THUNDER ON THE FLIGHT DECK

BY

LT. L. VICTOR STRUB

USS Bataan CVL-29 WW2 Cruise Book

Assistant LSO Lt. Victor L. Strub landing aircraft aboard “Carrier B” (aka USS Bataan CVL-29) during Bataan’s “carrier qualification” days in Pearl Harbor, from October 18, 1944 to March 3, 1945. Along with LSO Lt. C. Edgar “Iron Mike” Mikronis, they completed carrier qualifications for Navy and Marine pilots from 23 different Air Groups, completing 7,474 landings (both day and night) of F6Fs, TBMs, F4Us, with only 14 mishaps – a 99.81% success rate!

http://www.bataancvl29.org/Oct%20'44-Mar%20'451.htm

THUNDER ON THE FLIGHT DECK, part 1 (Edited by Chris Novak)

Tearing at your hair, pounding your body, compressing your cheeks and whipping tears from your eyes is a tornado of wind. Arm's length in front of you spins a fifteen foot circle of steel, the three bladed propeller of a navy fighting plane. Under your feet is a pitching deck, slippery from a thunder shower and oil spray. Your left hand clings to the plane's landing gear while your right hand carries a heavy chock, ready at any moment to be dropped forward of the wheel you are following. You are a "chock man" -- a member of the flight deck crew of an aircraft carrier, a vital clog in the performance of her purpose, but to many of us an unknown and unappreciated contributor to victory.
Nine hundred and fifteen enemy planes destroyed in one week. Fifteen enemy warships sunk. Impressive figures these, especially when they are the score of but one carrier task force on a single major operation, indicative of the tremendous striking power our navy has mustered for the final blows to the sons of Nippon. And, high praise is due to the pilots of planes from these carriers, from whose bomb and rocket racks and machine gun barrels came the well-aimed forces of destruction that ultimately wrecked such havoc. But back on the carriers and close behind that final coup de grâs, was the vital coordinated work of many men, which, like so many other steps leading to it was as necessary as the trained skill of the pilots themselves.

Let's take a look at the work of these men aboard one of Uncle Sam's typical carriers -- a CVL, midway in size between the big Essex class and the small escort jobs. Such a one as --- call it "Carrier B", a veteran of action from the shores of New Guinea to the cost of Japan. And, just to make the picture more genuine, imagine yourself on board as the observer, privilege to share the thrills and excitement of a day's operation -- a strike against another of the enemy's fast dwindling strongholds.

Reveille will be early -- two and a half hours before sunrise -- but that is an old story out here where fourteen hours is a routine working day. Time to wash the sleep from one's eyes, perhaps make a few quick passes with the razor, and the word goes around that breakfast is being served in the wardroom. At the long tables pilots and air department personnel are already making the most of hot cakes and "eggs as you like 'em", while aft in the crew's mess hall the same "chow" is being served, less fancy but just as wholesome, cafeteria fashion.

Soon the thrilling notes of flight quarters are sounded over the ship's loud speaker system by the bugler, and with a last gulp of coffee, chairs are shoved backward and everyone is on his way to answer the summons of the bo's'n mate -- "all hands, man your flight quarter stations 1'. Slipping into your borrowed flight jacket and helmet -- needed protection in these latitudes against that top side wind --, and buckling on the ubiquitous life belt, you join the stream of clattering feet moving up the ladders.

Overhead, the old familiar stars are clear and bright as they glide in and out among the scudding, black clouds. But their light is almost lost in the darkness of the flight deck, so that

you are thankful for the guiding hand that steers you over to the island and up the ladder to the bridge, from which vantage point you will enjoy a box seat for the show below.

Gradually your eyes accustom themselves and the scene unfolds. On the flight deck the massive hulks of many "Hellcat" fighters and "Avenger" torpedo planes are disclosed, their wings folded, wheels chocked and tie down lines in place, all "spotted" aft in orderly, compact rows. Many dim figures are vaguely visible, scurrying about at final preparations. The ordnancemen , your guide informs you have been up for several hours installing the bombs, rockets, and ammunition needed for the this launce. All of their work must be done in this same style of darkness, for not even a lighted cigarette is allowed topside from sunset until sunrise.

Preparations are now complete, for suddenly the Air Officer's voice is heard over the "bull horns" -- giant loud speakers aimed to cover all areas of the flight deck --, ordering all hands to "standby for preliminary warm-up!"
Each plane has its assigned "plane captain", who makes its welfare his particular pride and joy, polishing the shatter proof windshield, inspecting its every moving part and giving these warm up tests that are additional to those made periodically by the more experienced mechanics. Having warmed the engines, gradually, they are accelerated to the roaring speed necessary to accurately check their operation, then gradually decelerated and stopped.

Down in the lighted dimness of fighter and torpedo squadron ready rooms, the final briefing has been given. Pilots and aircrewmen already have donned their conglomeration of gear and harness, are making last minute notations of the important navigational data. Suddenly the word sounds out through the loud speaker from the air plot, "pilots man your planes", and the show is under way.

Trooping out of the passageway and up onto the flight deck, pilots are assisted into their cockpits by plane captains. There are a few silent minutes while they adjust shoulder straps, plug in radio cords, attach oxygen tubes and make all of the routine but vital "check offs" preliminary to each flight.

Again over the bull horn, with deliberate emphasis, comes the Air Officer's warning -- "stand clear of pro----pellers" followed by the command "start --engines". With a roar that this time seems more earnest, the mighty two thousand horsepower monsters come to life in unison -- THERE IS THUNDER ON THE FLIGHT DECK.

Your voice is now useless against this cacophony of noise, and it is only by visual signals that directions can be given. During daylight hours this is a simple matter, with a variety of standardized hand singles employed to call for anything from unlocking of a tail wheel to the opening of a cowl flap or spreading of wings. But in this blackness of pre-dawn take off, some

lights are necessary, and it is the breaking out of these few, dim guarded lights on the flight deck that indicates the approaching climax of this morning's launch.

Under your feet the ever moving deck, vibrating with shock as each wave is split and tossed aside from the plunging bow, gradually lists with the ship as the helmsman brings her around, directly into the wind. The Captain and Air Officer together check the wind's direction and velocity; it is now whipping by so fast that you make haste to secure the buckle of your chin strap to stop it slapping against your cheek. On the flight deck, the foremost planes are taxing forward, pilots following explicitly the signaled instruction and guidance of a plane director, with chockman, blurrily visible, clinging to each wheel strut despite that tearing force of the slip stream.

Because of the limited length of the flight deck, planes must first be catapulted until there is sufficient runway available for a normal take - off. "Carrier B" has two catapults, one located on each side of the deck at the bow, so arranged that planes can be launched alternately -- one firing while a plane is being adjusted in place on the other. It is a complicated series of events, requiring the highest degree of team work and timing, but, run off with a speed, precision and finesse by experienced crew like a routine drill of the Roxy Chorus.

The first two planes are now on the catapults, their engines once again "revved" up to pass the pilot's final check. On the bridge, with a nod from the Captain, the Air Officer flashes the "go" signal. When visibility is better, a green flag is used for the same purpose to indicate that all is clear for flight operations.

Forward and to one side of plane number one, the catapult officer is waiting. He receives the thumbs up signal from his crewman, points his wand at the pilot and rotates it rapidly. The pilot advances his throttle to full power and the giant engine leaps into action; it's huge three bladed prop churning back a tornado of wind that makes the tail surfaces shudder. A last glance at the instruments, his hear set back firmly against the rest, and the pilot signals he is ready. Down sweeps the catapult officer's arm, the signal is relayed below to the catapult shack and the huge machine drives forward to send the plane flying into the air -- accelerated to a speed of eighty miles per hour in the distance of a few feet !

Seconds later the other catapult is fired, while down the deck in a steady stream, passed on from the skillful guidance of one director to another, more planes are being taxied forward. Somewhere along the line there is a moment’s hesitation as a handling crew dashes out, struggling to maintain footing in the slippery stream of the Hellcat ahead while they spread their wings on this fighter, just in front of a flashing prop behind.

One after the other they go, in intervals amazingly short, leaping out into space and off on their mission. With every second counting, this operation requires a coordination and teamwork of the highest caliber. And its demonstrated achievement can be largely attributed

to those factors which are part of every American youth -- the timing and teamwork learned in football, baseball, and basketball are the same elements here utilized to get maximum results in our effort.

Impressed by these thoughts, you notice that the officer is no longer directing planes forward as the last plane is catapulted -- all hands dash for the security of the catwalks. Aft, in the middle of the deck, the fly-one officer points his wand towards the pilot of a plane spotted there. Apparently he receives a signaled "OK", for he whirls his light overhead and the engine speeds up in accompaniment until the desired crescendo is reached -- his wand sweeps dramatically forward -- breaks are released and the plane glides ahead. Slowly at first, it rapidly accelerates until, just as the bow is reached, the flying speed is gained, and with a slight turn the fighter is off into the dawn. Looking aft again you see other planes already taxing up to the take off spot and the performance repeated until all planes scheduled are airborne.

(end of Part 1)