

We will not forget March 19th because that is the day we saw the smoke pillaring above the FRANKLIN in the distance after she was hit twice. The magnitude of the disaster was not realized until one of her airplanes which was in the air at the time she was hit landed on our flight deck before his gas ran out. That night we heard Radio Tokyo announce they had sunk instantaneously 6 Essex Class Carriers and 10 battleships. We were quite sound and happy, and wondered how the Jap people could swallow such atrocious lies. We retired to the south on 20 and 21 March, covering the FRANKLIN as she withdrew. The Japs tried hard to get her, but the planes of the Task Force kept them away; 24 "Betty's" and 24 Jap fighters were splashed and 8 Nips ran for home.

March 22 was as busy a day as we ever had because we had to take on fuel oil, gasoline, bombs, and ammunition. Then, on the 23rd we started plowing up Okinawa, getting it ready for the invasion which was to start on 1 April. Our pilots shot up, bombed and rocketed every thing they could find that looked like a military installation, plus everything that moved. The Japs were literally chased into their caves by the fury of the attack of our pilots. During the week, a Jap convoy was sighted in the East China Sea, heading towards Okinawa. The planes from the Task Group destroyed the entire convoy; one of the ships evidently carried ammunition because the pictures taken by the planes showed it disintegrating in small pieces in a column of smoke 3000 feet high. On 27 March we had a thrill, because just after dawn, our radars detected several bogies coming down from the north at a high altitude. One was tracked to within about 15 miles and we knew he was close by us. All of a sudden, a "Judy" dove out of a low cloud, a few guns got out a very few shots, but the Nip flew down the whole length of our flight deck at about 300 feet altitude. No bombs were dropped and there was no strafing. Our planes were parked on deck. The Captain directed that we paint a gold horseshoe on our bridge. The Nip wasn't as lucky because some of our planes shot him down a few minutes later.

The invasion of Okinawa commenced on 1 April and thereby began an operation which kept us at sea for 70 days. The planes of Air Group 82 became flying artillery for the troops who were landing and combat air patrols to keep the Jap airplanes away. Some of the pilots were shot down, but most of them were lucky and returned to us. One Marine Lieutenant was shot down, made a water landing, and was picked up by a destroyer which was in a few hours hit by a Kamikaze and sunk, so the Marine aviator had to be rescued again. However, our pilots bagged many Jap planes during this period, having shot down 31 planes one day and 34 on another day. April 6 was another of those days when we had a close call from a Kamikaze; in fact it was so close the Captain ordered a chevron painted below the horseshoe on our bridge. A fighter strike was returning, and a number of Hellcats were in the landing circle. Very casually, almost leisurely, a Jap fighter, who had evidently been trailing the returning strike, dove in out of the clouds, astern and dove for our landing circle. As the Nip bore in for our fantail, he sprayed our flight deck with a burst from his 50's. At the same instant, some of our automatic weapon slugs caught him, and he hit the sea fifty feet from our screws and rudder, exploding as he hit. His carburetor bounced up intact on our flight deck, aft.

On 7 April, the Jap battleship, YAMATO was searched out and sunk, BENNINGTON planes playing a key role in her destruction. We were in the first wave of the force which attacked the big battleship, in all numbering about 300 carrier planes. One of the 1600 lb. bombs from a BENNINGTON Helldiver hit the YAMATO near the bow, and other bombs were observed to hit amidships and aft. BENNINGTON planes, in the same fracas, also sank one destroyer and damaged other enemy escort units.

A return trip was paid to Ulithi on 1-9 May, for replenishment, and then the "70 days" Okinawa operation was resumed. Our planes now flew up and down the Ryuku Island chain with increasing impunity, as Jap air attacks weakened. Between 16 April and the conclusion of the operation on 8 June, this ship participated in only one AA action. At 0639 on the morning of 14 May, a single-engine Jap plane was seen tagging along behind 3 PGF's, about 8 miles away, coming up on our port quarter. Only a destroyer and a cruiser lay between the Nip and our ship. At 13,000 yards, the Hellcats turned on the enemy and failed to splash him. By this time he was about 1000 feet high and coming in straight for our ship. Our 3 inch guns finally opened up at 3000 yards range and immediately got a direct hit; as shell, gas tank, and bomb exploded simultaneously.

Not long afterwards, we had two other unusual experiences. During AA firing practice a target drone plane was hit by our gun's fire, and, like a Kamikaze, it crashed