

John Dawson

RAF wireless operator who survived Atlantic ordeal

Born: December 11, 1919;

Died: July 16, 2016

JOHN Dawson, who has died aged 96, was a young wireless operator on an RAF flying boat that was unexpectedly shot down by the German submarine it had been sent to destroy. His subsequent survival in an open dinghy in the Atlantic, along with seven comrades, was hailed officially by senior commanders as an inspiration for other Second World War aircrew to always hang on to life and never give up.

Early on July 9, 1943, Mr Dawson and his 210 Squadron crewmates took off from Gibraltar in their US-built Catalina on a routine anti-submarine patrol, west of Cape St Vincent. A radio message instructed them to search for a damaged U-boat believed to be roughly halfway between Lisbon and the Azores. However, Nazi leaders had ordered subs to fight back instead of diving; an edict not universally known at the time.

Mr Dawson, who was manning a .50 calibre machine gun, spotted U-642 (Kapitanleutnant Herbert Brunning) travelling at full speed on the surface, leaving a wake about a mile long. The skipper launched his attack in a shallow dive, weaving the aircraft from side to side in evasive action. The first burst of tracer shells passed harmlessly to starboard but the enemy gunner corrected his aim, the Catalina flew into a hail of fire and was hit repeatedly. Nevertheless, the attack was still pressed home.

He recalled: "Pretty lights started coming towards us, there were a few dull thuds from up front, a strong smell of burning plastic and the port engine was streaming black smoke and petrol. We managed to drop three depth charges; it should have been six but the electrical firing wiring circuit on the port side had been shot through. The attack completed, the Catalina was in a sad state. The navigator's and engineer's compartments were ablaze and the port engine was on fire and coughing badly."

With the flames taking hold despite the crew's efforts with extinguishers and the aircraft filling with smoke, the skipper decided to ditch immediately with the floats up. After one bounce, the aircraft settled on the sea with its port wing tip in the water. Burning fuel poured on to the surface as the men evacuated, pushing two dinghies out.

Fire and choking smoke made retrieval of the wireless and emergency packs impossible, and the aircraft exploded and sank within minutes. The second wireless operator and navigator

never made it to the dinghies and were lost. Meanwhile Brunning, unaware of the ditching, had ordered his helmsman to crash-dive the submarine and leave the area.

The skipper, knowing aircraft were in the area and they were close to a shipping route, reckoned the crew could last a week without aid; perhaps 10 days for the fitter ones. They had three 2oz bars of chocolate and an orange to survive on. Mr Dawson later wrote: "On July 11 we had eaten all the chocolate when the rigger, Paddy Doyle, asked 'What about the orange? The skipper, Denis 'Buck' Ryan, who came from County Tipperary, replied 'Save it for tomorrow, Paddy - it's Orange Day'. And that is why I always remember July 12."

Under a relentless sun and through cold, wet nights, the eight young men tried to catch fish and a sea bird. They signalled frantically with shaving mirrors and a heliograph at passing planes, all without success. On the fourth day, they were seen by the Royal Navy escort vessel HMS Swale, although the quartermaster on the accompanying merchantman, SS Port Fairy, had already spotted the dinghies with his naked eye. "No Oxford rowing blue ever made a greater effort than the rigger, who was oarsman," Mr Dawson wrote.

The survivors, badly sunburned but with only minor injuries from the ditching, clambered aboard Swale unaided but to their surprise found their legs gave way. No sooner were they embarked than they came under German air attack. "It was not a case of out of the frying pan into the fire but out of the sea into the frying pan," Mr Dawson recalled. The ship survived, fires were extinguished and the airmen were landed at Casablanca, Morocco.

Their determination to survive after ditching, which earned a Distinguished Flying Cross for the pilot and Distinguished Flying Medal for the rigger, so impressed top brass their story was published by the Air Ministry in the Coastal Command Review to inspire other aircrew. The ditching also meant membership of the aircrew Goldfish Club for Mr Dawson and his comrades.

John Dawson was born in Cawdor, Nairnshire, the only son of a sawmill contractor. His parents divorced when he was three, with his father granted sole custody. He attended primary schools in Inverness-shire and Sutherland before attending Huntly Gordon Secondary, where he won a number of prizes. While playing cricket for the Huntly 2nd XI team in 1937, a match was organised against Gordonstoun School's team, and Mr Dawson found himself playing against one Prince Philip of Greece.



He left school at 16, found work in Aberdeen and took a course in wireless telegraphy, leading to his joining the RAF in October 1940. He became a wireless operator and joined Coastal Command, flying mainly in Catalinas at bases from Sullom Voe to the Azores, Archangel and Murmansk in northern Russia to the western Mediterranean. When peace came he was involved in transport and air-sea rescue before being demobbed in 1946.

Mr Dawson returned to his job in Aberdeen then sat the civil service exams and joined the Inland Revenue, being posted to Dumfries. In a long and distinguished career he moved to Glasgow, Edinburgh and finally back to Dumfries, retiring as senior principal inspector of taxes. He enjoyed attending squadron reunions with his wife of 67 years Janet, known as Jenny, who died last year. He was contacted in the 1990s by an old comrade living in Australia. His first

reaction, perhaps from the inner taxman, was to declare: "I lent him 10 shillings during the war and never got it back!" The money was returned as £30, to allow for inflation.

He enjoyed playing golf, snooker and fishing, and was delighted when he was invited to become honorary president of Dumfries Cricket Club. A dedicated churchgoer, he attended services even after going into care. He had a great sense of humour and liked watching TV shows such as *Fawlty Towers*, *Porridge*, *Scotch and Wry* as well as test matches, Wimbledon, golf and other sports.

He was a proud member of the Scottish Saltire Aircrew Association (SSAA). In a twist of fate, the former radio operator of U-642 read his account of the attack and survival on their website and got in touch nearly 70 years later. Gunter Labude, 19 at the time of the incident, received a friendly response and wrote back: "So many years after the disas-

trous war, I had not expected to get an answer. Is it possible that there are still crew people of the Catalina are living today? I pay tribute to them and wish a good and peaceful retirement. Sincerely, Gunter Labude (87), former radio operator from U-642."

Paying tribute to an SSAA comrade, fellow war veteran Jack Burgess, of Kirkcaldy, said: "The fact that he was mentioned as an inspiration to others in Coastal Command Review was indeed an honour. To be acclaimed as carrying out air crew expectations to the highest level and to hang on when all seems lost is a great tribute. We all hoped we would have the same resistance to defeat if shot down."

Mr Dawson is survived by his four children Irene, Diana, Jenny and Jim, 10 grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren.

CAMPBELL THOMAS