

BANZARE - JANUARY - 1931

2nd Voyage in S.Y. Discovery 1 - account of flying and some near mishaps on 27th January, 1931 - by Group Captain Eric Douglas.

Among the many occasions when it was my privilege to pilot Sir Douglas Mawson in the small seaplane belonging to the B.A.N.Z.A.R. Expedition 1929 -1931 on reconnaissance flights from the vicinity of the Expedition Ship DISCOVERY 1, when in or close to the pack ice off the unknown sectors of the Antarctic Continent south of Australia and the Indian Ocean, there was one instance when we came close to disaster.

It was in Latitude 65 - 07 S. Longitude 107 - 22 E on the 27th January, 1931 and our leader Sir Douglas Mawson was most anxious to gain a glimpse of the elusive Antarctic Continent which he considered was relatively close by. In rather unfavourable weather conditions we were lowered overboard in the Seaplane and I then taxied the plane down wind. Several times the plane's floats were buried under the oncoming swells and I was forced to stop. Eventually we gained what appeared to be adequate distance for the take-off run up wind before we would meet the heavy pack ice.

Early in the take off run it became evident that I would need all my skill to get the plane off safely, for as we picked up speed and rode over the swells the plane was repeatedly thrown into the air without proper flying speed. It was touch and go but we made it with about 100 yards to spare before we met the dangerous pack ice and to my surprise I heard Sir Douglas say to me over our speaking tubes "well done".

At 1500 feet altitude we climbed through a mist and at 3000 feet we met a layer of clouds through which we climbed for 600 feet before we broke through above them. I then climbed the plane to 6000 feet and observed that the clouds below us stretched away to the horizon in all directions except to the south where we detected a faint blue showing up in a sector of the sky. It probably was the Antarctic Continent as generally we proved from experience that when clouds prevailed over the pack ice the sky over the continent was clear of clouds. We flew southwards for about 20 minutes before making a sweeping turn to the right. What appeared to be undulating ice covered land showed up to the south but we could not be certain that it was indeed part of the Antarctic Continent. Sir Douglas recorded the sighting as probable land in the vicinity of Wilkes' Knox Land. After about 3/4 of an hour I throttled the engine down and glided through the clouds and after a short time sighted our ship about 4 miles away to the north west in a pool of water which appeared to be almost black against the glare of the surrounding pack ice and ice bergs. We came in low over ice strewn sea and made an alighting close to the ship.

Sir Douglas then indicated to the Discovery that we would attempt to hook onto the ship's lifting tackle with the ship steaming slowly into the swell to decrease the roll of the ship and thus minimize the danger of damaging the plane as it was being lifted on board. I turned the plane alongside but the surge and wash from the ship carried the plane out from the ship's side and we missed the lifting hook.

I made another attempt with much the same results but on the third try, Sir Douglas managed to hook our sling over the lifting hook. The next instance the plane was lifted clear of the water with a jerk as the ship rolled and then suddenly the starboard wing of the plane went under the sea and before we could appreciate what had caused this, the plane tilted up vertically and Sir Douglas who had been kneeling on the fuselage decking near the sling, fell towards the water but fortunately managed to grasp a strut and to hang on with only his feet in the sea. I was still strapped in my cockpit but managed to release the strap and clamber up towards the nose of the plane in an effort to weigh the nose down and give some degree of righting to our machine.

A few seconds later the plane's lifting sling broke and the aeroplane fell into the water with its tail and the rear part of the fuselage under the sea. We quickly dropped astern of the moving ship and could see and hear that consternation reigned as the crew made efforts to launch a boat to come to our rescue. During this time both Sir Douglas and

myself clambered on to the bow of the plane's floats and apart from our legs escaped a ducking in the cold sea. Several minutes later the boat came along side and took us on board.

We knew from repute and other incidents that Sir Douglas had always acted with great activity and control in emergencies and although this incident could have had serious consequences, his presence of mind and encouragement given to all, made our difficulties appear far less than they actually were.

We managed to get the aeroplane on board without further damage and later on made repairs and had the plane ready for further flights.

I wish to add that we all loved our leader as he was a truly great man and an inspiration to us, at all times.

Word - processed in July, 1999 by Sally Douglas, from a hand-written account by Eric Douglas.