

AIR-SEA RESCUE

THE SAVING OF DOWNED AIRCREWS IN THE PACIFIC HAD LESS TO DO WITH THE QUALITY OF THE SURVIVAL MATERIAL THAN COMPARED TO THE MENTALITY OF THE FIGHTING POWERS

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Air Rescue Service flight jacket patch.

During the Second World War, pilots and air crews that were forced to ditch or bail out of aircraft in the ocean were faced with a life and death struggle against the elements and the unforgiving, limitless sea. Confronted with the prospect of long hours or days in the water, pilots and crews relied heavily on the use of survival equipment issued to them. They also hoped for salvation by search and rescue whether by sea or air. The rescue of 74 crew members from the airship *USS Macon's* crash in the Pacific in 1935 showed the promise of rescue operations, but it was the coming of war that accelerated the need for locating downed airmen. The war led to important technological developments to aid in finding survivors. It also saw the first systematic planning in rescue efforts. By war's end, the United States developed equipment and systems to rescue aircrews which saved the lives of numerous airmen. Ironically, Japan, whose fortunes rose and fell in the islands of the Pacific, lagged on air-sea rescues of its pilots flying and fighting over the ocean. Thus, in the Pacific theater American and Japanese aircrews faced vastly different prospects of rescue for several reasons.

Pilots and air crews from both sides were equipped with the basics of survival. American aircrews,

Engine failures during carrier takeoffs were, unfortunately, not uncommon. Even in the heat of battle, the crews of the carrier and its escorts would make every effort to rescue the crews. This Grumman Avenger has gone over the side and the three-man crew has scrambled to safety before the torpedo-bomber goes under. Life rafts would be tossed to the crew from the speeding carrier but it would usually fall to the escorts to snatch the airmen from the water.