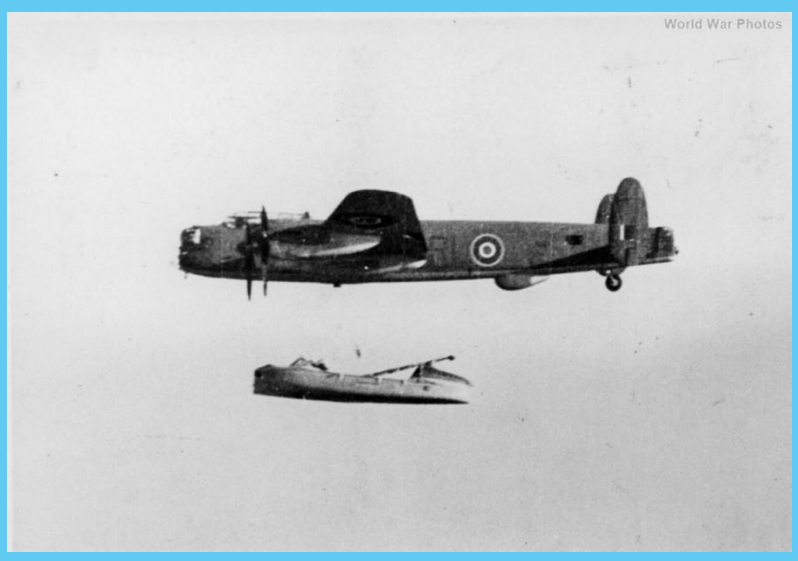
Carry On Lifeboats – as related by Roy Manington (51st Entry)

1955 and I was stationed at RAF St Eval, Cornwall when two Shackletons of 42 Sqn took off on a search and rescue exercise off Southern Ireland. The exercise was planned to last 15 hours; 10 hours into the flight, radio contact was lost with both aircraft. Another Shackleton in the area was diverted to carry out a search for the missing aircraft, without success. Over the next three days other aircraft and vessels conducted a thorough search but drew a blank and the search was called off. A subsequent Court of Enquiry had no evidence upon which to draw a conclusion but cited 'collision as the least improbable cause'.

At the time of the incident I was NCO i/c Airborne Lifeboat loading party for the week and due to our own Shackletons being in the midst of trials of the new Mk.III lifeboat which had still to be cleared for service, it was decided to utilize an Avro Lancaster borrowed from nearby RAF St Mawgan which could be fitted with a Mk.II lifeboat for the search.

The lifeboat was kept in the Safety Equipment Section on an adapted bomb trolley whilst the Lancaster had similar adaptations so that the boat could be attached to an inverted pyramid shaped tubular rig which was in turn attached to four bomb release points. Completing the modification, the bomb doors of the aircraft were altered with cut outs so that just the slip of the boat was shown once the bomb doors were closed.

On release, the boat would be lowered supported by parachutes and once the boat hit the sea, water immersion switches would initiate the firing of rockets which disengaged the parachutes to take them clear of the craft.



Fitting the lifeboat was a palaver given that the boat was hoisted through the aircraft floor and the centre

tube of the rig and it required ‘some poor sod’ (aka, the smallest member of the team) to be aboard the boat as it was hoisted to ensure that the mechanism had properly engaged and then to disengage the hoisting cable. Once done he then had to squeeze through a 12” by 18” access panel in the side of the boat in order to escape. The last thing to be done after hoisting was to connect the boat battery and the first thing after lowering was to disconnect the battery.

It was a process that was fraught with possibilities and proof was made real a few weeks previously when after a practice hoist, the lifeboat was being returned to the Safety Equipment Section by a ‘careful’ Bomb Dump tractor driver. There were rainwater puddles on the perimeter track with a particularly deep one outside of the Air Traffic Control tower. The driver drove on regardless and drove straight through, and the splash of water hit the Mercury Immersion sensor which in turn caused the three rockets attached to the parachute lines to fire. The forward-facing rocket narrowly missed the tractor driver; the port-facing rocket hit the rear wall of the wooden Air Traffic Control building; the third rocket went straight through the ‘Wing Commander Flying’ office window. It was soon realized that contrary to standard procedure the battery had not been disconnected.

Happily, lessons were learned and no such incident occurred when the ‘borrowed Lancaster was loaded/off-loaded with the Mk.II lifeboat over the three days of the search. Unhappily, although we were the only team ever to load a lifeboat with intent, nothing was seen or heard again of the two Shackletons, (albeit 11 years later, an engine from one of the aircrafts was trawled up by an Irish trawler).

It was shortly after this incident that the concept of using airborne lifeboats was discontinued and the Lindholme Gear came into use. The Gear (a collection of pods) would be carried in the weapons bay of the aircraft or on pylons and dropped in a long line up-wind of the survivors. The Dinghy would inflate on impact and then drift towards the survivors. The survivors could then use the dinghy, haul in the containers of equipment, and await rescue.

A far more elegant Air Sea Rescue solution and one that eliminated the risk of damage to Tractor Drivers, Wingco Flying or any other assets during ground transportation.

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