

35TH FIGHTER SQUADRON
8TH FIGHTER GROUP
MINDORO ISLAND

“STORY OF LST 916, ON TRIP TO MINDORO”

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I was one of 22 men of the 35th Fighter squadron on LST 916, making the trip on convoy from Leyte to Mindoro in the Philippines. We were bringing up material to replace that lost in the sinking of LST 738 on D-Day.

Loading was completed at 0630 a.m., 26 December 1944 and the ship moved into the bay to await convoy formation. It was soon noticeable that this particular ride was not going to be even the least bit comfortable. The ship's Administrative Officers were apparently of the opinion that the army was not neat and orderly enough to be allowed use of the ship's conveniences and facilities. I might add here that such strict discipline was reflected even in the crew, and never on any ship have I seen such a lack of loyalty to ship and command. It would seem that recognizing the fact that we were to run the gauntlet thru the most dangerous waters in any area, some effort should have been made to lighten the weight on the soldier's minds.

The convoy pulled out at 0400 p.m. on the 26th. It was not until the morning of the 27th when six enemy suicide planes struck with staggering suddenness and in quick succession sank three ships that all aboard realized that we were “in for it” and everything was secondary to survival. Of the three ships, two were of the LST Type and enough arrears to our outside front position so that I can give no account of their sinking. The third was a Liberty Ship loaded with ammunition in our line and two ships behind. After the Jap plane dived there were a series of three explosions. The last, as I watched quivering under a gun position was tremendous! It felt almost as though the fantail was blowing off. The area immediately clouded with smoke and it was impossible to see if there were any survivors. However, all aboard held that none could survive such an explosion.

The attack continued and several Japanese dive bombers were shot down in flames before they could do any damage. During this time I lay under the 40 m.m. gun pit in the bow, in a state of excitement and fear. As I analyze the fear now, it must have come from the newness of seeing voluntary death on the part of the Japanese pilots and the realization that except for ack ack, it was impossible to cope with them. Throughout the trip the anti-aircraft was marvelous and the Navy gunners deserve the highest commendation. Also, our ship beside the regular guns had additional 50 calibers, which were set up by army ack ack troops making the trip. Thus we had a super abundance of firepower. Being Air Corp troops we were wondering during this period why our own planes were not overhead to protect us. Then they finally arrived, and it was announced, “Friendly planes are now in the area”. A big cheer went up from everyone and some of the pressure went off.

Despite the fact that we still had contact with enemy planes, our cover left us at 3:30 p.m. and from that time on until morning the attack continued. All through the day and night the

loudspeaker announced the positions and attack azimuth of enemy planes. As I remember it, the Jap plane did no damage this night and I managed some three hours of sleep. This may have come from our night fighters being reported in the area.

At daybreak the attack was renewed. More Jap planes were shot down without serious damage to the convoy. One, making a frontal attack managed to clip the fantail of an LST after being set aflame. Our cover arrived and consisted of 28 P-38's and 4 Navy Corsairs. Despite this cover, it was not until about 4:00 p.m. when the all clear was given. As the Army Personnel were eating and the Navy preparing to do so, a Jap plane appeared suddenly and it was obvious that he was going to crash dive us. Only one of our guns was able to open up. However, a destroyer saved us by shooting the Jap plane to pieces. It was by far the worst scare we had catching us totally unprepared. As I crawled from under the gunpit where I had jumped for cover I was amazed to see the planes entire tail section coming down like a bomb, entirely intact.

The Nips knowing we were on the last lap of our trip, threw the book at us. As darkness settled, the attack was stepped up. The loudspeaker announced ships coming in at every possible angle in groups of six, eight, singularly, and even as indefinite as "many". A "Betty" bomber was destroyed by radar operated ack ack from a destroyer and exploded wonderfully. So much happened, it is difficult to recall. A message from the Captain warned us that torpedo wakes were sighted and in the event that we were hit, we were not to jump overboard. It was noticed that some of the planes were not attacking the convoy directly. When our ship gave a lurch, the riddle was solved - the Japs were laying mines in our path! Another message from the Captain: "Army personnel, if you expect to get to Mindoro alive, lay forward to the bow and watch for mines. Three ships have already hit them." The Nips were trying everything bombs were dropped from high level and low-level. We were being taught just how desperate is Japan.

That night was one of real terror. I never knew from one minute to the next if I'd be alive. From the bow I scanned the water with field glasses looking for mines. I was tired and terribly anxious to see the trip end. In the distance we could see the searchlights on Mindoro, which was evidently under attack also by Jap planes.

As all things must pass, so did night into day. We were approaching our destination. Suddenly the damn Jap showed up again. A single dive bomber broke through our cover and when the guns opened up on him, never was a plane more riddled! Bullets seemed to keep him stationary in the air. When everyone pulling her mentally forward, LST 916 beached. We unloaded and got off.

Whew! It was some trip! Estimates run very high as to the number of enemy planes shot down. A conservative number is 21. We lost three ships sunk, three hit by mines and many injured and killed from the explosions of the ammunition carrier. Only a few of our boys gave way under the strain which was great. One thing in particular noticed, the American soldier will leave his place of comparative safety to see a Nip "Bit the Dust."

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