

Captain John Murray

The tragedy of the ditching of Flying Tiger 923 in 1962 has touched many, many people. For years after this accident nobody spoke about it. One understands that it was an embarrassing subject for the Army during that tense period of the Cold War, the Cuban Crisis and when the Berlin Wall was erected.

Then, at the beginning of this 21st century, Fred Caruso's book "Born again" was published, soon followed by a website. Thanks to Fred, some light could be cast on this tragic accident. On the other hand, reading the web pages of <flyingtiger923.com> gives the impression that nobody really wanted to speak about the subject. It is as if it was taboo or a page of life that nobody wanted to look back on.

This shows that the tragedy was very difficult to overcome. No help was provided as it would be today and not only did the airplane lose three engines and a wing, but most of the people involved in that tragedy were severely affected.

Today we know that things could have been much more painful and if, for a long time, the survival rate was considered as the most successful for an air crash in the Northern Atlantic, this is not only thanks to God, but also because of the strong nerves of the captain of the airplane.

The captain of flight FT923 was John Murray, a 44 year-old professional pilot. In those days, I was a mere deckhand on the MS Celerina, a 150 by 19 meters Swiss cargo ship.

Since our departure from Port Churchill in Hudson Bay, Northern Canada, the weather had been rather poor, with a deep depression over the North Atlantic Ocean and strong winds from the NW, important swell and high waves.

On Sunday the 23rd of September 1962 I was shooting images of the heavy seas with my old 8mm movie camera. Part of this film can be seen on the internet, in the webpage of www.flyingtiger923.com and on YouTube. These pictures give a good idea of the heavy seas on which Captain Murray had to ditch his Superconstellation, with just one single engine and the propeller left, in the darkness of the night.

During the rescue operation of the survivors of this tragedy I attended to one of them, who had a deep cut on his head: John Murray. He insistently asked me to meet our captain. So I gave him some rudimentary care and after he had rested for a while, I went up with him on the bridge of our cargo ship.

No words were needed. The handshake between the two captains was an emotional moment that revealed a lot about the thoughts of both men.

In the course of the next few days Murray and I met on various occasions and he explained to me his decisions at the time of the ditching. Particularly, he had to choose whether to ditch "with" the waves, "against" them or parallel to them. On one hand, landing "with" a wave (and on the back of it) is generally preferable, but then the wind carries the plane with less airspeed and the aircraft may "fall" too roughly. Yet, in this case, the pilot intuitively chose to ditch "against" the waves 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. Today this would be easy to do, thanks to new technology that permits immediate voice communication between air and sea, and the organization of such a rescue operation would be much easier and more efficient. However, my conversation with John Murray about following his intuition to ditch his plane has remained in my memory.

I also learned that the Company flight manual states that one has to land parallel to the swell and I wonder if the author of such a directive had ever imagined the sea conditions on that particular day of September 23rd...

In a website dedicated to air crashes there is an official report on the Super Constellation disaster. In short, 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. 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.

All the facts above are all true, as so many testimonies could confirm. However a lot of errors and false statements have also been published.

In the initial pages of the webpage <www.Flyingtiger923.com>, there was a large blank on the subject of life rafts and very little was mentioned about the fact that so many seats were torn out of the floor of the cabin and propelled toward the front part of the plane, crushing the passengers there.

Therefore, I had another look at the CAB Accident Report FT 923, File no. 1-0028, published by the Civil Aeronautics Board and released on September 13, 1963. Here are a few verbatim quotes from this report:

Page 10: *Sometime before ditching, two soldiers-passengers, at the direction of the crew, removed the emergency life raft stowed in the crew compartment and placed it in front of the left rear main exit door where it was tied down.*

Page 11: *Just prior to ditching, the navigator went into the cabin and removed the tie down strap from the life raft.*

Page 12: *Immediately after opening the main cabin door, the navigator pushed out the life raft. Since the lanyard provided for the life raft's retention was not tied to the aircraft nor was it held by the navigator when he launched the raft, it drifted away requiring him to jump into the water to retrieve and inflate it.*

Page 13: *In addition to the 25-man life raft stowed in the crew compartment, the aircraft carried four 25-man life rafts which were stowed in four compartments, two in each wing aft of the rear spar. A cable control, actuated by a handle located inside the jamb of the aft over-the-wing exits, sequentially unlatches the wing compartments cover doors and opens the valves to the CO² cylinder of each raft on that of the aircraft. As each raft inflates, it ejects itself automatically from the compartment. The stowed rafts in the left*

wing can also be released by actuating a lever in the cockpit. In addition to these releases there is a release mechanism on each wing life raft compartment.

Page 14: *None of the life rafts stowed in the wings was seen by the survivors during the evacuation; however all rafts were later recovered. There was no evidence that these rafts were used by any of the non-survivors.*

Page 31: *Failure of the left wing deprived the survivors of the life rafts stowed therein. Rafts on the right side were never seen by the survivors even though many exited through the right-over-the-wing exits. However these were later recovered and found inflated.*

The reason for loss of the right wing stowed rafts is not clear from the testimony. The difficulty in opening the right rear over-the-wing exit may have contributed to the problem. Extended operation of this airplane at low temperatures could have increased the inflation time for these rafts materially, resulting in the rafts not inflating in time to be useful.

Page 32: Recommendations: *The unavailability of the wing life rafts leads the Board to question the advisability of their being externally stowed. Their unavailability can be attributed to the loss of the left wing and/or to the increase in inflation time resulting from the decrease in the temperature of the CO2 after prolonged flight at high altitude.*

So here we are... Where is (are) the mistake (s)? Where have the two rafts been found? Have they really been examined? If so, who did the survey? None of the survivors could ever see the rafts, but did they exist? And what about the raft found with the body of a stewardess? After the rescue operation the Celerina circled the zone in search of any other life raft, but we did not find anything on the sea.

Any navigator knows that if a raft is not attached with a line to the airplane or ship, the wind will blow it very quickly and far away (it is my personal experience as a ship officer). On the other hand, a raft is not built to remain inflated forever. It can be flat within 24 hours (this is my knowledge as a certified life raft operator).

It could be that the airplane was not fitted with all the usual safety equipment. I also understand that this accident was very embarrassing for the government.

About the statement on page 31 of the report, Caruso explains his experience as a survivor involved with the right wing exit:

I used the right rear over-the-wing exit for my escape. My eyes were fixated on that window. I was intent on being the first one out. Immediately after impact, I released my seat belt, jumped out of my seat, jumped over the broken seats in front of me, and tore that window out of the wall. I was out and I am pretty sure I was the first one. I don't recall any problems in opening that window. There were no life rafts.

Another survivor, Paul Stewart, comments:

The stewardess, after all of the ditching drills and instructions, moved some of the troopers to different seats. They moved me to an aisle seat over the right wing (the 3 seat side) next to the rear exit, and gave instructions to the trooper next to the exit how to remove the exit window, and how to operate the manual pull handle that would automatically activate the rafts. These instructions were covered by the stewardess shortly before impact, and she took the middle seat. She did not survive. Once in the water, as you know, this was an impossible task.

Having only one raft may have been a blessing. With only 20 to 25 people on a raft they could have been tossed from one side to the other, and the raft more than likely would have flipped over with the size of the waves. There were numerous times I thought we were going to flip over, and as you know we were packed so tight, that there was no shifting of weight as we were packed like sardines

In my opinion, the official report does not reflect the really great job done by Captain Murray and his crew during this tragedy. If one looks at the waves in my movie, one can see that ditching parallel to the swell, with only one engine left, would have led to a far worse tragedy, with probably not one, but two wings of the plane being broken. Many lives have been saved just because the captain of the aircraft made a correct choice and all the survivors may be sure about one thing: Captain Murray did a hell of a good job and saved a lot of lives.

P.-A. Reymond ©, crewmember MS Celerina, 2015



From left to right, Capt. Murray, Stewardess Groud, Navigator Nicholson