

MY CRUISE ABOARD THE "BIG BEN"

U.S.S. FRANKLIN CV - 13

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Air Group Five went aboard the "Big Ben" at Alameda, California, about two days before she set sail on her disastrous cruise to Japan. I had been in Torpedo Squadron Five for about four months while we completed our training in preparation to hit the Jap forces when opportunity would permit.

This was my first bit of sea duty and everything aboard ship was strange and new to me. We were all excited about leaving the good old U.S.A. When on the morning of February 7th, 1945, we awakened in our new quarters to the sound of hurried preparations to get under way. Quickly we dressed and went up on the Flight Deck to watch as the ship slowly left the dock and turned down San Francisco Bay headed towards the open sea. It was still dark when we first came on deck but the gray dawn soon gave way to the light of a new day as we made our way under the Frisco-Oakland bridge past Alcatraz and the thickly populated hills of San Francisco, itself. Soon we passed under the Golden Gate Bridge and out to face the broad Pacific. We left the U. S. behind and just what was in store for us we did not know.

The next few days passed by pleasantly enough with all of us getting used to life aboard ship. There were many things to do and see and I was quite enjoying myself. We had the Flight Deck full of planes to drop off when we hit the Hawaiians so we didn't do any flying.

Before dawn on February 13th, I was up on the flight deck and we could see the lights of Pearl Harbor in the far distance. We had been six days without seeing land and it was a pleasant sight to see. To know that the lights of Pearl Harbor were burning was quite a relief for I then knew that the Japs wouldn't be bothering us for awhile anyway. It was after 1000 when we were allowed to enter the Harbor. It was a beautiful day with a goodly breeze blowing across the deck, but all hands were up to see the countryside as we pulled in. The water was a beautiful deep blue at first; then as we came into the mouth of the harbor it was more like topaz. Ah yes, it was really pretty. The Island of Oahu is quite a pretty place with foliage all along the banks of the Harbor with pleasant green countryside in the background. There are all kinds of military establishments around -- Army, Navy, and Marines. There is a Range of mountains on the island that reach up to the clouds; it seems that there are always clouds surrounding high peaks. We had to stand quarters on the way in and that interrupted my sight-seeing for awhile. There were scores of ships in the Harbor, airplanes buzzing around over head, and a very warm sun shining down on the world. We docked and had the afternoon off, so I went to Ford Island and looked up a good friend of mine, visiting until time to go back to the ship. We were in port one day while they unloaded the planes we were ferrying; then we put to sea for a week of carrier operations. We completed it without any trouble in our squadron, but the fighters lost two planes and pilots in a mid-air collision. We were flying at the time and all I saw was a big splash where they hit the water.



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When we got back to Pearl Harbor we went ashore with our gear for a week. Eight of us were to go to tow school for a few days so we stayed on Ford Island two days before joining the squadron at Kaneohe Bay. We didn't get any schooling so on the second day we got an old truck to take us over. The truck was in mighty poor condition and I feared we'd never make it. We went through Honolulu and up over the Pali, which is quite a mountainous road. It is beautiful country to drive through and I wish that I could have taken some pictures. When we made it through the pass and started on the downgrade the surrounding countryside was spread out in a panorama of color with the ocean spreading out in the distance. A truly beautiful sight. The winding road is similar to so many of the roads in the mountains at home, crooked and steep.

We stayed at Kaneohe for one week while our ship was qualifying another Air Group for carrier operation. It was nice there with a good place to swim, a softball game every afternoon, and not too much flying and work. We all agreed that it would be nice to stay around awhile, but at the end of the week ---- It was on the 26th when our planes flew aboard the carrier east of Oahu taking all of the officers and part of the men. The planes returned in the night so by 0415 the following morning we had our gear packed and were in the chow hall. We ate such a breakfast as the cooks would give us at that early hour (for they weren't happy about having to get up at that time); then we went to the ready rooms where the planes were waiting. We were off before the sun came up and headed eastward. We flew for about an hour before we sighted the carrier and the East was just lighting up. The carrier blended in with the water so well that it appeared like a dark shadow. We passed several of the other islands on the way out. As per usual the torpedo squadron landed last so it was daylight by the time our turn came to land. Then our time came, the wheels dropped into their place and lock, the tail hook came out into position, and the flaps lowered. We, inside, fastened our safety belts and we're ready to land. I watched out of the window and just when the wake of the ship was in view the pilot cut the engine and we dropped to the deck with a thud. The hook caught the cable and we came to an abrupt halt. From there on the plane handlers took over and directed the pilot forward into position for respotting. Safe aboard once again!

We steamed back to Pearl Harbor and as usual we had to stand at quarters all the way in. The next two days we were in Port and being most fortunate I had liberty. I went in alone the first day and saw part of the city of Honolulu. The L.D.S. tabernacle came under my observation. It is a beautiful structure and the grounds are planned and kept well. I had a very pleasant chat with the lady who was in charge at that time and she told me a little about the islands which was very interesting. Returning to the base I found that two of my friends were on the Intrepid which had pulled into port that day. I went aboard the ship and located them. Ralph Albiston and Lynn Shearer are two very fine people and we had a nice chat together. The next day Ralph and I went to town, visited the tabernacle, and looked around and took some pictures. I had to get back to the ship to meet Chaplain Boud so I parted with Ralph in town. I made it to the ship just as Chaplain Boud was getting ready to leave. I had been delayed but I was surely happy that I made it in time to meet him.



We talked for a little while and then in a short but impressive ceremony, which took place in his jeep, I was set apart as an M.I.A. Group Leader by the laying on of hands. That was a wonderful feeling and the humble location only added to the importance of such a calling.

The next day we left port headed for the far advanced base at Ulithi where we were to join the fleet. I started looking for the L.D.S. boys on the ship, and before we reached Ulithi I had located 16 men. I held one meeting in which 8 men participated. I got to know several of the boys pretty well in that ten days from Pearl Harbor to Ulithi. On March 12, we dropped anchor in the midst of more ships than I even dreamed existed; ships for miles on end. The masts when first seen from a distance reminded me of a huge pine forest with most of the upper branches knocked off. The "Big E" was the third ship down the line at the anchorage, but they wouldn't let us transmit personal messages so I was unable to contact Phil. I know now it was just as well that I didn't.

We stayed in port one day and on the morning of March 13th, I watched the "Big E" sail past us as she went to take her place in the task force. Shortly afterwards we did the same and took our place in a task group (58.2). The U.S.S. Hancock was in our group along with two smaller carriers and a number of destroyers and cruisers for protection. This was what we'd been training so long for! We were headed for the Japanese homeland to see what damage we could do to their remaining Air Force and it was a large scale assault. On the way up all of the last minute details were taken care of, with the crewmen and pilots being briefed as to what to expect when we did start making raids. In this manner the next few days passed quickly by. Then the day for our first strike on Japan came. Everyone was up early that morning; the time dawn was lighting the Eastern sky our planes were ready to take off. I wasn't on the morning raid, all of the planes got off Okay, so I sweat it out with the rest of the men aboard ship. They were gone about four hours and when they came back we were very much relieved to find that all of the torpedo planes returned safely. We only lost three fighters, and one pilot was picked up by one of our submarines which was stationed for that purpose.

I was on the afternoon raid and it was quite an affair -- We took off about noon, joined up with the other planes, and were off on our first combat mission. We climbed steadily so that by the time we sighted the Japanese coast we were at 19,000 ft. Believe me it was cold up there and we nearly froze. Our target was an airfield nearly across the Island of Kyushu. Soon after we were over land I spotted two airfields on our Starboard. On our Port was a big race track and I thought at the time that it would make me feel a lot better if the Japs were watching a race instead of standing behind guns to shoot at us. I thought of a lot of places I would rather have been than where I was with a load of bombs to drop on them. Honestly, it doesn't make sense for people to be shooting each other up, but then -- . On our port I could see a group of volcanic mountains, some of which had water in the hollow on top. We flew over these mountains and the target was dead ahead. Russ, the pilot, calls back to us, "Okay boys, this is it, get ready to go in." So he pushed over into a glide at about 12,000 ft. He pulled up a bit then pushed on over; one of the chutes fell into my lap and I quickly set it aside. I was watching to see what we hit



but when the field came to my view bombs were bursting all over the place that I wasn't a bit sure where ours hit; however, I am sure that they were right in there. We dropped the bombs between four or five thousand ft. then kept right on going until we hit about 1500 ft. when we pulled out and high tailed it across the bay. Just as we pulled out the escape hatch came out of the turret, making an awful racket as it glanced off the stabilizer. For a moment I thought we had been hit, and I was very much relieved when the truth was made known. There was only light opposition so we didn't lose any planes. However, one did come back with a hole in its port wing. The last I saw of the field was a mass of dust and smoke. As we pulled out over the bay an American submarine was to be seen on the surface. We joined up and headed back to our carrier. We sighted a little barge enroute so the fighters went down and strafed it, the last seen of it was a spiral of smoke rising upward. The rest of the ride was uneventful but it sure was swell to be on the deck once again. They reported that over a thousand planes were over Japan that day and that our losses were very small, while a lot of damage was done to enemy installations. To tell you the truth it seemed very strange to me that there was so little opposition. We didn't see any planes in the air (at least I didn't) and there weren't too many at the air field we bombed. Where were the Jap planes we'd been hearing about? I figured they must have expected us to do something like that and flew most of them to some other island. The next day wasn't so uneventful and we surely found out where part of their planes had been hiding.

The next morning at about 0645 I rolled out of my sack and got ready to go to chow with one of the other fellows. The planes were taking off on their morning strikes as we made our way to the chow hall. We had slept late because we weren't scheduled to fly until the afternoon hop. My friend, Jim Faine, and I just got through the chow line when things became mixed up. Boom! Boom! and the chow hall was a riot as the fellows tried to get to their battle stations. Not having any battle station I just got back out of the way (I had two slices of bread and some butter, so I put the butter on the bread, jammed the slices together, and proceeded to eat). The fellows couldn't get out because the entire hangar deck was on fire, the forward chow hall was in shambles, and they all ended up in the part of the chow hall where I was. They finally got some semblance of order in the place and we were told to sit on the deck where the smoke wasn't so bad. We were confined in this manner for over an hour and could hear the awful explosions that were going on above us! We were wondering how long it would keep up and how we would ever get out. There was a Lieutenant who knew the ship pretty well and he finally took a few men out with him to see if they could make it. They made it all right; then he came back for the rest of us. The smoke and fumes in the center chow hall were terrible and we had to hold onto or keep touching the man ahead of us in order to follow him. We finally came to an air vent which led to the outside of the ship, and it was through this that we climbed and crawled to freedom and fresh air. Boy, what a relief to be out in the open once again -(I thanked My Heavenly Father that he delivered me from that great danger and it stands as a testimony of the Mercy of God). We climbed down into a forty mm. gun mount on the starboard side and made our way forward to the ladder going up to the flight deck. The flight deck was strewn with fire hose and trash, while men were still fighting the blaze which was raging from the island structure on aft. There was a group of men up forward so I made my way to them, from them I got a



rough outline as to the cause of our plight. One Jap plane made it past our defenses and dropped two 500-pound bombs on our deck. It then beat it but was shot down a few minutes later by our fighters. The damage was done. Most of our planes were still on the deck and were blown to bits by the bombs and gas in them. All of the TBM's were loaded with 500 pounders ready to hit the jap fleet at Kobe and Kure. The eight bombers that were still on the deck were also loaded heavily, while there were several Tiny Tims (our biggest airborne rockets) loaded on the fighters on the aft end of the flight deck. The Jap bombs only set off the fire works and our own weapons did the rest. The job of destruction was nearly complete.

At first we were afraid nearly all of our men were killed, but later we found that most of them had gone over the fantail and were picked up by accompanying destroyers.

At 0700 everything was nice and peaceful; one hour later everything was a big mess and the ship was listing hard to starboard. Hundreds of men went overboard and most of the men in the planes got out and went over the fantail. At about 1100 the Cruiser Santa Fe came along side and most of the remaining men were transferred to her. I stepped into my compartment, put a few of the things that were on my bunk in my ditty bag, and stepped aboard the cruiser. The water was rather rough and the forward gun mount was rising and falling within about a foot of the cat walk, so I just stepped to the gun mount and slid down to the deck.

We were on the Santa Fe for four days as we sailed back to Ulithi. The time spent aboard the cruiser was quite enjoyable for me under the circumstances. The men treated us swell even though we did crowd them pretty much. I went to bible class every evening and met a group of really swell christian fellows. I had several fine discussions which I enjoyed very much.

Shortly after we were hit a five-inch shell burst on the deck of the "Big E," so she had to come back to Ulithi with us for repairs. As soon as we hit port I had a message sent to Phil aboard the "Big E," telling him where I was and that I was all right. Shortly afterwards we were transferred to the U.S.S. General Scott, a troop ship where we spent the night and the next day. It was Sunday and I missed out on the L.D.S. meeting because I was up on the bridge sending another blinker message to Phil. Later, however, I located the Chief who was in charge of the meetings and he took me below to show me the ship and the place where he worked. He got out some of the best ice cream I had tasted in a long time and gave me a very generous portion. Ummmm Yum! That evening we were transferred to the U.S.S. Oneida for transport to Guam. The next morning, March 26th, I sent another message to the "Big E" to let Phil know where I was. It was getting late and I was about to think he couldn't make it. He did show up though and believe me I was happy to see him. He had received my first message and had started out on Sunday morning only to arrive at the Santa Fe to find I wasn't there. He had a bum steer and with transportation as it was he spent the day without catching up with me and had to spend the night on another ship. The next morning he went to the Franklin where he met some of our men who told him where we were. And so it was that after a day and a half my beloved brother caught up with me. And then the hour that he had to stay passed only too quickly and he had to return to his ship.



Next was a day and a half journey to Guam, through rough seas, with some of the boys getting pretty sick. I was a bit upset myself and the show didn't set too well with me, but I made it without a serious mishap.

Then we sighted the green clad hills of Guam and about noon we dropped anchor in the harbor. We were beached on Guam for two days where we relaxed and took life easy. GUAM, that Island that the Americans fought so hard for. The Yanks and Japs really played havoc with the towns and villages of the Natives on the Island. We drove through a good deal of the Island and it was most interesting. As it now stands, it is covered with foliage, ruins, graveyards and American installations. As is usual it has a great many beaches; however, not all of them are safe and especially at night, since there are still a goodly number of Japs present who are just waiting for anyone to stray too far alone. In peace time I think Guam was a pretty place and when peace comes again it will be rebuilt. These tiny native huts remind one of a children's play house, hardly big enough to stand up in. For two days we sat around doing as we pleased or nothing if we wished. Some of us washed our clothes and that red dirt, blown by the wind into them, was hard to wash out.

March 31st -- "OK men, pack your gear, we're going to Pearl Harbor and maybe to the States." We all perked up because those are the words we'd been waiting to hear. About 0645 we loaded our gear in the trucks, climbed aboard, and were off. We drove along good roads through pretty but torn-up country. Ruins passed by our view, then graveyards -- fields of white stakes to show how many of our boys gave their lives for this Pacific outpost. Past beaches fenced off for military personnel, we reached the landing where we unloaded our gear and went aboard the U.S.S. Barnes, CVE 20.

April 1st - Easter Morning. I held a meeting aboard the ship and had a pretty fair turnout, but I wasn't prepared to give the lesson as well as I should have been. It has been a wonderful experience for me and I have learned to get up in front of people and to speak without quaking. There was a wonderful spirit there anyway and I felt well repaid for my efforts. We were under way to Pearl Harbor.

As soon as we were settled down aboard the Barnes and had put out from Guam for Pearl Harbor we all felt a little better, though most of us were still plenty jumpy as we soon found out. They put nearly all of the third class men on working details and it was my lot to help out in the vegetable locker preparing them for cooking. Tubs of potatoes were peeled each day but I didn't mind until they had to peel a lot of big onions at the same time. Here we four fellows sat around huge tubs of spuds working away with big tears running down our faces. It must have been quite a sight for we all had to laugh ourselves. On our off-hours we spent as much time in the sun as we could so we'd have a nice tan when we got home. We called our new job by the title of "Aviation Spud Peeler" as our main duty was to fly.