

B24 Crash Lands In Saline Valley



"The Corporal From Kansas"

by Nurse Hazel Shultz

It was one of those blustery days in early spring. A day when any weather could happen. My husband had just come home to dinner when he got the call. I remember how the elm tree outside the kitchen window was just beginning to drop its seeds. And how as we packed the station wagon with fresh water, food and blankets, the wind blew the seeds like a shower. They danced on the driveway, swirling in drifts like driven snow against the curb.

By the time the folding stretchers, bandages, splints and plasma were stowed away it was dark. A night with clouds and neither stars nor moon. We wore our heavy coats and took some sandwiches with us, thinking to eat as we drove along, rather than taking time for dinner. The Sheriff's posse which was to accompany us pulled up at the gate. One car would lead the way and the second car would follow behind the station wagon.

The call had said that a B24 with a crew of seven had crash-landed on the floor of Saline Valley. Apparently as their radio was damaged, they had on the white salt flat of the dry lake spelled out in letters six feet high one word "Plasma." By this, army headquarters knew that someone was seriously injured and that someone was up and about. More than that we would have to learn when we arrived at the scene of the wrecked ship.

We proceed out through Keeler taking the dirt road at the Talc City turnoff to Jackass Flats. It was down in this low country that the lead car carrying Art Jewett and Charlie Cline got on the wrong road. The winter's snows and rains had washed away many of the tracks and landmarks were difficult to recognize. After wandering around a bit, they told us to wait while they scouted the area. When they had not returned after 30 minutes, Harry Mack in the rear car suggested that we go in search of them; but my husband thought it best to wait a while longer. I thought so too, for peering into the windy black, this valley looked immense, and not being able to see the slightest sign of a road, I feared that if we so much as moved, we would become hopelessly lost. Just then we saw Cline's headlights. When we pulled up beside us he informed us that they had had a flat tire, therefore the delay, but they were sure of the way now.

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Once more we got under way, slowly we crept across the rutted road of the flats, still more slowly up the side of Hunter Mountain and into a driving rain. The wind blew the drops so hard against the windshield that the wipers could scarcely carry them away. Occasionally the night was lighted by a flash of lightning.

From the growth of scrub pines and pinion appearing beside the road, we knew we were nearing the summit. The rain had now turned to snow and although it clung to the pines turning them into Christmas trees, fortunately it melted when hitting the ground. We started down the other side of the Inyo range. Desolate Saline Valley, dark and foreboding, lay below us. Slowly we threaded our way out of the pine, out of the snow and finally out of the rain. Only the wind remained, putting its strength against the side of the car, as though in an effort to blow us off the mountain.



It was at this point that we saw a strange green light above the horizon. It must be a star, we thought. Now it vanished only to appear with a reddish glow. "I think it's a flare", said my husband. We peered into the east. I rolled down the window to see better. The wind was almost warm. There it was again, the light. This time green. Now we were sure it was a flare. There were many, red, green, and white. They had seen us coming down the mountain and were giving us their position. We turned on our red spotlights to signal them that we were the rescue party. It must have cheered them for what we didn't know then was that they had been here since ten o'clock in the morning. It was now eleven at night.

In our interest in the flares and now a campfire ahead and to the right, we had failed to notice the rear car. When we looked back there was no Harry Mack. We stopped and waited; still he did not appear. We backed up and around a curve to find him out changing a flat tire. He insisted that we proceed without him, but as we had planned to stay together, we thought it best to do just that. The tire was changed in a few minutes and on we went. The flares were still flying in the air as we reached the base of the mountain.

Here the road led into a wash with boulders the size of a man's head. It was necessary to reduce our speed to a mere crawl. The wooden body of the station wagon creaked and gave as we bumped all over the rock. The minutes ticked by, but the campfire seemed to remain ahead and to the right. I strained my eyes for some sign of the plane but all I could see was the blazing campfire being fed large clumps of brush, the wind carrying flaming portions far out on the salt flats.



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At last we were as close to the camp as the car could get and we came to a halt near the other end of the old Keeler Salt Tram. Several buckets were still hanging on the cable overhead. We could hear men's voices as they ran through the bushes towards us. They were carrying flashlights, "Did you bring a doctor and an ambulance," they called? When they were assured that we had, they shouted, "Great!"



As we followed them through shrubs growing higher than a man's head in the sand banks surrounding this end of the lake they blurted out their story. They had left Muroc Air Base on a routine flight. They developed engine trouble and seeing Saline Valley below, decided to land. This salt flat was like Muroc, white and smooth with plenty of room to land a large plane. As is routine upon a forced landing, one man is detailed to open all hatches immediately when the plane comes to a stop. As the wheels of the giant ship touched the dry lake the top hatch was opened, but instead of coming back down into the cockpit, the man sat up on the fuselage swinging his legs.

It was a perfect landing, but as the entire weight of the ship came to rest on the lake, the salt crust gave away plunging the wheels into the brine beneath. The plane lurched forward, nose down, causing the man on the top to be thrown forward and into the still whirling propeller.

"He has a badly broken leg," said the young captain of the ship as we arrived at the injured man's side. "Look, Bob; here is a doctor and a nurse too. You're going to be as good as new in no time. They brought an ambulance too. Going to take you into a good hospital, aren't you, doc?" said the captain. "Say nurse, do they have any good looking nurses at that hospital?" I answered, "They surely do." All the men seemed to be talking at once, and laughing.

My husband had been preparing the plasma while I gave the injured youth a hypodermic of morphine. As I bent over him to bare his arm, I noticed the chevrons on his sleeve that he was a corporal, blond and of slight build that he bore of deathly pallor, his lips parched and dry. As he received the plasma he began to revive. He wanted to talk, said he was 20 years old. Between spoonfuls of broth and sips of hot tea he became almost silly. All of the men joked and laughed. It was that release that comes when any tense ordeal is over.

My husband was unwrapping the parachute that had been wound about the injured leg. I noticed the rakish angle of the toe of the shoe and I realized that this must be a bad break. When I saw him snipping the few remaining ties of flesh that held this leg to the corporal's body, my heart sank. Now the amputated member was lying upon the bloody parachute to one side. The tourniquet was removed, the bleeding vessels tied off and the stump dressed with sterile gauze.



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All eyes were watching but appearing as not to. We were drinking hot instant coffee and talking of many other things. I was watching the last of the plasma flow into the corporal's veins. All the time talking to him quietly. First about his home in Kansas, now about California. He had never been here before and had seen very little of the state; in fact, nothing but Muroc Air Base and its vicinity. But, boy, he was going to see plenty of it before he went home to Kansas. He liked flying. He liked the army. He had just had a bit of tough luck. Probably have to be in a cast a long time. Just how long, he wanted to know. After all, medicine had made some things now-a-days to speed read about it. Why, ankle and with the right kind of first aid went right back on the field and finished the game.



rapid strides. They can do healing of broken bones. He'd sometimes athletes brake an of first aid went right back on

It was at this point that he raised his head and looked squarely at his amputated leg. He stared a moment only, then sank heavily back upon the blankets. Someone lit a cigarette and placed it between his lips, but he closed his eyes and appear to be asleep, ignoring the gesture. Another man refilled each coffee cup with instant coffee. The fire was heaped high with bushes. It crackled and snapped, the flames reaching dangerous proportions in the fanning wind. We sat about silently, some smoking and us sipping the hot drinks while the second unit of plasma was given. Then we wrapped him warmly in blankets and carried him on the stretcher to the station wagon. He aroused briefly when his buddies gathered around, admonishing him to take it easy, to keep his chin up, and the like. They spoke encouragingly about seeing him soon and that he'd be up and about before he knew it.

The little caravan turned into the river of boulders. The patient groaned as the wheels dropped down from the rock with a jerk. My husband said something about he wished he had some whole blood for this boy, that was what he really needed.

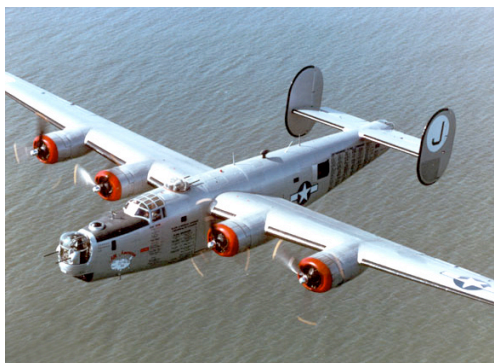
Now we were on the mountain side. The wind was again raw and cold. Once the corporal shouted out in a delirious dream, flailing his arms wildly out of the blankets. I turned back to reassure him and to receive him. His skin was cold, his pulse thready and he was shaking in a chill. We stopped and prepared a third unit of plasma. The deputies held the bottle high and spread their coats to break the wind.

The night dragged wearily on as the three cars switched back and forth down the mountain. When we reached Hunter's Flats, my husband said that we would pull out ahead and try to make some time, as he felt it was imperative that we reach Lone Pine as quickly as possible. The posse said they would bring up the rear and over-take us should we be stranded. We did not see them again that night.



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Above the noise of wind and the corporal moaning, I held my breath for him over the worst bumps and silently cursed the ruts and rocks in the dirt road.



It was before we came to the Talc City turnoff that our right rear tire went flat. My husband and I changed it in a very short time. The stars were out now, the wind dead. The patient was in a deep sleep - perhaps a coma. His condition was very grave.

Now we reached pavement. What a relief to accelerate the motor. It seemed to relieve tense nerves, to relax us. We fairly sailed along until we came to the boulevard stop south of Lone Pine. Dawn was breaking in the east. The stars had begun to fade. The morning was fair and silent.

Here we stopped long enough to examine our patient. He had expired! We were suddenly overwhelmed with weariness. The fatigue that accompanies defeat engulfed us and we felt heavy and old. I said, "All that for nothing." My husband said, "What a waste", but he was not speaking of a waste of time; he was referring to the expendability of American youth - like the corporal from Kansas.

Editors Note": This accident occurred on October 20, 1944. The B24 was on a routine training mission when it developed engine trouble. The landing caused severe damage to the undercarriage and other structures of the plane. Due to the damage and poor lakebed surface, it was impossible to fly the massive ship out, and so the army decided to abandon it. The B24 lay intact in this barren and remote desert wasteland until sometime in the late 1950's or early 60's at which time salvors dismantled and hauled it away. All that remains of that fateful night are a few small metallic parts, a tire and the memory of the "Corporal from Kansas."



File courtesy of: <http://www.qnet.com/~carcomm/wreck29.htm>