

Catalina Sinks in Evans Bay

written and edited by Stephen Berry



A fine photo of RNZAF Catalina NZ4051 taken in better days.



Sister aircraft Catalina NZ4053 photographed at RNZAF Hobsonville in 1950. Note the tail of TEAL Solent ZK-AMM on the right of photo.

In the early afternoon of Tuesday 7 February 1950, RNZAF Catalina serial number NZ4051, identification letters KN-H, arrived at Evans Bay, Wellington from the Chatham Islands to drop off passengers. Having done this, and taken on two passengers, the flying-boat taxied out into Evans Bay for the return flight to the Hobsonville air base in Auckland.

The sea was quite rough, with winds gusting to 40mph, so the pilot headed for the end of the bay seeking calmer water before beginning the take-off run. An eyewitness reported "The boat started to taxi, and when a very rough sea developed, with waves breaking right over her, she turned and taxied toward the beach. We heard the engines roaring as she moved through the spray of the waves. Then suddenly the engines stopped, and the flying-boat nose-dived into the water"

The inner and outer covers protecting the bomb-aimers panel had been punched in, and the glass panel itself shattered, when the nose of the aircraft hit a wave, allowing water to flood in. Fortunately, the crew and passengers were able to abandon the aircraft and were quickly picked up by the control boat to be returned to Shelly Bay. The plane, with the hull largely submerged, the wings awash and the tail sticking up, was towed towards the head of the bay, where it grounded.

Next day the Harbour Board's floating crane Hikitia was called upon the salvage the aircraft; one attempt on Wednesday failed when the lifting strops broke, and the wreck was finally lifted out of the water on Tuesday 14 February and deposited on the wharf at Shelly Bay. After a week in salt water, coupled with the damage sustained during the salvage, the aircraft was judged to be a total loss. The fuselage and engines were sold for scrap, and it was struck off charge on 24 June 1950.

Heavy Swell Causes Nose-dive

Crew Escapes Unhurt

PA WELLINGTON, Feb. 7.
A Catalina flying boat of the RNZAF was struck by a heavy swell and sank in Evans Bay as it was taxi-ing to take-off at 2.20 this afternoon. The crew of six and two passengers, air-force men, escaped unharmd and were picked up within a few minutes by a control launch.

The accident happened in a heavy sea driven by 40-mile-an-hour gusts of wind. The crew said that just opposite the patent slip, a swell of three to four feet stove in the glass of the bomb-aimer's panel and water flooded in and sank the craft.

The men aboard were lucky to make a quick escape before she sank. Eyewitnesses who saw the nose of the flying boat dive into the sea and the tail shoot up, were amazed when the men escaped, one even without getting wet.

The Catalina was carried by the sea further towards the head of Evans Bay where it lies tonight with its tail pointing into the air and the body and wings just submerged. Steps were taken to make her fast in that position. If the weather is favourable, the Harbour Board's floating crane will lift her tomorrow and she will be removed to Shelley Bay to be stripped down.

Attached to the Hobsonville unit of the RNZAF 5th Squadron, the Catalina returned earlier in the afternoon from the Chathams and set down passengers. She was leaving on her return to Hobsonville when the accident happened.

The crew were. Flying Officer P. V. Goddard (Auckland), Captain; Pilot 3 J. J. Shrubbsall (Auckland), second pilot; Navigator 3 H. S. Butterworth (Dunedin); Signaller 1 R. C. MacFarlane (New Plymouth); Engineer 1 A. G. F. Burke (Christchurch); Engineer 4 D. J. King (Tauranga). Two passengers who boarded the flying boat at Wellington were Flight Lieutenant L. R. R. Smith and Flying Officer V. Hjorring both stationed at Auckland.

An air force official said the Catalina went to the head of the bay seeking quiet water for the take-off and was making its take-off run when the accident happened.

The men were swift to act when the sea stove in the bomb aimer's panel and water poured in. The captain and co-pilot escaped through the emergency hatch above them, and the rest of the crew and the two passengers through the "blister" amidships. Two rubber dinghies were brought and floated by the men as they climbed out. One dinghy escaped them. Two men got into the second one, but the others went into the water. One of those in the dinghy, a passenger, did not get wet, but the others were soaked to the skin. Taken on board the control launch within a few minutes, they were rested, their wet clothes removed and blankets given them.

When the accident occurred, officials of the air force, the Harbour Board, and the police rushed to the scene, and after learning of the safety of the men, conferred at once on means of salvaging the aircraft. Salvage is the immediate concern of the technical services branch of the air force, whose new director, Group Captain G. H. Proctor, arrived from England last week. The Catalina was anchored fore and aft this afternoon as a means of preventing her from drifting inshore, where she might be in water too shallow for the crane. The Catalina is part of the lend-lease equipment which New Zealand received from the United States at the end of the war. Air force officials said the extent of the financial loss was therefore difficult to estimate.

SUNKEN CATALINA

Hard Salvage Job Ahead

This morning's wind and choppy seas thwarted attempts to salvage the R.N.Z.A.F. Catalina which sank in Evans Bay after a nose hatch was stove in by wind-whipped waves while the plane was taxiing before taking off yesterday afternoon. It was hoped to beach the flying-boat at Shelly Bay between 4 and 5 o'clock this afternoon, however.

The Catalina was completely submerged in 2½ fathoms of water this morning, and a preliminary examination showed that she is so badly damaged that she is unlikely to take the air again.

Eight R.N.Z.A.F. men had a narrow escape when the plane sank.

The pilot and co-pilot escaped through the emergency hatch above their heads, and the other four members of the crew and two passengers through a "blister" amidships. They were picked up by the police launch, which was on duty in the bay.

The members of the crew were:—F/O P. V. Goddard, of Auckland (captain); Pilot/3 J. J. Shrubsall, of Auckland (second pilot); Navigator/3 H. S. Butterworth, of Dunedin; Signaller/1 R. C. MacFarlane, of New Plymouth; Engineer/1 A. G. F. Burke, of Christchurch; Engineer/4 D. J. King, of Tauranga. The passengers were F/L R. R. Smith and F/O V. Hjorring, both of Hobsonville.

The Wellington Harbour Board's floating crane Hikitia has been made available for the salvage work. A salvage crew from the R.N.Z.A.F. Station at Hobsonville was flown to Wellington yesterday afternoon immediately on receipt of news of the accident, and this crew brought with them special equipment for the job. The Hikitia left the wharf at 1pm for Evans Bay and she was expected to be alongside the aircraft by 2pm. It was not thought that everything would be in readiness to begin the salvage until about 3pm.

There is no positive buoyancy in the aircraft, which means that her salvage will be difficult. The wing is full of water and the petrol tanks have also taken in water.

In these circumstances the greatest care will have to be exercised in lifting the flying-boat out of the water. In an endeavour to reduce the pressure of water and relieve the strain on the aircraft, it is planned to cut panels in the hull as she is raised gradually by the Hikitia. It is hoped by this means to prevent the hull from breaking up. After this, it is planned to tow the Catalina straight across to Shelly Bay on the opposite side of the harbour and to haul her up on the slipway there.

The Catalina will be stripped down—all the instruments and other equipment being removed.

The Catalina, which belongs to No. 5 Squadron, had arrived from the Chatham Islands about 1pm and was taking off for Hobsonville about 2.20 pm when the accident occurred. It was taxiing down the bay, seeking quieter water, when the hatch stove in and the plane filled with water. At the time there was about a four-foot swell and the northerly wind reached 40 m.p.h. in gusts.

Should Not Affect Tasman Service

"I cannot see that the flying-boat accident at Evans Bay is going to affect the proposed trans-Tasman service," said the chairman of the Wellington Harbour Board (Mr. W. H. Price). Flying-boats had in the past used Evans Bay for both alighting and taking-off in conditions apparently much less favourable than they were yesterday.

SHE SLIPPED FROM THE CRANE

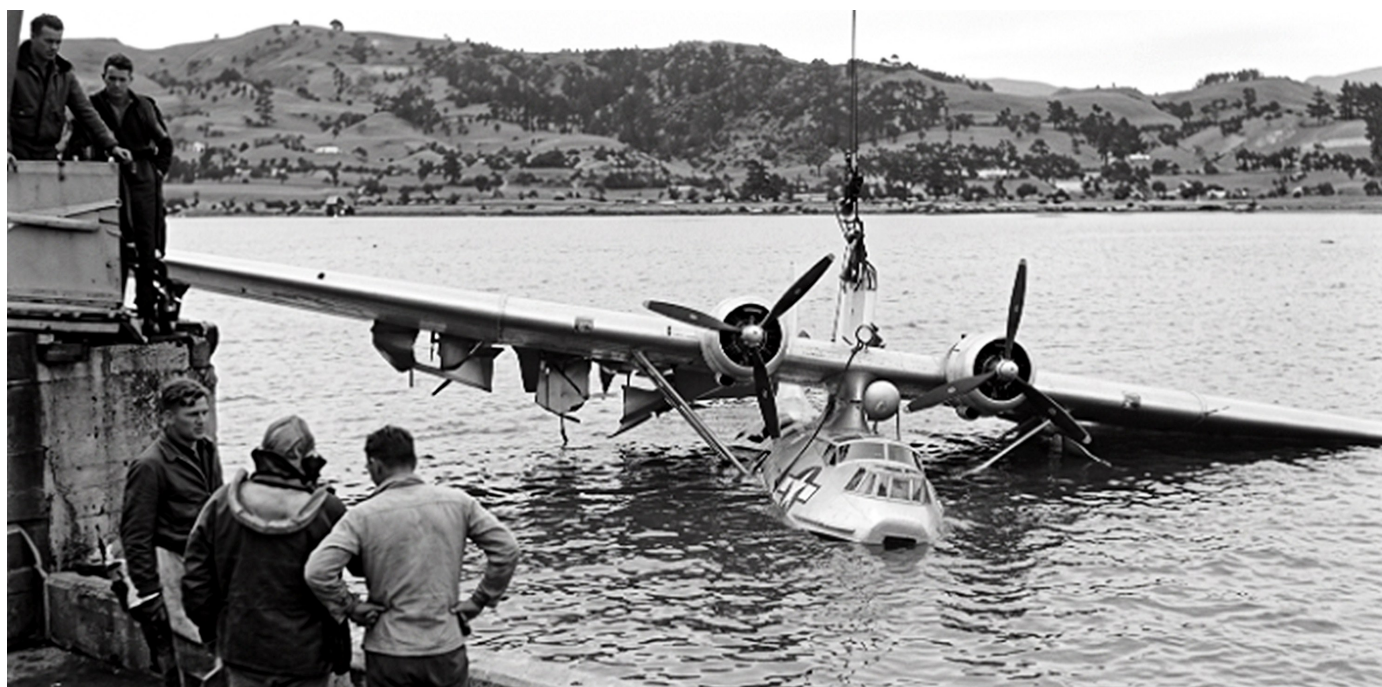
With The Greatest Of Ease

THE Catalina is still on the bottom of Evans Bay. Yesterday a valiant but abortive attempt was made to lift her from the water with the aid of the floating crane Hikitia, two pilot boats, a police launch, a dinghy, a diver, a lot of airmen, a "Post" reporter and a photographer, some special equipment from Hobsonville, and several hundred feet of wire cable. None of these factors made for final success.

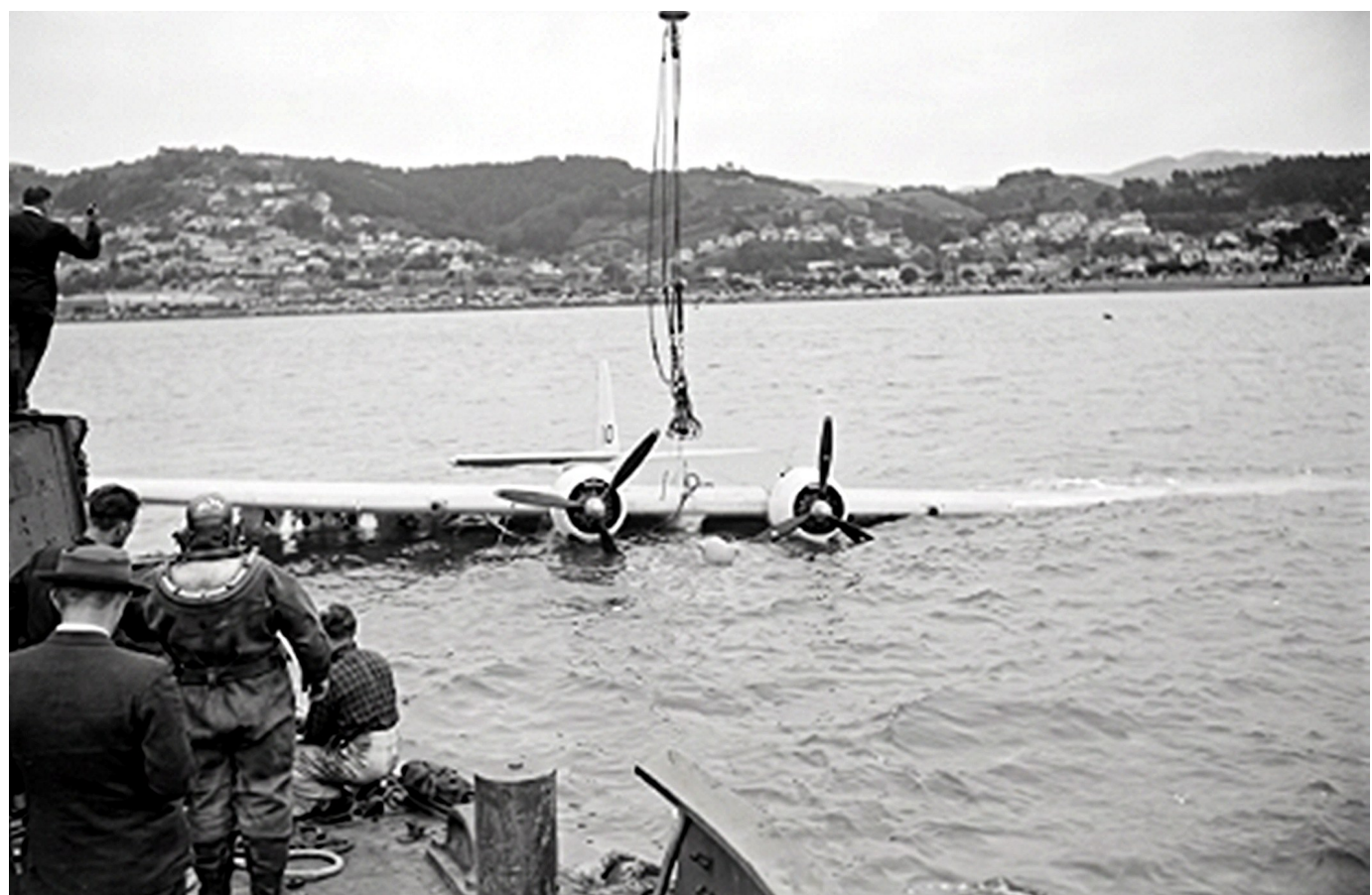
Ominous cracks during lifting operations made it apparent that it is now highly unlikely that the aircraft will ever be lifted in one piece. In any case corrosive action of the salt water on the metal will have made it a complete write-off.



PRINCIPAL figure in the first phase was the diver. After delicate manoeuvring by the Hikitia to get alongside the sunken aircraft he descended to attach the special lifting gear. Slowly the crane lifted. The plane surfaced and came clear. It all seemed so easy



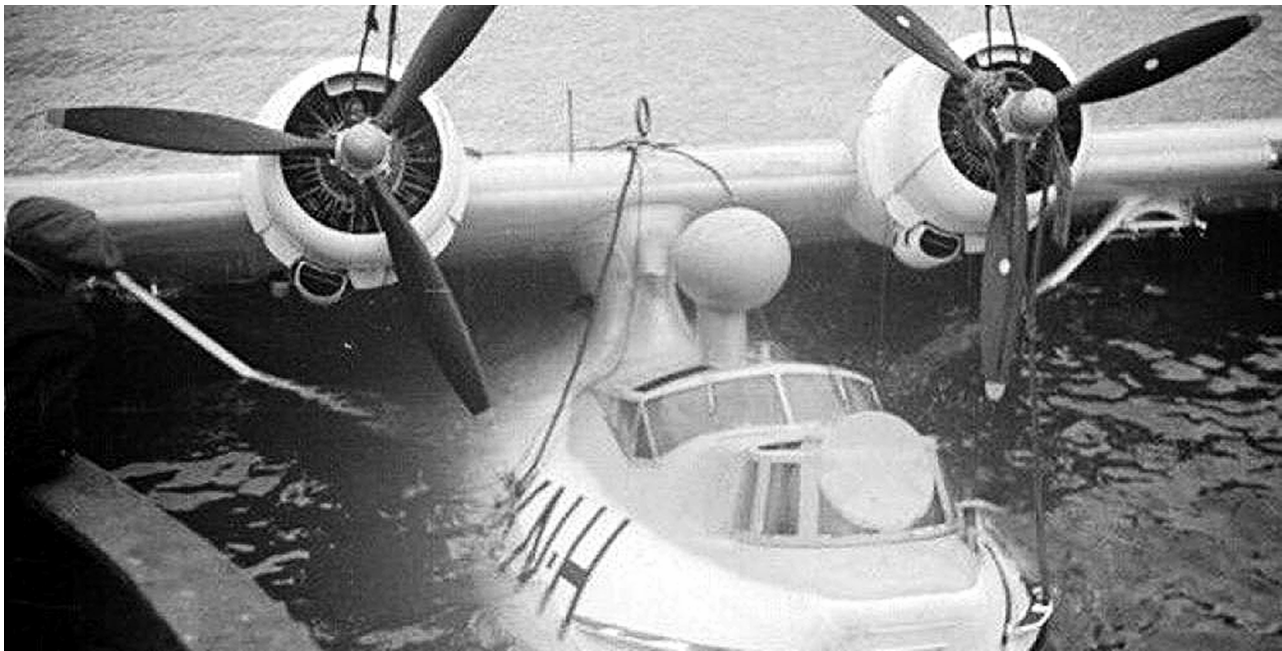
WITH water pouring from holes in the fabric the plane was gradually eased clear of the sea. Airmen in a dinghy pulled alongside and smashed panels and opened fuel cocks to help the draining. "Won't be long now," said the experts. Again the crane lifted



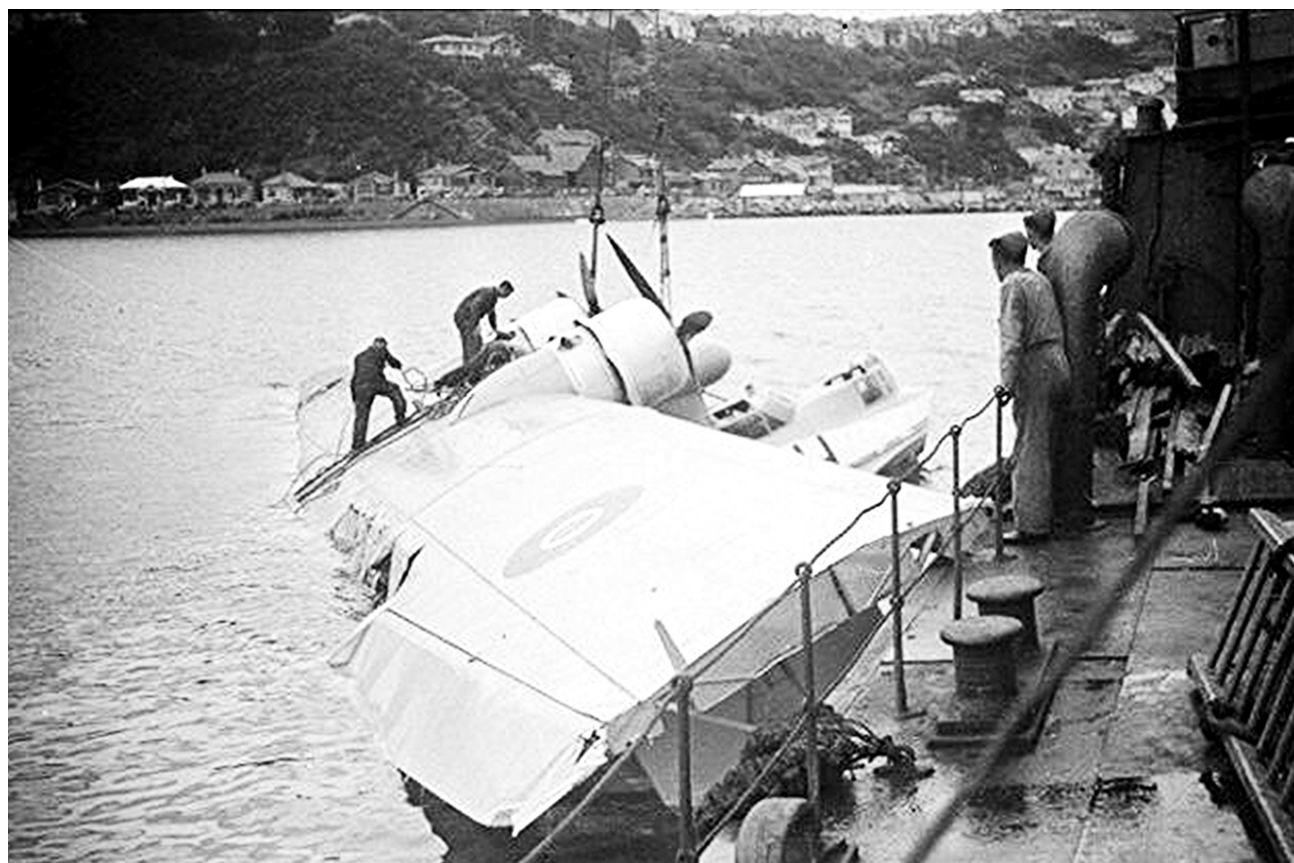
A HORRIBLE rending of metal. A snap as the cables broke and danced in the air. The Hikitia lurched drunkenly and the Catalina fell back into the water with a dull crash. Water rushed back in as the plane settled and sank



WITH the special gear gone it didn't seem quite so easy as the crane and the plane drifted forlornly apart. Launches secured more ropes and more cables as she settled back on the bottom. Rain fell, and hopes with it



NEXT move was to secure slings to the propeller shafts. Ropes broke and men cursed, but finally the plane was lifted clear by the engines and the fatal nose hatch, through which the first flush of water had poured, appeared. More ominous cracking noises showed that more lifting would tear the engines out



AIRMEN clambered out along the wing and fixed cables around the mainplane between the motors—the last chance. It was still cold, it was still wet, and the light was fading. The plane was let down again and the wires removed from the propeller shafts while the crane block was fixed to those around the mainplane. And now the last lift.

As the plane rose and came clear of the water the wire cables bit through the wing edges until they met the main spar. Suddenly more cracks, far more ominous than the last. The wires began to bite through the main spar. Lifting stopped. It was obvious that no more could be done. The Catalina was breaking up. She was let down into the water and the wires removed. It was all over

Catalina Salvage To Be Tried Again On Monday

If available, a barge will be used in another attempt to raise the sunken R.N.Z.A.F. Catalina from Evans Bay on Monday. The operation will be dependent on weather and the arrival of new equipment, including straps for holding up the tail, and beaching gear.

The barge will be placed under the wings to help buoy up the plane. It will give the machine balance and allow the water to drain out. The tail-plane will be strapped to keep the structure as rigid as possible. Beaching gear will be fitted underneath to allow the plane to be towed more easily.

This action was decided on yesterday by Harbour Board and Air Department officials, who are hoping to avoid having to dismantle the aircraft in the water and raise it in sections.

UP TO 50 TONS.

The greatly-increased weight of the plane caused by flooding, and the mobile nature of that weight were mainly responsible for the breakdown of Wednesday's salvage operations. The weight of the plane, which has increased from about nine tons to up to 50 tons, has produced a breaking tendency in certain parts of the aircraft.

The trailing edge of the main-planes has become torn, the tail-plane is fractured, and the port wingtip float is damaged. Though every effort has been made to salvage the Catalina in a complete state, it has been a very difficult operation, and a further breaking-up may be expected when it is raised on Monday.

Had pontoons been available to place under the plane's wings Wednesday's operations might have succeeded. As it was, water within the aircraft rushed to the tail as it was lifted, with the result that the cables broke.

Evening Post 13 February 1950

Bad Weather Stops Aircraft Salvage

Weather conditions this morning prevented the resumption of salvage operations on the Catalina in Evans Bay. The Harbour Board floating crane Hikitia stood by all morning but the wind was too boisterous. As soon as the weather lifts a diver will attach fittings to the aircraft's hull to assist in lifting.

Evening Post 14 February 1950

Another Try At Sunken Catalina

A further attempt to raise the sunken Catalina in Evans Bay will be made this afternoon. Weather conditions today are perfect and no difficulty is anticipated. A Harbour Board diver went out to the wreck in a police launch this morning and attached harness gear to facilitate the lifting. The floating crane Hikitia will be used for this afternoon's operations.



HIGH AND DRY—ALMOST AT LAST. After seven days under water and an abortive salvage attempt the Air Force Catalina rests on the wharf at Shelly Bay. The Hikitia picked the tattered craft out of the sea last night and shepherded it to land on a punt for dismantling. In the Air Force's own term—"she's had it."

RELATED STORY

Evening Post 7 February 1950

Flying through heavy tropical showers, with a very low ceiling and poor visibility, a R.N.Z.A.F. Catalina of No. 5 (Flying-boat) Squadron, Fiji, made a smart return mercy flight when the squadron received a call for aid from a neighbouring island.

The flight was to Waiyevo, on the west coast of Taveuni—one of the largest islands of the group, some 130 miles from Suva—where a woman lay seriously ill. As no harbour or sheltered inlet serves this vicinity, the aircraft had to come down through the rain and alight off-shore in the open sea, an undertaking made possible on this occasion only by an absence of wind or choppiness.

Arrangements had been made to have the patient at Waiyevo by mid-day and the aircraft arrived at 11.55am. At 1.30pm the captain, Pilot I. D. B. Flintoff, of Christchurch, was safely back at Lauthala Bay and the sick woman was on her way to hospital.

This mercy flight, safely and quickly executed in adverse weather, has earned the commendation of the medical authorities at Suva.