

Stay With The Plane!

From the tale related by Ralph Cushman, Lubert's Crew Captain

04-20-2009 by Harry Zirkelbach

The Central Pacific was base for many Navy and Air Force Squadrons in WWII. Much of this flight time was used for training. Then there were assignments, some for Search and Rescue. The reason for training for those who flew into the advanced areas, was to seek in Rising Sun, search for combat, adventure, peril, and come home.

Those difficult and challenging days spent in combat followed countless hours in training, much in the 48 states. Once in the Central Pacific and in Europe, training continues, almost to boredom.

Personnel from the breadbasket states, had never seen a large body of water. Even their buddies who lived in a shore lined state, never get a good view of the immensity of an Ocean until flying from the mainland, especially from the West Coast toward a Pacific duty station, usually Hawaii, first. Even at a couple of hundred miles per hour cruise, that journey seemed endless, monotonous.

Beyond the expanse of that seemingly flat sea, was the compelling beauty once fear was taken to the back of the brain. For all who flew in the military, fought against Japan, the beauty was compelling. Sunsets, sunrises, clouds and the contrast between the blue of the sky, and that of the sea; they really were different colors. Every day.

And, when either was angry, the colors darkened until near black. Then, it was safer to be on land, in doors, for nature turned the sea into a furious mother, intent on destruction by wave and wind. Thank goodness, most of the time both wave and wind were gentle, constant, welcome, exhilarating.

On the islands never touched by WWII battles, GIs saw the locals as different than anyone they had met anywhere before. Hey, they were friendly, carefree, social, easy going. They lived a good life. Little worry about punching a time clock, getting a weekly check, as on the mainland. They wore comfortable clothing, and not too much of that.

Local food was plentiful, often delicious, inexpensive if not actually free to be picked from tree and field. And fish, abounded just off shore, ready for the taking.

More than a few who visited these tropic Islands for the first time had wondered how the Missionaries had been successful. Imagine, promising Heaven to men women and children, who had everything they wanted in food, clothing and shelter, without a job. How could Heaven be better than this paradise they enjoyed, that is, until the whites came and began to change their culture.

We pick up a crew of Navy Patrol Squadron VP-100 in Oahu, Hawaii. We will follow them, loosely, take them to one day, spring 1945, if you can imagine spring in their South Pacific where it had never snowed.

They were one plane in a 15 B-24 aircraft Squadron. Each crew, three officers and nine enlisted men. In this crew, only the senior officer, the Plane Commanded, had flown against the Japanese earlier in the war. He had flown in a PBY Squadron, PV-60, from Guadalcanal, in 1943. Then Al Lubert was recently commissioned Ensign flying the PBY flying boat.

Now he flew in a better aircraft, and with a young crew graduates from various Navy Training Schools, each an expert from their training. They were good, had been told so enough times to reinforce their confidence in their skill. They had not been together long, and Lubberts was only mightily challenged to make them this fighting machine, not a machine of fighting individuals. From this they learned quickly they were led by a confident, competent Pilot-in Command.

Training began at Kaneohe Navy Air Station on the north shore of Oahu, hawaiian Islands. The field was on the Pacific, just down hill from the Pali Pass. In this intensive training, crewmen sensed that B-24s were being shot down in combat further west, and survivors would be in this huge Pacific Pool. Best to know how to swim. So in times the crew did not fly, several began swimming at the beach just

north of the field. They hoped this would be unnecessary training, but the Boy Scout spirit "Be Prepared" seemed reasonable, and soon these youthful airmen could swim for miles.

Sometime later the Squadron began flying out of Mindoro Island, of the Philippines. This was supposed to be temporary. As more Western Philippine Islands were overrun, airfields there would become base for Patrols, from south of Borneo to Japan itself. This tiny airfield was constantly overcrowded with aircraft. The one runway was short, at sea level, trees on both sides, hills beyond.

Each crew of VP-100 flew west from in assigned sectors every three days. Flight were long, began in the dark hours before dawn, lasted an average 14 hours. Return, debriefing, then pleasant hours until roused around midnight in two days preparing for another predawn take off, always headed west.

The flight we follow encountered good weather, was tense several times, but without direct skirmish with any Jap aircraft or ship.

Return to base, normally the dullest time, a snooze for some, became difficult. A storm was entered. More than usual buffeting. Then torrential rain, water seeping inside the fuselage, wetting everything.

Each hour seemed eternal, uncomfortable. To maintain aircraft control more power was added to the four engines. When it became apparent that fuel would be low near home, the crew was instructed to toss extraneous gear. This kept the crew busy, lightened the B-24, lessened fuel consumption.

Weary from the storm, they neared McGraw Field. Captain Lubert initiated preparations for an approach. In reality, the flight crew had seen nothing but torrents of rain, felt extreme buffeting of their B-24 home. The Captain asks for a reading of the four fuel tanks. He needed this since gauges on the instrument panel bounced off Empty pegs, because of buffeting. The plane captain dipped the tanks, found hints of moisture in each and optimistically announced, for all the crew, about 30 minutes of fuel remaining. An approach was began; the

aircraft began letting down through the storm. Nothing could be seen. They must try again.

Once again the long stretch downwind the field for an approach, left turns, then descent toward the airfield amid the violence of the storm, seeing only rain.

Suddenly. A violent slamming of the B-24 against something. The pilot pushed the four throttles forward, that motion thrusting his arm when the B-24 seeming to stop in flight. The plane combined a gigantic bounce and leap, as the obedient engines slowly regained altitude and airspeed.

The gradual increase, allowing the crew to appreciate the terror of that moment. The damage report requested when the B-24 was stabilized indicated their B-24 had landed in the Pacific, tearing away many aluminum parts that had slammed the ocean. Wheels, extended for landing on earth, which must have been in the Ocean, were intact. Yet the noisy plane would fly.

On the downward leg for another approach, uncertainty was reviewed. The Captain made a choice. He instructed his crew; he would fly over the island, the crew parachutes on, would jump.

This was met with ridicule. None trusted his chute. Besides all felt that they surely would be killed in any fall in this storm.

Crew Captain Cushman summarized. We'll stay with you and the plane, Captain. There is no other realistic choice.

That settled, the four tanks were dipped again, two showed nothing; still the four engines whined comfortably.

On final the Captain turned toward the promised land. Eyes peered ahead, searching for separation between ocean and land. Suddenly a lessening of rain, turbulence, the eternal noise. Then even more quickly, they were outside the storm. There, where it should have been, was the field. Throttle and mixture adjusted, descent begun, one engine coughed and quit. Near touchdown a second engine quit,

No problem, touchdown and the lightened B-24 rolled smoothly to a waiting signal man, directing them to a parking spot.

The remaining two engines were shut down. Quiet, for a moment.

Because the violent and ugly weather returned.

Their B-24 had penetrated the eye of a smaller, vigorous Pacific Ocean typhoon, and survived.

These young airmen had yet another story to tell, with exaggeration at the bars, vulgarities removed later at home.

Now they needed sleep, as two days later, they would fly again.

addenda.

Lt. Al Lubert would have the distinction of being the only recorded

B-24 pilot who had landed in the Ocean,

physically and aerodynamically pulled the plane out of the water, and lived to make that final safe approach, smooth landing.

This incident destroyed his airplane.

With B-24 pilots he had become an instant legend.

What Al did, could not be done.

