

Air Group 83 and the U.S.S. ESSEX

Submitted by Captain Frank Thigpen

This was the ESSEX tradition, deeply ingrained in her battle seasoned crew, when Air Group 83 reported on board in Ulithi lagoon on 10 March 1945. ESSEX men, recalling other pilots who had contributed to that tradition, eyed newcomers critically as they moved awkwardly about unfamiliar passageways and compartments, wondered if they would measure up. The opportunity to observe was not far off.

Flying the flag of Rear Admiral F. G. Sherman, Commander Task Group 58.3, ESSEX steamed out of Ulithi on the morning of 13 March in company with other units of Vice Admiral Marc Mitscher's famed Task Force 58. The fleet set course for the Japanese Home Islands. Before dawn on 18 March the first planes were airborne and had taken departure for airfield targets on the island of Kyushu. The plan was to deal a surprise blow to the enemy's air force before launching pre-invasion strikes on the fortress outpost of Okinawa. Schedules were revised to include even more critical targets on 19 March when returning pilots reported a heavy concentration of enemy fleet units at anchor in Kure Naval Base in the Inland Sea. With the Japanese Fleet incapacitated, assault and amphibious units approaching Okinawa might be assured freedom from surface attack.

That the two day operation was a tactical success was attested by the fact that the Okinawa invasion was accomplished without interruption by enemy surface units. Air Group 83 shared in the honors with damaging hits on two enemy carriers and two battleships, while its Corsairs and Hellcats shot down 29 planes and accounted for many more on enemy fields.

The toll of enemy sea and air power was not taken without cost. Waves of suicide planes mounted from nearby enemy fields to challenge combat air patrols and ships batteries. Many were shot down, but those who got through plunged crazily into the decks of American warships, leaving the FRANKLIN a flaming inferno and disabling other units.

On the evening of 19 March, the force retired to the vicinity of the Nansei Shoto to participate in the pre-invasion assault on Okinawa and adjacent islands. Between the 23rd and the 27th ESSEX planes conducted four days of intensive strikes on invasion beach defenses, anti-aircraft and coastal battery emplacements, and military headquarters buildings. Hellcat photo pilots ferreted out midget submarines in cleverly concealed pens at Unten-Ko and planes of the Group destroyed these installations.

On 29 March reports of a possible Banzai sortie of undamaged Japanese fleet units took the force once more to the Inland Sea area but search planes failed to make contact and strikes were diverted to airfield targets on Kyushu and Honshu.

Prefatory to the assault upon the principal island, Third Amphibious Force units occupied islands of the Kerama Group to the west of Okinawa on 30 and 31 March with the support of planes from the fast Carrier Force.

On Easter Sunday, 1 April, waves of landing craft bore American troops to the Okinawa beachhead, already laid waste by naval air and surface bombardment. ESSEX planes joined other groups to strafe, bomb, and burn remaining ground opposition on the enemy line of defense.

Succeeding days and weeks in the bloody painstaking advance of our ground forces down the length and breadth of zealously defended Okinawa found Air Group 83 providing daily ground support flights and combat air patrols over the target area. On 6 April fighters on target CAP encountered an intensive enemy air offensive shooting down 69 Jap planes for a new ESSEX record.

Early morning fighter searches on 7 April sighted and tracked a Japanese Task Force consisting of the 45,000 ton battleship YAMATO, one light cruiser, and eight destroyers off the southwest coast of Kyushu. Air Group 83 joined in the coordinated Task Force attack which followed, scoring hits which

contributed to the ultimate sinking of the battleship, cruiser, and three destroyers and sent the remaining light units fleeing.

Steadily increasing enemy air assaults on Okinawa landing and support forces, believed to be staged through fields on southern Kyushu as well as Kikai and Tokuno Islands in the Nansei Shoto demanded interdiction of these facilities to the enemy. Daily sweeps of the island chain coupled with neutralization bombing of air strips were implemented by a 325 mile strike on Kanoya Airfield from the fleet operating area east of Okinawa on 16 April, a two day assault on Kyushu fields on 14 and 15 May and a second long range fighter sweep on 24 May.

The demand for pin point bombing in support of ground forces become more acute as Okinawa defenders dug in for a tenacious last stand in the vicinity of Shuri town. On 20 May ESSEX Avengers landed on Yontan Airfield for a briefing by field officers on the defenses of an enemy held ridge which had taken a heavy toll of unsuccessful assault troops. Following detailed instructions, pilots laid their bomb loads on Jap positions within 150 yards of American front lanes, clearing the way for the bloodless capture of the enemy stronghold.

On 29 May ESSEX retired from the Okinawa operating area in company with the Task Group, dropping anchor in San Pedro Bay; Leyte Gulf, P.I., after 79 days at sea under the most intensive carrier combat conditions.

Following a month of rest, recreation, and replenishment, ESSEX and her Air Group got underway on the first day of July for what was to be the last combat cruise of the Pacific War. After nine days of air and gunnery exercises at sea, the Third Fleet lined up off central Honshu on the morning of 10 July to launch air strikes against airfields and aircraft in the Tokyo plains area. Most profitable target in the area assigned to Air Group 83 was Atsugi field, later prominent in the peace news as the scene of General Douglas MacArthur's landing to participate in the signing of formal surrender terms.

In sharp contrast to the Okinawa operation, enemy air power did not rise to meet attacking planes, nor did the Kamikaze Corps assault the fleet in strength. ESSEX did not open fire on a single hostile target during his final war though isolated and infrequent raids on other Task Groups were reported.

After retirement to refuel and rearm, the force proceeded to a launching position off Tsugaru Straits, the principal passage from the Pacific Ocean to the Sea of Japan between Honshu and the northern most home island of Hokkaido. Major targets for two days of strikes on 14 and 15 July were railroad ferries and other shipping which provided transportation for lumber, steel, and troops to vital points in this Empire. Of eight ferries believed to be in operation, planes of the Air Group sank four and caused a fifth to be beached. Fighter sweeps neutralized airfields in northern Honshu to prevent retaliatory measures by the Japanese Airforce.

Target for the 18th of July was the remaining operational enemy battleship NAGATO moored dockside at the strongly defended Yokosuka Naval Base in Tokyo Bay. The first of the forces Air Groups to attack, ESSEX fighters and torpedo bombers gave studied attention to anti-aircraft installations while dive bombers and fighter-bombers unloaded explosives on the warship.

The force turned to the Kure Naval Base on the 24th, 25th and 28th of July to put the finishing touches to remaining units of the dwindling enemy feet now lying in concealment under camouflage and foliage in caves of the vast fleet anchorage. Cruisers and destroyers were targets for the Air Groups bomb loads while fighters combed airfields in northern Kyushu for signs of enemy activity.

On 30 July the Task force sent its planes once again to Tokyo Airfields to seek out the retiring enemy airforce hidden in revetments and beneath trees along the back roads of the Japanese countryside. Degassed planes failed to burn, and lack of visible indication of destruction was disappointing though later evidence revealed that fragmentation bombing had riddled operational planes beyond further use.

Adjusting its schedule to the rapidly changing weather map, the fleet swung north for two days of assaults on airfields, shipping, and transportation facilities in the now familiar Tsugaru Straits area on 9 and 10 August. Complete immobilization of ferry traffic was assured by damaging railroad and shipping terminals at Aomori on the south side of the Straits. Hangar and shop facilities at well developed Hachinohe airfield were literally demolished and in the nearby coastal area rail junctions and marshalling yards were disputed.

Meanwhile staggering reports of the results of fabulous atomic bombing of Hiroshima, coupled with Russia's entry into the war against Japan, were lending credence to rumors of an Imperial plea for peace. Anticipating hourly an order of cessation, ESSEX launched strikes against the Tokyo area on the morning of 13 July, but returning pilots reported continued resistance from anti-aircraft gunners. The plains area was covered by a thick haze and strikes destined for airfields turned to industrial targets of opportunity.

The following day Domes News Agency broadcast unconditional acceptance of Allied surrender terms but official confirmation did not arrive in time to cancel scheduled strikes on the morning of 15 August. One flight had just reached Tokyo Bay and a second was taking departure for the target when orders were transmitted to jettison bombs and return to base. The victorious fleet retired to the replenishment area to await consummation of surrender plans.

On 25 August Task Group 38.3 returned to Japanese coastal waters to conduct air reconnaissance of Tokyo fields and sea approaches and to locate Allied Prisoner of War Camps which, pursuant to surrender terms, were to be marked for identification from the air. Incredulous pilots returning from flak-ridden Tokyo reported spiked guns, empty emplacements, and traffic moving normally along the highways. Most gratifying sight in months of aerial reconnaissance of the Empire was the happy spectacle of Allied War prisoners waving eagerly from the roofs and stockades of their imprisonment. The Japs were acting in good faith. The war was over.

On succeeding days Air Group 83 flew reconnaissance over Central Honshu, locating additional prisoner of war camps and dropping cigarettes, food, and clothing. Flights circled Atsugi Field during Army Air Force landings and flew security patrols over units of the Third Fleet as they steamed into Tokyo Bay for occupation of Yokosuka Naval Base. On 31 August frequently discredited rumors of an early departure for home materialized as ESSEX commenced loading passengers for return to the States, and on 3 September set course for Puget Sound in company with the MASSACHUSETTS and SAN JACINTO.

Ten days later Air Group 83 was launched for the last time and took departure for Sand Point Air Station, Washington. ESSEX ships company, seeing familiar faces flash by in cockpit enclosures, turrets and tunnel hatches, watching planes free of wartime bomb loads rise effortlessly from the deck, remembered these some faces, tense and tired, in planes burdened for the serious business of war, knew that this Air Group had become a part of the ESSEX tradition.