

days prior to the invasion date. During the seven-day period the Sangamon operated 50 miles south of Okinawa, providing support for activities close to the beach. On April 1--Love Day--she left Admiral Sprague's unit and joined the other carriers of her division to form Task Unit 52.1.3 under Rear Admiral William D. Sample.

From April 1 to April 8, she continued to fly off her routine patrols, launch support missions to aid the forces around the beach and maintain a night combat air patrol until 2115. On March 26, a Sangamon night fighter shot down a Val in a radar-controlled interception. This was the first time in Navy history a night fighter flown from an escort carrier successfully carried out a night interception. The Val was picked up shortly before dawn some 40 miles away. C.I.C. vectored out a night fighter to intercept. Shortly the night fighter sighted the enemy plane on his radar, closed in and shot it down in flames.

On April 2, two night crashes occurred. At 2100 a fighter attempting a landing broke through all barriers and crashed into the planes parked forward. At 2200 a second plane repeated the performance. The crashes damaged eight planes beyond repair and put the barriers out of commission until noon the next day. There was no fire and no injuries, however.

Meanwhile, the Japs were beginning to strike back in force at Okinawa. On April 6 Sangamon fighters on patrol over Kerama Retto entered the general melee of the day and shot down three Jap planes.

On April 8 the Sangamon and other ships of her unit moved to a new operation area 70 miles east of Sakishima Gunto. This group of islands included two--Ishigake and Miyako-- on which the enemy had airfields for launching attacks against shipping around Okinawa. It became the task of the Sangamon's unit to keep those fields inoperative.

The islands became what the air group called "our baby." Since other carriers of the division took over the routine patrols, every flight from the Sangamon to Sakishima was either a strike or a target combat air patrol. It constituted a rigorous job to keep the Japs grounded. The Sangamon planes had to keep hitting the target all day and most of the night. Yet the Japs doggedly stuck to repairing their battered fields and installations.

Several breaks occurred in the schedule. Weather closed in on the targets for several days. There was another day of refueling, two more days of support missions for Okinawa, another day of re-arming and re-provisioning at Kerama Retto and two more days of strikes and patrols during the occupation of Ie Shima.

During all this time, however, the closest approach the enemy made to the Sangamon's formation was during the mid-morning;

of the 12th. Two enemy planes, closing, appeared on the radar screen. They came in dropping "window" in the usual deceptive manner of Jap planes bent on attack. C.I.C. vectored out the combat air patrol and it shot down one Myrt within sight of the ship. The other plane fled. A parachute was seen to drop from the flaming Myrt but when a destroyer reached it no body was found. Another destroyer recovered the pilot's body from the plane's wreckage.

In about Mid-April, Admiral Sample transferred his flag from the Suwannee to the Sangamon. He introduced a new schedule for the ship at this time. The Sangamon became a night-operating carrier almost exclusively. Large dawn and dusk strikes were launched daily. Hockler missions were kept over Ishigaki and Miyako fields at night.

Our planes noted considerable activity around these fields despite the continual bombings and strafings. On the 18th and on the 21st Jap planes were sighted either in the air or on the ground. The Japs were not "writing off" these fields as useless. Apparently they had underground hangars or well-camouflaged revetments and brought their planes out only for dusk and dawn flights.

The Sangamon reached its high point of effectiveness during the Okinawa campaign on April 22. A dusk strike of eight fighters and four torpedo planes was launched against the Sakishima group. They later were joined over the target by four night fighters.

As the strike approached Miyako, it spotted a large group of enemy planes--possibly 25 or 30--warming up on Nobara Field. Most of them seemed to be twin-engined jobs. As the Sangamon planes began their attack, seven Oscars appeared overhead at about 14,000 feet.

Our planes pressed home their attack on the grounded aircraft first. Down they plunged. Bombs, rockets and 50-caliber machine gun fire tore into the enemy planes. Explosions and flames spread destruction among the aircraft and Jap personnel. Then the fighter planes turned towards the seven Oscars overhead. In the ensuing fight five Oscars were shot down. Later four more Oscars were sighted and shot down with the aid of the newly arrived division of night fighters. Thus by destroying what must have been a major portion of the enemy's Sakishima air force, Sangamon planes accomplished in a single stroke the purpose for which the task force had been sent there.

After this master stroke, operations settled into a round of neutralizing strikes against the fields until May 4--the day the Sangamon steamed into Kerama Retto to replenish supplies.

May 4 was the largest single day in the Sangamon's history.

Shortly before dawn she slipped into Kerama Retto in company with the destroyer Fullam and the destroyer escort Dennis. Many enemy aircraft in the area and over nearby Okinawa forced her to sound general quarters several times during the day. The sunnys

Fate dealt the carrier a body blow late in the day. Her departure was delayed by the late arrival of some aviation lubricating oil. Had she begun her return trip on time, May 4 probably would have been just another routine day.

At 1830 she finally got underway. Low cumulus clouds and fine light effects provided an ideal setting for an enemy attack.

Hardly had the ship secured her special sea detail when C.I.C. picked up a large group of enemy planes on one of the radars some 60 miles to the southwest. At about 40 miles the other air-search radar set confirmed that there were six to twelve planes. Shortly thereafter the Sangamon and her two escorts went to general quarters and swung into an anti-aircraft disposition.

Land-based fighters over Kerama Retto were vectored out to intercept and they tally-ho'd the enemy some 20 miles away from the ships. According to subsequent reports they shot down nine Japs in the ensuing air battle. Some got away.

At 1902 a Tony was sighted visually three or four miles off the Sangamon's port bow, circling fast to the left.

The carrier swung into a hard left turn, both an avoiding maneuver and an attempt to get into the wind to launch her own planes. Then all three ships opened fire. The Spears, a patrol craft nearby, also turned its guns on the plane. The Jap zoomed in a wide arc astern of the carrier, then straightened out on a course paralleling the Sangamon's. His speed was terrific. Smoke began streaming from the Tony as flak began to rip through it. The Jap continued to head towards the carrier, his wings almost vortical. But either the pilot was hit or the plane's speed was so great he could not quite nose into the ship. He crashed into the water about 25 feet off the starboard beam. So close did he come that the ship's transmitting antennae was carried away.

Three men went over the side but were rescued later by another vessel. (The Spears picked them up).

As the sun set the Sangamon completed its turn into the wind and launched two night fighters. The fighters were vectored out immediately on an enemy contact picked up by C.I.C., 12 miles to the southwest. Nothing was sighted by the fighters and the contact disappeared on the radar screen at six miles. Gun crews and lookouts continued to scan the darkening sky anxiously. Below decks, ordnancemen rapidly completed stowing rockets, closed the bomb elevator hatch against the possibility of renewed attack and hurried to their battle stations. All other personnel cleared the hangar deck.

At 1925, twenty-two minutes after sunset, the Fullam reported an enemy radar contact bearing 264 degrees true, distance 12 miles. The Sangamon's radar picked it up almost

immediately and the two night fighters were sent out to intercept. As seen from the bridge the two fighters disappeared into a dark cloud in the west. At about the same time a twin engined Jap plane was sighted breaking out of the same cloud cover about three miles away. He circled fast towards the rear of the formation. All ships opened fire but the plane, a Nick, eluded the cone of flak and slipped into a dense black cloud about 3000 feet aft.

Guns were checked momentarily to reorient for the expected attack. Gunners peered anxiously into the darkened sky. Then the attack began. The Nick plunged out of the cloud. His speed increased as he flashed downward directly at the carrier. Flak from the Sangamon and the Fullam astern ripped into the Nick. He didn't waver. Leveling out momentarily at one point, he nosed over again into a more shallow suicidal dive. Flak continued to bite into the plane. It flamed. Then the Nick was over the ship. It dropped a bomb load and crashed through the center of the flight deck.

A tremendous explosion ensued. A huge flame burst skyward, seeming to cover the entire ship. The two 26-ton elevators were lifted into the air by the blast and settled awry in their former seats. The ship itself shuddered as though attempting to shake off a fatal blow. For a moment a silence seemed to settle over the Sangamon. Then there was chaos. Flames began leaping from the ship. Fire broke out among planes on the flight and hangar decks. Ruptured steam and water lines hissed and gushed. The roar and crackle of exploding ammunition added a terrific din to the fiery scene. The fire raged generally on the flight deck, on the hangar deck and on the fuel or main deck. A heavy black smoke billowed skyward.

The ship took its hit at 1922. Bridge communications remained intact for a few minutes, long enough to put the ship on a course out of the wind. Captain Malstrom ordered all hands off the bridge except the navigator, the helmsman and the captain's orderly. Captain Malstrom, too, remained on the bridge. As the fires grew electrical and telephone lines burned through, so that by 1955 all communications from the bridge were severed.

Finally the ship started a slow blind turn. It was apparent then that control between the engine room and the bridge had been cut. Shortly thereafter, however, the Sangamon steadied on a safe course to the south at slow speed as steering control was assumed at the emergency steering unit--Batt II--back aft. At 2025 the bridge was abandoned entirely and a command post established by the Captain on the forward end of the flight deck.

Fire burned generally now on the flight deck between the two elevators, throughout the entire hangar deck where quantities of .50 caliber, 20 millimeter and 40 millimeter ammunition continued to explode, in the catwalks, on the gun sponsons and on parts of the main deck.



The Sangamon literally was divided into two separate units by the flames. The thick wall of fire through the middle of the carrier prevented those on the forward part from knowing just what was happening in the after part, and vice versa.

As in any catastrophe involving hundreds of men, there were countless incidents that night that never will be recorded. There were heroic deeds, some known, some unsung. There was death and terrible pain. There was quick thinking and inertia. There even was some humor.

With the ship divided by flames and communications severed centralized control was impossible. Ramification from the suicide hit and fire were many. All sorts of problems developed in all sections of the ship and men in each section used the means best at hand to solve them.

Fire fighting groups often were driven back by scalding water, exploding ammunition, fire and dense smoke. But they hung on. Many things went on simultaneously. Doctors and pharmacists mates treated the wounded and burned. Breaks in fire mains were isolated. Steam was secured on ruptured auxiliary lines. A three and one-half degree list was corrected. Submersible pumps and handy billies were rigged. Broken risers were located and secured.

Back aft on the flight deck men pushed unburned and partly burned planes over the side before they became enveloped in flames.

Several ships came alongside at great risk to aid in fighting the fire. LCI 61 fought the hangar deck fire from the port side. LCI 31, attempting the same, suffered extensive damage to her superstructure when she collided with the Sangamon. The destroyer Hudson, attempting to get close to the starboard side, also suffered damage. In addition, a burning plane tumbled from the Sangamon's flight deck onto the Hudson's depth charges. The plane was jettisoned without the depth charges exploding.

By 2200 all major fires were under control. An hour or so later scattered fires in such places as the photo laboratory, the C.I.C. transmitter room and the battery locker practically were out. At 2320 the carrier, with the Dennis and Fullam in screening stations, got underway at 12 knots. The Sangamon still was afloat and capable of making speed but fire and explosions had shattered her usefulness for months to come. She had only one plane left and that was badly damaged. Her flight deck was a charred mass of twisted wood and steel. The hangar deck was even worse. Her steel sides were riddled and torn. She was just a skeleton carrier.

Shortly after dawn the next morning she rejoined her task unit. There riding gracefully in formation she saw a new 105 class CVE, the Block Island, which had joined the unit the day

25

before. The Sangamon cruised with the disposition all day. At sunset she left on the first lap of a long journey that was to bring her to the Norfolk Navy Yard in Virginia on June 12.

As she headed out into the dusk of evening--a battered, blackened, plane-less carrier---there were many aboard who glanced back at the sleek 105 class CVE that had replaced her. The words went unspoken but these thoughts evolved:

The Sangamon was out of the wars forever. She had fought a good fight--a rugged fight--from Casablanca to Okinawa. Now she had been replaced by the Navy's newest most modern CVE. Her war career was ended. Her job was done.

The Queen of the CVEs, at long last, headed homeward towards peaceful waters and a peaceful world.....