

"A Day of Loss" by Bob Bleicher, as told to Skip Thrune, 820th Sqdn.

29 July 1945, we left Okinawa, target Myazaki, on Kyushu. We were a mixed Crew, in B-25J 327879, in the number 3 position on Dan Hill's wing. Pilot was Nate Mangeno, Nav Jim Van Epps, E/G Joe Kinkley, R/G Fred Forge Jr., A/G Tom Billings, with me as Copilot. During our low level attack on a rail bridge, one of our 8 nose guns kept firing. This affected our rejoining formation, until it stopped. We were hit and the tail gunner was wounded. The left gear dropped down, as we tried to climb.

Fire was burning in the left wing. Ditching was the only option, because of the wounded tail gunner. We prepared to ditch and as we neared the water, the waves looked like mountains. The initial touch was smooth, then a severe bump and the right prop flew off. The controls were not functioning and the cockpit hit nose down. From viewing the photos later, I saw there was an explosion, separating the rear fuselage from the wing assembly.

I remember going through the windshield, passing through pieces of plexiglass, then darkness. Then, I became aware of deep blue water, and total disorientation. Finally, I saw a lighter blue, and swam to the surface. All that floated was the wing section, heavily engulfed in fire and dense smoke. The only sound was the crackling of the flames. Believing I was all alone, I felt a mild panic.

Then I heard voices. I saw two people about a hundred feet away, yelling for me to get away from the aircraft. After swallowing salt water and swimming away, I activated my Mae West. Nate Mangeno and Jim Van Epps were struggling to inflate two one-man rafts. We got Mangeno into one, and Van Epps, who was the more injured, into the other. The large raft from the fuselage had blown clear, but was not inflatable due to a damaged pump.

We called and searched for others, but got no response or visuals. We unloaded what supplies were of use from the large raft to the small ones. Dan Hill had been circling us, after his photographer had recorded the ditching, and had been radioing for "Dumbo." A Navy PBM seaplane responded and Dan departed for Okinawa.

The PBM made three landing attempts, aborting each due to the very high seas. Much later, a B-17 appeared, and dropped a boat by parachute. It landed out of our sight, and beyond our ability to paddle toward it. A second B-17 made a better drop and we were able to reach it. But there was much strain in our efforts to finally disconnect the three chutes, which were dragging the boat underwater.

The Flying Dutchman was well equipped for survival. We were able to exchange our torn and oil-soaked gear for dry clothes. All this was done by 1700 hrs. With the med kit, we tried to care for Mangeno's broken leg and hands. He was ejected still in his seat, and had difficulty detaching it under water. I had a wide bruise where my seat belt broke on impact.

Van Epps was crouched behind Mangeno, and was ejected with the pilot's seat. His leg was torn open severely, on both sides, almost to a point of amputation. We did our best to hold it together.

The PBM stayed with us until dark. We dared not use a light, or start an engine, which might help the enemy locate our position. We noticed a flare around midnight, but no sounds. At dawn, after much effort, I got one engine started, giving us enough power to keep from drifting toward a hostile shore.

At about 1000 hours, a PBM flew over and signaled "S-T-O-P" with a sight gun. We shut off the engine, but the plane didn't land. After some time and concern, we were startled by the conning tower of a submarine surfacing behind us. When we spied the uniforms emerging from the hatch, we knew (or thought) we were safe. Little did we know what was to come.

The sub crew got us aboard in spite of the high seas, and destroyed our boat with gun fire. The 16mm film they took has been incorporated into our Group History VHS tape. The USS Batfish then returned to its assigned location for continued "Life Guard duty" until relieved. We were treated by their corpsman for our wounds, in very confined space, but well enough to stabilize Van Epps' leg.

The third day, while reclining in a bunk, I was jolted, my injured back vertically striking the wall, amid noises; a loud horn and a repeated "DIVE, DIVE!" We were under attack, and I heard the bomb sounds as we submerged. I remembered seeing this in movies, but this was real!

When all clear, the Captain asked me about our Planes. He described the one that attacked us perfectly. It was one of our 820th B-25s. We had assumed, too early, that we were safe, after our rescue.

After this event, our sub got permission to depart its post and head to Iwo Jima. There, we were put onto amphibious "Ducks" (while being filmed again), and taken to the hospital. It was here, from Skip Thrune, Bill Norling and Art Love, flying to Iwo to check on us, that we learned who bombed our sub.

Mangeno and Van Epps, because of their greater injuries, were flown to hospitals for full recovery. I was returned by C46 to Okinawa. Even that flight was aborted due to engine problems, before I made it back. We three, along with Skip, finally got together in 1990 for a reunion in Phoenix.



Jim Van Epps, Nate Mangeno, Skip Thrune and Bob Bleicher, together for the first time, since Iwo Jima, in 1945. February 21, 1990

We reflected on our experiences, but mostly on the heart-break of not finding and being able to have our three crewmen rescued with us. The PBM, circling for hours, was unable to sight anyone else. My wife, Marjorie, made it her mission to visit their families and share their grief.

As we were driving through Muskogee, OK one day, Marjorie saw a sign, "War Memorial Park." We drove in and found the USS Batfish on display, complete with a Docent and original Log Book. Imagine the surprise of the docent when he related the rescue incident, and we supplied the names

Postscript by Skip Thrune: Because our 41st Gp. Mission from Okinawa was first, breaking

the Japanese infrastructure, and then supporting the beach landings on Kyushu, we had a minimum of two crews per plane. This would entail two-a-day strikes, which we actually tested. Not extreme for the air crews, flying only one, but rough on the planes and hard working ground crews, doing double duty.

After the crash, we needed to know who survived. I boarded the Communications Ship in Buckner Bay and from the radio logs, badly garbled, I got names, rescuing vessel and destination. Permission to fly to Iwo was given by the Sqdn. CO. Due to the numbers of new men, I didn't meet Bob or Jim until that day on Iwo. Mangeno and I were Cadets and friends, even before he was copilot on my second crew. I'm happy we had many reunions before Bob and Nate left us. Bob and Marjorie hosted one 820th reunion in Dayton.

When Bob, Nate and Jim finished telling their stories, they suddenly, as one, asked, "Who, in the 820th bombed us?" I told them he was flying number 2, on my right wing, when he broke radio silence and then broke formation. He met us in our revetment, proudly announcing he had "sunk a Jap Sub"!

Before I could say his name, they had guessed correctly.

Bob had written a more complete account of his "Day of Loss" as a chapter in a book Marjorie just finished writing for their family. She gave me a copy, and permission to use material in The Crow Flight and in Rolf's 41st Group Web Site. I feel honored to have been a small part of their lives.



Sequence of Ditching Photos Taken from Pilot Dan Hill's Plane