

GUADALCANAL

DIARY



The first American pilot to land a combat plane on Henderson Field tells an intimate day-by-day story of the Marines and their Wildcat battles with the Japs - with Louie the Louse, Sewing Machine Charlie and the Tokyo Express

BY LIEUT. COL.

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✱ *FOR eight weeks the author and his fellow pilots shared the primitive life of the other Marines at Henderson Field. Some portion of his squadron was almost constantly in the air, attacking enemy reinforcements. The Marine fliers, with a Navy bomber unit, accounted for eleven Jap ships, including a cruiser and five destroyers. From these dive-bombing missions more than half the squadron failed to return. Colonel Mangrum was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for leading an attack in which three out of four enemy destroyers were sunk.*

WE ARE *lunching* in a swanky Washington restaurant—two of the country's ace fighter pilots and I. We all left the Solomons together. Our new uniforms are spick-and-span. Our shoes are highly polished. We have just come from the barber. There are thick carpets on the floor, gleaming glass and silver on the table.

Absent-mindedly, one of my companions requests a second cup of coffee. The waitress stares down at him in stern reproof. "Young man," she demands, "have you forgotten there's a war on?"

Momentarily we have closed our minds against the sights and sounds and smells we lived with, the things we did and the things we felt during those months on Guadalcanal. But we can never shut them out. They will be with us all the rest of our lives. . . .

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The siren has sounded and you're in the fox hole, waiting for the Jap planes to show up. You light a cigarette and stare at the sky, wondering what direction they'll come in from. The Marine Wildcats have already taken off.

It's a beautiful day. Where you crouch, the palm fronds overhead form a lacy pattern against the clear blue sky. To the south, clouds like cotton batting hang above the mountains. Suddenly you see them: 26 twin-engined bombers moving in a wide V. They are flying high—about 25,000 feet—with a fighter escort bringing up the rear. You notice how their wing tips glisten in the sunlight. Our own planes are barely specks, off somewhere to the right.

On they come, headed straight this way. Suddenly the anti-aircraft opens up. Black puffs blossom in the sky around the planes. A bomber close to the head of the formation falters and comes spinning down, black smoke trailing out behind. You learn later that it fell right on the battery, and the gunners collected a barrellful of trophies.

By this time (*Continued on page 82*) the racket of the guns is deafening, but still no bombs have fallen. You figure that if they wait much longer, the Japs will miss the field and hit your grove instead. Then the bombs begin to whistle. You watch them falling and duck deep into the dugout as explosions rock the ground.

Now our Wildcats tear in from above. The formation is broken up, and enemy planes are dropping right and left. One damaged raider jettisons its load; the bombs strike the radio shack and blow it to smithereens.

The melee moves seaward. You clamber from the foxhole. Near by, a food dump has been hit, and crates and cases have been tossed in all directions. Several gasoline supplies are blazing.

One by one the anti-aircraft guns go silent. The noise of motors fades away. You look down at your hand. You still have half a cigarette. . . .

The only way to hit Hirohito's aquatic artful dodgers is to go downstairs where they live. That's how this squadron has it over the Army boys, with their big crates, who have to stick to level bombing. A bomb from 20,000 feet isn't likely to catch an enemy ship that's steaming at 28 knots and zigzagging all over the ocean. So we make personal delivery of our little packages.

Lieut. Donald McCafferty, of Hempstead, L. I., however, seems to be carrying things to extremes. In our last encounter, Mac went so low before releasing his bomb square on a Jap destroyer that, when he came out of his dive, the horizon was above him. He, himself, declares that he was so lost in admiration at the way another of our fighters, Lieut. Laurence Baldinus, put his shot down the stack of a near-by cruiser, which promptly blew up, that he forgot to close his wing flaps.

In any event, Mac had to wrestle the stick with both hands and feet to get his plane straightened out; and then gravity slapped him back into his seat so hard that it's a wonder he didn't snap his spine. The ground crew tell me they found fish and seaweed clinging to his tail, but I think they're exaggerating. . . .

At dusk the other afternoon a couple of hundred leathernecks were cavorting in the Lunga River, just east of Henderson Field, when the air-raid siren sounded. There was no time to retrieve discarded clothing. Two

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hundred mother-naked bodies flashed across the sand and disappeared into the dugouts just as a flight of 15 Jap seaplanes swept in from the ocean.

It was a nice fight while it lasted, which wasn't very long. Our boys shot down eleven raiders in half as many minutes. The other four turned and ran before they even reached the field. Only a few small bombs were dropped. However, the entire battle was fought to the accompaniment of slaps and curses from the foxholes, where the mosquitoes, always most active in the twilight, were getting in some dirty work of their own. . . .

There is plenty of animal life in this tropical paradise of ours. But none of it is any use to us. There are cockatoos and parakeets, very beautiful in the daylight but a sleep hazard with their unholy chatter after dark. There are little birds about the size of sparrows that sit on a limb and rotate their tail feathers exactly like a propeller. There are lizards that skitter through the fallen fronds, and rats the size of cats.

There are also horses and cattle in the glades behind the camp, relics of the time, before the Japs moved in, when Henderson Field was part of a flourishing copra plantation. The cattle are tuberculous, so we can't eat them. But a little thing like a few bacilli in his food doesn't bother Brother Tojo. About four o'clock one afternoon a cow a couple of miles away started screaming as if possessed of seven devils. Lieut. Jim Standard, our Navy medico, remarked, "I guess our friends are cutting themselves a piece of steak without going through the usual preliminaries." . . .

One of my youngster pilots, Henry Hise, has evolved a foolproof formula for identifying Tojo's ships: If they shoot at you, they're Japs.

Several destroyers have been spotted north of Santa Isabel, and eight of us took off to intercept them. All the way out, Hise was worrying about whether we might not make a mistake and bomb some of our own ships.

At last we found them. As we started down, I noticed frantic flashes from the foredeck of the lead destroyer. Hise apparently saw them too, for through my earphones I heard him say, "I think they're trying to signal to us with their searchlights."

Later he told me with a grimace, "For a minute those gun flashes had me fooled. But I knew we were all right as soon as the shells began to burst around us." . . .

Under a spreading *cocos nucifera* tree the squadron tonsorial parlor stands. It consists of a stool, a red-and-white-striped barber pole, and a sign which reads: "Itching Palm Barber Shop, L. G. Etheredge, Prop." Below in smaller type is: "Price List: Haircut—When You Catch Me; Shave—You bring the Razor; Shampoo—Coconut Oil Our Speciality."

Behind that sign there lies a story. It all began with a gift package that we received from some of the boys at one of the bases farther south. They are forever chipping in to buy us luxuries we might be running short of—things like cigarettes and candy, and even an occasional bottle of good whisky. This particular package contained, among other items, a pair of clippers and some barber's shears. They set me thinking. The men, I noticed, were getting a little shaggy around the ears. I inquired who had had any experience at barbering. Corporal Etheredge reluctantly admitted that he used to trim his kid brother's hair at home, and might be able to do the same for adults.

"You can start on me," I told him. It wasn't such a bad job; and soon the customers started queueing up. Etheredge now enjoys the barbering concession for our entire

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squadron, and is doing nicely—or would be if he ever got paid for his services. . . .

Our mess sergeant has caught the craze for signs. Over the cook shack he's nailed a placard: "Gruenke's Grill. You Can Please Some of the People Some of the Time, But You Can't Please All of the People All of the Time."

Considering his resources, Gruenke manages pretty well. Although the men all grouse, they are secretly convinced that our squadron has the best mess at the field. Visitors who show up around chow time are certain to be greeted: "Well, did you come over to get a decent meal?"

We eat just twice a day. Dinner has to be over before sundown, because we don't dare show a fire after dark. It consists usually of soup, corned beef, chocolate, and hard tack, perhaps supplemented by some of the noodles or rice we captured from the Japs. The noon meal is the same—only it's served cold. Long ago Tojo formed the habit of bombing the field just as the boys line up for chow. That didn't agree with our digestion, so now lunch is a movable feast, eaten after the all-clear. . . .

Sergeant Gruenke passes headquarters returning from his daily journey to the food dump to claim our issue of provisions. I raise an inquiring eyebrow. He nods. Neither of us needs to say a word. The squadron will eat corned beef again tonight. . . .

The Tokyo Express arrives on schedule. The express consists of warships that run the gantlet after dark with supplies and reinforcements for the Japs on Guadalcanal. Then the ships move down the coast to blast at our positions. We look for them between 12 and 1 A. M., and they seldom disappoint us.

Between being bombed and being shelled there's simply no comparison. For one thing, the air raids, which always come by day, are usually over in the space of a few minutes, whereas the naval pastings break into our sleep and may go on for hours. Then, too, there's a different quality to the two types of explosions. Those produced by shellfire are infinitely more nerve-racking.

One of the older sergeants, who doesn't give a hoot for Tojo's bombs, confessed the other day: "I sleep with one eye open, and when I see a flash offshore, I can usually make it to the foxhole before the first shell lands." . . .

Who says the Japs are the world's most avid picture hounds? I'll match Don McCafferty against the best of them. Our friends from Tokyo have been over the field, dropping incendiaries for a change. Didn't do much damage, although they did fire a couple of gasoline dumps and one grounded plane. Don grabbed his camera and made a beeline for the burning ship. Got close enough to snap some swell shots of the plane's exploding gas tanks without ever noticing the 500-pound bomb beneath its belly.

When the thing went off, it scattered plane parts all up and down the field. All it did to McCafferty, though, was to lift him up, toss him about twenty feet, and set him down on his stern. Through it all he kept a tight grip on his precious camera. . . .

Rear Admiral John S. McCain has paid us an official visit. A group of us were standing beside the admiral's plane, which had just come in, when the Japs raided the field for the second time that day. We all made a dive over the embankment and into the slit trench. Before he hit the bottom, the admiral was wearing on his head a tin helmet placed there by an aide. It was the fastest bit of staff work I ever saw. Even the admiral looked surprised. "How did that blamed thing get there?" he inquired. Nobody 'fessed up. . . .

Mail from home. It arrives late in the afternoon, and it's dusk before the sergeant major has finished handing it all out. Most of the

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boys have two or three letters, but Mac has seventeen, the majority from his girl. He tries to read them by flashlight underneath a blanket, but this makes no hit with his tentmates, as enough light leaks out to guide the aim of a Jap sniper, of whom there are always a few prowling around camp. They commandeer letters and blanket, and hide them. . . .

Oscar the Submarine has come calling. Oscar is the Jap submersible that steals up the coast every so often to lob a few three-inchers into camp after dark. We sit in our foxholes and listen to the shells whistle and bang through the tops of the palm trees and knock down more coconuts for breakfast.

Lieut. Tom Moore, that big, good-looking, pugnacious Irishman, resents his inability to fight back.

"Things," says Tom, fingering his beard reflectively, "things were never like this in Gilhuly's Bar in Brooklyn." . . .

Our outfit has suffered its severest blow. Major Fletcher Brown, Jr., executive officer, is missing in action. Returning from a successful raid against the Japs in Gizo, his plane ran into heavy weather and failed to come through. Brownie was not only a brilliant officer and splendid flier, but my close friend and strong right arm in all matters connected with the squadron. His enthusiasm and energy pulled us through many a difficult period. His going leaves a gap that can't be filled.

Just that morning I had pinned on Brownie's shirt collar the gold leaves of his majority. They had been my own. I can hear him now, as he climbed aboard the plane, yelling in my ear, "By the Great Horn Spoon, tell Gruenke I want some decent chow this evening! And try to keep those kids out of mischief while I'm gone." . . .

Of the four men in his tent, Jim Standard always manages to be the last into the foxhole when the siren sounds. He can't figure out the reason why. He has tried slipping out the back flap of the tent, cutting corners—all to no avail. The others are always there ahead of him.

The other night we were discussing his problem over a bottle of Japanese sake someone had unearthed. Jim swore that he had improved his time by practice. "I'll bet you ten bucks I can make it in ten seconds flat!" he offered.

Mac produced a stop watch, and Jim retired to his cot. At the word "Go!" we heard him tear aside the mosquito netting and come plunging out, for all the world like an elephant that has run amuck.

He had almost reached the foxhole beside which we were sitting, when he went sprawling on all fours. He had forgotten about the guy rope. . . .

Radio reception has been good for several nights. On our two portables we've managed to pick up WCKY, Cincinnati, KIRO, Seattle, and WBT, Charlotte, N. C. But KNX, Los Angeles, comes in best of all. We're able to get stations in the States only between 7 and 8 o'clock. Before that it's still too light, and later the Australian broadcasts come in so strong they drown the American signals out.

At 7, which is 1 A. M. Pacific Coast Time, we hear Tom Hanlon at KNX broadcasting the Swing Shift News. Seems incredible that we can listen to the same voice that's reporting the previous day's events for lads coming off the assembly lines at the Douglas and Consolidated plants.

The news is all about the Russians and the magnificent fight they're making inside Stalingrad. When the program ends, Lieut. Bob Fleener, of Liberal, Kans., snaps the switch and says, "Those are the boys who are putting on the performance in the main tent. We're

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just a side show out here.”

“That’s right,” Mac agrees. “But I hope we aren’t so damn’ small a side show that the folks at home forget all about us!” . . .

Lieut. Ed Butler, my quartermaster officer, considers himself the victim of deliberate persecution. The quartermaster’s tent had been pretty knocked about, so I suggested to Butler that he move in with me for a night or two. We had just climbed into our bunks when Louie the Louse came over and we had to leg it to the foxhole.

A few minutes after the all-clear we got a new alert. Sewing Machine Charlie flew around the field, dropping a few flares. (Louie and Charlie are two Jap single-engined scouts who do no harm but keep the camp on the alert for shellings.)

Later Louie the Louse came back again. It had been raining all week and the interior of our dugout was dank and gummy. After three trips Ed’s pajamas were well caked with mud. He decided, with much cursing, to take them off and sleep the rest of the night raw.

This would have been all right if Charlie, too, hadn’t decided to pay us a second visit. Poor Ed had to high-tail it to the foxhole exactly as he was. Mud and mosquitoes on his bare posterior haven’t improved his disposition. But they have redoubled his desire to get back at the Japs. . . .

Tom Moore, a veteran of the Midway battle, is one of our best pilots. He and Ensign Hal Buell put a bomb squarely amidships of a destroyer during our recent show, and within a few seconds she blew up and sank. Tom has come a cropper; but even so, his luck has held. We had been shuttle-bombing Jap ships all evening. It was dirty weather and flying had to be by instrument almost from the take-off. Tom’s turn to go up again came at 2 A. M. His engine conked when he had barely cleared the field, and the plane crashed in a grove of palm trees.

Moore and his gunner were both badly cut, but they managed to scramble clear of the wreckage under their own power. There wasn’t enough of that bomber left intact to put in a bushel basket. One of the first Marines to reach the wreck saw another searcher close beside him.

“Gee!” he said. “Do you suppose we’ll ever find that pilot?”

The man he asked was Tom. . . .

Bob Fleener and Don McCafferty, our demon poker players, have been invalidated out. And with them they have taken Jim Standard’s last remaining dollar. Jim, as squadron medico, rode with the boys in the ambulance plane. It’s a longish trip, and before they got there the boys had Standard neatly sheared. When he got back, he found one lone bill wadded up in a corner of his pocket. So he sent it along with a note: “If I’d known I had this on me, you would have got it, too. So I don’t see why I should hold out on you.” They tell me at the hospital that Fleener and McCafferty wrangled for days over whether they should split it fifty-fifty or in proportion to the amount of money each had won from Standard. . . .

This squadron is all used up. My last two pilots have been taken out, rather the worse for wear. The ground crews and remaining gunners have left by ship. I am flying south. Night after the outfit sailed Tojo paid us a farewell visit. One shell blew my tent apart and filled the place with dirt. Another passed clean through Jim Standard’s quarters, lifting the lower of his two locker trunks out into the “street” and neatly setting the upper one down in its place. Then it burst the first trunk open and spread Jim’s best blue uniform all over camp. A third shell killed four quartermaster’s men. I saw Ed Butler crying with grief and rage. . . .

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I have to pinch myself to realize that I am actually back in the United States. The trip from Henderson Field was too swift and the change in my surroundings so complete that I haven't had time to catch my breath. But the hardest part of my job still lies ahead. That's seeing the families of the boys who aren't coming back. They are the real heroes of this saga of the Solomons. They and those brave, tough, dirty, tired, Jap-walloping Marines who are still out there fighting on the ground and waiting for relief. God grant they get it soon! . . .

Zeke, aged four and one-half, isn't sure he's glad to see me. He looks me over for a couple of days before venturing any comment. Finally he demands, "Is the war over, Daddy?"

"No, it isn't, son."

"Then what are you doing home?"

For a moment he has me stumped. "Well, son," I say at last, "I guess we just came back to get more rocks."

THE AMERICAN MAGAZINE

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