

Chapter 3

THE HEAVY, THUNDEROUS BLAST ROCKED OUR BARRACKS, JOLTING ME OUT OF A DEEP sleep. Frantic voices were yelling:

"Cheeerist! Some stupid airedale just did it!"

"Look at that ball of fire!"

"It's Vee Pee Twenty-two's hangar!"

"Some stupid fly-boy ... a live load. Man, will they hang his--"

"MEAT BALLS! JAPS!"

That last screamed yell bolted me from my top bunk to the deck as if I had been jabbed with a red hot poker. Where for the next few seconds I floundered in a sea of cursing, skivvies-clad, panicky sailors. We hot-footed it through the dorm and funneled down the narrow ladder to the ground floor of our barracks. All the while the large, cement, two-storied barracks building was being rocked like a ship at sea from a vastly increasing number of nearby bomb explosions.

My General Quarters (GQ) duty station was the ComPatWingII Flag communications office in the Ad Building directly across the street. The instant we reached the bottom of the ladder we were accosted by the Sheriff, as the Chief Master-at-Arms had come to be known. While waving a forty five over his head to enforce his commands, he ordered everybody to take cover under the tables in the mess hall to our left. The tables could afford us protection from falling debris and flying glass.

While agonizing over the fact that my GQ station was so close by, and believing that I had to be on station immediately -- as had been so deeply bored into me by the many emergency drills, my dimmed mind, numbed from shock, desperately groped for some means of getting there.

Just as I was about to obey the sheriff's order to head for a table, another voice bellowed: "Break out all of the window glass." That gave me an out. For as soon as the first window was clear of glass I jumped out through it, landing on all four on the ground about three feet below.

As I started to scramble to my feet from the ground, I found I had jumped into the damndest situation imaginable. A shipboard band was playing the Star Spangled Banner, which meant the flag was being raised. Now, being in just my skivvie shorts and shoes -- I'd practically jumped into my shoes when I hit the deck from my bunk -- do I stay put and stand at attention? Or lam out of there for my duty station.

About to stand up at attention and turn toward the music, I raised up amidst a hail of machine gun bullets from a strafing plane. Again, do I remain at attention? Or, do I forget the edict, "No matter what you're doing at that instant, the minute you hear the music and see the Colors, you stop everything, come to attention, and salute!" which had been so thoroughly drilled into me since the first day in boot camp, and get the hell out of there?

Finally, a bit of common sense surged to the fore: Take cover, idiot.

I dashed and dodged through the ricocheting bullets to cover in the Ad Building. Talk about scared, I was that. Upon making it to safety through the door of the Ad Building, a dozen washers could have been sliced from my bunghole.

After a deep breath of relief, I ran into the room filled with radio operators. Some hunched over their radio sets, copying or sending code; others worked over chattering teletypewriters (teletypes). Somehow, at the sound of smashing glass, I managed to stop in my tracks just short of the path of a chunk of flying shrapnel. It came crashing through the large window pane that faced the oil-fired, flaming harbor and slammed against the leg of an operator's desk. The desk leg broke, causing the desk to start to topple forward. But the quick-thinking, adjacent operator grabbed the desk and held it upright while the radioman at the desk finished copying the message in progress.

When my leading chief, Chief Glemont, spotted me, he yelled above the internal noises and the heavy booms of the big guns and exploding bombs from without: "Take it rolling, Buck. You're needed down at the squadron."

I turned heel and headed for the outside entrance that I had just entered through. Observing no more strafing planes overhead, I headed out of the building and legged it to the seaplane hangar area, where my assigned squadron, PBY Patrol Squadron, VP-23, was located. Its hangar, located about fifty yards from the furiously burning hangar no. 6 (hit by one of the first enemy bombs), was still intact but badly bullet-riddled from heavy strafing.

Just as I was about to duck into an entrance door to the hangar, a gruff voice yelled, "Hey, Mac. Gimme a hand. Help me down with this damned gun."

I stopped and looked back across the ramp area through the smoke for the speaker. There, standing in the waisthatch of a heavily damaged PBY, I saw a grizzled old salt. The crow (rating badge) on the sleeve of his uniform was that of an Ordinanceman First Class. He held a machine gun, which he apparently had just salvaged from its mounting in the waisthatch of the plane.

He lowered the machine gun down to me, then, getting the attention of other sailors passing by, he commanded them to help him get the containers of .50 calibre ammunition down out of the plane.

We soon got organized. I was to hold the gun by its barrel (which we wrapped with rags from the plane to protect my hands from the heat of the barrel) over my shoulder, acting as an adjustable bipod to support and steady and point it while the Old Salt did the aiming and firing from behind me.

Of the accumulated crew some rummaged through the damaged planes for additional ammo, while others connected the short pieces of belted ammo into much longer belts for feeding into the machine gun; and, of course, most attempted to serve as expert advisors, much to the Old Salt's consternation.

The setup provided the mobility we needed to find openings in the heavy smoke from the burning hangar and the oil fires of the harbor so we could see to shoot at the attacking planes; which we could hear roaring above and through the smoke as they made their strafing and bombing runs.

We took off toward the northern part of Luke Field's runway (part of NAS Ford Island), where we hoped to find little or no smoke. Our direction proved right, we broke into the clear near the far end of the landing strip. There, a short distance away, less than half a city block, clear of smoke except from its own guns, appeared the battleship Arizona, firing away at attacking planes. Farther out into the harbor, astern the Arizona, the Nevada blazed away at similar targets.

"There's one," one of our crew yelled, pointing nearly straight up.

"Gotta get that one. He's after the battleships. Looks like it's the Arizona," boomed the voice of another.

I followed the pointing arm to the plane, which was getting bigger fast. I pointed the barrel to what I took to be a good lead point. I tracked slightly downward, holding the lead as best I could on shaking legs.

"Good point, Mac," the Old Salt growled. "Hold what you got."

He started firing. The barrel jolted as if I held a jackhammer. Our tracers started to look good in spite of the bouncing barrel. I managed to squat and keep the lead while the Old Salt fired. The tracers looked like they were going right through the diving plane. Should be direct hits, I agonized.

A voice yelled, "Why don't he blow up?"

The rags were getting hot to my touch.

I yelled to myself. We've got to get the devil. Now! Before it unloads it's bomb. The Band! Migod, can't let it hit the Arizona!

The Old Salt kept the bullets spewing.

The rags started to unravel, the heat of the barrel got worse.

I kept bouncing and squatting, trying to hold the lead.

Gun smoke and rag smoke smarted my nostrils.

My hands hurt, almost unbearably.

I gritted my teeth ... hung on ... bullets spewed ... tracers good.

"We've got to be slamming in hits," I moaned to no one.

Visions of the times I had fired at towed targets from a PBV during air-to-air gunnery flashed to mind: the sight of the tracers going through the towed target then, as the tracers appeared now to be going through the plane, would usually result, when later we inspected the target on the ground, in a count of a dozen or more hits on the towed target; enough to bring down a plane.

But the Jap kept coming. On target.

My frustrated panic demanded: GET THE BASTARD. WE'VE GOT TO!

Then I saw it. The BOMB! ... tumbling ... righting ... steadying ... straightening

"We failed! Failed! Failed! ... should've got the devil!" I yelled at the plane as I tried to hold the aim as it pulled up out of it's dive.

Overhead at that instant sounded the deadly machine gun bursts from a strafing plane.

An instant later, the full weight of the machine gun pulled my hurting hands back down over my shoulder. Unable to hang onto the hot barrel tight enough to prevent it from slipping through the smoking rags, I arched backwards as far as I could and let the gun crash to the ground at my heels.

Someone yelled, "Guns' (the Old Salt) been hit! Get a stretcher, a Corpsman ... belay that. He's dead. Check the others ..."

Although I heard it, I didn't see the strafing plane that got the Old Salt and the others (I learned later that two besides the Old Salt had been hit).

I started the thought, How come I didn't get-- Only to have it snuffed out by the sound and sight of what had to be the whole world exploding. For there before my terrified eyes forty thousand tons of battleship, the USS Arizona, blew up, surging upward, belching smoke and fire from its guts.

As the hulk rose, parts of its superstructure buckled and twisted; parts of its gun turrets and slabs of its steel deck hurtled skyward through fireballs; white-uniformed bodies, some with arms and legs flailing, some limp, flew -- as if flung from a trampoline -- from rupturing decks through black, billowing smoke into flaming waters.

Then, becoming engulfed by a large, oil-fired wave, the twisted, jagged mass of steel shuttered from internal explosions, tilted, and slowly settled, boiling the water as it went to the bottom.

The superstructure remained twisted and tilted above water, only to be lashed at and further damaged by the huge, furious tongues of flames from the surrounding, on-the-water, oil fires. There the structure would remain, a grave marker for over 1100 entombed crew members, the entire band included.

The myth, "... bombs can never sink a battlewagon." so often spoken by the so-called-experts, was blown away during those tragic moments.

Those horrifying sounds, smells and images, ... diving plane, ... tumbling bomb, ... hellish explosions, ... flying, flailing bodies ... flaming waters ... screamed curses, burnt flesh, fresh blood -- hereafter referred to as *The Searing* -- scarred my mind and emotions so severely that they have nightmarishly haunted me ever since.

I hadn't moved. I just stood mesmerized as I stared at the pieces of superstructure. That, in spite of the flurried activity all around me. They were dragging the Old Salt's body and the others to a designated area. Where they'd be identified and become faceless numbers in newspaper headlines around the world: 2311 KILLED DURING PEARL HARBOR ATTACK.

After staring at the superstructure for some time, the hauntingly beautiful strains of the trumpeter playing Sleepy Lagoon sounded in my mind's ear, overriding the sounds of the massive bombing and heavy gun-firing nearby.

How long I remained in that trance, I don't know.

No matter, for I found myself being physically shaken by a seaman as he tried to get me to understand what he was saying. "Buck, you okay? C'mon--"

The rest of his words were drowned out by the heavy, laboring engine roar, being punctuated by deadly bursts of machine gun fire from another strafing plane as it flashed by overhead from out of the pall of smoke from the burning Arizona.

Now, out of my trance and realizing what was happening, I followed the seaman's (who I knew only as "Red," a messenger in the Communications Office) move to hunker down and cover his head with his hands. Not that that would do any good as protection against the strafers' bullets. But under the circumstances we reacted instinctively; instincts dictated by stark fear.

The disappearance of the plane into more smoke meant that we were temporarily out of danger from the strafers' bullets. So we got back to our feet and ran towards a building nearby for cover. While we ran I could again feel the hurt -- which seemed to have disappeared during the trance -- returning to my hands. When we reached the building, we took cover under its roof's overhang while we caught our breath.

As I gritted my teeth and looked at my burn-reddened, crusted palms and curled fingers, I heard Red say, "Dang it, Buck, I thought I'd never find you. I've been dodging bullets all over the island. Then, when I do find you, you're acting like a zombie. Anyway, Glemont wants you back at the comm shack. Pronto. You're to man a special circuit."

He went on to tell me that Chief Radioman Glemont wanted me to operate a "flash" radio circuit. (The transmission of "flash" messages would take priority over "urgent" messages, the highest priority message previously in use.) The circuit was part of a radio network being set up for joint operation by the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps commands.

Apparently, after only a few minutes into the enemy air attack, dispatches reporting unauthenticated "sightings" of enemy troop landings, and "sightings" of troops already landed and making their way inland through sugar cane fields and thicketed areas, were being "flushed" on all radio circuits. Therefore, with "flash" messages taking precedence, all communications with lower priority were being shut out. Consequently, the "flash" network (to be continuously monitored by all stations on the network) was set up strictly for transmitting "authenticated" enemy troop sightings.

As I listened to Red talk, I slowly opened and closed my palms. Then I straightened my fingers, ever so slightly at first, then as far as the pain would allow. When he finished explaining the circuit setup, I held up my hands, palms up, and said, "I don't know how it'll be with hands like these ... They're burned. But--"

His eyes widened in disbelief. "Jeez. Do you think you can copy--"

"I don't know about the hands. But I think I could copy and send code with a pencil clamped in my teeth, if need be. Let's have at it, red head."

However, before Glemont would let me operate the circuit he sent me to seek medical attention for my hands, and get into full uniform.

Normally, I'd have gone to the dispensary for treatment. But earlier the dispensary had taken a direct hit. The bomb exploded in the large open area at the center of the building; an area used by patients for sunning while convalescing. Fortunately, the space wasn't occupied at the time. Nearly all of the bomb's explosive energy was expended upward through the opening, causing no injuries to patients or staff in other parts of the building. But enough damage was done to the building and equipment to render it out of order.

With the dispensary temporarily out of commission, I was directed to the mess hall for treatment. What a difference a short time -- it seemed like an eternity -- made in the appearance and smells of the large chow hall.

Where before the attack there had been a soft glisten from the polished table tops, there now appeared mangled, bloodied, charred bodies writhing in agony on bloodied, burn-blackened sheets on the tables; where before the aromas had been the delightful smells of frying eggs and bacon and brewed coffee, they now were the heavy, sickening stench of burned flesh and fresh blood, blended with the stinging odors of medications; where earlier sounds of comradery, laughter and good natured joshing had prevailed, there now were moans, screams and growled curses over the din of gentle feminine voices instructing or consoling those being attended.

All the result of so many wounded having been, and still being, dragged from the fiery harbor and bombed out ships and taken to the mess hall. Which had been hastily turned into an emergency center complemented by a very limited medical staff. With the work load heavy at the outset, and increasing, volunteers became imperative.

Because of the fiery harbor and the incessant bombing, boat transportation between Ford Island and the main land became impossible. Therefore, the only persons to call upon to volunteer were those cpos' and officers' wives who lived there on Ford Island.

What a shock it turned out for those who showed up. Only a few proved capable of standing up to the stench of burned flesh and fresh wounds, as well as the screamed agonies and profanities by the wounded as they writhed in pain on the mess tables.

The rest only lasted for a short time. They either passed out or suffered from shock and themselves had to be treated, further burdening the limited staff. However, those who stayed on performed miracles.

Word had it that a call for help had gone out to the "millionaire" prostitutes in Honolulu. Whether or not that ever came to pass I don't know. Of course, there were rumors to the effect that it had.

My burns were salved and wrapped by a Navy nurse from the hospital ship, USS Solace, at anchor in the harbor. She had stayed on Ford Island the night before at her sister's home, a lieutenant's wife. She seemed to be the rod of steel -- cool, knowledgeable and effective -- that kept the nightmarish operation functioning with some semblance of organization.

I was still in my skivvie shorts when she got around to attend me. While she treated my burned hands, we listened to one of the severely burned sailors from the Arizona as he yelled at the top of his lungs between coughs and gurgles -- his yells apparently driven by maddening pain and hateful rage: "Let me up. ... gotta' live. ... gotta' git back ... git those dirty slant eyes. They killed my buddies. ... all my buddies. Dammit! ma'am. Just wrap me Let me git--"

A lengthy siege of gurgles, ending in a death rattle, choked off his piercing screams. To be followed by a momentary deathly silence.

Having finished bandaging my hands, the nurse working on me was checking my bare back for possible burns from the gun barrel when her shocked gasp pierced the eerie quiet. Then she blurted out: "My God, sailor. Have you been near someone who got hit?"

When I started to ask what she meant, she covered my mouth with the fingers of one hand to keep me from saying anything while she used the other to wipe a spot on my back with a piece of gauze. Then, holding the wipings for me to see, she removed her fingers and said, "Close enough to get splattered with this? Brain matter, tissue?"

I could only stare, as nausea seeped into my every fibre, at what she held in her shaking hand. The brilliant whiteness of the gauze highlighted even more so the grotesqueness of the splotch of bloodied, mucous-gray membrane smeared across the gauze. After taking a few deep breaths, I overcame the urge to upchuck and nodded affirmatively. As I nodded I looked into her eyes. Everything about her features begged me to tell more than what the nod told. Finally I managed to mumble through the story, adding that I believed what appeared on the gauze came from the Old Salt. To which she expressed disgust with what was happening and wonderment at how much the human body can stand.

While she finished cleansing my back, I kept fighting back surges of nausea. Surges that had become not totally the result of what she had shown me, but that as well as the stench and the sounds of those around us in so much pain.

When she finished, I started to hurry out of the mess hall to go up the ladder to my dorm to get in uniform. But I was slowed at the doorway by stretcher bearers carrying away the lifeless body of the sailor who had screamed to be fixed up so he could avenge his buddies.

Although we parted ways after the bearers cleared through the doorway and I took off up the ladder, his anguished, hateful ragings of vengeance stuck with me: They had become a part of *The Searing*.

I followed the nurse's instructions to wear something over my bandages. I did so by modifying my flight gloves. I cut off enough of the end of the gloves' fingers and thumbs to allow my finger and thumb ends to protrude up to the first knuckle. That way I would be able to type the "flash" reports, which were bound to be sent twenty-words-per-minute, or more, and work the telegraph key with some "feel."

In full uniform and ready to work the "flash" circuit, I left the barracks building for the Ad Building. When I got half way across the street that fronted the building entrance, an eerie quiet suddenly prevailed. For the next instant the only sound I heard came from my feet scraping the pavement as I came to a halt. The quiet lasted just long enough for me to glance at my wrist watch and read 0907 Hours. Then the sirens all around the harbor sounded, signaling ALL CLEAR! Soon to be followed by the wailing sirens and horns of emergency units, fire fighting, life saving and repair vehicles and boats, heading for the most urgent emergency spots.

It was now time for the *accounting*; the accounting of the thousands of tragedies. Something about which a multitude of books have since been written.

It was also time that I shag my butt to the ComPatWingII Flag comm office in the Ad Building and take over that "flash" circuit.

By the time I got relieved of the circuit at 1700 Hours, I would copy enough reports -- still unverified -- to indicate that hundreds of thousands of slant eyes had landed without opposition; had there been opposition, we'd have had some means of verification. All of which, ominously, meant that attacks by hordes of Jap troops appeared to be "imminent."

The "flash" reports persisted even though we managed to get a couple of J2F Ducks -- Grumman single-engined, single-pontooned amphibian planes -- airborne soon after the enemy's air attack ended to verify the reports; which resulted in no troop sightings reported by either of the plane crews.

The consensus by the top brass regarding the negative reports was that the flight crews weren't able to conduct effective patrols because they had to divert so much of their attention to evading the ground fire from our trigger-happy gunners around the island. Plus, they further reasoned, the enemy had had time to dig in and adequately camouflage their positions. Therefore, similar patrols were ordered up for the next day, Monday, December 8.

When I was about to leave the comm office, following my relief from the "flash" circuit, Glemont instructed me to grab a bite to eat and report back to the Flag comm shack.

I soon found out that the only chow available consisted of sandwiches to be eaten dry. The problem? the water main from the mainland to Ford Island had been bombed, broken open. That became a very telling blow to our life support systems. The only water supplied to us for the next few days would come from the ships with pumping equipment still in order. As a result our meals consisted of sandwiches, raw fruit and vegetables and other edibles that didn't require water for preparation.

With our toilet facilities in the barracks and work areas severely affected, we had to curb our "gotta'-go" necessities as best we could. For that reason I welcomed the flights I would make during the next two days. For the planes had "relief" systems aboard.

To add to our miseries, we had to operate under strict "blackout" conditions. Something that hadn't been taken into account during our air raid drills.

After finishing my sandwich I reported back to Glemont's office. There I joined him and a couple of Flag communications supervisors in the preparation of a communications plan for use during the next day's patrol. A patrol that had been ordered by the brass -- CinCPac -- because the day's patrols had failed to locate the Jap *invaders*.

The comm plan was developed to deceive the enemy into believing that we had more planes on patrol than the two Ducks that we hoped to put in the air, maintenance and flight crew availability permitting.

When we came up with a plan acceptable to the powers-to-be, I learned why I had been included in its preparation: I was to be one of the radio operator-gunners flying the early morning offshore patrol; and, I would be the one -- who better? -- to carry out the deceptive comm plan.