



I Saw Japan's Wings Clipped

A clash in the clouds over Guadalcanal proves unalterably which way of life is most effective—Fascism or Democracy

by IRA WOLFERT

THE IDEA of this war is simple. Our side is convinced that man can fulfill his potentialities better by extending his freedom while the other side believes that man can fulfill his potentialities better when he allows freedom to be denied him. Because of that idea, a world war is being fought, for we have at last learned that neither side will be able to realize its way of life unless the whole world goes one way or the other.

This reasoning is clear, but I never *saw* the idea here—not as I saw it on Guadalcanal. There it is given substance; it sits in the cockpits of our planes and of their planes, and lies in our foxholes with us and in theirs with them, deciding plainly and unalterably who dies and who lives, and which side must prevail in the end.

Japan has put into the arena a pure fascist man. It is making war against us with a well-nourished, athletic, re-

Coronet JUNE, 1943: p. 3

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lentless fighting animal who seems to be controlled to an extent we find difficult to understand by his government and by the officers who exert his government's authority. But we do not oppose this extraordinary creation with a pure democratic man, despite the fact that democracy has played a big enough part in the making of Americans to give us the advantage.

That is something very heartening to know about democracy: even a little of it, and a botched-up little at that, is enough to make a man superior to a pure fascist.

The Jap is losing to our side in the air even though our fighter planes are not so good as the Jap Zero in one extremely vital factor: maneuverability. As a matter of fact, the fighter plane's share in our victory at the time I left Guadalcanal was accounted for by the same planes which had achieved our great fighter victories in the past: Grummans, which take aching ages to climb to where the Zero gets in minutes; P-39s, P-40s and its British adaptation, the P-400.

I remember what an uproar a few better planes, P-38s, caused when they glided in at twilight of the day the Fifth Battle for the Solomons was reaching its awful climax. I was standing near Lunga Beach where more than 800 of our men, about 250 of them hurt, were being retrieved from the water into which they had been blown by their exploding ships.

Our artillery was working and Jap artillery was working, and the basin before Lunga Beach was crackling with small-arms fire as some thousands of Jap sailors, struggling in the water, were killing themselves or trying to kill our men. But above all this confusion, I could hear plainly the sound of cheering—an incredible sound.

In the midst of all that thunderstorm of explosions, there came the

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thin bodies they cheered, too. I saw boys with blood still on the stubble of their immature beards, with the shock of pain still in their eyes, lift their crutches and their bandaged hands to wave at those planes and cheer.

Yet even the P-38, I am told, is not greatly superior to the enemy's Zero. It is as fast, or perhaps even faster; it can climb as rapidly and carry more guns; but it is not nearly so maneuverable as the Zero. And as it turned out, these ten P-38s got into only one action in the battle.

The significant thing, therefore, is that we won the fight, and won it with old type planes. The Jap seems to have bet his entire air power in this war on maneuverability. He has removed every weighty protective device from his Zero and has armed it lightly with 7.7 machine guns (about like our .30 calibre), believing that speed and turning power are a plane's most powerful weapon. A 7.7 burst that hits its target is more useful than a 20-millimeter that doesn't. Armor plate can't protect a pilot whose wings have been shot off and self-sealing gasoline tanks do not propel a plane whose motor has been blown apart.

Earlier in the war, the Jap appeared to have made a crafty bet. He killed many of our fellows because he could turn inside them. When chased he would make a sharp turn, and while our boy was still floundering after him, the Jap would be standing straight up in the air under him in a vertical stall, sawing our boy's belly wide open with his machine guns.

Then gradually the Zero lost its one claim to being a first-class fighting machine—its power to maneuver more quickly than could our planes. One tracer bullet can destroy a Zero, and our fighter planes began out-maneuvering theirs so that our tracers

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and cannon shells began going home.

IT BECAME PLAIN that the Jap, in betting his air power on maneuverability, had overlooked something which only a pure fascist could overlook, and which a democratic man with his belief in the qualities of mankind could never overlook—the simple fact that a machine has to be operated by a man. The Jap Zero cannot ever be more maneuverable in combat than the man maneuvering it.

The Jap went into the war with an air corps skimmed from the top of his population. They were good pilots, but they are now dead. Many of our best pilots died killing them.

Our best pilots, too, were taken off the top of our population. They were college boys of high intelligence and perfect physique.

Then both sides began to dig deeper into their populations for pilots. Our side found young fellows who could be thrown quickly into mechanized war because they have great mechanical aptitude. Once I rode a Flying Fortress in an action against the Japs with a pilot who had never been in an airplane even as a passenger nine months before.

The Japs, however, could not maintain their first standard. They came up with young fellows who were so far inferior to ours that in one action I saw them knocked down at the rate of 32 to each of ours.

It can be seen, then, that the matter of having an aptitude for machines is not merely academic. It can be the difference between coming home all right—and not coming home at all. This aptitude is more than a familiarity with wheels and gadgets; it is more than having eyes that focus instinctively on the right instrument dial at the right time; it is more, even, than having in you, coordinated with

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your reflexes, what they call the "feel" of a machine.

It is, besides all this, a kind of subconscious mastery over the machine.

I owe my life to this subconscious faith, and nine of my friends owe their lives to it, while there are seven or nine Japs who owe their deaths to it. We were all in a duel together over Guadalcanal, the Japs in a 4-motored bomber and we in a 4-motored bomber. The Japs had a slightly slower plane than ours but they had greater maneuverability. They had fewer machine guns than we had, but they made up for that with three 20-millimeter cannon of which we had none. The fight lasted 44 minutes, and it is recorded as one of the most spectacular single combats of the war thus far.

Three of us were wounded but all the Japs and their plane burned to a cinder. We won largely because the pilot and co-pilot did what they had been told was impossible to do with a Flying Fortress.

Through 150 miles of crashing storm, these two paid no attention to their instruments with the little red danger lines on them, but stunted their heavy bomber through standard *pursuit plane* tactics. They did perpendicular dives, half rolls, banks past the vertical and tight turns. They worked their superchargers far past the absolute limit allowed. They closed their eyes to their instruments and worked by feel or, as the pilots call it, by the seat of their pants.

The Japs, living their last minutes, couldn't do this. They had in them the feeling that if they did, their own machine would kill them. But their own machine did not kill them—we killed their machine and they died with it.

I don't believe this quality in Americans is an accident. Aptitude for machines is not an inherited charac-

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teristic. But it happens that the product of our civilization is the machine. Under our democracy, the product of our civilization is available to millions of us and is a part of our upbringing and life. The fascistic Jap does not believe that making all his civilization available to all his people would do either them or him any good, and now at last he is paying for it in a way the fascist can understand.

It is true that the Jap is a more tenacious fighter than any we have ever before faced in our history. He cannot be induced to surrender, however impossible from a military point of view his position may be. He gives our men no more choice than a wild animal gives its foe. The alternative is to kill him, or if he is hurt to let him escape to come back some other time, or finally, to kill *him*.

And when the Jap sees there is no way for him to retreat and that his death is at hand unless he surrenders, he does one of two things. Those with frailer minds kill themselves in rage and despair. Those with stronger minds keep on stubbornly trying to kill us until they are finally dead.

THE CREATION OF a war-man is a preoccupation of a fascist state and Japan has created him better than any other fascist nation. Yet there is a flaw in the creation. Several times on Guadalcanal, Japs whose officers have been killed have surrendered, and other times (particularly in the air) they have refrained from fighting because no officer was present.

This is not at all general yet, of course. But according to Marine Intelligence officers who have lived in Japan, the Jap's tenacity in a fight depends upon two things: first, his knowledge that if he is disgraced in battle by failing to fight to the death, the ruling class from which his officers

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our men at war on Guadalcanal have proved to be as good at the fascist's own game as the Jap—as resolute and tenacious, as incapable of surrender and as willing to die killing.

Our men are not war-men, but they are good at the war-man's game.

It took some time before I finally came to the conclusion that this quality of ours is also a product of the democratic process. It seems to spring from a kind of unconscious respect which a man has for himself when he has fought for and won and taken advantage of his right to develop his potentialities. One night down there I wrote something in a dispatch which I have just now found. It says what I mean as distinctly as I can say it.

“There doesn't seem to be anything which has happened to Americans in the past that has convinced them that there is anything on earth to keep an American from trying to do what he wants to do.”

This may sound like a flagful of words, but not if you had been on Guadalcanal—not if you had seen those manufacturers of the fascist state, the war-men, made dead by it.

—*Suggestions for further reading:*

GUADALCANAL DIARY

by Richard Tregaskis

\$2.50

Random House, New York

THEY CALL IT PACIFIC

by Clark Lee

\$3.00

The Viking Press, New York

Traveling the well-known newspaper route, Ira Wolfert has expanded his field of writing into article and short story channels. For nine years he has served on the staff of the North American Newspaper Alliance, from which vantage point he has covered such stories as the seizure of St. Pierre Miquelon by the Free French (he saw it happen). And when the transport President Coolidge hit a mine and sank, this Johnny-on-the-spot of newsmen saw it all from a plane directly above the disaster. He has just published a book called "Battle for the Solomons," a subject he is competent to write about because (you guessed it) he was there!

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