

Navy Pilot Training WWII

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All WW II military prided themselves in the quality of the Aviator completing their Flight Trains, becoming commissioned Officers, usually Second Lieutenant in the Air Corps and Marines, Ensign in the Navy.

Yet the history of Naval Aviation indicated that slightly more than half of all pilot fatalities happened in tedious months of training.

Yet that may not be the full story.. Not everyone entering the fleet, or Army Command attached to a base Operation overseas, arrived fully confident they could conquer the world. Literally all had to do, have conviction, "I shall not die" or whatever means the same thing.

In the latter stages of the war, Pilot Wings were being graduated at a prodigious rate. Those who were to be assigned to multi-engine aircraft, received further crew and flight training (for the Pacific, the Navy these pilots would fly the dependable four-engine B-24).

These pilots chose a Co-Pilot, Navigator and crew of eight somewhere on the Mountain States multiple airfields, initially flying together locally, then as a team at a West Coast Navy Air Station, further crew coordination and aircraft training.

As the fighting against Japan intensified the final months, individual crews were sent as replacements, for crews missing

or unable to fly for any reason. So they joined a veteran group of crews who had survived because of skill of the pilot, aircraft and crew, problem solving, in some order.

I was attached to a Squadron in Leyte, Philippines. Our Commander a good pilot, Flew missions on schedule. Was a tyrant in disguise. You were his friend until some incident you might not recognize who'd forever make you unacceptable. Young Officers reporting for first assignment were favorably impressed.

They were given a slot in the daily rotation, expected to obey any order. At this time, that meant a flight every third morning; reporting for the departure about midnight, ready the aircraft ready to be over the target area at sunrise. The flight would usually last up to twelve hours, three to four hours to station, then patrol, possible conflict and safe return.

In this the third month of the Squadron's assignment, we had lost about two crews a month, less than the others Squadrons.

Then the Executive Officer's crew is lost. The replacement arrives. They really seem young. In fact, they were.

But when their Officers mingled in the Officers Mess, there was an immediate sense of a lack of confidence in the three. They peppered veterans with meaningless questions. Nothing we said would convince them, the Japanese pilots we met were untrained, flew inferior aircraft, in power-plant, armament, guns, yes pilot experience. They were no match for any B-24 crew.

The only concern, head-on attacks, where they usually break-off at the last minute, turn right, dive. For evasion, keep the forward guns firing, and at the last second pull up left, being prepared to come around sharply for further attack.. We rehearsed this on the chalk board, and from camera guns of earlier missions.

They left to train their crews accordingly. They seemed ready for the first mission.

It happened that our crew was assigned the same soirte, north of Iwo Jima, one of the few locations that aircraft from Japan might still be expected.

For the first three hours on location, nothing happened. We made a few straying runs as directed by ground spotters, on the west side of Suribachi. Then return to altitude continues patrol. All of a sudden our port gunners announce Japanese aircraft are approaching at 8.000. Sure enough, three light bombers are at the same altitude as the new crew. Are warned, acknowledge; they see the enemy. Continue toward the Japanese.

We see both side firing at the other without effect. Then dangerous closure, one Japanese bomber headed straight for our crew. More shouting from our crew. In an instant it's over, They had struck head on, neither making an effort to avoid the other.

Credited a Combat fatality. In reality another failure of Training, graduating pilots unable to act independently in an emergency.

We drew ground duty at times. My next assignment, go through the Officer's effects, collect material to be sent the next of kin.

For once, this was easy, nothing had to be destroyed. These were three wonderful young men, no trysts, skeletons to be hidden. Just an occasional simple love letter between innocents. And letters of genuine affection between the three and their immediate family.

With packets completed, it was my pleasure to write the family.

In affectionate terms, tell of the death in the sky of these heroes. Have the Commander forward it to the Admiral for his signature.

Two days later their replacement arrived. They had trained with the deceased. I avoid conversation with them. Arrange that they fly different days than ours.