Midshipman (A) Patrick Bernard Jackson

We did our training at Portsmouth in Frobisher. I was a midshipman. Next we went to the Courageous as an introduction to aircraft-carriers, after which we went to flying school and I started flying Tiger Moths at Gravesend on 5th May 1939. After tonsillitis I caught up with the course at Peterborough, which was an RAF base. We all had cars and in the evenings, we’d meet up with our girlfriends. Life was fun in those days. War broke out while I was there.

We went down to the south of France for deck landings. First the instructor took us down onto the deck in a Gipsy Moth, just to show us what it looked like. Then we were put in a Swordfish and had to go out and do it alone. People always think deck landings are difficult, but I never found the much of a problem. I drove my car faster than I landed a Swordfish.

The we came home to torpedo-school at Gosport. I was there until the invasion threat, when everyone was called into active squadrons. I went to join 825 Squadron which had had quite a few casualties, including their Commander. Lieutenant Commander Esmonde, the new Commander, arrived shortly before me and almost immediately we went to the Norwegian coast in Furious for bombing and anti-shipping strikes. That was in 1940.

In May 1941 the squadron joined the Victorious on a convoy to the Med. We had taken on some new crew, RNVR chaps who had not done any deck landings so we went to see to give them some experience. On our return to Scapa Flow, we saw the most wonderful sight: the Prince of Wales and the Hood going at high speed into the sunset. We thought something must be up, they were going so fast and sure enough, as soon as we moored up, the Victorious was ordered to follow them out and ploughed across the North Atlantic. We were after the Bismarck. She had sunk the Hood.

I must admit, there were butterflies in my stomach. The prelude to our Air Strike was horrible, sitting and waiting your turn to get into the ring. You feel, ‘God, I’d get out of this if I could,’ but once you get into the cockpit and start up and fly in formation, you’re just doing what you’re trained to do. Just going across the Atlantic at vast speed with little to do except check your aeroplane, though had butterflies galore floating around. I wouldn’t say only in the stomach; almost visible, they were!

Eventually the Bismarck was sighted and we were sent off to try to slow her down and do as much damage as possible. It was 24th may, the day before my Birthday. We took off at about ten o’clock at night. It was getting dark, the sea was rising and the weather forecast was not good. There were nine of us in the air. We staggered up through the cloud and got an echo on the ASV, so we came whistling down through the cloud and there was the Prince of Wales. Fortunately we didn’t attack her because we recognized the four guns in the forward turret. So we pulled away and she sent a signal by light that Bismarck was 15 miles from her starboard bow.

We went of trying to get a bit more height. Then the Bismarck saw us and started to let fly, it was chaotic as we went in for the attack. Heavy flak bursts all round and the stench of burning explosives. It was at this moment that I felt a tapping on my shoulder from the rear cockpit. I thought someone must have been hurt, so I put my head back and heard Lieutenant ‘Dapper’ Berrill’s calm voice wishing me a very happy Birthday. I looked at my watch; it was 0003 on 25th May.

Then we headed back to the carriers. We found them in the dark, purely because Captain Bovelle, bless his heart, used his signaling lamps to make a signal to the flagship. We all landed safely, even though it was dark, with rain and a pitching deck which was good because half the chaps hadn’t landed at night before.

The next day, we heard that the German ships had slipped clear of our radar net, so an air search was organized. We lumbered into the air, each on a different bearing from the Victorious. The weather was bad, and wherever we looked, all we saw was a small circle of breaking waves immediately below us. Eventually at the end of our search we had to head back as we were running low on fuel. But there was no sign of the Victorious where we had expected to find her. We were lost half way across the North Atlantic and the nearest land, Greenland, was well out of range of our fuel tank, which was nearly empty. All we could do was carry on the search, using the weakest mixture the engine would accept.

I was brought up a Catholic and when I saw the petrol tank register show ‘E’, I said three ‘Hail Marys’ pretty smartish. The I heard Dapper Berrill and saw his glove hand pointing downwards. Below us was the submerged outline of a ship’s lifeboat, with waves breaking over it. Someone was looking after us alright.

When someone gives you a lifeboat in the middle of the Atlantic and says, ‘Get on with it, chum,’ you don’t muck around, you get on with it. I decided to ditch immediately, and drop a smoke float to show which way the wind was blowing. I came down as if I were doing a deck landing and landed in the water about twenty yards upwind of the lifeboat. I stuffed my flying boots full of Very light pistols and cartridges, and Dapper brought his compass. We had to release the dinghy manually, and it was blowing so hard it was like trying to control a rather frisky horse. In the struggle with the dinghy, the air gunner, Leading Airman Sparkes, forgot to bring his fresh water bottles.

We got into the dinghy and it took just a few moments to drift downwind to the lifeboat, which was submerged. All we had to bale with was our flying boots, so we set to until there was enough freeboard for us to get on board and get some shelter from the freezing wind. As soon as we were on board we all felt sick and retched up what was left of our breakfasts. Then we explored the boat, which had come from a Dutch ship, the SS Elusa. There was a bundle amidships which we thought at first might be a dead body, but turned out to be a sail bag with a lug-sail and a fore-sail. There were sweeps and a mast lashed to the thwarts. There was also a rusty axe and knife, a suit of clothes and a trilby hat, a waterlogged tin of 50 cigarettes and a bottle of 1890 Napoleon brandy. There were hard ship’s biscuits and a water beaker in the boat’s lockers.

We had a tot of brandy to revive our spirits, but it was rather strong on an empty stomach. Then we began to rig the mast using the lashing lines and cut the blade off a sweep to make a gaff, put a splice round it and hauled it up. The oat heeled over and took on steerage, which was a great relief. Now we had to decide what direction to steer. The wind was westerly, force five or six and I thought I remembered from school that the prevailing wind over the Atlantic was westerly, so we headed East.

That night we were swamped by heavy seas and had to bail out non-stop. And the wind kept changing all the time; we were in a centre of low pressure. I tried to stay calm and sail with the wind, but then you’d find you couldn’t make headway. It was like being in a cave. The three of us in a small boat with nobody to push us through. Sometime I felt the world had given us up.

Dapper was a great comfort. I couldn’t have asked for anyone nicer to share the discomfort with. He was a Catholic, too, and he kept saying, ‘Don’t worry, chaps, I’m saying a prayer. You watch it, nine days and we’ll be saved.’ But Sparkes was a different story. He built himself a little igloo up in the bows using the aircraft dinghy cover and he sat under that saying, ‘Why bother? It’s only prolonging the agony.’

Since Sparkes had given up and Dapper hadn’t much experience under sail, it was up to me to handle the boat. I didn’t sleep for the first four or five nights and I started to hallucinate. I thought we were sailing around the moon and the British consul on the moon had called me ashore and said, ‘Would you like a hot bath?’ and I said, ‘Damn right I would,’ and I started to walk ashore. Fortunately old Dapper pulled me back into the boat and told me I probably needed some sleep, so I left him to it and slept.

Eventually the strong winds lessened and we concentrated on sailing in a westerly direction, hoping to reach North America. Then we spotted another boat. Everything about it was black. The crew had black rings around their eyes. The officer in the boat shouted across that they were Norwegian, the only survivors from a convoy which had been torpedoed fourteen days before, and there were several dead men on the bottom boards. They were heading for Greenland but had been driven back by gales. He suggested that some of his crew should join us and that we should sail in company to the North. It was a hard decision, considering the state they were in, but I had to refuse. Our boat was lighter and faster than theirs and we would have more chance of survival alone. Ewe gave then the cigarettes and some biscuits and went our separate ways. They were never seen again.

The weather alternated between fresh and gale force winds and during the storms we lost two sea anchors and our rudder. We were all suffering from the cold and the damp. We had to ration the water so we were thirsty all the time. Eating biscuit soaked in cold water gave us terrible toothache and the circulation in our legs and feet slowed right down. Dapper and I kept our flying boots off so we could move more freely and because we needed them for bailing. Although our feet were cold, we kept their circulation going by moving around the boat and whichever one of us was not at the tiller would massage the other’s feet.

Sparked insisted on keeping his wet flying boots on and because he sat in his tent and didn’t move around, his feet became much worse than ours. Eventually he crawled aft, saying, ‘Christ, I’m in agony.’ I looked at his legs and they were going black from his feet up. When I massaged them, they were like bags of ice. He was in serious danger of getting gangrene, so we decided to make for the nearest landfall – Greenland, even though we had little chance of landing near some habitation. We altered course to due North, hoping to spot some mountains before coming too close to the shoreline, and then sail along the coast to an inhabited area. On our eighth day in the boat we spotted some sea birds, then three geese landed on the water near us. We felt land shouldn’t be far away. There was a lot of wreckage in the water and at one point I thought I spotted the periscope of a U-boat and panicked. But it was just a table leg bobbing past.

Then the weather worsened into an Easterly gale, and without a sea anchor and with just a steering oar, all we could do was run before the wind. On our ninth morning in the boat it was sleeting and we were sailing through crashing high waves. Dapper was struggling to steer with the oar and the sails had started to split. It was utterly miserable. I was sitting amidships, thinking, ‘Well, I’ve asked the dear old Holy Mother to look after us and if she’s given me this, I can’t really ask her again, so I’d better start preparing to meet my maker.’ Then, as we were sitting on top of one of these huge breakers, I saw this funny little ship, and thought, ‘Oh gosh, I’m hallucinating again.’ Like the chap in the desert seeing a palm tree. But the next time we were up on a breaker, I saw the ship again. The wind was blowing its smoke in horizontal lines.

I then started panic stations and fired of all the Very lights we’d got. It looked as if the ship would pass without spotting us, but the last smoke puff went off with a louder ‘pop’ than usual, and they saw us and blasted on their siren. It was music to our ears. They dropped me a line over our ow which I made fast around our mast and this pulled us in under the lea. Some chaps jumped from their deck into the boat to help us. I could stand up, but Dapper’s hand was frozen to the oar; we had to lever his fingers up. Sparkes was unable to stand at all, so these three husky Icelanders hauled him on board.

Dapper and Sparkes were taken to the sick bay, but I felt fit, I just had tingly feet. Then there was some explaining to do. ‘Where are you from? What are you doing?’ They thought we were survivors from a German ship. Once I’d convinced the Captain we were not German, he couldn’t have been more charming. From then on it was all comfort and good food.

They took us to Reykjavik where Michael Bratbee came on board to check our identity. Dapper and Sparkes were taken to hospital and Sparkes lost his toes. I went to see the British admiral because I wanted to tell him about the Norwegian boat we saw. He sent a search out, but they didn’t find anyone. He also sent a signal to the Admiralty that we’d been found, and some kind civil servant rang up my mother and said, ‘You’ll probably be glad to know that your son has been found.’ She said, ‘I never had any doubts about it. I went to a séance the other day and the medium said, “Your son’s doing what he likes best: sailing.”’