

Scramble One

Wings of Gold, Summer 1999 by Robert W. Porter

It was November 9, 1944 and I was in VC-87, flying Wildcats aboard USS *Salamaua* (CVE-96). We were anchored with the fleet in the Ulithi lagoon preparing for major operations ahead. One of our F4Fs was on alert, hooked up to the catapult, the only one so rigged. I was reading on my bunk in our junior officers' stateroom. Seaman First Class Benny Moreno, one of our plane captains, was tending the plane. He took pride in his work and had the F4F polished and ready to go.

High above the lagoon a Japanese reconnaissance aircraft was spotted heading our way. The alert was sounded. I hustled to the ready room before anyone else and heard the loudspeaker blasting, "Flight quarters! Scramble one fighter!"

I grabbed my gear hurried to the F4F where Benny was waiting. He helped me with my equipment and both of us climbed onto the wing. I manned the cockpit and Benny leaned in to help me connect my seat belt before I started the engine. The damp salt air made the seat belts sticky and hard to cinch tight, so all four of our hands were on the belt.

Suddenly, the catapult fired! Benny was tossed up into the air as the Wildcat leapt forward. The vertical stabilizer caught Moreno across his back, the aircraft carried him along until it heaved him onto the forward part of the flight deck. He died instantly. Benny was one of our oldest sailors, a 30-year-old Filipino with a wife and three children.

As the Wildcat jolted forward, my head snapped back. I was startled and confused and thought, "So this is it—this is the way I'm going to get it." But adrenaline flowed through me and positive thoughts took form. I was able to lift my head off the head pad in time to see the flight deck disappear beneath me. I had instinctively grabbed the control stick. I gently eased the nose down to retain some flying speed. The F4F responded, for the moment anyway. I prepared for a tail-first water landing. I was traveling at 60 mph when I hit the water. The plane skipped momentarily then slammed into the sea. It was like hitting a brick wall.

Not being strapped in, my face smashed into the gun sight. I lost consciousness. The canopy slid forward, ran off its track and jammed shut. The aircraft was already sinking. In less than a minute the plane's tail slipped below the surface.

Carrier personnel hurried to help. Two sailors manned a whale boat and started toward me. The cockpit was filling with water as I struggled to regain consciousness. I felt as if I was waking from a dream. In a few seconds I knew where I was.

I tried to open the canopy but it wouldn't budge. I must have gained strength because with a second desperate effort I was able to move it back far enough to work my way out, even with my gear still attached. As soon as I was clear, I popped my Mae West and slipped out of the parachute harness.

The water was dark but I saw light above and I started kicking and pulling with all my might. It was later determined I was 70 feet down. Fortunately, I had been a California beach boy—a surfer and skin diver—and I kept on swimming though I believed I was too far down to make it. Near the surface I lost my breath, gulped sea water then broke the surface, gasping for air, vomiting and bleeding. The buoyancy of my Mae West probably saved my life.

My vision was fuzzy but I saw the whale boat speeding toward me. The sailors skillfully drew alongside, hauled me in and headed back to the carrier. Once there, thinking I would miss out on our first engagement with the enemy, I sought an airplane to join the fray. But CPO Spaven wisely cornered me and insisted I go to sick bay to get my face sewed up. I was flying again a few days later. Tragically, Benny Moreno was no longer with us.

There may have been others, but I believe I could be the only pilot to launch from a carrier before the engine was started.

Mr. Porter was nicknamed "Mouse" due to his quickness and size. He was 5 feet 6 inches tall and weighed 120 pounds, which may have been a factor in his egress from the sinking Wildcat. He led his squadron in combat missions flown.

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