

**AIR BATTLE FOR ATTU**  
By HARRY HIGGINS

BETTY'S FROM PARAMUSHIRO ATTACKED ATTU ON MAY 22, 1943 (THE FIRST SUCH RAID OF THE WAR) SO WE WERE NOT COMPLETELY SURPRISED THE NEXT DAY WHEN THE COMMAND POST ABOARD THE USS PENNSYLVANIA GAVE US VECTORS ON INCOMING FLIGHTS OF BANDITS UPON OUR ARRIVAL OVER ATTU, 250 MILES FROM OUR BASE ON AMCHITKA.

IT WAS A FINE SPRING DAY IN THE ALEUTIANS WITH NEARLY A SOLID OVERCAST AT 5000 FEET AROUND ATTU WHICH BECAME BROKEN TO SCATTERED TO CLEAR AS WE FLEW WEST OF THE ISLAND. I KNEW SOMETHING WAS UP WHEN WATT (COL. WATT) WENT TO FULL STICK PULLING HIS NOSE UP INTO A STEEP CLIMB. THE USE OF FULL THROTTLES TENDED TO BREAK UP A TIGHT FORMATION. I SPOTTED A FLIGHT OF BETTY'S AT ABOUT 20,000 FEET SO I PUT ON MY OXYGEN MASK AND CLIMBED THROUGH THE CLOUDS TO MEET THEM. THEY STARTED TO HIGHTAIL IT TO THE WEST WHEN THE REST OF THE FLIGHT APPEARED. DURING THE CHASE I SAW THE REMARKABLE SIGHT OF THEIR ENTIRE JETTISONED BOMB LOAD EXPLODING IN THE WATER. I CHARGED MY 50's AND FIRED A TEST BURST BUT WAS DISMAYED TO FIND MY 20 MM CANNON WAS INOPERATIVE. WE HAD BEEN BRIEFED THAT THE BETTY'S HAD 20 MM GUNS IN THEIR TAIL TURRETS AND AS I PASSED BY I FOUND OUT WHY THE JAPANESE PILOTS WERE LINED ABREAST. AS I SUCKED IN BEHIND THE ENEMY FORMATION IN MY PURSUIT OF THEM, SIXTEEN 20 MM GUNS FIRED THOSE HUGE TRACERS AT MY FRAIL BODY. WARREN BANKS DESCRIBED THEM AS BEING LARGER THAN BASKETBALLS.

IT WAS PRETTY EXCITING AND MY MEMORY ISN'T CLEAR ABOUT ALL THE PASSES I MADE EXCEPT THE FIRST AND LAST. I DO RECALL SEEING A P-38 IN A BIG BARREL ROLL DURING THE HEAT OF BATTLE AND I THOUGHT THIS GUY IS ENJOYING HIMSELF TOO MUCH (PROBABLY WARREN BANKS). THE JAPANESE WERE SLOWLY DESCENDING TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF ANY CLOUDS THEY COULD FIND. I RECALL SEEING ONE OF THE BOMBERS IN A SLOW SPIRAL WITH DENSE SMOKE TRAILING ONE NACELLE.

MY LAST PASS WAS SPECTACULAR. THE FLIGHT HAD MOVED FAR TO THE WEST INTO NEARLY CLEAR AIR WITH A FEW FAIR WEATHER CUMULUS CLOUDS. AS I TRIED TO WORK FORWARD FOR A HIGH SIDE ATTACK THE FORMATION DISAPPEARED. I CONTINUED CLIMBING AND ENTERED A CLOUD AND AFTER FLYING FOR WHAT SEEMED MORE THAN AN HOUR I BROKE OUT DIRECTLY OVER THE JAPANESE FORMATION. I ROLLED OVER AND DOVE ON THE LEADER GETTING IN A LONG BURST THEN FINDING MYSELF IN A SCREAMING DIVE WITH THE NORTH PACIFIC LOOKING AWFULLY CLOSE. AFTER I RECOVERED I LOOKED AROUND AND SAW 12 BETTY'S AND NO P-38's. AT THIS POINT I WAS FEELING LONESOME AND FAR FROM HOME. I WAS 350 MILES FROM THE NEAREST STRIP AND I HAD BEEN FLYING FULL THROTTLE ON INTERNAL FUEL

FOR MORE THAN A HALF HOUR. I WAVED GOOD-BY TO MY FRIENDS IN THE BETTY'S AND HEADED EAST. I LOOKED FOR A LANDING PLACE BUT COULD FIND NONE. I PUT THE SUN ON MY RIGHT WING AND FLEW WITH THE ENGINES AS LEAN ON FUEL AS POSSIBLE. MY EFFORTS WERE REWARDED BY SEEING ATTU COME UP OVER THE HORIZON AND A GREAT BIG LIBERATOR CIRCLING AND WAITING FOR ME. FEELING ELATED AND NOT BEING LOST ANYMORE I DID A BIG VICTORY ROLL WITHOUT FIRST SECURING MY OPEN CANTEEN AND A SLICE OF PUMPKIN PIE I HAD BROUGHT ALONG FOR LUNCH. IT TURNED OUT TO BE A VERY SLOPPY ROLL WITH CANTEEN OF LEMONADE AND THE PIE FLYING AROUND THE INSIDE OF THE COCKPIT MAKING THE GREATEST MESS YOU EVER SAW. THERE WERE NO OTHER 38's AROUND SO I HEADED BACK TO AMCHITKA.

I WAS A LITTLE SURPRISED THAT I WAS GIVEN CREDIT FOR A "KILL." ALL I TOLD S-2 WAS THAT I HAD SEEN A BOMBER BURNING AND DESCENDING. I NEVER SAID THAT IT WAS A RESULT OF MY FIRE. I WAS PRETTY SCARED DURING THE ENGAGEMENT AND SOMEWHAT DEMORALIZED THAT MY BIG GUN WAS NOT WORKING BUT I WAS GLAD THAT IT WAS OVER.

NOTE BY BRYON ELSNER: HARRY IS BEING TOO MODEST IN THE PART HE PLAYED IN THE BIGGEST AIR BATTLE IN THE ALEUTIANS WITH THE FIFTEEN BETTY'S. HE PROBABLY MADE "ACE" BECAUSE THE RUSSIANS REPORTED THAT ONLY FIVE OF THE BETTY'S RETURNED TO THEIR BASE.

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