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FIRE bombs are the hottest things this side of hell. The Japs learned that on March 10th when three hundred B-29s dropped some 2,300 tons of the hot stuff on Tokyo and then two days later, in a spectacular raid, turned five square miles of the city of Nagoya into a sea of flames.

Until these devastating raids were made on the Japanese homeland, military security prevented reports on results of our fire-bomb raids. Now it is possible to tell one of the more dramatic fire-bomb stories: how, on the battered little island of Peleliu, Marine fighter-bombers were turned into flying flame-throwers for one of the most delicate pinpoint bombing missions ever undertaken.

In eight days last October, on a section of Peleliu no bigger than a city block, the Death Dealers Squadron of the Second Marine Air Wing dropped more than 32,000 gallons of flaming gasoline on Jap cave positions and wiped them out.

The fire bombs dropped by the Superforts on Japan were not this kind, but a more intricate incendiary, nineteen inches long and weighing six and a half pounds. They were released in clusters of fourteen to thirty-eight at a time.

Prior to the conquest of Iwo Jima, the island of Peleliu was known to Marines as "the Gibraltar of the Pacific." Marine officers who should know called the terrain the most formidable ever encountered out there. The area where the fighting bogged down was covered by a series of jagged ridges divided by deep fissures bottomed with thousands of needle-pointed stalagmites of limestone.

More than 700 caves were counted after the fighting. Each of these had numerous openings and firing ports. Some were protected by heavy steel doors. Others were four or five levels deep. Within this underground fortress, the Japs lived like troglodytes and fought with their usual *Bushido* fanaticism from this labyrinth that often defied our heaviest weapons at point-blank range.

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IT WAS found that bombing did little good. The Japs, when far back in the caves, weren't seriously affected by concussion from the aerial bombs. Something else had to be tried.

Fire bombs had been dropped by Navy Hellcats on Saipan and by Army Thunderbolts on Tinian, but always far in front of the ground troops. Their main purpose was to burn the sugar-cane fields to deprive the enemy of cover. Never had fire bombs been dropped on pin-point areas surrounded by our own troops, until the Death Dealers Squadron went into action.

The fire bombs loaded into twenty Marine Corsair fighter planes were ordinary drop-pable auxiliary fuel tanks—belly tanks—filled with a mixture of aviation gasoline thickened to a sticky, raspberry-pink jell by the addition of a secret powder to pin down the intense heat of the burning fluid, which otherwise would vanish aloft in a fireball. They weighed over 1,000 pounds and contained 150 gallons of the mixture.

The first target assigned to the Death Dealers on Peleliu was tricky. It was a ridge about three hundred yards long. Pilots were told to try to hit the top of the ridge in such a manner that the flame from their bomb would whip around over the cliff face where many caves were located. The top of the ridge was not much more than ten feet wide. Among the Marines, the target area was known as "Dead Man's Gulch," or the "Slot."

WITH the "safe" area for dropping the fire bombs only 300 by 100 yards, it was small wonder that the Marines on the ground sweated while waiting for the air support. But the airmen were sweating, too. An error of three seconds on the pilot's part would put the bomb on our own lines; and in addition to that, the fire bombs were hot stuff to handle. The orders were: "If you can't get rid of your bomb, get off the island and hit the silk. Don't try to land with that stuff."

And there was one thing more. It was Friday the 13th.

Watching from a Grasshopper plane not far away from the target, I could see the Marines lying in their foxholes and behind their sandbag barricades, waiting. I could look back over the incredibly short distance to the airfield and see the Corsairs taxiing out to the line, ready to take off.

In a short time the first ship charged down the dusty strip and lifted into the air, tucking up its wheels and leaving the deadly fire-bomb belly tank plainly visible beneath it. Other planes rose and circled over the target for a final look-see before coming in on their run.

A control plane hovered in the air over the target ready to call the whole thing off if anything went wrong.

Finally the first ship came barreling in, doing better than 140 knots. It made a sharp

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banking turn and slid in over the target under 150 feet while the Japs in the caves opened up with everything they had. In the plane was Major Robert F. "Cowboy" Stoud of Fort Laramie, Wyoming, skipper of the Death Dealers, a Guadalcanal ace with six Jap planes to his credit. (He was killed in action several months later.)

When it looked as though Cowboy would scrape his Corsair's belly on the sharp-edged ridge, he slid his plane to one side and cut the fire bomb loose. The oval tank tumbled end over end through the air, hit on top of the ridge, skittered for half a second and burst. A wall of fire boiled down over the face of the cliff while hundreds of fiery balls rushed furiously out from the impact. At the same time a mass of thick, greasy smoke coiled up into the air and hung like a crape over Dead Man's Gulch.

Plane after plane tore in until the entire ridge was bathed in flames. By the time the Death Dealers had finished working over Dead Man's Gulch, it had a new nickname—Dante's Inferno—for they left it a boiling hell.

One pilot's bomb would not release. He was First Lieutenant Nicholas J. Virgets, Jr., of New Orleans. Virgets took his hot potato high out over the flat blue waters of the Pacific and pushed over into a dive, pouring on the coal until he was clocking better than 400 knots. Still the bomb wouldn't come off.

TO MAKE matters worse, a plane on patrol saw his wild gyrations, mistook him for one of the enemy and made two passes at him before getting the word.

A destroyer was below Virgets, while a Black Cat rescue plane hovered near by. His fellow pilots, waiting in the ready room back at the field, crossed their fingers as they heard his voice come over the radio saying, "Here goes nothing. Hope that 'can' has ice cream and cake for supper."

Virgets tried four times to climb out of his cockpit before he made it. Then his chute popped open, and the doomed plane zipped by him, made three wobbly chandelles, missed the waiting destroyer by a scant thirty feet, and hit the water, exploding in a sheet of flame.

Three sharks cruised near the floundering airman before he was picked out of the water, and the skipper of the destroyer read him off for nearly sinking his ship with the pilotless plane.

They were having ice cream and cake for supper on the can, but just as Virgets was reaching for a spoon to dig in, a crash boat called with an urgent message for him to return to the beach.

When the last Japs had been killed on Peleliu, the Death Dealers took their flying flame-throwers against Japanese positions on other Jap-held islands in the Palaus with fearsome success. Information based on these experiments has paid off at Iwo Jima, in the

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Philippines and at Okinawa where flickering flames from the dread fire bombs have helped burn a path for the infantry. . . .

CAPT. EARL J. WILSON, USMC.

Collier's

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