

WAR STORIES
By Harry Higgins

(ED. NOTE: THESE EVENTS HAPPENED BETWEEN SEPTEMBER AND OCTOBER OF 1943. THIS WAS ORIGINALLY A THREE-PART TRILOGY, APPEARING IN SEPARATE ISSUES OF "THE SHEMYA MAILBAG.")

THE WAR IN THE ALEUTIANS WAS OVER EXCEPT FOR THE FACT THAT THE JAPANESE WERE STILL WITHIN RANGE, SITTING THERE ON PARAMUSHIRO SO WE MAINTAINED AN ALERT STATUS JUST IN CASE.

THE MAIN THING ABOUT SHEMYA IS THAT THE WIND BLEW ALL THE TIME SO ONE DAY, SITTING AROUND THE ALERT SHACK SOMEONE SAID "WHY DON'T WE PUT A SAIL ON THAT OLD BOMB CART AND SAIL DOWN THE TAXI STRIP?" THE CART WAS A HEAVY TRICYCLE AFFAIR WITH A YOKE ON THE FRONT WHEEL LIKE A CHILD'S TOY WAGON. WE SCROUNGED A STEEL BOMB CRATE, SOME TENT POLES, A TARP, AND PLENTY OF BAILING WIRE AND FASTENED THE CRATE TO THE BED OF THE CART SO THAT THE HELMSMEN COULD SIT ON THE CRATE AND STEER WITH THE YOKE. ONE TENT POLE WAS LASHED TO THE BACKSIDE OF THE CRATE AND THE OTHER WAS HOISTED TO THE TOP OF THIS MAST WITH THE TARP FORMING A HUGE SAIL. JIM CRUTCHFIELD WAS ELECTED HELMSMEN AND MOUNTED HIS PULPIT WHILE ABOUT FOUR OR FIVE OF US PUSHED THE CONTRAPTION OFF AND JUMPED ABOARD AS BALLAST AND MAYBE BRAKEMEN. TYPICAL OF THE FIGHTER PILOT MENTALITY, WE HAD GIVEN NO SERIOUS THOUGHT OF HOW WE WERE GOING TO STOP THIS MONSTER WHEN IT GOT TO THE END OF THE PSP (PIERCED STEEL PLANKING) WHERE THE MUSKEG STARTED. BUT OFF WE WENT AND THE WIND DID ITS PART. WE RAPIDLY ATTAINED A FEROCIOUS SPEED AT WHICH TIME IT DEVELOPED THE THING WAS UNSTABLE, THAT IS, IT STARTED YAWING AND ROLLING WITH JIM HAULING THE TILLER FROM ONE SIDE TO THE OTHER WHICH ONLY SERVED TO AGGRAVATE THE HORRIBLE MOTION. ONE BY ONE THE BALLAST (ALL US RIDERS), ANTICIPATING THE INEVITABLE CRASH, BAILED OUT WITH POOR JIM SCREAMING FOR BRAKES THAT WEREN'T THERE. SO OVER HE WENT IN THE MIDDLE OF ALL THIS RANDOM HARDWARE. IT TOOK TWO ROLLS OF GAUZE AND TAPE TO BANDAGE ALL THE PLACES WHERE HIS SKIN HAD BEEN ABRADED. WE DIDN'T TRY THAT AGAIN!

IT MUST HAVE BEEN LATE IN OCTOBER WHEN THEY FINISHED THE STRIP THAT RAN UP THE SIDE OF THE VOLCANO AT ALEXAI POINT ON ATTU. THE 54th FIGHTER SQUADRON WAS MOVED TO THIS NEW STRIP BECAUSE IT WAS 40 MILES CLOSER TO PARAMUSHIRO.

WHEN MY FLIGHT LEFT SHEMYA I FLEW TAIL END CHARLIE. WHOEVER WAS LEADING US PUT US INTO LINE ASTERN AND SET UP A BIG BUZZ JOB DOWN CENTERLINE TO THE 10,000-FOOT STRIP ON SHEMYA. BEING ANXIOUS TO DO MY PART IN THIS FAREWELL TO OUR ISLAND HOME AND BEING THE LAST

PLANE IN LINE, I DID A SLOW ROLL. NOW IT'S NOT HARD TO DO A SLOW ROLL IF YOU KEEP YOUR WITS ABOUT YOU AND EASE FORWARD ON THE ELEVATOR AS YOU BECOME INVERTED BUT I MADE THE HORRIBLE MISTAKE OF LOOKING DOWN (UP?) AT THE RUNWAY WHEN I WAS INVERTED (YOU ARE SUPPOSE TO KEEP YOUR EYES ON THE HORIZON). I COULD SEE THE TWO INCH HOLES IN THE PSP (PIERCED STEEL PLANKING) AND REALIZED I WAS AWFUL LOW. I DIDN'T COMPLETELY PANIC BUT WHEN I GOT THAT BIG FIGHTER BACK TO WINGS LEVEL I COULDN'T BELIEVE THAT I GOT AWAY WITH IT, AND I NEVER DID THAT AGAIN!

WE HAD BEEN AT ALEXAI POINT FOR ABOUT A WEEK WHEN OPERATIONS GOT A MESSAGE THAT A FIGHTER PLANE WE HAD LEFT ON SHEMYA FOR REPAIRS WAS READY TO GO. JIM CRUTCHFIELD AND I WERE CALLED OUT TO RETRIEVE IT. THE PLAN WAS FOR THE TWO OF US TO FLY OVER IN THE PIGGY BACK P-38. WE FLIPPED A COIN AND JIM WON SO I RODE AS A PASSENGER.

NOW I DON'T KNOW IF YOU HAVE EVER BEEN A PASSENGER ON A P-38 BUT, BELIEVE ME IT IS QUITE AN EXPERIENCE. THE RADIO IS REMOVED FROM BEHIND THE PILOT AND THE PASSENGER IS SEATED THERE WITH HIS KNEES IN THE PILOTS BACK AND HIS HEAD ON THE PILOTS SHOULDER. IT IS A VERY TIGHT SPOT AND VERY UNCOMFORTABLE.

IT IS VERY UNUSUAL TO HAVE A PASSENGER IN A WW II FIGHTER PLANE, SO I AM SURE JIM WAS THINKING THAT THIS WAS A GOOD OPPORTUNITY TO DEMONSTRATE HIS SKILLS. THE RUNWAY AT ALEXAI RAN UP THE SIDE OF A VOLCANO FOR LANDING, AND BACK DOWN THE VOLCANO AND OUT OVER A LANDFILL IN MASSACRE BAY FOR A TAKEOFF. JIM DIDN'T REALLY TAKEOFF, HE SIMPLY SLID OFF THE SIDE OF THE RUNWAY AND DROPPED DOWN TO THE WATER AND PROCEEDED AT A MINIMUM ALTITUDE TOWARD SHEMYA.

IT WAS TRADITIONAL TO FLY AS LOW AS POSSIBLE FOR SEVERAL REASONS: WE BELIEVED THE JAPANESE COULDN'T DETECT US EARLY IF WE WERE LOW. FREQUENTLY THERE WAS ABOUT A HALF MILE VISIBILITY RIGHT AT THE SURFACE, EVEN IN DENSE FOG, AND IT WAS PART OF THE MACHO IMAGE TO STIR UP A WAKE WITH YOUR PROPWASH.

FOR WHATEVER REASON, THAT IS WHAT JIM DID AND I MUST SAY I WAS IMPRESSED WITH HOW LOW HE WAS FLYING. NOW YOU REMEMBER THAT AS A PASSENGER, MY HEAD WAS RIGHT ALONG HIS HEAD. AFTER WE HAD BEEN SKIMMING THE SURFACE OF THE NORTH PACIFIC OCEAN FOR ABOUT FIVE MINUTES, I NOTICED HIS NECK WAS STARTING TO GET RED. SOMETHING WAS EMBARRASSING HIM. HE SLOWLY REACHED DOWN WITH HIS LEFT HAND AND RETRACTED THE LONG LEGS OF THE P-38 LANDING GEAR WHICH WERE PROBABLY FULL OF BRINE BY THIS TIME. NOW HE COULD HAVE FLOWN SEVERAL INCHES LOWER BUT HE HAD LOST THE GAME SO HE PULLED UP TO 10 FEET AND THE REST OF THE FLIGHT WAS UNEVENTFUL.

JIM WAS REALLY A NICE GUY WITH A TERRIFIC SENSE OF HUMOR. HE WAS FORCED TO DITCH OFF AMCHITKA ONE AFTERNOON. THEY HAD TOLD US WE WOULD ONLY BE GOOD FOR ABOUT 15 MINUTES IN THAT COLD WATER BUT IT WAS 45 MINUTES BEFORE A PBY COULD RESCUE HIM. THE 15 MINUTE STORY HADN'T TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT THAT JIM WAS A LITTLE ON THE HEAVY SIDE. HE TOLD US HE WAS JUST BEGINNING TO ENJOY THE SWIM WHEN HE WAS FISHED OUT OF THE ICY WATER.

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August 1998