

KAMIKAZE ATTACK

by *CAPT John D. Cornwell, USNR-Retired*

January 13th, 1945, off Lingayen Gulf on the west side of Luzon Island of the Philippine Islands. What a day! Our VC (composite) squadron was based aboard the USS *Salamaua*, CVE-96, one of many small escort carriers assigned as part of the support group for the major invasion forces landing on the beaches of Lingayen Gulf. We had aboard our carrier a complement of 24 FM-2 *Wildcat* fighters (upped by four units for this action) and 12 TBM-3 *Avenger* torpedo bombers which filled to capacity our limited hangar and flight deck area. Our flight deck was 485 feet long and 84 feet wide. An *Avenger's* wing span was 54 feet, so little room for error existed on carrier landings—especially at night! We were fortunate to have the latest models of our particular aircraft. The FM-2 was equal in capabilities to the Japanese “Zero” up to 12,000 feet of altitude—a great morale booster for our fighter pilots. The “extra” horsepower in the new Avengers was a great comfort to me and other pilots when being launched with a full load of bombs, rockets and ammunition.



CVE-96 USS SALAMAUA

CLASS: CASABLANCA –
Entering port, possibly postwar
Displacement 7,800 Tons,
Dimensions, 512' 3" (oa) x 65'
2" x 22' 4" (Max) / Speed, 19
Knots, Crew 860.

Armament 1 x 5"/38AA 8 x
40mm, 12 x 20mm, 27 Aircraft.
/ Machinery, 9,000 IHP; 2
Skinner, Uniflow engines, 2
screws

As the invasion group had sailed up through the Philippines, we were under constant attack from land-based Japanese aircraft. As we neared Luzon Island, these attacks intensified. They were a very serious threat to the success of our forces' landing on Luzon, having already inflicted heavy losses upon us. Their effectiveness was quite graphically pointed out when our Air Intelligence officer told us one evening that he had just seen a communiqué from our Task Force commander to headquarters indicating the invasion would have to be aborted immediately if our losses were to continue at the current rate.

Ship after ship had been damaged or sunk by Japanese pilots diving their planes into our surface units. They were extremely persistent in their efforts, successfully breaking through our fighter cover and heavy anti-aircraft fire from surface units. In order to reduce the number of “friendlies” flying around the invasion group, on this particular morning our usual early anti-submarine patrols around the force had been cancelled. Our four-plane CAP (combat air patrol) was launched as usual.

Since our early morning flight had been cancelled, pilots and crewmen were secured from operations and went back to bed for some much relished “sack time.” The seas off Luzon Island are certainly not the calmest, and the small “jeep” carriers as well as the other smaller craft got bounced around quite a bit. The magnitude of the swells were graphically demonstrated when a destroyer escort, cruising alongside our ship, would occasionally disappear completely from sight! I point this fact out because, as one lay in his bunk

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trying to get to sleep, the motion of the ship rising, falling and plunging into the large swells caused one to semi-consciously, constantly brace oneself for the next shudder. One's body is in midair one moment and at the bottom of the bunk the next as the ship forges ahead. One gets used to this motion but sleep was only a semi-conscious state.

However, around 0900 on this morning, a rather heavy shudder ran through the ship, and immediately GQ (general quarters) were sounded. At the GQ call, all hands were to report on the double to their designated "battle stations."

My bunking quarters were situated far forward, immediately under the flight deck. Having no need to dress, as I had gone back to bed fully clothed, I hurried out of our cabin toward my battle station. In the companionway I encountered a member of the ship's crew and asked him, "What the devil is going on?" His reply: "We have been torpedoed!"

I hurried on down the companionway, across the hangar deck, up a port-side ladder to the port catwalk and flight deck. As I gained the catwalk and looked across the flight deck, I could not believe what I was seeing. Directly behind our ship's superstructure was a second one! Our escorting ship had pulled in right under our starboard catwalk and at that very moment, "May we be of any help?" was heard over its bull horn! I have often wondered: if the DE's captain had known our torpedoes were stored on the bulkheads on the hangar deck, not far from where he had positioned his ship, would he still have put his ship in such a position?! In dire situations such as this, it is interesting what bits of humor may be injected. Over the ship-to-ship radio from another nearby carrier came this message: "*Salamaua*, I see you took an unfriendly aboard!" Our ship's reply: "Yes, he caught the number four wire!"

Further examination of our flight deck revealed damage to parked aircraft and smoke rising from a large hole in our flight deck. This hole was shaped like silhouette of an airplane. We had not been torpedoed; we had been hit by a "Kamikaze!" A Japanese pilot had crashed his plane into our ship.

On to my battle station. At GQ, squadron personnel filled in to augment the ships' crew-members in their assignments. My assignment was as "third loader" on the starboard rear twin 40mm antiaircraft battery. After some time, we were secured from GQ onto standby conditions. At this point no one knew for sure just how much damage we had sustained. All fires had been extinguished, the wounded were being cared for and general order existed, to a degree. From all indications, it looked like our flight deck was so damaged that we could no longer operate aircraft from it.

While I and a fellow pilot were forward, near the port catapult, a flight of four fighters neared our ship. As the planes came nearer, the ship's gunnery officer standing near us ordered the gun crews to open fire on the planes. My friend and I grabbed and shook him, yelling, "Those are our own planes, so cease firing." His reaction: "Keep firing." Luckily for our pilots, no one was hit! The four planes were our early morning CAP (combat air patrol). The flight leader had flown over the ship to see what was going on, and if they might be brought aboard. I guess he had forgotten that old saw, "Curiosity killed the cat." This flight was later landed aboard another carrier. Since our carrier had suffered extensive damage, any of our planes that were undamaged were sent to other carriers as replacements.

The Japanese pilot's plane had hit our ship in an almost perfect vertical dive. As the plane penetrated deck after deck, leaving damage and plane parts along the way, one bomb exploded in the "small stores" area, doing very little damage; another exited through the starboard side hull without exploding. Evidently the bombs were semi-armor piercing and the thin steel plate used in our ship's construction did not trigger the fuse. Lucky for us! The plane's propeller hub, minus its four blades, was later found on the box structure between the ship's propeller shafts. Two more layers of steel and it would have gone completely through our hull! The plane's prop was a takeoff on our Curtis Electric propellers; the machine guns were "copies" of our Brownings. The plane that hit us was a late model fighter type. A metal plate found in the plane's debris had N1K1 on it, indicating an early model "Shiden."

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One plane, one pilot. This simple combination put one aircraft carrier out of action with the loss of many lives and infliction of many injuries. It was interesting, as we cleaned up the debris from this attack, to find evidence that the pilot was a colonel in the Japanese air force, wore a silk parachute and was wearing a pair of leather boots manufactured in California. Had the Japanese expended this resource on our supply ships, rather than warships, who knows where things might have gone. Supplies were critical. We could expend most of our airborne munitions in four days of close air support of ground troops. For example, I personally dropped depth charges (with little effect) in lieu of bombs when our carrier's supply was exhausted.

By afternoon our stern was low in the water from taking on water from an unknown source. "Bucket brigades" were tried to reduce the amount of water, but to no avail. While all of the described and many other activities were taking place, we had maintained a northerly heading off the coast of Luzon. Our captain's biggest worry was the danger of capsizing while turning the ship around to a southerly heading to depart the combat area. In preparation for any eventuality, all hands were provided flotation devices so that, just in case we did capsize during the darkness, they would have a good chance of survival. However, thankfully, the turn south was made without incident.

As we headed south, a seagoing tug was assigned to assist us and act as our escort. They provided us with a large pump which enabled us to pump the water from the ship and regain proper trim in the water. It was finally found that the major source of our water was a broken 12-inch water line. When this was shut off, our major source of flooding was stopped.

As mentioned before, we had received severe damage to the ship and aircraft aboard. The crew suffered greatly—several were killed instantly and others were injured and badly burned. The dead were buried at sea with proper military honors. Due to the large number of casualties, the chief petty officers' quarters were turned into a hospital area for those in need of care. Being unable to conduct flight operations, the pilots filled in, acting as "corpsmen" to supplement the ship's limited medical staff. Medical supplies were in extremely short supply—especially petroleum jelly and other needed medications for burn victims. We worked four hour shifts and I do not think any of us came away from that experience without being emotionally changed in many ways. Our group had experienced other fatalities during training and operations and I guess we just accepted this as part of life. However, being intimately associated with the injured and dying brought us more closely together. It seems at this point we became "seasoned veterans."

Lack of food was another problem facing the ship. Because of the extensive flooding below decks, the food in the refrigerators had spoiled, as had any other edibles that were not canned. I remember one evening our meal consisted of a small can of Vienna sausages and a few saltine crackers. Fortunately we did have fresh water.

We continued our trek back down through the many islands of the Philippines in the lone company of our sea-going tug. Our mechanics scavenged parts from damaged fighters and got at least one back into flyable condition. This plane was positioned on the port catapult ready for launching in case we came under attack. Fortunately we were not bothered by Japanese aircraft as we continued on our way.

Our final destination was a dry dock in the Admiralty Islands. Upon having been secured in the dry dock facility, enough repairs would be made to the *Salamaua* to enable her to get back to the States for major repairs. Our squadron was reassigned for duty aboard the USS [*Marcus Island*](#) prior to the Okinawa invasion.

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