

The Battle for Leyte Gulf
by
Lt (jg) Charles "F." Spalding

AUTHOR OF
LOSE AT FIRST
& SPP. FRIEND
CASE OF JACK & THE
VENNEDY'S

"The Jap fleet is fourteen miles astern!"
"Sure," I say, "Sure it is."

Angrily, the flight deck officer, LaRue, a small aggressive man who looks like a belligerent rooster with his yellow cap tied on his head, grabs my arm and points toward the last CVE in the formation. It is the Gambier Bay steaming along undisturbed against a background of gray, quarrelsome, early morning clouds that squat low on the early sullen sea. Gusty winds drive a dawn rain across the deck but nothing seems out of the ordinary. At 0900 on the 25th of October, 1944, the six escort carriers, three destroyers, and four destroyer escorts that make up Task Force 77.4.3 not exactly a gathering of naval might, apparently are about to commence another day of support air operations. It is a dull, monotonous, unadventurous mission, but one for which CVE's are particularly fitted with their limited speed, flimsy construction and negligible armament. It requires that our planes bomb and strafe in support of troops that have landed.

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askore on heyte Island. Naval might is not needed here; the job can be done by jeep carriers, destroyers, and destroyer escorts operating in guarded waters.

But even as I look, two geysers of spray rise up fantastically in tall lazy columns behind the Gambier Bay. Macker shells dye the water red. And then a phosphorus shell bursts short above the ship releasing glittering streamers.

I turn quickly back to LaRue, but he is under the bridge getting orders to launch from Lt. Comdr. Sweet, the air officer. Captain Whitney's bulk, peaked by a green base ball cap, looms up behind the air officer. The bridge teems with activity. Startled members of the staff peer thru glasses into the murky gray astern. The Admiral, holding binoculars in his left hand, his canvas flight jacket with the leather name plate, Oftsie, R.A., open below his neck, goes to the Captain.

"Captain, that's a Jap fleet behind us. What are you doing about it?"

"Admiral Sprague has ordered the Task Force to increase speed one knot."

"One knot!! Give her all she'll take!"

All she'll take amounts to nineteen knots. In of the C.I.C. room, a telltale red line on the plotting screen shows the Japanese warships closing at thirty. Enlisted men and officers work feverishly over squawk boxes, charts, radar instruments, radios and phones. Foul weather doubles the static; excitement multiplies the conversation: loud hectic talk, instructions, pleas, cries, shouted criticisms, Japanese, frantic questions all issue into the semi-lit room collide and jell into endless garbling. One of the officers stands aside watching an enlisted man plot with red chalk on the large, circular, luminous screen the course of the Japanese behind us.

"How could they get so close and not be detected?" I ask.

"The radar isn't as effective in bad weather," he answers.

"But fourteen miles! It must be part of a strategic plan."

He shrugs again.

"What about the other carriers? Listen, we're not out here alone, are we?"

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He shrugs.

My voice has risen too high. Someone looks at me. Embarrassed I start to leave. At the door I ask a talker what the Jap strength is.

"Four battleships, six cruisers, and a flock of destroyers," he says quickly and then relays an official message.

Back on deck the fighter planes are already off, the last in a climbing curving arc to the right. A plane director aids the first torpedo plane onto the catapult, walking slowly backwards and motioning with his hands. Immediately behind crawls another plane waiting its turn. The catapult officer, Lt(jr) Wertheimer, points down the deck and the first plane is ~~flung~~ aloft. The others inch clumsily nearer the catapult.

My eye follows the torpedo plane out over the water and falls upon the small escort vessels steaming along both sides of our force. They are laying a smoke screen. It shows clearly white against the sea's ashen shade. Two destroyer escorts and a destroyer are doing the same thing astern. Heavy black smoke issues from our

own stacks. And then again a six gun salvo raises fingers of foam on both sides of the Gambier Bay. They can come no closer without hitting. More shells strike around the carrier. It seems to be sailing between spouts of water.

Commander Richard Fowler, the squadron's skipper, is on the catapult now. The tip of his tongue shows between his teeth. It gives him an impish look. Still anxiety is pressed on other faces, but Fowler's face is almost bright. This is his profession. The helpless position he regards as the chance of a lifetime. Some men are made great in moments like this. Turner's tough bearded face is twisted, Garrison's fat rubbery face looks ugly behind his goggles. Issitt's dark face freezes evenly. Globokar is open mouthed, but the Skipper's humorous face is almost bright.

After he is launched, Lt. David appears out of Operations. We stand together in the catwalk.

"They're firing on the White Plains," he shouts.

Water rises beside the carrier off our port quarter.

"They're four battleships, six cruisers, and fifteen destroyers back there," he adds.

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I nod.

"Are we getting any help?"

"We sent a message, but everybody's busy. They're attacking down south and at the beach."

"There must be somebody. How about Army planes?"

He shakes his head. Tacloban Field isn't ready.

For the first time I fully realize our position. A Jap task force coming down from the north has accidentally run into us off the coast of Samar. We are all that lies between them and their objective, the defenseless transports at anchor in Leyte Gulf. Six CVE's, three destroyers, and four destroyer escorts are pitted against four battleships, six cruisers, and an estimated sixteen destroyers. Fear fills me and curls in my stomach like fog around a street lamp. We have nothing to fight back with but one five inch gun. And our planes.

"Our planes have been sent to attack the enemy," it is announced over the public address.

On the plotting board in C.I.C. it is evident that the Japanese are pressing closer and closer. They have moved up on both sides and lie about us like a horseshoe. From the catwalk you can plainly

see orange streaks from their guns, wait an endless thirty seconds and then observe the shell splashes. Their cruisers stand less than six miles off our port and starboard side. Battleships and the rest of the unit are drawing up astern.

I pass Lt. Harry at his twenty millimeter gun forward on the port side. His babyish face looks ridiculous beneath the steel helmet.

"I can't believe it," he mutters desperately. "It is incredible! How did it happen? We can't even shoot back!"

The anguish of utter helplessness gives the crew a craven look. They stand impotently at the rail watching shells splash about the White Plains and the Gambier Bay.

"lookit there! She's hit!" several shout at once.

The Gambier Bay swings violently to port, smokes badly and begins to drop back. She doesn't explode. I think of the Liscombe Bay. I watch her fall back. Shells drop on her with doubled fury now. Soon she will be a sitting target for their battleships, cruisers, and destroyers.

"I hope Mac gets off," murmurs a crewman.

Everybody has friends on the Cambier Bay. I want to run away. I duck into the light lock and run aimlessly down the passageway. In the flag office I find Lt. Snyder at his desk. His thick frame is slumped in a chair, and fear has drawn his features.

"What do you think?" I ask stupidly.

He spreads his thick hands helplessly.

"This is it," he says.

"Yeah, this is it," echo two pale yeoman, nodding together agreeably. They are packing secret papers that they have been ordered to destroy.

I leave this cheerless scene and go needlessly to the head. Two hundred and fifty pounds of Lt. McCabe are balanced on the toilet in what must be one of the most studied casual gestures ever assumed. Spread out before him is the sports edition of the Philadelphia Inquirer. This is October twenty-fifth. I calculate quickly that the paper is four months and thirteen days old.

"What do you think?" I ask again absurdly, taking a seat beside him.

He turns his high head slightly like an interested

St. Bernard and talks grandly as if he were the allied spokesman.

"I have every confidence that we shall emerge safely from this."

"You go up and look at that cruiser off our port beam, and you'll lose some of that confidence

"The hell there is!" he whispers hoarsely.

A thud is heard outside and a moment later it is announced tonelessly over the public address that we are now being fired upon ourselves.

"The Kitchin Bay is under fire."

The announcement is coupled with three more thuds in rapid succession. My stomach cramps.

Crippled by terror, I crawl into a bunk and turn out the lights so as not to be seen. But this is worse. I can't mentally overcome my fright because we are literally helpless. God, there must be some way out?! But there is no way out. Without firepower we are even deprived a fighting chance. I wonder numbly if I will feel this same panic forty years from now when age and sickness again bring death close enough to clasp. Forty years! Have I four or forty

minutes? Who wants to live forever? Not forever, sargeant. One hundred and six will do nicely.

Announcements come regularly over the public address system now. Chief heddy and Yeoman Percy keep the crew below decks advised of the battle's progress. "A salvo just exploded about a hundred feet off the port side."

later.

"They're pretty close, but they're doing no good. Our fellows are really putting out on the five inch."

Previously the Captain had given the Quixotic order: "When the Jap fleet comes within range, open up with our five inch." Gunner Davidson is firing the gun as if it were automatic, but he has no armor piercing shells, only anti-aircraft which will bounce like dried rice off the Japanese plating.

Somebody grumbles.

"Shoot it! Stick the goddam thing in the water and give us some speed!"

"A Jap battlewagon is pulling up behind."

The address system records every quaver in the announcer's voice.

"The last salvo straddled us," he cracks bravely.

Men walk rapidly through the passageway. I can't stand the darkness any longer. I follow Doc Witt out onto the Forecastle. It is an incredible sight. Enemy cruisers are in plain view off our port and starboard quarter. Orange flame spurts from their guns at uneven intervals. They fire broadsides in salvos of six.

"Isn't that the Nachi, Oscar?" Someone asks Lt. Dresslar, the squadron's A.C.I. officer.

He squints over the side at the obvious silhouette.

"That's the Nachi," he mumbles thickly and creep back into hiding.

"Our destroyers and destroyer escorts have been ordered to make a torpedo attack."

The word is passed again.

I watch incredulously and soon see the DF's, little bobbing bath tub toys they seem, wheel smartly and head back for the enemy. Struck dumb with admiration, the shelling momentarily goes unnoticed. It is a shaming fearful example of courage, discipline and faith in command. Could anyone on this belmiest day have dreamed

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that when the Jap fleet did come out it would be set upon by these tiny vessels!

The little craft slip outside the smokescreen. One tries impudently to head off a battleship. A direct hit sets it up on end. Cruiser fire surrounds two others.

An explosion aft raises our own ship clear of the water. The Admiral reduces the zig zag to keep the rudder from jamming. Now a perfect straddle. The cruisers have approached to a distance of some miles. Directly ahead lies Samar Island. We can turn neither right nor left. We are being driven right onto the beach!

Captain Whitney orders small arms handed out to the crew. We cannot force the semi-circle the Japs have drawn around us. Our planes have attacked. The escort vessels have attacked. All that keeps the enemy's force at bay are our four five inch guns firing from the carrier *Santails*. The *Fauslow Bay's* gun is out of commission.

Suddenly at 0913 the shelling stops.

"The cruisers --- the cruisers are retiring."

"They can't be!" shouts the Captain incredulously.

In another ten minutes they could have annihilated our entire force.

"Cruisers are now nine miles, - opening."

"Cruisers at twelve miles."

"The enemy has retired!" the announcer cries.

Wild cheers of relief rise out of the catwalks.

Falling limply against a railing I look down into the dark, impassive water scudding by below.

Nature is coldly impersonal! I feel light, so light. The air is fresh.

I wonder why the Japs broke off, why they did not press a torpedo attack that would have gone ~~un~~necessarily unopposed. How in Heaven's name could five escort carriers, guarded only by seven small escort vessels, survive two and one half hours of shelling by major enemy fleet units at almost point blank range? Will anybody believe it?

Flight quarters sound. Lt. Lock lands everybody safely aboard although the ship is seldom headed into the wind. Before we can learn how the pilots managed, the General Quarters bell

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clangs again.

"All hands stand by for an air attack!"

Black smudges against the gray sky indicate a carrier on the port side throwing up anti-aircraft fire. From nowhere four Zeros appear and coast slowly past at an altitude under eight hundred feet.

They are mistakenly regarded as friendly until Lt. (jg) Richter shouts frantically from air defense "They're Zekes. They're Zekes!"

The guns open up behind and none are shot down. Nobody realizes they are decoys until the starboard guns open up at a plane diving steeply on the ship. As the dive progresses, it appears that the pilot may have no intention of pulling out. Guns in his wings wink. People scatter. A gunner forward sags in his straps. I dive into the light lock amidships. The plane skims the bridge, crosses the deck, plunges through the catwalk, forward on the port ^{side} into the sea. There is a loud explosion.

"Fire! Fire on the hangar deck," the public

address announces listlessly.

The fire is quickly controlled. On deck the wounded are attended. La Rue, Lock, Wertheimer and Lyons bring stretchers to the island where Dr. Hennessey treats them. Two men at the gun stand where the plane crashed have gone out of their minds. One runs aft, shrieking; "Where is my right leg? Where is my right leg?"

Later they return shaking their heads.

A plane captain has been killed. There is a frightful gash across his chest as if he had been opened up by a plow. He lies exposed like a visceral diagram. Men look, then look away, dumb, ~~at~~ pathetic, helpless, sick. The sweet cloying smell of dead flesh hangs in the catwalks.

The guns begin again. Dr. Hennessey and Dr. Schaffer work intently in the middle of wreckage and noise. Later they will do surgery, some delicate work. They don't lose a man though several are badly hit. The hand of a man shot in the head begins to

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shiver violently. I have seen a squirrel's paw in identical throes. The doctor gives him plasma there on deck.

I looked behind at the Midway ^{57.10}. The planes that passed us are now attacking her. There is a tremendous explosion that arrests everybody on our deck in rigid, horrified stances. Flames burst out of the ship and engulf it. The bridge is blown off and the elevator must rise a thousand feet in the air. A lookout with glasses trained on the fiery ship cries, "Guys are flying thru the air!"

Another plane attacks us from the stern. The guns hack at it and tear it up. A wing comes off, the engine falls off. The plane spins dizzily into the sea ahead of the ship while the five hundred pound bomb it carried lobs over the radar screen, tears away a support of link chain forward by the starboard 40 millimeter and then explodes in the water below. The bridge is inundated. Water gushes down the voice tubes into the pilot

house but there is no damage and for the time being there is a lull. I looked at my watch. It is twelve o'clock already!

Sandwiches and pairs of coffee appear on deck. In the ready room, through bursts of excited talk I learn of the squadron's attack. The Skipper has made the most of his opportunity! The day turned on his leadership. On the way to the target he gave encouragement and final instructions. "I think we can do it," he said. Then he put the squadron in perfect position for a coordinated attack, and together they swung the tide of battle.

The fighters went in and strafed. White, Davis, Stockard, Gallagher, Mchachlin, Stoece, Pollard, Krouse, Snyder. Lt. Garrison made twenty runs on a cruiser, ten times in bluff, without any ammunition. Lt. Sullivan attacked a destroyer that had pulled up within 500 yards of the Gambier Bay. The Gambier sustained twenty direct hits from six heavy cruisers at point blank range, but continued

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to limp along at two knots answering the enemy with her light anti-aircraft guns, until the very end.

The big damage was accomplished by our torpedo planes. Comd. Fowler put his own bomb into a cruiser. Behind him came Globokar, Turner, and Issitt. Globokar bombed the same cruiser amidships. Turner and Issitt got more hits and then the vessel exploded and sank, hee hit a battleship.

Later in the morning Lt. Andrews led a torpedo attack. He and Buttle, Kalb, Curtis, and McDermitt attacked another cruiser from both sides. The cruiser turned to parallel Kalb and Curtis and then Buttle and Andrews and McDermitt each hit it amidships. They left the ship dead in the water and listing badly to port.

In the evening four ensigns, all new to the squadron, made an attack by themselves. Marchant, Kummerlin, King and Fulton chased the retreating fleet up into San Bernadino Straits and dropped on it without even fighter

support. They did no great damage, but their attack has a special value. Marchant led them down on a battleship. Kummerlin believes he hit one cruiser amidships.

"Nice work," the Admiral said later.

"I'd have given a million dollars to see that thing go up, sir," Marchant exclaimed.

"Nice work," said the Admiral.

When the score is totaled, VC-5 is credited with two cruisers, hits on a battleship and damage to several ships. It is a record for a Composite Squadron.

We land planes all afternoon and then after dark, Lt. Hock manages without a ~~single~~ ~~and forcing him~~ single mistake although one TBM almost lands on top of him, knocking down the wind screen and forcing him to jump into the net for safety. The Negro gun crew finds huge amusement in the incident.

"What he do that for, Mr. Hock?" shouts on.

"What's he got against me?" Hock shouts back.

The mess boys howl with laughter.

Conversation is loud at dinner. Talk is all of certain defeat turned to victory by the ungainly, hastily built, expendable CVFs and their miniature squadrons. Tonight the jeeps are king.

My nerves are raw. A chain scratching over the deck sounds like a rocket and any sudden noise startles me. When the G.O. bell clangs again at 2150 I almost leap through the overhead. Gathered in the ready room are many unfamiliar faces. Pilots from other carriers, separated in the actions, have landed aboard us.

"Bogeys at nine miles. Skunk dead ahead," C.I.C. reports.

A submarine has spied us and is giving bearings to enemy bombers. Flying in the moonlight above us.

"For Christ's sake!" mutters somebody disgustedly.

Slowly quiet settles over the ready room. If four battleships, six cruisers and fifteen destroyers cannot sink us in the daytime, a few

planes and a submarine won't do any harm this night!

The pilots stretch out. Just the battle lights are left on. They diffuse, a dim red light through the room. Laughter bubbles in the back row and subsides.

"Bogeys at seven miles."

Nobody pays much attention.

"Play the phonograph, Charlie," calls Issitt drowsily. "Play her softly."

I lay down on the floor and rest my head on a back pack.

"Bogeys now at six miles."

The phonograph is playing lowly.

"Hello fellows, this is Gladys Swarthout. I do want to thank you all wherever you are for your kind notes and wish each one of you a safe, speedy return home."

"Cut the crap, Gladys. Just sing," growls Turner.

I turn uneasily to get comfortable, the room is almost dark, Gladys Swarthout is singing "Make Believe."

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"Boys still at six miles."

The ship creaks. All around men
are sleeping like children.



U.S. Naval Communication Service

MAILGRAM

FROM: Commander Escort Carrier Group

ACTION: All ships and units under my command.

DATE: 2 November 1944

INFO: Com 7th Fleet / CINCPAC /

Com Air Pac / Com Des Pac /

Com 3rd Fleet / Com 5th Fleet

To those officers and men of the escort carriers and to the kin of those who were lost X This task group has participated in one of the decisive battles of this war X The aircraft of these carriers not only have met and

defeated enemy attacks in the air but they have turned back a large enemy fleet composed of his most modern ships X The intrepid courage, skill and fighting spirit of the pilots and air crewmen were superb X

Never have fighting men had a greater task and never have fighting men performed their duty with greater determination and distinction X

The seamanlike handling of the vessels X
The brilliant offensive and defensive work
of the screen X The cool accuracy of the
gunners X The sustained and imperturbable
handling of planes on deck X The calm
singleness of purpose of the rearming and
gasoline details X The prompt and
efficient action of the damage control
parties and the engineers X All contributed
to turning the tide of battle to victory X
Against such teamwork the enemy
could not prevail X I am proud

to have been privileged to be present
and observe your achievements X May
God bless everyone of you and may
the citizens of your country forever
remember and be thankful for your

courage X To the mothers, fathers, sisters,
and brothers, wives and sons and daughters

of those who were lost I say X Do
not be sad X Be comforted and in-
spired in the thought that the victory

for which these men so freely and
courageously gave their lives has contributed
immeasurably to the final defeat of the
enemy X

T. L. SPRAGUE

(Rear Admiral - in charge of
all CVEs on Leyte invasion.)