

Our Navy

Mid-July, 1945

Nightmare off Iwo

*The BISMARCK SEA Was Part
of the Price of Conquest*

GAIL W. BROOKS and EDWIN C. GAY
As Told to Edward Pinkowski



BISMARCK SEA

NINE months and a day after she was commissioned, the pug-nosed little carrier BISMARCK SEA was as much in the two-day-old battle for Iwo Jima as the Marines fighting for the island's lower air strip. This was her third major campaign in less than four months. Her career was just beginning, and the crew was proud of calling her the *Busy Bee*. She was a happy ship.

The ship's commanding officer, calm, efficient, 44-year-old Captain John L. Pratt, USN, who is from Milford, Delaware, had been in command of the ship from the day of commissioning. He had taken her into the South China Sea with the first fleet to enter it since the fall of Corregidor. He was awarded the Legion of Merit for the efficient operation of the ship.

The BISMARCK SEA furnished air coverage for convoys going to Leyte and some of her planes led an air attack against two Japanese destroyers in Lingayen Gulf. The two destroyers were presumably sunk. The little carrier was under air attack several times, but she always came out safely.

But, on February 21, 1945, the intrepid life of this busy little carrier of the CASABLANCA-class ended abruptly. At 1700 the ship's crew was called to General Quarters. Jap planes were sighted in the area. From the bridge they could see beyond the wind-whipped deck almost thirty miles to shore, to Mt. Suribachi on the southern end of Iwo Jima, and all this expanse of water was filled with ships.

Many Jap planes speckled the horizon. There was no telling how many there were. As they ran across the sky toward the bigger ships in the center of the task force, our fighter planes intercepted them, and many enemy planes dropped out of the sky like ducks. The first attack was beaten off.

The intermittent attacks which followed were not as tame as the first one. The more the Japs tried to break through the air defense, the more vicious they got. They lengthened and thinned the line of air defense until, at 1830, some broke through. The BISMARCK SEA veered. Her anti-aircraft showed its teeth. The enemy planes were bound to take a lot of lead before coming in to spit out their tinfish missiles.

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A pattern of tracers streaks the sky as U. S. ships fight off Jap planes at Iwo.

As one plane sped in at a low level at another carrier, the *Busy Bee* gunners tracked it and shot it down in flames. Whereupon the other planes took notice of the spitting, 500-foot, 11,200-ton target. One single-engined plane came in so fast that before the gunners could count up to 5 it swooped down, swerved as if hit, and raced in for the attack. The plane was set afire, but still it hissed through the twilight to drop its black egg.

The first bomb struck the aft hangar deck and set the elevator well on fire. The ship's CO sped the orders along to fight the fire. The fire fighting parties worked hard trying to extinguish it. To the tall, gray-haired skipper it looked as if they would succeed, but the second plane snarled the works.

Dropping down straight out of the night sky, the second plane was not seen from topside. Its bomb came just a minute or two after the first one. It hit just forward of the flaming aft elevator well and there was a certain wonderment about the way the bomb landed among four gassed fighters on the hangar deck. The 40 mm and 20 mm ammunition clipping rooms under the flight deck were wrecked. The aft fire main was ruptured.

The fire meanwhile gained headway. There was nothing the Smoky Joes could do. Co₂ extinguishers were not enough. The entire aft fire main was dry as Death Valley, and nobody could get to the damaged section. The fire parties led the hoses aft from the amidships and forward connections, but they were helpless. The fire was red hot. There was only one thing to do.

Captain Pratt did not hesitate. He had just been told that four torpedoes were knocked loose from their storage and lying in the fire, and five others were on the edge of it. Immediately he ordered all hands to abandon ship. Life rafts were cut loose. Hundreds of men adjusted and checked their life jackets and jumped into the wind-chilled water.

But some men did not quit. Two men, ruddy faced Robert Hughes, SK2c, of Portland, Oregon, and short, slender Dean Carver, S1c, of Nucla, Colorado, heard the whine of another plane. They

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Suribachi, bloody rock on Iwo, will not soon be forgotten by those who viewed it.

tracked it coming in to lay another bomb and filled it with lead. It is not officially confirmed, but crew members credit Hughes and Carver for getting that plane.

The landing signal officer of the flying squadron aboard the BISMARCK SEA, sturdy, friendly, Georgia-raised, Lt. (jg) Billie C. Spell, moved into action the moment the attack came. He started to the after end of the flight deck and rescued four injured members of the crew. He brought them to the forward battle dressing station. After abandoning the ship, he struggled for awhile in the water until he found a life raft, and then dived into the water at least three times to rescue men unable to make life rafts.

Twenty-year-old William C. Bull, a lanky, quiet, blonde from Philadelphia, was in the forward engine room when the first bomb hit the carrier. The lights went out and smoke poured down the vents. He stopped what he was doing and started topside in the dark. The ship was rocked by blast after blast. When he reached the hangar deck, the place was blazing furiously. A torpedo went off and the concussion threw him against a plane. Steel splinters were flying like paper. He was hit in six places but wasn't hurt seriously. He was making his way out of the debris, toward the abandon ship station, when abruptly he halted.

He saw a shipmate, with a fractured pelvis, and picked him up. Despite the presence of explosions, fire, and flying debris, he carried the wounded man from the hangar deck to the abandon ship station. The man was lowered into a life raft and was later picked up by one of the rescue ships.

Then Bull checked his life belt and went over the side on a line into the cold and choppy seas that rose 12 feet high. It was chilly swimming. What was worse was that rescue operations were hindered by the darkness and rough water.

One sailor, 21-year-old Reginald Fischer, AMM2c, of Ann Arbor, Michigan, did not even know his collarbone was broken until he climbed aboard an empty life raft. But he had no time for that. He had to dodge bullets from Jap planes that were strafing the floundering swimmers in the white-capped seas.

Some men, like 19-year-old Albert Lee, could not swim. Lee, a short and chunky radio striker of Chinese extraction from

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San Francisco, put on a life belt before starting down the portside of the ship. He was about halfway down when there was another explosion within the vessel.

When Albert Lee hit the icy water, he found that only half of his life belt would inflate, the other half having been punctured when the explosion ripped the ship. He hollered for help. He was all alone and plenty scared. But even so, he reacted with true courage. Instead of depending solely on half of a life belt, he took off his pants, tied knots in the ends, and filled the pants with air to hold him up in the water. He remembered to do that from a picture that was shown to him long before aboard the ship.

He treaded the water for over 2 hours, practically alone. When he was finally picked up by a DE, he saw a sailor holding back another sailor. The latter sailor thought that he was a Jap.

Other men had difficulty in the icy, mountainous seas, too. Most of them carried flashlights and they bobbed like fireflies in the water. Many were continually calling for assistance. Jap planes machine-gunned the survivors in the water, and half of the casualties drowned in the heavy sea from wounds or cramps.

Burned and shocked as the men were, many reached life rafts and were later picked up by small ships. Tall, rugged Lynn Young Hancock, Cox., from Challis, Idaho, somehow climbed into a life raft. He was tired. But the water was filled with tired and weakened survivors. Some were going under. Exhausted himself, Hancock left the safety of his raft to save the lives of shipmate after shipmate. When he was pulled aboard a rescue ship, he was physically weakened and in a semi-conscious condition.

The Marine observers who were on the BISMARCK SEA at the time of the attack were also forced into the cold water. Ship's Clerk Gail W. Brooks, stocky, brown-haired native of Clifton, Kansas, gives credit to one Marine observer, Capt. Norman D. Goulet, of South Milwaukee, for helping him out of the water. That's the way it was during that night of horrors. The men gave no thought of themselves when they could help someone near them in the water. It is believed that some give their lives in helping others.

The officers and men of the vessels which came to the aid of the escort carrier after it had been hit also voluntarily dived into the water to rescue those unable to make the ships or get aboard unassisted. Most of the men, in the water from 30 minutes to 4 hours, were picked up by the rescue vessels.

Meanwhile, back aboard the stricken ship, the fire licked the entire hangar deck and rocked the ship with a series of explosions. By 2100 the ship rolled over on her starboard side and disappeared.

All survivors were transferred to a transport the following day, and the task force, including over 800 ships, rode in close to Iwo to avenge the BISMARCK SEA.

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