Eagles' Nest U.S.N.

How It Feels To Be Shot Into the Air

Last of a Series

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ABOARD USS, BENNINGTON, Essex Class Carrier, Somewhere in the Sea (Delayed), "Five o'clock, Sir!"

It was that orderly again, and we slid out of our cot and suppressed a yell as our bare feet touched the cold steel floor of the admiral's cabin.

Minutes later we were feeling our way down ladders to the wardroom, where sleepy-eyed pilots were breakfasting. Ham and eggs, fruit juice, pancakes, if you wanted them, cereal, toast, jam and coffee. Things were picking up.

We had asked to accompany the early patrol. We wanted to know how it felt to be catapulted from the flight deck of a big carrier, fly over a wide expanse of water and t. come in to a fast-arrested landing. We had watched the fighters and bombers both take off from the deck and other planes catapulted from a standing start.

And we had looked at them from underneath the forecastle. We had stood at the stern on the hangar deck, watching 'em come in with flaps, wheels and landing-book down, and heard them either thumped to a stopproof almost instant stop, on the "ee puh."}

Rickenbacker's Rescue.

Breakfast over we climbed up to the airconditioned, comfortable torpedo squadron's ready room where the pilots are briefed.

The torpedo squadron's leader is Cmdr. W. F. Radie, who gained international fame through his difficult rescue of Capt. Eddie Rickenbacker and his companions in the Pacific. Cmdr. Radie, flying a small pontoon naval observation-bomber, landed in rough seas and then taxied 40 miles to safety with Rice and another.

Cmdr. Radie briefed the pilots on the coming day's flight as they reclined easily in new-type adjustable seats much like those on the average airliner. At the end of the air-conditioned room was a nearly large screen on which typical news of the preceding 24 hours was shown around the clock. Music could be enjoyed either from a phonograph or tuned in by radio.

Each seat is equipped with a school desk-type of folding writing area. And at each pilot's desk is his specific job. He is seated at the main facts with pencil.

Four Hours of Patrolling.

They were to fly the dependable TBM torpedoes in and over the assigned area near the coast of Japan. The pilots picked up the part of the task. Together we bought our way against the blast of the high-pressure propellers to the side of our Avenger.

Turret Too Small.

In addition to a pilot, the TBM carries: a tail radio operator, who occupies the compartment near the tail of the plane, as the bottom of the fuselage. A rear turret gunner covers the area directly behind the pilot, facing the tail and stopping the fuselages. The turret gunner's seat was assigned to us, but getting into it with all of our 190 pounds was another matter.

Climbing through a side door into the tail gunner's position, we laboriously struggled through the small aperture meant for 110 pounds, twisted and found ourselves seated in a remarkably small turret. Directly in front of us and too close to be a metal gunnery. Tightly strapped in, we had a 360-degree view of the entire horizon.

As the starter began whirling his right arm and the turret revved up, Pilot Ross spoke over the interphone: "'Sorry, fellas, we're not ready! Watch your step over there."

Suddenly, off our portside, a speedy Hellcat fighter plane appeared from nowhere as our escort. Selecting a spot just off our left wing the pilot smiled and generally waved that everything was now okay. We sat back and relaxed.

Some 30 miles ahead of the carrier we encountered rain squalls. After two hours of flying in stormy weather we circled back toward the ship, dove low over the flight deck and dropped a sandbag-weighted message advising of the weather. Other bombers came in from their flight areas with the same reports and with visibility almost as good as we were ordered.

A Sudden Stop.

The landing was even more expected. Circling around to the left, Ens. Ross made his last turn over one of the receiving destroyers, some 600 yards off the stern and swung in low, with wheels, flaps and landing hook down. With beautiful timing he caught the first cable on the flight deck with the landing hook and we almost stopped dead. Blurred figures dashed in from the side, unhooked the cable, the engine roared and we taxied up and took off deck out of the way of the next bomber, only seconds away.

Back in the ready room, with more coffee and sandwiches, we found that Cmdr. Radie had made us a member of the "Selected, Sacred and Slightly Special Society of Sexy Seabees" and hereafter to be recognized as an "Honorable Bird of the Feather."

What had been a real experience to us is only a part of the every-day existence of the heroic pilots and crew of America's huge aircraft carrier fleet. In or out of battle zones they take to the air and land with regularity, searching the seas for the enemy, whether his be battleships, planes or submarines. In any kind of weather. It is seldom that these remarkably well-trained flyers and tremendously efficient bombers and fighters meet with accident on routine daily.

We left them with a wish in our heart that we could face whatever war's future holds with confidence. Twenty-pet cent of the pilots are trained carrier veterans. Some have served on carriers that were sunk. The others are so highly trained that one watching them take off, fly and land can find no flaws. Their leaders are all tried veterans of wartime aerial fighting.

We flew back over miles of sea and land with a secret prayer that the good carrier Bennigton will come through with colors flying and guns blazing.

Our one thought is: Goodbye Japan!