

Flight 63931 – The full story

The crash of a USAF Liberator off the coast of the Algarve

Michael Pease

Jaime Henriques Nunes together with his friend José Mascarenhas, both aged about 30, viewed this Tuesday morning as no different to any other working day in their lives as fishermen of Faro town, the capital of Portugal's southernmost region, the Algarve. But November 30th 1943 was to prove very different. They were busy, in what is now Faro Marina where Jaime kept his boat moored, repairing and sorting nets and readying Jaime's small 5-meter uncovered row boat for a night's fishing off the coast. They planned to leave later that evening when the outgoing tide would be sufficiently high to permit them to row via the channels and waterways of the Ria Formosa to a fishing ground south of Baretta Island (N 36° 57.00'; W 007° 54.00'), some 6 km in a direct line south of the Faro marina. Off Baretta they hoped to get a good catch of corvina (bass), their only source of income, before returning with the incoming tide in the early hours of the following day. High tide was scheduled for 06.00 hours on December 1st.

They would be joined later by Manuel, José's 10 year-old son. Meanwhile, they checked the ship's gear and fittings and ensured that the hurricane lamp that hung from a pole in the stern was filled with paraffin. Later that evening, before casting off for their expedition, they would load a few blankets, an item or two of spare clothing and a little food as the night would be cold and it was an open boat. There would be no moon to see by and a storm was expected later. Both fishermen smoked. So they took with them tobacco and paper with which to make themselves smokes to while away the time. This little boat had a small sail whose mast, when not in use, projected from the front like a bowsprit. Otherwise, the boat was propelled only by one set of oars. But other events were taking place 200 km to the south that would dramatically change the lives of Jaime and José.

At between 9 and 10 a.m., when Jaime and José were working on their boat in Faro Marina, aerodrome controllers were despatching four United States Navy four-engined Liberator bombers (PB4Ys – the Navy's version of the B249) of Squadron VPB-112 from the airstrip at Port Lyautey (Kenitra) in Morocco. This tactically important airstrip was captured from Vichy and Axis forces by the mainly U.S. forces shortly after the North African landings on November 8th 1942. The action of commencing an eastwards facing front in North Africa was designed to place the Axis forces in a pincer movement as the British and Commonwealth forces were advancing rapidly westwards through Libya and Tunisia. The Axis forces in North Africa finally surrendered on May 13th 1943. But, by November, at the time of this story, Allied forces had invaded Italy and were fighting their way northwards but had yet to reach Monte Casino and Rome.

The four Liberators operated independently; but the mission of each was to patrol for German U-boats and to act as convoy escort. Their route took them far to the north-west over the Atlantic towards the Açores and then eastwards, off the southern coast of Portugal before returning to base. They expected to be airborne for at least 12 tedious hours. But each aircraft's 11-man crew was not exposed to the elements, as were Jaime and José, and they had plenty of food and warm clothing. Two of these four aircraft completed their missions successfully and returned to Port Lyautey on schedule. One ran out of fuel shortly before the end of its mission and ditched into the Atlantic not far from their home base. There were no survivors.

But all was not well also for the fourth of these aircraft, Flight 63931. The pilot and captain was Richard Trum and his co-pilot was Lt. John Eden. Another of the crew was Lyle G. Van Hook (machinist's Mate) who was to play a significant part as the story unfolded. It had been an uneventful and therefore tedious patrol. But as they flew along Portugal's southern coastline the navigator, Clarence Miller, and radio operator, George Doane, picked up conflicting beacon signals from Seville in Spain and other stations in Portugal and Morocco that led them to a navigational error. As a result, Trum and Eden were eventually forced to acknowledge that they were 'lost'. Fuel was running low and it became clear that they would not be able to return to base successfully. But now they noted the lights of towns near Faro and, despite there being no moon the crew thought they could see a potentially adequate hard beach on which they might land. However, this landing attempt had to be aborted after the wheels touched only soft sand that would have been disastrous on which to land. Trum and Eden reacted quickly by abandoning this potential landing and regaining height. Lyle was then sent to consult the rest of the 11-man crew and it was agreed that parachuting into the sea was not an acceptable option. They had earlier noted the hilly land to the north of the town below them. So Trum decided to jettison all ordnance, bombs and depth charges, and to ditch the aircraft into the sea off Baretta Island.

And this is where we meet Jaime and his crew again. They had left Faro marina with the high tide at about at about 17.00 hours and, after rowing through the maze of channels and inlets of the Ria Formosa, had arrived at their selected fishing ground some 2 nautical miles south of Baretta Island, at about 19.00 hours. There they anchored, cast out their nets and, as is the custom of fisher folk, sat down to wait. It was a quiet but dark night and they settled down to talk in low murmurs and to enjoy a smoke whilst waiting for their nets to fill. However the silence of the night was soon to be shattered as they first became aware of a large aeroplane close to where they were fishing when it attempted to land on a sand bar outside Faro, failed and gained height again. Jaime recognised it for what it was – a four-engined bomber. Then, despite the dark night, they were aware of the plane jettisoning its load of ordnance into the sea not far from where they were fishing as some of the depth charges exploded on impact. But now, the huge bomber circled and flew low overhead scaring the fishermen with its thunderous roar of power. When it crashed into the sea at 125 miles per hour at about 22.15 hours no more than 200 meters from Jaime's boat, he and his crew were, for a moment speechless and aghast.

Meanwhile in Faro town it had become apparent that an aircraft was in trouble so a motor-powered naval rescue vessel set out on a search-and-rescue mission shortly after 22.00 hours. However, they found nothing and returned to harbour some two hours later. Also the fire service (Bombeiros) was alerted but, again finding nothing returned to their land-base in Faro at about 02.00 hours.

Meanwhile, at the scene of the crash, there was clearly not a moment to lose. So Jaime and José abandoned their nets which were moored with corks and rowed swiftly to the scene of the disaster. They arrived none too early for the plane was already settling into the water and had disintegrated into at least two parts. Figures were clambering over the fuselage and one wing as Jaime, José and his son immediately set about rescuing the six members of crew that had survived. The official report records that the surviving crew were in the water for some 20-30 minutes before being rescued. The other five were probably killed by the impact; but in any event, they sank with the aircraft as it settled and then disappeared below the surface to rest forever 18 meters below on the seafloor. The official investigation recorded that that the crash was due to a navigational error and that well-rehearsed procedures for ditching an aircraft were not followed, i.e. the crew stationed themselves before impact in the bomb bays and under the deck turret, contrary to the recommended procedures. It was not until 2007 that divers located the wreck and noted the smashed cockpit, the scattered wings and the engines some distance away.

Rex McCoy and William Stultz were hurt, the latter with a severe leg injury that later resulted in amputation, and they were the first to be hauled aboard the small fishing vessel. Jaime took off his heavy duty coat and wrapped Stultz in it. Subsequently they were joined in the boat by Lyle and Richard together with Julian Pierce and John Eden. All were cold and wet and Jaime, José and Manuel set about trying to dry them out as best they could and to wrap them in the few blankets that they had chanced to bring with them.

But now there was little else that Jaime and José could do, for the tide was still ebbing and they could not attempt to row to shore for some time until there was an adequate depth of water. High water was not scheduled until about 06.00 hours on Wednesday morning (01/12). So they settled down to wait, cheered only by the little tobacco and paper that they had brought with them to roll cigarettes. It was a cold and cheerless November night lit only by the hurricane lamp that was rigged on a pole above the stern. William was in considerable pain from his leg injury but suffered stoically.

The bomber's crew spoke only English so all communication with Jaime, José and Manuel had to be conducted in sign language.

Jaime and José could not begin their long and tedious row back to Faro marina until after midnight when there was just sufficient water to permit them to navigate through the shallow winding inlets of the Ria Formosa. The boat was now heavily laden with 8 men and a boy on

board so it was not until about 3.15 a.m. on Wednesday morning that they finally tied up in the marina. Jaime and José were exhausted.

On arrival they were met by the Faro Fire Service (Bombeiros) who quickly took over the five airmen leaving Jaime, José and Manuel to retire wearily to their homes. The airmen were deposited at the nearby Misericórdia (church house of mercy) where they were welcomed by Irma (sister) Noraldina, previously from Brazil, who immediately took charge of the two injured airmen and also ensured warm clothing and food for the remainder. She proved a constant 'Angel from Heaven' throughout the airmen's stay.

Faro was suffering from one of its frequent general power cuts and there was only one x-ray machine available in the town, owned by a private doctor. But, of course, without power it was useless until much later in the day.

At this point the story took a turn for the worse as far as Jaime, José and his son were concerned. For, despite all that they had done and what it had cost them in supplying blankets, clothes, smokes and the temporary loss of their fishing gear and the night's catch, they were side-tracked, ignored and not allowed to visit the rescued airmen for some 5 days. They felt very aggrieved. However, they did return to Baretta Island waters on the following day to retrieve their fishing nets.

On Thursday 2nd December, the day after the crash, the two injured airmen were taken by ambulance to Lisbon where they were hospitalised until able to complete their journey via Gibraltar back to Port Lyautey in Morocco.

Meanwhile, there were many visitors to see the uninjured airmen back at the misericórdia. These included Mr. Faulkner, the British Consul from Vila Real de S. António, but, importantly, the officer in charge of a U.S. naval delegation that happened to be located in Faro. This officer immediately recognised that if the crash was officially registered as having occurred only 12 km from shore, as had originally been stated by Jaime Nunes, the Portuguese government would have been obliged, under international procedures for neutrality, to intern the rescued airmen for the duration of hostilities. Consequently, he 'persuaded' Jaime to adjust his reported find so as to state that he had rescued the airmen 32 km from shore. This would place the location of the crash outside Portuguese territorial limits and the airmen could then be repatriated without infringing the laws of neutrality. Whilst it is clearly ridiculous to suggest that a small rowing boat would be fishing 32 km from the coast, bureaucracy was satisfied.

On December 6th the four uninjured, surviving airmen - Richard, John, Julian Pierce and Lyle, were flown to Lisbon where they were housed in a hotel, from where they were able to enjoy the city by day and by night. Four days later and ten days after the crash, they were able to board a British Sunderland flying boat that took off from Lisbon at 2 a.m. on December 10th for Gibraltar from where, after a brief stop-over, they were flown back to their home base at Port Lyautey in a USAF C-47 aircraft.

But the story was not yet over. On December 14th 1998, 55 years after the event, Lyle, now a civilian working in the insurance business in the United States, received a letter from Carlos Guerreiro, a journalist, resident in Faro who was pursuing the story behind the crash of Flight 63931. Lyle was surprised and delighted and commenced an exchange of correspondence with Carlos. Both felt that Jaime and José had been hard done by and were determined that their actions should be officially recognised before the end of their days.

In the first instance, on February 8th 1998, Lyle wrote to His Excellency, the United States Ambassador in Lisbon, detailing the incident and calling upon the United States government to “correct an obvious wrong done to those men to whom we owe our lives.”

However, it was not until April 16th 1999, nearly a year later, that Carlos Guerreiro was able to inform Lyle that, as a result of the latter’s letter to the U.S. Ambassador in Lisbon, “The Portuguese Ministry of Defence wished to pay homage to Jaime Nunes”.

The diplomatic wheels ground slowly forward and it wasn’t until May 5th 1999 that Lyle was informed by telephone that the U.S. Government in conjunction with the Portuguese Ministry of Defence proposed to honour Jaime Nunes (José Mascarenhas had, by this time died) in the Açores – the location of a U.S. air base. But this proposal had to be discarded because Jaime, in his old age, was suffering from ill health and could not make the journey to the Açores. So, finally, the occasion was fixed for Saturday July 3rd 1999 at Gambelas University near Faro when an International TV Conference call would take place to honour Jaime.

Present at the University in the Algarve, apart from Jaime and members of his family and Portuguese government officials, were: Lt. Col. Kelly M. Langdorf of the United States Army, an attaché of the U.S. Embassy to Portugal; Greg Adams, representing the U.S. Ambassador’s Office in Portugal; and Carlos Guerreiro to whom special credit must be given for instigating the whole exercise. Through the TV conference facility, Lyle Van Hook, his wife, Jean, and other family members were able to participate in the ceremony. Jaime was presented with a special plaque to mark the occasion that is held to this day by his grandson. During the ceremony a special and personal message from Lyle honouring Jaime’s and José’s heroism on the night of November 30th 1943 was read out.

Subsequently, a special personal arrangement was engineered by Carlos Guerreiro whereby Jaime received a fine new coat from the Liberator squadron commander of VPB-112 in recognition of Jaime’s actions and the loss of his coat that he had used to wrap the injured Stultz. No other compensation appears to have been made.

Jaime Henrique Nunes died in 2007 and was buried in Faro cemetery. José had died earlier and Manuel died more recently. Lyle G. Van Hook died on January 26th 2009, aged 87, at Hot Springs Village, Arkansas.