

Guadalcanal, Early 1943

by Harry Zirkelbach 09-13-2010

The Navy Squadron, VP-52, that Tom was part of,
was on their first Pacific tour, early 1943.

These 18 Crews, some 200 Officers and enlisted men, were replacing VP-12, which had been on Guadalcanal since the first days of the American invasion. These PB2Y-2 aircraft crews would fly nightly search patrols, reporting on, attacking, anything Japanese on sea in air, west and north of their Henderson Airfield base.

For two weeks the Squadrons overlapped,
though VP-12 ceased flight operations against Japanese with VP-52's arrival.

Tom called Denver home, and in these few days he met a Coloradan from VP-12, Jim K, from Brighton. They had never met, though their families farmed the same area.

Crew assignments were set well before arrival. Training together fixed duties,
an understanding of who would do what in expected emergencies.
And establish binding friendships.

Oddly, immediately on arrival at Guadalcanal, one Flight Officer requested reassignment. Without discussion, this was done. Later, one the first operations for VP-52, his former crew began a mission, did not return. Was never heard from.
Their loss naturally makes all others nervous.

The next night, the crew involving Tom began a mission well after dark.
Aloft about five uneventful hours, they spot a Japanese Cruiser.
It was alone, fleeing northwest, very visible wake. Cruising at 6,500',
they report the sighting, had two small bombs to drop.
All 13 aboard go on alert, await the Captain's decision.

Rudy Johnson, Plane Commander, was indecisive. Several approaches begun,
turning back. Someone shouts "For God's sake Rudy, let's attack or go home."
Rudy decides on a bombing attack. He pushing throttles "Full Up".
The Cruiser had done nothing but steam away until hearing the increased engine RPM.
They began VP-52's shooting war.

This clear night, enemies have a unobstructed view of each other. None in the PB2Y could be sure what Rudy thought we could accomplish, these small bombs,
several 30 and one 50 Cal machine guns.
Less than a mile from a drop, trouble.

One Cruiser shell exploded, starboard, under the single wing of the PBY. Shell fragments rattled off and through that side, fore and aft. The concussion threw the "Dumbo" violently to port, almost as if we were suddenly flying sideward. Then, nothing but trouble.

For starter, Ensign Cooper was handling the aft starboard side 30 mm gun mount. Tom's back was adjacent Coopers, Tom handling the port gun mount. Cooper is thrown off balance and out of the PBY, never seen again. He is gone. If he made a sound, none heard it in the turmoil.

Control regained somewhat, Rudy headed away from that war. Rudy announced we would make a water landing. Crew participation argued "No, we were sure to be dead, or prisoners."

That resolved, complete check showed the starboard strut severed from the wing, pieces of both ends seemingly waving back at the Japanese.

The crew concentrates on return to base. Pieces of severed spar wave irrationally, bang convenient parts of their noisy home.

Airspeed is decreased. Altitude gradually sacrificed to maintain speed with less power. Fuel would be critical, for some holes existed where fuel tanks were stored. The ugly wind screams, from exterior damage, became part of life. The three hour, 27 Minutes needed to return finally completed prayerfully.

Even the landing was not routine, for American gunners firing at them were lousy shots.

12 of Rudy's crew had survived, unharmed. Th PBY did not.

Jim K could never get enough detail of this flight. He sought out Tom everywhere. Tom was glad when Jim left for home days later. Jim K. had become a pest. Tom couldn't understand Jim's jealousy of our almost being killed, though this Catalina had been his aircraft.

Later, Tom appreciated that misplaced curiosity that kept Tom from recalling the certain death of Cooper. And the irony of having that young man, a friend not know well, as the first object being dropped on anything Japanese, in the 19 months Tom would spend flying the Pacific into the inferno within the Rising Sun.