

# **The Sea Witch**

**Airframes**

**by Stephen Coonts, 1946–**

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places and events are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.



*To Rachael, Lara, David, and Tyler*

## **Preface**

Airplanes have fascinated me since my first airplane ride at the age of six.

*The Sea Witch* resulted from daydreaming about the PBY Catalina, the most numerous allied seaplane of World War II and the one that made the largest contribution to the allied war effort. Manufactured by Consolidated Aircraft, the Catalina first flew in 1935 and was obsolete by 1941. Still, it was relatively cheap and in production when the war arrived; over four thousand of them were built before production ceased in 1945.

The Catalina had two engines mounted in nacelles on the wing, a fully cantilevered design that was mounted on a pedestal to get the props well above swells and sea spray. The design was continuously updated with more powerful engines, acrylic glass blisters for the waist guns, improved armor and electrical systems, and self-sealing fuel tanks. The first versions were true flying boats, but later in the war retractable wheels were added to some versions so they could land and take off ashore or on water, increasing the plane's utility at the expense of its weight-carrying capacity and range.

Amphibious Catalinas flew into the 1980s as water-bombers and island transports. Even today a few are still flying as toys for the wealthy. Margarita-man Jimmy Buffett owned one for years, as did oceanographer Jacques Cousteau.

Although painfully slow, cruising at about 100 to 110 knots, loud, unheated, unpressurized, and uncomfortable, the flying-boat versions of the Catalina could carry fuel for over twenty hours of flight, giving them extraordinary range. They were used in every imaginable role, including ocean reconnaissance, air-sea rescue, mine-laying, and antisubmarine warfare. A few squadrons in the western Pacific painted their Catalinas flat black and attacked Japanese warships and freighters at night. Between August 1943 and January 1944, Black Cat squadrons sank 112,700 tons of Japanese shipping, damaged another 47,000 tons, and damaged ten warships.

You will find Catalinas at several aviation museums, including the San Diego Air and Space Museum, the Lone Star Flight Museum in Galveston, Texas, and the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force in Dayton, Ohio. The best display, however, is probably at the National Naval Aviation Museum in Pensacola, Florida. A complete restored Cat hangs from the ceiling. Displayed on the floor under it is a cutaway version of the hull, complete with manikin pilots and crewmen, machine guns, a bomb sight, a drift-indicating instrument, radios, bunks, and a coffeepot. You can put your nose right up to the glass and really look.

That display will fire your imagination. You are somewhere over the great ocean on a deep Pacific night, you and your mates have found an enemy ship, and you are going to attack!

The Bell Boeing V-22 Osprey, perhaps the most revolutionary aircraft to enter military service since the first helicopter, is the airplane featured in the novella *Al-Jihad*. A transport that can land and take off vertically, the plane was number one on the U.S. Marines' wish list for a generation, which was how long it took to design, manufacture, test, tinker, and get it into service. The engineering and aerodynamic problems were immense, and, many thought, insolvable. One of the largest was the necessity of keeping the machine aloft if one engine failed: The solution was an automatic transmission that allowed one engine to turn both rotors. The first flight of the Osprey took place in 1989, yet it didn't become operational until 2007, eighteen years later. The machine takes full advantage of the latest computer technology to help it remain aloft and controllable.

With two turboprop engines mounted on the ends of the wings, the Osprey has a unique look. One must be both a fixed-wing and helicopter pilot to fly it. I had the good fortune to fly the simulator in the late 1990s, an experience that eventually led to *Al-Jihad*. I also used the V-22 in the novel *Cuba*, published in 1999.

*The 17th Day* was a short story that came from my fascination with World War I aviation. I have always wanted to write a novel about WWI aviators, but it hasn't happened yet.

The planes of the Great War were little more than flying shipping crates. Made of wood, fabric, piano wire, and engines that weren't ready for prime time, they flew without armor, self-sealing fuel tanks, or, except late in the war, oxygen for the pilots. The fabric was treated with a chemical called dope to tighten it up, and the stuff burned easily. In fact, the whole plane was a flying match-head, especially when the fuel tank was spewing gasoline from bullet holes onto the hot parts of the engine. Amazingly, the pilots and gunner/observers flew without parachutes.

The planes were also difficult to fly. These machines did not fly like the Cessnas and Pipers of our day. The margin between their stall speed and maximum airspeed was often painfully thin, which led to a great many stall/spin accidents, inevitably fatal. None of these WWI machines had brakes, merely a steerable tail skid. They had no altitude instruments, no electrical system, and only a rudimentary compass.

Aeronautical engineering was still an occult art when these planes were designed, mostly by eye. If it looked about right, they gave it to a test pilot to see if

he could get it off the ground. Even the designs that made it into service had a depressing habit of shedding wings in dives or turns and having fabric peel off.

Early scouts flew with rotary engines, which had good power-to-weight ratios. The spinning engine—yes, the whole engine revolved around a fixed crankshaft—acted like a giant flywheel, imparting a tremendous torque to the airframe, which had to be overcome by design features and pilot input on the controls. These airplanes turned well in one direction, with the torque assisting, and poorly in the other.

The rotary engine had many technical limitations, however, not the least of which was a very real limit to how big such an engine could be when mounted and flown on the airframes of the day. More complex water-cooled in-line engines replaced the rotaries. Needless to say, the science of designing reliable internal combustion engines was also in its infancy, so these motors had a deplorable tendency to quit in flight.

The Royal Aircraft Factory S.E.5A (for Scout Experimental Model 5A), which is featured in *The 17th Day*, was powered by a French-built 200-HP Hispano-Suiza V-8 engine, one manufactured under wartime conditions with poor metallurgy. Still, the airframe was soundly designed, stable, and the machine made a good gun platform. Although it wasn't as maneuverable as other designs, the S.E.5A was fast, capable of about 138 mph in level flight. It carried one synchronized belt-fed .303-caliber machine gun that fired through the prop arc and a Lewis gun with a fifty-round ammo tray on a Foster mount placed above the wing so it could fire over the prop arc.

Today the best place to see World War I aircraft—originals and modern copies—in flight is the Old Rhinebeck Aerodrome in Rhinebeck, New York. The facility also has the best static collection I have ever seen of these airplanes and the biplanes of the 1920s. For that we have the late Cole Palen to thank.

Airplanes, adventures, life and death in the skies ...

Come on, strap in and we'll go flying.

Stephen Coonts

## Chapter 1

"I'm looking," the skipper said, flipping through my logbook, "but I can't find any seaplane time." The skipper was Commander Martin Jones. His face was greasy from perspiration and he looked exhausted.

"I've had four or five rides in a PBY," I told him, "but always as a passenger." In fact, a PBY had just brought me here from Guadalcanal. It departed after delivering me, some mail, and a couple of tons of spare parts.

The Old Man gave me The Look.

"You're a dive-bomber pilot. What in hell are you doing in a Black Cat squadron?"

"It's a long story." Boy, was that ever the truth!

"I haven't got time for a long story," Jones said as he tossed the logbook on the wardroom table and reached for my service record. "Gimme the punch line." Aboard this small seaplane tender, the wardroom doubled as the ship's office.

"They said I was crazy."

That comment hung in the air like a wet fart. I leaned against the edge of the table to steady myself.

Hanging on her anchor, the tender was rolling a bit in the swell coming up the river from Namoi Bay, on the southwestern tip of New Guinea where the Owen Stanley Mountains ran into the sea. The only human habitation within two hundred miles was a village, Samarai, across the bay on an island. The sailors on the tender never went over there, nor was there any reason they should. If Namoi Bay wasn't the end of the earth, believe me, you could see it from here.

The commander flipped through my service record, scanning the entries. "Are you crazy?"

"No more than most," I replied. Proclaiming your sanity was a bit like proclaiming your virtue—highly suspect.

"This tender can support three PBVs," Commander Jones said, not looking at me. "We launch them late in the afternoon, and they hunt Jap ships at night, return sometime after dawn. Three days ago one of our birds didn't come back." He looked up, straight into my eyes. "The crew is somewhere out there," he swept his hand from left to right, "dead or alive. We'll look for them, of course, but the South Pacific is a big place, and there is a war on."

"Yes, sir."

"Until we get another plane from Australia, we'll only have two birds to carry the load."

I nodded.

"One of our copilots is sick with malaria, too bad to fly. You will fly in his place unless you've really flipped out or something."

"I'm fine, sir."

"Why did they get rid of you?"

"The Japs shot three SBDs out from under me, killed two of my gunners. The skipper said he couldn't afford me. So here I am."

The Old Man lit a cigarette and blew the smoke out through his nose.

"Tell me about it."

So I told it. We launched off the carrier one morning on a routine search mission and found a Jap destroyer in the slot, running north at flank speed. When the lookouts spotted us the destroyer captain cranked the helm full over, threw that can into as tight a circle as it would turn while every gun let loose at us. There were four of us in SBDs; I was flying as number three. As I rolled into my dive I put out the dive brakes, as usual, and dropped the landing gear.

With the dive brakes out the Dauntless goes down in an eighty-degree dive at about 250 knots. Takes a couple thousand feet to pull out. With the dive brakes and gear out, prop in flat pitch, she goes down at 150, vibrating like a banjo string. Still, you have all day to dope the wind and sweeten your aim, and you can pickle the bomb at a thousand feet, put the damn thing right down the smokestack before you have to pull out. Of course, while you are coming down like the angel of doom the Japs are blazing away with everything they have, and when

you pull out of the dive you have no speed, so you are something of a sitting duck. You also run the risk of overcooling the engine, which is liable to stall when you pour the coal to it. Still, when you really want a hit...

I got that destroyer—the other three guys in my flight missed. I put my thousand-pounder right between the smokestacks and blew that can clean in half. It was a hell of a fine sight. Only the Japs had holed my engine, and it quit on the pullout, stopped dead. Oil was blowing all over the windshield, and I couldn't see anything dead ahead. Didn't matter—all that was out there was ocean.

My gunner and I rode the plane into the water. He hit his head or something and didn't get out of the plane, which sank before I could get him unstrapped.

I floated in the water, watched the front half of the destroyer quickly sink and the ass end burn. None of the Japs came after me. I rode my little life raft for a couple days before a PBY landed in the open sea and dragged me in through a waist-gun blister. With all the swells I didn't think he could get airborne again, but he did, somehow.

A couple days later the ship sent a half dozen planes to Henderson Field to operate from there. I figured Henderson could not be tougher to land on than a carrier and was reasonably dry land, so I volunteered. About a week later I tangled with some Zeros at fifteen thousand feet during a raid. I got one and others got me. Killed my new gunner, too. I bailed out and landed in the water right off the beach.

Jones was reading a note in my record while I talked. "Your commanding officer said you shot down a Zero on your first pass," Jones commented, "then disobeyed standing orders and turned to reengage. Four Zeros shot your Dauntless to pieces."

"Yes, sir."

"He says you like combat, like it a lot."

I didn't say anything to that.

"He said you love it."

"That's bullshit."

"Bullshit, sir."

"Sir."

"He says he pulled you out of SBDs to save your sorry ass."

"I read it, sir."

"So tell me the rest of it."

I took a deep breath, then began. "Six days ago another Zero shot me down after I dive-bombed a little freighter near Bougainville. I got the Maru all right, but as I pulled out and sucked up the gear a Zero swarmed all over me and shot the hell out of the plane, punched a bunch of holes in the gas tanks. There wasn't much I could do about it at 150 knots. My gunner got him, finally, but about fifty miles from Henderson Field we used the last of our gas. I put it in the water and we floated for a day and a half before a PT boat found us."

"Leaking fuel like that, were you worried about catching fire?" Commander Jones asked, watching me to see how I answered that.

"Yes, sir. We were match-head close."

He dropped his eyes. "Go on," he said.

“Kenny Ross, the skipper, was pissed. Said if I couldn’t dive-bomb like everyone else and get hits, he didn’t want me.

“I told him everyone else was missing—I was getting the hits, and I’d do whatever it took to keep getting them, which I guess wasn’t exactly the answer he wanted to hear. He canned me.”

The Black Cat squadron commander stubbed out his cigarette and lit another.

He rubbed his eyes, sucked a bit on the weed, then said, “I don’t have anyone else, so you’re our new copilot. You’ll fly with Lieutenant Modahl. He’s probably working on his plane. He wanted to go out this morning and look for our missing crew, but I wouldn’t let him go without a copilot.” The skipper glanced at his watch. “Go find him and send him in to see me.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

“Around here everybody does it my way,” he added pointedly, staring into my face. “If I don’t like the cut of your jib, bucko, you’ll be the permanent night anchor-watch officer aboard this tender until the war is over or you die of old age, whichever happens first. Got that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Welcome aboard.”

The tender was about the size of a Panamanian banana boat, which it might have been at one time. It certainly wasn’t new, and it wasn’t a Navy design. It had a big crane amidships for hoisting planes from the water. That day they were using the crane to lower bombs onto a float.

A plane was moored alongside, covered with a swarm of men. They had portable work stands in place around each engine and tarps rigged underneath to keep tools and parts from falling in the water.

Five-hundred-pound bombs were being loaded on racks under the big Catalina’s wings. Standing there watching, I was amazed at the size of the bird—darn near as big as the tender, it seemed. The wingspan, I knew, was 104 feet, longer than a B-17.

The plane was painted black; not a glossy, shiny, ra-ven’s-feather black, but a dull, flat, light-absorbing black. I had never seen anything uglier. On the nose was a white outline of a witch riding a broomstick, and under the art, the name *Sea Witch*.

The air reeked, a mixture of the aromas of the rotting vegetation and dead fish that were floating amid the roots of the mangrove trees growing almost on the water’s edge. The freshwater coming down the river kept the mangroves going, apparently, although the fish had been unable to withstand the avgas, oil, and grease that were regularly spilled in the water.

At least there was a bit of a breeze to keep the bugs at bay. The place must be a hellhole when the wind didn’t blow!

None of the sailors working on the Cat wore a shirt, and many had cut off the legs of their dungarees. They were brown as nuts.

One of the men standing on the float winching the bombs up was wearing a swimsuit and tennis shoes—nothing else. I figured he was the officer, and after a minute or so of watching I was sure. He was helping with the job, but he was also directing the others.

“Lieutenant Modahl?”

He turned to look at me.

“I’m your new copilot.”

After he got the second bomb on that wing, he clambered up the rope net that was hung over the side of the ship. When he was on deck he shook my hand. I told him my name, where I was from.

He asked a few questions about my experience, and I told him I’d never flown seaplanes—been flying the SBD Dauntless.

Modahl was taller than me by a bunch, over six feet. He must have weighed at least two hundred, and none of it looked like fat. He about broke my hand shaking it. I thought maybe he had played college football. He had black eyes and black hair, filthy hands with ground-in grease and broken fingernails. Only after he shook my hand did it occur to him to wipe the grease off his hands, which he did with a rag that had been lying nearby on the deck. He didn’t smile, not once.

I figured if he could fly and fight, it didn’t matter whether he smiled or not. Anyone in the South Pacific who was making friends just then didn’t understand the situation.

MODAHL:

The ensign was the sorriest specimen I had laid eyes on in a long time. About five feet four inches tall, he had poorly cut, flaming red hair, freckles, jug ears, and buckteeth. He looked maybe sixteen. His khakis didn’t fit, were sweat-stained and rumpled—hell, they were just plain dirty.

He mumbled his words, didn’t have much to say, kept glancing at the Cat, didn’t look me in the eyes.

Joe Snyder and his crew were missing, Harvey Deets was lying in his bunk shivering himself to death with malaria, and I wound up with this kid as a copilot, one who had never even flown a seaplane! Why didn’t they just put one of the storekeepers in the right seat? Hell, why didn’t we just leave the damn seat empty?

No wonder the goddamn Japs were kicking our butts all over the Pacific.

The kid mumbled something about Jones wanting to see me. If the Old Man thought I was going to wet-nurse this kid, he was going to find out different before he got very much older.

I told the kid where to put his gear, then headed for the wardroom to find Commander Jones.

After Modahl went below, I climbed down the net to look over the Black Cat. The high wing sported two engines. The wing was raised well over the fuselage by a pedestal, which had been the key innovation of the design. The mechanic or flight engineer, I knew, had his station in the pedestal. The Cat had side blisters with a fifty-caliber on a swivel-mount in each, a thirty-caliber which fired aft through a tunnel, and a flexible thirty in a nose turret.

This Cat, however, had something I had never seen before. Four blast tubes covered with condoms protruded from the nose under the bow turret. I entered the Cat through one of the open blisters and went forward for a look. The bunk compartment was where passengers always rode; I had never been forward of that.

I went through a small watertight hatch—open now, of course—into the compartment used by the radio operator and the navigator. The radio gear took up



all the space on the starboard side of the compartment, while the navigator had a table with a large compass mounted on the aft end. He had boxes for stowage of charts and a light mounted right over the table. The rear bulkhead was covered with a power distribution panel.

Three steps led up to the mechanic's seat on the wing support pylon. The mech had a bunch of levers and switches up there to control the engines and cowl flaps in flight.

On forward was the cockpit, with raised seats for the pilot and copilot. The yokes were joined together on a cross-cockpit boom, so when one moved, the other did also. On the yoke was a set of light switches that told the mechanic what the pilot wanted him to do. They were labeled with things like, "Raise floats" and "Lower floats," which meant the wingtip floats, and directions for controlling the fuel mixture to the engines. The throttle and prop controls were mounted on the overhead.

The cockpit had windows on both sides and in the roof, all of which were open, but still, it was stifling in there with the heat and stink of rotting fish. The Catalina was also rocking a bit in the swell, which didn't help either.

The door to the bow compartment was between the pilot and copilot, below the instrument panel. One of the sailors was there installing ammo in the bow gun feed trays. He explained the setup.

Four fifty-caliber machine guns were mounted as tightly as possible in the bow compartment—the bomb-sight had been removed to make room and the bombardier's window plated over with sheet metal. Most of the space the guns didn't occupy was taken up by ammo feed trays. The trigger for the guns was on the pilot's yoke. The remainder of the space, and there wasn't much, was for the bow gunner, who had to straddle the fifties to fire the flexible thirty-caliber in the bow turret. Burlap bags were laid over the fixed fifties to protect the gunner from burns.

The sailor showing me the installation was pretty proud of it. His name was Hoffman. He was the bow gunner and bombardier, he said, and had just finished loading ammo in the trays. Through the gaps in the trays I could see the gleam of brass. Hoffman straddled the guns and opened the hatch in the top of the turret to let in some air and light.

"That hatch is open when you make an attack?" I asked.

"Yes, sir. Little drafty, but the visibility is great."

The Cat bobbing against the float and the heat in that closed space made me about half-seasick. I figured I was good for about one more minute.

"How do they work?" I asked, patting the guns.

"They're the Cat's nuts, sir. They really pour out the lead. They'll cut a hole in a ship's side in seconds. I hose the thirty around to keep their heads down while Mr. Modahl guts 'em."

"He goes after the Japs, does he?"

"Yes, sir. He says we gotta do it or somebody else will have to. Now me, I'd rather be sitting in the drugstore at Pismo Beach drinking sodas with my girl while someone else does the heavy lifting, but it isn't working out that way."

"I guess not."

“In fact, when we dive for those Jap ships, and I’m sitting on those guns, I’d rather be somewhere else, anywhere at all. I haven’t peed my pants yet, but it’s been close.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Guess everybody feels that way.”

“Hard to get used to.”

“Are you going to be flying with us?”

“I’m flying copilot for a while. They told me Deets has malaria.”

“You know Cats, huh?”

“I don’t know a damn thing about flying boats. I figure I can learn, though.”

Hoffman wasn’t thrilled, I could see that. If I were him, I would have wanted experienced people in the cockpit, too.

Oh well, how tough could it be? It wasn’t like we were going to have to land this thing on a carrier deck.

HOFFMAN!

This ensign wasn’t just wet behind the ears—he was dripping all over the deck. Our new copilot? He looked like he just got out of the eighth grade. What in hell were the Zeros thinking?

That wasn’t me you heard laughin’, not by a damn sight. It wasn’t very funny. This ensign must be what’s on the bottom of the barrel.

It was like we had already lost the war; we were risking our butts with an idiot pilot who thought he could win the war all by himself, and if it went bad, we had a copilot who’s never flown a seaplane—hell, a copilot who oughta be in junior high—to get our sorry asses home.

I patted those fifties, then crawled aft, out of the bow compartment, before I embarrassed myself by losing my breakfast. There seemed to be a tiny breeze through the cockpit, and that helped. That and the sunlight and the feeling I wasn’t closed up in a tight place.

There were lots of discolored places on the left side of the fuselage. I asked Hoffman about that. He looked vaguely surprised. “Patches, sir. Japs shot up the *Witch* pretty bad. Killed the radioman and left waist gunner. Mr. Modahl got us home, but it was a close thing.”

Hoffman went aft to get out of the airplane, leaving me in the cockpit. I climbed into the right seat and looked things over, fingered all the switches and levers, studied everything. The more I could learn now, the easier the first flight would be.

Everything looked straightforward... no surprises, really. But it was a big, complicated plane. The lighting and intercom panels were on the bulkhead behind the pilots’ seats. There were no landing gear or flap handles, of course. Constant speed props, throttles, RPM and manifold pressure gauges... I thought I could handle it. All I needed would be a little coaching on the takeoff and landing.

The button on the pilot’s yoke that fired the fifties was an add-on, merely clamped to the yoke. A wire from the button disappeared into the bow compartment.

I gingerly moved the controls, just a tad, while I kept my right hand on the throttles. Yeah, I could handle it. She would be slow and ponderous, nothing like a Dauntless, but hell, flying is flying.

I climbed out and stood on the float watching the guys finish loading and fusing the bombs. Three men were also sitting on the wing completing the fueling. I climbed up the net to the tender's deck and leaned on the rail, looking her over.

Modahl came walking down the deck, saw me, and came over. He had sort of a funny look on his face. "Okay," he said, and didn't say anything else.

He leaned on the rail, too, stood surveying the airplane.

"Nice plane," I remarked, trying to be funny.

"Yeah. Commander Jones says we can leave as soon as we're ready. When the guys are finished fueling and arming the plane, I think I'll have them fed, then we'll go."

"Yes, sir. Where to?"

"Jones and I thought we might as well run up to Buka and Rabaul and see what's in the harbor. Moon's almost full tonight—be a shame to waste it. Intelligence thinks there are about a dozen Jap ships at Rabaul, which is fairly well defended. We ought to send at least two Cats. Would if we had them, but we don't."

"Buka?"

"No one knows. The harbor might contain a fleet, or it might be empty."

"Okay."

"Tomorrow morning we'll see if we can find Joe Snyder."

"Where was Snyder going the night he disappeared?"

"Buka and Rabaul," Modahl replied, and climbed down the net to check the fuses on the weapons.

## Chapter 2

While the other guys were doing all the work, I went to my stateroom and threw my stuff in the top bunk. Another officer was there, stripped to his skivvies in the jungle heat. He was seated at the only desk writing a long letter—he already had four or five pages of dense handwriting lying in front of him.

"I'm the new guy," I told him, "going to be Modahl's copilot."

He looked me over like I was a steer he was going to bid upon. "I'm Modahl's navigator, Rufus Pottinger."

"We're flying together, I guess."

I couldn't think of a thing to say. I wondered if that letter was to a girl or his mother. I guessed his mother—Pottinger didn't strike me as the romantic type, but you can never tell. There is someone for everyone, they say.

That thought got me thinking about my family. I didn't have a solitary soul to write to. I guess I was jealous of Pottinger. I stripped to my skivvies and asked him where the head was.

He looked at his watch. "You're in luck. The water will be on in fifteen minutes. For fifteen minutes. The skipper of this scow is miserly with the water."

I took a cake of soap, a towel, and a toothbrush and went to visit the facilities.

POTTINGER:

I'd heard of this guy. They had thrown him out of SBDs, sent him to PBYs. I guess that was an indicator of where we stood on the naval aviation totem pole.

The scuttlebutt was this ensign was some kind of suicidal maniac. You'd never know it to look at him. With flaming red hair, splotchy skin, and buckteeth, he was the kind of guy nobody ever paid much attention to.

He also had an annoying habit of failing to meet your gaze when he spoke to you—I noticed that right off. Not a guy with a great future in the Navy. The man had no presence.

I threw my pen on the desk and stretched. I got to thinking about Modahl and couldn't go on with my letter, so I folded it and put it in the drawer.

Modahl was a warrior to his fingertips. He also took crazy chances. Sure, you gotta go for it—that's combat. Still, you must use good sense. Stay alive to fight again tomorrow. I tried to tell him that dead men don't win wars, and he just laughed.

Now the ensign had been added to the mix. I confess, I was worried. At least Harvey Deets had curbed some of Modahl's wilder instincts. This ensign was a screwball with no brains, according to the rumor, which came straight from the yeoman in the captain's office who saw the message traffic.

In truth I wasn't cut out for this life. I was certainly no warrior—not like Modahl, or even this crazy redheaded ensign. Didn't have the nerves for it.

I wasn't sleeping much those days, couldn't eat, couldn't stop my hands from shaking. It sounds crazy, but I knew there was a bullet out there waiting for me. I knew I wasn't going to survive the war. The Japs were going to kill me.

And I didn't know if they would do it tonight, or tomorrow night, or some night after. But they would do it. I felt like a man on death row, waiting for the warden to come for me.

I couldn't say that in my letters home, of course. Mom would worry herself silly. But Jesus, I didn't know if I could screw up the courage to keep on going.

I hoped I wouldn't crack, wouldn't lose my manhood in front of Modahl and the others.

I guess I'd rather be dead than humiliate myself that way.

Modahl knew how I felt. I think he sensed it when I tried to talk some sense into him.

Oh, God, be with us tonight.

I sat through the brief and kept my ensign's mouth firmly shut. The others asked questions, especially Modahl, while I sort of half listened and thought about that great big ocean out there.

The distances involved were enormous. Buka on the northern tip of Bougainville was about 400 nautical miles away, Rabaul on the eastern tip of New Britain, about 450. This was the first time I would be flying the ocean without my plotting board, which felt strange. No way around it though—Catalinas carried a navigator, who was supposed to get you there and back. Modahl apparently thought Pottinger could handle it—and I guess he had so far.

Standing on the tender's deck, I surveyed the sky. The usual noon shower had dissipated, and now there was only the late-afternoon cumulus building over the ocean.

Behind me I could hear the crew whispering—of course they weren't thrilled at having a copilot without experience, but I wasn't either. I would have given anything right then to be manning a Dauntless on the deck of ENTERPRISE rather than climbing into this heaving, stinking, ugly flying boat moored in the mouth of this jungle river.

The *Sea Witch!* Gimme a break!

The evening was hot, humid, with only an occasional puff of wind. The tender had so little freshwater it came out of the tap in a trickle, hardly enough to wet a wash-rag. I had taken a sponge bath, which was a wasted effort. I was already sodden. At least in the plane we would be free of the bugs that swarmed over us in the muggy air.

I was wearing khakis; Modahl was togged out in a pair of Aussie shorts and a khaki shirt with the sleeves rolled up—the only reason he wore that shirt instead of a tee shirt was to have a pocket for pens and cigarettes. Both of us wore pistols on web belts around our waists.

As I went down the net I overheard the word “crazy.” That steamed me, but there wasn't anything I could do about it.

If they wanted to think I was nuts, let 'em. As long as they did their jobs it really didn't matter what they thought. Even if it did piss me off.

I got strapped into the right seat without help, but I was of little use to Modahl. I shouldn't have worried. The copilot was merely there to flip switches the pilot couldn't reach, provide extra muscle on the unboosted controls, and talk to the pilot to keep him awake in the middle of the night. I didn't figure Modahl would leave the plane to me and the autopilot on this first flight. Tonight, the bunks where members of the crew normally took turns napping were covered with a dozen flares and a dozen hundred-pound bombs, to be dumped out the tunnel hole aft.

The mechanic helped start the engines, Pratt & Whitney 1830s of twelve hundred horsepower each. That sounded like a lot, but the Cat was a huge plane, carrying four five-hundred-pound bombs on the racks, the hundred-pounders on the bunks, several hundred pounds of flares, God knows how much machine gun ammo, and fifteen hundred gallons of gasoline, which weighed nine thousand pounds. The plane could have carried more gas, but this load was plenty, enough to keep us airborne for over twenty hours.

I had no idea what the Cat weighed with all this stuff, and I suspect Modahl didn't either. I said something to the mechanic, Dutch Amme, as we stood on the float waiting our turn to board, and he said the weight didn't matter. “As long as the thing'll float, it'll fly.”

With Amme ready to start the engines, Modahl yelled to Hoffman to release the bowlines. Hoffman was standing on the chine on the left side of the bow. He flipped the line off the cleat, crawled across the nose to the other chine, got rid of that line, then climbed into the nose turret through the open hatch.

A dozen or so of the tender sailors pushed us away from the float. As soon as the bow began to swing, Amme began cranking the engine closest to the tender. It caught and blew a cloud of white smoke, and kept the nose swinging. Modahl pushed the rudder full over and pulled the yoke back into his lap as Amme cranked the second engine.

In less time than it takes to tell, we were taxiing away from the tender.

“You guys did that well,” I remarked.

“Practice,” Modahl said.

Everyone checked in on the intercom, and there was a lot of chatter as they checked systems, all while we were taxiing toward the river’s mouth.

Finally, Modahl used the rudder and starboard engine to initiate a turn to kill time while the engines came up to temperature. The mechanic talked about the engines—temps and so on; Modahl listened and said little.

After two complete turns, the pilot closed the window on his side and told me to do the same. He flipped the signal light to tell Amme to set the mixtures to Auto Rich. While I was trying to get my window to latch, he straightened the rudder and matched the throttles. Props full forward, he pulled the yoke back into his lap and began adding power.

The engines began to sing.

The *Witch* accelerated slowly as Modahl steadily advanced the throttles while the flight engineer called out the manifold pressures and RPMs. He had the throttles full forward when the nose of the big Cat rose, and she began planing the smooth water in the lee of the point. Modahl centered the yoke with both hands to keep us on the step.

I glanced at the airspeed from time to time. We were so heavy I began to wonder if we could ever get off. We passed fifty miles per hour still planing, worked slowly to fifty-five, then sixty, the engines howling at full power.

It took almost a minute to get to sixty-five with that heavy load, but when we did Modahl pulled the yoke back into his lap and the Cat broke free of the water. He eased the yoke forward, held her just a few feet over the water in ground effect as our airspeed increased. When we had eighty on the dial Modahl inched the yoke back slightly, and the *Witch* swam upward in the warm air.

“When the water is a little rougher or there is a breeze, she’ll come off easier,” he told me. He flipped the switch to tell Amme to raise the wingtip floats.

He climbed all the way to a thousand feet before he lowered the nose and pulled the throttles back to cruise manifold pressure, then the props back to cruise RPM. Of course, he had to readjust the throttles and sync the props. Finally he got the props perfectly in sync, and the engine noise became a smooth, loud hum.

After Modahl trimmed he hand-flew the *Witch* awhile. We went out past the point, where he turned and set a course for the tip of the island that lay to the northeast.

“Landing this thing is a piece of cake. It’s a power-on landing into smooth water: Just set up the attitude and a bit of a sink rate and ease her down and on. In the open sea we full-stall her in. After you watch me do a few I’ll let you try it. Maybe tomorrow evening if we aren’t going out again.”

“Yeah,” I said. The fact that Modahl was making plans for tomorrow was comforting somehow, as I’m sure it was to the rest of the crew, who were listening on the intercom. As if we were a road repair gang on the way to fill a pothole.

When we got to the island northeast of Samarai, we flew along the water’s edge for twenty minutes, looking for people or a crashed airplane or a signal—anything—hoping our lost Catalina crew had made it this far.

We had been in the air over an hour when Modahl turned northeast for Bougainville. He engaged the autopilot and sat for a while watching it fly the plane. We were indicating 115 miles per hour, about a hundred knots. The wind was out of the west. Pottinger, the navigator, was watching the surface of the sea to establish our drift before sunset.

“Keep your eyes peeled, gang, for Joe Snyder and his guys. Sing out if you see anything.”

The land was out of sight behind and the sun was sinking into the sea haze when Modahl finally put his feet up on the instrument panel and lit a cigarette. The sun on our left stern quarter illuminated the clouds, which covered about half the sky. The cloud bases were at least a thousand feet above us, the tops several thousand feet above that. The visibility was about twenty miles, I thought, as I studied the sun-dappled surface of the sea with binoculars.

Standing in the space behind us, between the seats, the radioman also studied the sea’s surface. His name was something Varitek... I hadn’t caught his first name. Everyone called him Varitek, even the other sailors.

The noise level in the plane was high; the headsets made it tolerable. Barely. Still, the drone of the engines and the clouds flamed by the setting sun and the changing patterns on the sea were very pleasant. We had cracked our side windows so there was a decent breeze flowing into the plane.

One of the sailors brought us coffee, hot and black. As Modahl smoked cigarettes, one after another, we sat there watching the colors of the clouds change and the sea grow dark. A sliver of the sun was still above the horizon when I got my first glimpse of the moon, round and golden, climbing the sky.

The other members of the crew were disappointed that they didn’t see any trace of Snyder’s plane. I hadn’t thought they would, nor, apparently, did Modahl. He said little, merely smoked in silence as the clouds above us lost their evening glow.

“Watch the moonpath,” Modahl told me after a while. “Anything we see up this way is Japanese, and fair game.” He adjusted the cockpit lighting for night flying and asked the radioman for more coffee.

MODAHL:

I couldn’t get Joe Snyder and his crew out of my mind. A fellow shouldn’t go forth to slay dragons preoccupied with other things, but I liked Joe, liked him a lot. And whatever happened to him could happen to me and mine.

The Japs were staging ships and supplies through Buka and Rabaul as they tried to kick us off Guadalcanal. They were working up to taking Port Moresby, then invading Australia, when our invasion of Guadal threw a monkey wrench in their plans. Now they were trying to reinforce their forces on Guadalcanal. A steady stream of troop transports and cargo ships had been in and out of those harbors, not to mention destroyers and cruisers, enough to put the fear in everybody. Then there are Jap planes—they had a nice airfield on Rabaul and a little strip near Buka. The legs on the Zeros were so long you just never knew where or when you would encounter them, though they stayed on the ground at night.

If they could have flown at night, the Cats couldn’t. The guns in the side blisters were poor defense against enemy fighters. When attacked, the best defense was to

get as close to the sea as possible so the Zeros couldn't make shooting passes without the danger of flying into the water. If a Japanese pilot ever slowed down and lined up behind a Cat a few feet over the water, he'd be meat on the table for the blister gunners—the Japs had yet to make that mistake and probably never would.

I sat there listening to the engines, wondering what happened to Joe, if he were still alive, if he would ever be found.

VARITEK:

If you didn't believe you had a good chance of living through the flight, you would never get aboard the plane. Somebody said that to me once, and it was absolutely true. It took guts to sit through the brief and man up and ride through a takeoff, knowing how big this ocean was, knowing that your life was dependent on the continued function of this cunning contraption of steel and duraluminum. Knowing your continued existence depended on the skill of your pilot.

On Modahl.

Modahl. If he made one bad decision, we were all dead.

These other guys, I saw them fingering rosaries or moving their lips in prayer. I didn't buy any of that sweet-hereafter Living on a Cloud Playing a Harp bullshit.

This is it, baby. This life is all you get. When it's over, it's over. And you ain't coming back as a cow or a dog or a flea on an elephant's ass.

I tried not to think about it, but the truth was, I was scared. Yeah, I believed in Modahl. He was a good officer and a good pilot. Sort of a holier-than-thou human being, not a regular kind of guy you'd like to drink beer with, but I didn't care about that. None of these officers were going to be your buddy, and who would want them to? Modahl could fly that winged boat. He was good at that, and that was all that mattered. That and the fact that he could get us home.

He could do that. Modahl could. He could get this plane and his ass and the asses of all of us home again, back to the tender.

Yeah.

HOFFMAN:

These other guys were so calm that afternoon, but I wasn't. Tell you the truth, I was scared. Waiting, waiting, waiting... it was enough to make a guy puke. I tried to eat and managed to get something down, but I upchucked it before we manned up.

I knew the guys on the Snyder crew—went to boot camp with a couple of them and shipped out with them to the South Pacific. Yeah, they were good guys, *guys just like me*, and they were dead now. Or floating around in the ocean waiting to die. Or marooned on an island somewhere. The folks at home saw the pictures in *Life* and thought tropical paradise, but these islands were hellholes of jungle, bugs, and snakes, with green shit growing right down to the water's edge. Everything was alive, and everything would eat you.

And the South Pacific was crawling with Japs. The sons of Nippon didn't take prisoners, the guys said, just tortured you for information, then whacked off your head with one of those old swords. Gave me the shivers just thinking about it.

If they captured me... well, *Jesus!*



No wonder I was puking like a soldier on a two-week drunk.  
I just prayed that Modahl would get us home. One more time.

POTTINGER:

This evening the wind was only a few knots out of the west-southwest. Our ground speed was, I estimated, 102 knots. We were precisely here on the chart, at this spot I marked with a tiny x. If I had doped the wind right. Beside the x I noted the time.

Later, as we approach Bougainville, Modahl would climb above the clouds and let me shoot the stars for an accurate fix. Of course, once we found the island, I would use it to plot running fixes.

I liked the precision of navigation. The answers were real, clear, and unequivocal, and could be determined with finest mathematical exactness. On the other hand, flying was more like playing a musical instrument. I could determine Modahl's mood by the way he handled the plane. Most of the time he treated it with the utmost respect, working the plane in the wind and sea like a maestro directing a symphony. When he was preoccupied, like tonight, Modahl just pounded the keys, horsed it around, never got in sync with it.

He was thinking about Joe Snyder's crew, I figured, wondering, pondering life and death.

Death was out there tonight, on that wide sea or in those enemy harbors.

It was always there, always a possibility when we set out on one of those long flights into the unknown.

The torture was not combat, a few intense minutes of bullets and bombs; torture was the waiting. The hours of waiting. The days. The nights. Waiting, wondering...

Sometimes the bullets and bombs came as almost a relief after all that waiting.

The *Sea Witch* was Modahl's weapon. The rest of us were tiny cogs in his machine, living parts. We would live or die as the fates willed it, and whichever way it came out didn't matter as long as Modahl struck the blow.

But the men had faith he'll take them home. Afterward.

I *wanted* to believe that. The others also. But I knew it wasn't true. Death was out there—I could feel it.

Modahl was only a man.

A man who wondered about Joe Snyder and probably had little faith in himself.

Was Modahl crazy, or was it us, who believed?

Nothing in this life was as black as a night at sea. You can tell people that, and they would nod, but no one could know how mercilessly dark a night could be until he saw the night sea for himself.

After the twilight was completely gone that night there was only the occasional flicker of the moonpath through gaps in the clouds, and now and then a glimpse of the stars. And the red lights on the instrument panel. Nothing else. The universe was as dark as the grave.

Modahl eased his butt in his seat, readjusted his feet on the instrument panel, tried to find a comfortable position, and reached for his cigarettes. The pack was empty; he crumpled it in disgust.

"You married?" he asked me.

“No.”

“I am,” he said, and rooted around in his flight bag for another pack of Luckies. He got one out, fired it off, then rearranged himself, settling back in.

He checked the compass, tapped the altimeter, glanced at his watch, and said nothing.

“Can I walk around a little?” I asked.

“Sure.”

I got unstrapped and left him there, smoking, his feet on the panel.

The beat of the engines made the ship a living thing. Everything you touched vibrated; even the air seemed to pulsate. The waist and tunnel gunners were watching out the blisters, scratching, smoking, whatever. Pottinger was working on his chart, the radioman and bombardier were playing with the radar, Amme the mechanic was in his tower making entries in his logbooks.

I took a leak, drank a half a cup of coffee while I watched the two guys working with the radar, and asked some questions. The presentation was merely a line on a cathode-ray tube—a ship, they said, would show up as a spike on the line. Maybe. Range was perhaps twenty miles, when the sea conditions were right.

“Have you ever seen a ship on that thing?” I asked.

“Oh, yeah,” the radioman said, then realized I was an officer and added a “sir.”

I finished the coffee, then climbed back into the copilot’s seat.

When my headset was plugged in again, I asked Modahl, “Do you ever have trouble staying awake?”

He shook his head no.

A half hour later he got out of his seat, took off his headset, and shouted in my ear: “I’m going to get some coffee, walk around. If the autopilot craps out, I’ll feel it. Just hold course and heading.”

“Yes, sir.”

He left, and there I was, all alone in the cockpit of a PBY Catalina over the South Pacific at night, hunting Jap ships.

Right.

I put my feet up on the panel like Modahl had and sat watching the instruments, just in case the autopilot did decide that it had done enough work tonight. The clouds were breaking up as we went north, so every few seconds I stole a glance down the moonpath, just in case. It was about seventy degrees to the right of our nose. I knew the guys were watching it from the starboard blister, but I looked anyway.

We had been airborne for a bit over four hours. We had lost time searching the coast of that island, so I figured we had another hour to fly before we reached Buka. Maybe Modahl was talking to Pottinger about that now.

If my old man could only see me in this cockpit. When he lost the farm about eight years ago, five years after Mom died, he took my sister and me to town and turned us over to the sheriff. Said he couldn’t feed us.

He kissed us both, then walked out the door. That was the last time I ever saw him.

Life defeated him. Beat him down.

Maybe someday, when the war was over, I'd try to find him. My sister and I weren't really adopted, just farmed out as foster kids, so legally he was still my dad.

My sister was killed last year in a car wreck, so he was the only one I had left. I didn't even know if he or Mom had brothers or sisters.

I was sitting there thinking about those days when I heard one sharp, hard word in my ears.

"Contact."

That was the radioman on the intercom. "We have a contact, fifteen miles, ten degrees left."

In about ten seconds Modahl charged into the cockpit and threw himself into the left seat.

"I've got it," he said, and twisted the autopilot steering. We turned about fifty degrees left before he leveled the wings.

"We'll go west, look for them on the moonpath, figure out what we've got."

He reached behind him and twisted the volume knob on the intercom panel so everyone could clearly hear his voice. "Wake up, people. We have a contact. We're maneuvering to put it on the moonpath for a visual."

"What do you think it is?"

"May just be stray electrons—that radar isn't anything to bet money on. If it's a ship, though, it's Japanese."

## Chapter 3

"We've lost the contact," Varitek, the radioman, told Modahl. "It's too far starboard for the radar."

"Okay. We'll turn toward it after a bit, so let me know when you get it again."

He leaned over and shouted at me. "It's no stray electron. Ghost images tend to stay on the screen regardless of how we turn."

He was fidgety. He got out the binoculars, looked down the moonpath.

He was doing that when he said, "I've got it. Something, anyway." He turned the plane, banking steeply to put the contact ahead of us.

As we were in the turn, he said, "It's a submarine, I think."

As he leveled the wings the radioman shouted, "Contact."

Modahl looked with binoculars. "It's a sub conning tower. About six miles. Running southeast, I think. We're in his stern quarter."

He banked the plane steeply right, then disengaged the autopilot and lifted the nose and added power. "We'll climb," he said. "Make a diving attack down the moonpath."

"Going to drop a bomb?"

"One, I think. There may be nothing at Buka or Rabaul."

He explained what he wanted to the crew over the intercom. "We'll use the guns on the conning tower," he said, "then drop the bomb as we go over. You guys in the blisters and tunnel, hit 'em with all you got as we go by. They'll go under before we can make another run, so let's make this one count."

Everyone put on life vests, just in case.

“Your job,” Modahl said to me, “is to watch the altimeter and keep me from flying into the water. I want an altitude callout every ten seconds or so. Not every hundred feet, but every ten seconds.”

“Yessir.”

He called Hoffman to the cockpit and talked to him. “One bomb, the call will be ‘ready, ready, now.’ I’ll pickle it off, but to make sure it goes, I want you to push your pickle when I do.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

MODAHL:

The theory was simple enough: We were climbing to about twenty-five hundred feet, if I could get that high under those patchy clouds, then we would fly down the moonpath toward that sub. We’d see him, but he couldn’t see us. At two miles I’d chop the throttles and dive. If everything went right, we’d be doing almost 250 mph when we passed three hundred feet in altitude, about a thousand feet from the sub, and I opened fire with the nose fifties.

I planned to pull out right over the conning tower and release the bomb. If I judged it right and the bomb didn’t hang up on the rack, maybe it would hit close enough to the sub to damage its hull.

On pullout the guys in the back would sting the sub with their fifties.

Getting it all together would be the trick.

HOFFMAN:

I opened the hatch on the bow turret and climbed astraddle of those fifties. I patted those babies. I’d cleaned and greased and loaded them—if they jammed when we needed them Modahl would be royally pissed. Dutch Amme, the crew chief, would sign me up for a strangulation. Modahl was a nice enough guy, for an officer, but he and Amme wouldn’t tolerate a fuck-up at a time like this, which was okay by me. None of us came all this way to wave at the bastards as we flew by.

The guns *would* work—I *knew* they would.

POTTINGER:

We know the Japanese sailors are there—they are blissfully unaware of us up here in the darkness. Right now they have their sub on the surface, recharging batteries and running southeast, probably headed for the area off Guadalcanal... to hunt for American ships. When they find one, they will torpedo it from ambush.

We call it war but it’s really murder, isn’t it? Us or them, whoever pulls the trigger, no matter. The object of the game is to assassinate the other guy before he can do it to you.

We’re like Al Capone’s enforcers, out to whack the enemy unawares. For the greater glory of our side.

Modahl climbed to the west, with the moon at his back. He got to twenty-four hundred feet before he tickled the bottom of a cloud, so he stayed there and got us back to cruising speed before he started his turn to the left. He turned about 160 degrees, let me fly the Witch while he used the binoculars.

“We’ve got it again,” the radioman said. “Thirty degrees left, right at the limits of the gimbals.”

“Range?”

“Twelve miles.”

“Come left ten,” Modahl told me.

I concentrated fiercely on the instruments, holding altitude and turning to the heading he wanted. The Catalina was heavy on the controls, but not outrageously so. I’d call it lots of stability.

The seconds crept by. All the tiredness that I had felt just minutes before was gone. I was ready.

“I’ve got it,” he said flatly, staring through the binoculars. “Turn up the moonpath.”

I did so.

“Okay, everybody. Range about eight miles. Three minutes, then we dive to attack.”

I tried to look over the nose, which was difficult in a Catalina.

“Still heading southeast,” Modahl murmured. “You’ll have to turn slightly right to keep it in the moonpath.”

The turn also moved the nose so it wouldn’t obstruct Modahl’s vision.

Maybe I shouldn’t have, but I wondered about those guys on that sub. If we pulled this off, these were their last few minutes of life. I guess few of us ever know when the end is near. Which is good, I suppose, since we all have to die.

The final seconds ticked away, then Modahl laid down the binoculars and reached for the controls. He secured the autopilot, and told me, “I’m going to run the trim full nose down. As we come off target, your job is to start cranking the trim back or I’ll never be able to hold the nose up as our speed drops.”

“Okay.”

He retarded the throttles a little, then advanced the props to the stops so they wouldn’t act as dive brakes. Still, nose down as we were, we began to accelerate. Modahl ran the trim wheel forward. I called altitudes.

“Two thousand... nineteen hundred... eighteen...”

Glancing up, I saw the conning tower of the sub and the wake it made. I must have expected it to look larger, because the fact that it was so tiny surprised me.

“Twelve... eleven...”

The airspeed needle crept past 200 mph. We were diving for a spot just short of the sub so Modahl could raise the nose slightly and hammer them, then pull up to avoid crashing.

I could see the tower plainly now in the reflection of the moonlight, which made a long white ribbon of the wake.

“Six hundred... five... four-twenty-five...”

We were up to almost 250 mph, and Modahl was flattening his dive, from about twenty degrees nose down to fifteen or sixteen. He had the tower of that sub bore-sighted now.

“Three-fifty...”

“Three hundred...”

“Ready,” Modahl said for Varitek’s benefit. He shoved the throttles full forward.

“Two-fifty...”

Modahl jabbed the red button on the yoke with his right thumb. Even with the shielding the blast tubes provided, the muzzle flashes were so bright that I almost visually lost the sub. The engines at full power were stupendously loud, but the jackhammer pounding just inches from my feet made the cockpit floor tremble like a leaf in a gale.

HOFFMAN:

I could see the sub's tower, see how we were hurtling through the darkness toward that little metal thing amid the swells. When the guns beneath me suddenly began hammering, the noise almost deafened me. I was expecting it, and yet, I wasn't.

I had been pointing the thirty at the Jap, now I held the trigger down.

The noise and heat and gas from the cycling breechblocks made it almost impossible to breathe. This was the fourth time I had done this, and it wasn't getting any better. I could scarcely breathe, the noise was off the scale, my flesh and bones vibrated. The burlap under me insulated me from the worst of the heat, yet if Modahl kept the triggers down, he was going to fry me. I was sitting on hellfire.

And I was screaming with joy... Despite everything, the experience was sublime.

"One hundred." I shouted the altitude over the bedlam. Some fool was screaming on the intercom, the engines were roaring at full power, the guns in the nose were hammering in one long, continuous burst... I had assumed that Modahl would pull out at a hundred. He didn't.

"Readeeee..."

"Fifty feet," I shouted over the din, trying to make myself heard. I reached for the yoke.

"*Now!*" Modahl roared, pushing the bomb release with his left thumb, releasing the gun trigger, and pulling the yoke back into his stomach all at the same time.

I began cranking madly on the trim.

We must have taken the lenses off the periscopes with our keel. I distinctly felt us hit something... and the nose was rising through the horizontal, up, up, five degrees, ten, as the guns in the blisters and tunnel got off long rolling bursts. When they fell silent our airspeed was bleeding off rapidly, so Modahl pushed forward on the yoke.

"Hoffman, you asshole, did the bomb go?"

"No, sir. It didn't release."

"You shit. You silly, silly shit."

"Mr. Modahl—"

"Get your miserable ass up here and talk to me, Hoffman."

He cranked the plane around as tightly as he could, but too late. When we got level, inbound, with the moon in front of us, the sub was no longer there. She had dived.

"You fly it," Modahl said disgustedly, and turned the plane over to me.

Hoffman climbed up to stand behind the pilots' seats while Modahl inspected the hung bomb with an Aldis lamp. I tried not to look at the bright light so as to maintain some night vision—the light got me anyway. When Modahl had inspected

the offending bomb to his satisfaction and finally killed the light, I was half-blinded.

Hoffman said, "Maybe we got the sub with the guns."

Modahl's lip curled in a vicious sneer, and he turned in his seat, looked at Hoffman as if he were a piece of shit.

"Which side are you on, Hoffman? Your shipmates risked their lives to get that bomb on target, to no avail. If that bomb comes off the rack armed while we're landing, the Japs win and our happy little band of heroes will go to hell together. I don't care if you have to grease those racks with your own blood. When we make an attack they goddamn well better work."

Hoffman still had pimples. When Modahl killed the Aldis lamp I could see them, red and angry, in the glow of the cockpit lights.

"Are you fucking crazy?" Modahl asked without bothering to turn around.

"No, sir," Hoffman stammered.

"Screaming on the intercom during an attack. Jesus! I oughta court-martial your silly ass."

"I'm sorry, sir. It just slipped out. Everything was so loud and—"

Modahl made a gesture, as if he were shooing a fly. But that wasn't the end of it. "Chief Amme," Modahl said on the intercom. "When we get back, I expect you and Hoffman to run the racks through at least a dozen cycles on each bomb station. I want a written report signed by you and Hoffman that the racks work perfectly."

"Yes, sir."

"Pottinger, bring your chart to the cockpit. Let's figure out where we are and where the hell we go from here."

I was still hand-flying the plane, so Modahl said to me, "Head northwest and climb to four thousand, just in case we are closer to Bougainville than I think we are. We'll circle around the northern tip of the island and approach the harbor up the moonpath."

Modahl took off his headset and leaned toward me. "Hoffman's getting his rocks off down there."

"Maybe he's crazy, too," I suggested.

"We all are," Modahl said flatly, and nodded once, sharply. His lips turned down in a frown.

I dropped the subject.

"When you get tired, we'll let Otto fly the *Witch*." Otto was the autopilot. After a few minutes I nodded, and he engaged it.

MODAHL:

Of course Hoffman was crazy. We all were to be out here at night in a flying boat hunting Japs in the world's biggest ocean. Yeah, sure, the Navy sent us here, but every one of us had the wit to have wrangled a nice cushy job somewhere in the States while someone else did the sweating.

It's addictive, like booze and tobacco. I just worried that I'd love it too much. And it's probably a sin. Not that I know much about sin... but I can feel the wrongness of it, the evil. That's the attraction, I guess. I liked the adrenaline and the risk and the feeling of... power. Liked it too much.

It was two o'clock in the morning when we approached Buka harbor from the sea. Jungle-covered hills surrounded the harbor on two sides. A low spit formed the third side. On the end of the spit stood a small lighthouse. In the moonlight we could see that the harbor was empty. Not a single ship.

Pottinger was standing behind us. "How long up to Rabaul?" Modahl asked.

"An hour and forty-five minutes or so. Depends on how cute you want to be on the approach."

"You know me. I try to be cute enough to stay alive."

"Yeah."

"Before we go, let's wake up the Japs in Buka. Why should they get a good night's sleep if we can't?"

"Think the Japs are still here?"

"You can bet your soul on it."

Modahl pointed out where the town lay, on the inland side of the harbor. It was completely blacked out, of course.

We made a large, lazy circle while the guys in back readied the parafrags. We would drop them out the tunnel while we flew over the town... they fell for a bit, then the parachutes opened, and they drifted unpredictably. This was a nonprecision attack if there ever was one. It was better than throwing bricks, though not by much.

We flew toward the town at three thousand feet. We were still a mile or so away when antiaircraft tracers began rising out of the darkness around the harbor. The streams of shells went up through our altitude, all right, so they had plenty of gun. They just didn't know where in the darkness we were. The streams waved randomly as the Japs fired burst after burst.

It looked harmless enough, though it wasn't. A shell fired randomly can kill you just as dead as an aimed one if it hits you.

"One minute," Modahl told the guys in back. He directed his next comment at me: "I'm saving the five-hundred-pounders for Rabaul. Surely we'll find a ship there or someplace."

"Thirty seconds."

We were in the tracers now, which bore a slight resemblance to Fourth of July fireworks.

"Drop 'em."

One tracer stream ignited just ahead of us and rose toward us. Modahl turned to avoid it. As I watched the glowing tracers I was well aware of how truly large the Catalina was, a black duraluminum cloud. How could they not hit it?

"That's the last of them." The word from the guys in back came as we passed out of the last of the tracers. The last few bombs would probably land in the jungle. Oh well.

We turned for the open sea. We were well away from the city when the frags begin exploding. They marched along through the blackness, popping very nicely as every gun in town fell silent.

"Rabaul," Modahl said, and turned the plane over to me.



## Chapter 4

Rabaul!

The place was a legend. Although reputedly not as tough a nut as Truk, the big Jap base in the Carolines, Rabaul was the major Japanese stronghold in the South Pacific. Intelligence said they had several hundred planes—bombers, fighters, float fighters, seaplanes—and from thirty to fifty warships. This concentration of military power was defended with an impressive array of anti-aircraft weapons.

The Army Air Corps was bombing Rabaul by day with B-17s, and the Navy was harassing them at night with Catalinas. None of these punches were going to knock them out, but if each blow hurt them a little, drew a little blood, the effect would be cumulative. Or so said the staff experts in Washington and Pearl.

Regardless of whatever else they might be, the Japanese were good soldiers, competent, capable, and ruthless. They probably had bagged Joe Snyder and his crew last night, and tonight, with this moon, they surely knew the Americans were coming.

I wondered if Snyder had attacked Rabaul before he headed for Buka, or vice versa. Whichever, the Japs in Buka probably radioed the news of our 2 A.M. raid to Ra-baul. The guys in Rabaul knew how far it was between the two ports, and they had watches. They could probably predict within five minutes when we were going to arrive for the party.

I didn't remark on any of this to Modahl as we flew over the empty moonlit sea; he knew the facts as well as I and could draw his own conclusions. At least the clouds were dissipating. The stars were awe-inspiring.

Pottinger came up to the cockpit with his chart and huddled over it with Modahl. I sat watching the moon-path and monitoring Otto. I figured if Modahl wanted to include me in the strategy session, he would say so. My watch said almost three in the morning. We couldn't get there before four, so we were going to strike within an hour of dawn.

Finally, Modahl held the chart where I could see it, and said, "Here's Rabaul, on the northern coast of New Britain. This peninsula sticking out into the channel forms the western side of the harbor, which is a fine one. There are serious mountains on New Britain and on New Ireland, the island to the north and east. The highest is over seventy-five hundred feet high, so we want to avoid those.

"Here is what I want to do. We'll motor up the channel between the islands until we get on the moonpath; at this hour of the morning that will make our run in heading a little south of west. Then we'll go in. As luck would have it, that course brings us in over the mouth of the harbor.

"They'll figure we want to do that, but that's the only way I know actually to see what's there. The radar will just show us a bunch of blips that could be anything. If we see a ship we like, we'll climb, then do a diving attack with the engines at idle. Bomb at masthead height. What do you think?"

"Think we'll catch 'em asleep?"

He glanced at me, then dropped his eyes. "No."

"It'll be risky."

“We’ll hit the biggest ship in there, whatever that is.”

“Five-hundred-pounders won’t sink a cruiser.”

“The tender was out of thousand-pounders. Snyder took the last one.”

“Uh-huh.”

“We can cripple ‘em, put a cruiser out of the war for a while. Maybe they’ll send it back to Japan for repairs. That’ll do.”

“How about a destroyer? Five hundred pounds of tor-pex will blow a Jap can in half.”

“They got lots of destroyers. Not so many cruisers.”

He thought like I did: If there was a cruiser in there, the Japs knew it was the prime target and they’d be ready; still, that’s the one I’d hit. When you’re looking for a fight, hit the biggest guy in the bar.

MODAHL:

The kid was right; of course. There was no way we were going to sucker punch the Japs with a hundred-knot PBY. Yet I knew there would be targets in Rabaul so we had to check Buka first.

Snyder not coming back last night was the wild card. If the Japanese had radar at Rabaul, they could take the darkness away from us. Ditto night fighters with radar. Intelligence said they didn’t have radar, and we had seen no indications that Intel was wrong, but still, Joe did what we plan to do, and he didn’t come home.

Probably flak got him. God knows, in a heavily defended harbor, flying over a couple of dozen warships, the flak was probably thick enough to walk on.

Bombing at masthead height is our only realistic method for delivering the bombs. Hell, we don’t even have a bombsight: We took it out when we put in the bow guns. The Catalina is an up-close and personal weapon. We’ll stick it in their ear and pull the trigger, which will work, amazingly enough, if we can take advantage of the darkness to surprise them.

We’ll pull it off or we won’t. That’s the truth of it.

POTTINGER:

Talk about going along for the ride: These two go blithely about their bloody work without a thought for the rest of the crew. They have ice water in their veins. And neither asked if damaging a ship was worth the life of every man in this plane. Or anybody’s life.

They’re assassins, pure and simple, and they thought they were invulnerable.

Of course, the Japanese were assassins, too.

All of these assholes were in it for the blood.

One hundred knots is glacially slow when you’re going to a fire. I was so nervous that I had trouble sitting still. Despite my faith in Pottinger’s expertise, I kept staring into the darkness, trying to see what was out there. I didn’t want to fly into a mountain and these islands certainly had ‘em. When Pottinger said we had reached the mouth of the channel between the two, we turned north. Blindly.

As we motored up the channel at two thousand feet, I wondered why I didn’t want to put off the moment of truth, till tomorrow night, or next week, or next year. Or forever. I decided that a man needs a future if he is to stay on an even

keel, and with Rabaul up ahead, the future was nothing but a coin flip. I wanted it to be over.

Pottinger and Varitek, the radioman, were on the radar; they reported lots of blips. We came up the moonpath and looked with binoculars: We counted twenty-three ships in the harbor, about half of them warships and the rest freighters and tankers. Lots of targets.

"I think the one in the center of the harbor is a cruiser," Modahl said, and passed the binoculars to me. As he turned the plane to the north, to seaward, I turned the focus wheel of the binoculars and studied it through his side window. With the vibration of the plane and the low light level—all we had was moonlight—it was hard to tell. She was big, all right, and long enough, easily the biggest warship in the harbor.

"Looks like a cruiser to me," I agreed. I lost the moon as I tried to focus on other ships. Modahl turned the *Witch* 180 degrees and motored back south. This time the harbor was on my side.

"See anything that looks like a carrier?" he asked.

"I'm looking." Destroyer, destroyer, maybe a small cruiser ... more destroyers. A sub. No, two subs.

"Two subs, no carrier," I said, still scanning.

"I'd like to bomb a carrier before I die," Modahl muttered. Everyone on the circuit heard that, of course, and I thought he should watch his lip. No use getting the crew in a sweat. But it was his crew, so I let the remark go by.

"The biggest ship I see is the cruiser in the center," I said, and handed back the glasses.

"Surrounded by cans. When they hear us, everyone opens fire, and Vesuvius will erupt under our ass."

"We can always do a destroyer. We can send one or two to the bottom. They are excellent targets."

"I know."

We turned and motored north again. He waited until the moonlight reflected on the harbor and studied it again with the binoculars. Pottinger was standing behind us. He didn't say anything, kept bent over so he could look out at the harbor.

"The cruiser," Modahl said with finality. He told the crew, as if they didn't know, "We are off Rabaul harbor. The Japs have twenty-three ships there, one of which appears to be a cruiser. Radio, send off a contact report. When you're finished we'll attack."

"What do you want me to say, Mr. Modahl?"

"Just what I said. Twenty-three ships, et cetera."

"Yes, sir."

"Tell me when you have an acknowledgment."

The cruiser lay at a forty-five-degree angle to the moonpath, which had to be the direction of our approach since we were bombing visually. To maximize our chances of getting a hit, we should train off the four bombs, that is, drop them one at a time with a set interval between them—we were going to try to drop the bomb that had hung on the rack at Buka. On the other hand, we could do the most damage if we salvoed all four bombs right down the smokestack. The obvious

compromise was to salvo them in pairs with an appropriate interval between pairs—that was Modahl’s choice. He didn’t ask anyone’s opinion; he merely announced how we were going to do it.

Hoffman consulted the chart. If we managed to get up to 250 mph at weapons release, an interval of two-tenths of a second would give us seventy-five feet between salvos. Modahl knew the math cold and gave his approval. Hoffman set two-tenths of a second on the interval-ometer.

“How low are you going to go?” Pottinger asked. The cockpit lights reflected in the sweat on his face.

“As low as possible.”

“We’re going to get caught in the bombs’ blast.”

“Every foot of altitude increases our chances of missing.”

“And of getting home,” Pottinger said flatly.

“Get back to your station,” Modahl snapped. “The enemy is there, and I intend to hit him.”

“I’m merely pointing out the obvious.”

“Take it up with Commander Jones the next time you see him.”

“If I see him.”

“God damn it, Pottinger! That’s *enough!* Get back to your station and shut the fuck up.”

The crew heard this exchange, which was one reason Modahl was so infuriated. Right then I would have bet serious money that Modahl and Pottinger would never again fly together.

We flew inbound at three thousand feet. Modahl had climbed higher so he could dive with the engines at idle and still get plenty of airspeed. I was used to the speed of the Dauntless, so motoring inbound toward the proper dive point—waiting, waiting, waiting—was like having poison ivy and being unable to scratch.

“Now,” he said, finally, and we both pushed forward on the yokes as he pulled back the throttles and advanced the prop levers. The engines gurgled... and the airspeed began increasing. Modahl ran the trim forward. Down we swooped, accelerating ever so slowly.

The cruiser was dead ahead, anchored, without a single light showing. The black shapes on the silver water, the darkness of the land surrounding the bay, the moon and stars above... it was like something from a dream. Or a nightmare.

I called the altitudes. “Nineteen, eighteen, seventeen ...”

He pushed harder on the yoke, ran the nose trim full down. Speed passing 180, 190...

Every gun in the Jap fleet opened fire, all at once.

“Holy...!”

Fortunately, they were all firing straight up or randomly. Nothing aimed our way.

The tracers were so bright I would clearly see everything in the cockpit. The Japs had heard us—they just didn’t know where we were. Why they didn’t shoot away from the moon was a mystery to me.

“Eleven... ten... nine...”

Even the shore batteries were firing. The whole area was erupting with tracers. And searchlights. Four searchlights came on, began waving back and forth.

A stream of weaving tracers from one of the destroyers flicked our way... and I felt the blows as three or four shells hit us trip-hammer fast.

“Five... four...”

Modahl was flattening out now, pulling on the yoke with all his strength as the evil black shape of the Japanese cruiser rushed toward us. The airspeed indicator needle quivering on 255...

“Three...”

“Help me!” he shouted, and lifted his feet to the instrument panel for more leverage.

I grabbed the yoke, braced myself, and pulled. The altimeter passed two hundred... I knew there was some lag in the instrument, so we had to be lower... The nose was coming up, passing one hundred...

*We were going to crash into the cruiser!* I pulled with all my strength.

“Now!” Modahl shouted, so loud Hoffman could have heard it without earphones.

I felt the bombs come off; two sharp jolts. Dark as it was, I glimpsed the mast of the cruiser as we shot over it, almost close enough to touch.

As that sight registered, the bombs exploded... right under us! The blast lifted us, pushed...

Modahl rammed the throttles forward to the stops.

The *Witch* wasn't responding properly to the elevators.

“The trim,” Modahl said desperately, and I grabbed the wheel and turned it with all my strength. It was still connected, still stiff, so maybe we weren't dead yet.

Just then a searchlight latched on to us, and another. The ghastly glare lit the cockpit.

“Shoot 'em out,” Modahl roared to the gunners in the blisters and the tail, who opened fire within a heartbeat.

I was rotating the stiff trim wheel when I felt Modahl push the yoke forward. His hand dropped to mine, stopping the rotation of the trim wheel. Then the fifties in the nose lit off. He had opened fire!

Up ahead... a destroyer, shooting in all directions—no, the gunners saw us pinned in the searchlights and swung their guns in our direction!

Modahl held the trigger down—the fifties vibrated like a living thing as we raced toward the destroyer, the engines roaring at full power. With the glare of the searchlight and tracers and all the noise, it looked like we had arrived in hell.

And I could feel shells tearing into us, little thumps that reached me through the seat.

We were rocketing toward the destroyer, which was shooting, shooting, shooting

...

Another searchlight hit us from the port side, nearly blinding me. Something smashed into the cockpit, the instrument panel seemed to explode. Simultaneously, the bow fifties stopped, and the plane slewed.

Modahl slumped in his seat.

I fought for the yoke, leveled the wings, screamed at that idiot Hoffman to stop firing, because he had opened up with the thirty-caliber as soon as the fifties lit off and was still blazing away, shooting BBs at the elephant: Even though we were

pinned like a butterfly in the lights, in some weird way I thought that the muzzle flashes of the little machine gun would give away our position.

My mind wasn't functioning very well. I could hear the fifties in the blisters going, but I shouted, "*Hit the lights, hit the lights*" anyway, praying that the gunners would knock them out before the Japs shot us out of the sky.

We were only a few feet over the black water: The destroyer was right there in front of us, filling the windscreen, strobing streams of lava-hot tracer. I cranked the trim wheel like a madman, trying to get the nose up.

The superstructure of the destroyer blotted out everything else. I turned the trim wheel savagely to raise the nose and felt something impact the plane as we shot over the enemy ship.

More shells tore at us, then the tracer was arcing over our wings. One by one the lights disappeared—I think our gunners got two of them—and, mercifully, we exited the flak.

The port engine was missing, I was standing on the rudder trying to keep the nose straight, and Modahl was bleeding to death.

He coughed black blood up his throat.

Thank God he was off the controls!

Blood ran down his chest. He reached for me, then went limp.

Three hundred feet, slowing... at least we were out of the flak.

The gyro was smashed, the compass frozen: The glass was broken. Both airspeed indicators were shot out, only one of the altimeters worked...

Everyone was babbling on the intercom. The cruiser was on fire, someone said, bomb blasts and flak had damaged the tail, one of the gunners was down, shot, and—

Modahl was really dead, covered with blood, his eyes staring at his right knee.

The port engine quit.

Fumbling, I feathered the prop on the port engine. If it didn't feather, we were going in the water. Now.

It must have, because the good engine held us in the sky.

We were flying straight at the black peninsula on the western side of the bay. We were only three hundred feet above the ocean. Ahead were hills, trees, rocks, more flak guns—I twisted the yoke and used the rudder to turn the plane to the east.

*We'll go down the channel*, I thought, then it will be a straight shot south to Namoa Bay. Some islands north of there—if we can't make it home, maybe we can put down near one.

**The gunners** lifted and pulled Modahl out of the pilot's seat while I fought to get the *Sea Witch* to a thousand feet.

Varitek had caught a piece of flak, which tore a huge gash in his leg and ripped out an artery. The other guys sprinkled it with sulfa powder and tried to stanch the bleeding... I could hear the back-and-forth on the intercom, but they didn't seem to think he had much of a chance.

Dutch Amme climbed into the empty pilot's seat. He surveyed the damage with an electric torch, put his fingers in the hole the shell had made that killed Modahl. There were other holes, five of them, behind the pilot's seat, on the port side.

Amazingly, the destroyer hadn't gotten him—someone we had passed had raked us with something about twenty-millimeter size.

"Searchlights... That's why Joe Snyder didn't come back."

"Yeah," I said, refusing to break my fierce concentration on the business at hand. I had the Cat out into the channel now, with the dark shape of New Ireland on my left and the hulk of New Britain on the right. From the chart I had seen, that meant we had to be heading south. Only 450 nautical miles to go to safety.

"The hull's tore all to hell," Amme said wearily. "When we land we'll go to the bottom within a minute, I'd say. You'll have to set her down gentle, or we might even break in half on touchdown."

Right! Like I knew how to set her down gently.

Amme talked for a bit about fuel, but I didn't pay much attention. It took all my concentration to hold the plane in a slight bank into the dead engine and keep a steady fifty pounds or so of pressure on the rudder, a task made none the easier by the fact that my hands and feet were still shaking. I wiped my eyes on the rolled-up sleeve of my khaki shirt.

The clouds were gone, and I could use the stars as a heading reference, so at least we were making some kind of progress in the direction we wanted to go.

"Tell radio to send out a report," I told Amme. " 'Searchlights at Rabaul.' Have him put in everything else he can think of."

"Varitek is in no shape to send anything."

"Have Pottinger do it. Anybody who knows some Morse code can send it in plain English."

"You want to claim the cruiser?"

"Have him put in just what we saw. People saw fire. Leave it at that."

"With Mr. Modahl dead... it would look good if we claimed the cruiser for him."

"Do like I told you," I snapped. "A hundred cruisers won't help him now. Then come back and help me fly this pig."

Ten minutes later Amme was back. "Some flak hit the radio power supply. We can't transmit."

## Chapter 5

When the sun rose Varitek was dead. The mountains of New Britain were sinking into the sea in our right rear quarter, and ahead were endless sun-speckled sea and open, empty sky. Right then I would have appreciated some clouds. When I next looked back, the mountains were lost in the haze.

Dutch Amme sat in the left seat and I in the right. Both of us exerted pressure on the rudder and worked to keep the *Witch* flying straight. We did that by reference to the sun, which had come up over the sea's rim more or less where we thought it should if we were flying south. As it climbed the sky, we tried to make allowances.

I also kept an eye on the set of the swells, which seemed to show a steady wind from the southeast, a head wind. I flew across the swells at an angle and hoped this course would take us home.

Our airspeed, Amme estimated, was about 80 mph. At this speed, with a little head wind, it would take nearly seven hours to reach Namoi Bay.

Fuel was a problem. I had Amme repeat everything he had told me as we flew down the strait, only this time I listened and asked questions. The left wing had some holes in it, and we had lost gasoline. We were pouring the stuff into the right engine to stay airborne. The upshot of all this was that he thought we could stay up for maybe six hours, maybe a bit less.

“So you’re saying we can’t make Namoi Bay?”

Amm thrust his jaw out, eyed me belligerently. This, I had learned, was the way he dealt with authority, the world, officers. “That’s right, sir. We’ll be swimming before we get there.”

Of course, the distance and flying time to Namoi Bay were also estimates. Still, running the Witch out of gas and making a forced landing in the open sea was a surefire way to die young. I knew just enough about Catalinas to know that even if we survived an open-ocean landing in this swell and were spotted from the air, no sane person would risk a plane and his life attempting to rescue us. Cats weren’t designed to operate in typical Pacific rollers in the open sea.

If we couldn’t make Namoi Bay, we needed a sheltered stretch of water to land on, the lee of an island or a lagoon or bay.

There were islands ahead, some big, some small, all covered with inhospitable jungle.

Then there was Buna, on the northern shore of the New Guinea peninsula.

“What about Buna?” I asked Amme and Pottinger, who was standing behind the seats. “Can we make it?”

“The Japs are still in Buna,” Amme said.

“I heard they left,” Pottinger replied.

“I’d hate to get there and find out you heard wrong,” Amme shot back.

So much for Buna.

I had Pottinger sit in the right seat while I took a break to use the head. The interior of the plane was drafty, and when I saw the hull, I knew why. Damage was extensive, apparently from flak and the bomb blasts. Gaping holes, bent plates and stringers... I could look through the holes and see the sun reflecting on the ocean. The air whistling up through the wounds made the hair on the back of my head stand up. When we landed, we’d be lucky if this thing stayed above water long enough for us to get out of it. Hell, we’d be lucky if it stayed in one piece when it hit the water.

As I stood there looking at the damage, feeling the slipstream coming through the holes, I couldn’t help thinking that this adventure was going to cement my reputation as a Jonah with the dive-bomber guys. They were going to put me in the park for the pigeons. Which pissed me off a little, though there wasn’t a damn thing I could do about it.

Varitek’s and Modahl’s corpses lay in the walkway in the center compartment. I had to walk gingerly to get around. Just seeing them hit me hard. The way it looked, this plane was going to be their coffin. Somehow that seemed appropriate. I had hopes the rest of us could do better, though I was pretty worried.

When I got back to the cockpit I stood behind Amme and Pottinger, who were doing as good a job of wrestling this flying pig southward as I had. Still, they



wanted me to take over, so I climbed back in the right seat. Amme suggested the left, but I was used to using the prop and throttle controls with my left hand and the stick with my right, so figured I would be most comfortable with that arrangement.

Someone opened a box or two of C rations, and we ate ravenously. With two guys dead, you think we'd have lost our appetites, but no.

AMME:

We were in a heap of hurt. We were in a shot-up, crippled, hunk-of-junk airplane in the middle of the South Pacific, the most miserable real estate on the planet, and our pilot had never landed a seaplane in his life. Jesus! The other guys pretended that things were going to work out, but I had done the fuel figures, and I knew. We weren't going to make it, even if this ensign was God's other son.

I tried to tell the ensign and Pottinger; those two didn't seem too worried. Officers! They must get a lobotomy with their commission.

Lieutenant Modahl was the very worst. God-damned idiot. The fucking guy thought he was bulletproof and lived it that way... until the Japs got him. Crazy or brave, dead is dead.

The truth is we were all going to end up dead, even me, and I wasn't brave or crazy.

POTTINGER:

The crackers in the C rations nauseated me. The only gleam of hope in this whole mess was the right engine, which ran like a champ. Not enough gas, this little redheaded fool ensign for a pilot, a damaged hull ...

Funny how a man's life can lead to a mess like this. Just two years ago I was studying Italian art at Yale...

Searchlights! The Japs rigged up searchlights to kill Black Cats. They probably nailed Snyder with them, and miracle of miracles, here came another victim. Those Americans!

Modahl. A braver man never wore shoe leather. I tried not to look at his face as we laid him out in back and covered him with his flight jacket.

In a few hours or days we'd all be as dead as Modahl and Varitek. I knew that, and yet, my mind refused to accept the reality. Wasn't that odd?

Or was it merely human?

"We're going to have to ditch somewhere," I told everyone on the intercom. "Everyone put on a life vest now. Break out the emergency supplies and the raft, get everything ready so when we go in the water we can get it out of the plane ASAP."

They knew what to do, they just needed someone to tell them to do it. I could handle that. After Amme got his vest on, I put on mine and hooked up the straps.

I had Pottinger bring the chart. I wanted a sheltered stretch of water to put the plane in beside an island we could survive on. And the farther from the Japs the better.

One of the Trobriand Islands. Which one would depend upon our fuel.

We were flying at about a thousand feet. Without the altimeter all I could do was look at the swells and guess. The higher we climbed, the more we could see, but if

a Japanese fighter found us, our best defense was to fly just above the water to prevent him from completing firing passes.

I looked at the sun. Another two hours, I decided, then we would climb so we could see the Trobriand Islands from as far away as possible.

As we flew along I found myself thinking about Oklahoma when I was a kid, when my dad and sister and I were still living together. I couldn't remember what my mother looked like; she died when I was very young. I remembered my sister's face, though. Maybe she resembled Mama.

The island first appeared as a shadow on the horizon, just a darkening of that junction of sea and sky. I turned the plane ten degrees right to hit it dead on.

The minutes ticked away as I stared at it, wondering. Finally I checked my watch. Five hours. We had attacked the harbor five hours earlier.

Ten minutes later I could definitely see that it was an island, a low green thing, little rise on the spine, which meant it wasn't coral.

Pottinger was in the left seat at that time, so I pointed it out to him. He merely stared, didn't say anything. About that time Dutch Amme came down from the flight engineer's station and announced that the temps were rising on the starboard engine.

"And we're running out of gas. An hour more, at the most."

I pointed out the island to him, and he had to grab the back of the seat to keep from falling.

In less than a minute we had everyone trooping up to the cockpit to take a look. Finally, I ran them all back to their stations.

That island looked like the promised land.

POTTINGER:

A miracle, that was what it was. We were delivered. We were going to make it, going to live. Going to have some tomorrows.

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. The island was there, yet it was so far away. We would reach it, land in the lee, swim ashore...

Please God, let us live. Let me and these others live to marry and have children and contribute something to the world.

Hear me. Let us do this.

HOFFMAN:

I was so happy I couldn't stand still. I wanted to pound everyone on the back. Sure, I had been fighting despair, telling myself we weren't going to die when I really figured we might. The hull was a sieve—when the ensign set the *Witch* in the water we were going to have to get out as it sank. I knew that, everyone did. And still, *now* we had a chance.

"Fighter!"

One of the guys in the blisters saw it first and called it.

"A float fighter."

I rolled the trim over a bit, got us drifting downward toward the water. The elevator control cables had been damaged in the bomb blast. The trim wheel was the only reason we were still alive.

“He hasn’t seen us yet. Still high, crossing from starboard to port behind us, heading nearly east it looks like.”

After a bit, “Okay, he’s three miles or so out to the east, going away. Never saw us.”

The Japanese put some of their Zeros on floats, which made a lot of sense since the Zero had such great range. The float fighters could be operated out of bays and lagoons where airfields didn’t exist and do a nice job of patrolling vast expanses of ocean. The performance penalty they paid to carry the floats was too great to allow them to go toe-to-toe with land or carrier-based fighters. They could slice and dice a Catalina, though.

“Shit, it’s coming back.”

I kept the Cat descending. We were a couple hundred feet above the water, far too high. I wanted us right on the wavetops.

“He’s coming in from the port stern quarter, curving, coming down, about a half mile...”

I could hear someone sobbing on the intercom.

“I don’t know who’s making that goddamn noise,” I said, “but it had better stop.”

We were about a hundred feet high, I thought, when the float fighter opened fire. I saw his shells hit the water in front of us and heard the fifty in the port blister open up with a short burst. And another, then a long rolling blast as the plane shuddered from the impact of cannon shells.

The fighter pulled out straight ahead, so he went over us and out to my right. He flew straight until he was well out of range of our gun in the starboard blister, then initiated a gentle turn to come around behind.

“Anybody hurt?” I asked.

“He ripped the port wing, which is empty,” Dutch Amme said.

“Good shooting, since he had to break off early.”

I was down on the water by then, very carefully working the trim. I didn’t have much altitude control remaining—if we hit the water at speed our problems would be permanently over.

I thought about turning into this guy when he committed himself to one side or the other. The island dead ahead had me paralyzed though. There it was, a strip of green between sea and sky. Instinctively, I knew that it was our only hope, and I didn’t want to waste a drop of gas in my haste to get there.

Perhaps I could skid the plane a little to try to throw off the Zero pilot’s aim. I fed in some rudder, twisted the yoke to hold it level.

And the lousy crate began sinking. We bounced once on a swell and that damn near did it for us right there. We lost some speed and hung right on the ragged edge of a stall. Long seconds crept by before we accelerated enough for me to exhale. By then I had the rudder where it belonged, but it was a close thing. At least the plane didn’t come apart when it kissed the swell.

Pottinger was hanging on for dear life. “Don’t kill us,” he pleaded.

On the next pass the Zero tried to score on the starboard engine, the only one keeping us aloft. I could feel the shells slamming into us, tearing at the area just behind the cockpit. Instinctively I ducked my head, trying to make myself as small as possible.

I could hear one of the waist fifties pounding.

“Are you gunners going to shoot this guy or let him fuck us?”

With us against the water, the Zero couldn't press home his attacks, but he was hammering us good before he had to break off.

“He holed the right tank,” Amme shouted. “We're losing fuel.”

Oh, baby!

“He's streaming fuel or something,” Hoffman screamed. “You guys hit him that last pass.”

They all started talking at once. I couldn't shut them up.

“If he's crippled, the next pass will be right on the water, from dead astern,” I told Pottinger. “He'll pour it to us.”

“Naw. He'll head for home.”

“Like hell. He'll kill us or die trying. That's what I'd do if I were him.”

Sure enough, the enemy fighter came in low so he could press the attack and break off without hitting the ocean. He was directly behind, dead astern, so both the blister gunners cut loose with their fifties. Short bursts, then longer as he closed the distance.

Someone was screaming on the intercom, shouting curses at the Jap, when the intercom went dead.

I could feel the cannon shells punching home—the cannons in Zeros had low cyclic rates; I swear every round this guy fired hit us. One fifty abruptly stopped firing. The other finished with a long buzz saw burst, then the Zero swept overhead so close I could hear the roar of his engine. At that point it was running better than ours, which was missing badly.

I glanced up in time to see that the enemy fighter was trailing fire. He went into a slight left turn and gently descended until he hit the ocean about a mile from us. Just a little splash, then he was gone.

Our right engine still ran, though fuel was pouring out of the wing. As if we had any to spare.

The island lay dead ahead, but oh, too far, too far.

Now the engine began missing.

We'd never make it. Never.

Coughing, sputtering, the engine wasn't developing enough power to hold us up.

I shouted at Pottinger to hang on, but he had already let go of the controls and braced himself against the instrument panel. As I rolled the trim nose up, I gently retarded the throttle.

Just before we kissed the first swell the engine quit dead. We skipped once, I rolled the trim all the way back, pulled the yoke back even though the damn cables were severed, and the *Sea Witch* pancaked. She must have stopped dead in about ten feet. I kept traveling forward until my head hit the instrument panel, then I went out.

POTTINGER:

The ensign wasn't strapped in. In all the excitement he must have forgotten. The panel made a hell of a gash in his forehead, so he was out cold and bleeding profusely.

The airplane was settling fast. I opened the cockpit hatch and pulled him out of his seat. I couldn't have gotten him up through the hatch if Hoffman hadn't come

up to the cockpit. The ensign weighed about 120, which was plenty, let me tell you. It was all Hoffman and I could do to get him through the hatch, then we hoisted ourselves through.

The top of the fuselage was just above water. It was a miracle that the Jap float fighter didn't set us on fire, and he probably would have if we had been carrying more fuel.

"What about the others?" I asked Hoffman.

"Huntington is dead. The Zero got him. So is Amme. I don't know about Tucker or Svenson."

We were about to step off the bow to stay away from the props when a wave swept us into the sea. I popped the cartridges to inflate my vest, then struggled with the ensign's. I also had to tighten the straps of his vest, then attend to mine—no one ever put those things on tightly enough. I was struggling to do all this and keep our heads above water when I felt something hit my foot.

The ensign was still bleeding, and these waters were full of sharks. A wave of panic swept over me, then my foot hit it again. Something solid. I put my foot down.

The bottom. I was standing on the bottom with just my nose out of the water.

"Hoffman! Stand up!"

We were inside the reef. A miracle. Delivered by a miracle. The ensign had gotten us just close enough.

The *Sea Witch* refused to go under, of course, because she was resting on the bottom. Her black starboard wingtip and vertical stabilizer both protruded prominently from the water.

When we realized the situation, Hoffman worked his way aft and checked on the others. He found three bodies.

We had to get ashore, so we set out across the lagoon toward the beach, walking on the bottom and pulling the ensign, who floated in his inflated life vest.

"He took a hell of a lick," I told Hoffman.

"Maybe he'll wake up," Hoffman said, leaving unspoken the other half of it, that maybe he wouldn't.

HOFFMAN:

The only thing that kept me sane was taking care of the ensign as we struggled over the reef.

Maybe he was already dead, or dying. I didn't know. I tried not to think about it. Just keep his head up.

Oh, man. I couldn't believe they were all dead—Lieutenant Modahl, Chief Amme, Swede Svenson, Tucker, Huntington, Varitek. I tried not to think about it and could think of nothing else. All those guys dead!

We were next. The three of us. There we were, castaways on a jungle island in the middle of the ocean and not another soul on earth knew. How long could a guy stay alive? We'd be ant food before anyone ever found us. If they did.

Of course, if the Japs found us before the Americans, we wouldn't have to worry about survival.

POTTINGER:

Fighting the currents and swells washing over that uneven reef and through the lagoon while dragging the ensign was the toughest thing I ever had to do. The floor of the lagoon was uneven, with holes in it, and sometimes Hoffman and I went under and fought like hell to keep from drowning.

We must have struggled for an hour before we got to knee-deep water, and another half hour before we finally dragged the ensign and ourselves up on the beach. We lay there gasping, desperately thirsty, so exhausted we could scarcely move.

Hoffman got to his knees, finally, and looked around. The beach was a narrow strip of sand, no more than ten yards wide; the jungle began right at the high-water mark.

At his urging we crawled into the undergrowth out of sight. The ensign we dragged. He was still breathing, had a pulse, and thank God the bleeding had stopped, but he didn't look good.

The Witch was about a mile out on the reef. The tail stuck up prominently like an aluminum sail.

"I hope the Japs don't see that," Hoffman remarked.

"If we can't find water, it won't matter," I told him. "We'll be praying for the Japs to come along and put us out of our misery."

After some discussion, he went one way down the beach and I went the other. We were looking for freshwater, a stream running into the sea... something.

At some point I became aware that I was lying in sand... in shade... in wet clothes... with bugs and gnats and all manner of insects eating on me.

My head was splitting, so I didn't pay much attention to the bugs, though I knew they were there.

I managed to pry my eyes open... and could barely make out light and darkness. I thrashed around awhile and dug at my eyes and rubbed at the bugs and passed out again.

The second time I woke up it was dark. My eyes were better, I thought, yet there was nothing to see. I could hear waves lapping nervously.

The thought that we had made it to the island hit me then. I lay there trying to remember. After a while most of the flight came back, the flak in the darkness, the Zero on floats, settling toward the water with one engine dead and the other dying

...

I became aware that Pottinger was there beside me. He had a baby bottle in his survival vest, which he had filled with freshwater. He let me drink it. I have never tasted anything sweeter.

Then he went away, back for more I guess.

After a while I realized someone else was there. It took me several minutes to decide it was Hoffman.

"Are we the only ones alive?" I asked, finally.

"Yes," Hoffman said.

## Chapter 6

The next day, our first full day on the island, I was feeling human again, so Pottinger, Hoffman, and I went exploring. Fortunately, my head wasn't bleeding, and the headache was just that, a headache. We had solid land—okay, sand—under our feet, and we had a chance. Not much of one, but a chance. I was still wearing a pistol, and all of us had knives.

We were also hungry enough to eat a shoe.

We worked our way east along the beach, taking our time. As we walked we discussed the situation. Hoffman was for going out to the plane and trying to salvage a survival kit; Pottinger was against it. There was a line of thunderstorms off to the east and south that seemed to be coming our way. Still hours away, the storms were agitating the swells. Long, tall rollers crashed on the reef, and smaller swells swept through the lagoon.

Watching the swells roll through the shallows, I thought the wreck of the Sea Witch too far away and the water too dangerous. Then we saw a group of shark fins cruising along, and the whole idea of going back to the plane sort of evaporated. We certainly needed the survival kits; we were just going to have to wait for a calmer day.

I had seen the island from the air, though at a low angle, and knew it wasn't small. Trying to recall, I estimated it was eight or nine miles long and a mile wide at the widest part. Probably volcanic in origin, the center of the thing reached up a couple hundred feet or so in elevation, if my memory was correct. I remembered the little hump that I flew toward when we were down low against the sea.

The creeks running down from that rocky spine contained good water, so we wouldn't die of thirst. There was food in the sea, if we could figure out a way to get it. There were things to eat—birds and snakes and such—in the jungle, if we could catch them. All in all, I figured we could make out.

If there weren't any Japs on this island.

That was our immediate concern, so we hiked along, taking our time, looking and listening.

On the eastern end of the island the jungle petered out into an area of low scrub and sand dunes. It was getting along toward the middle of the day, so we sat to rest. After all I had been through, I could feel my own weakness, and I was sure the others could also. But sitting wasn't getting us anyplace, so we dusted our fannies and walked on.

The squall line was almost upon us when we found the first skid mark on the top of a dune.

"Darn if that furrow doesn't look like it was made by the keel of a seaplane," Hoffman said.

I took a really good look, and I had to agree.

I took out my pistol and worked the action, jacked a shell into my hand. The gun was gritty, full of sand and sea salt.

"Going to rain soon," Pottinger said, looking at the sky.

"Let's see if we can find a dry place and sit it out," I said, looking around. I spotted a clump of brush under a small stand of palms, and headed for it. The others were in no hurry, although the gray wall of rain from the storm was nearly upon us.

"Maybe it's Joe Snyder's crew, where he went down in *Charity's Sake*."

"Maybe," I admitted.

"Let's go look." If Hoffman had had a tail, he would have wagged it.

"Later."

"Hell, no matter where we hide, we're going to get wet. If it's them, they've got food, survival gear, all of that."

"Could be Japs, you know."

He was sure the Japanese didn't leave a seaplane mark.

The first gust of rain splattered us.

"I'm going to sit this one out," I said, and turned back toward the brush I had picked out. Pottinger was right behind.

Hoffman ran up beside me. "Please, sir. Let me go on ahead for a look."

I looked at Pottinger. He was a lieutenant (junior grade), senior to me, but since I was the deputy plane commander, he hadn't attempted to exert an ounce of authority. Nor did I think he wanted to.

"No," I told Hoffman. "The risk is too great. The Japs won't want to feed us if they get their hands on us."

"They won't get me."

"No."

"You're just worried I'll tell 'em you're here."

"If they catch you, kid, it won't matter what you tell 'em. They'll come looking for us."

"Mr. Pottinger." Hoffman turned to face the jay-gee. "I appeal to you. All our gear is out in the lagoon. You know the guys in *Charity's Sake* as well as I do."

Pottinger looked at me and he looked at Hoffman and he looked at the squall line racing toward us. He was tired and hungry and had never made a life-or-death decision in his life.

"Snyder could have made it this far," he said to me.

"There's a chance," I admitted.

He bit his lip and made his decision. "Yes," he told the kid. "But be careful, for Christ's sake."

Hoffman grinned at Pottinger and scampered away just as the rain hit. I jogged over to the brush I had seen and crawled in. It wasn't much shelter. Pottinger joined me.

"It's probably Snyder," he said, more to himself than to me.

"Could be anybody."

There was a little washout under the logs. We huddled there.

"Hoffman's right about one thing," I told Pottinger. "We won't be much drier here than if we had stayed out in it."

While it rained I field-stripped the Colt and cleaned the sand and grit out of it as best I could, then put it back together and reloaded it. It wasn't much of a weapon, but it was something. I had a feeling we were going to need everything we had.

After the squall had passed, the fresh wind felt good. We sat on a log and let the wind dry us out.

We were alive, and the others were dead. So the wind played with our hair as we looked at the sea and sky with living eyes.

For how long?



I had seen much of death these last few months, had killed a few men myself ... and oh, it was ugly. Ugly!

Anyone who thinks war is glorious has never seen a fresh corpse.

Yet we kill each other, ruthlessly, mercilessly, without qualm or remorse, all for the greater glory of our side.

Insanity. And this has been the human experience since the dawn of time.

Musing thus, I kept an eye out for Hoffman. He didn't come back. After an hour I was worried.

Pottinger was worried, too. "This isn't good," he said.

We waited another hour, a long, slow hour as the rain squall moved on out over the lagoon, and the sun came boiling through the dissipating clouds. Extraordinary how hot the tropical sun can get on bare skin.

The minutes dragged. My head thumped and my stomach tied itself into a knot. I wanted water badly.

One thing was certain; we couldn't stay put much longer. We needed to get about the business of finding drinkable water and something to eat.

"I guess I fucked that up," Pottinger said.

"Let's follow the keel mark," I suggested.

We didn't walk, we sneaked along, all bent over, even crawled through one place where the green stuff was thin. Hoffman's tracks were still visible in places, only partially obliterated by the rain. And so were the scrapes of the flying boat's keel, deep cuts in the sand where it touched, skipped, then touched again. The plane had torn the waist-high brush out of the ground everywhere it touched. Still, there was enough of it standing that it limited our visibility. And the visibility of the Japs, if there were Japs.

The thought had finally occurred to Pottinger that if we could follow Hoffman, someone else could backtrack him. He was biting his lip so tightly that blood was leaking down his chin. His face was paper white.

The pistol felt good in my hand.

We had gone maybe a quarter of a mile when we saw the reflection of the sun off shiny metal. We got behind some brush and lay on the ground.

"That's no black Catalina," I whispered to Pottinger, who nodded.

Screwing up our courage, we crawled a few more yards on our hands and knees. Finally we came to the place where we could clearly see the metal, which turned out to be the twin tails of a large airplane. Japanese. The rest of the airplane appeared to be behind some trees and brush, partially out of sight.

"A Kawanishi flying boat," Pottinger whispered into my ear. "A Mavis." He was as scared as I was.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice quavering. "You were right, and I was wrong. Letting Hoffman go running off alone was a mistake."

"Don't beat yourself up over it," I told him. "There aren't many right or wrong decisions. You make the best choice you can because the military put you there and told you to decide, then we all get on with it."

"Yeah."

"You gotta remember that none of this matters very much."

"Ahh..."

"You stay here. I'll go see what Hoffman's gotten himself into."

I wasn't going to go crawling over to that plane. Hoffman had probably done that. His tracks seemed to go that way. I set off at a ninety-degree angle, crawling on my belly, the pistol in my right hand.

When I'd gone at least a hundred yards, I turned to parallel the Mavis's landing track. After another hundred yards I heard voices. I froze.

They were speaking Japanese.

I lay there a bit, trying to see. The voices were demanding, imperious.

Taking my time, staying on my stomach, I crawled closer.

I heard Hoffman pleading, begging. "Don't hit me again, for Christ's sake." And a chunk of something heavy hitting flesh.

Ooh boy!

When they were finished with Hoffman, they were going to come looking for Pottinger and me. If they weren't already looking.

I had to know how many of them there were.

I crawled closer, trying to see around the roots of the grass bunches that grew on the dunes.

The Mavis had four engines, one of which was blackened and scorched. Either it caught fire in the air, or someone shot it up.

Finally I got to a place where I could see the men standing in a circle.

There were four of them. They were questioning Hoffman in Japanese. A lot of good that would do. I never met an American sailor who understood a word of it.

The Japs were taking turns beating Hoffman with a club of some kind. Clearly, they were enjoying it.

The Mavis was pretty torn up. Lots of holes, maybe fifty-caliber. It looked to me like a Wildcat or Dauntless had had its way with it.

I kept looking around, trying to see if there were any more Japs. Try as I might, I could see only those four. Two of them had rifles though.

About then they whacked Hoffman so hard he passed out. One of them went for water, dumped it on him to bring him around. Another, decked out in an officer's uniform, went over to a little pile of stuff under a palm tree and pulled out a sword.

They were going to chop off the kid's head.

*Shit!*

I should never have let him go trooping off by himself.

The range was about forty yards. I steadied that pistol with a two-hand grip and aimed it at the Jap with the rifle who was facing me. I wanted him first.

I took my time. Just put that front sight on his belt buckle and squeezed 'er off like it was Tuesday morning at the range. I knocked him off his feet.

I didn't have the luxury of time with the second one. I hit him, all right, probably winged him. The other one with the rifle went to his belly and was looking around, trying to see where the shots were coming from. I only had his head and one arm to shoot at, so I took a deep breath, exhaled, and touched it off. And got him.

The officer with the sword had figured out where I was by that time and was banging at me with a pistol.

I rolled away. Got to my feet and ran, staying as low as possible, ran toward the tail of the Mavis while the officer popped off three in my direction.

“How many of them were there, Hoffman?” I roared, loud as I could shout.

“Four,” he answered, then I heard another shot.

I ran the length of the flying boat’s fuselage, sneaked a peek around the bow. Hoffman lay sprawled in the dirt, blood on his chest, staring fixedly at the sky.

The Jap bastard had shot him!

I sneaked back along the hull of the Mavis, thinking the guy might follow me around.

Finally, I wised up. I got down on my belly and crawled away from the Mavis.

I figured the Jap officer wanted one of those rifles as badly as I did, and that was where he’d end up. I went out about a hundred yards and got to my feet. Staying bent over as much as possible, I trotted around to where I could see the Japs I had shot.

The officer wasn’t in sight. I figured he was close by anyway.

I lay down behind a clump of grass, thought about the situation, wondered what to do next.

I had just about made up my mind to crawl out of there and set up an ambush down the beach when something whacked me in the left side so hard I almost lost consciousness.

Then I heard the shot. A rifle.

With what was left of my strength, I pulled my right hand under me. Then I lay still.

I was hit damned bad. As I lay there the shock of the bullet began wearing off and the pain started way up inside me.

I tried not to breathe, not to move, not to do anything. It was easy. I could feel the legs going numb, feel the life leaking out.

For the longest time I lay there staring at the sand, trying not to blink.

I heard him, finally. Heard the footfall.

He nudged me once with the barrel of his rifle, then used his foot to turn me over.

A look of surprise registered on his face when I shot him.

POTTINGER:

I heard the shots, little pops on the wind, then silence. After a while another shot, louder, then twenty minutes or so later, one more, muffled.

After that, nothing.

Of course I had no way of knowing how many Japanese there were, what had happened, if Hoffman or the ensign were still alive...

I wanted desperately to know, but I couldn’t make myself move. If I just sat up, I could see the tail of the Mavis... and they might see me.

I huddled there frozen, waiting for Hoffman and the ensign to come back. I waited until darkness fell.

Finally, I slept.

The next morning nothing moved. I could hear nothing but the wind. After a couple of hours I knew I was going to have to take a chance. I had to have food. I tried to move and found I couldn’t. Another hour passed. Then another. Ashamed of myself and nauseated with fear, I crawled.

I found them around the Japanese flying boat, all dead. The four Japanese and the two Americans. The Japanese officer was lying across the ensign.

There was food, so I ate it. The water I drank.

I put them in a row in the sand and got busy on a grave. I shouldn't have let Hoffman go exploring. I should be lying there dead instead of the ensign.

Digging helped me deal with it.

The trouble came when I had to drag them to the grave. I was crying pretty badly by then, and the ensign and Hoffman were just so much dead meat. And starting to swell up. I tried not to look at their faces... and didn't succeed.

I dragged the two Americans into the same hole and filled it in the best I could.

I was shaking by then, so I set to digging on a bigger hole for the Japanese. It was getting dark by the time I got the bodies in that hole and filled it and tamped it down.

The next day I inventoried the supplies in the Mavis. There was fishing gear, canned food, bottled water, pads to sleep on, blankets, an ax, matches.

After I'd been on the island about a week I decided to burn the Mavis. The fuel tanks were shot full of holes and empty, which was probably why the Mavis was lying on this godforsaken spit of sand in the endless sea.

It took two days of hard work to load the fuselage with driftwood. I felt good doing it, as if I were accomplishing something important. Looking back, I realize that I was probably half-crazy at that time, irrational. I ate the Japanese rations, worked on stuffing the Mavis with driftwood, watched the sky, and cried uncontrollably every now and then.

By the end of the second day I had the plane fairly full of driftwood. The next morning at dawn I built a fire in there with some Japanese matches and rice paper. The metal in the plane caught fire about an hour later and burned for most of the day. I got pretty worried that evening, afraid that I had lit an eternal flame to arouse Japanese curiosity. The fire died, finally, about midnight, though it smoldered for two more days and nights. Thank God I had been sane enough to wait for morning to light it.

With the fire finally out, I packed all the supplies I had salvaged from the Mavis and moved four miles along the south side of the island to a spot where a freshwater creek emptied into the sea. It took three trips to carry the loot.

I never did try to cross the lagoon to the wreck of the *Sea Witch*. On one of my exploratory hikes around the island a few weeks later I saw that she was gone, broken up by a storm or swept off the reef into deeper water.

I fell into a routine. Every morning I fished. I always had something by noon, usually before, so I built a fire and cooked it and ate on it the rest of the day. During the afternoon I explored and gathered driftwood, which I piled into a huge pile. My thought was that if and when I saw a U.S. ship or plane, I would light it off as a signal fire. I had a hell of a pile collected but finally ran out of matches that would light. The rain and the humidity ruined them. After that I ate my fish raw.

And so my days passed, one by one. I lost count. There was nothing on the island but the jungle and birds, and wind and rain and surf. And me. Just me and my ghosts alone on that speck of sand and jungle lost in an endless universe of sea and sky.

Later I learned that five months passed before I was rescued by the crew of a U.S. Navy patrol boat searching for a lost aircrew. Not the crew of the *Witch* or *Charity's Sake*, but a B-24 crew that had also disappeared into the vastness of the great Pacific. The war was way north and west by then.

I must have been a sight when they found me, burned a deep brown by the sun and almost naked, with only a rag around my waist. My beard and hair were wild and tangled, and I babbled incoherently.

The Navy sent me back to the States. They kept me in a naval hospital for a while until I sort of got it glued back together. Then they gave me a medical discharge.

Cut off from human contact during those long nights and long, long days on that island, I could never get the ensign and Modahl and the other guys from the *Witch* out of my mind. They have been with me every day of my life since.

I have never figured out why they died and I lived.

To this day I still don't know. It wasn't because I was a better person or a better warrior. They were the warriors—they carried me. They had courage, I didn't. They had faith in each other and themselves, and I didn't. Why was it that they died and I was spared?

The old Vikings would have said that Modahl and the ensign were the lucky ones.

In the years that have passed since I flew in the *Sea Witch* the world has continued to turn, the seasons have come and gone, babies have been born and old people have passed away. The earth continues as before.

As I get older I have learned that the ensign spoke the truth: The fate of individuals matters very little. We are dust on the wind.

