

Shark attack!

The horror of a pilot downed in the perilous Pacific

IT was like a scene from the thriller *Jaws*: a menacing shark slowly circling an exhausted man.

But the drama was all too real for 50-year-old Australian pilot Bill Bell. He had been floating for nine hours in the Pacific after his light aircraft had ditched 300 nautical miles from Hawaii.

In despair he watched as rescue planes came and went without spotting him. And, as the ominous shadow cruised closer, Bill began contemplating suicide. "I decided that if he came and took a bite I would try to drown myself," says Bill.

Miraculously Bill survived the ordeal, and from his home near Warrnambool on Victoria's south-west coast he told *New Idea* of those nightmare hours.

"There was a lot of water sloshing around at the time. I heard a sort of flicking noise to one side of me and out of the corner of my eye I saw what I thought was a fin," Bill says. "I started looking around pretty hard. About 20 minutes later, right in front of me, I saw a fin break through the water.

"I thought — I hoped, 'It's probably a dolphin'," says Bill.

A little later the shark — a blue fin — leaped clear out of the water six metres away.

"After a time it made a direct run at me. The dorsal fin and the tail fin were streaking through the water at me from about 15 feet away. I started to pelt the water and yell and kick and carry on, and it diverted and dived.

"I thought, 'Gee, that's not good. It might have a go at me from underneath'. I was trying hard to walk on water but what I was doing must have been the right thing because he turned away from me."

For the next three hours Bill was closely watched by the giant shark.

"He was circling, coming in closer all the time, like a gramophone

record. I put my head under water and had a look at him. He was sitting in the water, idly flicking his tail and swimming about. I could see the old eye looking at me.

"I was going to stab him with my pocket knife if he attacked."

Bill's 12-hour nightmare began at 5.10am on August 16.

The director of the Warrnambool-based Staywood Air, he was ferrying a plane from the United States to Australia, a trip he had done many times.

He had left Monterey on the west coast early the previous evening.

Thirteen hours later, as the first glimmer of sunlight appeared on the horizon, Bill was relaxed, flying at 6000 feet and thinking about breakfast in Hawaii.

Then the engine stopped. "It gave a couple of pops and a splutter and then it quit," Bill recalls.

"The first thing I did was switch on to the main tank which was full. The engine should have roared into life . . . but it didn't."

For several minutes Bill worked on the now silent aircraft.

But at 3000 feet he realised he was in trouble so he went into the forced landing phase.

"I put out mayday calls on three different frequencies — I found out later that nobody heard any of them — and I put on my life vest, tightened up the seat belt, put on the additional lap belt, opened the door and window on the pilot's side and closed the engine right down.

"I really couldn't believe I was doing all this. It was like a bad dream. But you find that your mind sort of goes into neutral and you go to work."

As the waves came closer Bill deliberately positioned the plane to touch down on the water tail first.

"I could feel the tail snag and then I felt the belly come down on the water. I could see the water welling up the windscreen."

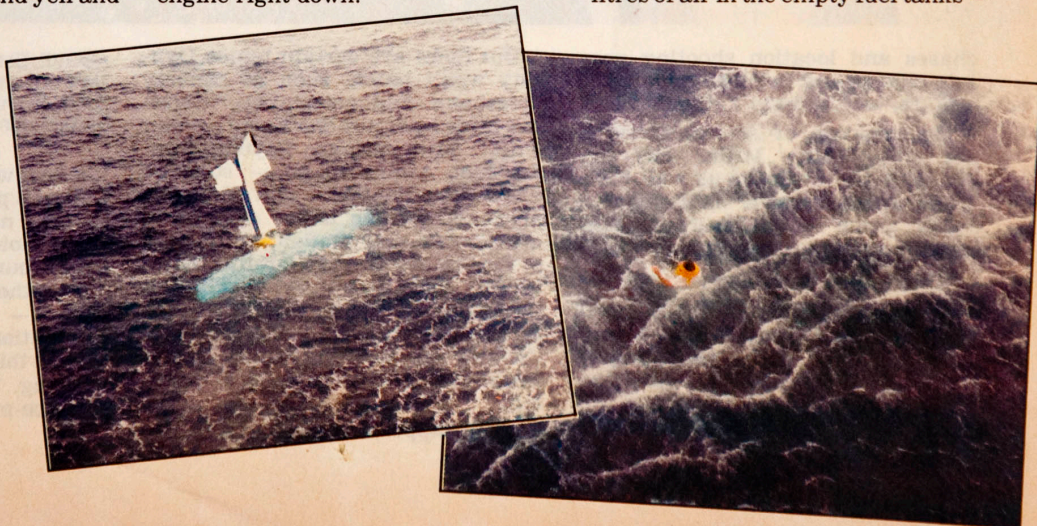
After the ditching, water rushed into the tiny cabin. As it reached the bottom of the dashboard Bill unclipped the seatbelt and "just floated out of the window".

"I felt fine. I had a couple of little cuts which I picked up after I got out of the aircraft and I cut my leg getting up on the wing, but it wasn't too bad," he says.

Bill's first thought was for his survival gear — a life raft, a survival beacon, and a flare pistol. He retrieved them from the slowly-sinking plane. He stuffed the flare pistol in his shirt and activated the survival beacon.

He later learned that the signal had been heard three minutes after he switched it on and a rescue crew was on its way in 15 minutes. But it took rescuers five long hours to reach the crash site — and a further seven hours to find him.

Bill inflated the life raft and tossed the survival beacon inside. He calculated that the plane would float for a long time — there were hundreds of litres of air in the empty fuel tanks —



It came to the surface and made a direct run at me... the dorsal fin and the tail fin were streaking through the water 9



ABOVE: Bill Bell with a Cessna similar to the one in which he went down.

LEFT: Bill safely home with his wife Shirley and two of their children, David, 24, and Robyn, 20.

BELOW FAR LEFT: The wreck of Bill's plane floats in the Pacific.
BELOW LEFT: Bill, as he appeared to his rescuers: a tiny dot bobbing in the waves.

so he tied the raft to the plane so he would be more visible.

Then disaster struck. As Bill pulled himself over the edge of the raft it tipped on top of him. Everything inside fell out, including the survival beacon which bobbed away. The flare gun in his shirt fell out.

"When I got out of it I had swallowed a big belly-full of water — that took all the sting out of me — and I was tangled in the rope and being pulled under."

He worked quickly to free his arms, feet and legs from the mess of rope. When he was clear he looked to where the raft should have been — it was 15 metres away.

"I tried as hard as I could to swim and paddle to it but it was no use. I got farther and farther away. It was probably 30 metres away when I thought, 'I'm never going to make

this', and I tossed up whether to take my life jacket off and swim to it. But I wasn't game enough to do it."

Bill drifted in his life vest for five hours before he heard the first aircraft, a coast guard Hercules.

"He was right down about 150 feet off the water and I could see him go up to the aeroplane.

"I thought, 'Wacko, this is great, I've been found'. But then the Hercules turned to the right, away from me."

Bill found out later that the beacon had drifted down wind and the Hercules — and later rescue planes — were unfortunately following its signal.

For an hour the aircraft went around in a search pattern.

"I was floating there watching it. I didn't take my eyes off it and I waved every time the plane came

near. Then it went off. I thought, 'Well, that's it, they've had their go...'"

Early in the afternoon Bill was having trouble seeing his plane and storms started to whip up the water.

Soon more search planes were circling overhead. Bill could see them clearly but they could not see him.

"It was demoralising and this rotten shark was still hanging around," he says.

Just when things looked their blackest, Bill heard a lot of noise and three aircraft and two helicopters came over to give the "best airshow on earth".

Then the incredible happened. The helicopters flew in his direction.

"The first one went right over me. I could see the two pilots quite clearly and I waved like crazy. I didn't think they would miss me — but they did."

The second helicopter followed and Bill put on the same performance. The chopper passed, swung around in a gentle, lazy turn and came straight for him.

"I could see fellows sticking their heads out and they were waving like crazy. My feelings then? Absolute magic! I'd been found!"

Bill recovered quickly from his ordeal and on August 21 he was back in Australia — via a commercial flight. Two days later he was back in the air.

Suzanne Monks