The Saga of Ormoc Bay
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The battle for Leyte had been raging since an Allied invasion force arrived off the coast of this central Philippine island. From the 23rd of October to the 26th, in a running battle on the sea and in the air, the Japanese attempted to repulse the landing. This titanic military engagement, known as “The Battle of Leyte Gulf,” proved to be the largest naval battle in history and decided the fate of not only the Philippines, but also of the once mighty IJN Combined fleet. During the four-day skirmish, Adm. Halsey’s Third Fleet and Adm. Kinkaid’s Seventh decimated four separate Japanese naval task forces commanded by Admirals Ozawa, Kurita, Nishimura and Shima. When the smoke had cleared, the surviving Japanese ships of Operation “SHO-GO” limped back to Tokyo and the Americans secured the landing beaches. Consequently, despite the stiff resistance by the Imperial Navy and Adm. Onishi’s newly instituted Kamikaze tactics, American ground troops finally stormed ashore.

Since U.S. Army soldiers had landed on the island in late October, they had been pushing inexorably west across the island. The Sixth Army had allocated over 200,000 ground troops for the operation, which included the 1st Cavalry Division, 6th Ranger Battalion and the 24th, 32nd and 77th Infantry Divisions. The American units were making great progress, and by early November, through the use of a double envelopment strategy, they were pushing the enemy infantry units towards the sea. However, Field Marshal Hisaichi Terauchi, the Japanese Southern Army commander, refused to concede defeat. The “Tiger of Malaya” ordered that a maximum effort be made to augment Leyte through Ormoc Bay. The original enemy strength on the island consisted of 21,000 men from the 16th Infantry Division. However, by November 9th, they had already reinforced the island’s defense with another 20,000 soldiers that were brought in from other areas. This disturbing trend could not be allowed to continue.

Leyte sits in the central portion of the Philippine archipelago, as part of the Visayan group. It lies SW of Samar, east of Negros and Panay, between the Pacific Ocean and the Camotes Sea. Possession of this island was crucial for the Allies, as it split the Japanese forces in the north on Luzon from those in the south on Mindanao, which constituted a great threat to enemy shipping lanes and served as an excellent base for driving further into the Philippines.

Japanese Convoy TA-4

Following the Leyte invasion, the Japanese began sending reinforcements to the battle zone in the form of "TA convoys." These flotillas which originated in Manila were bound for Ormoc Bay and loaded to the gunnels with men, supplies and vehicles. One of these convoys, designated TA-4, departed Manila on November 8th and headed southeast for the Leyte battleground. This convoy was transporting the Japanese 1st and 26th Infantry Divisions, as well as 3500 tons of munitions and four long range artillery pieces. The body of TA-4 consisted of three high-speed naval transports (APDs) and three army freighter-transports: Takatsu Maru, Kashii Maru and Kinka Maru. The procession was escorted by six warships of Adm. Kimura's Destroyer Division 31 and four coast defense vessel's that made up Adm. Matsuyama's Seventh Escort Group. The ships would receive additional protection from IJN vessels in Ormoc Bay and local ground-based fighters. The TA-4 convoy reached its destination on the evening of the ninth and crews commenced frantic efforts to unload their cargo. Sailors and laborers worked all through the night, unaware that, simultaneously, the men of the 38th Bomb Group were already preparing to attack them the following morning.

Allies alerted

Just after nightfall on the ninth, TA-4 was spotted in Ormoc Bay by American aircraft. Shortly, the ships were assaulted by P-38s from Tacloban, four courier B-25s from the 345th BG and three CENPAC PT boats. Additionally, an urgent order was transmitted to Thirteenth Bomber Command to commence attacks on the convoy as soon as conditions allowed. The order trickled down to the Fifth Air Force and, accordingly, Gen. Whitehead called on the "commerce raiders" of the 38th BG to make the strike. Late on the ninth, the Sun Setters who were already on "alert status," received a fragmentary order from GHQ for action the following morning. The group was directed to seek out and engage a Japanese convoy that had just steamed into Ormoc Bay. The strike was to be a maximum effort that employed all available B-25s. For cover, the bombers would be escorted by P-47s from the 460th Fighter Squadron, 348 BG. Additionally, there would be P-38s in the area, staging from Tacloban.

Emergency briefing

That night after chow, combat crews were notified to head for their individual squadron operations tents at for an initial briefing on the mission to Leyte Island. In what was becoming a regular event, Japanese "Betty" bombers were undertaking one of their nightly "heckling" raids on Morotai Island. These types of raids usually generated little damage, although they kept the airmen jittery from sleep deprivation. The allies also regularly employed these nocturnal harassment missions. Affecting the morale and sleep of the enemy, these "Psy Ops" (Psychological Operations), were beneficial to the overall war effort and rarely placed the participating aircrews in harm's way. In fact, as with aircraft carrier operations, the most dangerous part of the mission was often the take-off and landing cycle. In between the out-going flak and the falling bombs, airmen were arriving in small groups for their squadron meetings, which began at 1900 hours. The flyers were provided with details on the Japanese convoy, which included their primary target, the six ships transporting reinforcements, as well as any known Imperial Navy

escorts.

Japanese fighter cap

Furthermore, they were informed that interception over the target was highly probable, since Gen. Kyoji Tominaga's Fourth Air Army (Kokugun) was headquartered in the Philippines. By the summer of 1944, the Fourth Air Army had been decimated in New Guinea by the American Fifth Air Force, in conjunction with Australian and Dutch units. However, this beleaguered force was bolstered in early fall by the transfer of the Second Air Division (Hiko Shidan), from Manchuria and Japan. The detachment included many of the newest type-4 fighters. It was a sure bet that enemy interceptor's from Gen. Seichi Terada's Second Air Division and Gen. Kizo Mikami's Fourth Air Division would react rapidly and vigorously to the raid. Additionally, the (JNAS) Japanese Naval Air Service still posed a threat in the region, although it was a shadow of its former self. Prior to the "Battle of Leyte Gulf," the JNAS controlled 450 combat aircraft in the Philippines. By early November, what remained was a diminutive medley of serviceable attack planes. Adm. Onishi's First Air Fleet, although beaten down by U.S. carrier operations, still possessed several dozen Zero's from Air Group 101. The Second Air Fleet commanded by Adm. Fukudome, still maintained a smattering of "Zeke's" and "George's." Since the B-25s infiltration route would over-fly much of occupied Mindanao, the Japanese air arm in the Philippines would have plenty of time to arrange for a hostile reception. When the squadron briefings were finished the men hung around the "war room" poring over wall maps, terrain studies and escape methods.

Maurer pumps up the troops

Over in the 405th area of the camp, Maj. Edward J. Maurer, the squadron CO, was talking to his men. He described the up-coming strike and its importance to the allied ground forces slugging it out on Leyte. Seeing that some of the newer men were nervous at the prospect of tangling with Japanese ships of the line, Maurer gave the crews a pep-talk: "Let me tell you that no one stands up to the 12 forward firing 50 caliber machine guns we have on our planes. Go for their guns and I assure you that the Japs manning them will leave their positions and take cover. I've even seen them jump overboard trying to get away." The assembled airmen took heart from these strong words and went about their business preparing for the coming day.

When Maurer was finished with the particulars of the mission, the squadron intelligence officer produced a large map of the Philippines and everyone crowded around it. The "skipper" traced the route that the bombers would follow from their base at Morotai, through the lower Philippine Islands and into Ormoc Bay. Then remarked to the assembled airmen, that the Intel shop had "red marked" all known enemy bases, airdromes and AA positions on the map. According to 2/Lt. John M. Henry, a navigator present at the meeting, the crews were stunned: "…there was red everywhere we looked-our flight was to take us within range of 26 known Japanese airfields." Shortly, the squadron XO (executive officer), second in command, called to the men's attention the fact that not one crewman had taken notes. Lt. Henry later explained that everyone was

so dazed by the scope of the mission that they weren't following their normal procedures. After a time the briefing broke-up and the combat crews headed back to their quarters in order to catch some shut-eye before their final briefing at 0600 hours. The men caught a few hours of sleep, but were awakened at 0300 by another air raid. They spent much of the rest of the night dozing in their fox-holes, and then went to early chow.

Scramble at first light

After a breakfast of powdered scrambled eggs, salt pills for dehydration and atabrine pills for malaria, the crews got the final details of the mission and went down to the flight line to pre-flight their aircraft. Each member of the crew had the responsibility to check certain aspects of the plane or equipment while it was on the ground. When their tasks were complete and everything appeared satisfactory, the bomb-bay doors and hatches were closed. Before long the air controller's voice came over the radio authorizing the planes to commence launching. All across the airfield, pilot's wound up their engines, linemen removed the chocks from under the tires and B-25s began pulling out of their revetments. Planes moved down the taxiway, turned onto the end of the runway and lined up according to squadron. With full flaps, the pilot's advanced their throttles and started rolling down the "Marston Matting" to reach their take-off speed.

At 0800 hours, the first of 32 B-25s from the 38th BG took to the air and began circling up to its cruising altitude. Soon the sky was full of medium bombers, landing gear and flaps were raised and pilots used their rudders and throttle to jockey into their assigned position. Right on time, the B-25s were joined by 37 Thunderbolts from nearby Wawa Airdrome. The air task force formed-up and headed out over the Molucca Sea, steering a course of 330 degrees for the Philippines. During transit the P-47s took up station around the medium bombers. Half of the "Jugs" call-sign "Backfire Red," flew close cover with the Mitchell's, the rest designated "Backfire Blue," were "stacked high."

Convoy TA-4 weighs anchor

The formation continued winging their way toward the west coast of Leyte, unaware that several of their targets had already steamed out of the harbor en route to Manila. The previous night, several air and naval attacks destroyed landing barges and much of the freighter's loading tackle, which greatly hampered efforts to unload the six transports. However, by night's end the speedy IJN APDs T-6, T-9 and T-10 were empty, so they raised anchor and set sail for safer waters. By the time the Sun Setters arrived, they would be crossing the Camotes Sea with "a bone in their teeth," unescorted, but out of range. Convoy TA-4's freighter-transports would not be as fortunate. All three ships disgorged their troops, though, only the Takatsu Maru and Kashii Maru were clear of cargo. The Kinka Maru was still heavily laden with munitions and supplies, when the convoy slipped its ties and departed from the Ormoc pier, about three hours after dawn. Despite leaving with much of the 26th Division's supplies still onboard, the transport group commander Adm. Micuhara Macujama, decided to retire from Ormoc Bay at best possible speed before the allies returned.

While flying at several thousand feet in the vicinity of Mindanao, "radio silence" was broken by a transmission sent from their base on Morotai. The message included an intelligence update from U.S. forces in the Leyte area. It stated briefly that in addition to the expected escort of destroyers and smaller naval craft, two IJN light cruisers had been spotted in the vicinity of the target convoy. As the Sun Setters would soon learn, the waters of Ormoc Bay were teeming with Japanese warships.

Attrition en route

As usual, this mission like many others, suffered from unforeseen mechanical attrition. Not long after lifting-off, B-25J #43-27890, THE ARKANSAS TRAVELER, ran into trouble. The aircraft, flown by 2/Lt. G. D. Hoover, was forced to abort the mission. Apparently, during the launch sequence, another "Wolf Pack" plane that was flying above the lieutenant in the first flight dropped a shell casing onto Hoover's plane. The casing created a tear in the elevator forcing the pilot to return to Pitoe Airdrome. The formation continued their inbound leg of the mission, however before reaching Leyte another strafer peeled off from the formation. 1/Lt. Jack E. Hutcheson was flying B-25J #43-36040 for the "Green Dragons" that day. The aircraft developed a problem with the fuel-transfer system, which prevented access to all of the onboard fuel. Hutcheson and his right-seater, 2/Lt. F.R. Crowther made repeated attempts to draw avgas from other fuel tanks on the plane. When it became clear that the problem could not be resolved while airborne, they broke formation and turned for home.

The remaining 30 Mitchell's reached Ormoc Bay at approximately 1130 hours in clear skies and found an anchorage strewn with multiple targets. Aircrews noted that there were as many as 30 enemy ships visible in the area, more than half of them members of the Teikoku Kaigun (Imperial Navy). In addition to the escorts that had arrived with the TA-4 convoy, there were numerous other warships prowling the wide inlet. Among these were; destroyer escorts, coast defense vessels, at least a half dozen more destroyers and two light cruisers. A lot of firepower to be tackled by four squadrons of low-flying B-25s, each destroyer on its own, could boast at least 32 separate anti-aircraft batteries.

822nd commences hostilities

Prior to entering Leyte airspace, aboard every plane in the formation, crews were preparing for battle. Gunners and pilots were arming, checking and test-firing their machine guns. Also, aboard every B-25 a navigator had to crawl into the bomb-bay and deal with the business end of each 500-pound general-purpose munition. One by one, they would pull the safety pins from the fuse, located in the nose of each bomb, arming them for combat.

The Japanese convoy was first spotted while steaming out of the harbor, in column, in a westerly direction between Ponson Island and Apale Point. Not including other enemy ships in the vicinity, TA-4 now encompassed three transports, nine destroyers and one light cruiser. The Mitchell's had approached the objective area from the northwest, intending to cross the southern tip of the Ormoc Peninsula and attack from a landward

direction. During the mission briefing, the pilots had been advised to circle around behind the ships and use the hills for cover on their attack runs. The Japanese gunners would have more difficulty spotting the inbound aircraft with the dark mottled terrain at their six O'clock position. Three of the squadrons stuck to the mission profile. The 822nd however, barreled-in directly over the water in a long visible approach on the ships, barely skirting the edge of the isthmus. Every gunsight in the area was tracking these first eight planes, which were bracketed by an unremitting volley of fire on their final approach to target. The "Black Panthers" bore in on the enemy ships with total disregard for personal safety, initiating what would soon be their bloodiest day of the war.

The inbound strike force had been sighted by the Japanese while it was still several miles out to sea. However, the convoy most likely already had advanced warning of the air raid. One of the screening warships, the Wakatsuki, was an advanced Akizuki-class destroyer equipped with radar. As the B-25s closed in, the alarm was sounded and ships all over the bay began steaming at high speed while taking evasive action. On every merchant and warship, gunners opened-up on the approaching B-25s with everything they had. Small arms, machine-guns, 13 and 25-Millimeter "Pom-Poms," and even large caliber 5-inch naval shells from the main batteries of the destroyers and cruisers.

The 822nd flew into this maelstrom with their "skipper," Maj. Edward R. McLean in the vanguard. Flying in B-25J #820, he brought the formation across the Camotes Sea, south of Dupon Bay and along the edge of the Ormoc Peninsula.

The remains of the TA-4 convoy were visible between the peninsula and Ponson Island to the south. There were three large transports (AP's) transiting the straits, which were being protected by a flock of Japanese warships. Steaming in close proximity to the merchants was the Seventh Escort Convoy Group, commanded by Adm. Matsuyama Mitsuharu. This tactical flotilla was responsible for the protection of the valuable Maru's in the convoy. From the air, the flyers could make out numerous Japanese destroyer's, several light cruiser's and smaller kaibokan. Some of the destroyer's (DD's) stayed in column, flanking the transports. Others taking a more aggressive approach, turned perpendicular to the incoming air raid, allowing them to bring to bear every gun on their deck. Flying over the water at 450 feet AGL, McLean zeroed-in on a large ship identified as a freighter-transport. The merchant, Kashii Maru was engaged by flight number one about 2 miles northwest of Pilar Point on Ponson Island.

McLean ditches off Pilar

Leading the first two-plane element, with 2/Lt. Dean M. Clark, on his wing, the major dropped down to masthead height and began firing at one of the destroyer's that taken up station in front of the merchant. Three destroyers were throwing up a curtain of flak and machine-gun fire at McLean and Clark. Additionally, they were firing broadsides with their main batteries, which the airmen could see, as well as hear even over the roar of the engines. Both planes strafed the decks of the warship until much of the return fire was silenced. The B-25s zoomed over the destroyer, which poured withering fire into their "six" on the approach to the transport. From their 12 O'clock position, came tracers and

black puffs of AA fire originating from the deck of the heavily-armed merchant. In between were two lone Mitchell's with their bomb-bay doors open, relentlessly bearing down on the Japanese hulk. Despite the odds, both planes managed to reach their aimpoint for the target and release their payload. Clark's quartet of 500-pounders landed just off the stern, within 20 feet of the hull, sending up huge plumes of water. McLean's ordinance landed closer to the mark with at least one bomb scoring a direct hit amidships. Looking back, crewman observed debris sailing skyward after the detonation. Both pilots stuck together as they pulled away from the convoy, jinking like mad as they were forced to pass over two more destroyers and a cruiser, which shredded both planes with triple-A fire. On the inbound leg, gunners on both planes had strafed the freighter-transport, a DD and a destroyer escort. Outbound of the target, Clark's tail-gunner, Sgt. L.J. McClory, was on his knees firing his pair of Browning "fifties" from his battle-station, located in the aft end of the bomber. Observing a destroyer off to the north of them, he followed it with his aiming reticle, and then depressed his dual triggers and pelted the deck of the warship from stem to stern with tracers. He was gratified to see Japanese sailor's running around like crazy trying to avoid the ricocheting rounds.

The bombers continued heading south away from the harbor, but both were badly shot-up. The flak from the warships followed them all the way out of the harbor and finally abated when they reached Ponson Island. Lt. Clark's plane, B-25J #967, was hit in the right engine nacelle and the left wing. The compartment for the starboard landing gear was hit hard, tearing off the door and destroying the tire on the right wheel. Additionally, there were numerous holes in the rudders and elevators; Clark however, was the lucky one since his plane could still fly. McLean's aircraft had absorbed critical damage in the last pass over the warships and was literally falling apart. The port engine was on fire, the starboard rear gas tank exploded and the engine had fallen off the starboard wing.

Lt. Clark, still positioned on the major's wing, watched on helplessly as #820 descended toward the surface of the ocean: "When the plane hit the water, the wheels were part way down, the right wing broke off, the left wing crumpled, the nose was rolled back to the cockpit and the fuselage broke off behind the radio compartment." McLean and his co-pilot, 2/Lt. Maurice W. Clayton, had managed to ditch their plane off the northeast tip of Ponson Island near the village of Pilar. Clark, who was observing from overhead, watched as hatches flew off the floating aircraft and two men emerged from the cockpit. He immediately got on the radio and broadcast the location of the crew, but due to the state of his own aircraft he was unable to render any further assistance.

The navy responded to the emergency call by sending out a rescue PBY with a fighter escort, however upon arriving at the scene, the Catalina found no evidence of the downed crew. Clark and his co-pilot, 2/Lt. Donald P. Raymond, managed to keep their wounded "bird" aloft and in level flight. After clearing Ponson Island, they continued their exfiltration from Ormoc Bay south into the Camotes Sea. When they reached the entrance to Kawit Strait, the waters between Ponson and Poro Island, they linked up with another crippled plane from the squadron. Together, they headed for the relative safety of Tacloban Airdrome on the east side of Leyte Island.

Fitzsimmons shot down off Apale

The second flight for the 822nd followed seconds after the first and homed-in on a Fox-Tare-Able (large freighter-transport) and a Fox-Tare-Baker (medium freighter-transport) in the center of the flotilla. The leader of the element, 1/Lt. Lewis J. Fitzsimmons, was piloting B-25J #43-28124. Along with his wingman, 2/Lt. R.R. Seay, they turned in on the alerted convoy. Fitzsimmons went after a heavily loaded transport. The 9306-ton Kinka Maru, still had plenty of cargo latched to her deck. Although she appeared to be a sitting duck, the merchant was adequately screened by IJN warships. Adm. Kimura's six destroyers and the DE (destroyer-escort) Shimushu were hovering close at hand and filling the air with a torrent of bullets and a continuous barrage of red-hot shrapnel. Lt. Seay was attempting to follow his flight leader in his pass on the transport, but was cut-off by two planes from the third flight that were close behind and flying on Fitzsimmons' tail. Without room to maneuver on the original target, Seay went after another merchant in the convoy.

The B-25 flown by Lt. Fitzsimmons and his co-pilot, 2/Lt. Norry R. Harley, was hit by triple-A very early in their run on the ship. Before veering off on his own attack run, Seay had a last glimpse of his flight leader and his cockpit was full of smoke. No one in the squadron witnessed what had happened to Fitzsimmons after he peeled-off. However, airmen in the 405th Squadron reported seeing an airplane crash about six miles southwest of Catiyoman Point, on the western side of the Ormoc Peninsula, below Dupon Bay. It appears that after being hit hard by flak from the screening destroyers, Fitzsimmons and Harley headed due west away from Ormoc Bay and the convoy. But due to the extent of the damage were unable to remain aloft, or make a successful water-landing, ultimately crashing into the sea. This is believed to be the final resting place of #124 and her crew of three officers and three enlisted men. No further trace of this aircraft or her crew was ever found.

Seay ditches in Cabalian Bay

After losing sight of Fitzsimmons, Lt. Seay, flying in B-25J #953, commenced his run on the Takatsu Maru, located further down the column from the Kinka Maru. He zoomed in low-level over the water, strafing the Fox-Tare-Baker (FTB) with his 12 forward-firing, .50-Caliber machine-guns (eight in the nose, one pair each, port and starboard of the cockpit in blister-packs attached to the outer fuselage. Arriving over the merchant, the co-pilot, 2/Lt. J.H. Gamble, released the payload believing the ship to be damaged from the attack. Unfortunately, he had little time to ponder this thought, when seconds later the bomber was shredded by up to a half dozen anti-aircraft rounds.

The first AA shell exploded under the tail, cutting the trim tab control cables, making manipulation of the rudder very difficult. Another round scored a direct hit in the radio compartment, killing the radio operator, S/Sgt. Nolan. The next one burst behind the pilot's seat, giving Lt. Seay superficial scratches. One shell hit the starboard wing and a

couple hit the leading edge of the port wing, causing severe damage. They caused such a large hole, that part of the wing was stalled out and the port-side aileron was almost useless as the air stream went boiling across it. With one aileron out of commission, the aerodynamics of the plane were altered, inducing adverse yaw and increased drag across the surfaces of the wing. This "stalled" wing made it harder for the pilot's to keep flying straight and level, because now the aircraft had a tendency to roll over. As if this wasn't enough, both rudders were out of line and the whole tail section was shaking like it wanted to break off.

Lt. White, the wingman from flight number three, had just pulled off target and was behind Seay at this time. As he closed in on the aircraft, he could tell immediately that it had been shot to ribbons. Aside from the other damage he could readily see, the rudders were shaking and were not properly aligned. As White pulled even with the battered ship, he observed four crewmen in the forward part of the Mitchell and they appeared to be okay. Unfortunately, he could not linger with Seay as he had to follow rejoin his leader, who had broke in a different direction after his firing pass. The crew of 953 were in a tight spot. If they ditched now, they would probably get captured and they all knew that "guests" of the Japanese military didn't live too long. On the other hand, if they kept flying the bomber could literally shake itself to pieces. For the moment, Seay and Gamble decided to take their chances and head in the direction of the nearest allied airbase on the other side of the island.

When the Mitchell finally made it out of range of the fleet's triple-A fire, the pilot's decided to take stock of the situation. They got on the interphone and tried to contact the radio-operator, but received no answer. Then they got on the horn to the tai-gunner, Sgt. R.K. Wickliffe, who advised them that the radioman had been killed. The rest of the situation report however was good, no one else was injured and the airplane was not on fire. More good news appeared in the form of a solitary B-25 that had tacked on to them, it was Lt. Clark in #967. Clark, a survivor from the first element, was badly damaged and had also lost his flight-leader. He was cruising due south in the direction of the Camotes Sea, when opposite Kawit Strait, between Ponson and Poro Island's he caught sight of Seay's bomber. He sidled up to the mangled plane and gave it a visual inspection to assess its air-worthiness. From any angle it was in bad shape and would be lucky to reach an allied field, let alone land successfully. Despite his own damage, dwindling fuel supply and the continued possibility of Japanese fighter interception, he decided to stick with Lt. Seay. Clark and Raymond decided they would not break faith with one of their own, they would escort Seay until he landed, ditched or the crew were forced to bail out. #967 took the lead with #953 on its wing and together they set off for the southern Leyte mainland.

Although Seay and his crew were glad to have a fellow strafer on their wing, at one point they cursed the bomber for tossing them around with his prop wash. The pair of badly mauled B-25s headed south, through the Canigao Channel, which lies between Leyte and Bohol. Several times during the transit Clark initiated a turn to port across the island, with the intention of taking the more direct route to Tacloban, yet each time Seay was unable to follow. It soon became apparent that #953 was incapable of gaining enough

altitude to climb over the island's hills, which separated the east coast from the west. Therefore, both planes continued to skirt the coastline, with the intention of circumnavigating the whole of southern Leyte on their way home. They flew past Limasawa Island and into the Surigao Strait where they rounded the southern tip of Panoan Island, before turning north to head up the east coast of Leyte. Reaching Cabalian Bay, Clark noticed that his wingman was falling behind, so he circled back around to allow him to catch up. As he drew closer, he observed the bomber dropping down closer to the water, apparently, #953 had finally "given up the ghost."

Seay and Gamble were trailing #967 into Cabalian Bay when, without warning, the port engine cut out. Before they had a chance to feather the propeller, the extra drag it created caused the B-25 to plummet towards the water. With both pilot's on the yoke, they hit the surface hard, at 150 miles per hour, about 4 miles south of Agayay. Although the impact was great, the fuselage remained intact. In violent ditching's, it was common for the tail section to snap off. When Clark reached the crash site, he observed a couple of men climb out the cockpit overhead hatch and jump into the water. They were close to the rapidly sinking plane and fumbling with an apparently damaged raft. Passing over the flyers, he jettisoned the life raft that was stored in the top of the fuselage. Indeed, he accomplished this task so skillfully, that his plane was not damaged as the raft flew aft, passing between the vertical stabilizer's and just over the tail turret. As he circled the area, he watched the flyers in their futile effort to inflate the damaged raft. It quickly became obvious, that it had been perforated by the Japanese anti-aircraft fire and was useless to the survivors. Accordingly, another raft was dropped, this time from the rear hatch. Clark was soon rewarded by the site of two men climbing into the now inflated, small yellow-orange dinghy. At this point, one of the airmen in the boat stood up and waved, the other was laid out as if exhausted or injured. With this small gesture accomplished, Clark and Raymond brought their B-25 around and headed for a U.S. destroyer located about 10 miles northeast of their position. In an effort to guide the "tin can" to the downed crew, the Mitchell buzzed the warship several times, headed towards the life raft and fired flares. However, when repeated attempts met with no response, the bomber retired to Tacloban. Upon arrival, Clark made an excellent landing on the strip, despite a flat tire on the right gear and damage to the control surfaces.

McLanahan battles IJN Akishimo

1/Lt. H.C. McClanahan in B-25J #43-28026 and his dash-two, 2/Lt. A.R. White, formed the squadron's third flight. Flying close behind element number two, they decided to follow Lt. Fitzsimmons in his run on the Kinka Maru. At the time the Fox-Tare-Able was steaming about three miles southwest of Matlang, on the western edge of the Ormoc Peninsula in the company of two destroyers and several coast defense vessels. The freighter-transport was easily over 10,000 tons and sitting low in the water, loaded to the gunnels with supplies and ammunition. As the two Mitchell's approached, the pilots could see that the three upper decks of the ship were full of men, these were most probably soldiers of the 16th Infantry Division that were unable to disembark. More urgently at the moment, they could see that the ship was well armed with two 75-Millimeter AA guns on the bow and four 25 or 40-Millimeter guns, near the rail, port and

starboard of the weather deck. The gunner's on the transport were well-trained and managed to put out a withering barrage of flak, some rounds detonating as close as fifty feet to the B-25s. Considering the fact that the deadly shrapnel expands out several hundred feet from the center of the exploding air-burst, McClanahan and White were well within the killing radius of the anti-aircraft artillery shells.

B-25 on low-level run over IJN Akishimo
(U.S. Army Air Corp Official Photograph)

The planes came screaming in at minimum altitude, strafing the ship with suppressive fire. Moments before they released their payload, the captain of the Kinka Maru had shrewdly rung up flank speed, playing havoc with the aim of the co-pilot in each plane. The lead strafer, made a pass over the merchant and its co-pilot, 2/Lt. W.A. Wolfe, managed to pickle one 500-pounder just aft of the ship's stern, in her the foaming wake. This bomb appeared to blow up exactly under rotating blades of the ship's propeller. White, flying in the wingman slot, ended up in a better position over the transport and his second-pilot, 2/Lt. Robert L. Miller, dropped his string of bombs with aplomb, managing to get two direct hits on the AP. One bomb was seen to explode in the area of the forward hatch and the second, in the island, amidships.

As the pair pulled off-target they became separated as each B-25 found its own way through the maelstrom of flak bursts and tracers, for some reason most of the gunners in the area seemed to tack onto his plane. While trying to evade the worst of the enemy fire, McClanahan was forced to over-fly one of the warship's screening the Kinka Maru on the opposite side of the convoy formation. From his vantage point in the cockpit, it appeared

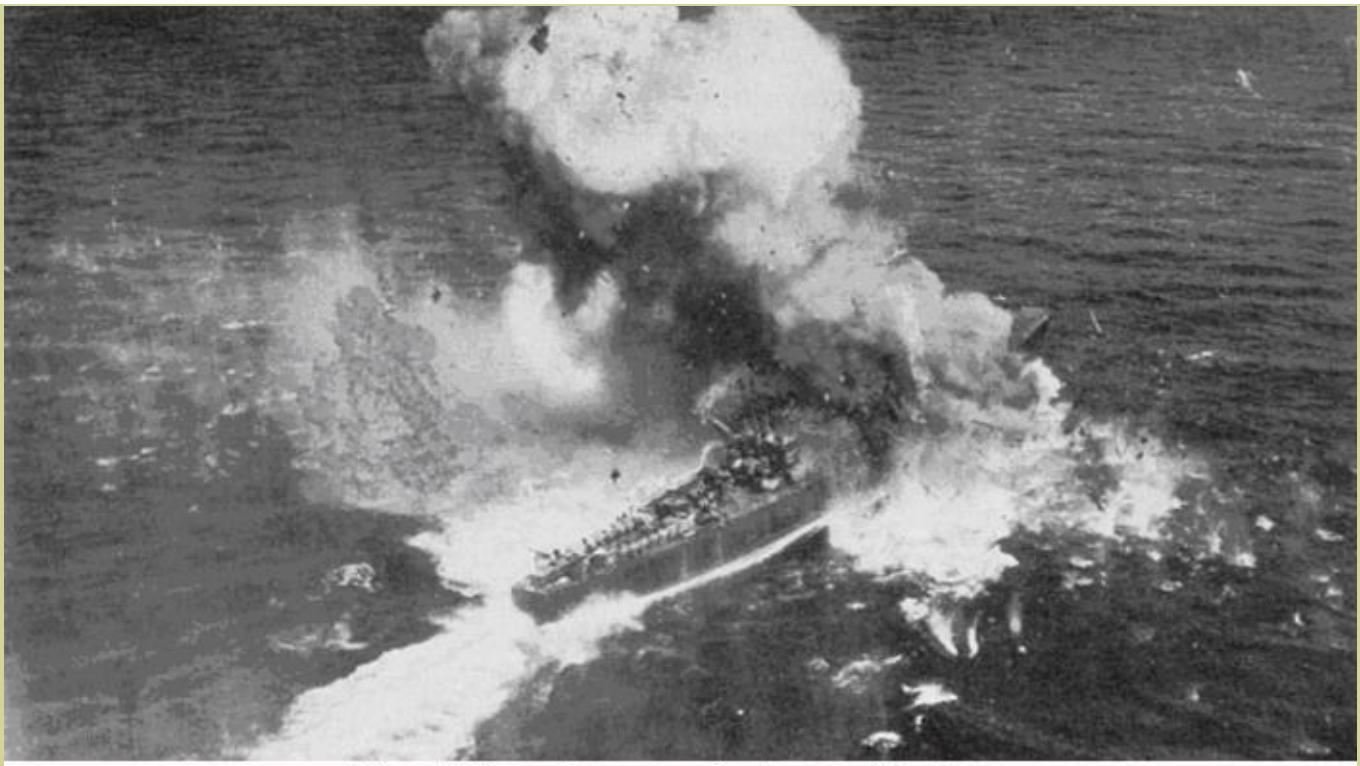
to be either a large DD or a light cruiser. In fact, it turned out to be the IJN Akishimo "Autumn Frost," an advanced 366 foot long, Yugumo-Class destroyer of 2520 tons. This veteran of the Battle off Samar," mounted six 5-inch guns, which lobbed 50-pound projectiles, as well as 28 25-Millimeter and four 13-Millimeter AA guns, she literally bristled with anti-aircraft mounts. The latest and most modern of her class, the powerful Akishimo, which only came out of the shipping yard seven months earlier, was Japan's answer to allied air attacks. At the time, her "skipper," Commander Nakao Kotarou, had most of the weapons on this floating arsenal trained point blank at #026.

McClanahan could see this destroyer steaming with "a bone in its teeth" to cut him off, unfortunately, it was too close for him to avoid. Cdr. Kotarou had steered the 366-foot Akishimo perpendicular to the B-25, so he could bring all his guns to bear. The DD was firing salvoes from its main turret's, which were throwing up huge water plumes in front of the plane, a regular tactic employed by the Japanese with their large caliber naval and shore batteries. Additionally, the Akishimo was pouring out anti-aircraft barrages of 15 bursts at a time, which blanketed the airspace near the bomber with shrapnel. In response to this onslaught, McClanahan was bobbing between 25 and 50 feet above the water and jinking like mad in an attempt to avoid the worst of the incoming fire. Somehow, he managed to keep a cool head and strafe the destroyer with his nose-guns. He came at the ship extremely low, so low in fact, that his windshield busted through an aerial that was strung between its two masts. As the Mitchell passed just above the superstructure, Wolfe in the right seat, let go the remaining three bombs, which went off with a high order of detonation, causing secondary explosions which engulfed the Akishimo in a huge fireball. The tail-gunner, Sgt. E.J. Muldoon, was the only member of the crew to witness the action. After the pass, he yelled out "good bombs" over the interphone. Two American infantry officers that were watching the battle from Caridad, south of Ormoc City, stated that the bombs went off on contact with the "Tin Can" (destroyer). Additionally, two fighter pilots from the 460th Fighter Squadron, that happened to be close to the action, stated that the warship was enveloped in a sheet of flame and appeared to capsize.

Just moments after Sgt. Muldoon made his excited announcement; the bomber was devastated by triple-A fire. McClanahan kept the throttles "firewalled" until they got clear of the other escorts and then he took stock of the situation, which was dire. A large caliber shell had ripped through the starboard wing and both engines had taken shrapnel damage, which set them ablaze. The starboard engine was totally engulfed in flames, which rapidly spread to the wing. The pilots set off the Lux CO2 fire-suppression system, which temporarily kept the inferno at bay while they feathered the engine, however, the situation was about to go all the way to FUBAR.

Immediately, the starboard flap came down, the landing gear in that wing dropped out of its compartment and the bomb bay doors fell into the open position. Wolfe got on the interphone and advised the radio operator and tail-gunner that they were hit. The navigator, 2/Lt. J.M. Fitzgerald, was right behind the pilots and coolly pointed out the way toward friendly territory, without preamble, McClanahan nosed the injured bomber in that direction. They knew that their trusted Mitchell would not hold together indefinitely, but they hoped that with a little luck they could remain airborne long enough

to reach allied territory. After all even though the port engine was still ablaze, it was putting out enough power to keep the plane aloft. It would however be a struggle. With the exception of the air speed indicator, all the instruments were out and the medium bomber had lost all the normal flight characteristics that resembled an airplane. McClanahan and Wolfe were engaged in a titanic struggle with their flight yoke's just to hold the B-25 in level flight.



Direct hit on Japanese destroyer Akishimo
(U.S. Army Air Corp Official Photograph)

With Matlang Bay at their backs, Fitzgerald had his pilots chart a course SSE, across Ormoc Bay and passing through the Camotes Islands. Their destination was the southern Leyte mainland, territory which the U.S. 7th Infantry Division had recently taken from the Japanese. The aircraft was lumbering along at 150 miles per hour over Kawit Strait, when the conflagration in the port engine erupted into a fireball. Immediately, there was a drop off in power and it now became clear, that they would never make dry land.

Meanwhile, off in the distance, another "Black Panther" was barreling in to link up with McClanahan, it was Lt. White, who had observed the plight of his flight leader and was coming in to offer assistance. He had somehow made it past the convoy screen with only minor damage, partly because most of the Japanese gunners were trained on McClanhan.

Even with the diversion of fire, White flying in B-25J #43-28024 only made it through by continually employing violent evasive maneuver's to avoid the Japanese triple-A. As he pulled clear of the area, he looked in the direction of his dash-one and observed him flying directly over a destroyer with his bomb bay doors open, was he possibly attacking, single-handed, a Japanese man-of-war? He circled around to form up with #026 and as he drew closer, it became apparent that the plane had been taken serious damage. Even from several miles away, he could see that both engines were burning; also it was trailing thick black smoke. White pursued the slow moving bomber towards the Camotes Islands where it abruptly began a controlled descent towards the water.

Back aboard #026, the aircraft commander was preparing his crew for an imminent water landing. Wolfe told the men in the rear compartments to brace themselves because they were going down. McClanahan turned on the emergency VHF, cut the fuel mixture control, shut down the rest of the control switches and pulled the life raft release, just before the Mitchell lost all its lift. The aircraft slammed hard into the waters of the Kawit Strait southeast of Ponson Island, breaking into four pieces from the impact. Both wings snapped off near the engine nacelles, and the tail section was severed about five feet aft of the bomb bay rear bulkhead. Up forward, the nose was caved in and water was streaming in through the navigator's compartment. As soon as the fuselage came to a stop, it remained afloat, but seawater swiftly began filling the crew spaces. For the six airmen onboard, the race was now on to escape this metal tomb.

Lt. White and his co-pilot, 2/Lt. R.L. Miller, watched on from the dubious safety of their cockpit, as McClanhan's crippled plane made an emergency water landing, shattering as it made contact with the sea. He orbited the crash site as several of the flyers made good their escape and within 30 seconds the B-25 slid beneath the waves. As his crew watched the survivors inflate a life raft and climb aboard, they could make out three native sail boats from Baybay and two more from Poro Island heading toward the area. Hopefully, like the majority of Filipinos, they were friendly to Americans. While this scene played out below them, the radio operator, S/Sgt. E.E. Phillips, sent in the "fighter grid" position, although he never received acknowledgement of the message. With little more to be done and Japanese fighters nearby, White egressed from the area, bearing northwest for Tacloban Airdrome. Three miles behind him, the Akishimo, was still reeling from McClanahan's audacious attack, when a pillar of flames and smoke erupted and billowed to 3000 feet above the battered hulk. Lt. White put down easily on the strip and after cutting the engines, made a thorough inspection of his aircraft. After careful scrutiny of the aluminum skin, he was amazed to find only two small holes in the tail, a miracle, considering the wall of flak that the Japanese had thrown up at the second flight.

Although #026 had been shot down, her destruction had not been in vain. Her bombs had killed 20 Japanese sailors, wounded 35 and literally blown the bow off the destroyer, cleaving it in two. Indeed, Army officers on the mainland could still see the warship's bow floating in the water, two hours later. Miraculously, she was able to sortie from Ormoc Bay under her own power and head for repairs at Luzon, however revenge for McClanahan's crew, would not be long in coming. Two days later, as the battered warship lay tied-up alongside the Cavite Pier at Manila; she was caught in an air raid by

U.S. carrier planes. Along with a flanking destroyer, the IJN Akebono, she absorbed tremendous damage. The Akishimo was set ablaze, the fire continuing into the next day when she exploded and rolled over onto her starboard side, never to fight again.

Capt takes on the IJN Ushio

The last flight of the day for the 822nd Squadron was led by 1/Lt. Edward S. Polansky, from Kenosha Wisconsin, flying in B-25J #808. Along with his wingman, 2/Lt. Albert B. Capt, they swung well north of the preceding flights, passing along shore near Catiyoman Point, between Matlang and Dupon Bay's. Flying seaward from the Ormoc Peninsula, they selected the Kinka Maru as their target. According to the navigator, 1/Lt. W.C. Crutchfield, they had no trouble finding the ships, only getting at them: "They were throwing more flak than I thought the Japs had." However as they began their approach, McClanahan and White of the third flight, zoomed in on the transport, forcing them to break off their attack abruptly. Both bombers veered hard to port and went off in search of another ship. As related by Polansky, "I picked a can that was head on to us. I figured that we would get him from bow to stern. We were moving pretty fast, but so was he."

As their new target, they picked a nearby warship that was steaming bow-on about a mile south of Tolingon Village. With their bomb bay doors open, they dropped down to masthead height and zeroed-in on the bow of the IJN USHIO, a Fubuki-Class destroyer of 2520 tons. The Ushio (Tide) was one of the older generation of Japanese destroyers, whose keel was laid down between the first and second world wars. Nevertheless, this veteran of the attack on Pearl Harbor still packed a mighty punch and could undoubtedly defend herself against air assault. With the two planes inbound at high speed toward the Ushio, her "skipper", Commander Araki Masaomi, now realized his ship was in harm's way and ordered a radical turn. His ship heeled hard over, coming broadside to the inbound B-25s and then let go with every gun on board. Both Mitchell's were quickly bracketed by heavy and medium triple-A bursts, although for some reason, the Japanese gunner's concentrated most of their fire on Lt. Capt in B-25J #43-28137.

Polansky and Capt rapidly closed the distance to the 378-foot warship, but as they prepared to fire their nose-guns, both planes were pummeled by direct hits from anti-aircraft shells. The "dash-two" plane, flown by Capt and his co-pilot, F/O James W. Davis, took a direct hit from a large caliber shell in the bomb bay, which caused a catastrophic explosion. The bomber emitted a huge gout of black smoke and flame from her belly, then rolled over into inverted flight, and crossed under the lead aircraft. In its last moments, the Mitchell was on fire and accelerating downward, breaking in half a couple of seconds before it crashed violently into the Camotes Sea. The six-man crew of 137, never knew what hit them, it took only moments for them to go from level flight to oblivion. Polansky's plane also took a tremendous beating. The top turret gunner, Sgt. John D. Gaffney, stated that the plane was staggered by a series of explosions: "It quivered all over and started to slide off on one wing. There had been four separate quickly concurring jolts."

Polansky would not be deterred by the loss of his wingman or even the damage to his

own aircraft, which was extensive. 808 took hits in the bomb bay, the fuselage and both wings. The port wing suffered a gaping hole three feet in diameter and the engine crankcase was also holed. A burst in the starboard wing rendered the flap useless. One 20-Millimeter burst of triple-A went off inside the waist section of the aircraft, cutting the control cables to the starboard side of the plane. The explosion also injured S/Sgt. R.V. Zachman, a photographer-gunner from HQ section, attached to #808 for this mission. Two others were also hurt in the melee, Sgt. Gaffney and the radio-operator, Cpl. Wilford A. Gabel. Gabel was slightly wounded by shrapnel, while Gaffney received bruises to the head when the aircraft was rocked violently by the explosions. It was Zachman though, that absorbed the brunt of the explosions.

When the AA round exploded, the sergeant was covering the attack with his Howell 16-Millimeter movie camera. The shell's casing fragmented into a multitude of red-hot, jagged pieces of metal, hitting him in the head and abdomen. At the time, the engineer gunner, S/Sgt. Fred M. Hellman, a native of Chicago, Illinois, was also in the waist compartment and noticed that Zachman was doubled over. At first, he thought that the photographer was balled-up in an instinctive futile effort to shield himself from any harm, a familiar practice used by men unused to the horrors of combat. However, this was not the case. Following the mission, Hellman said "I was right next to him and I thought I was hurt because I was covered in blood. I didn't know it was him." The engineer and the rest of the crew soon realized it was Sgt. Zachman's blood that was saturating the waist compartment. Lt. Crutchfield made his way aft, grabbed a first aid kit and checked over the grievously wounded man. Working amid the crimson stained bulkheads, he administered as much emergency care as was possible in the spartan surroundings of the bomber. He remained by his side until they were wheel's-down at Tacloban.

Oblivious to the drama unfolding amidships, Polansky closed in on the Ushio. On his approach, he managed to get off almost a 1000 rounds from his nose-guns, despite the fact that they were not working at maximum efficiency. Making his run over the destroyer, the co-pilot, 2/Lt. Carl W. Blieck, was only able to get off two bombs due to damage AA damage in the bomb bay. The release mechanism was broken and there was widespread fire damage in the compartment. Nevertheless, those two 500-pounder's were perfectly placed, scoring direct hits as they were skip-bombed into the side of the hull. Surviving more flak on the outbound leg, #808 limped out of Ormoc Bay in the direction of Surigao Strait.

Pulling away, Gaffney recorded the events, as secondary explosions ignited, sending gun turrets and pieces of the superstructure skyward disintegrating as they fell. Maj. Dunam and Lt. Carter of the 460th Fighter Squadron, 348 FG, were patrolling nearby and subsequently, had a front row seat to the action. They saw Polansky and Blieck make their run on the warship, which was instantly covered in smoke and flames from secondaries. Although they stated that they saw a destroyer roll over and sink, the Japanese claimed no such loss in the action. Following the attack, the Ushio sailed back to Manila Bay. On November 13th, she was damaged further by carrier planes from Task Force 38, in spite of this, she survived the war, the only one out of 20 Fubuki-Class destroyers to do so.

With the departure of B-25 #808, the last of the airworthy "Black Panthers" retired to the east coast of Leyte Island. It would turn out to be their costliest mission of the war in both men and airplanes. Of the eight strafers that departed from Pitoe Airdrome on Morotai, ultimately, only three would complete the mission and return to an allied airbase. Of the five Mitchell's that were shot down by the Japanese, two entire crews were lost to the waters of Ormoc Bay. By days end on November 10th, the remaining three aircrews would find themselves all alone in enemy territory and struggling to survive.

With a critically wounded man aboard, Clark took the most direct route possible to the other side of Leyte and coaxed as many RPM's as possible out of his deteriorating engines. The B-25 flew through the mountain pass that ran from Baybay to Tacloban. Somehow, the port engine continued to function, although, the drop-off in power barely allowed the aircraft to clear the 1200-foot crest in the pass. Nearing the airdrome, the co-pilot, 2/Lt. Carl W. Blieck, of Bonduel, Wisconsin, updated his commander, saying, "We should be there in 15 minutes." Polansky responded, "If we get there at all." From his vantage point on the left side of the cockpit, he could see that the underside of the port engine was badly torn. Yet, somehow, the only indication of the damage so far, was a gradual decrease in oil pressure, power and a constant stream of smoke trailing from the power plant.

With Tacloban looming in the distance, Cpl. Gabel got on the interphone and informed Polansky that the control tower was holding the airstrip open for them; they would not have to circle before landing. Additionally, there would be an ambulance waiting on the field for the wounded airman. Gabel also mentioned that Zachman's condition was deteriorating: "He's getting worse. It's not just his head. His gut is ripped open too." The gear and flaps came down and the plane banked to make a straight-in approach on the field. Landing opposite the tower on the pierced-steel planking, the B-25 rolled toward the end of the strip with the hydraulic brakes squeaking in the background.

The bomber taxied off the runway and stopped close to the ambulance, whose attendants rushed the plane and placed the wounded man on a litter. One of the crewmen approached the litter, intending to inquire about the man's chances, when the doctor pulled the blanket over his head. The body of Sgt. Zachman was loaded on the ambulance and driven away. T/Sgt. Matthew C. Gac, another photo-gunner from headquarters knew him well. According to Gac, Zachman was known as "a likeable guy" and his death hit the unit hard, "It was a sad blow to our photo section." When the ambulance departed, the crew made a visual inspection of the aircraft to check for damage. The leads to the oil lines for the bottom four cylinders of the port engine were all but blown off. The hit in the bomb bay had severed the electric release wires for the second pair of bombs, one set of rudder and elevator wires had been cut and the plane was peppered with flak, they were lucky to have made it back in one piece. Reacting to the amazing strength and integrity that the Mitchell had shown on the mission, Crutchfield commented, "The next time I hear one of those diehards tell how B-17s can take it, I'm going to tell him something about 25s." About that time, everyone outside started shouting and Polansky and his crew ran out. The rest of the formation was limping in.

The "Green Dragons" engage

The 405th Squadron, which held the number two position in the formation, had been right behind the 822nd when they made their tragic turn into the convoy. Maj. Edward J. Maurer, the "Green Dragons" CO, who led the 405th on this mission, watched in horror as the lead squadron in the formation broke off and made a run at the convoy over open water. At the time, Maurer had the most experience in the 38th Bomb Group against shipping targets. Likewise, he knew that with no cover and inadequate altitude to build up their airspeed, the "Black Panthers" would pay a high price during their attack runs. The B-25s could not have been traveling at more than 250 miles per hour on their approach. Maurer happened to know the flight leader, Maj. McLean and made repeated attempts to call him back, but these went unanswered. From five miles away, he could see that things were going dreadfully wrong: "As they approached the cruisers and destroyers they started potting them down. It was like a shooting gallery. I saw at least three of them hit the water."

While still over the northern end of the Camotes Sea, Maurer watched on helplessly as his comrades in the 822nd got cut to ribbons. However, he continued to lead his squadron and in turn, the entire group further north to take advantage of the terrain. The formation flew up the west side of the Ormoc Peninsula, staying well out of range of the Japanese guns. This strategy allowed the strike force to head into the hills, gaining altitude, without being noticed by the enemy. Reaching Canaguayan Point, the three remaining squadrons made a starboard turn to the east and headed for the beach. When Maurer flying in B-25J #43-27971, made landfall, he had the group turn 90 degrees to the south, in the direction of the target. With the rugged terrain of the peninsula between the B-25s and the convoy, the formation stayed low, just above the trees, contour-flying the undulating landscape. Indeed, they were flying so low, that the propellers of some of the planes were chopping through the tops of the trees like a lawnmower. The bombers climbed up to 7000 feet, before gradually increasing power, while still remaining out of the line of sight of the Japanese ships. Flying down-slope, the aircraft were zooming along at about 400 miles per hour, with the engines way over the red line, when they crested the final ridge before reaching the sea again. That speed is way over the red line of the engines, however the pilots found out through experience that they could get away with it without anything coming apart. Although the tail did a lot of wiggling, it did not greatly alter the flight characteristics of the aircraft. At 1135 hours, the 22 strafers broke out over the water at full throttle, going like a bat out of hell. So complete was the surprise, that the first few flights attracted not a single shot from the enemy vessels before making their runs.

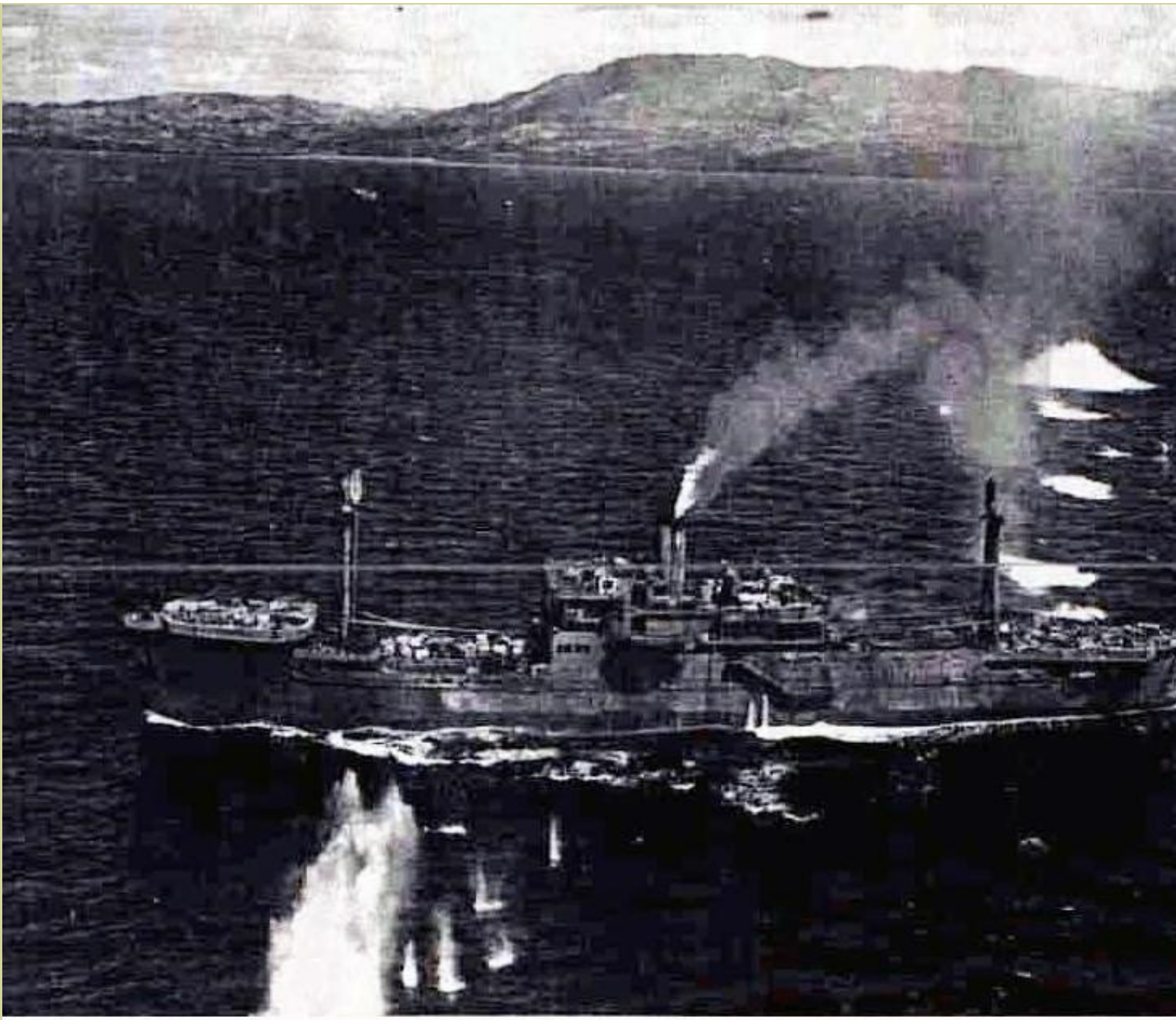
The major had broken the "Green Dragons" into a lead element of three planes, followed by a pair of two-plane elements. Each flight locked-on to their own targets, while jockeying for a good position to commence their final approach. The first flight crossed the coast near Dulijugan Point, just west of Matlang Bay, and then dropped down to wave-top height. There were numerous ships in the convoy; it was just a matter of picking the one you wanted. Maurer led the first flight, with the 38th BG commander,

Col. Edward M. Gavin in B-25J #43-28108 on his starboard wing and 1/Lt. Harry E. Terrell, a little further back and on his port side. By this time, Terrell was an experienced combat pilot, while the colonel, who was from the HQ section, was pretty green. In fact, there were those in the group that considered him ill-suited to the job of group commander and that his appointment was a political one. Gavin was not a squadron commander or even a flight leader and had no skip-bombing experience; he just came along on the mission.

Takatsu Maru deep-sixed

As his target, Maurer chose a freighter-transport, however he would have to cross over an IJN kaibokan (corvette) in order to get at it. Closing in on Coast Defense Vessel #11, all three planes in the first element strafed it heavily. Terrell, in B-25J #43-28022, was behind and to the right of his flight-leader, had all his "fifties" going, with the tracers passing directly below his fuselage. Realizing what was going on, Maurer got on the radio and contacted Terrell, using his call-sign, 2CGD, and chewed him out for his lapse in concentration. Terrell was so intent on strafing the warship that he almost shot down the major. Pulling away from the kaibokan, the major thought that Terrell was going to get it, however his co-pilot, 2/Lt. Ansil M. Hopper, forgot to open the bomb bay doors. This slip-up was caught on film by Maurer's tail camera and showed #022 directly over the warship with its doors closed.

The trio of Mitchell's just cleared the superstructure of CD #11 and then tacked onto the Fox-Tare-Baker steaming ahead of them. Their target was the Takatsu Maru, a brand new, 5656-ton freighter that had been converted into a landing craft transport for the Japanese Army. The ship, also known as the Kozu Maru, was now alerted and steaming at flank speed away from the inbound B-25s. The strafers approached the FTB, dropping their ordnance almost directly overhead. They had to pull up sharply to clear her superstructure, skimming the top of her funnel, located amidships, in the process. Maurer and Gavin salvoed four bombs a piece over the target, scoring several direct hits and near misses, then dove for the waves and closed up their bay doors. Only moments later, the Takatsu Maru exploded violently, engulfing the vessel in smoke and flames, which almost totally obscured her from view. The navigator aboard Maurer's plane, Capt. George V. Ricks of Enis, Texas, was flying on his 80th mission and was captivated by the bold attack. "That ship was so large and so high, I didn't think Ed could pull it up fast enough to clear the top deck. To me it looked as high as the 'Normandie,' I knew it was the largest ship I had ever seen." Outbound of the transport, Ricks looked back and noted that the, "bombs hit and the ship blew sky high." Egressing from Ormoc Bay, Maurer led the flight southeast and managed to pass safely between two light cruisers, located on the far side of the convoy. The trio of strafers flew through Kawit Strait, then turned to starboard, circling around Poro Island en route to the squadron rally point. Flying south of the Camotes Islands, smoke from the doomed FTB had already wafted up to 7000 feet. Secondary explosions and flames quickly took their toll, as water rushed in through ruptured hull plating and collapsed bulkheads. The Takatsu Maru immediately lost all headway and settled rapidly. Before long, she plunged to the ocean bottom just outside the 100 fathom curve, in over 600 feet of water. She sunk with all hands aboard.



Japanese freighter Takatsu Maru under heavy fire
(U.S. Army Air Corp Official Photograph)

Although the spectacle of a sinking Japanese merchant was pleasing to the Americans, a very disturbing sight, however, was also visible. In the distance, the flyers caught sight of the final moments of a B-25 from one of the follow-on squadrons. They would later find out it was a plane from the "Terrible Tigers." As they watched the drama unfold about six miles south of Catiyoman Point, the men observed a bomber get hit by triple-A fire and

fall burning into the sea. They also saw another B-25 flying through Kawit Strait that was on fire.

Destruction of Kaibokan #11

The second flight was led by 2/Lt. Dorence L. Van Fleet, in B-25J #43-27976. He came screaming out of the hills, with his wingman, Lt./Col. Edwin H. Hawes in B-25J #43-28088, taking up station on his starboard side. The Mitchell's crossed the coast at the eastern edge of Matlang Bay, pushing maximum RPM's and quickly letting fly with their nose-guns on nearby Kaibokan #11. The 745-ton warship, was smaller than a destroyer, but almost as large as a destroyer-escort. The agile craft was a formidable escort vessel with both anti-aircraft and anti-submarine capabilities and mounted numerous .25-Millimeter AA guns. On their approach to the target, the pilots used a slight kick of the rudder, back and forth, enabling them to spray the whole deck with tracers. Responding to the incoming fire, the hull of the 206-foot corvette began heeling hard over to bring her 4.7-inch main battery to bear. The B-25s however, were too close and too fast. Van Fleet and Hawes made a beautiful run over her deck, scoring near misses and hits with their 500-pounder's. As they pulled away, their marksmanship was rewarded by secondary explosions amidships, smoke and a sheet of flames that obscured the target. Continuing their run, the bombers turned to port and zeroed-in on the Kinka Maru, located midway between the tip of the Ormoc Peninsula and Pacijan Island, the most western of the three Camotes Islands. The Fox-Tare-Able was screened by two destroyers forward and a pair light cruisers astern. Heading southwest, Van Fleet and Hawes slipped between the convoy screen and pummeled the merchant with their .50-Caliber Browning's until she started smoking. Evading fire from the Japanese warships, they turned hard to port, circled around the backside of the Camotes and headed for the rally point located between Pacijan and Poro Islands.

While the B-25s were making good their escape, Kaibokan #11 was fighting for her life. Van Fleet and Hawes had riddled her decks and hull with .50-caliber fire, scored at least one direct hit with a 500-pound bomb and many near misses. Burning furiously and wracked by explosions, the survivors of the 134-man crew, battled the flames and struggled to keep the ship on an even keel. While damage control parties scurried about, the "skipper" conned the corvette due north toward the Ormoc Peninsula. As the warship penetrated Matlang Bay, the fires above and below decks continued to burn out of control. Once the captain realized that the ship was beyond saving, Kaibokan #11 was beached near the shoreline, and her sailors jumped ship and waded to shore. High and dry on the water's edge, the blaze continued unabated, until all that remained of this once proud ship was a burned-out hulk.

Bradley mauls Kashii Maru

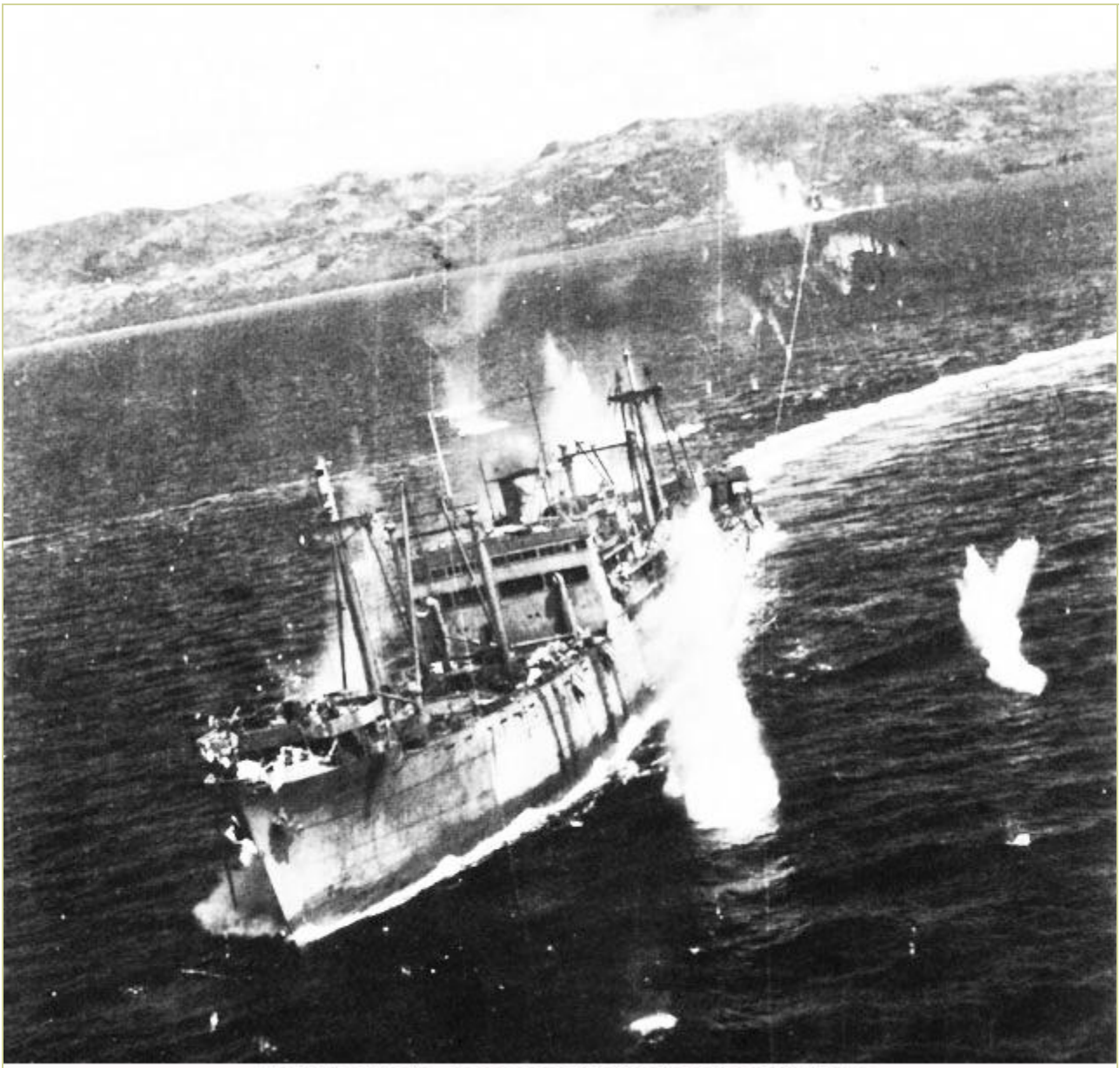
The last flight for the 405th Squadron bisected Matlang Bay en route to the straits just west of Ormoc Bay. Led by 1/Lt. Harry E. Bradley, in B-25J #43-27958, the strafers chose a southeasterly heading, taking them toward the aft elements of the convoy, where they spotted a large merchant. The transports were screened by a half dozen or more

destroyers steaming in a circle just east and by two light cruisers (CL) and a destroyer near Ormoc City. Despite the odds, Lt. Bradley directed his flight toward the vessel cruising just west of Ponson Island. This was the Kashii Maru, an 8417-ton, Imperial Japanese Army transport. Bradley and his wingman, 1/Lt. W.L. Gibbons, flying in B-25J #43-28096, closed in on the ship and opened their bomb bay doors. As the vessel came within shooting distance of their nose-guns, both planes were rocked by accurate, heavy anti-aircraft bursts. Lt. Gibbons was hit in the bomb bay and also took damage to his hydraulic system. He was forced to veer off from his attack run and jettison his payload in the water. The radio operator, S/Sgt. Warren Davis, was in the waist section during the attack, manning one of the 30-Caliber machine guns, when a fire broke out due to flak damage. The blaze ignited several onboard flares which created intense heat and filled the compartment with choking acrid smoke. He was overcome by the fumes and burned slightly from the flames, however that was the only casualty suffered during the incident.

Bradley had taken shrapnel in his port engine, which knocked out one of the cylinders. He feathered the propeller, shut down the engine and continued on at greatly reduced speed. Additionally, the tail gunner, Sgt. J. Provard, had one of his legs broken from the enemy fire. In spite of their perilous circumstances, the pilot and his right-seater, 2/Lt. James F. Beardsley, bravely decided to continue on with the mission. Continuing their pass on one engine, almost a sitting duck for triple-A batteries and machine guns in the area, #958 homed in on its target. Bradley approached the Kashii Maru from her starboard flank, zooming over at the level of the ships bridge and released his munitions directly overhead. Three of the quarter-ton, delay-fuse bombs landed on the deck, the other was a near miss. In response, the transport exploded almost instantly, sending up a mushroom cloud of smoke and flames 8000 feet high. Due the ships high order of detonation, it was believed to be carrying ammunition stockpiles for the infantry.

Following the run, Bradley skirted the southwest coast of Ponson Island, turning to port to enter Kawit Strait. With half his horsepower gone, the lieutenant was struggling to keep up his airspeed up and remain airborne. South of the Camotes Islands, the B-25 had descended to just 50 feet over the water and was unable to climb. The pilots decided to abort the rendezvous with the rest of their squadron and head directly to Leyte. At the 405th rally point, six bombers orbited at several thousand feet while waiting for #958. When Maj. Maurer realized that his comrades were a no show, he had the rest of the "Green Panthers" form up on him and set course for Tacloban Airdrome. They took the direct route over the hump and landed about two hours later, on runway number five without incident. They pulled their plane into a revetment and settled in to wait for the return of Lt. Bradley. Once on the ground the flyers were shocked at the terrible conditions at the airfield. There were smashed and burned aircraft all over the place from Japanese air raids and insufficient room to bring in more planes to land. There were smashed up U.S. Navy aircraft all over the field. According to Maurer, "There were planes literally where you could see that they had been bulldozing perfectly good airplanes off into the water just to clear the strip. No place to park them whatsoever." While the men were refueling they sat around talking and laughing about the mission. Despite the losses to the group, everybody's spirits were high, because of how much damage they inflicted on the enemy. At one point, a one-star Army general came up to the flock of airmen and tried to get them to take off immediately and hit the convoy

again. The general said “We’re going to refuel you and re-arm you’re going to go out there and hit the fleet again” Maurer however, thought this was crazy and wanted no part of it. He told the officer, “You’re welcome to my plane, General if you’d like to take it.” And with that the one-star just walked away.



B-25s strafe Japanese freighter Kashii Maru
(U.S. Army Air Corp Official Photograph)

Following the attack on the Kashii Maru, the situation for Bradley and his crew went from bad to worse. #958 was flying on one engine and could barely maintain 145 miles per hour. In an attempt to gain altitude, the pilot had the crew toss all their equipment overboard. However, even with a lightened load, the aircraft could not climb and the

pilots were forced to fly at 50 feet off the water for the entire return leg. Flying inland was impossible due to a chain of hills that ran the length of Leyte, therefore they took the long route around the southern tip of the island. Bradley and Gibbons conned the B-25 out of the Camotes Sea, down Canigao Channel, across Surigao Strait and into Leyte Gulf. They flew up the eastern coast of Leyte, then turned inland near Tacloban, where they put down without further trouble. The 405th Squadron had done a great deal of damage to the Japanese, while coming away relatively unscathed. Although all seven planes were holed and three of them damaged seriously, only two men were injured on the mission and these were both minor. While Provard and Davis received medical attention, five planes took off for Morotai, landing at 1900 hours on the strip at Pitoe. The other two aircraft remained behind for repairs.

"Wolf Pack" joins the fray

At 1145 hours, seven strafers from the 71st Squadron crossed the coast on the eastern tip of the Ormoc Peninsula, directly over the village of Calunangan. Guided by smoke and flames that was inflicted on the convoy by the first two squadrons, the "Wolf Pack" scanned the water for worthy targets. Flying in the vanguard position was the squadron leader, Capt. Frederick E. Nelson, flying in B-25J #43-27816. Entering the straits, Nelson signaled his planes to break up into flights of two and commence their attack. Flying through a barrage of flak, as well as waterspouts thrown up by the impact of large caliber naval shells, the bombers headed for the tail end of the TA-4 convoy.

The first element, formed by Nelson and his wingman, 2/Lt. Ware, in B-25J #846, headed in the direction a freighter-transport cruising north of Ponson Island. It was the Kashii Maru, sitting low in the water and still reeling from the attack by the "Green Dragons." Approaching the transport, the Mitchell's were forced to fly through the close-in fire from a nearby destroyer and the 860-ton Shimushu, an IJN destroyer-escort (DE). Flying right on the deck, Nelson and Durrant braved the curtain of steel and successfully skip-bombed their ordnance toward the Fox-Tare-Able. The second wave of B-25s, piloted by 2/Lt. H.A. Huehn and 2/Lt. Matson, followed closely on the heels of the first and targeted the Kashii Maru. Once again, both payloads were well placed, landing either on the deck or in the sea near the waterline. As with the first flight, Huehn and Nathan had to fight through the machine gun fire and triple-A bursts of the IJN warships that were close at hand. The final three bombers formed the last flight and followed a course that took them further east than the other aircraft. They tacked on to a different ship in the convoy and dropped their ordnance with good effect.

All seven planes were virtually unscathed by the Japanese anti-aircraft fire and egressed east across Ormoc Bay en route to the mainland. As they retired, the airmen observed that many of their bombs had hit the mark. The battered Kashii Maru was on fire, listing to one side and emitting a column of black smoke that mushroomed up to 3000 feet. In addition to the transport, most of the squadron had heavily strafed the Shimushu causing some damage. The DE survived the day, only to be damaged further later in the month. On November 25, she was torpedoed by an American submarine, the USS Haddo near the island of Mindoro. In the end, the lucky ship managed to survive the war and was

sold to the Russians for scrap.

"Terrible Tigers" mop up

The 823rd Squadron followed closely on the heels of the "Wolf Pack." As these last eight J-models approached the shore, the carnage that had taken place west of Ormoc Bay was clear to all. The criss-crossing wakes of fleeing ships abounded in the Camotes Sea and the smoke of battle hung over the water like fog. Both warship and merchant alike were steaming at flank speed in a vain attempt to outrun the relentless attacks of the low-level B-25s. One destroyer was broken and burning, a kaibokan was wrecked and the precious freighters were under siege. The remains of one maru was flotsam on the surface. Another was losing headway and burning, while a third was damaged. In addition, the ocean was already littered with the shattered hulks of several American bombers and numerous Japanese fighters. Into this maelstrom flew the "Terrible Tigers."

As the squadron dropped down to attack height, angry black puffs of triple-A fire zeroed-in on their position. The 823rd led by the squadron CO, Maj. Leonard W. Geissel, in B-25J #959, crossed the beach at the tip of the Ormoc Peninsula, between Matlang Bay and Apale. As the major and his second-pilot, F/O Clarence F. Jureczki, brought the lead plane out over the water, they received headed in the general direction of the convoy. At this point, the Tiger Terrors broke up into flights of two and searched out their individual targets.

Geissel and his wingman, 2/Lt. J.D. Irick, flying in B-25J #892, formed the first element. Geissel's navigator, 1/Lt. Robert E. Rihs, directed his pilots into the best possible position for an attack. Rihs, who had been kneeling between the cockpit seats on the approach, took one look at the battle and said "What am I doing here?" As the B-25 dropped down to attack height, the navigator "gave Maj. Geissel a hand signal to turn approximately 30 degrees to the right toward the transports to avoid or minimize exposure of the squadron to the intense AA fire of the destroyers." Apparently, the "skipper" was thinking the same thing, because he instantly racked the airplane into a steep starboard bank and headed for the largest transport, the Kinka Maru. The FTA appeared relatively unscathed and was steaming at flank speed, just southwest of Matlang Bay.

As the B-25s closed in, the airmen could identify the class of ship by her silhouette and configuration. She had a raked bow, spoon stern and large superstructure located amidships. In addition, the freighter's two main decks were flush and her long hull allowed for a both a mast and kingpost fore and aft of the funnel. This design allowed for the stowage and offloading of her many landing craft. Moreover, the ample deck space enhanced the ship's survivability, by increasing her anti-aircraft capability. This was one freighter that would not go down without a fight. The Kinka Maru boasted a pair of medium flak guns on the poop-deck at the bow and another pair on the fantail at the stern. What's more, there were another half dozen or so smaller AA batteries and heavy machine guns on top of the superstructure encircling the stack. These weapons were carefully sited on the ship allowing for clear fields of fire in any direction. From the

cockpit of a low-level bomber, the merchant appeared to bristle with gun barrels, many of which were literally shooting down at the incoming planes.

At this stage of the Pacific War, this modern, high capacity ship was of critical import to the empire. Although a tough target, the intrepid Tiger pilots decided it was worth braving the intense AA barrages if she could be sunk or damaged. The charmed freighter had already been put out of action once by a Dutch submarine early in the war. On December 12, 1941 the troop transport was lying at anchor off Singapore, when she was torpedoed by the O-16 in shallow water. The Kinka Maru was grounded nearby to prevent sinking and was later salvaged and refit to fight another day. By November, 1944 she was being hunted by both the U.S. Army Air Corp and the Navy, her days were surely numbered.

Geissel and Irick tacked onto the massive ship and started strafing the deck and starboard hull on the approach. Rihs, the plucky navigator on 959, was tasked with making sure that none of the major's forward-firing Browning's jammed during the run. To accomplish this duty, the lieutenant was forced to stand on the floor behind the flight deck and "continuously pull the charge handles on the side pocket guns to eject any misfired or dud rounds which would have caused one of the guns to cease firing." Braving the intense return fire from the maru, the first wave of Mitchell's bore in and skip-bombed eight 500-pound bombs toward the side of the vessel, scoring three direct hits amidships and five near misses. With a lightened load the Mitchells pulled up sharply to clear the superstructure, zooming between the kingposts and skimming over the top of the funnel. Once clear of the vessel, they dove for the safety of the ocean's surface, flying at "buster" all the while. According to Rihs, in Geissel's B-25 "the violent maneuver filled the cockpit area with flying parachutes people and anything else that wasn't tied down." The major and Irick stayed on the deck, continuously jinking, until the Japanese gunners found more worthwhile targets.

Peters shot down by Kaibokan

The second flight led by Capt. William J. Peters in B-25J #43-36036, followed close behind the first and decided to tackle one of the coast defense vessels that was flanking Kinka Maru. The flight came in low and fast, pelting the CD with .50-Caliber rounds, while flying into a buzz saw of heavy triple-A which bracketed both aircraft. Despite both Mitchells being mauled by shrapnel and bullets on the inbound leg, the daring airmen pressed home their attack. The captain along with his wingman, 1/Lt. Zane E. Corbin, piloting B-25J #046, managed to reach the kaibokan and pickle their ordnance before all hell broke loose. Half of their bombs went off after making contact with the deck or the starboard-side hull, while the other four fell in the bay nearby sending up huge plumes of water that drenched the man of war.

Although outbound of the warship, both planes continued to be trailed by a torrent of golf-ball sized tracer rounds as well as flak bursts and then all at once their luck ran out. Midway between Matlang Bay and Kawit Strait, 036 took a catastrophic hit that sent it plunging toward the water. Bill Peters and his co-pilot, 2/Lt. Vernon A. Norris, struggled

with the crippled bomber, but they clearly knew that they could not get very far. The plane was making a controlled descent and it appeared that they were attempting to ditch. Other airmen from the 823 Squadron were flying nearby and had a front row seat to the crash. Capt. Vernon A. Torgerson, who was flying in the third element, describes the incident as he observed it. "I saw this captain, that was taking this corvette as a target! I saw him go down. It looked like he was trying to do a belly landing but his right wing caught and he cartwheeled. …He made a tremendous water spray and that was it." 036 had gone down in the Camotes Sea about 10 miles south of Apale Point, the sixth casualty of the day for the Sun Setters. While heading for the rally point, several airmen spotted a small Japanese boat pull up to the crash site, however no one was seen to emerge from the aircraft. Peters and Norris, as well as four other crewmen were never seen again and presumed dead on impact.

The wingman, Lt. Corbin and his right-seater, 1/Lt. Martin L. Larsen, managed to keep their Mitchell airborne, despite having part of their starboard wing shot off. 046 retired south through the straits and linked up with the two planes from three-flight. Torgerson remembers the arrival of Corbin's beleaguered plane: "…Zane came in from the left side and he had a tremendous hole in his right wing. I don't know how the plane flew. I escorted him all the way back to the strip at Leyte." Corbin and Larsen nursed their B-25 all the way back to Tacloban and landed without further incident. Their battle damage was so severe that the plane was turned over to the service squadron.

Kinka Maru takes her toll

The third element, led by Capt. Torgerson in B-25J #43-27970, WEARY WILMA, also went after the Kinka Maru. The FTA was already smoking due to hits made by Geissel and Irick in flight number one. Their intention was to send her to the bottom before she could make good her escape. She was cruising at speed, rounding the peninsula and leaving a considerable wake. The flight leader and his wingman, 2/Lt. Michael G. Alex, in B-25J #830, went off in pursuit of the large transport. However, the damaged ship was no easy kill, as the airmen found out when they came within range of her guns. The merchant belched continuous volleys of flak at the incoming airplanes in an effort to either shoot them down or compel them to veer off, but the seasoned pilots kept closing the distance. The bombers were flying at wave-top height and the Japanese gunners were aiming their heavy AA batteries into the water ahead of the B-25s, forcing the pilots to fly through clusters of water spouts.

While WEARY WILMA remained unscathed, 830 absorbed at least a couple of 40-Millimeter bursts, one in the air cooler and one in the starboard wing. The pilots managed to survive the maelstrom and flying well below the level of the main deck, skip-bomb their quarter-tonner's in the direction of the merchant's hull. They scored a high percentage of direct hits, which caused a secondary explosion amidships and got the hell out of there. Torgerson describes the harrowing series of events as they unfolded: "I lowered one wing. I was worried about hitting the mast so I pulled my right wing up. I was that close to the mast. We wanted to get back down on the deck as fast as we could. The co-pilot kept telling me to jink it up and down. He had his hands going up, down,

around and I was just concentrating trying to get my bombs into the ship. He was saying up, down, down."

Retiring south at full throttle, Corbin latched on to Torgerson and Alex in Kawit Strait and they made for Tacloban together. While egressing west over Ormoc Bay, Lt. Alex looked up at the instrument panel to discover that his he was losing oil pressure in his starboard engine and it was steadily heating up. He was advised by his navigator, F/O R.F. Howard to head south along the Leyte coast, where the shorter mountains would pose less of a problem for their limited power. Alex agreed and headed south towards Surigao Strait, with lieutenants Corbin and Torgerson providing escort.

Death throes of Kashii Maru

The last flight of the day led by 1/Lt. John W. Lupardus, in B-25J #952, headed further southwest than the previous flights, with the intention of finishing off the heavily damaged Kashii Maru. The Fox-Tare-Able was floundering north and west of Ponson Island, emitting huge gouts of smoke and showing several fires on deck. She was already listing to one side and losing headway when Lupardus and his wingman, 2/Lt. James T. Corn, in B-25J #017, UMBRIAGO, made their run. Due to a malfunction in his bomb bay doors, Lupardus was unable to release his payload. Undaunted, the strafers continued the engagement and Lt. Corn managed to release three off his rack, two of which struck the transport between her kingposts. She erupted in steam, black smoke swelled upward and her decks were ablaze from bow to stern. As 952 and UMBRIAGO withdrew to southwest, Lt. Corn jettisoned his remaining bomb and buttoned up for the return leg. To the rear, Kashii Maru could be seen settling in the water on an even keel. The battered hulk would continue to take on water, for several hours before she finally slipped beneath the waves en route to her final resting place. Although the vessel and its supplies were lost, the surviving sailors were transferred to IJN destroyers from convoy TA-3, which were en route to Ormoc Bay.

Lt. Alex downed by U.S. Navy

While the remaining four "Terrible Tigers" sortied west over the 4000-foot peaks, 830 flanked by a pair of squadron B-25s took the longer, less hazardous route back to base. The last three flyable Sun Setter aircraft were slowly making their way up the east coast of Leyte Island en route to the newly captured airdrome at Tacloban. As the bombers approached the allied field they noticed about a half dozen U.S. Navy warships in San Pedro Bay nearby. Within sight of the emergency strip, the Mitchells broke up to make their landings singly and a cruiser and several other vessels opened fire at them. The B-25s had their IFF radar on that identified them as friendly, but it made little difference to the jittery Navy gunners who had been repelling Japanese fighter sweeps for days.

Torgerson in WEARY WILMA and Corbin in 046 got through unscathed, but most of the gunners seemed to zero in on the slow-moving plane flown by Alex. They were lumbering along at 200 feet over the briny, and were completely bracketed by triple-A bursts, 830 was a sitting duck. The pilots moved the plane around as much as they could

to throw off the gunners aim, all the while furiously shooting red flares, hoping to be recognized as American. The B-25 was only 50 feet off the water when she gave up the ghost. They were making a starboard turn into the bad engine when Alex gave his co-pilot, 2/Lt. Donald E. Bartz the order to ring the bell preparatory to ditching. Torgerson gives a good account of what occurred: "I think that the boy the Navy shot down was flying with us. All of a sudden he disappeared. Later on they came into the strip. Our navy had knocked both his engines out and he belly landed on the beach." The bomber had slammed hard into the water, after taking a beating from friendly fire. Alex was knocked unconscious from the impact, the rest of the six-man crew escaped from the sinking plane, dragging their leader with them. The men floated in the water, about 3 miles south of the Dulag airstrip and about a mile offshore. There they would remain, until someone on shore came and got them. Soon enough the troops on the beach sent out a DUKW (amphibious tractor) and pulled them from the drink. Lt. Alex woke up on a stretcher while he was being carried to the hospital, he remained there for three days before rejoining the unit. Bartz and the rest of the crew were uninjured and so joined the 38th Bomb Group stragglers that had been coming in all morning. After landing at Tacloban, Torgerson took met up with the rest of the pilots from the mission. After a brief give and take, he realized his was the only plane in the squadron that did not come back full of holes. Later on, while the pilots and crewman were sitting around swapping stories and counting their blessings, Torgerson was approached by a U.S. soldier: "This infantryman came up and said, 'As soon as I can get you rebombed, you take off and hit them again.' I said, 'you fly it.' That about summed up the feelings for the whole group. Although the last of the planes had returned for the day, the drama was still unfolding for three aircrews from the "Black Panthers" that were still far behind enemy lines.

Seay adrift in the straits

After retiring from Ormoc Bay and a long trip south, 953's luck was running out. Lt. Seay's heavily damaged aircraft was crossing Cabalian Bay en route to Tacloban, when his port engine cut out. The pilot's skillful belly-landing managed to keep the fuselage intact, however, 953 hit the water at high speed and afforded the crew only moments to prepare for ditching. Except for Seay and Gamble, the airmen had inadequate time to brace themselves for the crash. It is most probable that they were knocked unconscious or otherwise wounded, preventing them from escaping. The navigator, radio operator, and both gunner's went down with the bomber. The pilot's popped out through the cockpit overhead hatch and swam a short distance from the sinking plane. Gamble inflated his own life vest and did the same for Seay by blowing through the tubes. They watched the B-25 disappear beneath the waves, taking their comrades with it. Climbing into a life raft that had been dropped by Lt. Clark, Gamble pulled Seay aboard, and immobilized him to prevent further injury. The co-pilot had received only minor cuts and bruises from the crash, however, it was obvious from Seay's pain, that he had sustained a serious back injury. Two oars and a canteen of water that were floating nearby were retrieved, then the airmen made themselves as comfortable as possible under the circumstances.

Bobbing around in the swells, they could make out Clark trying to get the attention of a destroyer and lead it to them, but the warship failed to approach any closer. Gamble

grabbed the bag that contained the life raft and used it to fashion a sea anchor. The drag would keep the raft from drifting too far from the crash site. If their position could be maintained, they had every reason to be optimistic of an early rescue. Not long after Clark had departed, a pair of "Zeke's" coming in low from the northeast approached their position. One of the fighters passed near the destroyer, but out of range of its guns. In a close brush, the other "Zeke" flew directly over the raft at an altitude of only 50 feet, but evidently the small craft was hidden among the whitecaps. During the afternoon, they saw three native sailboats, although none came close enough to signal. About 1700 hours, a PBY flew along the beach, but never explored further out to sea. Shortly, the Catalina abandoned the search and retired to the north.

Nightfall came and with it the temperature dropped precipitously, they were cold, wet and miserable. In an effort to make Seay more comfortable, Lt. Gamble pulled in the sea anchor and draped it over them. He also used his own body to warm up the injured man. Early the next morning, they heard the sound of PT boats, but it was still to dark to see them. When day dawned, they took a dead reckoning fix on their position and realized that the raft had drifted about six miles during the night. Since the shoreline was only four miles away now, the co-pilot attempted to row the remaining distance. His continuing effort was hampered by a leak in the skin of the dinghy, which would have them treading water long before they reached the surf zone. Fortuitously, a destroyer was spotted to the northeast and Gamble successfully signaled with her deck watch, with a mirror he had picked up from the floor of the aircraft before it sunk.

At approximately 1030 hours local time, the superstructure of an American "tin can" was looming large over the stranded men. A motor launch was dispatched and its coxswain pulled alongside the floundering raft. Sailors plucked the drenched flyers from the sea and brought them back to the ship, where they were given food, water, dry clothes and medical attention. After 24 hours of being at the mercy of the pacific and exposure to its harsh elements, Seay and Gamble were now in the capable hands of the U.S. Navy. Shortly after landing on the deck of the destroyer, the pilot's requested that Tacloban be apprised of their rescue. However, some unexplained SNAFU intervened and no radio message was ever sent. The first notice that the 38th Bomb Group ever received about the downed crew, was when they deplaned in Morotai almost a week later. Due to operational orders, the DD had to rejoin the battle fleet and therefore, could not drop them off in a friendly port. They remained onboard through the 15th of November. Lt. Seay spent much of his time in sick bay, where the ship's corpsman administered as much medical care as the condition allowed.

Anytime there was a perceived threat of enemy submarines or air attack, the warship was brought to full readiness. This continuous cycle of alert and stand down, played havoc with the weary flyers. Subsequently, during the cruise, the airmen were denied much sleep, since "general quarters" was sounded quite often. The ruckus created by alarm bells and sailors stampeding to their battle stations, were a constant nuisance, as was the stifling heat below decks. On the 16th, the lieutenants were transferred to a tanker, which was alongside refueling the warship. The airmen were dropped off in Leyte Gulf where they were forced to part company for the duration of the war. Lt. Seay was brought on

board the hospital ship Comfort, which soon departed for Hollandia. It was soon discovered that the pilot had broken his back, thankfully though, his spinal cord was not severed. Seay was sent back to CONUS to sit out the rest of the conflict and recuperate. The next day, Gamble wrangled a spot on a B-24 which deposited him on Biak. He bided his time in a transient camp until the following morning, when he was returned to Morotai by troop carrier. Walking into the squadron area on November 19th, his comrades in the 822nd were shocked. Since they had heard no word of Seay's crew since the mission on the 10th, everyone assumed they were dead.

McLean's War

Following Lt. McLean's successful water landing off of northern Ponson Island, the entire six-man crew managed to get free of the wreckage before the plane plunged into the abyss. While the airmen were abandoning ship, they managed to free one of the life rafts that was stowed in the plane. There was some difficulty with the inflation process and it took them 30 minutes to make the boat seaworthy. Finally, climbing over the gunwales, the sodden men took up positions, grabbed the oars and began paddling for nearby Ponson Island. After paddling south for about two hours, the group noticed two canoes that were tacking toward them from Pilar Point. Each canoe held two natives that were sitting upright and stiff, even while paddling their own craft. The flyer's were unsure if the natives were friendly or not, so they broke out their only weapons, two revolver's and settled in to wait.

Before long, the banca's pulled alongside and an interesting dialogue took place. According to McLean, "The native seemed excited. One of them spoke a kind of English. When we told him we were Americans, he translated for the other men and they all started to jabber. They were crazy excited. The first Joe told us he hadn't seen Americans for many years, and he kept grinning at us. It sounded like a chamber of commerce speech back home." The airmen's new friends turned out to be very sympathetic to Americans in general and soldier's in particular. The natives related that there were no Japanese on Ponson, then asked the group to follow them back to Island. The consensus among the GI's, was that the Filipinos could be trusted, so they accepted the invitation. Anyway, sitting in the water in a bright orange-yellow raft was asking to be strafed by an enemy fighter. The natives proceeded to lash the lifeboat up to their banca's and towed it to the island.

Coming ashore, any lingering doubts that the men may have had concerning the Filipinos were put to rest. S/Sgt. R.E. Arnold, the top-turret gunner, was amazed at the reception that they received: "There must have been about five hundred people there-old men and young men and women and small children. The guy who had done the talking to us in the canoe shouted something to them, and they all started to cheer. The little kids ran out into the water and began to pull in the raft by hand." The tail gunner, S/Sgt. James S. Glendenin, had suffered contusions to the chest from the crash and was in obvious pain. The natives scurried out into the water, lifted the injured gunner out of the boat and gingerly carried him to the beach. Arnold said he "never saw anybody handle anyone as carefully as they handled him."

The airmen were brought to the mayor's house, where all their clothes was scooped up and taken away to be cleaned and mended. While their army-issue outfits were being tended to, the men were offered clothing to wear which was made from some type of indigenous grass. The villager's themselves, were attired in rags, however everything they wore was immaculate. They were a very clean and proud people. Afterward, the airmen were given limited first aid for their injuries, most of which were cuts and abrasions. These were treated with an alcoholic compound captured from the Japanese as an antiseptic, then wrapped up with a clean cloth, a sprained knee and ankle were simply rested.

Within 30 minutes of their arrival, the men were presented with a huge feast, consisting of fried chicken, sweet potatoes and eggs. The climax of the meal came when one of the villager's produced a half-pound tin of coffee and some sugar. The generosity of the natives was unbridled, apparently, they had been hoarding these rare commodities for the past three years, but they wanted the aviators to have them. Due to the presence of the Americans, the morale of the Filipinos was soaring and the meal took on a festive atmosphere. While the men filled their bellies and relaxed, they were serenaded by a guitar. The natives were singing and laughing, some were even crying, it was a very powerful moment both for the village and the survivors.

Following the banquet, the gorged GI's remained in the mayor's home, resting, talking and just enjoying their newfound feeling of well-being. There current circumstances were quite a departure from their predicament of just three hours prior. They went from the abject terror of the attack and its subsequent crash, to the relative safety of this quaint little village where they were treated like long lost relatives. While the men hung out in the official's residence, local's began trooping through to observe them close up. It was almost as if they were an exhibit in a museum or a zoo. According to McLean, "We were sitting there covered with some kind of grass, and one by one all the people stepped in and looked at us. Sometimes they just looked with a serious expression on their faces, without saying anything. Some of the girls giggled and ran out. The little kids came up and touched us as though they were unable to believe we were real." Later in the day, a Catholic priest arrived and held mass in gratitude for the men's deliverance. After nightfall, the men, exhausted from their long day of combat and evasion, hit the rack, content in the knowledge that they were surrounded by friends.

After a good night's sleep, McLean and his crew awoke to the sight of another delicious platter of fried chicken and eggs. It was somewhat peculiar, here they were, on the run and hiding from the Japanese and yet they were eating better that they did at their own base on Morotai. When they finished chowing down, one of the villager's who had towed them to shore, visited them. The native, who now considered himself a close friend, chatted with the airmen for some time. After which, he agreed to transport McLean to the nearest outpost of white men, where the major would transmit a request for a pickup by a Catalina flying boat. At 0900 hours on the 11th, McLean and the Filipinos boarded a canoe and left Ponson Island behind. They headed southeast across the Camotes Sea, in the direction of Baybay on the west coast of Leyte. While McLean was transiting to the

mainland, the other five crewmen led by Lt. Clayton, remained in the official's home and received further medical treatment for their injuries. They whiled away the day eating and resting, while they were entertained by native musicians who sung for them. To the delight of the whole crew, while they were listening to the singers, they were provided with some local brew that was made from coconuts. All things considered it was an enjoyable day, the same could not be said for McLean.

The Japanese ships in Ormoc Bay, were attacked for the second day in a row, this time by carrier planes from Task Force 38. McLean and his friend, who were fording the local waters in their tiny canoe, were in serious danger. Starting about 1015 hours and lasting for over two hours, they were caught in between Japanese anti-aircraft fire from convoy TA-3 and the strafing by the American planes. The brave Filipinos though, never faltered from his mission and sailed right through the combat zone. The most dangerous part of the journey occurred when a dogfight erupted directly above them, seven P-38s jumped four "Oscar's." The ensuing "rhubarb," was so wild that seven machine gun bullets actually tore through the boats sail. Undeterred by this close call, the canoe beached at Baybay at 1430 hours and the major departed immediately to send a radio message up the chain of command.

Meanwhile, back at Pilar, at about 2200 hours, a lone survivor from one of the sunken Japanese ships was captured by the natives and brought to the Americans. Clayton and the navigator, 1/Lt. Roy F. Breerwood, attempted to garner information from the prisoner. But when the sailor repeatedly refused to answer their questions, the Filipinos marched him to the cemetery and killed him with his bolo knife (large machete-like instruments). About 0300 hours, church bells started ringing and an alarmed Filipinos rushed into the airmen's quarters. He informed them that greater numbers of Japanese were arriving in small boats and many had already landed on the beach. These were the survivors of four destroyers that were sunk by TF-38 during the day. The villager's, who had prior experience with the Japanese, kept their composure and took charge of the situation with great efficiency. As the stragglers drifted ashore singly and in two's and three's, about 40 Filipinos were using their bolo knives to kill them. But as the night wore on, and the trickle became a flood, they became unsure if they would be able to dispatch them with just their knives. At 0400 hours, it was decided to remove the airmen from the village and they were whisked away into the surrounding hills, about two miles inland. Sgt. Glendenin, who was still in bad shape, was carried by Clayton and Breerwood, using a makeshift stretcher. The radio operator, T/Sgt. R.L. Brown, made his way by using an oar from the life raft as a crutch.

All five men were taken to a large cave and were soon joined by women, children and old men from the village. Knowing that the Japanese had little regard for their welfare, they even brought their chickens and pigs to the shelter, a previous enemy patrol had stolen all the food they could get their hands on. The younger men remained behind to protect their property and to deal with "Tojo's" warriors. Everyone in the cave stayed up all night in expectation of the battle, below, in the village it was eerily silent. The land around the cave was largely cultivated with few trees, so by daybreak, the flyers had a good view of the Japanese floating in on the wreckage. They noted that the area around the Camotes

Islands was being constantly patrolled by U.S. navy aircraft. Later on, they watched as a half dozen or more P-40's dive-bombed an enemy warship. They scored direct hits on its bow, which set it afire, soon the magazine exploded and the ship sank shortly after.

At About 1030 hours the next day, the mayor came up to the cave and reported on what was happening below, he related that "the Nips" were the survivors of several sunken ships that were attacked by U.S. aircraft. About 200 exhausted and dazed Japanese had slogged ashore near Pilar. Of these, about 130 had been killed by the Filipinos at the water's edge. The remaining 70 or so, had made their way to the village, several of them possessed revolvers or knives, but most were unarmed. Three naval officers led this ragtag group of men, the ranking officer was Commander Mori Takuji, the "skipper" the IJN Naganami, a destroyer sunk earlier that day. They were being held in the flimsy municipal jail and guarded by Filipinos with bolo knives. In order to pacify the Japanese, the natives had promised to transport them to Ormoc City.

After further discussion with the mayor, it was decided that one of the airmen would attempt a bit of subterfuge in order to get the Japanese in a more vulnerable position. Lt. Clayton strapped on a .45-Caliber pistol salvaged from their B-25 and ambled down the hill into the village. He was helped in his mission by a 19 year old Filipinos girl who spoke English. She took him to the mayor's house, sat him at a desk in an upstairs room and had the Japanese officer brought over. The girl stood by fanning the flyer to create an air of importance, while he smoked a cigarette to hide his nervousness. The sailor was apparently educated in America and spoke flawless English. Clayton greeted him gruffly, ordered him to sit down and asked him a number of military questions as part of the bluff. During the interrogation, the officer said that they had been instructed not to land on Ponson Island, but the current had dragged them to its shores. Clayton said, "I've been sent down by an American garrison. We are heavily armed and number several hundred men. I've been sent down to order you to surrender to me." The lieutenant advised the Japanese that they were now American prisoners of war, that resistance would remove their right to be treated as such. He ordered him to return to the jail and advise Takuji of his surrender conditions, he was to allow the Filipinos to tie the hands of the Japanese and march them off in pairs to the stockade. If the plan worked, the natives could easily kill the sailors when they were in small groups.

It appeared that the junior officer was duly impressed and scared by the pilot's bluster. However, when Takuji was told of the demands, he became angry and objected strongly. Clayton went over to the jail in an attempt to scare the commander into submission. There were about 70 enlisted men locked up and the three officers sat outside on a bench, about three dozen natives with knives surrounded the compound. The situation was precarious, because the "jail" contained several windows and the door was feeble, held closed only with the aid of rope. Clayton grabbed the captain by the shoulder, pulled him to his feet and guided him away from the others. He pressed his .45 automatic into his back and commanded him to give the order, his words were translated by the other officer, however the meaning was obvious. When Takuji did not respond, the airmen poked him in the back with the gun and told him to make up his mind. The "skipper" was obviously scared, but barked an order to the sailors then spun around and made a grab for

the gun. Clayton instinctively pulled the trigger, but the shot went low, digging into the dirt, Takuji broke free and sprinted for the outskirts of the village. Clayton brought the gun up to shoot him in the back, but a Filipinos was in the line of fire, as it happened he was in the process of chasing the captain. The native, who was actually a sergeant with the Filipinos scouts and saw much action on Bataan, eventually caught up to Takuji and cut him down with a bolo.

While their leader was sprinting for the woods, the rest of the Japanese began rushing for the front door of the jail. They easily busted through and started to make their way outside, before Clayton put a couple of shots into the crowd and sent them scurrying for the rear entrance. The lieutenant ran around the back yelling at them to stay put, but by then some of them were climbing out of the side windows. The airman rushed to the side, just in time to see a sailor clambering out of the opening. When the man noticed that a gun was being aimed at him, he collapsed to the ground, his spirit broken. Clayton did not have the heart to shoot him. He returned to the front of the building just in time to see a mass of sailors fleeing in the distance with their Filipinos guards in hot pursuit. The Japanese fled toward the beach, where they commandeered three sailboat's and began paddling for Ormoc. Along the way, about 20 of them were killed by the villagers and their deadly machete's. Clayton, discouraged at the failure of their plan, rejoined his comrades in the cave by 1400 hours. At the time the situation appeared critical, because if survivors reached Ormoc, an enemy patrol could return for the Americans. The men considered grabbing a boat on the south side of the island and making for the mainland, however, in the end they decided to wait for McLean.

McLanahan's journey

B-25 #026 had slammed into the water hard, shattering on impact. With water rushing in from all sides, its six-man crew struggled to escape. Up forward in the cockpit, the pilots were fighting with the overhead escape hatch. There had not been time before the ditching too release the emergency hatch and now it would not budge. Both pilots were pounding on it and finally McClanahan drove his fist through the plexiglass, releasing the hatch, but he cut his hand in the process. They bounded through the opening and climbed up on the fuselage heading aft toward the top turret. Fitzgerald had grabbed the tail gunner, Cpl. A.J. Charbonneau, who was partially unconscious and was leading him into the cockpit and out of the hatch. He got them both into the sea, successfully inflated both of their life vests and swam a short distance from the aircraft. Meanwhile, the pilot was on the wing trying to pull out the other life raft and the co-pilot was at the top turret trying to help the turret-gunner, Sgt. E.J. Muldoon get clear. The gunner was shooting through the plexiglass with his .45-Caliber pistol, but even after emptying a whole magazine into the dome, it would not break open. Wolfe had nothing to use to break the plexiglass and tried to direct Muldoon to get out through the escape hatch. However, the gunner was frantic and screaming like mad and was not thinking clearly. Muldoon was also bleeding badly from a laceration that ran from his scalp all the way to his neck. The radio operator, T/Sgt. James A. Bacon Jr., must have been knocked unconscious or killed in the crash, because they never saw any sign of him. The pilots gave up their effort at freeing the second raft just before the plane sank, diving off the trailing edge of the wing.

The B-25 headed down to Davy Jones locker, taking Sergeant's Muldoon and Bacon with it.

With the bomber gone, McClanhan finally pulled the chords on his vest, but it failed to inflate. So he depressed the levers directly and it finally engaged, puncturing the cartridges and pumping up the vest with air. Fitzgerald was floating nearby, using his hands to keep Charbonneau's head out of the water. McClanahan was sick from swallowing salt water, blood and dazed from being under water so long trying to free the raft. He did however, retain his focus. He spotted the life raft that came from the aft end of the plane, it was floating close at hand and half underwater. He swam over and inflated it, while Wolfe retrieved some first aid kits that were bobbing in the surf. The two of them searched for more survivors and finding none, put Charbonneau in the lifeboat, and then climbed in with Fitzgerald. Once aboard the men made another visual search of the area for Bacon and Muldoon using the height advantage they had gained from the raft. Once again this proved unrewarding. The men's attention now turned inward toward the welfare of those in the boat. First aid was applied to multiple cuts on all the crew members, received while evacuating the aircraft. Lt. Wolfe had one eye that was so badly bruised and swollen, he could not see out of it. Everyone except Fitzgerald was throwing up from ingesting the mixture of salt water and sea marker dye from the life vests. McClanahan and Charbonneau were so sick they had to lay down.

The men rested in the boat for awhile, until they realized the current was dragging them towards the remaining ships in the Japanese convoy. Two bags of marker die were tied to the raft to determine their drift, then they broke out the oars and started paddling toward the southeast. Several hours later, they noticed two native sailboats tacking toward them from the northeast. Afraid that the banca's had Japanese on board, the men spent 20 minutes rowing hard to get away. The effort was wasted and soon the boats drew near. As the banca's closed in, the natives aboard began yelling "Americans" to the crew. The canoes pulled alongside about 1600 hours and the flyers could see that they were manned exclusively by Filipinos and friendly at that. A man of about 50 years old, Calaredio Suello, another of about 20 and two 14 year old boys that helped the airmen climb aboard. The natives immediately concealed the brightly-colored raft with matting, because there were three Zero's cruising overhead at 6000 feet, flying in a sloppy Vee. They also covered the Americans with matting, to hide them from the prying eyes of the Japanese. The Filipinos pointed toward Ponson, 10 miles distant, indicating that they were going to take them there. The airmen though, believed that there might be Japanese troops on the island, and wanted to go to the Cuatro Islands, much farther away to the southeast. Although the older men could not speak English, the boys apparently knew enough of the language to understand what they were saying. After a brief translation and discussion among the natives, they agreed to the new destination and the banca's set sail for the quartet of small islands that make up the Cuatro chain.

While McClanahan and the others remained hidden under the thatch, Lt. Wolfe stayed in the main cabin, guarding the helmsman with his .45-Caliber pistol in case of treachery. Due to fair winds, the boats reached Apit Island only an hour later and dropped anchor. One of the boys bolted ashore and told the locals, that they had four American on board.

The natives of Apit greeted the airmen warmly and carried them one by one into their village. When the flyers were all in the village, they were approached by a Filipinos guerilla who came to attention in front of McClanahan and said in good English, "I am reporting to you sir, will keep you safe and will stand by you till I die." The guerilla, PFC Porforio Decatoria, of the 91st Division Field Artillery, remained at attention until he was told "at ease" by the lieutenant. The airmen were brought through the village, where they were accorded a royal welcome by the entire population, then deposited at the mayors house. Sgt. Charbonneau was carried inside, and given a hot bath and the others were provided with clean white clothes, while some eggs were boiled for the crew.

The mayors wife, Mrs. Milliton, was beautiful and had tears in her eyes at the rescue of the downed airmen. Everyone in the village had seen the plane crash and were overjoyed that they were still alive. The airmen were told that the villagers had also helped the pilot of a P-38 who had crashed. Once they were settled in, McClanahan questioned the locals about Japanese positions on the west coast of Leyte. He was told that U.S. engineers in jeeps passed by Inopacan on their way to and from their post at Baybay. The American post at Baybay was only 13 miles north of Inopacan. The Filipinos offered to take the men to Inopacan, which was only seven miles across the water. Once there, they could wait by the road for a jeep. Before leaving, McClanahan gave Suello the life raft and handed out the remaining sulfa drugs to the villagers of Apit. The rest of the airmen got into the act and gave out all the equipment that was left from the emergency rations. The natives scrambled for these tokens, which meant a great deal to them. A short while later, while the flyers were boarding the boat, the villagers showed up and brought them many boiled eggs as presents. They were told by the natives, "It is our duty to save lives of Americans." During their heartfelt farewell, the aviators were given the impression that the Filipinos wanted to be part of the United States and not independent.

At about 1730 hours, they shoved off in a large boat, with a main sail and jib made of course burlap. The crew consisted of the owner, a woman, two guerillas and four sailors. En route to the Inopacan, the airmen were fed rice and dried fish on china, while they drank cool water from cups made of coconut shells. The natives, who considered themselves to be very civilized, went so far as to apologize for the lack of silver servings. After their sit-down with the crew of the banca, the four men were offered local Filipinos cigarette's, which gave them a definite lift during the voyage. Due to light winds the trek across the narrow channel, which separated Apit from Leyte took much longer than expected and it was a full three hours before the native boat grounded on the mainland. Furthermore, the wind had pushed them further north then they would have liked, leaving them at Cunalom, about three miles down the coast from Inopacan.

Reaching the village, they were accorded another stately welcome and provided quarters in the house of the Mayor, Senor Porforio. So many villagers crowded into the casa, at least 60, that the floor gave way underneath them. In good spirits, the floor was braced and two of the airmen were taken to another dwelling, which was the home of "Bobo," a former aid to an American colonel in Manila. Sleeping areas were made up with mattresses, clean blankets and pillows and before long, the exhausted flyers laid down on their cozy beds. Even with McClanahan and Wolfe prostrate in their beds, the natives did

not leave, but sat there gazing at them with admiration. After a time, the officers asked the locals why it was that they were staring at them. They responded by saying, "Americans were handsome and beautiful and the best people in the world." The Filipinos remained there giggling and gawking at the crewman, until "Bobo" commanded them to leave. The villagers serenaded the Americans with guitars while they sang American songs, even while others guarded them from possible Japanese patrols. Several men and women remained inside each house as guards and many others, armed with bolo's, surrounded the outside of the structures. It was an interesting dichotomy of spirit, the Filipinos could be brutal warriors, who gave their enemy no quarter on the field of battle, yet they were also very cultured and sensitive. Over the course of their escape and evasion, the Americans became truly endeared with these enigmatic people. Before hitting the sack, McClanahan sent a runner to make the 16-mile trek to the nearest American base. The native was provided with a note addressed to the U.S. Army contingent at Baybay. The lieutenant was hoping for an early resolution to their predicament and wanted desperately to get Sgt. Charbonneau the medical attention he needed.

On the morning of the 11th, when they awoke, the airmen were provided with soap and water to clean up. As soon as the natives were informed that the Americans had arisen, people began showing up with food, tableware and silver. The entire resources of the barrio were combined in order to present the flyers with a feast fit for nobility. Sitting down to a table covered with white linens and bordered by numerous enthusiastic waiters, the men ate an elaborate meal of roast chicken, rice, potatoes and papaya. After a desert of cookies and cigarettes, the villager's apologized for not having more to offer, "Sorry, we are poor people and can't give you more." Once again the survivors were overwhelmed by the humility and generosity of these simple, but proud people. During the meal, many of the natives stood by the table, closely watching everything their guest did. When one of the airmen questioned their presence he was told, "they watched so they could be more like them, the most wonderful people in the world, so big and strong." One of the men went so far as to grab McClanahan's arm and say, "American very strong I betcha he killed plenty Japs." The lieutenant told him that he had been fighting the Japanese for 14 months. The Filipinos asked him if they were part of the group that had attacked the convoy near Ormoc Bay. The Villagers had watched the battle from the shore and had seen six large columns of smoke rising up from the enemy ships. They had even heard about their crash and rescue before they arrived on Leyte, apparently news traveled fast among the barrios.

Later in the morning, the runner they had sent the night before returned. His report was disappointing, because despite the written note, he was not permitted to pass through the front gate of the base and inform the soldiers about their situation. With little choice, they sent out another runner and hoped for the best. In the meantime, the flyers toured the village, making friends and exchanging tokens and information with their staunchest of allies. The men traded Dutch Guilders with the natives for Filipinos money and Japanese invasion currency. Along the way, the women held up their babies to see the Americans and the combat veterans made very flattering remarks about their children. They were also told many of their stories about the war-time occupation. The Japanese, called

"squirrel teeth" by the natives, had beheaded 100 villagers when they first arrived and they periodically returned and stole all the food and supplies they could get their hands on. The men also learned about how the Filipinos would ambush the enemy. Japanese patrols would monitored in the area and once they knew their line of advance they would line the sides of the trail with razor-sharp bamboo-stakes. When the soldiers entered the "kill zone," a few shots would be fired at them and the Japanese would dive off the trail wounding or killing themselves when they became impaled on the stakes. The Filipinos managed to fight a very effective guerilla war, despite their almost total lack of modern weaponry.

At 0830 hours, three army jeeps came rolling through the town with no intention of slowing down or stopping. McClanahan and Wolfe hailed them, greatly surprising the U.S. soldiers. The officer in charge of the patrol gave them a jeep and two men to take them to Baybay. The airmen said their goodbye's and set off for the base. Upon arrival Charbonneau was attended to immediately by a doctor and the rest were questioned and fed. Afterward, they were taken to the command post, where they broadcast a message to Air-Sea Rescue at Tacloban. The message read "Have 3 survivors with me of B-25 crash. Please send Catalina. This is an emergency. Signed McClanahan, 1st Lieutenant. Relay message to 38th Bomb Group attached to 13th Air Force at Morotai." An hour and a half later, a receipt for Lt. McClanahan's transmission finally arrived. It read, "All authorities concerned notified." The men were relieved, now that that the "brass" knew of their predicament, it was just a matter of time until they were picked up. At 1500 hours, a banca pulled into Baybay. An American that was on board, came ashore and strode through the gate of the military compound and then headed toward the command post. McClanahan, who had only been at base for five hours himself, happened to run into this army officer. The man turned out to be none other than the "Black Panther" squadron leader, Maj. McLean. Upon seeing one of his flight leaders in the compound, he instinctively realized what had happened and greeted him with the frank assertion, "you too Mac." The major had just completed his own trek to the mainland, a six hour voyage from the Camotes Islands. Following the cheerful reunion, the major headed into the command post, where he transmitted an updated message to Tacloban. McLean was reluctant to stand by and wait and therefore, decided to intervene directly and speed up the process. He drove over to a nearby airfield, commandeered an L-5 "Sentinel" light liaison plane and flew to Tacloban.

Following McLean's departure, the men got cleaned up and strolled the base in search of information about their Ormoc Bay mission. They found a lieutenant, from the 7th Cavalry Reconnaissance Troop, who had seen part of the battle. Watching through field glasses from the village of Alluera, located 20 miles north of Baybay, he saw two Japanese destroyers laying down a smoke screen prior to the attack. 10 minutes later, when the 822nd Squadron attacked, he observed the crash of both McLean's and McClanahan's B-25. This being said, due to the distance and haze from the battle, he could not confirm how much damage the 38th Bomb Group had inflicted on the convoy. That night they had a good dinner of American food and hit their assigned racks for some much needed sleep. It was however, a restless night for all the men, due to an air raid and the intermittent drone of enemy aircraft engines in the area. On the morning of the 12th,

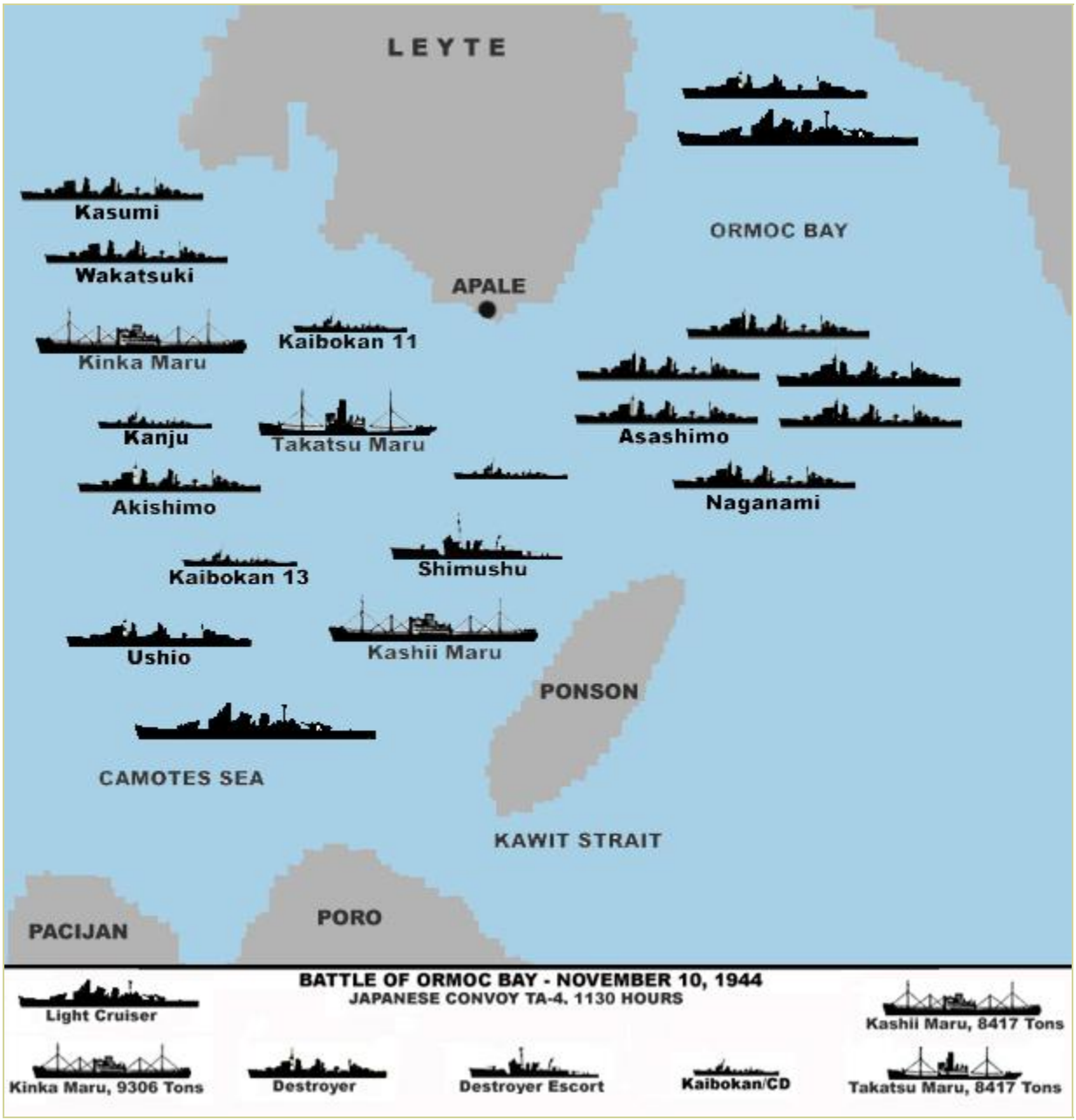
the flyers joined the army chow line, then went to church and spent some time buying souvenirs in Baybay. Later in the day, they had the good fortune of meeting another infantry officer who had witnessed part of the convoy attack. The lieutenant had observed McLean's run on the freighter-transport, which appeared to break in half and sink afterward. He also managed to see McClanahan's attack of the IJN Akishimo. Both airplanes were seen to emerge from their firing passes trailing smoke and flames, crashing shortly thereafter.

Rescue

Back on Ponson Island, Lt. Clayton and the others had retired to the hills again after the Japanese prison break. At 1430 hours, they observed a PBY land in the water and taxi to the jetty. Knowing that this must be their ride, the men made their way back to the village and down to the waterfront. Reaching the dock, they joined the natives who were watching a small one-sided naval battle unfold. Apparently, as soon as the Catalina landed, the Filipinos sergeant had rowed out and asked the crew and Major McLean to strafe the fleeing Japanese. This they agreed to do and as the B-25 crew and the entire population of the village watched on from the shore, the PBY went after the sailors. The seaplane taxied toward the sailboats and its gunners let go with their .50-Caliber machine guns. They riddled the boats and then many of the men who jumped in the water. Soon, eight P-38s showed up and added to the carnage, the Japanese never had a chance. Just in case their were survivors, the Filipinos waited on the shoreline with their bolo's.

With their strafing mission over, the Catalina returned to shore to pickup the crew of #820. After thanking the Filipinos, Clayton and the rest of the marooned men climbed aboard the rescue plane. Before departing, they handed over to the natives, every weapon they had, including rifles, pistols, Thompson sub-machine guns and ammunition. They also swore to the villagers, that if they ever flew over the Ponson Island again, they would drop cigarettes and arms. Additionally, McLean handed over to the guerrillas, an official military document. The note described how the natives had helped the airmen and ordered any American forces that were presented with it, to hand over any arms, ammunition, food or supplies that could be spared. With heartfelt farewell's, the flyer's closed the PBYs hatch and settled in for the short hop to Leyte.

McLean landed at Baybay at 1545 hours, gathered up McClanahan and his crew and took off for the east coast. The ten survivors of #820 and #026 unloaded at Tacloban, where they we debriefed by the intelligence officer (A-2) of the 308th Bomb Wing, then interviewed by members of the international press corp. The airmen were checked out at the 29th Field Hospital, fed and put to bed. On the morning of the 12th, McClanahan learned from the A-2 about the grisly aftermath of their attack. Following the battle, the bodies of approximately 3000 Japanese sailors and soldiers had washed up on the shoreline of Leyte, a grim testament to the effectiveness of the Sun Setters low-level tactics. At 1100 hours, the men were loaded onto a "Black Panther" B-25, flown by Capt. Gordon Fuller. The plane touched down at Morotai in the afternoon, thus ending the rescue of two bomber crews through the effort of many Americans and Filipinos.



Epilogue

When the last of these brave airmen were finally reunited with their compatriots, we are able to bring to a close the epic story of the Battle of Ormoc Bay. During the course of one daring morning, the Sun Setters took on the might of the Japanese Navy and prevailed. They had aided the U.S. Army by stemming the flow of troops and material to Letye and had all but decimated the reinforcement Convoy TA-4. The 38th BG was given credit for sinking the large transports Kashii Maru and Takatsu Maru and for damaging the Army Landing ship Kinka Maru. Kaibokan #11 was destroyed, Kaibokan #13 was heavily damaged and The IJN destroyer Akishimo suffered the loss of her whole bow

section. Furthermore, the destroyer escort Shimushu was damaged and a number of other destroyers and light cruisers in the area were strafed or bombed with unknown effect. This was without a doubt, the single most effective Fifth Air Force shipping attack of the war. It did however, come with a heavy price. Of the 30 allied B-25s that entered Ormoc Bay that morning, only 23 ever returned to an allied airfield. Many others were so badly damaged in the battle that they were retired from active service. Lastly, 25 men from the group lost their lives on the mission.

[Source: http://www.militaryhistoryonline.com/wwii/articles/ormocbay.aspx Jul 2011 ++]