

Rescuing a Super Constellation in the North Atlantic Ocean, 1962

In those days I was a mere deckhand on the MS Celerina, a 150 by 19 meters Swiss cargo ship under the command of Captain Domenico Lugli.



MV Celerina in the English Channel

Since our departure from Port Churchill in Hudson Bay, Northern Canada, the weather had been rather poor for that time of the year, the end of the summer. Our ship was loaded with 12.000 tons of wheat for export to Europe and it pitched and rolled non-stop.

On that day, the 23rd of September 1962, I was writing a letter to my parents, telling them we were experiencing gale-force winds of 8 or 9 on the Beaufort scale, practically a storm. The deck of the ship was swept by waves over 10 meters high. During that day I had shot part of an 8mm film and when I look at these images today, I must admit that the sea looked pretty awesome. The porthole of my cabin was covered with a flap, a kind of inside metal shutter designed to protect the porthole from the cannon-ball force waves that crashed along the side of the ship. When we slept we had to arrange our berths in a V position and stuff pillows and life jackets under the mattress, so there would be less chance of our being ejected by the rolling motion of the freighter. Waves on such a day could roll the ship up to 30 degrees.

On that Sunday evening I was in the cabin of my friend Jean Unghy, the chief steward, and we were talking, as usual. The Celerina tossed and rolled, its speed had been reduced to about 8 knots, though in good weather the ship could easily sail at 15 knots, driven by its 7200 HP Sulzer 8SAD72 engine.

Around 21.30 GMT (that is, at 19.30 local time) we were informed that our radio officer had just picked up a distress message concerning an aircraft that

had made an emergency landing on the sea, its position being at 54°05'N and 30°30'W. This was flight 923 of the Flying Tiger Line and the plane in question was a Super Constellation, a four-engine aircraft built by Lockheed. Our ship was probably the closest to the scene of the disaster.

One hour later the radio station of ocean weather ship "Juliett" transmits the following message :

Flying Tiger N 6923 C preparing to ditch. Last position *54.12 N, 30.00 W* at *GMT 21:10. Ships in that area, please indicate your position.*

At 21:00 the Celerina immediately sends its position, which is 53.21 N, 23.53 W.

Weather ship "Juliett" asks Celerina to head to the last position indicated by the Super Constellation. At 21.00 GMT Our radio operator confirms that we are on our way and that we hope to arrive there within 5 hours. We are now about 60 nautical miles away from the indicated position.

With Olympian calm the Captain gave orders for us to be ready to find and help possible survivors. The galley was reactivated, the stewards collected blankets, the motormen prepared the lifeboat and checked its engine, searchlights were stripped of their protective coverings. The speed of the ship was increased as far as safety and sea conditions would allow. The radio operator was in permanent contact with all the other stations that participated in the rescue operation. In those days there was no VHF on board the Celerina and the Morse code was used for communication. Other members of the crew had prepared blankets and clothes. The boatswain organized ladders, nets and ropes to be used in bringing the victims on board. The hospital was opened; it was a small room that contained first aid material for the ship. The 2nd Mate was responsible for running it and I was assigned to be his helper.

On the bridge everyone was calm, but we were eager to arrive at the site and to help the survivors as soon as possible. The engineers had told us that the sea temperature was only 7° C. This, combined with the wind, must have been horrible for the survivors, even if they could shelter inside inflatable life rafts.

As the hours passed the wind and the sea calmed down; it was a stroke of luck, even though the waves and swell were still high. The helmsman maintained a steady course 330°.

A plane of the US Air Force (a C-118 / DC6), the "Flaming Five Zero", has heard the distress signal and also flies toward the area. It was able to spot the survivors thanks to a flashlight the plane's captain had thought of bringing with him before jumping off the Super Constellation after it ditched.

A British ship, the "Manchester Progress", which is equipped with both Morse and voice communication devices, relays to the Celerina the distress signals from the radio stations dealing with the disaster.

We waited for a long time and finally, toward one o'clock in the morning, on the starboard side, bearing 290°, we saw the signalling rockets sent by the C-118 at our captain's request that same plane also arranged some floating light signals in order to mark out the area. These lights are very useful to us in the dark of the night.

Our electrician was in charge of our main projector. Later we would realize that this searchlight had conveyed to the survivors the message that help was coming and that it had raised their hopes.

Suddenly we notice the beam from the flashlight of the Super Constellation's captain. Then, in the light of his projector, the electrician sees a bright spot: it is a life-raft. At first all one can see is the bright yellow color of the raft, but soon the survivors can be detected, bundled together and gazing at our vessel. How many are there? There are many of them, it seems, and we make out even more of them when we are able to distinguish their faces looking up, blinded by the search beam and trying to see us in the night. It is almost two in the morning, the west wind is still blowing at a speed of about 30 knots.

Approaching the raft was difficult, for the waves were still pretty large. It was impossible to launch a lifeboat. Moreover, the Celerina could only maneuver with minimum speed. The problem was to get the life raft to the leeward side of the ship, so as to protect it from the wind and the huge waves. I can still clearly see the scene today: the raft rises with a wave until it nearly reaches the level of our deck, then it plunges down again and within a few seconds it is 5 to 8 meters below us. At first, the boat was too far for us to be able to throw them a cable or a heaving line. We had to maneuver in those difficult conditions and yet not lose sight of the raft that kept disappearing in the trough of the waves.

Our chief steward, who was an excellent swimmer, wanted to jump into the sea with a rope and swim to the raft. Fortunately I was able to talk him out of this idea.

Our second attempt was the good one. We installed a pilot ladder and this work was completed by our brave and daring carpenter, Walter Wunderlin and by the AB Sailor Spampinato, , who both unhesitatingly jumped from the railing of the ship into the raft to make it fast. The boatswain and the seamen then quickly set up other ladders and nets along the sidewall of the ship.

Then, while the freighter was maintained in the same position by the vessel's engine, we started the slow operation of getting the survivors on board. Some of them could pull themselves up by their own means, but others had to be helped. Many of these had to be hoisted up; they were paralyzed with cold or in shock, and completely unable to make such an effort by themselves. Unfortunately, three of them had not survived the long waiting period and there were found drowned at the bottom of the raft. At 04:20, local time, the rescue operation was finished. The Celerina then went off in search of other life rafts or survivors. But at dawn we still had not found anything else.

There had been 51 people on the raft we saved, a raft normally meant for 25 passengers. Later we were informed that the raft had been inflated upside down. We also learned that another raft had been found by the weather ship "Juliette", but empty. The other rafts on the plane could not be used, for they were stored in the wing that had broken off upon ditching on the sea and had sunk immediately.

Once on board the Celerina the survivors were brought inside to warm up and have a hot drink; often they were put directly under a hot shower, then we changed their clothes and tucked them in our own berths. There were also some wounded people. Some had fractured limbs or open wounds. But most of them suffered from burns due to the rubbing of their clothing with the sea water added to the kerosene of the airplane. There was plenty of work at the hospital and the 2nd mate was very resourceful in spite of our primitive installation.

I attend to the aircraft's pilot who has a head wound. Soon he asks me if he can see our captain. I give him some rudimentary care and after he has rested a little, I go up with him on the bridge. No words are needed. The handshake of the two captains is an emotional moment that reveals a lot about the thoughts of both men.

I have a new mission. Our captain tells me that among the dead is the corpse of a woman who is probably the wife of one of the survivors. He asks me to check: she is supposed to be a redhead and she wears tooth braces. The corpses have been placed in a little crew saloon at the stern of our ship. I go there and I return with the sad news: it is indeed the wife of the survivor.

Next to this woman there were two other corpses, one being that of a young man we had vainly tried to revive for many minutes. The corpses would subsequently be put in body bags and transported by helicopter to a Canadian aircraft carrier better equipped than we are to store corpses.

Our captain's wife and daughter were on board of the Celerina. These two women played a great part in caring for the wounded, who will remember those two beautiful Italian ladies who took many pains to help and comfort them.

Indeed, on the next day, that carrier, the Bonaventura, is half a mile away from us, leeward on our portside. Now the sea is much calmer. We are moving very slowly, with just enough speed to maintain our course close to the wind and to permit transferring people and goods from one ship to the other. There is now an aerial ballet, with the helicopters sending us two doctors and first aid equipment. The three corpses are transported by helicopter and also the seriously wounded, who have been placed on stretchers and will be attended to by the doctors on the warship.

Then the Celerina gets on its way, taking along the other survivors, and heads for Cork, Ireland.

Our radio officer, Georg Stoeckli, must have spent practically 80 hours awake, receiving and sending hundreds of messages. For the service he provided, he well deserved the thanks he was given personally by the shipowner at the end of the rescue operation, on our arrival in Antwerp.

Of course the survivors are sharing our berths and our table and even our clothes, but everyone is happy about it and we have cheerful contacts with one another. Most of these survivors are young air force recruits. They tell us about parachute jumping: not a single one of them would hesitate to fly in an airplane or to jump off again. Later we realized that the prospect of the Vietnam war was already in the air at the time. We were practically all the same age, some of them were even only seventeen.

Personally, I made friends with John Murray, the pilot of the Super Constellation, who was 44 years old then. Together we discussed the difficult decisions he had to make when the accident happened. Particularly, he had to choose whether to ditch "with" the waves or "against" them. Landing "with" a wave is generally preferable on one hand, but in that case the wind carries the plane with less airspeed and the aircraft may "fall" too roughly. The pilot finally chose the last solution intuitively and he worked with the wind as far as possible until the impact. And if you had to do this over again? I asked. I would try to land as close as possible to a ship, he said, provided one could ascertain its position. This conversation has remained in my memory, even though communication between air and sea and rescue methods have made a lot of progress nowadays.



On the left, Capt. Murray, the lady is stewardess Grove

The Celerina arrived off Cork, Southern Ireland, on the 26th of September. Helicopters came to fetch some twenty lightly wounded survivors who were still on board with us. They also brought us some parcels, which we picked up from stretched tarpaulins. I remember that they contained not only food, but also cigarettes and toothbrushes.

The press arrived in a small boat that started bouncing around our ship. They were hoping for photographs and stories about the rescue. But it hadn't occurred to any of us to take photos: we had better things to do and saving human lives was far more important.

Later I would learn that our navigation company had received the following message, signed by Gil Patric, of the American OSE.

« Please relay to the Captain and crew of the MS Celerina the gratitude of the United States Armed Forces for their heroism in the rescue efforts in the North Atlantic this week. They have earned our admiration and the American people will not forget the seamen of the Celerina and their dedication in the finest tradition of the sea. »

Then, on the 27th of September we were on our way again across the English Channel, taking the remaining survivors with us. The sea was calm at last and that was much better for our survivors.

Because of the tide we did not arrive in time to cross the lock that evening and we anchored the ship for the night on the river Scheldt, facing the port of Antwerp. On the next day, a Friday, we entered the Kruisschans lock .

I am on duty on the forecastle, together with the first officer. The wharf is crowded with people and there are many photographers flashing with their cameras. The Celerina is moored and we wait for the lock to fill. Somebody asks me if any one here speaks French. I am the only one on the forecastle who speaks this language and the radio, television and newspaper journalists fire questions at me. But they will be disappointed, for we have been asked not to speak until later and the officer in charge frowns at me to gently remind me of the orders.

At 16:00 the Celerina was fast at dock 123 in the port of Antwerp. The docking maneuvers were watched by 300 spectators who were waiting for our ship. There were many uniforms and officials and also journalists, but no idling ordinary people: we came from abroad and we found ourselves in a restricted customs zone.

There were about twenty survivors left on the Celerina when we arrived in Antwerp. Buses were waiting for them, but we were informed that the same evening we were all invited to a conference and to a general reception. The party took place at the Dock Hotel and the American army made sure that the reception would reflect the importance of the occasion. Sailors and soldiers

mixed and ate and drank together till exhaustion, we laughed, we sang, we exchanged addresses and caps and we swore that we would meet again and would never forget one another.

We had just experienced what was to remain, for a long time, the most important rescue operation of an aircraft forced to land in the North Atlantic. Never before had there been so many survivors. However, we should not forget that in spite of all the rescue efforts, some 30 people died, men, women, children, crew, civilians and soldiers.

In a website dedicated to air crashes there is a small report on the Super Constellation disaster. This document explains that a fire started in the no. 3 engine of the plane. This fire was extinguished, but it was impossible to get the engine started again. Then engine no. 1 failed, due to an error of the engineer. Finally no. 2 also started to lose power and stopped and the pilot was forced to ditch. On impact with the water the left wing of the plane broke off and the cabin quickly filled with water. The Super Constellation sank within ten minutes, nose first.

After unloading our cargo we took off again in direction of Lake Charles, Louisiana. From that small American port we carried another load of grain, destined for India. Therefore we had to sail in the waters near Cuba. October 1962 was the time of the Cuban Missile crisis between the Soviet Union and the United States. As it had been done during the Second World War, we placed a wooden panel painted with a huge Swiss flag on the stern of the vessel. At night this symbol of our neutrality was lit up, for we were in real danger of being sunk by one or the other of the warring factions. We kept showing this panel until our arrival in Madras, for meanwhile a crisis had also broken out between India and China.

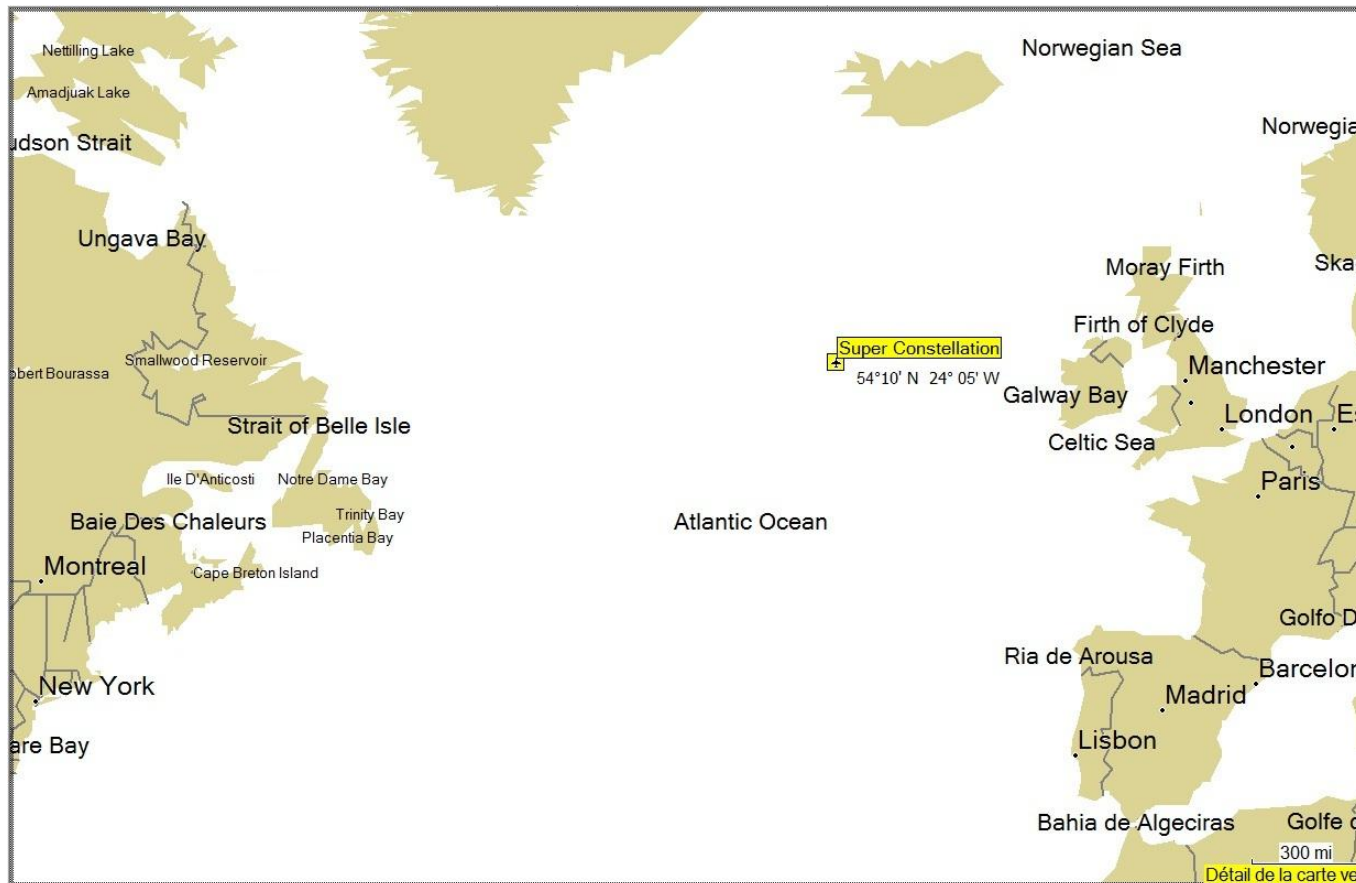
On 20 December 1962, in Madras, General Royal Hatch, in the name of the US Air Force, presented Captain Domenico Lugli with a commemorative plaque and also with another plaque from the US Army, bearing the names of all the crew members of the Celerina. Moreover, the General Consul of the United States gave each of us a letter of thanks and a check. The amount of the check was in accordance with everyone's rank and I received about US\$10, enough for a pleasant celebration in India in those days. But the real thanks had been those we had read in the eyes of the people we had saved from the sea.

Later, I happened to know that the owner submitted a claim for the expenses and whilst mariners bear a moral duty to save lives in peril, there is no salvage award for such efforts, not is one recognized under US law. However, the US Navy –who had the aircraft under charter- made an “ex gratia” payment of all expenses.

Some fifty years later I realize that each one of us has gone his own way and that the saying “out of sight, out of mind” still applies. Of course, since that time, the Vietnam war, which I mentioned above, probably took the lives of some of those young soldiers, but not all of them are gone... Indeed, thanks to the Internet, I read by chance an extract from a book published by Fred Caruso, one of the survivors of the Super Constellation disaster. The advertisement gave an email address and I contacted this ex-paratrooper.

This was his first contact with one of the crew members of the Celerina. The text published by Fred (see www.carusogroup.com/ireland/tiger/tiger.html or www.bornagainirish.com/) is very poignant and it is fascinating to be able to read a testimony about what was going on in the head and in the body of a man who was waiting to be rescued in the icy waters of the North Atlantic.

P.-A. Reymond© 02/09/2011



List of passengers of flight Flying Tiger 923
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Total 76 persons, 8 crewmembers, 59 soldiers US and 9 parents
Dead and/or disappeared: 28 persons

Crew:

01	Pilot	MURRAY John, USA,
	44	
02	Co-Pilot	† PARKER Robert W., USA,
	27	
03	Navigator	NICHOLSON Sam, Dallas
04	Board engineer	† GARETT Jim, USA

05	Chef-Stewardess 32	† SIMS Betty, USA,
06	Stewardess 24	† MUDD Ruth, N.J.,
07	Stewardess 22	GOULD Carol, N.J.,
08	Stewardess 24	† BROTMAN Jackie, Chicago,

Passengers:

09	Pvt.	ACEVEDO-CAMBERO Raul, Los Angeles
10	Sgt.	ALEPOS Juan, Texas
11	Sgt.	† ALLEN James, Ala.
12	Specialist	† ALTIERI Anthony, Conn.
13	Pvt.	APANEL Juan, Texas
14	Pvt.	BACKER Marck, La.
14	Sgt.	† BANEY Melvin, N.H.
16	Sgt.	BATES Alph, Ky
17	Pvt.	BAZELL Frank, Calif.
18	Sgt.	† BELL Edmond, Colorado Spring
19	Major	BENSON Harry, Mass.
20	Pvt.	† BINFORD Harold, Minn.
21	Sgt.	BODUNG Alfred, Indianapolis
22	Specialist	† BROADWATER Charles, Texas
23	Pvt.	† BROWN John, Pittsburgh
24	Caporal 19	BROWN George, Wis,
25	Pvt.	† BUECK August, Wis.
26	Pvt. 21	CARUSO Fred, NY,
27	Specialist	CRAPOLICCHIO Anthony, VA.
28	Pvt.	DAVIDSON Larry, Md.
29	Pvt.	DAWKINS BOBBY, S.C.
30	Lieutenant	DENT GEORGE, Va.
31	Mrs.	† DENT Elizabeth, USA,
32	Capt.	† DEVLIN John, Philadelphia
33	Mrs.	† DEVLIN Naomi
34	Major	ELANDER Carl, NY
35	Mrs.	ELANDER Lois, wife of Carl
36	Captain	ELDRED Robert C., Pa.
37	Mrs.	† ELDRED Edna, wife of Robert Eldred, Pa
38	Captain – medical	FIGUEROA LONGO, Puerto Rico USA
39	Mrs.	FIGUEROA Carmen, Puerto Rico USA
40	Sgt. Reporter 45	FOLEY Peter A., Ind.,
41	Pvt. 18	GAZELLE Fred, USA,
42	Pvt.	GILBERTH Arthur, Calif
43	Specialist	† GROVES John, Pittsburgh

44	Mrs. 19	GROVES Helga, wife John, origin. Germ.
45	Pvt.	† HANSON Joe, Idaho
46	Pvt.	HAWKINS Robert, Ala.
47	Pvt. 24	HOFER Joe, Ala. ,
48	Mrs	† HOOPII Rachel, USA, Hawaii,
49	Child 11	† HOOPII Uilani, USA, Hawaii,
50	Child 9	† HOOPII Luana, USA, Hawaii,
51	Pvt.	† JOHNSON Don L., Calif
52	Pvt.	† JOHNSON Carroll, Ariz
53	Pvt.	KECK Charles, N.C.
54	Pvt.	KOLTAK Thomas, W. Va.
55	Pvt.	† LESANE Harold, Philadelphia
56	Pvt	† MANNING James, III.
57	Cpl.	Mac DONALD John, Me.
58	Pvt.	† Mc GINTY James. Atlanta
59	Pvd	Mac GLOTHREN Willard, Fla.
60	Sgt.	† MISKIMEN Richard, Ohio
61	Pvt.	MENDEZ Reynolds, Calif
62	Pvt.	MURRAY Michael, Ohio
63	Pvt.	NEVILLE Larry, Fla.
64	Pvt.	PIERCE Leroy, Calif.
65	Pvt.	RUFFOLO Frank, Chicago
66	Pvt. 17	SAYERS James, W Va.
67	Pvt 19	SMITH Willie, USA,
68	Pvt.	STEWART Paul, Okla.
69	Pvt.	THORNSBERRY Gordon, Ark.
70	Pvt.	TOMMINELLO, USA
71	Pvt.	TOOLE John, Ala.
72	Pvt.	TRAWICK Richard, Ala.
73	Pvt.	VASQUEZ Samuel, Ariz.
74	Pvt.	WERNER Douglas, Ind.
75	Pvt.	WIDMER Edwin, Queens.
76	Sgt.	WILSON, Ernest, New Orleans

See also the website flyingtiger923.com