

The Sparrow's Fall

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THIS WAS IT, the last mission! As Bill crawled into the cockpit the thought ran through his mind again and again. The last one! His orders should come in on the noon flight from headquarters. That was what the adjutant had said. Well, it was too bad that there was an escort mission before then—but it should be easy. The bombers were hitting Buka, and, although it was a long flight for a "38," it wasn't *too* far. . . .

Bill checked his equipment and looked around the cockpit. The notes on his knee pad were the usual ones; he would need to refer to them in flight: Time for starting engines, take-off, rendezvous with the bombers, time over target and estimated time of return. He looked over the list quickly, but hesitated as he read the last line. "Estimated time enroute . . . 4:30. Fuel limit . . . 5:00." "Not much time left over if we see any real action," he thought. "But what the hell, here goes."

Along the line of revetments, planes came to life. Starters whined and engines coughed into action. Bill started his engines with practiced ease and set the throttles for 100 RPM to keep the plugs from getting fouled. He watched his hack-watch carefully, knowing that it was timed exactly with the watches in all the other cockpits on the field. When the time came, he taxied out of the revetment into his usual place in the line of planes that was filing past toward the run-up blocks. It was the same routine he had gone through more than eighty times in the islands and so many times in the States. He went through each procedure like an automaton, carefully and accurately—and almost unthinkingly.

The planes warmed up in turn on the run-up blocks and taxied to the take-off point. There they waited, and in each ship there was a young man, very much like Bill, bending over his watch or eyeing his instruments anxiously. Soon they all straightened up. It was H-hour, on which their complete time-table hinged. One by one, they taxied onto the runway and took off.

Bill's time was H plus 3. His was the fifth plane to take to the air. He moved onto the runway as number four moved off. Then,

after carefully counting off thirty seconds, he shoved the throttles firmly but slowly forward. Just as soon as his airspeed indicator reached 120 he moved the gear lever to the "Up" position. His wheels retracted while his plane was still on the ground, and he pulled up only after the gear was almost retracted and his airspeed was 140.

Climbing quickly, he found his place in the formation that was circling the field. As soon as they were all in position they arrowed away to the northwest, toward Japanese-held territory. After climbing to 10,000 feet they leveled off, low enough so that they would not need to use their oxygen masks and yet high enough so that a short climb would let them catch up with the bombers that had to labor slowly up to the assigned altitude.

It was a beautiful, clear day and the pursuit ships flew along at an economical speed, for there was no rush about the rendezvous with the bombers. If necessary, the big ships would wait for them. In the first place, they wanted an escort whenever they could get one. Besides, they had all the gas they could use and the time schedule allowed plenty of leeway for making up the few minutes that might be lost.

The big planes did not have to wait, for they spotted the smaller ships coming and started away toward the target, knowing the pursuits could easily see them and catch up. As they overtook the heavies, the fighters broke up into two-plane elements, and scissored back and forth over the formation of bombers in order to stay close to them without moving ahead of them. They could not fly as slowly as the bombers without losing gas efficiency.

"Those poor devils that got stuck in bombers," Bill thought to himself. "They don't get a chance to have any fun at all. Even in combat they have to think about their crew. If they want to cut loose they have to come over to our field and beg a plane they can do it in. They sit there for ten hours at a stretch, heaving those airborne cows around in formation. There's only one thing worse, and that's transport." He thought about this for a while as he weaved back and forth, back and forth over the bomber formation. Then he smiled. "If Betty's plans are as complete as she says they are, I might try to get a transport job if I can. Why, by God, this is the last one! In a matter of days, I'll be married—a family man. Got to settle down. Can't expect a girl to put up with a guy who takes too many chances. Betty'd understand, of course—she's that kind. Yeah, that will be the life. I'll log plenty of hours, sitting back in a plush seat while 'Iron Mike' flies the plane."

Bill's attention was brought back to the present when he realized that they were starting in on the run. The bombay doors were open and the formation seemed to writhe as the pilots tried to stay in close and still keep their bombardiers happy. Guiltily, he scanned the sky for enemy planes. According to Intelligence, they should be out in

force and Bill was not the type that leaves such essential cautiousness to others.

He was not disappointed. Coming up from Bonis, right across the strait from Buka, there was a swarm of them. They stood on their tails as they climbed steeply to meet the raiders. It was a formidable welcoming committee. Quickly, Bill switched his guns from "Safe" to "Fire" and charged them. Then he made an "S" turn in order to approach with the sun at his back.

The Japs headed for the bombers, moving in quickly before the bombs could fall on their comrades. Bill dived to intercept them before they could accomplish their purpose. His wingman pulled up nose to nose with him. Bill could see him straining forward in the cockpit, intent on his target.

"Nice guy," thought Bill. "Eighth mission. God, if he only knew what was ahead of him. I'd hate to have it to look forward to, myself. Oh well, it's all over for me. This is the last one. Say! That Nip there ahead might make number four. He's just sitting there waiting for me. Hope he doesn't look around in time." He pressed the trigger stud and watched his tracers strike home in the enemy plane. He held the trigger down until the Jap started to smoke, then let up and pressed down again. With an orange flash, the Jap plane blew up. Bill ducked as he passed through the smoke that marked the remains of the enemy.

Then the world became a wheeling, swirling panorama. One after another, big, red "meat balls" flashed across his sights and he fired again and again. Sickening black-outs closed his eyes as he twisted and dived. Whenever possible, he looked around for the bombers and worked over toward them. His mission was to protect them. The world was a nightmare of red tracers and flashing wings, intricately interwoven with thin tendrils of smoke and silver vapor trails. He had become a flying, fighting machine.

Suddenly, he was conscious that the enemy planes were gone. He looked around and saw that they were far away from the target and one of the bombers was missing from the formation. Ponderously, the other ships moved up to fill in the gap. Bill wondered fleetingly when it had gone down. He had not noticed. He realized that he had been so absorbed in the fight that he had seen nothing of what had happened. Glancing quickly at his watch, he found that it had been ten minutes since he had made his kill. Then he looked around for stragglers. There were none. He relaxed.

"Bill, look out!"

He turned and caught a glimpse of a Jap plane, fire flickering along its wing. A neat line of holes stitched into the fuselage across the cockpit. Bill gasped and threw his head back, pain racking his body. Blood gushed into his mask from lips bitten through. He felt as if he had been kicked in the stomach. His vision dimmed and he stared at the instrument panel through reddening eyes. Perspira-

tion ran from his forehead into his eyes and added its sting to the all-consuming anguish he felt. He vomited into his mask.

Struggling, he opened his eyes wide and looked out. He was in a steep diving turn. Slowly he pulled out, grimacing as the extra gravity tugged at his wounded intestines. He shook his head to clear it and pressed his mike button.

"Gem one from ruby three, over."

"Gem one. Roger, over."

"I think I got pinked, sir. Request permission to proceed alone."

"Roger, Bill. Go ahead. Williams, you ride herd on him."

Bill fumbled for his first-aid kit and took out some bandages. Tearing his flying jumpers apart, he looked at the two blue holes in his left side. Blood oozed slowly from them and ran down into the bucket seat under him, soaking his parachute. He placed a bandage over each hole in turn and straightened up. A surette of morphine was in his hand, and he fingered it uncertainly as he looked over to his right where his wing-man, Williams, was flying close by. Putting the surette away, he waved and tried to smile. "Lucky the mask is over my face," he reflected, then turned to the serious business of trying to keep his plane straight and level. To all outward appearances, he succeeded, but it was a struggle to keep awake. The growing pool of blood on the floor and in his seat worried him. There was little pain now, only a numb feeling that seemed to creep up from his stomach into his chest, making his breathing painful. Several times he shook his head to clear it. The drone of his engines lulled him and he wanted nothing more than just to let himself slip off to sweet slumber. He removed his mask gratefully when he had descended to breathable air. Lighting a cigarette, he sucked on it greedily.

Time passed with dragging feet. Each turn of the propellers seemed an eternity and he watched the slow motion of the water sliding past under his wings. One hour, one and a half. Now the time had come to look for home. Visibility was still good and ahead, about fifty miles away, he could see the home island. He threw his head back and pushed himself upright from the slump he had unconsciously assumed when he was hit. This started a fresh spurt of blood and he felt the warmth again, trickling down his side. He tried to look up but an intolerable weight pulled his head down again. He lifted it once more, sobbing with the effort. It was no use. With one last effort, he raised his head enough so that he could look over at Williams. He waved—and then blackness engulfed him. He slumped.

"I thought he was reaching over to check his gear lever, honest. Then he dived straight in. Tough. It was his last mission." Williams rose and wandered over to the snack counter to get some coffee. The intelligence officer nodded slowly and made a note on the pad before him.