

Notes on the attack on the YAMATO by Frank Guptill ARM2c –

As noted above, VB-83 launched 12 SB2Cs at 1000 hours. Air Crew had pre-launch chow of chicken a la king; I remember that, my pilot was Ltjg Kermit Quenton (Kirby) Ellis. On the intercom he called me Gup.

On the run-in for the attack, I noticed that we were attacking the Yamato broadside, not so good with all their guns bearing. Just after pushover into the glide, with no flaps, we took a hit in the left wing tank. White-hot flames occurred immediately, which burned a 3-foot hole in the wing. Kirby completed his drop, but I didn't see where we hit. After pullout, I heard "Gup, we're on fire". I said something like "roger". Kirby kept Wonder 209 airborne and we retreated low over the water. Soon the fire burned out, but the engine was running really rough, and I learned later that the left wheel was down and the bomb bay was open. I could see Hugh columns of smoke rising from the attack area behind us.

Soon another SB2C joined up. It was Lt. Olney, the Navigation Officer and rearseatman Kelley. Kelley watched as I threw my guns and ammo cans over the side. After a few minutes Kirby announced that we were on fire forward, under the speed-ring, and said it was so hot in his cockpit that we would have to ditch. I took out my life raft, cut the line to the external provisions bag so that it wouldn't get tangled in the wreckage and take the raft down with the plane. Then, facing forward, I stuffed the raft down in front of me and waited. Olney and Kelley were still with us, and watched us go down. I remember the left wing tip starting to cut the water, and that was all.

Kelly told me later that the plane broke in half at my cockpit, and I went sailing out about 150 feet, still in my bucket seat with legs sticking straight out. I came to under water, tangled in something and sinking fast. I got loose and swam for the surface, which was sort of a pale green. I dumped my gun and one shoe trying to stay afloat. I never did pop my life vest, remembering that I had the pulls tucked around to avoid accidental inflation. Kirby was right there, already in a raft, and pulled me in. Olney had Kelly drop another raft, and I moved to that one. Olney and Kelley circled once more and shoved off, and there we were. We tied a line between the rafts to keep us together, and Kirby put out a sea anchor. He said Olney would report our position, and we needed to avoid drifting.

We took inventory. No food or water. The bag I had cut loose was gone, and the one dropped with the other raft had split on impact and lost its contents. Bad news – I had thrown up seawater, and with it my chicken ala king breakfast. Kirby had a bad gash across his eye, caused by the glass plate on the bombsight that he been too busy to jettison. I had cuts on my left palm and top of my head, and a severe backache, but we were both functional.

By then it was mid-afternoon, cold and raining. I figured we were waiting for the Kingfishers (OS2Us) to come and get us. Kirby must have known we were too far out for that, but he didn't let on. One time he looked strange in his raft, all huddled over. I said, "Mr. Ellis, are you OK". He said, "I'm OK Gup, I'm praying". Time dragged on darkness came and it got colder and was still raining. We rigged for overnight as best we could. Kirby's raft had a full-size tarp, yellow on one side, blue on the other. Mine had only a half-size tarp. I still had my white scarf, which we wore with flight suit. I took mine apart at the seam and made sort of a blanket out of it, which helped. I guess we both drifted off to fitfull sleep. The sea was not rough, but we were soaking wet, and I was really cold.

Daylight came slowly. Through breaks in the fog, we could see an island, not there before. We had drifted. Kirby decided that we had best make for the island, although he knew it was Jap. He still had his handgun, and he made me a shoe out of the empty survival bag. We bailed the rainwater out of the rafts. Blood from our wounds was in the water, and in 5 minutes the sharks were there, slowly circling, and their fins about 6 inches above the surface. While watching the sharks, things started to come alive.

We heard planes overhead, not visible through the fog. I figured they must be Jap. Then, very faintly, we heard the thump-thump of a heavy diesel engine. The sound grew louder, and through the fog we could make out the shape of a vessel. It was a submarine, Jap, I assumed, running low in the water, deck awash. Forward on the prow stood a man in a rubber suit, knee deep in water, holding a machine gun. He had a beard. It had to be one of our subs. Kirby stood up in his raft and starting waving. I worried that he would fall to the sharks. The sub came on, and was headed between us. I called out that we had a line between the rafts. A shout went out, and the sub squatted on a dime. We paddled over to the conning tower. Several crew grabbed us and our rafts, slit the rafts with big knives, and pushed us and rafts down the hatch. The hatch slammed and it got real quiet. We were on the bridge. I didn't hear any "Dive, Dive, Dive" like in the movies, but I knew we were going down fast. A crewman told me the Japs on that island had us on their radar.

The submarine was the USS Tench. They had been on lifeguard duty off Tokyo to pick up B29 crews. Assigned to us, they had run south all night at flank (four engine) speed. They were conducting a square search, had gone south through our reported location, then west for 10 miles, and started north. They were low on fuel and about to break off the search when the high lookout spotted us. The Tench ran submerged between the islands defining the East China Sea, surfaced and preceded at a leisurely, fuel conserving, pace back to their base on Guam.

The trip to Guam took several days. For the Tench the mission was over, and picking us up gave them the prized 'clean sweep'. I had a bunk in the chiefs' quarters. I saw Kirby only once on the sub, one day when they let us go topside for fresh air. On Guam we reported to the Carrier Aircraft Service (CASU) Unit for

transportation back to fleet. Kirby disappeared again into officers' country. I made good friends with Yeoman Bowman, who seemed in charge of everything, and took good care of this combat survivor, ship's company chow pass and all that.

Later, when I left the Essex at Leyte Gulf, I ended up again in the CASU unit with Yeoman Bowman. He let me pick from a list of personnel requests for my next assignment. I chose a 4-engine Privateer (Navy B24) squadron based at Yontan Airstrip on Okinawa, and became a "radar jammer specialist".

In due course, Mr. Ellis and I were transported back to the Essex by destroyer, and went aboard by breeches buoy on a line across to the fantail. My flight log shows that Mr Ellis and I resumed combat duty with VB-83 on 28 APR with Support 3 over Okinawa.

Submitted by Frank Gupstill ARM2c