

“I’m looking,” the skipper said, flipping through my logbook, “but I can’t find any seaplane time.” The skipper was Commander Martin Jones. His face was greasy from perspiration and he looked exhausted.

“I’ve had four or five rides in a PBY,” I told him, “but always as a passenger.” In fact, a PBY had just brought me here from Guadalcanal. It departed after delivering me, some mail, and a couple of tons of spare parts.

The Old Man gave me The Look.

“You’re a dive-bomber pilot. What in hell are you doing in a Black Cat squadron?”

“It’s a long story.” Boy, was that ever the truth!

“I haven’t got time for a long story,” Jones said as he tossed the logbook on the wardroom table and reached for my service record. “Gimme the punch line.” Aboard this small seaplane tender, the wardroom doubled as the ship’s office.

“They said I was crazy.”

That comment hung in the air like a wet fart. I leaned against the edge of the table to steady myself.

Hanging on her anchor, the tender was rolling a bit in the swell coming up the river from Namoia Bay, on the southwestern tip of New Guinea where the Owen Stanley Mountains ran into the sea. The only human habitation within two hundred miles was a village, Samarai, across the bay on an island. The sailors on the tender never went over there, nor was there any reason they should. If Namoia Bay wasn't the end of the earth, believe me, you could see it from here.

The commander flipped through my service record, scanning the entries. “Are you crazy?”

“No more than most,” I replied. Proclaiming your sanity was a bit like proclaiming your virtue—highly suspect.

“This tender can support three PBVs,” Commander Jones said, not looking at me. “We launch them late in the afternoon, and they hunt Jap ships at night, return sometime after dawn. Three days ago one of our birds didn't come back.” He looked up, straight into my eyes. “The crew is somewhere out there,” he swept his hand from left to right, “dead or alive. We'll look for them, of course, but the South Pacific is a big place, and there is a war on.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Until we get another plane from Australia, we’ll only have two birds to carry the load.”

I nodded.

“One of our copilots is sick with malaria, too bad to fly. You will fly in his place unless you’ve really flipped out or something.”

“I’m fine, sir.”

“Why did they get rid of you?”

“The Japs shot three SBDs out from under me, killed two of my gunners. The skipper said he couldn’t afford me. So here I am.”

The Old Man lit a cigarette and blew the smoke out through his nose.

“Tell me about it.”

So I told it. We launched off the carrier one morning on a routine search mission and found a Jap destroyer in the slot, running north at flank speed. When the lookouts spotted us the destroyer captain cranked the helm full over, threw that can into as tight a circle as it would turn while every gun let loose at us. There were four of us in SBDs; I was flying as number three. As I rolled into my dive I put out the dive brakes, as usual, and dropped the landing gear.

With the dive brakes out the Dauntless goes down in an eighty-degree dive at about 250 knots. Takes a couple thousand feet to pull out. With the dive brakes and gear out, prop in flat pitch, she goes down at 150, vibrating like a banjo string. Still, you have all day to dope the wind and sweeten your aim, and you can pickle the bomb at a thousand feet, put the damn thing right down the smokestack before you have to pull out. Of course, while you are coming down like the angel of doom the Japs are

blazing away with everything they have, and when you pull out of the dive you have no speed, so you are something of a sitting duck. You also run the risk of overcooling the engine, which is liable to stall when you pour the coal to it. Still, when you really want a hit . . .

I got that destroyer—the other three guys in my flight missed. I put my thousand-pounder right between the smokestacks and blew that can clean in half. It was a hell of a fine sight. Only the Japs had holed my engine, and it quit on the pullout, stopped dead. Oil was blowing all over the windshield, and I couldn't see anything dead ahead. Didn't matter— all that was out there was ocean.

My gunner and I rode the plane into the water. He hit his head or something and didn't get out of the plane, which sank before I could get him unstrapped.

I floated in the water, watched the front half of the destroyer quickly sink and the ass end burn. None of the Japs came after me. I rode my little life raft for a couple days before a PBY landed in the open sea and dragged me in through a waist-gun blister. With all the swells I didn't think he could get airborne again, but he did, somehow.

A couple days later the ship sent a half dozen planes to Henderson Field to operate from there. I figured Henderson could not be tougher to land on than a carrier and was reasonably dry land, so I volunteered. About a week later I tangled with some Zeros at fifteen thousand feet during a raid. I got one and others got me. Killed my new gunner, too. I bailed out and landed in the water right off the beach.

Jones was reading a note in my record while I talked. "Your commanding officer said you shot down a Zero on your first pass," Jones commented, "then disobeyed standing orders and turned to reengage. Four Zeros shot your Dauntless to pieces."

"Yes, sir."

"He says you like combat, like it a lot."

I didn't say anything to that.

"He said you love it."

"That's bullshit."

"Bullshit, sir."

"Sir."

"He says he pulled you out of SBDs to save your sorry ass."

"I read it, sir."

"So tell me the rest of it."

I took a deep breath, then began. "Six days ago another Zero shot me down after I dive-bombed a little freighter near Bougainville. I got the Maru all right, but as I pulled out and sucked up the gear a Zero swarmed all over me and shot the hell out of the plane, punched a bunch of holes in the gas tanks. There wasn't much I could do about it at 150 knots. My gunner got him, finally, but about fifty miles from Henderson Field we used the last of our gas. I put it in the water and we floated for a day and a half before a PT boat found us."

“Leaking fuel like that, were you worried about catching fire?” Commander Jones asked, watching me to see how I answered that.

“Yes, sir. We were match-head close.”

He dropped his eyes. “Go on,” he said.

“Kenny Ross, the skipper, was pissed. Said if I couldn’t dive-bomb like everyone else and get hits, he didn’t want me.

“I told him everyone else was missing—I was getting the hits, and I’d do whatever it took to keep getting them, which I guess wasn’t exactly the answer he wanted to hear. He canned me.”

The Black Cat squadron commander stubbed out his cigarette and lit another.

He rubbed his eyes, sucked a bit on the weed, then said, “I don’t have anyone else, so you’re our new copilot. You’ll fly with Lieutenant Modahl. He’s probably working on his plane. He wanted to go out this morning and look for our missing crew, but I wouldn’t let him go without a copilot.” The skipper glanced at his watch. “Go find him and send him in to see me.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

“Around here everybody does it my way,” he added pointedly, staring into my face. “If I don’t like the cut of your jib, bucko, you’ll be the permanent night anchor-watch officer aboard this tender until the war is over or you die of old age, whichever happens first. Got that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Welcome aboard.”

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