

The Story
of
AIR GROUP

40

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THE RECORD

The most intensively sustained combat operation ever fought by an aircraft carrier was completed by Air Group 40 and its carrier, the U.S.S. SUWANNEE, in the Okinawa campaign. The air group operated through 82 days of almost incessant combat, during which Fighting Squadron 40 pilots averaged 75 missions each. The carrier departed Ulithi for Okinawa on 27 March 1945. It was 20 June 1945 before it dropped anchor at Leyte and the aviators again set foot on shore. The 86 days of sea-keeping is a record surpassed earlier in the war by the U.S.S. YORKTOWN; but whereas the YORKTOWN fought several great but widely dispersed engagements during her record cruise, the SUWANNEE had 11 continuous weeks of strikes and support missions.

Air Group 40's combat activities resulted in 158 action reports, an action report being made only when the enemy has been contacted and hit. The pilots flew over 3000 sorties and 10,000 hours during that single campaign, an unbelievable record for a 30-plane air group. Prior to Air Group 40's embarkation in February 1945, the SUWANNEE had gone through three years of warfare and had 6700 landings. At the end of the Okinawa campaign, Air Group 40 pilots were headed toward the SUWANNEE's 11,000th landing; almost matching in three months the old fighting lady's three year record. The leader of a replacement team which joined Fighting 40 for the last five weeks of the campaign flew more combat missions in those five weeks than he had flown in his entire previous 13-months tour of sea duty with fast carrier forces.

The primary task of Air Group 40 and of her carrier task unit was the neutralization of Japanese airfields in the Sakishima Gunto. Missions were flown in support of the landings on Okinawa and on Ie Shima, the island where Ernie Pyle was killed; but on 8 April, a week after the landing on Okinawa, the small carrier unit of which the SUWANNEE was flagship, was ordered to the Sakishima station. Thereafter, until 16 June 1945, the Hellcat fighters and Avenger torpedo bombers smashed steadily at Sakishima runways and military installations. When the carrier task unit refueled and when on several occasions it was recalled to Okinawa to support ground forces, a British task force took its place in the Sakishima's.

The Sakishima Gunto is a group of islands lying southwest of Okinawa, midway between Okinawa and Formosa. The Japs planned to stage strikes from the six airfields of the island group against U.S. ships off Okinawa. It was to head off these strikes that the Navy decided upon the unprecedented action of pitting a carrier task unit against airfields in a continuous slugging campaign. Heretofore carrier aircraft had raided airfields and struck airfields for several days on end. They had never, however, stood off airfields which still had their routes of supply open and tried to keep them subdued for weeks on end.

How successful was this neutralization program is told by Rear Admiral Kiland, USN, SOPA Kerama Retto where U.S. ships rearmed and reprovisioned. Rear Admiral Kiland said, in a special tribute to

the task unit, "The Kerama Retto has not been troubled by any planes from the south, although planes from the north have sunk or damaged many ships."

The most frequent targets were airfield runways, which were hit 138 times, but the destruction to other military installations wrought by Fighting 40 and Torpedo 40 comprises a long list: 27 aircraft, 4 luggers, 11 small craft, 21 fuel dumps, 37 barracks, 22 anti-aircraft guns, 2 artillery positions, a mortar and machine gun position, an ammunition dump, 31 trucks, a tank, 2 radio stations, a radio weather station, a cable station, an airfield motor pool, etc. Enemy front lines on Okinawa were hit 15 times. The above list does not include the damage and devastation wrought on a variety of buildings such as warehouses, storehouses, airfield buildings, and whole towns which housed Jap military targets. Among the towns which suffered heavily for their military activity were Komigusuki, Awacha, Sashiki and Kakazu on Okinawa; Hirara, Matsubara and Nobaru on Miyako Island; and Ishigaki, Moemote and Ohama on Ishigaki Island. Komigusuki was levelled by the conflagration of 13 fuel dumps in and around the town which Air Group 40 destroyed in a single mission. The anti-aircraft batteries in Matsubara knocked down two of the air group's planes as they were attacking nearby Hirara Airfield, in return for which Matsubara was left largely waste.

The air group's losses in dead and missing were 6 pilots and 7 aircrewmen. Eight of the group's planes were destroyed in combat and 33 others sustained some degree of battle damage. The 33 damaged planes and 3 of those destroyed in combat were flown back to the carrier and, with the exception of one plane, landed without further damage. The three destroyed planes were "non-flyable," and their 150-mile return flight and safe landing was miraculous.

The SUWANNEE and Air Group 40 fought one more campaign after Okinawa. Following a bare 5 days of rest at Leyte, the SUWANNEE and her task unit sallied forth to cover the July 1 invasion by Australian troops of Balikpapan, Borneo. During this operation an Australian observer, who was radioing a play-by-play account of the invasion, was moved by a Fighting 40 strafing exhibition to broadcast: "I say! These Navy gents are terribly terrific!"

When Japan surrendered, the air group and its carrier were poised at Buckner Bay, Okinawa, for a raid along the China coast.

CVE'S

The SUWANNEE is classed by the Navy as a CVE, or "escort carrier." Captains and admirals who have commanded ships of the SUWANNEE type, protest the name "escort." They want a better name for ships which have specialized in that most exacting task known to aviation - the close support of amphibious operations.

There are several classes of escort carriers. The most numerous are the Kaiser-built ships known as the CASABLANCA class. They are

built from the keel up as small carriers and are trim, square, little ships. The SUWANNEE and her three sisters, the SANGAMON, SANTEE and CHENANGO, were laid down as big tankers and then converted into aircraft carriers. The BOGUE class are converted merchantmen. Not long before the end of the war the Navy brought off the ways still another type of escort carrier, known as the COMMENCEMENT BAY class. This last type was built especially for amphibious operations support work by Marine air groups, and was modelled closely upon the SUWANNEE (or SANGAMON) class, which had established such excellent records of efficiency in support work.

The escort carriers are small and slow compared to the big ESSEX class carriers. The escort carrier's top speed is 18-21 knots compared to the fast carrier's 30-33 knots. The escort type carries 27-30 planes, compared to the 105 carried by the ESSEX. The SUWANNEE, whose 23,000 tons and 500-foot long flight deck were considerably bigger than those of other escort types, often operated 33 planes.

The big carriers and the slim, cruiser-hull CVL's make up the fast carrier task forces, which slash swiftly in the van of all other sea, air and ground forces to cut down the enemy's air power and lay waste his installations. They carried the war to the Jap fleet as long as there was a Jap fleet. They are the glamour girls of the fleet. They have always overshadowed their plain little sisters, the escort carriers. As a result, the virtues and deeds of these small carriers are better known to fighting men than to the rest of the American public.

Marines who were at Tarawa, Saipan, Iwo Jima and other hard-won Pacific islands, respect these ships and their planes. They provided "close support on call," a kind of air-ground warfare practised only on Pacific battlefields. Bomb and rocket-laden fighters and torpedo bombers hovered overhead until Marines ran into a pill-box, a gun position, or similar enemy defense which their own mortars and artillery could not reach. The hovering planes were called in to attack; and more planes appeared on station to replace the "empties" and await the call to a new target. It was a complicated system based on a common target map grid, an air-ground radio hook-up, and a hard-working team of air-ground liaison officers functioning through an air support control unit. It made the most exacting operating demands upon the carriers and upon the pilots, who hit enemy targets sometimes only a stone's throw from their own troops.

Escort carriers were also probably the greatest single factor in the defeat of the German submarine campaign. Their planes sank large numbers of the underwater craft. Teamed with destroyers or destroyer escorts the CVE planes formed a deadly hunter-killer combination. Escort carriers ferried planes to advanced bases and advanced fleet units. The little ships were also used for training pilots in carrier landing work. An ESSEX flight deck looks like broad and spacious acres to a carrier pilot after he has landed on the pitching postage-stamp deck of a CVE. The small flat-tops did not usually go hunting for the Jap fleet, but when a Jap battleship

and cruiser force broke through the San Bernardino Straits, a CVE unit slugged it out for hours with 40mm guns and planes which made dry runs when their bombs were exhausted.

CVE pilots, especially CVE fighter pilots, envy their friends on the big, fast carriers. On fast carriers one was more likely to meet Jap planes and to find big, new, juicy targets. CVE pilots got only occasional cracks at Jap planes. Ordinarily their planes munched off the deck, wings cluttered with bombs and rockets. They spent weary hours picking out battered morsels on smoke and dust shrouded battlefields, where they had to be careful not to hit friendly forces and not to get hit by enemy AA. Their targets were pill-boxes, trenches, revetted guns and the like, which seldom went up with a beautiful, satisfactory bang. It was frequently impossible for them to measure their success visually. Instead, a voice from the ground droned into their earphones "On target" or "Well done."

PRELIMINARY

When Air Group 40 embarked on the U.S.S. SUWANNEE at Alameda on 9 February 1945 that veteran carrier was an unprepossessing old lady, still licking the wounds she had received in the Second Battle of the Philippine Sea. She was rushing back to the wars, having hurried out of the Bremerton Navy Yard with the repair workers' scaffolding still clinging to her sides. She had plunged drunkenly down the West Coast to San Francisco through a raging storm. Her decks were littered with rust and scrap, and her paint was cracked and flaked. Her joints creaked, one of the elevators was defective, and the port catapult broke down regularly. She was a blunt, un-beautiful old girl who had been kicked squarely in the teeth by two Jap suicide dive-bombers; and she had not spent enough time in the make-up room. Built as a big tanker, then converted to a carrier, the old washer-woman stood up solidly and slugged where her fast, clean limbed sisters, the ESSEX and CVL classes, made lancer-like thrusts and withdrawals.

The SUWANNEE's commanding officer, Captain Delbert S. Cornwell, USN, was a quick little man and a veteran naval aviator of 6000 flying hours. He could fly anything, and had done so. He made a flier's severe demands upon Air Group 40's pilots, and his praise was a flier's praise. Red Roman once had his left flap and a sickeningly large portion of his left wing shot off by Ishigaki anti-aircraft fire, and came back to make a clean, safe landing at over 100 knots, without flaps, and with only 18 knots of wind across the deck. When Captain Cornwell called it "one of the best carrier landings I have ever seen" Red's head was closer to the clouds than even his 6 feet and 3 inches justified.

Air Group 40 consisted of two squadrons, Fighting 40 and Torpedo 40, of American kids. Several of them were not old enough to vote in the 1944 elections; and only the two Air Combat Intelligence Officers had reached the decrepit age of 30. These youngsters had

broken off their college studies or came straight from high school and, in two years of training, had mastered their one art, that of harnessing and whipping through the sky the 2000 horses which thundered and whined under the hood of their planes. They called themselves "airplane drivers."

For eight months, since June 1944, they had worked and rehearsed together at California airfields on gunnery, dive bombing, glide bombing, torpedo bombing, carrier landings, navigation, night flying, support work and more support work. Their commanding officers had drilled them mercilessly. Lieutenant Commander Richard D. Sampson, USN, the fighting squadron and air group commander, had flown scout-observation planes from a cruiser earlier in the war. Lieutenant Carroll Raymond Campbell, USN, the torpedo squadron skipper, was a carrier pilot of long experience and had flown with a land-based torpedo squadron in the Solomon Islands. Both were lost in combat early in the Okinawa campaign.

The new fliers were built around and whipped into smooth combat teams by those Solomon Islands veterans (now fast approaching the age of 24 years) Ev Truly, Mike Tracy, Frank Collura, Rock Johns, Bullet Lochridge, Don Michie, Baranowski, Hypo Roth and Gull Newman, and by Bill Neal, Dick Hunt and Earl Hartman. The latter three were former flight and instrument instructors, good fliers going into combat for the first time. A few weeks before embarkation Lieutenant Commander Jack Longino, USN, joined the air group as executive officer of the fighting squadron.

Jack was to become the fighting squadron and air group commander on the fourth day of the long campaign, the day that Sampson was lost. He had fought the Japs from the deck of a cruiser before he shifted to aviation. When he reported to the squadron he had less flight experience than his lieutenants; but with a thin-lipped determination Jack made himself into the air group's top flyer. He finished the campaign with more combat missions, shot down more planes, and performed more varied feats of airmanship than any other pilot of his air group.

Lt.Cdr. Sampson used to stress flight safety; Lt. Ray Campbell was a nut on flight discipline; and the young lieutenants back from the Solomons coached the new fliers on "how not to get your fanny shot off." The ACI officer once commented to some of these leaders on the Japs' policy of stressing aggressiveness in their training. Sampson snorted.

"Aggressiveness! Imagine teaching aggressiveness to these wild fool kids! Coals to Newcastle!" Later, in a formal report on the air group's training, Sampson cited with pride the group's record of not having sustained a single serious casualty, and remarked solemnly that the need to inculcate the fliers with an aggressive spirit had never evidenced itself.

Both the air group and the carrier, destined to make carrier operational history together, brought fine combat histories to their meeting. The SUWANNEE had supported more landings than any other carrier ever built. Its record began with the invasion of North Africa in 1942 and continued on through the invasions of Guadalcanal, the Russells, New Georgia, the Gilberts, Tarawa, Kwajalein, Eniwetok, Aitape, Hollandia, Saipan, Tinian, Guam, Morotai and the Philippines. Its planes had sunk the first submarine ever credited to carrier-based aircraft.

Air Group 40 had fought for nine months during 1943 and 1944 as a land-based outfit in the Solomon Islands, participating in the Munda, Bougainville and Rabaul campaigns. The importance of these campaigns is recognized by perhaps only a few military and naval authorities. The operations resulted not only in securing stepping stones toward the Philippines and far-away Japan; they also completed a task begun in the great Battle of Midway, that of breaking for all time the back of Japanese naval air power. Fighting 40, escorting strikes against the Jap strongholds, shot down its share of Jap ZEKE's. Torpedo 40's numerous strikes were capped by the sinking, in one mission, of 4 large Jap cargo ships and one large transport. Each of the twelve torpedo bombers that day carried a 2000 pound bomb. Every one of those 2000 pounders found its mark as the Jap ships were literally blown to pieces in Rabaul's Simpson Harbor. It was in that action that Ev Truly, Mike Tracy and Frank Collura won their Distinguished Flying Crosses. Frank, his shoulder and arm lacerated by an exploding 20mm shell, brought back his damaged plane to collect a Purple Heart in addition to his DFC. The luck of the Italian boy from Chicago was to run out late in April 1945 when Collura, who was everybody's friend, was shot down by anti-aircraft fire over Miyako Island.

To the SUWANNEE's long list of invasions Air Group 40 helped to add those of Okinawa and Balikpapan. The SUWANNEE's record thus stretched from the first to last landings made by U.S. troops in the war against the Axis and Japan.

February and March were filled with intensive training, culminating in an amphibious exercise with the Sixth Marine Division at Guadalcanal. Those same Sixth Marines later cracked the long-holding Jap line at Shuri and Naha. On the way to Guadalcanal a stop had been made at Pearl Harbor where the SUWANNEE was joined by the CHENANGO, and the flag, Rear Admiral William D. Sample, USN, came aboard. The Air Group began to hear stories of how hard it was to keep the admiral out of an airplane. The Navy had finally and unequivocally ordered him to stay on the bridge after he got shot up in a torpedo bomber over Leyte. The stories should have provided insight to the admiral's character, and given warning of the tough days to come.

The air group's first death occurred at Guadalcanal. Slick, blonde, bon vivant Ed Bridgers spun in after having been catapulted; and his plane exploded. Ed was a likeable chap and a fine flyer who

had gained national notoriety and a court-martial (which acquitted him) when he flew circles around the Empire State Building and zoomed under the Brooklyn Bridge. The whole group was shocked and subdued by Ed's death. The pilots sat silently in the Ready Room, scene of virtually all air group business and pleasure, and occasionally a head would be shaken.

The SUWANNEE and CHENANGO escorted the 50 transports bearing the Sixth Marine Division to Okinawa by way of Ulithi. Between Ulithi and Okinawa they were joined by the SANTEE. The carrier task unit was completed on 31 March, the day before that set for the invasion, when the SANGAMON with her night fighters and night torpedo bombers, joined the formation.

OKINAWA

The first few days of operation at Okinawa gave no hint of the back-breaking job to come. Practically no resistance was offered to the landing on Easter Day, 1 April, by Marines and Army troops. The troops raced across the central part of the island, from its west to east coast, virtually unopposed. Then the Marines streamed rapidly northward through Okinawa's mountainous sector, while the Army pushed southward toward the populous, cultivated area including the towns of Naha, Shuri and Yonabaru.

Those first several days were an eerie time for Air Group 40 pilots. Keyed for combat, the pilots found no targets and no opposition. The missions on 1 and 2 April were sent out to support the "demonstration landing" off the island's southeast coast. This demonstration was a full dress affair which sent landing craft up to, but not on, the beach; and was covered by naval gunfire and air support missions. It was designed to pin down Jap forces and prevent their concentration against the actual landing on the west coast. But no Jap forces put in an appearance. There was no evidence of defense. The villages seemed deserted. The planes attacked bridges of doubtful military value, and struck at numerous gun positions, all of which turned out to be empty.

One mission came back and reported excitedly that they had seen a horse moving in a field. It was the first sign of life they had observed on the enemy island.

The loss of Lt.Cdr. Sampson on 4 April added to the ghostly nature of the show. The cause of his plane's destruction could not be determined. Some Jap trucks had begun to appear on southern Okinawa roads; and Sampson and his wingman, Maxie Donnan, were strafing. Maxie pulled out of his fourth run in time to see a fiery explosion at the base of the 2000 foot ceiling of clouds. Bits of burning plane fell to earth. One of the strafed trucks had replied with small arms fire; but small arms could hardly have accomplished this sudden destruction. The Japanese portion of the island was

still very quiet. A mystified and distraught Maxie sat on the edge of the bunk in the ACI Officer's stateroom and cudgelled his brain to remember every detail of the action. (Two months later three other fighter pilots sat there and told how Maxie's plane was shot down by AA). Sampson was listed as missing in action; and Lt. Cdr. Longino became the commanding officer of the fighting squadron and of the air group.

Jap defenses had, however, simply gone underground. They were quietly waiting among steep scarps and ridges which stretched across the island north of Yonabaru, Shuri and Machinato. The army, moving southward, began to encounter this defense. On 5 April the pilots got some close support work instead of being assigned to hit targets of opportunity. Two gun positions were silenced and an entrenched ridge was plastered with rockets and bombs.

A holocaust of 13 fuel dumps was touched off on 6 April by a mission of 8 fighters and 7 torpedo bombers. The attack was coordinated by Lt. Ev Truly, who gradually became the favorite air coordinator of Okinawa's air support control units. The Japs had stored hundreds of drums of gas and fuel in and around Komigusuki village, a few miles south of Naha. The fuel was packed into long huts, the thatched roof of which gave them the appearance of long, loaf-shaped hay stacks. Most of the huts were widely dispersed in the open fields around Komigusuki. Truly assigned his torpedo bombers, loaded with bombs and rockets, to destroy the dumps in Komigusuki; while he, in his torpedo bomber, led the fighters in rocket and strafing attacks on the huts in the fields. The rockets and bombs of the torpedo bombers, plus three great belching explosions of fuel dumps, obliterated Komigusuki. Huge blazes sprang up from the huts in the field where the fighters strafed. The clouds of smoke forced the fighters to change the direction of their runs and approach from windward. Finally it was impossible to distinguish anything through the pall of towering black smoke, and Truly called off his planes. While he could still see Truly had counted at least 13 of the big conflagrations. A number of smaller, smouldering fires were also burning in huts containing stores other than fuel.

The SUWANNEE's record for sorties was broken next day, the 7th of April. That day the air group pilots made 75 landings. Most of the pilots flew two missions and were stand-by's for a third mission. Twenty-eight planes were in operation that day. It was superhuman work for pilots, planes, ordnance gang and the ship's air department. The performance enabled the carrier division to maintain its full flight schedule in spite of reduced operations by two carriers which suffered flight deck accidents. Ordinarily when two of a unit's four carriers have their arms in a sling, lesser flight schedules are enforced. But things were getting hot around Okinawa and it required something more complicated to slow down Rear Admiral Sample. The coolness with which he assigned the SUWANNEE and Air Group 40 their back-breaking schedule was in itself a compliment.

That evening the carrier task unit was ordered to proceed south and, for several days, strike the airfields of the Sakishima Gunto. Those "several days" were to stretch into months. The order caused excitement. This sort of work had heretofore never been assigned to small carriers.

"We're gonna make like ESSEXES!" chortled Smitty. Smitty is a fresh-faced kid with blonde crew cut, and a bubbling youth which ought to be as perennial as Pan. "Bull Ensign" Smith and the other fighter pilots were especially excited. The Sakishima airfields raised visions of Jap planes and aerial combat.

As the formation pushed southward through the Pacific night, ACI officers dug feverishly through files and charts for information on these new targets. The pre-dawn strike groups had to be briefed at the numbing black hour of 0400. It was one of the several nights in which these officers got no sleep.

THE SAKISHIMA GUNTO

The Sakishima's are a group of small islands in the Ryukyu chain. They are scattered over about 3600 square miles of ocean, midway between Okinawa and Formosa. East of them rolls the broad Pacific and west of them is the East China Sea. The two main islands of the group, Miyako and Ishigaki, have three airfields each. Ishigaki is 60 miles west of Miyako, and only 100 miles beyond Ishigaki is Formosa. Pilots flying at 10,000 feet over Ishigaki could on clear days see Formosa.

Not one of the islands measures as much as 100 square miles in area. Miyako and the southern half of Ishigaki are well cultivated, fairly populous, and were heavily garrisoned by Jap troops. It was estimated that 30,000 Jap solidiers occupied triangular-shaped Miyako. ACI officers used to tell pilots, "Any time you see a building that looks like a barracks, hit it. It almost certainly is a barracks."

Both islands were very well defended by anti-aircraft batteries. Task Force 58 fliers had said that while Tokyo AA was more intense, the Sakishima AA was most accurate. Practically all of the AA was grouped for the defense of the four most important airfields: Hirara and Nobaru on Miyako; and Ishigaki and Miyara on Ishigaki.

Air Group 40's missions were, with few exceptions, strikes and fighter sweeps against these airfields. They hit the four fields named and the two less used fields, Sukuma and Hegina, a total of 136 times. Pilots and ACI officers became familiar with every gun, plane, revetment and activity on the islands. The fliers used to report in terms of "that tail hangar in the trees northeast" and "that shack at the intersection."

There were no adequate maps nor target charts when the task unit started to operate in the Sakishima's. One of the remarkable photographic jobs of the war resulted, however, in the gradual building of a series of mosaics and aerial photographic grid charts. Responsibility and credit for this job rests primarily with Chief Photographer's Mate Humphrey of the SUWANNEE's photographic laboratory and with granite-faced Penny Pendergrass, a torpedo plane pilot whose every task was accomplished with a careful excellence. Humphrey got the DFC for his work, while Penny, whose bombing and rocketting were as perfect as his photographic work, got a flock of DFC's and Air Medals.

The British task force and Task Force 58 had left the wrecks of Jap planes scattered over the Sakishima fields. Many an Air Group 40 pilot risked his neck to strafe planes which closer inspection revealed to be minus landing gear or broken-backed. The Japs propped up and painted these planes in order to entice pilots into the teeth of AA, and to divert them from the well dispersed and well-camouflaged "live" planes. Gradually, however, the fliers, through personal observation and with the help of photographic interpretation officers and ACI officers, came to know every plane on the islands and could spot a newcomer instantly. More than two months later, when another escort carrier task unit came to relieve the weary SUWANNEE unit, the new pilots combined with Air Group 40 pilots on several strikes. The new pilots started an orgy of strafing against these brightly painted wrecks and called excitedly back and forth to each other on the radio. Little John Benson, an Indiana farmer boy, broke it up when he broke tiredly into the radio chatter, "Those damn wrecks have been sittin' there since April. Leave 'em alone."

The Japs tried constantly to keep runways (or strips of runways) and other air facilities in repair. These and the new planes brought in by the Japs were the air group's targets. The Japs did not often bring in new planes, because they seldom had a runway fit for landing. Admiral Sample kept strikes, fighter sweeps and patrols over the fields all the time. The SUWANNEE, SANTEE and CHENANGO flew these missions from the blackness before dawn to the dusk after sunset; and then the night fighters and night torpedo bombers of the SANGAMON (until she was disabled by a suicide bomber on 5 May) heckled the Jap fields all night.

The BLOCK ISLAND replaced the SANGAMON; and in June the GILBERT ISLANDS relieved the weary CHENANGO. These two COMMENCEMENT BAY class carriers with their Marine air groups teamed with the SUWANNEE and SANTEE to continue the pasting of the groggy airfields.

Four small carriers kept six airfields shattered and impotent for two months. The whole operation was within easy range of Formosa's big air bases, which were, however, getting a bad time from Army bombers based on Luzon and China and from the British task force. The little carriers were doing something which most experts pronounced impossible, and from a position which the same experts said was untenable. They were deliberately coming to grips with a

potentially superior land-based air power. The tremendous first punch landed by Task Force 58 squarely on the button of the Saki-shima fields made the little carriers' achievement possible. But the successful completion of the task was due to the unparalleled stamina of CVE pilots, each one of whom flew one and two strikes daily for days which became weeks, and weeks which stretched into months.

Only three times were the Japs able to attempt to mount sizeable strikes from the airfields. This happened twice while the British were there (the British always had more luck than the CVE's in finding aerial combat). The third time was on 22 April when the SANGAMON's dusk strike found 25 planes preparing to take off from Nobaru and 11 Jap fighters already in the air. Planes were taxiing to the end of the runway where other planes were turning up their engines; and hundreds of Jap service personnel were scurrying among the aircraft. The SANGAMON's torpedo planes spread carnage among the planes and Japs on the ground, while the fighters knocked 9 of the Jap fighters out of the air.

At dusk on 15 May the Jap airfields put another small force of 7 planes in the air bound, apparently, for Okinawa. Short shrift was made of them. Marine fliers from the GILBERT ISLANDS drove 3 of the planes scurrying back to Ishigaki field while the SUWANNEE's combat air patrol of 4 fighters disposed, in a matter of minutes, of 3 of the other 4 suicide bombers. Ray Lebel and Joe Coleman, facing Jap planes for the first time, shared the three splashed planes. Bullet Lochridge, the leader, and Bill Wiedeman also hit and got assists. The fourth plane got away temporarily only to be splashed by a Marine fighter at Okinawa. It was the only Jap plane encountered by Fighting 40 to get away from them.

SUWANNEE pilots became adept in the art of bombing runways. Ordnance experts calculate that, allowing for the normal percentage of bombing error, it requires a load of 200 one-hundred-pound bombs to render inoperational an air strip the size of one of Nobaru's runways. The job, according to the ordnance men, would require 20 torpedo bombers with the loading used by the SUWANNEE. But the air group's pilots reduced their percentage of error to an abnormally small figure. On numerous occasions a strike group of 8 torpedo bombers and 8 fighters, carrying a total load of 96 bombs, left a runway unusable. Each pilot was assigned a specific segment of the runway to hit. Fighter pilots, using a dive bombing technique, reached the point where they apologized for anything less than 100% hits (apologies were of course frequent). The torpedo bombers' work culminated in a classic attack in which 8 planes, led by Lt. Gus Macri, USN (who had come from a fast carrier to take the place of the deceased Ray Campbell as VT skipper), walked all 80 of their bombs perfectly down the north-south runway of Nobaru.

An anomaly in the air group was the way the fighters, who carried one bomb, boasted of their bombing prowess, while the torpedo bomber pilots, with their two guns, always wanted to strafe. One

torpedo pilot particularly, McGrath, always got mad when the AA opened up, and dived at it with both guns blazing. Regularly the older pilots called him aside afterwards and explained that the people who designed the Muffy did not have strafing in mind, that strafing AA was furthest from the designer's thoughts, and that anyway he would get his fanny shot off. Regularly big, gentle-tempered McGrath ruefully agreed with them, and with the same regularity the next time AA opened up on him he went berserk and started strafing it. Mac was one of the few pilots who never got a bullet hole in his plane.

The air group's best group of rocketeers was Bill Sours' fighter team. Bill and the other five fighters of his team had been especially trained as a complete replacement team. Bill had had a tour of duty on the BELLEAU WOOD, a CVL, during the hot period when the Gilberts, the Marshalls and the Marianna's were invaded. He had been returned to the States in due time; and was there given five ensigns fresh from operational training and told to mould them into a fighter team. His team and many others were then brought out to Guam where they were in time ordered to a carrier to fill up air groups depleted by combat. The six fighters, already a smooth combat unit, were assimilated much more rapidly into the fighting squadron's organization than would have been possible with six individuals who had not trained together.

Sours' team was a bunch of good gunners and smart rocketeers. Some of the older pilots figured that the newcomers held a gunnery run longer than safety allowed. Every night when the gun camera films of the previous day's strikes were projected the pilots would whistle and groan and shout "Pull out!" as they viewed the shots by Sours' team. But although Bill and his boys often returned with bullet holes in their planes, they hit regularly; and their work with rockets was outstanding. Barracks, storehouses, cantonments, a radio weather station and a cable station were blown up by their rocketing. The cable station simply disintegrated under a hail of direct hits.

Bill's team joined Fighting 40 in May. In the remaining 5 weeks of the Okinawa campaign Bill flew more strike missions than he had flown in his entire previous 13-months tour of sea duty with the busy fast carrier task forces.

AA LOSSES

When a man was lost it made you sick. If he was shot down while doing something foolish you could get angry and curse him for his foolishness. But when he was doing everything right and got shot down anyway, all you could do was get sick.

The practice of the air group against AA was always sharp. It was the basic doctrine of a fast breaking attack, pure speed, and the quickest way out. The pilots usually initiated attacks from 10,000 feet, which allowed them to get up plenty of speed. They came down

in sharp fast dives, dropped or launched at 2500 to 3000 feet, and pulled out at 2000 to 2500 feet headed for the open sea. Sometimes a pilot retired on the deck, but that was mostly the result of getting sucked too low in the dive.

The torpedo bombers were of course most vulnerable. The biggest single-engine plane in the world, a Muffy is not supposed, with a bomb load such as VT-40's carried, to be dived at an angle of more than 40 degrees nor exceed a speed of 280 knots (about 315 miles per hour). At greater speeds the tremendous forces result too frequently in a tail or a wing being torn off the big plane. VT-40 pilots, faced with the dilemma of tearing off a tail or being shot down, seldom pulled out at less than 310 knots. Several times huge portions of the tail were torn off but the pilots always managed to get the planes back to the ship and land safely.

The fighters always dropped their bombs first and then ran interference against the AA for the Muffies. Even the fighters, however, never picked on the AA unnecessarily, except for the day Frank Collura was shot down with his aircrewmembers, Powell and Stewart. That day 8 fighters ran amuck, making attack after attack on the Jap guns. Jack Longino led the attacks, and afterwards apologized to his fighters for having lost his head.

The Sakishima AA was very good, and the Japs shot down several of the best of Air Group 40's pilots. Warning was served when on the first day of Sakishima strikes the CHENANGO lost its air group commander and had another plane badly shot up. The following day, Bitter Burns of VT-40 returned with a huge hole torn in his wing by an AA shell. It was the first of a long parade of battle damaged planes which were to return to the SUWANNEE.

Collura and his crewmen were the first of AG-40's losses to Sakishima AA. The plane went down flaming, to crash and explode in the water off Miyako. Collura and Powell, who had gone through the Solomons campaign together, and Stewart were listed as missing in action. When Frank's plane was hit he was in a dive at 3500 feet, making 300 knots, and doing everything right.

"After his plane was hit," reported Ray Campbell, "Collura tried to pull out. The plane's nose came up a little, then dropped and they went on in. But Frank was pulling back hard on the stick to the end. I could tell because his guns were spraying tracers all the way down."

Every man in the air group loved Collura; but it happened that none of his old friends from the Solomon Islands days were on the flight. When they heard what had happened they went without a word to their staterooms. Baranowski was on a strike at Ishigaki at the same time that Collura was hit over Miyako. When the Baron landed and came down to the Ready Room he got the news. The little Milwaukee Pole sat in a Ready Room chair for hours, staring into vacancy with dull, tired red eyes. Rock Johns and big Hypo Roth got back

next day from another carrier on which they had spent two days. An officer a few hours later walked into the Ready Room and inquired: "What's the matter with Rock Johns? I walked into his room and asked him a civil question and he told me to get out! He looked as though he was crying. Is he cracking up?"

Two days later (and a couple of weeks after celebrating the birth of his daughter) Ray Campbell and his crewmen, Zahn and Loughridge, were killed. They were shot down by AA over Ishigaki. Ray's big torpedo bomber was in the bombing run, going down fast and steep, when slowly it began to bank away to the right, kept turning until it was on its back and, continuing its dive upside down, crashed and burned off shore. Ray's guns were firing the whole way down.

Ray was the most experienced and meticulously capable pilot in the air group. "He did everything by the numbers," Ev Truly once remarked. Ray knew the answers. When a pilot got into difficulties in the air it was Ray who was called to C.I.C. to talk to the pilot by radio and straighten out the trouble. It was Ray who had directed McGrath and his crewmen, Auld and Rogers, in one of the most bizarre landings in carrier history. Ray was on the deck and these three were high aloft in a plane with tab controls severed and big Mac's strength fast running out in the effort simply to keep the plane in level flight. Ray figured out the three-man system of control and coached them until it was perfected and the plane was safely landed aboard. The three men had hovered high and dangerously above the endless blue Pacific and Ray was an unseen voice from space; but it was enough to give confidence to Mac, Auld and Rogers. It somehow never occurred to anybody that Ray Campbell would get it.

"Everybody's vulnerable now," somebody remarked grimly.

Maxie Denman's plane was shot down late in May and Maxie parachuted to land on Jap-held Miyako Island. His leader, Earl Hartman, was the first to see Max's trouble, and Earl sent his Hellcat whining low and fast over the spot where Max had landed. He saw the parachute and what he believed to be Max nearby; and wheeling as rapidly as possible he came back again over the spot, flying low in the face of the most intense AA ("Every damned gun on the island was firing at him!" declared Monteau). Although only three to five minutes elapsed between Earl's first and second runs, the parachute had disappeared and there was no trace of Max. The other fighters joined Earl in making low passes, hoping to spot the downed pilot and give him protection in his anticipated break for the beach. They found nothing.

Bullet Lochridge had climbed for sufficient altitude to establish radio communications with the SUWANNEE. As soon as the word was received aboard the carrier, Jack Longino led a fighter team to Miyako and continued the search.

Max, a very tired but always pleasant young man after two months of combat, is missing in action. Max once said, "The first Jap

plane I see I'm going to take out after. I'll chase him to Tokyo. I'll get my tail shot off, but I don't care. I'm gonna get me one Jap plane." He was one of several Fighting 40 pilots who never encountered a Jap plane in the air.

Three days after Max's loss, Smoky Calo, a VT replacement pilot, was shot down over Miyako on his first combat mission. Calo's plane was hit at 5000 feet and he fought for control of his erratically diving craft until he reached 3000 feet. Twice the plane momentarily straightened out and then went back into its crazy dive. At 3000 feet Calo directed his crewmen, Baird and Christmas, to bail out. One of them acknowledged, and that was the last Calo heard from them. Smoky stuck a few seconds longer to his plane, then he too started to climb out. His harness caught and when he finally loosened it he was only a couple of hundred feet above the water. He does not remember jumping. His last recollection before he came back to consciousness in the water, was the realization that he was too low to jump safely.

McGrath spotted the parachute and the one survivor in the water less than two miles from the hostile shore, and immediately dropped a life raft ("I had to be careful not to hit him on the head," said Mac. Actually the big Irishman dropped the raft in Calo's arms). Then McGrath and Dick Hunt took up patrol a few hundred feet above the drifting pilot, and Bill Sours' fighter team patrolled above them to drive back any attempt by the Japs to put out from shore after the pilot (An American pilot is a prisoner prized by the Japs for the information they hope to wring from him). Bullet Lochridge, as he had done in Denman's case, established communications with the SUWANNEE, and the carrier got a DUMBO (rescue flying boat) on the way. All of the pilots searched for other survivors, but Baird and Christmas are missing in action.

Ninety minutes after Calo crashed DUMBO landed in the reef-lined, hostile waters, picked him up, and took him back to their seaplane base.

The four fighters and two Muffies stood by Calo until he was picked up, then headed for the SUWANNEE. It was dusk when Calo was rescued and completely dark when the planes arrived back over the ship. None of the six pilots had ever made a night carrier landing before. Landing Signal Officer Joe Auman was well aware of that fact, and in his phosphorescent skeleton costume had been pacing the flight deck for 30 minutes, too nervous to talk or stand still. Joe and the pilots got the planes aboard without mishap. Satch Lang, a fellow with a constantly worried expression and the air group's youngest pilot, was the last to land. After three wave-off's he put his big Hellcat down just five feet from the starboard catwalk, his right wing extending far out over the murky depths; but he was straight and true on a fore-and-aft line.

Glenn Thorne crash landed his torpedo bomber on the flight deck as a result of the same nerve-wracking mission on which Calo's plane

was shot down. The turret escape hatch of Glenn's plane flew off in the bombing run and sheared away half of his elevator and horizontal stabilizer. The accident occurred at 7000 feet and Glenn struggled without success to pull out until he reached 2000 feet. Just as he reached for the microphone to tell the crewmen to bail out the lunging TBM levelled off and began to behave.

Glenn experimented with the controls and told his leader, Dick Hunt, that he thought he could make a landing. Glenn did not then know that the severed piece of stabilizer was still clinging to the plane by one twisted, shredded spar and was being gradually jammed between the remaining portions of stabilizer and elevator. It was impossible for Glenn or his crewmen to see the danger; and Thorne came back to the carrier unaware that the elevator, which he had tested and found satisfactory, was gradually being jammed and frozen.

The damaged controls rendered Thorne's approach awkward and he got a wave-off. His plane was surging above the carrier's fantail as Glenn gave it the gun, pulled hard on the stick and found it frozen. In that split disaster-ridden instant Thorne was a great instinctive flier. He cut the gun, pushed the stick forward and dove at the deck. The plane hit wheels and prop first, and Glenn and his crewmen walked away uninjured.

CARRIER LANDINGS

Ernie Pyle once wrote a column about carrier landings and concluded, "They say that Navy carrier pilots are the best in the world. I guess they must be, else none of them would be alive."

The experienced flyer and the aviation tyro are both struck instantly with an appreciation of the peculiar hazards of even the normal carrier landing. A wing commander of the Royal Australian Air Force and an Australian Army major were aboard the SUWANNEE as liaison officers for the Balikpapan operation. They were always on the bridge when planes were landing. When a plane had landed they would look at each other and shake their heads, then grip the rail and lean forward as the next plane came down the cross leg. Pyle's column contained mention of the fact that some officers and men serving aboard carriers refuse to watch landings.

The normal carrier landing is dangerous; but to execute a carrier landing with a plane, the controls of which have been damaged, seems an impossible feat and too much to ask of a man. The sheer courage and skill displayed by pilots and the two landing signal officers in getting damaged planes back aboard, contributed in no small degree to the SUWANNEE's superlative operational record at Okinawa. One of the reasons that SUWANNEE planes flew more missions than those of other hard-working carriers was because the SUWANNEE usually had more planes to fly.

Thirty-six times battle damaged planes were landed, and the only mishap was the unavoidable crash landing of Glenn Thorne, described

above. Many commanding officers have ordered similarly damaged planes to ditch, rather than risk a disabling accident to the ship and to the other planes parked forward on the flight deck. Captain Cornwell always chose to bet on his pilot and landing signal officer; and he won every gamble that he made. When the war ended Captain Cornwell and Air Group 40 had a perfect record of no voluntary ditchings.

Five of these landings were more remarkable than others.

Ensign Dick Adrian, one of the sharpest of the young VT pilots, made two of the landings. The first occurred after a mission to Ishigaki in the course of which Adrian's plane was hit twice by medium AA. In the bombing run a shell tore a rocket from beneath his wing and punctured the surface of the wing and the vanes of the other rockets. Adrian maintained the run without a break, released his bombs, and joined up with the other planes for a rocket attack. This time the Jap AA plugged him right on the nose. A shell smashed deeply into the base of a propellor blade, and the exploding fragments tore through the engine and engine housing in forty places. The plane shook with a heavy vibration, and was inundated from nose to tail by oil, which blackened the windshield. With the engine coughing and the plane vibrating Adrian somehow stayed in the air for the 150-mile return trip to the carrier and there, in spite of a bad engine and a blind windshield, he made a safe landing. The plane was a strike.

For that landing Dick was punished with three days of extra duty. Forgetting to put his guns on safe, he had strafed the deck in landing. No one was hurt.

Adrian's second hampered landing was made after a three foot section of his plane's starboard elevator pulled off in the course of a rocket run. The plane bucked like a hooked tarpon; but Adrian brought it under control and got back to the carrier. That landing added to the premature grey hairs of young Ensign Nickerson, the Assistant Landing Signal Officer. It was impossible for Adrian to get the plane's nose up in the approach and Nick was forced to cut him for a wheels-first landing. It worked.

When Dick Hunt, however, came back a few days later with the entire starboard elevator and horizontal stabilizer torn away, he was sent on to land on one of Okinawa's captured airfields, where wheels-first landings do not cause everybody to dive for the safety hatches.

Red Roman, with no flaps, a mutilated left wing and only 18 knots of wind over the deck, brought his Hellcat in at over 100 knots for a safe landing. AA had caught Red in a strafing run on Ishigaki Airfield. It tore away the whole flap and a huge portion of the left wing. Red pulled out of his run and called his leader, Bullet Lochridge.

"Maybe I better not make another run," drawled the thin New Mexican, "I picked up some AA."

Lochridge whistled when he pulled up alongside and saw the chewed-off wing. Consideration was given to having the redhead ditch or try to reach an airfield on Okinawa. It was Roman who elected to try to make a carrier landing.

"That guy is the coolest cucumber in the Pacific," said Lochridge afterwards, "or else he just don't know."

The pilots say that Joe Auman, the LSO, finessed Red to the deck. As Red came in on his cross leg he was doing better than 100 knots indicated, but Auman kept giving him frantic come-on's in an effort to get rid of the fatal dip in the left wing. Seeing that the wing would not come up, Auman brought him in fast and well to starboard. He gave Red the cut, and Roman slipped it on to catch the number two arresting wire. The hurtling Hellcat pulled more wire than had ever been pulled on the SUWANNEE and stopped short of the barrier. Captain Cornwell, in his official report, called it "one of the best carrier landings I ever saw."

Less than 24 hours later Ev Truly found himself and his big Avenger in circumstances identical to Red's. Miyako AA tore a large hole in his left wing and rendered the flaps inoperative. The SUWANNEE was still operating in a dead calm and could get only 18 knots of wind across her deck. But the slim, little veteran VT pilot made it look easy. He put his damaged plane into the groove well aft and, holding it steady, steamed right up on the deck to catch the same number two wire.

Skipper Jack Longino made the last of these tough landings. An unlucky slug from Miyako AA caught Longino's plane, snapped a control rod and left him with no right rudder. He was in a strafing run doing well over 400 knots when the rod snapped, and his plane slewed wildly. He straightened out, and on the way back to the carrier experimented calmly with the controls and figured out a technique for getting aboard. It was fortunate that he did so, because by an inadvertence Nickerson had not been advised of the nature of Jack's plight. Temporarily mystified by Jack's irregular and awkward approach, Bostonian Nick gave him three wave-offs, and by a miracle Jack was able to take them and get away. By that time, however, Nick had deduced exactly the difficulty and with Nick and Jack cooperating perfectly on the fourth pass a good landing was effected.

FLYING THE WEATHER

Don Michie, a slight red-faced Scotch-Norwegian with a corn-colored Kaiser mustache and a quick temper, was bitching about the irrational attitude of the Navy.

"Back in the States they ground you on account of a little haze, and out here they shoot you off into this stinking soup."

Mich had just landed from a three hour combat air patrol, two hours of which had been flown on instruments in weather so thick that he could hardly see his wingman and the other hour of which was spent on oxygen at 20,000 feet. It was not the first of such patrols.

In spite of the Ryukyus' numerous foul weather days, SUWANNEE planes were held on the deck only twice by the elements. On one occasion in early June the task unit lashed its planes to the decks and ran from a typhoon. The other time the dawn fighter sweep ran into a thunder storm up ahead of the formation. Instruments spun wildly and the planes were tossed violently by thermal currents. "I was going up and down like a yoyo!" said Red Roman. The flight extricated itself and returned; and, with the storm crackling throughout the entire operating area, planes were grounded for the rest of the day.

Strike groups frequently arrived over Miyako and Ishigaki to find the islands completely closed in, but, with the torpedo bombers leading, the flights attacked nevertheless. The torpedo bomber leader was usually able to get a glimpse from a spot somewhere out at sea of an edge of the island and, using his radar and timing his run, could do a fair job of area bombing. The other planes, including the fighters, released with the leader. The amount of damage accomplished was always dubious, but it was some satisfaction to know that the bombs had exploded on enemy territory rather than been jettisoned in the sea.

Fighters by themselves, having no radar, were forced to other expedients. Of course the smallest hole in the clouds permitted a fighter with its steep diving angle to attack. Otherwise the fighters depended purely on timed runs, or took a chance on going in low under the clouds to pick at targets along the coast.

One fighter team, led by Bullet Lochridge, hit upon the strangest expedient. A low cloud cover varying from 500 to 1500 feet blocked them from their objective, Nobaru Airfield's runways. They circled low beneath the clouds and out beyond Miyako's coast line, looking at the airfield and wondering how to hit it. To go in under the clouds would be like perching on the mouths of the AA guns. Lochridge decided that they would, one at a time, make a climbing circle to 5000 feet and make a timed drop. The other three planes would continue to circle and observe, and endeavor to correct on the preceding man's error. At 5000 feet, the release altitude selected, they would be buried in clouds and flying on instrument.

Gull Newman went first. His bomb was a half-mile over and landed between Nobaru and Hirara Airfields. Bullet made the second attempt. His bomb landed squarely on the runway. Joe Coleman, the third to try, set up an explosion in the dispersal area. Then Bob Jennings planted the fourth bomb on the edge of the runway.

"But Jennings cheated!" said Coleman. "The dope dive-bombed in the clouds!"

"I thought that's what we were supposed to do," grinned Bob. "Anyway, I broke through the base of the clouds and scared the hell out of myself."

Jack Longino is probably prouder of a weather-flying feat on 15 May than he is of the three planes he shot down. In the darkness before dawn he led off an eight plane fighter sweep to hit targets on Miyako. A strike group from another carrier took off at the same time to hit Ishigaki.

Directly ahead of the formation they ran into a blind front. The fighters closed up on Jack and he took them down to the surface. There, with a thick downpour reducing visibility to zero, unable to see anything but the tossing waters beneath them, the closely grouped planes roared on for mile after mile. "It was so bad," claimed Baranowski, "that even a Kamikaze wouldn't take off."

Over their radios they could hear the leader of the other carrier's strike group, which was also barreling along somewhere through the storm, make repeated reports to his carrier on the conditions. Longino had also reported, of course, when he hit the front. The carriers themselves were by this time engulfed and one ship could not be seen from another.

The planes covered 20, 50, 80 miles and there was no break. A half hour had passed. The leader of the other strike group reported to his carrier that he could not break through, and that he was jettisoning bombs and rockets and returning. The eight SUWANNEE planes droned on.

A few minutes later Longino took them up from the surface and shortly afterwards they burst into the clear, directly above Miyako.

Longino then directed Bill Sours to take his team and hit the targets assigned on Miyako. Jack, with his team, went on and attacked the Ishigaki targets of the group which had turned back.

That day the admiral sent a message to the carrier from which the other strike group had taken off. The message began: "THERE ARE NO BLACK MARKS AGAINST YOU FOR TURNING BACK WHEN SUWANNEE WENT THROUGH BECAUSE SUWANNEE AFTERALL -----X" For a short time thereafter SUWANNEE was unpopular with her sister carrier.

To prove, however, that this performance was no accident, Bill Neal's team repeated it two weeks later. This time all other carriers launched strike groups which were forced to turn back. Bill Neal, who is an instrument instructor from way back, broke through with his team and hit his targets.

"The guys who turned back needn't have red faces, though," said Doc Taylor, the air group's flight surgeon, "because so far as Bill Neal is concerned there isn't any bad weather."

It has nothing to do with weather, but it was Bill Neal and his teammates, Don Michie, Bill Warner, and Moe Molsbergen, who shot up 30 to 35 trucks in one mission at Balikpapan and caused the Australian observer to exclaim, "I say! These Navy gents are terribly terrific!"

"I gotta admit," said Molsbergen, a lethargic-looking tall fellow, "that we were putting in a few curlycues."

CLOSE SUPPORT

When the SUWANNEE and her task unit had been ordered to the Sakishima's on 7 April, the invading forces on Okinawa were sweeping northward without encountering heavy opposition, while the Army moving southward had just encountered the Jap defenses stretched from Yonabaru Airfield on the east coast to Machinato Airfield on the west coast. Within a week the northern half of the island was pretty well cleaned up. But the Jap line across southern Okinawa held for six weeks, with the Army and later the Marines slowly pushing it back to Yonabaru town and Naha on the ends and to Shuri in the center. Late in May the Army and Marines, aided by naval gunfire and both land and carrier-based planes, crumbled this line and the rest of the Okinawa campaign was a pursuit and mopping-up operation. One strong core of resistance in southwest Okinawa was finally crushed late in June to mark the end of organized Jap defense.

On five occasions the small carrier task unit was recalled from the Sakishima's to support these operations and to aid in the capture of Ie Shima, small island air base just off the northwest coast of Okinawa. These periods of close support lasted one or two days, and on one occasion for six days.

Ie Shima is flat and oval-shaped, and only about 3 miles long. One cone-shaped pinnacle about 500 feet high, called Iegusukuyama, juts up from the table top surface of the island. The coasts of the island are 50-foot sea cliffs except on the south, where there is a narrow beach backed by a steep wooded ridge. This southern beach was the only one on which a landing could be made. The ridge backing it and Iegusukuyama were the only positions the Japs could defend.

When the Marines invaded Ie Shima, Lt. Cdr. Jack Longino led a pre-H hour strike of 8 Fighting 40 planes and 8 other fighters from the task unit. Each fighter carried a 100 gallon Napalm fire bomb. Their target was the first Jap line of defense in the wooded ridge backing the landing beach. Going in just ahead of the first boat loads of Marines the fighters attacked in line abreast. They left the whole ridge aflame. As the Marines stormed over the beach the fighters transferred their attention inland and strafed and re-strafed across the island.

The following day the Japs had been backed into their last defenses on the east side of steep Iegusukuyama, which was honey-combed with caves. Ev Truly coordinated a 27-plane strike on the Jap

position. Fighters and torpedo bombers threw bombs into the side of the mountainous cone and fired nearly 200 rockets into the slope. They left Iegusukuyama a mass of erupting dust and smoke.

After the capture of Ie Shima support missions were flown only by the carrier's torpedo bombers and by land-based torpedo bombers and Corsairs. The fighter planes of the carriers at Okinawa were thenceforth used only for combat air patrols to cope with the frequent and heavy attacks by Jap suicide planes.

Ev Truly and Mike Tracy became two of the best air coordinators at Okinawa. They directed all of the Air Group 40 support missions and were frequently used to coordinate the work of planes from other air groups. They several times flew three air coordinator missions in a single day.

The air coordinator job is an uncomfortable one. The air coordinator is assigned the target by the air support control unit. He must find it, then pin-point it with dry runs. These dry runs not only serve to point out the target to the planes of the attack group, but also are confirmation to ground force officers that the planes have the right target. Usually the air coordinator makes one more preliminary run on which he fires two rockets or strafes, as a final pin-pointing device. The air coordinator also often determines how many planes are required to reduce the target, whether bombs or rockets will be used, and how many will be dropped or fired by each plane on each run.

The job keeps the flier so low so much of the time that he expects the Japs to start throwing rocks at him. Ev Truly was hit by Jap fire on four occasions, more times than any other flier in the air group.

Marines a month later were still talking about a support job led by Mike Tracy on 16 May. At that time the Marines were pushing hard on the Japs' southern defense line and, on the west coast, had reached the edges of Naha. There they were temporarily held up by a steel and heavy concrete warehouse which the Japs had fortified. The building bristled with machine guns and riflemen and had withstood a day's pounding from mortars and planes.

The planes of Tracy's team were specially loaded with 500 pound SAP's with an 8 to 11 seconds delay fuze. There were four planes each carrying four bombs and eight rockets.

Mike used a low level glide bombing attack, throwing the bombs into the side of the building. With Marines hugging their holes a few hundred feet away Mike, Dick Adrian, Irish Dyer and Glen Fowler, one after the other, roared down at 300 knots, threw their bombs and zoomed to clear the top of the building. They made four runs each, dropping one bomb per run, and then made a rocket run.

"At first," a Marine officer a month afterwards told Irish Dyer, "we thought you had missed or that the bombs were duds. Then those delay fuzes got going. There was one explosion after another, inside the building. There was a lot of ammunition in there and when the fireworks were over that building was really gutted!"

"We could always tell the difference," the Marine added, "when the escort carrier planes came back to Okinawa to support us."

Later that same morning Tracy, Ed Halcin, Jack McMonigle and Bill Shortall went over on another support mission and silenced a mortar and machine gun position.

In the afternoon of the same day Tracy and Truly took another mission to Okinawa. This time they were assigned the Shuri radio tower as target. It was a tall steel network affair based in concrete. The Japs were using it as an observation post.

Tracy and Truly, remembering the fiascos against the similarly constructed Cape St. George lighthouse in the Solomons, were disturbed at the assignment. Tracy demurred to the Commander Air Support Control Unit.

"Do you think it is a suitable target for planes?" he asked. He was told that the tower had to come down.

"It was some of the best damn bombing I ever saw," said Ev Truly. "We got eight direct 500 pound hits and I got my ten 100-pounders right on the base in a cluster. When we finished and the dust cleared away, the tower stood as strong as the day on which it was built."

There was a platform halfway up the tower on which the Japs had mounted a machine gun. The gun opened fire on the planes. McGrath was along and saw it.

"I got the bugger in my sights and let him have it! I held it right on him the whole way in! Then I saw this tower start looming up above me. I pulled back on the stick and zoomed straight up and just cleared it! Boy, I scared the be-jesus out of myself!" reported Mac.

The fellows finally got a crack at the Jap troops on 24 May when a support mission was sent to intercept and dispose of several hundred of the enemy moving near a cross roads west of Yonabaru. Obie Slingerland never got a chance to report his part in that mission. He and his radioman, Joyce, were killed when a loose bomb exploded in the bomb bay of his plane as he landed aboard. The wrecked plane was immediately enveloped in flames. Morrow, the gunner, and Joyce both got clear of the plane and stumbled with clothing aflame into the catwalks. Joyce died of his injuries within 48 hours but Morrow, though seriously burned, recovered. Obie died in the cockpit.

AERIAL COMBAT

The fighters, flying combat air patrol during these periods of support work, had rotten luck. The station usually assigned them was south of Okinawa. The Japs always came from the north.

The first fighter kill came on 12 April, when the task unit was refueling far to the east of Okinawa. The Jap plane was a MYRT, 440 mile-per-hour reconnaissance plane. It was quite a bit faster than Fighting 40's Hellcats. The radar had picked up a single bogey, and Jack Longino's fighter team was brought streaking across the formation to intercept.

Longino and his fighters were at 9000 feet when Monteau, the commander's wingman, tally-hoed. The MYRT was 1500 feet above them, on a crossing course, and headed straight for the formation which was in plain sight. It must have been a luscious sight for the Jap; several big tankers laden with gasoline and fuel, and four carriers, which are themselves a combination of big tanker and floating arsenal. Fortunately the MYRT, loaded with a 275Kg. (500 pound) bomb, was cruising at only 200 knots and had apparently not yet seen the fighters. It gave the Hellcats a chance.

The fighters made a climbing turn which brought them around on the MYRT's tail with Longino in the lead. Jack's first burst flamed the Jap plane and the second burst exploded his wing tanks. Jack, who was closing fast, whipped straight through the flames.

From the deck of the SUWANNEE the Jap plane first became visible as it arched downward, a long graceful curve of black smoke against the bright blue sky. It was 15 miles dead ahead, the closest a Jap plane got to the SUWANNEE during the campaign.

When the admiral asked Jack to tell him how it had happened, Jack answered, "I just gave him a squirt."

The very next day, on a coveted northern station, Longino's team got five SONIA's, slow but maneuverable dive-bombers. A single SONIA was intercepted, with Earl Hartman making both the tally-ho and the kill.

The fighter team had hardly gotten back on station when the fighter director again vectored them out. Monteau spotted the enemy, four SONIA's. The fighters split up, Longino going after a plane, Monteau after another, and Hartman and Clement teaming up on a third.

Monty lost no time in getting on the tail of his quarry and flamed it almost immediately. When it splashed Monteau was already in hot pursuit of the fourth and so-far-unmolested Jap. He burned and splashed it as quickly as the first.

The pilots of the planes pursued by Longino and by Hartman and Clement were good. They twisted, turned, did split S's, and used every trick in the book. One did a split S not more than 500 feet above the water.

Longino smoked his victim early, but had to stick grimly to the dodging Jap and get several more bursts into him before he began to burn and finally dived flaming into the sea. Then Jack turned his attention to the plane which was still twisting itself out of Hartman's and Clement's gunfire.

Earl and Clem had hit it and forced it down close to the water, when Jack made a highside run and with a long burst flamed and splashed it.

Those were the last Jap fliers encountered by Fighting 40 until 15 May when Lochridge's team got the three VAL's in the Sakishima's with Lebel and Coleman scoring the kills.

CONCLUSION

Air Group 40's last action in the Okinawa campaign was a strike on 16 June, intended for Kagashima in the Jap homeland.

The last fast carrier task unit had pulled out of the Ryukyu area to return to Leyte and get ready for the series of strikes which Admiral Halsey was preparing to deliver against Japan itself. The withdrawal of the fast carriers left the Okinawa air defense seriously depleted. A determined Jap strike of several hundred planes, such as they had previously thrown at Okinawa, might have resulted in serious damage and destruction. There were a number of worried naval men around Okinawa at that time.

It was decided to scrape together every Hellcat, Avenger and Corsair (all of them types used by the fast carrier task forces) which could be spared, and strike at Japan. The strike was planned to look like a fast carrier strike and cover up the absence of these big ships.

The SUWANNEE-led task unit was the only escort carrier task unit which had Hellcats. All other escort carriers used the smaller Wildcat fighters. Admiral Sample's unit was therefore most heavily drawn upon for planes.

A total of 107 planes were gathered. There were 24 planes from the SUWANNEE, 24 from the SANTEE, 8 from the BLOCK ISLAND, 4 from the GILBERT ISLAND, and 47 from the Marine air groups on Okinawa.

Lt.Cdr. Jack Longino was accorded the signal honor of being given the strike leadership.

Although the strike never reached Kagoshima it probably accomplished its primary purpose.

Staging from Kadena Airfield, the big group started up the Ryukyu chain. A little north of Okinawa the group began to encounter bad weather. They droned on, however, up past the Amami Gunto. The

