

Aboard the Escort Carrier NATOMA BAY October 24th:

This was one of the strangest sea battles ever fought. The victors were running away from the losers. The losers had heavy odds in their favor. From my notebook, hour by hour, I can recount it.

At about 9 o'clock this morning, the situation was simple, and ominous. A Japanese force of 4 battleships, 8 heavy cruisers and about 10 destroyers was already shelling our "baby flat tops." They had been shelling us for more than 2 hours. The big Jap warships had superior range. They had armor against which our carrier guns were of little use. They had swarms of land based bombers aiding them. And worse, the Japs had the speed. They were overtaking us, bringing carrier after carrier into range.

We had no protection other than our aircraft, our maneuverability and a gallant destroyer screen.

Fateful decisions had to be made by Rear Admiral T. L. Sprague, in over-all command, and by Rear Admirals C. A. F. Sprague and Felix Stump. On their tactics depended the lives of thousands of our American sailors on these 16 carriers::

SAINT LO (formerly the MIDWAY), Capt. F. J. McKenna; GAMBIER BAY, Capt. W. V. R. Vieweg; KALININ BAY, Capt. T. B. Williamson; KITKUN BAY, Capt. J. P. Whitney; FANSHAW BAY, Capt. D. P. Johnson; WHITE PLAINS, Capt. A. K. Morehouse; MANILA BAY, Capt. Fitzhugh Lee; OMMAHEE BAY, Capt. H. L. Young; KADASHAN BAY, Capt. R. N. Hunter; MARGUS ISLAND, Capt. C. F. Greber; SAVO ISLAND, Capt. C. E. Ekstorm; SANGAMON, Capt. M. E. Browder; SUWANNEE, Capt. W. D. Johnson; SANTEE, Capt. R. E. Blick; and PETROF BAY, Capt. J. L. Kane.

Down the line of these many carriers the order had flashed-- "Launch all available planes," and to some of the destroyers the message, "Go in and attack."

Aboard our carriers, their line of retreat stretching for miles all hands worked feverishly, resupplying and getting away every Avenger torpedo plane and Wildcat fighter; then waiting to take them on again, rearm them, fly them away once more for further strikes at the Japs.

The heavy Jap units pressed forward, closing on us, and the plight of the rearmost carriers caused me to write shakily in my notebook, they are being heavily shelled by Jap cruisers and battleships; the situation looks almost hopeless.

To my limited vision, at that time, it seemed grim. The GAMBIER BAY took a big Jap shell that knocked out one of her engines. This sudden slowing of her, plus the Jap's speed, came a result which was weird to the eyes of our pilots overhead. The GAMBIER BAY was overtaken by the entire Jap fleet, and the Jap heavies deliberately riddled her, point blank, and sent her to the bottom but with a great number of her crew saved later.

To our pilots, above, there was also the sight of the SAINT LO, heavily hit and afire, her crew going over the starboard side to abandon ship, and an escort picking up survivors.

Some of our fliers perhaps saw the brave end of 2 destroyers who were among those attacking the great Jap ships and who took mortal wounds, the JOHNSTON and the HOEL, dead in the water and swept backward in the tide of battle. And some of them saw the gallant little destroyer escort SAMUEL B. ROBERTS when she was sunk on her courageous torpedo run.

I myself saw, during one period, shells from the foremost Jap warship falling over our destroyer screen, astern of the NATOMA BAY on which I stood. The Japs use a green dye to mark hits for spotting and the plumes of water exploded a beautiful iridescent green in the clear sunlight against the dark blue sea.

Farther ahead of us, most remote from the pursuing Jap warships but not any more immune than we were to Japanese land based bombers, were the converted oilers SANGAMON, SUWANNEE, and SANTEE, and the Kaiser carrier PETROF BAY. They probably saw no shell splashes but in my log of today's action this brief excited entry tells that they too were busy. "The carriers in the van are now under air attack. If the planes already launched cannot stop the Japanese ....."

We expected no outside aid. The older United States battleships were busy elsewhere, victorious against the Japanese force in Surigao Straits. And the far as fast prior task force was far to the north of the scenes of the simultaneous battles.



Then, in quick sequence, these things happened:

"The Japanese force is splitting turning away....."

"The torpedo planes have stopped the Japanese. At least 1 Jap cruiser had been torpedoed and sunk--other cruisers and the battleships have been hit."

I know now that the cruiser mentioned in that note of mine was torpedoed by Ensign George W. Gaiennie of Shreveport, La., and Ensign Robert F. Voltz of Chicago.

During that air attack, which saved us for the first time, Lt(jg) Leon S. Conner of Eufaula, Ala., made his bombing run first on a Jap battleship, through heavy flak, but did not "drop" because the ship was turning too sharply. So he made a second run through the bursting ack-ack, dropped his fish, and hit a cruiser with it. Clear of the flak, Lt. Conner found an Avenger circling behind a cloud, its pilot calling him on the radio, saying he had a torpedo and would Conner go in ahead of him and strafe!! Conner did. For the third time he made a run, his machine guns rattling against the combined might of a Jap cruiser's batteries. The unknown Avenger pilot, behind him dropped his torpedo. It went home in the cruisers belly--and as Conner cleared the hail of heavy fire, banked, turned and looked back, he saw the stricken Avenger fall, strike the sea, flame for a few seconds, and disappear beneath the surface.

For hours today the sailors on our baby flat-tops worked under terrible pressure and yet with precision. Crews swarmed over the returning planes, loaded torpedoes and bombs, readied them for more take-offs. Mostly bombs, because our escort carriers had come to the Philippines primarily to bomb and strafe enemy forces on shore and not to fight the Japanese battleships unaided.

The result of that precision work by thousands of American sailors is written in such proud phrases as this from my log:

"At 11:15. A striking force has launched again....."

Armed, gassed, briefed, fed sandwiches, launched in rapid sky fleets. Another strike. Back again. All through the forenoon, this sunlit and ghastly day of Oct. 24, it went on. Our ships fleeing at the start, and we aboard them wondering if the pilots, a good many of whom were in their first real combat, could stop the march of the Jap battleships. Wondering too if these baby flat-tops, built in the Kaiser yards in a matter of months would have the stamina for such a job against those Jap warships.

The final answer to our doubts was written in my log:

"The Japanese force has been whipped by planes. Japanese ships lie crippled in their pools of oil...the surviving ships are running for their lives, leaving their wounded behind. The battle has turned and we are no longer the pursued but are now the pursuers. A Jap battleship, a cruiser and a destroyer are ignored by our pursuing planes as they lie crippled in the sea. We are harrying them in their retreat.."

And that is the story, except that at 4:30 this afternoon the Jap, who could not outfight us with surface ships, sent more land based planes, some 40 odd, to attack us as the sun angled low. We shot down 16 of those Jap bombers. None of them scored a hit on us.

(Editors Note: Unknown to this eye-witness, planes from the Third Fleet's fast carrier task force also reached and struck this Jap force at 1:20 that afternoon. The Japanese were therefore turned back by the cumulative effect of : (1) carrier based airounding on the 23rd, (2) pounding by planes from the 16 "baby flat tons" during the forenoon of the 24th as described herein, (3) the arrival of fast carrier task forces planes the afternoon of the 24th, and (4) their knowledge that they would shortly be at the mercy of our Third and Seventh Fleets, because the other 2 Jap forces, that in Surigao Strait and that off Luzon, had both suffered staggering defeats that same day in this triple "Second Battle of the Philippines Sea". The eye witness narrative continues.)

And so, aircraft and the gallant destroyers and destroyer escorts have saved 14 of our 16 baby flat tops. Two of us are sunk, the SAINT LO and the GAMBIER BAY, others have been damaged.

It has been a long day, this 24th of October, and few dates more glorious have been logged in the history of our Navy.

(Taken from the Honolulu Advertiser)