

KAMIKAZE



A flaming Jap suicide plane is dropping into the sea off the stern of the target it failed to hit

The USS Newcombe managed to bring down the first Jap suicider and to dodge the second. The third plane connected and left the crippled destroyer easy prey for two more hits. With all power and communications knocked out, the tin can still survived.

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OKINAWA, RYUKYUS—The skipper of the destroyer stood on the bridge, his head thrown back, peering through glasses at the ack-ack fire high on the horizon. "They're at it again," he said. He lowered the glasses and pulled his baseball cap down over his eyes. "They're licked, but they keep coming back for more. Now it's suicide planes with suicide pilots—the *Kamikaze* Corps. Means 'divine wind' they tell me. Kids with a little flight training hopped up with the idea of joining their ancestors in the most honorable way possible."

He smiled and the lines of fatigue and strain made deep furrows in his weather-beaten face. "It's a weird business; something that only a Jap would dream up. Almost every day they claim they've sunk another hundred of our ships. Actually we shoot most of them down before they get to us. Some get through, of course. They're bound to. A few hit. If they only knew how few, maybe they'd quit."

The destroyer was the *USS Newcombe*. She had taken the worst the *kamikaze* boys could offer. Seven Jap suiciders had hurled their planes at her, determined to destroy the ship and themselves in one big moment of beautiful everlasting glory. Three had been shot down. Four had connected. The *Newcombe* still was afloat and most of her crew still were alive. Some of them were sitting cross-legged on the deck below playing cards. They didn't look as if they were very much awed by the attention of the Japanese Navy's special attack corps.

THE weather that day had been good. The *Newcombe*, patrolling off Okinawa, slid easily through the slight swell, her crew at battle stations. The air defense had passed word that an attack by Jap suicide planes was expected, but the afternoon wore on and there were no visitors. The crew, restless from their long stay at the guns, watched the sun drop down toward the horizon. It would soon be time for evening chow.

"Bogies coming in ahead."

In the turrets the men stretched out on the deck beside the guns leaped to their stations. On the 20s the gunners who had been dozing in their harnesses snapped erect. The electric motors whined. The gun muzzles arched around, sweeping the target area. The destroyer shivered as the throbbing engines picked up speed. The seas began to curl away from her bow. In a moment the *Newcombe* was knifing through the water at better than 25 knots.

"Bogies in sight, bearing three zero zero."

What had been mere specks in the sky grew suddenly larger. They were Japs, all right. A whole swarm of them. One detached himself from the group and headed for the *Newcombe*. The can's heavy guns challenged him. Dirty brown bursts appeared in the sky. One Jap bore through them, jiggling from side to side as he tried to line up the ship in his sights. He was a suicider, deliberately trying to crash the ship. The *Newcombe* shook as her 40s and 20s joined in. Their bullets hammered into the Jap. He faltered, lost control and splashed into the sea 400 yards away.

Another plane tried it. The *Newcombe's* guns blazed savagely. The second plane disappeared in a wall of ack-ack. For a moment the gunners thought they had him, too. Then he burst into view, much closer. A yellow flame flickered along his left wing. He was starting to burn out but still he came on. Commander Ira McMillian of Coronado, Calif., stood on the wing of his bridge, eyes fastened on the approaching plane. At the last minute he shouted an order. In the wheel house the quartermaster spun the wheel. The speeding destroyer heeled over in a sharp, rivet-straining turn. It was too late for the Jap to change his course. There was a splash and a great ball of yellow flame as he plunged into the sea at the spot where the *Newcombe* had been a moment before.

The bogies buzzed warily about out of range, seeking an opening. One thought he saw it. Zooming up, he made a quick diving turn, levelled out and came in low, the belly of his fuselage a few feet above the waves. The *Newcombe's* 5-inch batteries pointed. A burst threw the Jap down against the water. He staggered, recovered and kept coming. Comdr. McMillian barked his order for a change in the course. But this time the onrushing plane swerved freakishly in the same direction. For an instant the men of the *Newcombe* had a glimpse of the pilot hunched forward in the cockpit, his begoggled face an impassive mask. Then the plane shot past them, ripped through the gun mount and shattered itself against the afterstack. There was a blinding flash. The *Newcombe* shuddered and rolled heavily to starboard.

ON the signal bridge Richard Hiltburn SM3c of Tacoma, Wash., was flung high into the air by the explosion. Before he landed unhurt on the deck he caught a glimpse of the bits of plane, guns and men flying in all directions. Wounded men struggled to gain their feet. Others lay motionless, already beyond help. Escaping steam roared from the broken pipes. But the *Newcombe* had been hit before. The rest of the crew remained on station. Up in the wheel house the quartermaster wrote carefully in the ship's log: "Plane hit our stack, causing damage not known at present." A mile behind the *Newcombe* another ship saw the flash of the exploding plane. Altering her course she started for the scene at full speed.

She wasn't the only one who saw the plane hit the *Newcombe*. One of the bogies noted it too. He banked around and came for a closer look. He probably wasn't expecting much opposition but a surprise was waiting for him. The *Newcombe's* guns still packed a punch. The startled Jap veered as the 5-inch batteries opened up. He wasn't quick enough. The burst hit him. He caught fire. His wing dropped off and he spun into the water.

From his post on the bridge wing Jesse Fitzgerald SM1c noticed the ship's photographer lying helpless on the platform half way up the undamaged forward stack. Running aft he climbed the ladder to the platform. As Fitzgerald bent over the photographer, the *Newcombe's* guns started again. Whirling around he saw not one but two planes attacking, one from the port bow, the other from the port quarter. As they closed in, the guns in their wings started winking. The bullets ricocheted from the bridge and whined around Fitzgerald.

Aboard the *Newcombe* the gunfire rose to a crescendo. Again Comdr. McMillian tried to dodge at the last minute but the ship had lost too much speed. The planes were upon her. One buried itself in the base of Fitzgerald's stack; the other dove into the hole made by the first suicider. There was a tremendous explosion. A giant fist seemed to descend upon the *Newcombe* and drive her down into the water. Men and gun tubes alike disappeared skyward. The heavy steel hatches which had been tightly dogged down were blown off their hinges, twisted like sheet metal. Engulfed in flame and billowing black smoke, the *Newcombe* lost headway and slowly came to a dead stop in the water, all her power and communications knocked out.

Up forward the dazed men picked themselves up and stumbled out to see what had happened to their ship. The bridge and forward portion of the *Newcombe* were relatively undamaged but the flame and smoke amidships hid the stern from view altogether. Shielding their faces from the searing heat, the men tried to peer through it. Was the stern still there, they wondered. There was no way of knowing. "Stern is gone," someone cried and many men believed him.

Signalman Fitzgerald had ducked at the last minute. Miraculously he and the wounded photographer were untouched by the explosion. Looking down, Fitzgerald found the base of the stack surrounded by burning gasoline and wreckage from one of the planes. Above him the coils of wiring in the broken rigging whipped about, crackling and spitting, showering the decks below in a cascade of blue sparks. Fitzgerald took his man down the ladder and found a path through the burning gasoline to the forward part of the ship. He applied a tourniquet to the photographer's bleeding leg and then rushed back to the bridge to help put out the fires in the signal flag bags.

Men on the other destroyer had seen the second and third planes hit the *Newcombe*, had seen her go dead in the water half-hidden in the clouds of smoke. As the distance between the two ships narrowed they could make out figures stumbling about in the dense smoke that covered the *Newcombe's* stern. Other figures lay along her starboard deck waving feebly, too badly hurt to move. Into the smoke went the other destroyer.

At almost collision speed she swept up alongside the *Newcombe*. There was a grinding crash as the two ships came together. The men jumped across and made the ships fast. Fire hoses were snaked across the rails. Powerful streams of water leaped from their nozzles and drove the flames back from the prostrate men. Rescue parties rushed in and dragged them to safety.

The suicide boys were not through. Another plane was roaring in, headed straight for the *Newcombe's* bridge. Looking up, Joseph Piolata WT2c, of Youngstown, Ohio, saw the other destroyer firing right across the *Newcombe's* deck. The gunners did their best but the *Newcombe's* superstructure hid the plane from their sights. On both ships the men watched helplessly. This was the kill. The *Newcombe* could never survive another hit.

But the battered, burning can still had fight in her. Incredulously the men of the *Newcombe*, crouched on her stern, struggling in the water, lying wounded on the deck heard their ship's forward batteries firing. There was no power but the gunners were firing anyway—by hand.

The gunnery officer stood at his station shouting the range data to the men in the forward 5-inch turrets. In the No. 2 turret Arthur McGuire GM1c, of St. Louis, Mo., rammed shells with broken, bleeding fingers. His hand had been caught by a hot shell while firing at the third plane but he was still on the job. The Jap had the *Newcombe's* bridge in his sights. It looked as if he couldn't miss. The burst from McGuire's gun caught him and blew him sideways. The hurtling plane missed the bridge by a scant eight feet, skidded across the *Newcombe's* ruptured deck and plowed into the other destroyer.

With a gaping hole in the afterdeck and the portside a tangled web of broken lines and wildly sprouting fire hoses, she drifted slowly away.

WITHOUT water to fight the fire still raging amidships the *Newcombe* was doomed. But the destroyer's crew contained some notoriously obstinate people. Donald Keeler MM2c, of Danbury, Conn., was one of them. Keeler had been at his station in the after steering compartment. He was knocked down by the explosions but got up and put the ship in manual control. When it became evident that all the power was gone he joined the crowd on the stern just in time to hear that the after ammo-handling rooms were burning and the magazines were expected to go any minute.

Keeler elected to fight the fire. His only hope lay in the "handy billy," a small, portable pump powered by a gasoline engine. The engine was started like an outboard motor—by winding a rope around the flywheel and giving it a quick tug. Like all outboard motor engines sometimes it started, and then again sometimes it didn't.

Groping around in the blistering heat, Keeler found the handy billy. Carefully he wound the rope around the flywheel, held his breath and yanked. The engine kicked over and kept going. Now Keeler had water. He and Donald Newcomer WT1c, of Portland, Oreg., took the hose in the No. 4 handling room and went to work on the fire. Malcom Giles MM3c, of San Jose, Calif., and Lt. David Owens, of Waukesha, Wis., joined them. The four men got the fire under control. Then they dragged the pump forward.

The No. 3 handling room was a roaring furnace. Steel dripped like solder from overhead. In the galley next door the heat had already transformed the copper kettles into pools of molten metal. Flames shot from the ammo hoists like the blast of a huge blowtorch. It looked hopeless but Newcomer shoved the hose in the doorway. No sooner had he done so than a wave came overside and doused the pump. The chattering handy billy spluttered and died. Keeler rushed back to the pump. Again he wound the rope around the flywheel, gritted his teeth and yanked. "I think I even prayed that second time," he says. "But the damn thing popped right off, something it wouldn't do again in a million years."

The men went back into the handling room. They kept the hose in there, taking turns. The magazines didn't blow up.

Up forward the sailors were trying to fight the fire with hand extinguishers. A withering blast of heat drove them back. Their life jackets smoking; their clothing was afire. The *Newcombe's* doctor, Lt. John McNeil of Boston, Mass., and Edward Redding QM3c, found one of the crew battling the flames with hair ablaze, half blind from the blood dripping from the shrapnel wounds in his face and forehead. With difficulty they dragged him off to the emergency dressing station in the wardroom. Many of the pharmacist's mates were out of action. Men with only first-aid training helped McNeil mix blood plasma for the burn cases.

Earl Sayre CPhM, of Roseville, Ohio, was trapped on the stern unable to get his casualties forward. He was working on a fracture when someone tugged on his sleeve. "Blue Eyes has been hit bad. Looks like he's bleeding to death."

Blue Eyes was the youngest member of the crew. He had come aboard claiming 18 years but the men had taken one look at him and decided he must have lied to get in. They teased him by calling him Blue Eyes and it became his name. Now he lay on the deck, blood spurting from a vein in his neck. Sayre had no instruments. He knelt down beside Blue Eyes and stopped the flow of blood with his fingers. He stayed there while a second plane came in and hit the other destroyer 20 feet away. He stayed there for almost an hour longer until they could come and take Blue Eyes away and operate on him and save his life. But Sayre had saved it already.

The rest of the Japs had been driven off. It was

beginning to get dark when a ray of hope came to the exhausted men of the *Newcombe*. Keeler's volunteer fire department seemed to be holding the fires. Perhaps now they could save their ship. But the wave that had stopped the handy billy was followed by another and another.

The *Newcombe* was sinking. The weight of the water that the hoses had poured into her after compartments was dragging her down. The rising water moved steadily forward. It reached the after bulkhead of the forward engine room. If it broke through, the *Newcombe* was done for. And the bulkhead already was leaking.

Back on the stern Lt. Charles Gedge of Detroit, Mich., and torpedomen Richard Mehan of Verona, N. J., Richard Spencer of Roddick, Pa., and Joseph Zablotny of Boswell, Pa., had neutralized the depth charges and dumped them overside. After them went the wreckage, smashed equipment, anything that would lighten the stern.

In the forward engine room the damage control party shored up the bulging bulkhead. Water oozed from it but it held. With less than one foot of free board between sea and her decks, the *Newcombe* stopped sinking.

Now the blinkers flashed in the darkness. Other destroyers were coming alongside. Over their rails came men with fire hoses and pump lines, doctors and pharmacist's mates with plasma and bandages. Tugs were on the way. The fight was over.

The *Newcombe's* men had answered the question: just how much punishment can a destroyer take? The answer was: just as much as any gang of Japs can dish out, provided her crew never stops trying to save her.



Sailors battle flames on flight deck of the carrier SARATOGA, hit by Kamikaze off Iwo Jima

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