



Benton's guns sang and the Zero in front of him came apart in flames

LEYTE LULLABY

By ROBERT SIDNEY BOWEN

Navy Lieutenant Benton knows he can get into plenty of trouble for breaking orders—but he takes a chance and defies authority, when the life of his ship depends on it!

CHAPTER I. LOST!

BENTON tore out of the fluff of cloud, throttled his Grumman a little and searched the white-blotched skies all about him. Suddenly he spotted a Jap Zero less than three thousand feet below him, tooting along as though its buck-toothed pilot didn't have a care or worry in the world. The young Navy Lieutenant (j.g.) pilot eyed it for a second or two, then dropped the nose of his Grumman and went hurtling down.

"You for me, Nippy!" he grunted and hunched forward over the stick.

The Jap plane continued to tootle along until just before Benton got into gun range. Then the Zeke wheeled in less than his own length and cut around behind a convenient cloud. Benton flattened out and went slicing around the end of the same cloud. Two split seconds later he cursed his foolhardiness. There was not just one Zero behind that cloud, there were three Zekes, poised to strike.

Benton's sturdy Grumman shuddered as the whole sky seemed to explode in savage yammering

sound. To go into a steeper dive would be suicide. The Japs would have a top shot they couldn't miss.

There was just one slim chance. That was to charge the Jap to the right, blast him out of the way and make for the fluffy cloud behind him.

Benton brought the Grumman around hard and fast. His guns sang their song of death, and the Zero in front of him came apart in a shower of flaming and smoking embers.

The Navy pilot flew through that patch of sky inferno, and felt hunks of the disintegrated Zero slap his wings. More Zero fire crackled against his eardrums, and the Grumman seemed to stumble in midair.

The windmill kept turning over, however, and the wings and the tail section stayed put. A moment later, the blessed misty whiteness of the cloud had completely enveloped him.

He let out a half sob, half sigh of relief and throttled the Pratt & Whitney halfway back. The cloud was a big one and he intended to stay in it as long as he could.

The Grumman was still flying, but it had been hurt. His glass hatch had disappeared like so much powdered glass in a gale of wind. The instrument board was a shambles, and a good foot of his right wingtip was gone.

"He who fights and runs away, lives!" he grunted through stiff lips.

And so he nursed the Grumman along in the cloud. Presently it thinned, and then ceased altogether. But there was another cloud just ahead. He eased out into thin air, took a quick look around for Japs, saw none and made a run for it. The other cloud closed in around him.

Shortly he ran out of it, but streaked for yet another glob of fluffy white. For some fifteen or twenty minutes he jumped from cloud to cloud, saw not a sign of the Japs during the moments he was in clear air.

Finally he ran out of clouds. Below was the limitless expanse of the Pacific. And dead ahead was the sun, just about to sink below the western rim of the world.

He debated ducking back into the cloud area to play it safe, but decided against it. He wasn't sure how much fuel he had left in his tanks. The gauges had been riddled by Zero bullets. And it was still a long way back to the aircraft carrier Newton.

He sat up straight in the seat.

"But I'm lost!" he told himself.

That was no lie. The compass was a mess of junk. True he knew exactly the Newton's position, but he didn't know his position. He was somewhere east of the Philippines—three, four, maybe five hundred miles.

And the Newton was somewhere between his position and the Philippines. But was it due west toward that golden red ball, more to the north or more to the south? That was the question he couldn't answer.

He reached out his free hand toward the radio panel, but let his hand drop. Radio silence was the order.

Using the setting sun as a course point he eased the Grumman through the air and went into a swivel-neck routine trying to keep a sharp lookout in all directions. The Japs had seemingly lost him and gone on about their business.

When minutes piled up on one another, he began to think less of surprise attack by Zeros and more of his immediate future. The gas gauges told nothing, but his watch informed him that the borderline between powered flight and powerless flight was dangerously near.

Each time he glanced down at the limitless expanse of the Pacific below, it looked more and more uninviting. Oddly enough he wasn't afraid of what seemed increasingly inevitable. He had eight months of combat service behind him, and many times he had seen death staring him in the face.

Contrary to general opinion, you never actually overcame the fear of death. You simply become used to it. And most times you are so busy that you haven't time to think about what might happen to you until it's too late.

Balanced against the fear gnawing at his innards was disappointment that it had to come this way. If he had succeeded in nailing that Jap Kawanishi snooper his section had been ordered after in the first place, he'd feel a whole lot better. With Commander Hartley, the Fighter Squadron Commander, and Bud Kelley, he had been flying top patrol over the Newton when the order to go get it had been radioed.

The three of them had gone highballing toward the given point. They hit clouds and lost touch with each other. Then he had spotted the huge flying boat as he cut out of a cloud. But he wasn't in position, and before he could wheel and let go, the Kawanishi had been swallowed up in more clouds. He'd been hunting for it when he spotted that Zero.

"And here I am, probably heading for the ditch!" he finished bitterly. "Shot up, lost and no idea where home is."

A momentary sputter from the Pratt & Whitney in the nose sent his heart into his throat. But the power plant did not quit. He frantically searched the surface of the sun-blooded waters but saw no sign of a ship of any description.

"Looks like it," he said aloud, and was more than a little surprised that his voice was steady.

Suddenly it happened, like a movie. A flock of surface ships came looming up over the horizon a few degrees north of his position. He veered toward them as emotion surged through his body. Presently, he knew beyond all doubt that it was the Twenty-seventh Carrier Task Force. He was able to make out the Newton in the lead.

"Just a dummy who gets all the breaks, that's me!" he exclaimed.

A few minutes later, he released an emergency recognition flare. He watched it blossom out in light, then fixed his eyes on the Newton.

Two agonizing minutes dragged by, and then as the carrier heeled around into the wind her signal officer flashed him permission to land. With a prayer on his lips that his windmill would keep turning for these last few moments he flew by the Newton to port, circled back and set the nose down toward the flight deck.

The flagman brought him in over the stern and set him down almost as lightly as a feather. He caught his hook and that was that, save for one item that neither he nor the flagman knew anything about—the damage that Zero bullets had done to the port wheel gear.

The port wheel and strut buckled like a broken toothpick. Though momentum was practically nonexistent the jar threw Benton forward. His head banged hard against the rubber ring of his gun sight and he saw stars. He had a momentary vision of the portside crash nets, and then he seemed to be hanging in space.

The crippled Grumman, though, did not go spilling over the side. The efficient deck crew hogtied it and made it fast. Still dazed by the blow on his head, Benton managed to climb down onto the deck under his own steam. Ten minutes later, after a routine crash check had been made of his injuries, he was reporting, at the officer's request, to the quarters of Commander Hartley.

The commander of the Newton's fighter

squadron fixed Benton with a steady stare as the latter entered, silently motioned him to a chair.

"Anything more than that bump on the head?" he asked when the pilot had seated himself.

"No, sir," Benton replied. "I was lucky."

The commander's eyes seemed to frost up slightly, though there was no change in the tone of his voice.

"Very lucky," he said. "But that's not the kind of luck we like aboard the Newton. By the way, did you get that Zero?"

"You saw me, sir?" Benton replied with a gulp. "Yes, I got it. Or one of them, anyway. There were three behind that cloud. But what about that snooper, sir? Did you, or Kelley?"

"Yes, we got it," the senior officer replied. "So you got a Zero? That makes nine, doesn't it?"

"Yes, sir," Benton replied. "But if neither you or Kelley saw it—"

"Unfortunately we didn't," he said. "Too bad."

The commander stared hard at Benton.

"Tell me." He spoke again. "Give me just one good reason why everybody aboard shouldn't hate you, Benton!"

The pilot blinked.

"What—what's that, sir?" he managed to get out.

"I'll explain," the other said, and there was an edge to his voice now. "Four days ago, General MacArthur and his troops got a fingerhold on Leyte Island. The Navy blasted the way for him, and helped him in every way possible.

"Since then we've been waiting for the Jap Navy to do something about it. Is the Jap Navy coming out, or is it going to stay holed up wherever it is? Only the Japs know.

"But the Admiral does not intend to be caught with his flap down. He wants to keep the Japs in the dark as to our force size as long as he possibly can.

"That's why it was so all important to get that Jap snooper this afternoon. To nail him before he could scout this force and get the information back."

"You and Kelley got him, sir," Benton said as the other paused for breath.

"Yes," the commander said evenly. "But not until he got a good look at us. And maybe not before he was able to radio back all about us. I saw you get a flash of him, Benton."

"Then I saw you dive and I thought you had him

again. But I saw that it was a Zero and let you go. That Zero had decoy stamped all over him.”

Benton felt the blood climb up into his face. The senior officer returned his stare.

“That’s right, Benton, exactly what you’re thinking,” he said. “I saw it was a decoy trap, and let you go down alone. If there had been fifty Zeros I still would have let you go down alone.

“Our job wasn’t to build up Zero scores. It was to find that snooper and nail it before it was too late. That’s what Kelley and I did. But you didn’t, Benton. You passed up the real mission.”

CHAPTER II. CARRIER DOGHOUSE.

THERE was a heaviness in Benton’s chest, a powdery dryness in his throat.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Of course you’re sorry,” the commander said. “But perhaps the Kawanishi didn’t get a chance to use his radio. The Newton’s operators didn’t pick up anything. We may never know one way or the other.

“The point is that you quit a vital mission for individual accomplishment. And I won’t take that from anybody under my command. Stay on the deck until further orders, Lieutenant Benton. You may go.”

The pilot stood up slowly. He didn’t protest because he knew that it would do no good. Commander Hartley was already busying himself with some papers on his desk.

“Yes, sir,” Benton said finally and walked out.

He went straight to his own quarters forward under the flight deck and stowed his flying gear. He shared a cabin with Bud Kelley, the other wing man of Section One, but Kelley was not there—for which he was glad. He wanted several minutes alone to get a grip on himself.

There was no anger in him for Commander Hartley. The commander had been absolutely right in everything he said. He had slipped in going after that Zero. Yet at the same time he had not gone after it with the self centered idea of adding to his score. It had been simply automatic, instinctive.

That was what worried him as he sat on his bunk. He should have known better. Was he browning off, as the English call it? Was he losing his team play sense right now when perhaps the biggest scrap of all seemed to be shaping up?

“Maybe Hartley figures it that way,” he murmured aloud.

He sat on the bunk a few moments longer, then got up and went outside and made his way to the junior officers’ wardroom. Bud Kelley was the first one he saw as he entered. His bunkmate grinned at him over the top of a magazine, then promptly exchanged his grin for a puzzled look.

“For a chum who darn near took his last swim you don’t look any too happy,” Kelley said.

Benton lifted a hand in a half gesture.

“Maybe I should have taken the swim,” he grunted and dropped into a chair.

“So?” Kelley murmured. “Like that? I haven’t heard.”

Benton fished for a cigarette, found it, but didn’t bother to light it.

“Skip it,” he said. “I’ve been glued to the deck. Duration maybe. Who knows?”

Bud Kelley snorted.

“Bilge juice, chum!” he said. “Keep the reasons a secret if you like, but being glued to the deck for long is out. This time tomorrow you’ll have Zeros in your hair, and perhaps even a Jap battle wagon or two.”

Benton turned his head and gave Kelley a sharp look. His bunkmate nodded.

“That’s the word,” he said.

“Scuttlebutt?” Benton demanded.

“Not the way I heard it,” Kelley said as he lowered his voice and edged his chair closer. “I happened to hear the Exec talking to Flags. It seems that a part of the Jap fleet was sighted today steaming east through the Sulu Sea. The Exec figures that they plan to barge through Surigao Strait tonight to get out into the Pacific for a crack at our force, and Force Six.”

“Surigao Strait?” Benton echoed sharply. “Then it must be Leyte they’re after!”

“Sure,” Kelley said with a nod. “After they’ve washed us up, plus Force Six. But that’s not all of it. The Brains believe there are two other units of the Jap Fleet on the move, but they don’t know where they are. They believe that one is close to Formosa, but where the other is, they don’t know.”

“But what about the Japs that have been sighted?” Benton demanded.

Kelley shrugged.

“I wasn’t allowed to linger long enough to hear about that,” Kelley said. “But the word is that most of the Sixth headed that way some hours ago. If

true, that's your answer."

Benton nodded but didn't say anything. He was thinking of that Jap snooper. The Jap was coming out, but he was first trying to make sure of what he would be up against. Had that snooper been able to tell him? Had . . . ?

"By the way, chum," Kelley's voice came to him, "just what did happen to you on that business this afternoon? I lost you for keeps ten minutes after we threw the deck away."

"I got lost," Benton said absently. "Let it ride, will you?"

"Sure, sure," Kelley said easily. "But don't let it foul your plugs, chum."

An hour after ship's mess that night it appeared that Bud Kelley had made a very sound prophecy. All pilots and crewmen were summoned to the ready-room.

The Admiral of the Force, no less, stood on the little raised stand at the far end of the room. Behind him were blown up aerial photographs and charts of the Philippine battle theatre. Although he was on non-flying status, it was Barney Benton's duty to be there.

Seated next to Kelley, he tried to catch Commander Hartley's eye. The commander, however, did not once look his way.

"The Jap is coming out at last, gentlemen," the Admiral said in a quiet voice. "We hit him where it hurts when we put General MacArthur ashore on Leyte. And so he's going to throw everything he has at us.

"Don't get the idea that it is going to be easy to stop him. We could do with a lot more strength, but we haven't got it, so it's up to us to do the job. Within the next forty-eight hours we'll get the chance to hand the Jap Navy a beating from which it will never recover."

The Admiral was silent for a moment. Then picking up a pointer off the table in front of him, he turned toward the huge maps and photos on the bulkhead.

"Here is the picture, or as much of it as we know at the moment," he said. "Early today a force of two Jap battleships, some cruisers and protecting destroyers was spotted steaming east through the Sulu Sea.

"Planes of the Sixth went to intercept, but the Japs weathered the attack. That force is now entering Surigao Strait. Part of our battle fleet has gone to block it off—a rather light force because

that's all that could be spared."

The Admiral paused and moved the tip of his pointer up the huge chart.

"The reason the entire battle force did not move into Surigao Strait," he went on, "is because our submarines have spotted an even larger Jap force moving through the Sibuyan Sea. That force may head for St. Bernardino Strait and pass through and come down at us. Or it may swing down through the Sibuyan and strike straight at MacArthur's positions on Leyte.

"The Jap still has a third fleet unit reported somewhere off Formosa. Of course we have our Third Fleet up Luzon way to handle the situation if a situation arises. Our immediate problem is the force now in the Surigao and perhaps the force in the Sibuyan.

"If both forces get through it will result in a two-way squeeze on us and the Sixth, and we'll have our hands full. If the Surigao force is just a feint, and the Sibuyan force strikes straight down at Leyte, we'll still have our hands full."

The Admiral paused to let his words sink in. Then he cleared his throat and spoke again.

"That is the general picture," he said. "General quarters will hold from this point on. Turn in with your clothes on and gear handy.

"Right now a naval engagement is in progress. We'll know the result by dawn, so we've got to be ready for everything. Gentlemen, if you do go out tomorrow, remember that General MacArthur's fate and that of our troops ashore on Leyte, will be riding in the cockpit with you. Thank you, and good luck."

Everybody rose and stood at attention as the Admiral and his staff walked out of the ready room. The instant they were gone, the place buzzed with comment. Barney Benton took no part in it. As quickly as he could he made his way through the mob to Commander Hartley and got that officer's attention.

"I want to be put back on active flying status, sir," he said, striving to keep his voice steady.

The commander didn't answer for a moment.

"I'm sure you do, Benton," he said presently, "but I'll have to think it over. Follow the Admiral's orders and stand to general quarters."

"Yes, sir," said Benton. He walked away, holding hard to the tiny crumb of hope contained in Commander Hartley's last sentence.

That night not an officer nor man aboard the

Newton slept. Personnel haunted the wardroom or walked the flight deck, grabbing eagerly at every scuttlebutt rumor that filtered through the ship.

Official reports on the naval engagement being waged in the Surigao Strait were posted every so often. But from reading the scraps of information they contained it was impossible to tell which way the battle was going.

With every passing hour of darkness, tension mounted. Talk was exhausted and eventually ceased altogether. Everybody became content to sweat out the long hours of anxious waiting. What was happening, actually, in the Surigao? What was the position of the other Jap fleet? Would the Newton's force see action of its own making?

Those and countless other questions spun unanswered in everybody's brain. But in Barney Benton's brain there was one additional query. Would Hartley take him along with Section One if action came?

Hartley was a stickler for strict compliance with orders. And he had broken a rule by chasing off after that Zero. And as the commander had once said, when speaking to his Squadron—

"A man who won't follow a job through is of no use to this carrier no matter how good his flying and fighting qualities may be. I don't want that kind of man. I won't have him in the air with me!"

But all the rumors and hopes and fears would have no answer until dawn. Not until the sun's fiery edge slipped above the eastern horizon could they know the result of the battle of the Surigao.

That dawn was not more than an hour away when the waiting came to an end, and the tension was broken. The "Donald Duck" loud speaker system summoned all fighter pilots to the flight deck, dive bomber and torpedo plane pilots and crews to the ready room.

The deck of the wardroom shook with the pounding of many feet as the Navy airmen headed for their respective stations. And Barney Benton's heart was like an over inflated balloon of hope that would burst most any second.

CHAPTER III. TAKE-OFF AT LAST.

AT Bud Kelley's heels, he tore up the companionway ladder. Deck crews had Grumman props already ticking over, and the first fighter was already in position dead on the take-off

line that cut the flight deck through the center from bow to stern.

Its pilot, Commander Hartley, stood to one side in the shadow of the "island" waiting for his pilots to come topside and gather about him.

"Land-based Jap planes coming at us," he said crisply. "Very heavy fighter cover for them. We're to keep them away. That's our job. Our only job. We'll be needing the Newton some more, so do your stuff!"

Commander Hartley shrugged.

"I don't know," he said. Then jerking a thumb toward the dive bombers and torpedo planes parked farther aft, he added, "But they are going down to lend a hand, so guess for yourself. We've got our job to do to protect the Newton. Man your planes!"

The gathering of pilots broke up instantly, with everybody sprinting toward where his ship was parked. That is, all save Benton. He saw a pilot named Caldwell headed for his Grumman, reached out a hand and grabbed Commander Hartley's arm.

"Sir!" he shouted above the noise of revving engines. "For the love of—"

But the commander was shaking his head.

"Caldwell is flying right wingman," he snapped.

Benton grabbed him by the arm with both hands.

"For God's sake, sir, don't freeze me to the deck!" he burst out "I'd go mad. Besides, you need every fighter pilot. Don't think of me, sir. Think of the Newton. I'm needed up there."

Commander Hartley scowled, then nodded.

"All right, Benton, into your ship!" he snapped. "But Lord help you if you don't fly your place, and do your job. Caldwell! Fly right wingman in Section Twelve!"

Caldwell climbed out, shouted something to Benton, but Barney didn't listen. He wasn't taking any chances of Commander Hartley changing his mind. As soon as he was in the pit he buckled his safety harness.

It was the same Grumman that he had crash-landed on the flight deck the evening before, but he didn't worry about it. Too often had he seen what the Newton's men could do with a battle-damaged plane.

He completed preparations for flight, fixed his gaze on Commander Hartley's plane. A moment later, a flight officer station near the bow flashed his signal light, and the commander's plane moved forward, picked up speed with every revolution of

its power howling engine.

Benton didn't watch the take-off. The signal bridge officer was motioning him into position. He released his wheel brakes, gunned his engine slightly and, with a deck man at each wingtip, trundled into position.

Flight officer's light winked again, and he sent his Grumman forward. The Newton was steaming eastward into the wind. Benton cleared the flight deck with ease, tore out over the bow and then climbed up and around to the left to get out of the way of Kelley taking off right behind him. As he prop-climbed up after the commander's plane, the dawn seemed to come bursting up over the eastern horizon.

A moment later, Commander Hartley was on the radio, and his words came barking into the earphones like machine-gun bullets.

"Close it up, fighter sections, close it up! We're late, now. Course Twenty-six on your navigation boards. First man who sees anything, yell it out. Close up and stay that way until orders. Let's go!"

The entire squadron was now in the air. After sliding into wing position on Commander Hartley's right, Benton took a quick look around, then turned front and paid full attention to his own flying. A look at course Twenty-six on his flight navigation chart told him that the squadron was heading for a point about halfway up Samar Island north-northeast of Leyte.

For a second, he wondered if the northern Jap sea force were out in the Pacific and coming down along Samar. But even as he wondered he remembered that Hartley had said they were out to intercept Jap land-based planes that were seeking to blast the Newton and the other ships in the force.

"Company, sir!" he heard Bud Kelley call out over the radio. "There's the fighters from the Acton off to port."

"I see them," Commander Hartley grunted in acknowledgement.

Benton looked across and saw the Squadron of Grummans that used the Carrier Acton as their mother ship. Eighteen and eighteen made thirty-six. Not a bad little reception committee headed for Jap bombers and fighters, somewhere ahead in the now murky western heavens.

And then, as he turned his head, he spotted the eighteen fighters from the Thompson, the third carrier in the force.

"All fifty-four fighters on this job, eh?" he

murmured as he turned his eyes front. "The Old Man really means business this time."

Eighteen thousand was the altitude now, and all pilots were taking oxygen. Before Benton's eyes the murkiness ahead seemed to melt away into yellow-blue sky. But the murkiness didn't melt away. It formed itself into clouds that hung low over the western rim of the world.

Benton scowled. Eight months in the far reaches of the Pacific told him that those low-hanging clouds were rain squalls that might hit with the speed of lightning. But somewhere in those clouds was the Jap air armada roaring out to play its part in the hoped-for smashing of the American Pacific Fleet and the retaking of Leyte.

"Heads up, everybody!" Commander Hartley's voice suddenly blasted his earphones. "Our altitude, most of them, and a couple of degrees to port. Get a look at them, men."

For a second, Benton stared in the direction indicated by the commander's words and could see nothing but the sky and the lurking squall clouds. Then, as though a curtain had suddenly been ripped aside he saw them.

His eyes popped. There were so many Jap planes that for a moment they looked like a solid black wall. They were flying in six layers, beginning at about twenty thousand feet and extending down to sixteen thousand or so.

"Look at them, will you?" Benton murmured, and was forced to swallow hard. "Three hundred of them at least!"

"All right, fellows!" Commander Hartley's voice came through the earphones again. "Sections One, Two and Three, take that first layer of dive bombers. Four, Seven and Twelve, go after those torpedo jobs. Never mind the Zeros. Our two wing squadrons will help us out there. This is it!"

No more than a minute had elapsed since the commander had first spotted the Japs, but with both air armadas hurtling at top speed toward each other, the gap between them had been practically closed. Body set and hands rock-steady on the controls, Benton carefully set his sights on a Mitsubishi dive bomber almost dead in front of him.

But he held his fire for a moment longer. As the Mitsy streaked straight at him, he wondered in a crazy sort of way if Hartley's orders about leaving the layer of escort Zeros alone had been a reminder for him.

Then he forgot everything save the Mitsy that

loomed up in his sights. Red and orange balls spitting his way told him that the Nip had already opened fire. But the stuff sliced by over his head, and he held his Grumman dead on.

Then he let go with all eight guns at almost point-blank range, and that was the end of the Mitsy. It just fell apart in small pieces that went sliding through the air.

Benton had already cut his fire and was bringing his Grumman over and around for a broadside blast at another Mitsy. His snap deflection burst was almost too late.

It didn't get the Jap plane square, but it did catch the tail assembly, chewed it off as though it had backed up into a meat grinder. The dive bomber went over by the nose and straight down into the Pacific.

Belting the Grumman around to the right after a third victim, Benton felt the skies above him fall in a thunderous yammering of sound. Five lines of holes traced their paths across his right wing, and a split second later four Zeros in line went ripping past him, so close that he got a quick look at an ugly Jap face in each cockpit.

And then without warning, the lurking rain squalls struck. Benton let out a yell of alarm when he suddenly found himself plunged into the middle of a world of slashing, blinding rain.

CHAPTER IV. SOLO AGAIN.

BUT even as he yelled the Grumman thundered into a spot of clear air. And there, right in front of him, was a Zero coming about in a tight turn. He fired instantly, and the Zero went down in a crazy flat spin minus its right wing.

"One less, anyway," Benton muttered as he cut his fire and leveled off. "And I don't think Hartley would object."

A Grumman came tearing down past him on the right. He had time for only a flash glimpse of it, but it was enough to recognize the personal markings of Commander Hartley's plane. The next instant rain clouds closed in again and the commander's plane was lost to view.

Hurling through that blind world Benton was gripped by the old fear of crashing into somebody while trying to get out of the soup. He was climbing the Grumman as fast as he could. But with every passing second, he envisioned Yank

Navy and Jap planes alike swishing by to miss his wingtips by a matter of inches.

Then, suddenly, he was out of the slashing rain and in clear air.

But he was completely alone. No matter in what direction he looked, he couldn't see a single plane, Jap or American. He had the whole sky to himself, but he had plenty to worry about. That rain squall was the best break the Japs could possibly get. It hid them from the deadly Grumman fighters, and enabled them to get that much closer to their carrier targets.

Cursing, Benton hauled his Grumman onto a course back toward the Newton. His job was to head hot-prop back toward the carriers before the Japs beat them to it.

Perhaps it was a trick of wind and clouds, perhaps a higher power brought it to pass for the sake of civilized mankind—at any rate, as Benton stuck the Grumman around toward the Newton, the clouds to the north seemed to slip apart.

To the north and below him, he spotted the curving shoreline of a lush green island. And then as he raised his eyes and looked way north he saw a sight that made his heart stand still. There far, far to the north, was a cluster of elongated dots moving across the surface.

"The Japs!" He spoke in an awed whisper. "The second Jap naval force that the Old Man wasn't sure about. It slipped through the St. Bernardino Strait and is heading for a crack at us!"

Then, as though the gods considered that was all he needed to see, the clouds closed about his Grumman to place him in a world of misty whiteness. So sudden was the second change that when it happened his first reaction was to doubt the truth of what he had seen.

The sensation passed almost instantly, and as he veered around toward the north he put his lips to the flap mike and called Commander Hartley. There was no response. Belief gripped him that death had finally caught up with the Newton's fighter squadron commander.

He switched over and called the Newton, itself. But his luck wasn't any better. Either his sending had gone dead, or else the Newton's radioman was refusing to acknowledge his call.

"Make sure, make sure!" he told himself aloud. "Maybe it was a unit of the Third Fleet, and not the Japs at all. Take a good look."

He whipped the Grumman all north and sent it

rocketing through the misty cloud formations. For perhaps ten minutes he flew blind, and then, suddenly, the Grumman thundered out into clear air. There was a thick haze beneath him that blanketed the Pacific, and for the first two or three minutes he found he couldn't see a single moving thing.

Suddenly the sea haze thinned out. Below, not over five miles away and steaming along the coast of Samar Island was a Jap sea armada of four battleships, ten cruisers and thirteen escorting destroyers.

They were Japanese ships, unquestionably the force that had sneaked through St. Bernardino Strait during the night.

One swift look was all he needed. In the next second, he was frantically calling the Newton on the radio. Dead silence was his only answer, and he shivered slightly as he wondered if the Newton had already been sunk by land-based planes.

He tried to raise Commander Hartley again, but there, too, he drew a blank. Either nobody was tuned in on his wavelength, or his sending set had gone out whack.

But as he tried again, he made notes on his flight navigation board about the Jap fleet down there under the low hanging haze.

The number of ships, their type, the position of the fleet, its course—every item that would be wanted by the Admiral commanding, if, and when, he was able to get the information through.

And then, suddenly, it happened!

A swarm of carrier Zeros, riding air guard on the surface fleet, swooped down at him with all guns blazing. In the first couple of seconds, he had the crazy impression that every square inch of the Grumman was hit. The craft shuddered and shook from wingtip to wingtip, from prop to rudder post. But the sturdily built thing hung together, and the Pratt & Whitney in the nose howled out a defiant song of power as Benton instinctively whipped it up, over, and down in a flash half-roll.

Perhaps the diving Jap pilots expected him to zoom and charge, guns blazing, into their midst. They were caught off guard for a few seconds, and those few seconds were the difference between life and death for Benton. They permitted him to take full advantage of the terrific diving speed of the Grumman and rip down momentarily out of range of the Jap fire.

The instant he saw orange and yellow tracers no

longer slicing past his wingtips, he pulled out of the dive and high-tailed all-out toward the safety of the cloud formations to the south.

As he reached the first of the cloud formations he heard a terrific crash just behind him. The Grumman rocked and bucked as though it had been whacked by a falling meteor. Something hit him a sharp, painful blow just over the left ear, and he slumped forward over the stick for a moment, utterly unable to move.

The Grumman dropped into a power dive and went hurtling down through the clouds. His brain cleared in time, though, and he was able to pull himself up straight in the seat, and haul the Grumman onto an even keel.

The instrument board in front of him kept blacking out on him as he peered at it to locate the compass and check his course position.

Time and time again every drop of life seemed to drain out of him.

Thirty minutes dragged by, and then suddenly he was in clear air. Just ahead of him were the ships of the Newton's carrier task force.

But they were not as he had last seen them. The entire force was now under vicious Jap air attack. The skies were filled with twisting, darting, turning Yank and Jap planes alike.

It was like a scene out of a mad dream set against a flashing red and black background of bursting flak. And even as he got his first look at it, he saw two Jap planes burst into balls of fire, leaving behind long trails of boiling black smoke.

He wasted but a brief instant on the general picture, however. Instead he searched the task force for sight of the Newton. When he found it, the Newton had been hit by a Jap bomb aft on her flight deck, and a thick column of smoke rose up from fire that had broken out below decks.

"But she's the Force flagship!" he thought desperately as he stared down at the wounded Newton. "The Admiral's aboard, and I've got to get to him. I'll have to sit down on her deck somehow, fire or no fire."

At that moment, two Jap Zero pilots cut in toward him, fired and missed, went rocketing on past. But Benton barely knew he had been fired on, so single-purposed was he to land and report.

A fighting heart, and nothing else, enabled him to do it. Briefly he thought he was going to overshoot in his effort to dodge the flames. As it was, he had few feet to spare.

He saw the signal officer gesticulating frantically for him to sheer off and go to one of the other carriers. The flag men on the flight deck were italicizing the order.

"Coming in!" he shouted into his own flap mike. "Hear me, Newton? I'm coming in. Get the Admiral. Important. Important! I'm coming in, Newton. Stand by for a crash!"

Benton knew that he couldn't hold out much longer. The left side of his head felt on fire, and blood was trickling into his left eye. But blind in one eye, or not, he had to hang on long enough to sit down on the Newton's deck; to sit down on it somehow.

He was completely engulfed by the towering column of black smoke. He felt the heat of the fire below deck hit the Grumman, and lift it skyward. It seemed also to fling his plane to the side and cold fear gripped him as he threatened to ram the Newton's island.

Then he was through the smoke and sinking rapidly toward the surface of the flight deck. Out the corner of his good eye he saw deckmen standing rigid and watching him. And he saw others dressed in white fire suits running toward a point amidships of the flight deck with their tanks of fire foam.

And then the tail hook caught. The shock slammed him forward, but he managed to fling up his hands and protect himself in time. Then a figure was standing on the right wing-stub, yanking open his glass hatch, and roaring at him. He recognized the man as the Newton's flight executive officer, but his voice seemed to come from miles away.

"You madman! What in the name of—"

But that was all Benton heard because he was too busy shoving his flight navigation board at the officer, shouting as loud as he could.

"Jap fleet! Heading south. Got everything. All information there. Tell the Admiral! Give him—"

He tried to go on, but without warning the Newton's flight deck rose up and hit him right in the face!

When he next opened his eyes it was to find himself between cool white sheets in the Newton's sickbay. His head felt as big as a barrage balloon, and when he touched it with gingerly exploring fingers he discovered that miles of bandage circled

his head and the whole left side of his face. Out of his good right eye he saw Commander Hartley standing beside his bed. The senior officer grinned at him.

"That's right, Benton," he said. "You're still alive, but nobody will ever believe that it could happen."

Benton grinned weakly, and then memory came back with a rush. "The battle, sir! There was a Jap force I sighted up north."

Commander Hartley lifted a silencing hand.

"Save your breath, Benton," the commander said. "Everything is under control. Has been for three days, as a matter of fact. Your little stunt helped a lot, Benton. The Admiral was able to summon units of the Third Fleet in time.

"It was touch and go for a while, but we came out on top. We gave the Jap a licking he'll never forget. Probably one of the greatest sea and air victories of all time. But I'll give you all the gory details later.

"Right now you want to soak up as much rest as you can. You took a bullet in the head, and in the left side of your face. But ship's surgeon says that in couple of months, or so, it'll be nothing but a bad memory. So, roll over and knock off some more, Benton."

Barney Benton stared at Commander Hartley out of his good eye.

"Then, it's all okay, sir?" he asked. "I mean—well, I broke away from the general fight to get a good look at that Jap Fleet. But, I figured it was the thing to do."

"Skip it, Benton," the senior officer stopped him with a grin. "Orders are orders, but sometimes a man has to think for himself. That was one of those times. And you did exactly as I, or anybody else, would have done, considering.

"And don't worry about that Zero you smacked in the clouds. I saw you do it. You beat me to the punch by a split second. You're back on the beam in my book. Hurry up and get well so that you can stand on your own two feet when you get it."

"Get it, sir?" Benton asked as he blinked his good eye. "Get what?"

"The Navy Cross," Commander Hartley said, and moved away from the sickbay bed.