



CARRIER OFF JAPAN

When the air-crewmembers came back from their low-level raids, the thing they talked about most was the lack of Jap air opposition.

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A BOARD A CARRIER OFF JAPAN—The last flight was coming home. The planes circled through the thick mist toward the stern of the *Essex*-class carrier. One by one they hit the deck—Hellcats, Corsairs, and EBMs, with names like *Hydraulic Bess*, *Miss Fortune*, *Sweat'er Girl* and *Kansas City Kitty*.

They were part of the Navy's force of carrier planes that was finishing the historic first full-scale air attack at low level on the Japanese homeland. For two days the planes of this world's largest carrier task force had bombarded the Tokyo area with bombs, rockets, incendiaries, bullets and propaganda. The carriers and their accompanying warships were only a hundred miles off the coast of Japan, but few enemy planes had come out to attack them. And the Jap fleet had remained in hiding.

A plane handler waved a welcome to one of the returning pilots. A man wearing an asbestos suit and carrying a fire extinguisher also waved a greeting. On the catwalk at the flight deck's edge a shivering gun-crewman jumped up and down, maybe only to warm his tropics-thinned blood. The wintry weather of the last few days seemed strange to men who had become used to the tropics.

Down in the air-crewmembers's ready room everybody was whooping it up. Frequently one of the men would look up at the drawing chalked on the blackboard and chuckle. The drawing showed a scrawny woman behind a mike. A bomb was hurtling toward her head. Presumably the woman was Tokyo Rose.

None of the air-crewmembers had believed that the Jap resistance would be so light. All of them talked about it while they played poker, shot the bull or horsed around. They said the enemy resistance on the Japanese homeland had been much weaker than that on Luzon, Formosa and Indo-China. Not one of the carrier's air-crewmembers suffered a scratch in the three strikes they made on the homeland. And none of them saw a Jap plane in the air.

"We caught them with their planes down," cracked one crewman.

"Aw, shut up," said another. "You read that in *Reader's Digest*."

At the front of the ready room Edward Fay AMM2c of Troy, N. Y., paraded around without his pants, yelling and singing. He wore his shorts and a helmet, and carried a long stick on his shoulder like a gun. Fay was egged on by Freddie Horan ARM3c of Astoria, N. Y., in spite of the pleas of the poker players to hold the noise.

In the center of the room William Buckner ARM3c of Laurens, S. C., told his story. His TBM, bomb-carrying torpedo plane, had barreled out of the clouds that surrounded the carrier force into a patch of sunlight over the target, an airfield about 50 miles south of Tokyo.

"We heard a Jap voice on the radio," said Buckner. "It sounded like a woman screaming."

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Soon the Japs really had something to scream about. First, single-seat Hellcats and Corsairs blasted the airstrips, hangars and barracks. Then, three-seat torpedo planes, in which the crewmen rode, made dives.

Buckner's plane had hurtled down from 12,000 feet. The pilot, Ens. George Harding of Richmond, Va., dumped his bombs. Buckner, radio-man-gunner, and rear gunner William Roberts AMM2c of Allentown, Pa., strafed the field as the plane pulled out of the dive. Buckner stopped strafing to take pictures of the field. The flak that followed them was not heavy.

En route back to the carrier, Buckner frequently heard Hellcat and Corsair fighter pilots shout "Tally-ho" over the radio. Then he saw them diving toward coastal shipping, blasting with rockets, bombs, bullets and whatever they had left. Buckner got some pictures of sinking ships, all small ones.

The Hellcats and TBMs were manned by Navy men. The Corsairs were piloted by marines. The marine pilots had been assigned to the carrier recently and were making their first strike.

In one corner of the ready room "Dirty Dan" Dodge ARM2c of Hinsdale, N. H., described an attack on an airfield 70 miles south of Tokyo. Dodge says his nickname was given to him by his "loving friends—the bastards." His plane dived through low clouds toward hangars and barracks that were already burning. The pilot, Lt. William Chealverus of New York City, dumped his bombs. Dodge strafed Jap fighters that were standing along the edge of the airstrips. Rear gunner Elliott Garver AMM1c of Sioux Falls, S. Dak., held his fire. He was saving it for any Japs that might take to the air. Light flak had come up at them at the beginning of the dive but ceased abruptly. The escorting fighters had taken care of the Jap gunners.

The flak became thicker around the plane. As usual the Japs concentrated on the cripple. O'Donnell and Crowther watched for Jap planes to take to the air after them. The hole in the wing had cut the speed to about 180 miles per hour. The plane was wobbling slightly. But it got back to the carrier escorted by the others.

ALTHOUGH the attacks on Japan proved to be almost a junket for these air-crewmen, it wasn't a walk-away for the others. That was brought home by an announcement from the loudspeaker in the ready-room wall. First there was the eerie wailing of the boatswain's pipe. Then a voice said: "This is the captain. It is with deep regret that I tell you that four Corsairs and three Hellcats are missing from our carrier. We will miss their pilots very badly. Let us bow our heads."

For a few moments the ready room was still. Then the rattling of poker chips, the talk and the horseplay resumed. One man threw a Mae West at another. An air-crewman whistled a tune. And up front Robert Ellis Webster AOM2c of Eden, N. Y., reached into a crate of oranges and tossed one to Clifford Knox ARM1c of Springfield, Mass. They are the Mutt-and-Jeff team of the air-crewmen, assigned to the same plane. Webster, a rear gunner, is 5 feet 4 inches tall. Knox, a radioman-gunner, is 6 feet 3. They, too, had been over the Jap mainland.

"But we didn't see much," said Webster. "Nothing except an airfield not far from Fujiyama. We bombed hell out of it."

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