



Trexel tripped the bomb release at exactly the right moment

# DECISION TO DIE

By NORMAN A. DANIELS

*Jinxed by failure on every mission over the Pacific, Ensign Doug Trexel is given one final chance to prove his mettle!*

THERE were plenty of fires and smoke pillars on that Japanese-held Pacific Island. The sky above it was humming with the wild songs of twenty Dauntlesses from a carrier now far out at sea.

Ensign Doug Trexel was in his usual sweat. He was twenty-one though he looked eighteen. His cheeks were pink; he

had to shave only once or twice a week.

In direct contrast, his gunner, seated behind him, was a tough man, the type caricatured in movie comedies. Joe Compton was as tough as he looked too, but for the first time in his life he was scared. Not because he was in battle—that was old stuff. Not because he had to sit there and let himself be dived straight

down at two big oil tanks which were the plane's objective. It was solely because of Ensign Doug Trexel at the controls.

Trexel had a reputation. Not as a coward. Nobody ever accused him of that because Trexel had shown himself as brave as the next man. Perhaps a little braver, almost to the point of foolhardiness, whenever he tried to overcome that reputation.

Trexel's trouble lay in the fact that he seemed to lack confidence in himself. He was afraid he couldn't take the steep dive, that he'd black out. That he'd miss the doggone target anyway, and that Zeros in the sky would pulverize him.

He set the carrier's landing officer and crew in a complete dither every time he brought his plane around in the counterclockwise circle for deck landing. Just as he came down, that lack of confidence, that odd indecision would grip him. He'd cracked up two Dauntlesses already.

At this particular moment, however, Ensign Doug Trexel was circling the target. Ack-ack bloomed around him. He didn't mind that. It was the danger of blacking out before he released his bomb that bothered him. Trexel set his jaws hard and tilted the nose of the plane down.

The whine of wind against wings was no song in his ears, but the shrill yell of banshees. His face blanched as the target rushed to meet him. He tripped the bomb release and the biggest of his three bombs slid out of their rack and went hurtling down.

But—just as he tripped the release, Ensign Trexel flipped his plane out of the dive. Too soon—the bomb would miss its target. He saw that even before it burst. Gunner Compton groaned and then began to swear. He tilted back his collapsible seat, manned the machine-gun and looked above for some Zeros upon which he

could vent his rage without being court-martialed. One thing Compton knew—he'd flown with Trexel for the last time.

Trexel came out of the dive nicely. No expert could have done better. But in his eyes the whole thing, from start to finish, had been botchy. He peered overside as he began circling. The bomb had missed by a hundred or more yards. The big tanks stood there, tantalizing targets still.

Flak was getting thicker, for those Jap gunners knew their stuff. As they began chasing Trexel around in a circle he realized he had to gain altitude. He should have flown out to sea to do it, away from those gunners below. Instead, he hesitated, began to circle over the lagoon, still well within range. He'd seen two Zeros flash in the sunlight out to sea and indecision hit him again.

Compton, at the machine-gun, was blistering the heat of the sun with his curses. The ack-ack puffed out dangerously close and twice the Dauntless wobbled crazily. Somehow, though, Trexel reached his proper altitude, nosed down, and went into another steep dive.

This time he really let her roar, swelling with a savage determination to make the next bomb find its mark. He was squarely on target, aiming his whole plane at the tanks. A hit between them would do the job. He even forgot the fact that he might black out.

**T**HEN, as his fingers tightened on the bomb release, he saw a whole battery of ack-ack. The gunners were going a trifle crazy trying to bring their rifles into line with the diving ship. They couldn't do it. In his heart Trexel knew that, but his brain had full command and his heart took no part in it.

All he knew was that he'd be a target and he had to pull out quick. Even the fact that in pulling out, he'd be a better target,

never entered the battle raging in his brain. He flipped the release, knew darned well he'd missed again and started for altitude while the gunners brought their barrels to bear.

The bomb missed, by a quarter of a mile this time, but it did serve to do some damage.

It landed just left of that ack-ack battery and silenced it—permanently.

There were others though, and they seemed to be firing with redoubled energy. This time Trexel didn't even think about heading for the open sea to get necessary altitude. He circled above the vividly blue lagoon sparkling below, and made himself a perfect target for the ack-ack. Gunner Compton stopped sweating and shivered with a sudden chill.

The idiot was going to try again.

Trexel got himself above the target for the third time. He was numb by now, oblivious to anything except that he was supposed to blast those oil tanks and he hadn't done so. There was only one chance left. One bomb.

He threw her into a dive. He couldn't fail now. It was utterly impossible. Then he saw another Dauntless swooping almost beside him. The pilot had seen Trexel miss, knew the importance of getting those tanks, and had added his might to Trexel's. Both their bombs would certainly do the job.

Trexel, however, felt the stab of indecision again. He tripped the release too soon. The other Dauntless pulverized the target, came out of the dive and shot at full speed toward the sea. It kept low so the ack-ack wouldn't be able to get the range. Trexel followed suit and he cursed with every ten turns of the prop.

He'd bungled this assignment worse than any of the others.

Gunner Compton had no remarks to make. He was too busy looking for the

inevitable Zeros. They were decidedly dangerous to this particular plane. It was one of the Douglas Dauntlesses—the SBD-1. The carrier had new planes aboard, highly improved and more heavily armored. Faster too, and as maneuverable as a Zero. They were the SB2C-1s, latest product of American aviation ingenuity.

The Zeros, however, stayed away. Ensign Trexel roared out to sea for the rendezvous with the carrier. He didn't feel too good. Disappointment curdled his stomach and lately it seemed as if he were constantly carrying around a cannon ball.

He saw the carrier later, lost altitude fast and started his counterclockwise circle before landing. Compton slumped as low as possible his seat, closed both eyes and clenched his fists. Ensign Trexel's reputation for landing on a carrier deck was bordering on the famous. He'd ripped off more wings than any other pilot.

The landing officer howled a warning and crewmen scampered to places of safety. A figure, looking like something from Mars, moved forward a little. It was a seaman clad in an asbestos suit whose purpose was to drag pilots out of burning planes. A couple of pharmacist's mates mentally licked their chops at the good possibility of some work.

Trexel made his circle and came in, but it was going to be sloppy and the landing officer waved his signal paddles crazily. Trexel got his nose up just in time, roared over the deck while tiny figures flopped on their stomachs and then rose to shake their fists at him.

He made the circle again. This time the landing officer offered up a prayer and signaled an okay. Trexel came in over the stern, his wheels hitting the deck and bouncing wildly. Then the arresting gear caught him and jerked the plane to a halt.

Crewmen sprang forward, disengaged the arresting gear and opened the barrier.

Trexel taxied the plane through it. The net came down again, ready for the next landing. The carrier seemed to heave a great sigh of relief. Trexel had landed without blowing off the deck.

ON THE narrow foretop platform overlooking the acreage of deck which was the carrier, were the ship's commander, Captain Burroughs and his executive officer, Commander Leads. They were both elderly men, square-jawed and moved with businesslike efficiency.

Captain Burroughs swore softly.

"That does it," he snapped. "Ensign Trexel is going to be sent ashore at our first port. I'll do better than that. I'll have him transferred to a destroyer as soon as one is headed back for refueling. He's a menace."

Commander Leads nodded.

"I've only been aboard two days, but Trexel certainly does seem to be the menace of this carrier. Did you see his gunner when they helped him out of the plane? He looked as pale as death."

"You'd have been pale too"—Captain Burroughs winced at the thought—"if you'd ridden with him. Trexel had three chances to demolish an easy target and he failed. I wish I knew what was wrong. The kid is brave enough, he flies well enough and he passed his examination right after Pearl Harbor. But every time he is sent on a mission, he fails. I've never seen a case like it."

Leads sucked on a dry pipe.

"Captain—is this Trexel's first name Douglas, by any chance?"

Burroughs nodded.

"Know him? That's his name. Look, if you even think you have a solution to whatever his problem is, for heaven's sake speak up. If I beach him, he's done—completely. The kid wants to fight, but doggone it, he simply can't."

A telephone demanded Captain Burroughs's attention. He grunted a few times, listened a lot and hung up with a bang.

"That's it," he barked. "Trexel, instead of trying to get clear of flak, rode right through it in a tight little circle and absorbed enough flak to cripple his plane for days. We're short on ships and I won't let him smash another. Prepare his papers, Leads. Get him off my ship."

Leads nodded, stowed his pipe away and disappeared through the hatch. He climbed down to sky control, farther down along a thirty-foot ladder to the flag bridge and found Gunner Compton still shivering as he told his mates about that last wild ride.

Compton came to attention. Leads took him aside and questioned him for ten minutes. Compton was most emphatic about it all.

"He's a swell pilot and he's got all the nerve any man in the fleet owns, but when he starts to dive, his mind seems to go in all directions at once. I don't understand it, sir, but I hope I won't be assigned as his gunner again."

"It would be tough on Trexel if we asked for volunteers," Leads observed. "Tell me—would you say that Trexel is okay just before he moves into definite action and then something happens to throw him off? Is that the feeling you got?"

"Yes, sir—like he wasn't sure of himself."

"Ah," Leads muttered mysteriously, "exactly. Thank you, Compton. Get some rest now. We'll be back in action pretty soon."

Leads went to his quarters and sent a yeoman for the records on Ensign Trexel. He studied these intensely, was still at it when Captain Burroughs came in.

"Did you prepare those papers on

Trexel?" Burroughs asked.

"No, sir," Leads replied. "I think he deserves one more chance."

"No," Burroughs snapped. "That's the way I always felt, but I can't afford to risk any more planes. He's beached."

"Sir," Leads pleaded, "we took aboard several brand new Helldivers when we steamed out of port. They've been taken out of their crates and are ready for business. I'm asking that Trexel be assigned to one of them."

"Are you crazy?" Burroughs demanded.

Leads smiled.

"No, sir. You see, I used to be the principal of a private school for boys. I know these kids. Trexel has to find himself. Some boys do it quickly. He's slower about it and there is a reason for that somewhere in his past. I think I know what it is and that's why I'm asking another chance for him."

Burroughs started to reject the idea, hesitated and finally shrugged.

"On your own head, Leads. If I didn't like the kid, I'd bust him. Go ahead. Have it your own way."

An hour later, Ensign Trexel viewed his new plane. This stepped-up Helldiver could hold its own anywhere. Heavy armor protected the crew and she carried a heavier bomb load.

Ensign Trexel was hardly aware of this. He was staring at an inscription on the nose of the plane. It read:

POMEROY BOYS SCHOOL—  
"BLAST THEM JAPS"

Someone stepped up beside Trexel. He glanced at the man then returned his stare to the plane. Suddenly he remembered that in that brief glance he'd subconsciously seen a lot of gold braid. Trexel stiffened, pivoted neatly and saluted.

"Nice ship," Commander Leads remarked. "An example of what our civilians are doing, too. It was donated by the boys of that school. Of course they came of wealthy families and could assemble cash enough to build this plane, but the kids in public schools are doing the same thing on a smaller scale, perhaps."

"Pomeroy Boys School!" Ensign Trexel pronounced softly. "Sir—that's my school! When I graduated, I realized we'd soon be at war so I enlisted. And now the plane those boys donated, is mine. Funny how these things happen, sir."

"Isn't it?" Leads said dryly. "Trexel, you've got a reputation around here. It isn't a very good one. I don't think any man has failed to carry out as many missions as you have and yet, it isn't because you're afraid. What is it? Do you know?"

Trexel flushed.

"No, sir. I realize how it is. I do my very best, but it isn't any good, sir. I—honestly expected to be beached after my last flight." Leads nodded.

"You were very nearly right. Well, here is your ship, Ensign. If you don't bring glory to it, those kids will feel bad. They'll follow this craft. You can't let them down. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," Trexel answered tremulously. "I—I'll do my very best, sir. I'll bring it back or—I won't come back."

At mid-afternoon the loudspeaker came suddenly to life.

"All pilots to briefing room. All pilots . . ."

Trexel joined the other men in the briefing room below decks and listened while an officer pointed out objectives on a map.

"One thing I want distinctly understood," he warned. "This is a task force. We're out to do as much damage as possible. All battle units are going to carry

out attacks on other islands. It means our carrier will be alone and unprotected except for her own guns and her speed. Our fighters are taking off along with the bombers. If any of you get into a jam, don't use your radio. Those Japs will draw a bead on the carrier and send out everything they've got to sink us."

Every man knew what those orders meant. If they ran out of gas, they couldn't signal for help. If their ship was crippled, they'd have to land on the open sea, take to their rubber boats and trust to luck. The location of the carrier must at all cost be kept a strict secret

"Pilots, man your planes," came the order.

Men zipped up their flying jackets, tested their Mae Wests, pulled on helmets and goggles and hurried from the room.

On deck, the planes were ready.

"Start engines," came the command and the motors roared. "Launch fighters," came next, and the smaller craft began zipping off the deck, each one giving the illusion that it was doomed to crash.

The bombers were next. Trexel, with Gunner Compton accompanying him again, softly patted the control panel. This was his ship. More a part of him than anything else now. There'd be a lot of kids watching him through newspapers and radio reports. If he let them down, they'd feel worse than he—even with Jap bullets smashing into his body. This was one plane that had to come home and be welcomed like a hero.

"Launch the bombers," the loudspeaker commanded.

Trexel revved his engine and went roaring down the deck. The added weight of armor plate gave the ship a tendency to slide to the left. Trexel didn't hear the groan that went up as he slid toward the deck and the five-inch guns mounted there. His wing-tip missed one gun by

inches, but somehow it managed to clear the deck. Dipping crazily, it climbed and went swinging away to port. Trexel turned and grinned at Compton. The gunner's grimace was decidedly feeble.

The other bombers were airborne and in formation. Trexel's position was far to the rear. The weather was none too good, he noted. A decided haze was developing. But the flight had a job and weather wasn't going to stop it.

Far to the north Trexel could see flashes of light, brighter than the sun. Those would be the battle units, destroyers, cruisers and that one big sleek battlewagon, heaving shells onto an island. The Japs were going to get a pasting this day.

Somewhere beyond the skyline, Trexel knew that transports were waiting, their landing barges overside while troops hurriedly gave their weapons a last inspection.

Then, suddenly, Trexel's engine began to cough. He cursed and worked the throttle. The ship was losing altitude. Gunner Compton showed signs of extreme nervousness and Trexel's heart became lost somewhere around his landing gear.

Ocean was coming up to greet him as Trexel worked on that plane with fingers frozen in terror. Not for himself, but for the plane. It looked as if he was about to lose it before her guns were even fired.

Then, by some miracle, the engine roared back on an even pitch and growled pleasantly with its power. Trexel heaved a sigh, nosed upward and discovered that while he had tussled with his plane he'd lost his squadron. And it was impossible to radio for position, he knew. The Japs would have enjoyed picking up such a message.

"Compton," Trexel said over the intercom, "I've lost the squadron so I'm going in alone. We'll do whatever damage

we can. When we get back, I want all bombs gone and every doggone round of ammunition for your guns exhausted. I'm going to show them I can really fight a war."

"Aye, aye, sir," Compton acknowledged disconsolately.

He didn't have much hope.

Trexel came out of the haze to find himself directly above a cove. Nestled in it lay a Jap tanker, an inspiring target. It would have Diesel oil aboard, probably. There were only a few fighters on this island and they had all the fuel necessary. But Diesel or high test meant little. The tanker was a savory dish and Trexel started circling for altitude.

He wondered how the rest of the planes were making out. The fighters were going to strafe emplacements and then race for another carrier protecting the troop transports. They were to land, refuel and rearm and then strafe some more. The big carrier would be sailing out to sea and they'd head for it only alter their mission was completed.

Resolutely, Trexel tipped his nose down. Somehow he didn't feel any indecision this time. He and the ship were welded together by invisible bonds of loyalty to a school. To a bunch of swell kids who'd given up plenty to get money enough to build this plane. Furthermore, they wanted something for their money and Trexel was the only man to oblige them.

**H**E TRIPPED the bomb release precisely at the right moment. The big bomb went sweeping down and it hit the tanker amidships. Trexel's plane was lifted high by the concussion and it didn't come from the bomb alone. The tanker blew to bits and wild blue flames were leaping into the sky.

"That's a high test octane," Trexel

yelled. "Compton, look around. There must be more planes than we know of on the island. The tanker was piping the stuff overside. That's why she couldn't move. There have got to be more planes!"

"Don't see any yet," Compton reported, "but I'll keep my eyes peeled, sir."

There was respect in Compton's voice, now. He'd seen the miracle of miracles. Trexel had filled a mission and filled it well.

They both wondered at the utter absence of ack-ack. Not a particle bloomed around them. But a few moments later they saw the reason. Compton spotted a flight of Zeros coming in high and every one of the dozen enemy planes seemed bent on exterminating the Helldiver.

Trexel knew he had to get out of here fast. He banked, turned into the sun and began running. Compton swiveled his gun into position to cover the rear and started blasting. The first Zero, at full speed, overtook the Helldiver and came in for a strafing attack. His bullets slapped into the Helldiver in deadly staccato. Those kids back at Pomeroy were going to get something for their money now.

Compton held his fire wisely enough until the Zero was close. Then he played a stream of steel at it. The Zero blew up in less than two seconds. There were others, though. They seemed to be everywhere in the sky and their guns were making the Helldiver quiver from stem to stern. Oil was gushing out of a broken line.

Trexel gave her a full gun. It was crazy to tangle with all these Zeros. He had to get away, but the Zeros were playing tag with him. They seemed astounded at the maneuverability of the Helldiver, for these craft were usually easy prey.

It was the heavy armor that saved Trexel, but Gunner Compton, standing erect to use his gun better, couldn't duck

the slug that hit him square on the head.

Trexel heard the gun grow silent, looked around and gasped. Now he was really unprotected. He dived toward a cloud formation with the pack on his heels, throwing lead all around him. He wondered why they didn't cross-stitch him. There'd been opportunities. It almost seemed as though they were only trying to cripple him.

If that was their intention, they'd succeeded all right. The pride of Pomeroy School was a limping duck now. Only the cloud formation had saved him, Trexel reasoned, but he couldn't just endlessly fly around in it. Already fuel was getting low.

He broke through the formation of clouds to find the sun at his back, and the sky clear of Zeros. Either they'd lost him or given up the chase. Trexel tried to see how badly hurt Compton was, but that proved impossible. He was being forced to slow down considerably. Something had happened to the engine housing and the power plant wobbled badly. Then too, it was vital that he conserve his fuel.

If those Zeros ever followed him, he was a dead pigeon this time. Trexel kept searching the sky for signs of them until he was far enough out so that he knew the Zeros wouldn't be able to venture this distance from their base. Then he settled down to dangerous flying. He plotted the vicinity through which the carrier would be riding, then directed the plane onto the determined course.

He saw some tiny specks, but he was looking into the sun and visibility was difficult. It bothered him though—those vague dots. He so went into a circle, this time slanting his eyes 0 against the sun. Then he gasped.

There was a full squadron of Jap bombers a on his trail!

Suddenly Trexel knew the answer to everything. The Zeros really had tried to

cripple him so he'd have to fly back to the carrier. The bombers were flying high, trailing him. They wanted a crack at the carrier and Trexel was their only means of locating it.

Without a second's hesitation, Trexel turned in a direction that would take him miles from the carrier. They'd never find it through him. He knew what it all meant. When his gas was exhausted, he'd have to sit down, get Compton out if he was alive and clamber aboard a rubber boat. But those Japs would be a trifle sore about the whole thing and would certainly strafe the boat. It looked like this would be the end of Trexel and this new ship he wanted so desperately to save.

But his decision held firm, even though it was a decision to die. There was nothing vague about it, no qualms, no hesitations. He didn't have to make any false moves or try to reason it out. The thing was starkly clear. He doubted whether he'd ever be undecided again in his lifetime.

**A**HEAD of him, for some five thousand miles, lay water—and death. He didn't want to die this way—running from those bombers—but what else was left for him. To attack them would have been futile, with his ship in her present state. Besides, his objective was to lead those bombers as far from the carrier as possible.

Not that the carrier under ordinary conditions, couldn't cope with them. But then, these conditions were not ordinary. Her fighters were off in the blue somewhere. She had only ack-ack for protection and these Jap bombers seemed to enjoy suicide. They were bound to get the carrier if they attacked before the fighters returned and had time to rearm and refuel. It was up to Trexel to give the fighters time.



He studied the dial of his watch, mentally figuring when they would be on the carrier's deck, poised for business. Then, and only then, could he break radio silence and flash the warning.

He lumbered on, conducting a pretty good show of a man in a crippled plane intent on reaching his carrier. He figured that he could break radio silence only when his gas would be all but exhausted. Trexel smiled grimly. If the plane could save that carrier, her glory would be great and satisfying. The kids couldn't say she hadn't done her job.

It was a strange sort of glory, but Trexel reveled in it. He wouldn't let the school down. Not even his life mattered now. He was almost glad that Compton had been hit and was sagging there either dead or unconscious. He would at least be spared the agony of knowing what was bound to happen.

There were many miles between himself and the carrier when Trexel decided it was safe to radio the ship with his warning. He was positive the fighters were back and the carriers free to maneuver if necessary. The Jap bombers were closer now, he could see. As soon as they heard him radio, they'd know they'd been tricked and try to take it out on him. They could, too, for his ship, crippled as it was, must be slower than those big crates.

Trexel made his radio contact and signed off the moment he got his okay. The bombers had heard. They were coming down to finish him off. He'd been most precise in his message, speaking of the fighters ready for battle. The Japs wouldn't attack now. They rarely did when the odds were so much against them.

Machine-guns rattled somewhere. The Helldiver bucked and pitched. A hot iron seared through Trexel's body and blood spurted over his flying jacket. That slug had not only wounded him, it had killed

him as well, for it had punctured the Mae West. Now he didn't have a chance.

Nosing up, Trexel saw one of the lumbering crates coming toward him, guns spitting. The slightest use of gasoline would be suicidal, but he gave the Helldiver a full throttle, daring the engine to fall out. Almost gleefully, he squeezed the trigger of his forward guns and had the satisfaction of seeing the Jap bomber burst into flame.

The others veered off, made a wide circle and headed back home. They'd lost all desire to tangle with this crippled Yank bird now that their real objective had been jerked right from beneath their noses.

Trexel bit his lip to keep from screaming with pain. He gained more altitude, made certain those Jap bombers really had faded away, and then headed for the carrier.

He'd never make it, he knew. There wasn't a chance. He'd fall short, but it didn't matter now. The carrier was safe. The Helldiver had performed an important mission and was now quite expendable.

Things were getting hazier and hazier, but he battled the desire to sleep and forget this heart-splitting pain. He was going to bring this ship back—he had to.

Then he saw her, a great expanse of manmade island in the middle of a great sea. Her decks were cleared. They were waiting for him to come in. At that moment his engine coughed and died.

Trexel went into a glide. Nobody ever landed a bomber in a glide like that. In fact, he couldn't even land them successfully with power behind his props.

On the flag deck, Commander Leads and Captain Burroughs watched through their glasses. Burroughs was cursing steadily in a monotone. Leads was talking and Burroughs suddenly realized he was saying something of interest.

"Trexel lost confidence," Leads said.

“I know when, too. He was a baseball player. A pretty good one and his team was playing the team my school sent out. It was for the championship. Trexel was at bat with two men on. A hit would have cinched the game for Pomeroy, and Trexel was their best batter. We fixed up a sort of liaison between the pitcher and the bleachers. When a poor ball was pitched, the bleachers would break out in a sing-song.

“They’d shout ‘Hit it! Hit it! Hit it!’ When the ball was good, they’d holler for Trexel to stall. Well, it got him. He made some passes, changed his mind and had strikes called. He let dead center ones go by. Yes, he fanned out, and I was responsible, for I’d cooked up the whole thing. I thought it smart to practise my brand of psychology on him. He lost his confidence then and it never came back. They razzed him unmercifully.”

“I’d give ‘em a broadside if they razzed him now,” Burroughs grunted. “He can’t make it. Look at that thing wobble. He can’t make it.”

THERE was a terrific pain near Trexel’s heart. It came and went and one of those times wouldn’t come back. He knew. That wound was bad. The broad deck looked very narrow to him. He was coming in. He paid no attention to signals from the landing officer.

If it looked as though he couldn’t make it, he intended to crash in the sea as close as possible to the carrier.

Through the intercom he heard Gunner Compton groan. Then he wasn’t dead. Good. Trexel doubled up in a spasm of pain. Through it all, he managed to grin, and the grin remained frozen on his features.

He hardly felt the deck contact his landing gear. The usual jerk of the arresting hook never even jarred him. He was staring through a film of blood at the net. It looked like a Cheshire cat grinning broadly. The grin became wider and wider until Trexel felt himself swallowed up by it.