after being in the sea for two hours. Ken Doran was a highly

successful Blenheim pilot and had been awarded the DFC for his part in the attack on German warships on September 4, 1939. Following the Battle of France, the Luftwaffe was able to use bases in the Netherlands, France and Belgium in

preparation for the assault on Great Britain. As a result, SNKdo 1 was able to operate small numbers of aircraft from Amsterdam-Schellingwoude from late May 1940. At that time, moves were afoot to increase what were called Seenotkommandos into a single Seenotgruppe (SNGr), headquartered at Norderney. By the end of August 1940, the service was organised as follows:
 SNKdo 1 (Brest);
 SNKdo 2 (Cherbourg);
 SNKdo 3 (Boulogne); SNKdo 4 (Norderney, with a detachment at Schellingwoude); SNKdo 5 (List with detachments at Aalborg, Stavanger, Bergen and Trondheim). This expansion of the Seenot world resulted in increased combat

BELOW A Heinkel He 59 of an unidentified unit working closely with a German rescue launch in the North Sea, during 1940-41 ALL CHRIS GOSS UNLESS STATED



WAVES

Seenot Flying Units

June 1941

Gruppe	Staffel	Location
I SNGr (Brest)	1 Staffel	Brest
	2 Staffel	Cherbourg
	3 Staffel	Boulogne
II SNGr (Wilhelmshaven)	4 Staffel	Wilhelmshaven
	5 Staffel	List
	9 Staffel	Kiel
III SNGr (Athens)	6 Staffel	Syracuse (Sicily)
	7 Staffel	Athens-Phaleron
	8 Staffel	Constanza (Romania)

Seenot Flying Units

June 1942

Gruppe	Staffel	Location
Seenotbereichskommando I (Brest)	1 SNS SNKdo	Brest Hourtin
Seenotbereichskommando II (Cherbourg)	2 SNS	Cherbourg
Seenotbereichskommando IV (Utrecht)	3 SNS 2 SNS SNKdo	Schellingwoude (to December 1942) Schellingwoude (from December 1942) Ostende
Seenotbereichskommando V (Wilhelmshaven)	4 SNS	Wilhelmshaven
Seenotbereichskommando VII (Riga)	9 SNS	Libau, Latvia
Seenotbereichskommando VIII (Stavanger)	5 SNS	Stavanger
Seenotbereichskommando IX (Kirkenes) 1	0 SNS	Tromsø
Seenotbereichskommando X (Taormina/Margherita di Ligure)	6 SNS	Syracuse/Venice
Seenotbereichskommando XI (Athens)	7 SNS	Athens-Phaleron
Seenotbereichskommando XII (Eupatoria, Crimea)	8 SNS	Constanza
Seenotbereichskommando XII (Berre, southern France from December 1942)	3 SNS	Berre

SNKdo 3 He 59 was lost two days later, probably shot down by a warship, after which the He 59 ditched and sank – the crew later being rescued near the Channel Islands. Three days afterwards, Fighter Command was instructed that any German “air ambulances” were a legitimate target, the subsequent Air Ministry Order of July 29, 1940 stating:

“It has come to the notice of His Majesty’s Government that enemy aircraft bearing civil markings and marked with the Red Cross have recently flown over British ships at sea and in the vicinity of the British coast, and that they are being employed for purposes which cannot be regarded as being consistent with the privileges generally accorded



ABOVE Though capable of being used in the Seenot role, the Do 18 (this example being from Küstenfliegergruppe 106, photographed in 1941) was inferior to the Do 24, which proved itself as a very capable Seenot aircraft on all Fronts

ABOVE RIGHT This unidentified German Leutnant was no doubt relieved to have been rescued from the Channel by his own side, during August 1940



between RAF aircraft and the unarmed He 59s, the first occurring on July 1, 1940. During the previous night, a Heinkel He 115 of 3 Staffel/ Küstenfliegergruppe 106 took off to lay mines off the British coast, but one of the seaplane’s engines failed and the pilot force-landed 30 miles east of Whitby, Yorkshire. The crew managed to get into a dinghy and were eventually rescued, being landed at Grimsby, Lincolnshire, after 28 hours in the leaking craft.

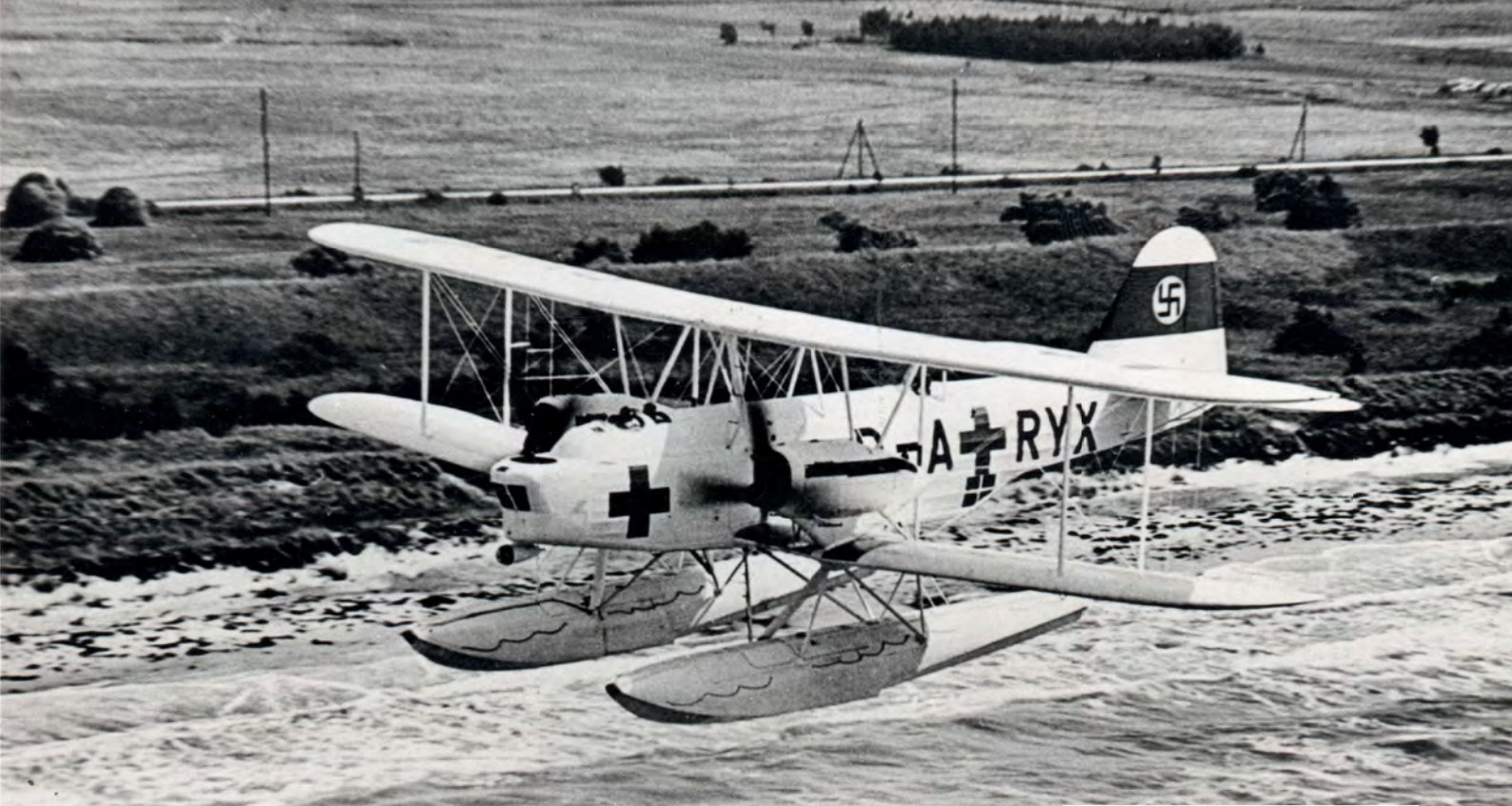
At first light on July 1, a Heinkel He 59 of SNKdo 3 flown by Uffz Ernst-Otto Nielsen, headed for Middlesbrough, looked for the Heinkel 115 crew. Its observer, Lt Hans-Joachim Fehske, recalls:

“We arrived at the correct latitude shortly before 0600hrs. There we changed course and headed towards the British coast. During

our approach, we were flying in low stratus/haze. Immediately after changing course, the fog lifted. The visibility was excellent, and we were flying between the coast and a convoy headed south. One can understand why the RAF did not like this. Consequently, there were two British fighters behind us a few minutes later and very quickly we were shot down.”

There were in fact three Spitfires from 72 Squadron flown by Flt Lt Ted Graham, Fg Off Edgar Wilcox and Flt Sgt Harry Steere, who forced the German aircraft onto the North Sea; the four crew were then captured by HMS *Black Swan*.

Another combat took place on July 9, 1940 when 54 Squadron shot down the He 59 of SNKdo 1 flown by Uffz Helmut Bartmann over the Goodwin Sands (off Deal, Kent). A



ABOVE The white-painted Heinkel He 59N, D-ARYX of 3 SNSt, patrols a section of coastline



LEFT In the background here is Do 24T-3, Wk Nr 0087, DJ+ZM of 7 SNSt. In the launch fifth from left is Hptm Hans Lösch, kapitän of this unit. Shortly after this photo was taken, on December 23, 1943, this aircraft hit a house on take-off from Kythera harbour, Greece, and crashed, killing three crew and injuring as many more VIA DAEHN



LEFT A 203 Squadron Martin Maryland was shot down off Crete on October 11, 1942 and its inhabitants were rescued by 7 SNSt. The following day, Sgt Bill Charlesworth (centre) from that Maryland was helped ashore at Souda Bay by Lt Karlheinz Daehn (right) DAEHN VIA GOSS

North Sea while rescuing the crew of an He 59 from the same unit, shot down by a 206 Squadron Hudson; the Do 24 subsequently capsized while under tow and sank.

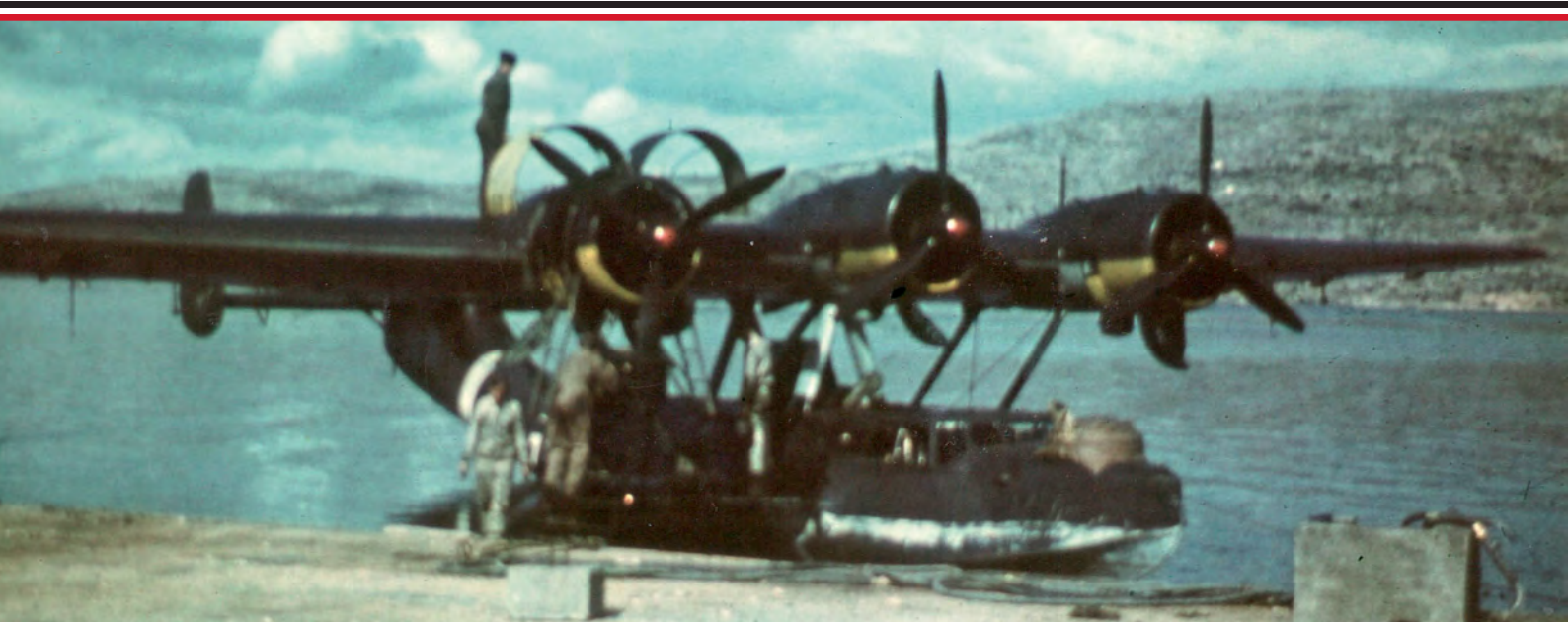
Meanwhile in the Channel, several frontline units were operating Focke-Wulf Fw 58s in both the communications and air-sea rescue roles, searching for their downed aircrew and dropping them a dinghy. A final addition to the inventory were 17 captured French Breguet 521 Bizerte seaplanes, operated by SNKdo 1 out of Brest. They too were not immune to the RAF and the first to be lost was shot down by a Blenheim flown by Plt Off Graham Russell of 236 Squadron on November 6, 1940. By the end of the year, and besides those lost in July 1940, a further eight He 59s and a single Bizerte were claimed by the RAF (and an He 59 to bombing) while another 16 He 59s, one Do 24 and a Bizerte suffered accidents or were destroyed not as a direct result of enemy action. For a non-combat organisation, it suffered its fair share of losses.

Far horizons

In November 1940 and as usual with the Luftwaffe, reorganisations took place. Additional Seenotgruppen were formed and the Seenotflugkommando became Seenotstaffel (SNSt) beneath them

to the Red Cross." As a result, before the month had ended, SNKdo 1 would lose another He 59, to 601 Squadron on July 20, 1940, while a SNKdo 3 aircraft was claimed by 615 Squadron on July 27, 1940 and a second to 111 Squadron on July 28. It became startlingly clear that white camouflage and red crosses were no longer a means of immunity so, on July 29, 1940 the Luftwaffe ordered that all red cross markings and civilian registrations should be replaced by normal alternatives and the aircraft camouflaged.

July 1940 brought the arrival of a new aircraft – the three-engined Dornier Do 24 – which, despite being initially camouflaged white, was armed. The first loss of this type occurred on August 16, 1940 when a Do 24N-1 of SNKdo 4 was badly damaged landing in the



Seenot Flying Units

August 1944

Gruppe	Staffel	Location
SNGr 20 (Malcesine, Italy)	Seenotsuchstaffel	Udine
SNGr 50 (Oslo)	SNSt 50	Oslo
SNGr 51(Tromsö)	SNSt 51	Tromsö
SNGr 60 (Pillau)	SNSt 60	Pillau
SNGr 70 (Athens)	SNSt 70	Athens
SNGr 80 (Jever, Germany)	SNSt 80	Norderney
SNGr 1 (Bug, Germany)	SNSt 81	Parow

The predominant aircraft was by far the Do 24T-3, but different types were in use by this time. Seenotgruppe 60 and 80 both flew the Me 410A-1, which were part of the Such-und Schutzstaffel for the Seenotgruppe being employed for both search and protection.



TOP Photographed at Souda Bay, Crete, in 1942 is this Do 24T, probably from 7 SNSt. Note the white tail band and yellow under the cowlings

ABOVE RIGHT Beaufighter T4935 of the RAF's 252 Squadron ditched in the Mediterranean on March 11, 1942 and its crew, Fg Off Bernard Moody and Sgt Ian Philip, were rescued by a Do 24T of 7 SNSt. The rescuers and rescued are seen here

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by June 1941 (see panel, page 73).

The crews of 1 SNSt remained very active over the Bay of Biscay, and similarly 6 and 7 SNSt over the Mediterranean – but for those operating closer to Britain, air-sea rescue missions were fraught with danger. On March 11, 1941, an He 59E of 5 SNSt was shot down off the Danish coast by a 220 Squadron Hudson flown by Plt Off Tony Simpson, all the crew being rescued safely. Then on April 9, 1941, an He 59D of 3 SNSt was shot down off Cap Gris Nez, northern France, by three Spitfires of 64 Squadron, with one crew member killed. Finally, on May 5, 1941 a 2 SNSt He 60D flown by Ofw Paul Stockhinger was shot down into the Seine Bay,

Normandy, by 145 Squadron's Plt Off Jean Offenber; the observer and Staffelfkapitän Oblt zS Hans Hilbig were wounded. As a result, such missions were increasingly escorted and no further aircraft were lost in combat for the rest of 1941, albeit quite a number had accidents or were destroyed in unknown circumstances.

Another reorganisation of the Seenot service and its flying units came in 1942 (see panel, page 74).

The He 59 still soldiered on with such units as 2, 7, 8 and 9 SNSt as did the Breguet Bizerte with 1 SNSt. However, it was the more capable Do 24 that equipped 1-10 SNSt while two other types, namely the Arado Ar 196 with 8 and 10 SNSt and the Do

18, then made a limited appearance. By 1943, it was the Do 24T-3 that equipped all Seenotstaffel, with a few Bizertes and a handful of He 59s struggling on.

Rescues and losses occurred throughout 1942 and into the next year, by which time Germany was on the retreat. By means of example, a typical rescue occurred



on March 12, 1942. A Do 24 of 7 SNSt flown by Fw Hans Sost took off from Athens-Phaleron and later spotted a dinghy carrying two people – Fg Off Bernard Mooney DFM and Sgt Ian Philip DFM of 252 Squadron, who had ditched their Beaufighter the day before while on an escort mission. Both RAF aircrew were rescued no worse for their ordeal and landed at Souda Bay, Crete, where they were apparently happy to be photographed with their saviours.

A final reorganisation with the formation of Seenotgruppe units, each normally having an air (Seenotstaffel) and sea element (Seenotflottille), occurred in 1944 (see panel, left).

Air-sea rescue battle

One Me 410 pilot, Oblt Heinz Langer of SNGr 80, was credited with shooting down a Handley Page Halifax on September 29, 1944, a Wellington on October 7, and, together with Fahnenjunker-Fw Wehrmann, two Wellingtons on October 8. Paradoxically, their last victims were two air-sea rescue Vickers Warwicks of 280 Squadron flown by Fg Offs George Chester and Bert Mason (the former crew survived but the latter were all killed). On that day, 280 Squadron was actively searching for survivors in the North Sea with at least 16 sorties being flown in 24 hours. This came to the notice of the Luftwaffe. Fg Off George Chester was airborne at 1055hrs after they were reported missing but the reason for this soon became clear when Fg Off Ernest Rhodes reported being attacked by two Me 410s at 1145hrs, and evading them in cloud. An hour later, the Chester crew had spotted six dinghies containing at least ten survivors but on dropping their airborne lifeboat, came under attack, as their

report stated: “Two Me 410s then attacked out of cloud. Rear and mid-upper gunners opened fire, one of which broke away with port engine smoking. The remaining Me 410 continued to attack and first shot up hydraulics and undercarriage dropped. Aircraft took violent evasive action but attack continued. Engines, turrets, rudder, elevators and fuselage all shot up and tail set on fire. Rear gunner injured by cannon shell fragments. E/a [enemy aircraft] delivered nine separate attacks and at 1303hrs the Warwick ditched. Broke into three pieces and sank within 10 seconds.”

Amazingly, apart from the wounded rear gunner and the navigator who had dislocated his shoulder, all the crew survived

Lloyd Stuchbery then appeared, apparently not spotting the Me 410. The Messerschmitt then began to approach unseen, only to be attacked by a pair of 279 Squadron Hudsons with Flt Lt Henning Pedersen and Fg Off Don Carmichael at the controls. After a short battle, all aircraft broke away and returned to base; the Chester crew members rescued the following day. The postscript to this story is that Heinz Langer then moved to command SNGr 20 flying the Fw 190A-8, but his luck ran out on February 16, 1945 when he was shot down into the sea just over seven miles south of Grado in Italy by 1st Lt Walter ‘Lefty’ Selenger of the USAAF’s 318th Fighter Squadron. Langer is believed to have been the last Seenot pilot to

BELOW The Such-und Schutzstaffel of SNGr 60 and 80 used the Me 410A-1 for both search and protection duties, operating from Pillau and Jever/Norderney respectively in 1944



unhurt. The Me 410 circled them for a few minutes then flew off, but at 1540hrs reappeared with a Do 24, the Me 410 making a low run over the dinghy and firing three red flares. However, a 280 Squadron Warwick flown by Sqn Ldr Bill Harpur, and two Beaufighters of 489 Squadron piloted by Sqn Ldr John Reynolds DFC and Flt Lt

be killed in combat with enemy aircraft during World War Two.

Epitaph

By April 22, 1945, the Luftwaffe’s Seenot organisation had reduced to SNGr 80 (Jever) with SNSt 80 (List) and Such-und Schutzstaffel 80 (Jever); SNGr 81 (Bug) with SNSt 81 (Parow) and Such-und Schutzstaffel 81; SNGr 50 with SNSt 50 (Oslo) and SNGr 51 with SNSt 51 (Tromsø).

In using dedicated rescue units, the Luftwaffe was certainly more advanced than the RAF, whose bespoke squadrons were not formed until October 1941. Thus, Seenot crews flew with distinction – and the numbers rescued on both sides were countless... and exceedingly grateful. **FP**

BELOW LEFT Two lifeboat-equipped air-sea rescue Vickers Warwicks of 280 Squadron RAF (similar to this example from the same unit) were shot down by Me 410 pilot Oblt Heinz Langer and Fahnenjunker-Fw Wehrmann of SNGr 80, on October 8, 1944
DAVID HOWLEY COLLECTION VIA GOSS

