

OPERATIONS OF THE FAST CARRIER TASK FORCE

IN THE BATTLES OF LEYTE GULF, October 25,1944.

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In mid-September, 1944, Classmate Bill Botts and I arrived at Ulithi Lagoon on the same Navy transport and together went aboard our first ship, the U.S.S. *Independence* (CVL 22). After reporting aboard and getting room assignments, we responded to a summons from the ship's Executive Officer, a crusty old Naval Aviator Commander, Class of 1934, with lots of wartime service. Our greeting was short and to the point. He welcomed us with a bear-paw handshake, and growled:

“Well, two Academy men! I ‘m glad to have you aboard. We have some fine junior officers, mostly reserves. They're all good officers, but take a while to break-in on the bridge. I need qualified underway watch standers now! We're expecting to support the Leyte landings very soon. Since you have been trained at the Academy, I want to have you both standing top watch in six weeks. I will put you on JOOD watches for a few days until you get the routine of our ship. Our watches are one-in-three—four hours on and eight off—and we dog the 16 to 20. Any questions? No? Then, welcome aboard, and get to work, we go to sea with Task Force 38 tomorrow.”

Bill and I did get to work fast; both of us were standing top watch in two weeks, not six, as the Officer of the Deck (OOD) underway, in a massive operation of the Third Fleet, including Task Force 38 with all of the fast carriers and fast battleships.

We quickly found that the *Indy* was a night-fighter carrier with the first night-fighter and night-scouting Squadrons in the Pacific Fleet. The Air Group Commander was Commander (later Vice Admiral) Turner Caldwell, USNA '35 who had taken his men through the training stages to be night operators. They were looking forward to the action for which they had been trained.

Aboard the *Independence*, ship's company worked all night and slept all day to accommodate to the aviators' nighttime operations. The Squadron, Air Group 41, was composed of black F6F Hellcats (fighters) and TBM Avengers (torpedo bombers), all equipped with special radars and special radio equipment for operations in the dark of night. We quickly learned that the F6Fs got all the glory with their nighttime interceptions and shoot-downs of Japanese snoopers, while the TBMs quietly served as vital night-time scouts who kept the fleet advised of Japanese operations under the cover of darkness. This capability proved to be of great importance, since it was one of our night-flying TBMs that sighted Japanese ships on their way under cover of darkness to attack the ships and troops of the Leyte landing.

The *Independence's* normal operations were to steam with Task Group 38.2 all day, with pilots, aviation personnel, and ship's personnel needed to support the Squadron sleeping, and the ship's watch-standers and support personnel standing their usual day and night rotation. At sundown, the *Indy*, departed from Task Group 38.2, accompanied

and protected from submarines by two Destroyers, who also served as plane guards during the night. *Indy* and her two DDs would position themselves between the ships of the Third Fleet and the nearest Japanese land positions, so that there would be plenty of room for *Indy* to maneuver to launch and retrieve aircraft during the night. This placed them in position to intercept Japanese planes coming out from land after dark. We kept our AA guns manned, but were directed not to open fire on aircraft at night because the gunfire would outline our ship's shape and give away the presence of a lone aircraft carrier.

Our aviators had all received special training to qualify them to detect and attack airplanes in total darkness and to take off and land aboard a narrow-deck CVL. They were very good—proud and cocky, and quite boastful about their ability to land on a narrow deck in the dark. One replenishment day, during daylight hours, one of our aviators took a damaged F6F to Fallalop Island (the only one of Ulithi atoll with a landing strip) to trade it for a replacement F6F. Our flight deck was not spotted to receive him when he got back with the replacement plane, so he decided to try landing for a temporary stay aboard one of the big *Essex* class carriers in our Task Group with its spacious flight deck, compared to our narrow CVL deck. The *Indy's* voice call was Cupid; so the pilot came up on the voice circuit with: “This is Cupid Chick 32; Cupid has a fouled deck and I need a lillypad, can anyone help me?” One of the big carriers replied with, “Cupid Chick 32, this is Big Boy; we can take you aboard.” Our guy replied: “Thanks, Big Boy, from Cupid Chick 32; many thanks. Which runway?!” Everyone listening in CIC had a great laugh. We were proud of our feisty fighter pilots, who never failed to kid the big carrier aviators about their broad decks.

Our *Independence* LSO's (Landing Signal Officers) who brought our planes aboard in the dark were also specially trained and were excellent in all respects. Each LSO, a performing artist in his own right, would stand on the tiny LSO platform during night landings, fitted out in a special ultra-violet (UV) light-reflective suit and holding in each hand a UV-reflective “paddle” to signal to the landing aircraft. When an approaching fighter was vectored by the Fighter Director in CIC to take its position “in the groove” for a landing, the “black lights” and the tiny deck-edge lights were switched on and there stood the LSO in all of his florescent glory, imperiously waving his paddles, and with paddle signals demanding a safe and sane approach, no matter the weather or the blackness of the night. When each black F6F in turn caught a wire with its tailhook, the UV-lights and the hooded deck-edge lights were switched off, and the LSO and the entire ship retreated into the safety of their cloak of darkness.

The night-fighter squadron and the LSOs were all new to the *Indy*; they had arrived aboard on 16 August 1944, just a month before Bill and I got there, but the Air Group didn't begin their night operations—CAPs (Combat Air Patrols) and night searches—until later, flying in August and September with daytime strikes to soften up the Japanese bases in the Philippines.

Bill and I were assigned GQ (General Quarters) stations on 40mm batteries—he on the port side aft, and I on the starboard quarter. We each supervised a gunner's mate who operated a lead-computing director at flight deck-edge that controlled our 40mm guns. Bill and I and other Director Officers wore sound powered phones connected to the Gun Boss on the bridge who gave orders to “open fire” and “cease fire” when the enemy planes came within range. We executed the fire and cease fire orders by hitting one shoulder or the other of the gunner's mate who manned the director's handlebar controls; such tactics were necessary because of the noise from gunfire and planes being revved up. The day after our reporting aboard, we were at sunrise GQ—they called it “torpedo defense—same as GQ but with a different bugle call. (Yes *Indy* used bugle calls and I still remember Torpedo Defense as (parroting the bugle sounds): “*Torpedo, torpedo, torpedo, look out, look out, look out!*”

There were plenty of incoming Jap planes, so we had hours of GQ firings almost every day, with kamikazes attacking the Third Fleet formations, but (lucky for us) going after the big carriers first. I remember during a short break in the action, I had a chance to relax and look around and saw the three big carriers in TG 38.2 with flight deck fires caused by kamikaze hits. Later, a Jap bomber (Betty) made a low altitude torpedo attack on the carrier *Yorktown* some two miles on our starboard bow. “Commence firing” came quickly, and my 14 barrels of 40mm's (two quads and six twins) expended 190 rounds per barrel on that Betty, low on the water and an easy shot for my guns, and those of DD's and a cruiser that were also on that side of our Task Group 38.2. I could see the 40mm shells flash as they exploded against the Betty's sides, but it was a tough airplane that held its course. It finally went down just 300 yards before hitting *Yorktown*. All ships in the area claimed it—probably all on that side of the Task Group were hitting it, so no one got credit for a kill.

Soon Bill and I were old hands at the gunfights. At one evening meal, relaxing in the wardroom, I mentioned to the Gun Boss that we were sometimes surprised by incoming Jap planes and could be better prepared if someone on radar would give us a “heads up” when a bogey was approaching, with the direction he was coming from. The Gun Boss nodded and smiled and a week later changed my GQ station to a new one in CIC (Combat Information Center) to man the gunnery circuit and keep everyone on the circuit advised of incoming Jap planes being tracked by CIC. At first I was disappointed in the new assignment; I rather enjoyed the excitement of being in the open and directing my guns, watching the Jap planes go down, seeing burning ships hit by kamikazes, and observing the general confusion and excitement of the battle. But soon I adapted to the darkened CIC and liked it even better because there in CIC I had a front-row seat for the whole operation, with radios and radars going full blast, and I could see and hear what was going on with the entire Fast Carrier Task Force.

Since I had an assigned position as observer in CIC, I had free access to the space at any time and found it a good place to hang out. It was air conditioned (for the

equipment, not the people) so in the hot South Pacific I frequently welcomed a few minutes there to cool off. Also, I frequently spent time there before going on OOD watch to get the overall picture before going to the bridge. One night I went into CIC early to watch four of our F6Fs going on a strafing run on Jap shore emplacements. The voice radio circuit was always crowded in day operations, but at night it became a private circuit for our night-fighters, so our four F6Fs were keeping it busy with jokes and kidding back and forth, not needing or using voice call signs because they recognized each other's voices. Finally, Lieutenant Teal, the senior man and flight leader said: "Okay, knock it off, you guys," and then proceeded to give them a short lecture on circuit discipline and the need for call signs with each use of the circuit. After his "Out," there were about 30 seconds of quiet, then an unrecognizable falsetto voice came up with, "Dickie Teal eats sh*t." That led to much hilarity and a minor explosion from Lieutenant Teal.

During the October 24 sunrise Torpedo Defense period (one hour after sunrise, when the Japanese liked to attack out of the rising sun) the powerful Japanese Central Force was sighted by U.S. submarines headed in the direction of San Bernardino Strait. In a short time The Japanese force was attacked by planes from TF38. Serious damage was done to their ships, especially their large battleships, so the entire group was seen to turn back to get beyond the range of American aircraft. Their retreat meant that the Central Force would not transit the San Bernadino Strait to threaten the Leyte landing the next day, or so everyone thought.

That perception changed later in the day. Just after sunset, our TBM pilot Lt (jg) John Dewis, USNR, starting his night scouting flight, spotted a number of Japanese ships approaching San Bernardino Strait. By voice radio, he reported to our Aviation Intelligence Officer, Lt. Cdr. Jack Westland, in CIC, that he counted four battleships, eight or nine cruisers, and about a dozen destroyers entering the San Bernardino Strait. The Japanese Central Force had apparently resumed its plan to attack the Leyte landing, hoping to be unobserved during the night.

The new sighting was quickly relayed to the Flagship, but was rejected by the CTF 38 staff, with a cryptic "We know that." Rear Admiral Bogan, Commander of TG 38.2 tried again, insisting that the sighting report was a new one from one of his search planes, but he was rebuffed by a staff officer, who tersely replied "Yes, yes, we have that information." As a result, Admiral Halsey did not get the new sighting information. That was probably the reason for his later charge north, going after the Northern Jap Fleet..

At approximate 1700 on 24 October, U.S. submarines reported a large Japanese carrier force east of the northern tip of Luzon. *Indy* launched all available night search TBMs to look for them. Our night Avenger pilot, Lt (jg) "Lucky" Jim Taylor, USNR, spotted the Northern Jap carrier force in the early evening on the 24th and reported its location to CIC, who passed it on to Commander TF 38. This was what Halsey had been looking for; his initial guidance from Admiral Nimitz had been "SINK THE

CARRIERS!” Halsey's voice message to the Fast Carrier Task Force was short and sweet: *“This is what we've been hoping for; let's sink all of their carriers tomorrow morning. Go get 'em!”* Halsey's chief of staff, Captain Carney, sent a dispatch at 2042 ordering three carrier groups north with the fast battleships leading the way. Task Group 38.1 was heading for Ulithi for R&R, so was not included. Our Avengers tracked the Northern Group all night, reporting locations and numbers of ships at frequent intervals.

Halsey had reported late in the afternoon of the 24th: *“If the enemy sorties, Task Force 34 will be formed when directed by me.”* Halsey did not form Task Group 34 (the fast battleships) because his information that the Central Force was moving away from the San Bernardino Strait had not changed. So the fast battleships were still with us; they led the way northward, anxious to finish off any ships damaged by the attacking air groups. Everyone was spoiling for a fight. CIC was alive with cheers of “Get the carriers!” I left CIC for the open bridge and my midwatch; my return was too late for the critical climax. Later I found that Admiral Nimitz had sent a message to Halsey asking:

“TURKEY TROTS TO WATER GG WHERE IS RPT WHERE IS TASK GROUP THIRTY FOUR RR THE WORLD WONDERS.”

The first and last “nonsense” sentences were “padding,” separated by double letters—a standard procedure used to confuse Japanese code-breakers. The first padding (but not the last) was stripped off in the radio room before sending it to Halsey who—not knowing that the last sentence was padding—took it as a personal denunciation.

So Halsey formed TG 34, turned it around, and sent it south, along with our night-fighter Task Group 38.2. The Air Groups had damaged the Jap Northern Fleet badly, and the BBs were expected to go in and finish them off, but instead they headed back south to protect the landing force.

We in CIC were mystified. What was happening seemed perfectly logical, until we in TG 38.2 and the battleships were turned around. Halsey was later blamed for being overeager to get the Northern Force, which was said to to be a decoy to lead us



away so the Japanese Central Force could attack the ships and soldiers of the Leyte landing force. We didn't know that until later.