

Dear Sweetheart

We departed San Diego when the New Year was only eleven hours old, and secured at a dock in Pearl Harbor about noon on January 7th. Approximately three weeks were spent there in training, upkeep, etc., and on January 29th, during a rain-storm, a powerful armada consisting of the carriers BENNINGTON, BUNKER HILL, RANDOLPH, SARATOGA, and BELLEAU WOOD and the cruiser ALASKA, headed west for the battle area. Our first contact with "bogies" (enemy planes) was as we passed to the north of the Jap-held base of Truk, but nothing happened in spite of our preparedness.

On 8 February we anchored in Ulithi and we were awed by the number of ships which were present. We reported for duty to Vice Admiral Mitscher, Commander Task Force 58, and were assigned to Task Group 58.1, under Rear Admiral Clark. Two days later we departed Ulithi on our first combat mission, and Task Force 58 headed for Japan. On the morning of 16 February, we were 80 miles off the coast of Japan and launched the planes of the BENNINGTON's Air Group 82 for a "strike" (offensive) on the air facilities around Tokyo. The weather was cold and disagreeable, especially so after having spent considerable time in the hot tropics; there was considerable rain and a low ceiling and high winds. However, our planes reached Tokyo, and we knew it because Tokyo went off the air. Press releases informed us that the word regarding our attack on Tokyo had been passed to the folks back home by the big broadcasting networks. The nearest we got to an enemy airplane was when our combat air patrol shot down three in flames a long distance away. All we could see was smoke.

About two days were spent in the Tokyo area, the weather remaining bad, and then the Task Force headed for Iwo Jima after refueling at sea. At Iwo, during the invasion, our Air Group was busy keeping Jap planes away from the Marines and also bombing, strafing, and rocketing block houses and caves, and burning strong points. Several Kamikazes made attacks on other carriers and ships on the evening of 22 February, while we were off Iwo Jima, but we didn't even get a chance to fire a gun because no enemy planes came near us.

After replenishing, the entire force headed for Tokyo again and we were all set to have a field day with the Japs, but the weather was so bad that all strikes planned over a period of two days for Tokyo on the north to Kobe in the south were cancelled. On 1 March, we ended up by striking Okinawa in order that they might feel the power of events which were to take place there at a later date. The BENNINGTON's Air Group attacked considerable medium sized shipping around Naha and the Jap army ground installations. One strike hit Miyako Shima to the southwest of Okinawa. The score for this period stood at about the following:

19 enemy planes shot down  
67 enemy planes destroyed on the ground  
40 enemy surface ships sunk or damaged

About ten days were then given over to rest at Ulithi, which is a big place with a lot of water and plenty of hot sun. You probably saw the pictures of Ulithi in Life Magazine; they sure made it appear like an attractive place.

On 14 March, we again headed for the Japanese Empire and daybreak of the 18th found the BENNINGTON playing left end for the Carrier Task Force; in other words, we were the closest carrier to the beach which was about 80 miles away. It made us feel as though we would be the target for all the enemy planes which might come out - and they came out before we expected they would. Before it was light, we had information that Jap planes were nearby and we soon saw parachute flares dropping through the solid overcast. The airplane engines were turning up on our flight deck, and the planes were about to depart for a strike against Kanoys airfields when the guns of our ship started shooting. A "Betty" was coming in low over the destroyer screen; the cruisers and destroyers started a fire in one engine and then the plane turned as though in an attempt to crash on our flight deck. The starboard guns brought it down and it crashed with a great big ball of orange flame about 200 yards from the side of the ship. A total of 8 enemy planes were "splashed" around and in our Task Group and several ships had close calls. The Air Group did very well during the two days we were in the area attacking Kyushu, Kure, and in an attack on the Jap battleship YAMATO in the Inland Sea; about 57 planes were shot down or destroyed, and about 35 more seriously damaged.