

The Sinking of the Bismarck Sea

CVC-95 VC-86

The Andy Mouw Story

Prologue

February 21, 1945

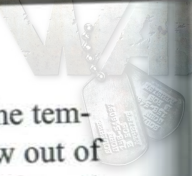
February 21, 1945 started out as a normal day, if there is such a thing in war time. I had no idea that my ship, the *USS Bismarck Sea*, was going to be the last aircraft carrier sunk in WW II by Kamikazes. On that particular day the *USS Bismarck Sea* steamed along at 18 knots through the 20 foot swells*. A little rough, so it was not uncommon to see sailors losing their breakfast over the rail.

The *USS Bismarck Sea* was a part of the 7th fleet. At the moment we were accompanied by five other aircraft carriers and six destroyers. We were all doing our part to make it rough on the Japanese who were beaten but didn't know it yet. Our role was to cover the invasion of the island of Iwo Jima^{2*}, a Japanese stronghold and focal point of the war in the Pacific. With help from other destroyers, cruisers, battleships and carriers (495 ships in all), the Navy planned to continuously bombard the island.

We were hoping to soften them up and make the landing for the marines a lot easier. American planes would take off from the aircraft carriers, fire on the island, and return for more fuel and ammunition.

^{1*}Swells are groups of waves that can toss a ship around like a cork.

^{2*}Iwo Jima means Island of Sulphur in Japanese.



It was late afternoon. The weather was clear and the temperature was a little on the cool side. A steady breeze blew out of the south. I was standing on the bridge facing south, watching all the action that was taking place on the heavily fortified island of Iwo Jima*. Part of our main task force was on the north side of Iwo Jima. I watched as the *USS Saratoga* came around the west side of the island listing badly to port. The *Saratoga* had been hit on her flight deck and wasn't able to retrieve her aircraft, so they were sent to the *Bismarck Sea*. The way the *Saratoga* was headed, she would cross our bow in front of us. We were watching her carefully when something drew our attention to the sky above her. Evidently going in for the kill, over 50 Jap fighters and kamikazes started to attack the wounded ship like a horde of angry hornets.

But to our delight the *Saratoga* wasn't done yet. The early evening sky lit up like the fourth of July as the *Saratoga* opened fire on the Jap planes. Every fourth bullet from their 40 mm guns was a tracer so we saw exactly what they were aiming for.

All the fire power was a sight to behold. If the enemy planes would get by the 40mm guns, then the 20 mm weapons would get them.

Suddenly I became aware that **our** 40 mm guns were going off too, poom, poom, poom. That usually meant that a kamikaze was coming at **us** under the radar. This meant that it was flying straight at the **USS Bismarck Sea** less than 50 feet above the water. In horror I watched as the kamikaze narrowly missed the *USS Patterson*, DD 392, a destroyer next to us and instead hit our ship in the aft, where our torpedoes were stored!

*Author's note: When Andy was telling me about this occasion, I asked if he had seen the recent movie about Iwo Jima, "Flags of our Fathers" by Steven Spielberg. Andy gave me an "I can't believe you asked that" look, and answered, "Why should I go to see that movie. **I saw the real thing.**"

In a few seconds everybody on the ship leaped into action. Sailors are well trained to do their duty during general quarters. In the past general quarters drills I had learned to help out where I could. But this was not a drill! **This was the real thing.**

“Now what?” I thought as my body kicked into survival mode. I wondered if I’d make it through this alive. Amazingly, the ship’s engines kept running.

But unbelievably, while we were distracted by the hit we had taken; another kamikaze came at us from straight above, and crashed right into our aft elevator where our bombs were stored. There was a tremendous explosion that reached 700 feet in the air. All thought of saving the ship seemed unrealistic now. We couldn’t survive a hit like that because we had just picked up thousands of gallons of fuel, and tons of ammunition. Adrenaline surged through my body as I heard our commander yell, “Abandon Ship!”

I’ve got to get off this ship before she blows up with me on it, I thought. I raced to the meeting place that Eddie Milolta (my close friend) and I had decided on for this exact occasion.



Andy's official Navy picture, 1943

Chapter 1 - Early Life

1920's, 1930's, and early 1940's

My name is Andy Mouw. I was born in Griswold, IA. I was unfortunate enough to lose my birth mother at an early age. I was sent by relatives to a Christian Children's Home in Council Bluffs, IA, and was later adopted by a farm couple from Hospers, IA, who became my wonderfully loving parents, Peter and Nellie Mouw. Since I was adopted when I was two, I probably would have never known about my real parents if a friend hadn't called me by my real name one day when I was five. One day when I was 11 or 12 years old, my parents were gone so I did a little snooping and discovered my adoption papers and a letter from my real dad who wanted to come and see me. I couldn't quite get my nerve up to ask my parents about this until I was seventeen.

I grew up a typical farm kid in the Dutch Reformed area near Hospers, IA. We worked hard on our eighty acre farm, had cows, pigs and chickens, and went to church several times a week. Sundays were always a day of rest.

When I became a teenager my friends and I would drive around town checking out the girls, a little afraid of them, but interested anyhow. One Sunday night I was driving around Hospers. The wind was blowing hard. I stopped at a stop sign and suddenly noticed a red hat blow right in front of my car. I leaped out of my car and grabbed the hat, then noticed that a nice looking girl was chasing it, or had I noticed that before? I gave it back to her trying to look very debonair. She dusted it off and thanked me



Andy as a young boy, 1930's



Andy in his Dad's 1940 Roadmaster Buick

nicely, then turned and left. I didn't know who she was but I made it my business to find out.

Several weeks later at a Christian Endeavor Meeting (a Sunday Evening after church bible study), I saw her again. I casually made conversation with her and ended up introducing myself, and she did the same.

She turned out to be Nelvina Vellinga. She lived on a farm between Archer and Hospers in an area that used to be called Philby. We started dating and our relationship bloomed.

One cold December evening in 1941 I drove to pick Nelvina up for Christian Endeavor. She wasn't quite ready so as I waited in the car. To pass the time, I turned on the car radio. While we drove to church we heard the news about the Japanese attack on



Andy's parents, Peter and Nellie Moww of Hospers with the happy couple, 1945

Pearl Harbor for the first time. (We never usually listened to the radio on Sunday.) When we heard the news I looked at her and she looked at me, and I said, "Hoo boy!" and then it was quiet all the way into town.

We went into the church only to find everybody talking about the "day of infamy." It was shocking and upsetting to think that anyone would attack our fleet unprovoked. Why would they do that?

We were suddenly at war, but what did I care. It had nothing to do with me. The rationing of gas, meat and sugar didn't really affect my life. So why worry? I'm not going to get involved in this I thought with my 18 year old brain.

A few years later, I surmised I had been a bit naïve. I realized that I could be drafted. My number was coming up in 1943 and after serious consideration I decided to volunteer for the Navy for 3 very good reasons:

1. The Navy would give you a decent place to sleep. (Who wanted to sleep in a fox hole in the wind and the rain and snow?)
2. The Navy would give you three square meals a day. (In the Army you had to carry your food with you and Army rations had a rotten reputation. I had heard "the Navy gets the gravy but the Army gets the beans.")
3. You could sleep in a bed every night with clean sheets. (No mud or camping out sleeping for me! But later on Nelvina and I and the kids did camp out and had a great time.)

Thankfully three of my childhood friends decided to join the Navy with me; Harold Booty Roos, John Hulst, and Casey Van Veldhuezen. (Casey was the only one of us who didn't come back.) We all took the physical and were accepted, and soon sent to Farragut, Idaho for six weeks of boot camp.

My parting from Nelvina was harder than I expected, but you have to do your duty during war time.



Camp Farragut, Idaho

In boot camp we learned how the military operated; specifically we learned discipline. We were taught how to march, drill and follow orders. The Boatswain's mate was the Navy equivalent of the Army drill sergeant. It was his job to direct us how to be good disciplined sailors. He didn't baby any of us.

There was no maid service in the Navy. We actually had to make our own beds! I had never made my bed at home. Mom did that job. I had kind of taken her labor of love for granted. During basic training, I quickly learned how to make my bed properly according to Navy standards. I became very proficient in getting my top sheet so tight you could bounce a coin on it. Keeping my



Swimming instruction at Camp Farragut.

quarters clean and tidy kept me out of trouble with the Boatswain's mate, and helped me learn the discipline I needed to be a good sailor.

The only part of basic training I didn't like was the chow line. Now I love to eat, but I had certain tastes and I didn't want to eat anything I didn't like. The first time I walked into the chow line I noticed a giant poster of a muscular, fierce-looking Shore Patrol sailor with a big club in his hand. Under his picture were these words: TAKE WHAT YOU WANT, BUT EAT WHAT YOU TAKE. That sounded okay to me. I quickly told myself I could handle this part of the Navy with no problem. I proceeded through the chow line and quickly observed the way it worked. You picked up your stainless steel tray, and if you wanted some food, you would hold your tray out to the cook who was serving it. He would give you whatever he was serving and you went on down the line and repeated your actions to get your full meal. The first day I went through the line I held my tray out to the cook and he served me what I thought was steak. After he had slapped it on my tray, I



Ship's Mascot

inspected the "steak" more closely and I didn't pull my tray back like I was supposed to. The cook, thinking I wanted another "steak" quickly put a second piece on my tray. The sad part of this story is that I hate liver, and

what I had thought was a steak turned out to be liver. And I had two pieces of it! I ended up forcing both pieces of liver down by mixing it with catsup and mustard. My mother would have been very proud of me that day, because she could never convince me to try liver, and the Navy had done it with no problem at all.

After leaving Farragut, we were sent to Astoria, Oregon

and assigned to the **USS Bismarck Sea** which had been transferred to the United States Navy in May of 1944. The **USS Bismarck Sea** was jokingly called "one of the Kaiser's little coffins," because it was so poorly made. It didn't have any armor and its defenses were limited. The Kaiser Company had hurriedly constructed our ship after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The **USS Bismarck Sea** was actually a redesigned cargo ship with a flight deck kind of tacked onto the top, and an island on the starboard side which was the command center of the ship. This type of ship was never expected to come back from the war. We were blissfully unaware of that piece of information. We didn't find that out until much later.



This photo shows the length of the USS Bismarck Sea, 495 feet long

Our ship was named after a body of water in the Pacific Ocean between the northeastern coast of New Guinea and the islands of the Bismarck Archipelago. The Bismarck Sea extends 500 miles east and west. I had no idea at the time where it was located, or what that place in the world was going to mean to my life. I never dreamed that my ship, the **USS Bismarck Sea**, would be the last US aircraft carrier sunk by kamikazes. I was just a sailor, a Seaman 1st Class. My main goal at this time in my life was to help win this war so I could go home and marry Nelvina and live happily ever after.

Chapter 2 - Life aboard Ship

1944

I was paid \$29 a month to serve in the Navy. Of course that included my room and board, dungarees and a long sleeved shirt for every day, dress whites for special occasions, and free laundry. I was getting 3 square meals a day and a nice dry bed at night. No drafty, wet and cold foxholes in the Navy. (I would think about this later when I was bobbing around in the cold dark ocean, with no rescue in sight.)

Most of the sailors also had a set of dress blues that we wore when we went on liberty, but we had to buy them ourselves. This set of dress blues cost \$90. I bought them in San Francisco at a tailor shop. They fitted perfectly, and I felt like a million dollars when I wore those dress blues.

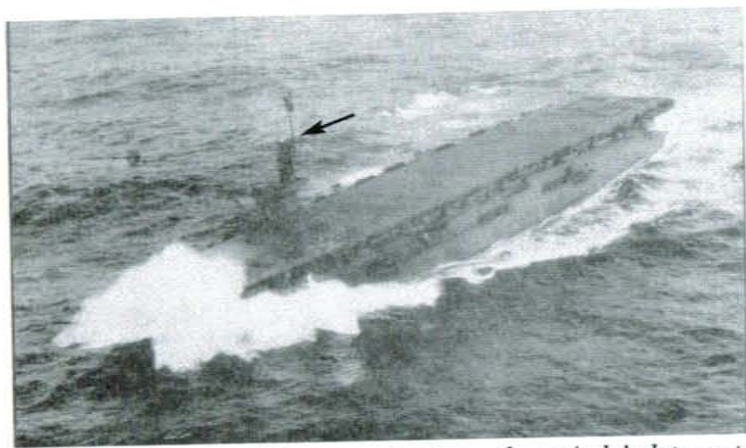
I was in the first division of the Navy, which meant that I was trained to work as a deckhand. Included in my training was experience shooting the 20 mm gun during "General Quarters Drills," better known to civilians as "battle stations." The 20 mm guns were used to shoot at enemy fighter planes and bombers. When you shot these guns, you were sitting with your back to the ship and you were in a harness. You could shoot an area approximately 180° in front of you and on either side of you.

No one had ever heard of kamikazes at that time. I didn't hear that term until much later. The thought of trying to shoot an enemy suicide bomber out of the air to save my ship seemed to be unheard of. I'm glad I didn't know, because that would have been a scary thought to this Iowa farm boy.

Life aboard ship was surprisingly routine. Everyone got seasick at one time or another. I had a sure cure for seasickness; I heaved a lot. One day when I was standing at the rail throwing up, I noticed that Commander Born (Our ship's commander) was right beside me doing the same thing. The only thing he said was, "I can heave just as far as you can."

One night in the South China Sea I had search light duty

on the top of one of the masts, 80 feet above the ocean. The swells were so great that night that I got sprayed 80 feet in the air, a little frightening when you think about it.



The USS Bismarck with large swells. Arrow shows Andy's duty post.

Our day-to-day schedule of events went like this: Swab the decks, clean the decks, paint the decks, and polish wood and metals on the decks. One of my all time favorite jobs, (I say this sarcastically) was the daily cleaning of the heads (bathrooms).

Surprisingly, my main duty aboard ship became one I wasn't trained for and hadn't planned on. I became the Commander's Orderly. The Commander's Orderly was supposed to be at the beck and call of the commander constantly. When the commander walked anywhere you stayed five paces behind him. If he wanted anything done, you were the one to do it. If he wanted to see somebody, you were the one to locate that person.

I didn't like the Orderly job. I ran my legs off trying to keep up with the Commander Born who was rumored to be half Apache Indian. I was a little scared of him, but I had to admit he was a conscientious officer. He made a complete tour of the ship twice a day to see if everything was ship-shape and it kept me on my toes keeping up with him. I got so familiar with his routine that I could realize and predict where he would be at almost any time.

New sailors were supposed to take turns doing the Orderly job for a month. My friend Eddie had the job just before I did, and then it was my turn. I could hardly wait until my time was up. I was taking it easy on the first day when I assumed my Orderly Duty was over. I was surprised when someone ran up to me and told me I had to report to Commander Born immediately. When I got there Commander Born questioned me.

"Mouw, where were you?" I snapped to attention and said, "Sir, I was in the first division and thought I was relieved of the duty. "No," he stated emphatically, "I want you on this duty permanently." Oh happy day!

Every day Commander Born made rounds to inspect the ship and I was with him constantly. One day I was waiting outside Commander Born's stateroom door, when he called me in and asked me a surprising question. "Mouw," he said, "Do you think you could inspect this ship?" I was flabbergasted and somehow managed to stammer, "Sir, not as well as you, sir." He then suggested that I go around and inspect the ship like he regularly did, and come back and report to him what I had observed. "Oh, by the way," he added, "When you're finished we will go around together and see how well you have done." I knew what he looked at, and the path that he took so I very conscientiously did his inspection knowing full well that he was going to be checking up on me.

Everything appeared to be ship shape in the 1st. Division quarters, in the 2nd Division quarters, and the ship's galley. But when I arrived in the area occupied by the "Airdales", things were not the way they were supposed to be. I went back to Commander Born and reported what I had observed.

The Airdales were the flight crews who worked on the planes. They acted a little uppity at times, so it did not bother me much to report to the commander that their quarters were not what they should be. When Commander Born heard what I had to say about the Airdale's quarters, he shouted, "Get me Lt. Commander Melich at once!"

Lt. Commander Melich was in charge of the Airdales. I raced down to his stateroom and reported to him that Commander

Born wanted to see him right away. I'll never forget the look of fear on his face.

When Lt. Commander Melich arrived, Commander Born ordered him to go down to the Airdales quarters and inspect them, then come back and tell him what he saw.

When Lt. Commander Melich returned, Commander Born snapped, "How was it?"

Lt. Commander Melich answered, "It wasn't so good, sir."

At that understatement Commander Born yelled, "It looked like a #*% house and you know it!" I felt sorry for Lt. Commander Melich, but he **was** in charge of the Airdales, and their quarters **were** a mess, so watching him get chewed out by Commander Born was kind of entertaining. My Midwestern ears heard a few words I won't repeat, but the essence of reading him the riot act was to tell Lt. Commander Melich to go down to the Airdale's quarters, do what he had to do to get everything ship shape, and then report back to Commander Born when the job was done. **(Commander Born never did go down and check to see if my information was correct. He took my word and believed me.)**

After that time, every so often Commander Born would send me to do the inspection, and no one was ever the wiser. I think the Commander took a nap while I did his duty. Sailors told me later that when they saw me they shaped up because they knew that wherever I was the Commander was nearby.

I think the Commander liked me, because one day he presented me with a very nice Hamilton Wristwatch. All the pilot's had one of these expensive watches, and it made me feel very special. Commander Born never wore a watch himself, but every so often he would ask me the time. I felt very proud of that watch.

The Pilots didn't commune very often with us regular sailors, but we admired them deep down. It was always a thrill to watch the returning airplanes as we retrieved them. One pilot called Bargie actually visited with me one night after he had a rough day. (He had landed too hard and his right landing gear collapsed. His plane went down the right hand side of the flight deck.

The splinters flew as his propeller chewed up the wooden planks. Very embarrassing for a pilot.) I got up my nerve and asked him a question that I had been dying to ask someone. "What does it feel like to land on an aircraft carrier?" He wryly told me the following: "Go home and fill up your bathtub with water. Throw a cork in. Stir up the water, and then try to throw a dime on the cork."

Chapter 3 - Crossing the Equator

November 26, 1944

Day to day life on the rolling sea was usually pretty routine, but there were also some highly entertaining moments. We began hearing from the experienced sailors about some sort of initiation ceremony that everyone had to go through on your first crossing of the equator. We didn't know whether to believe the stories or not, but the tales turned out to be pretty much true.

So on one particular day, November 26th, 1944, at 0° latitude, it was announced over the ship's loudspeakers that we were in the presence of royalty. King Neptune had actually arrived on the ship and we all had to perform certain duties to be worthy to be in his presence. First of all you need to know about some new terms: "Shellbacks" were sailors who had already crossed the equator, and "Polliwogs" were young sailors who had never crossed the equator before. These "Polliwogs" needed to be initiated properly in order to become a "Shellback."

The whole cere-



This is a picture of the actual paddle line. We couldn't run - we had to walk. Anybody who ran had to go through again.



The strap used to slap our wet backsides as we went through the paddle line.

mony started with 20-30 Shellbacks lined up in two lines facing each other. We Polliwogs were dressed in our under shorts and nothing else. First we were hosed down with cold salt water, and then told to walk between the two lines of Shellbacks. The Shellbacks formed a paddle wagon holding some sort of strap that they used with great glee to slap us across our behinds, some harder than others.

The paddle-wagon wasn't the end of it though. From there we were directed to go individually to an appointment with the Chief Boatswain's Mate who had a big belly. We were directed to kiss his bare, fat tummy (which had been greased



*Part of crossing the equator initiation -
Kissing the Boatswain's belly!*



When 2 ship's crews get together in port, we had boxing matches, wrestling matches, jitterbug contests, etc.

with some sort of fatty substance), and when we did, he grabbed our heads and really pushed our faces into his belly. It was not a wonderful experience, but I made it. The worst was yet to come; the Slop Shoot!

The Slop Shoot was a large container on the ship that contained garbage from the ship's cooks. We had to jump onto a ramp that took us into one foot deep muck. That was awful. When you got out of the Slop Shoot you were official "Shellbacks." Most sailors jumped into the ocean to wash all the crud off. I wasn't that great a



Swimming during a quiet moment by the Marshall Islands, South Pacific

swimmer, so I headed for the showers.

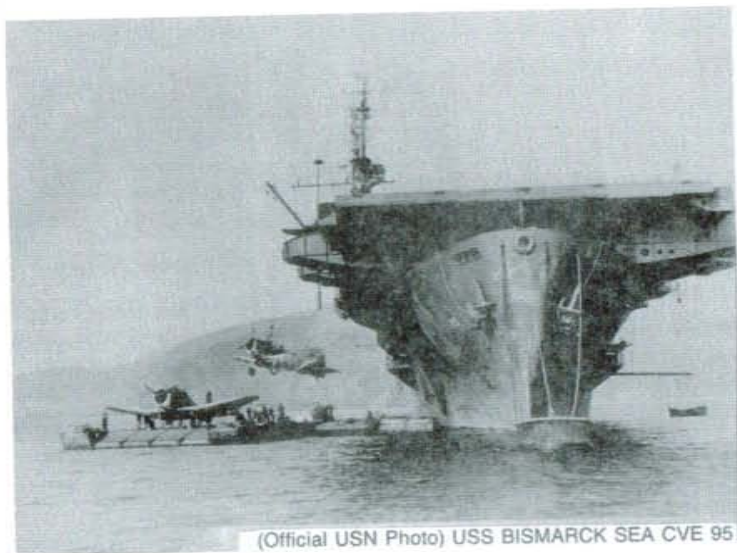
Interestingly enough in the ship's log for November 26, 1944, it was noted "*On this day the USS Bismarck Sea crossed the equator at 14:09, the polliwogs were initiated, and there were no casualties.*" (The Navy's idea of humor.)

The whole experience sounds gross and stupid now when I retell it, but to this day I know that if I cross the equator again, I am officially a Shellback!

Chapter 4 - Into the War

1944-1945

When the USS Bismarck Sea sailed out of Astoria, Oregon, we were loaded up with a cargo of many fighter planes, (Hellcats and Wildcats), and TBM's (Torpedo bombers). The planes were so numerous they completely covered the flight deck and the hanger deck. We sailed for Pearl Harbor where we delivered our cargo, and loaded up some other fighters and TBM's, and headed toward the South Pacific.



(Official USN Photo) USS BISMARCK SEA CVE 95

Loading air craft on the USS Bismarck Sea

Our first stop was at Manus Island north of New Guiana. We never went ashore. We refueled out at sea and took supplies to other ships and places. We ended up going back to Peal Harbor several times.

One time we got shore-leave in the Marshall Islands and I was able to trade t-shirts for beautiful shells and necklaces. (I ended-up trading them away to a man who gave me a ride later,

not a great decision.)

We sailed to Guam and took on supplies, then left for Tinian and Saipan loaded to capacity with 100 octane fuel and several ton of bombs. We filled our aft bays with torpedoes. The torpedoes were armed and called "fish." Sometimes we used crayons to write what we considered funny sayings on these torpedoes like, "We hope you get a bang out of this."

It seemed to us that we were leading the way into many battle areas. For a small aircraft carrier we seemed to be doing a big job. When we arrived at the Leyte Gulf off the Philippines, the 7th Fleet was behind us and we were actually the first to do bombing missions there.

An official register of where the USS Bismarck Sea was and what she was doing is documented in the following paragraph from the Navy Department:

During July and August of 1944 the USS Bismarck Sea escorted convoys between San Diego, California and the Marshall Islands. After repairs and additional training, she steamed to Ulithi in the Caroline Islands to join the Seventh Fleet. During November 14-23, 1944 she operated off Leyte in support of operations and later took part in the Lingayen Gulf landings on January ninth through the eighteenth of 1945. On February sixteenth, the USS Bismarck Sea arrived off Iwo Jima to support the invasion.

We were learning more new names of the many islands and island groups in the South Pacific. The next island that we sailed for was called Iwo Jima, not a geographical location I was acquainted with, but it was to have lasting significance in my life. We had been watching Mt. Suribachi for several days and had seen the huge cannon roll out of the mountain on rails, and pound ships within its range. Then it would roll back inside the mountain to safety. Our planes bombed that mountain and our ships fired repeatedly, but to our dismay as we watched through our telescopes, a caterpillar-like tractor would come out of that tunnel, clear out the opening for the gun, and it would soon come out and



fire again.

More serious to me than the battle for Iwo Jima were the enemies new weapon; the kamikazes.

Kamikaze literally means “divine wind” in Japanese. At one point in Japanese history, a Mongol emperor set out with a fleet of ships to conquer Japan. The Japanese were happy when a typhoon came up and wiped out all the ships of their enemies. The Japanese were convinced that the typhoon had been called up by the gods, and named it “kamikaze” meaning “divine wind.”

To us the word “kamikaze” meant living on the edge of constant danger. We first ran into kamikazes between Saipan and Iwo Jima, and they certainly made our life interesting. One afternoon we dodged 9 of them. Captain Pratt (we called him “the old man”) had a certain way of handling kamikazes that served us well many times. The ship normally would be traveling in a zig-zag line. When a kamikaze took aim at us, there would come a certain time when he couldn’t change his direction, (any change of direction would tear his wings off if he tried). When the Captain noticed that we were being attacked by a kamikaze who was locked into his dive, the Captain would yell, “Hard right rudder!” The ship would lean and turn rapidly, and the enemy plane would crash into the ocean right where we would have been if we had kept going straight. The kamikazes would usually be their most ferocious at high noon because the ship’s gunners were blinded by the sun, and couldn’t see them as they came at us.

We usually caught them on radar well ahead of time. One came in close one day and crashed near us. The bombs he was carrying exploded and sent shrapnel flying that hit our ship, but we didn’t sustain any injuries.

I wrote the folks at home about the kamikazes and at first they didn’t believe me. For some reason information on the kamikazes wasn’t released in the news, but they were very real.

The kamikaze attacks began in 1944. They followed several very significant and critical military and strategic defeats for Japan which had decreased the Japanese’ capabilities of waging war. Japan had lost many trained pilots, were behind in their

industrial capacity, and they didn't want to surrender to the US. Japanese kamikaze pilots would deliberately attempt to crash their aircraft—usually laden with explosives and full fuel tanks—into allied ships with a goal of higher chance of causing greater damage than a conventional attack such as dropping bombs, torpedoing or using machine guns. Their objective was to stop or slow the Allied advance towards the Japanese home islands by causing as much damage and destruction as possible on the American fleet.

It turned out that the first kamikaze unit was organized by a Japanese commander named Asaiki Tamai. Later, Tamai asked Lt. Yukio Seki to command this special attack force. Seki is said to have closed his eyes, lowered his head and thought for ten seconds, before saying: "please let me do it."

Another source stated that the "eyes of the young pilots gleamed with excitement" upon hearing about their suicide missions.

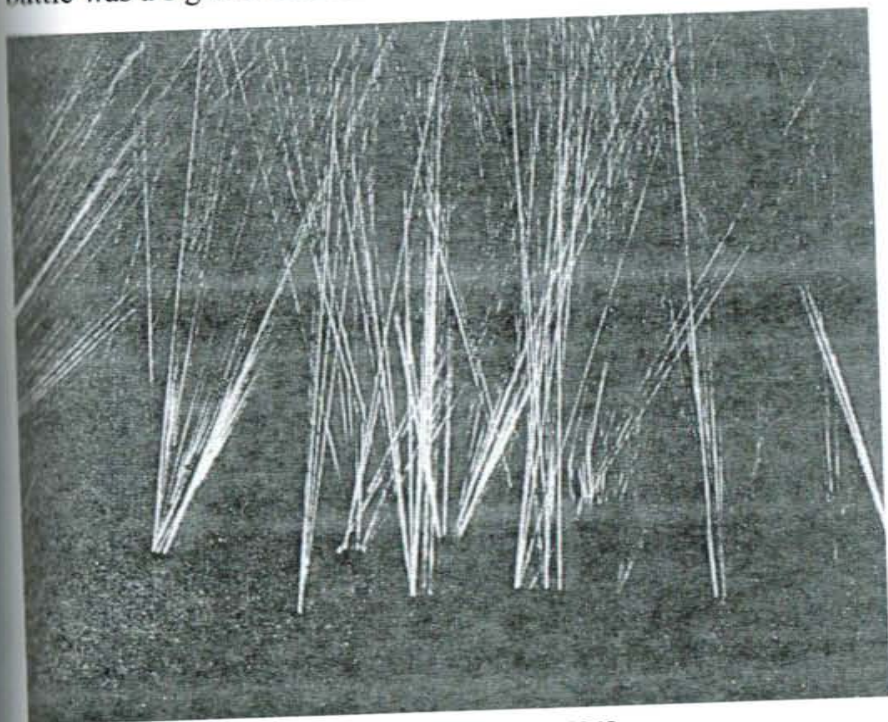
Surprisingly enough, US warships with their wooden decks were more vulnerable to the attacks of the Kamikazes than the reinforced steel-decked carriers from the British fleet. On May 4, 1945 the HMS Formidable was hit from great height by a kamikaze who made a "massive dent 3 meters long and 1 meter deep in the armored flight deck."

By the end of WWII the Japanese naval air service had sacrificed 2,525 kamikaze pilots and the army air force had lost 1,387, as reported by the Japanese.

The US reported that there were approximately 2,800 kamikaze attackers and they sank 34 Navy Ships, damaged 368 others, killed 4,900 sailors, and wounded over 4,800. Despite radar detection, airborne interception and attrition, and massive anti-aircraft barrages, a distressing 14% of kamikazes survived to score a hit on a ship. Nearly 8.5% of all ships hit by kamikazes sank.

Chapter 5 - February 21, 1945

The day our luck ran out is clearly imprinted on my mind. I was on the bridge facing south. It was about 6:00 PM at night and already getting dark. Evenings come fast in the tropics. I was observing a carrier, the *USS Saratoga*. She was limping toward us still fighting off a swarm of 50 Japanese fighters continually trying to give her the death blow. The *Saratoga* fought bravely, her gunners blasting several of the Japanese planes out of the sky. With every fourth bullet she fired being a tracer bullet; the battle was a sight to behold.



USS Saratoga's tracers, 1945

Two of the *Saratoga's* planes had landed on our ship because they couldn't land on the beat-up, badly-listing deck of the *Saratoga*. We had just retrieved these planes and pilots when the unthinkable happened. (Sadly both of these pilots perished as did everyone who was in and around the deck area.)

All of a sudden I heard **our** 40 mm guns go off, poom, poom, poom! A Japanese plane was obviously sneaking in under the radar which was below 50 feet. The kamikaze seemed to be aiming at a destroyer beside us, but went over the top of it, and headed for the front of our ship where the fuel was. But because of our gunner's fire, he took a quick left and right and hit us in the fantail where the torpedoes were. The stern exploded and flames shot upward.

I took off running for my general quarter's position, and then to my horror heard the whine of another plane diving toward us. I felt the ship move as the kamikaze hit our aft bombay and then a huge explosion. 250 ton of explosives erupted into a holocaust. Shrapnel started falling like rain. The air was filled by shouts and screams of men injured and dying.

I had hopes after the first hit that we would be okay, but after the second strike I knew it was time to get off the ship. The ship was no longer our shelter, but had become our enemy.

My friend (Eddie Milota) and I had worked out a contingency plan for this type of a situation, and now seemed to be the time to use it. I heard the Commander yell, "Abandon ship!" and I made my way as quickly as possible to the meeting place we had agreed on; the forward flight deck on the port side, 42 feet above the ocean. We felt we could swim with more safety away from the ship if we jumped from there. Otherwise, if we jumped with the wind blowing away from us there was more danger of ending up in the middle of a burning oil slick. The ship's engine's unbelievably kept going so our ship was still moving. I knew I had to get in the water and go the opposite way that the ship was going to avoid explosions and fuel spill.

The other ships in our group could not help us right now because they were fending for themselves and they dared not get

near our exploding craft without great danger to their men. It was difficult for the large ships to maneuver closer to us, so we were on our own, at least for now.

There was noise and confusion. Men came up from below, badly burned, their faces melted like pancake batter.

I hoped Eddie had not been near the point of impact. Amazingly, when I reached our meeting point, Eddie was there too. We both had on life preservers, and we quickly stripped off our socks and highly polished shoes, and set them together neatly, like we were coming back for them.

We stood poised at the edge of our jump off point. Eddie said, "Let's go!" and he jumped.

I didn't.

For some reason I didn't trust my Navy issued Life Preserver. I can only describe that life preserver as two gas tubes that were supposed to inflate the life belt. If they didn't work, there was another tube you could blow in that would inflate the life preserver. But I had tested mine earlier that day for some unexplainable reason, and I knew it wouldn't keep me above the water in the twenty foot swells. I also knew I wasn't a strong swimmer, so I felt I would have to depend on that life preserver to keep me afloat after a while.

What should I do? I'm not going to jump, I decided. But I couldn't stay on the ship. There were no choices left. Time was running out. **I had to get off and fast.**

It was at that point I noticed a monkey line dangling over the edge of the ship. A monkey line is a thick rope with knots in it every few feet. I started letting myself down into the darkness. I can't explain how frightening it was not being able to see the pitch black water below. The only light we had was from the fire and explosions on our ship. When I got down to a certain level I made the discovery that there were 10 other guys hanging on the monkey line below me. The swells were twenty feet that night so there we all were going up and down. At the lowest, the guys on the bottom were in the water, and then we all were dangling 20-30 feet in the air, like a bunch of bananas.

Two of the *Saratoga's* planes had landed on our ship because they couldn't land on the beat-up, badly-listing deck of the *Saratoga*. We had just retrieved these planes and pilots when the unthinkable happened. (Sadly both of these pilots perished as did everyone who was in and around the deck area.)

All of a sudden I heard **our** 40 mm guns go off, poom, poom, poom! A Japanese plane was obviously sneaking in under the radar which was below 50 feet. The kamikaze seemed to be aiming at a destroyer beside us, but went over the top of it, and headed for the front of our ship where the fuel was. But because of our gunner's fire, he took a quick left and right and hit us in the fantail where the torpedoes were. The stern exploded and flames shot upward.

I took off running for my general quarter's position, and then to my horror heard the whine of another plane diving toward us. I felt the ship move as the kamikaze hit our aft bombay and then a huge explosion. 250 ton of explosives erupted into a holocaust. Shrapnel started falling like rain. The air was filled by shouts and screams of men injured and dying.

I had hopes after the first hit that we would be okay, but after the second strike I knew it was time to get off the ship. The ship was no longer our shelter, but had become our enemy.

My friend (Eddie Milota) and I had worked out a contingency plan for this type of a situation, and now seemed to be the time to use it. I heard the Commander yell, "Abandon ship!" and I made my way as quickly as possible to the meeting place we had agreed on; the forward flight deck on the port side, 42 feet above the ocean. We felt we could swim with more safety away from the ship if we jumped from there. Otherwise, if we jumped with the wind blowing away from us there was more danger of ending up in the middle of a burning oil slick. The ship's engine's unbelievably kept going so our ship was still moving. I knew I had to get in the water and go the opposite way that the ship was going to avoid explosions and fuel spill.

The other ships in our group could not help us right now because they were fending for themselves and they dared not get



near our exploding craft without great danger to their men. It was difficult for the large ships to maneuver closer to us, so we were on our own, at least for now.

There was noise and confusion. Men came up from below, badly burned, their faces melted like pancake batter.

I hoped Eddie had not been near the point of impact. Amazingly, when I reached our meeting point, Eddie was there too. We both had on life preservers, and we quickly stripped off our socks and highly polished shoes, and set them together neatly, like we were coming back for them.

We stood poised at the edge of our jump off point. Eddie said, "Let's go!" and he jumped.

I didn't.

For some reason I didn't trust my Navy issued Life Preserver. I can only describe that life preserver as two gas tubes that were supposed to inflate the life belt. If they didn't work, there was another tube you could blow in that would inflate the life preserver. But I had tested mine earlier that day for some unexplainable reason, and I knew it wouldn't keep me above the water in the twenty foot swells. I also knew I wasn't a strong swimmer, so I felt I would have to depend on that life preserver to keep me afloat after a while.

What should I do? I'm not going to jump, I decided. But I couldn't stay on the ship. There were no choices left. Time was running out. **I had to get off and fast.**

It was at that point I noticed a monkey line dangling over the edge of the ship. A monkey line is a thick rope with knots in it every few feet. I started letting myself down into the darkness. I can't explain how frightening it was not being able to see the pitch black water below. The only light we had was from the fire and explosions on our ship. When I got down to a certain level I made the discovery that there were 10 other guys hanging on the monkey line below me. The swells were twenty feet that night so there we all were going up and down. At the lowest, the guys on the bottom were in the water, and then we all were dangling 20-30 feet in the air, like a bunch of bananas.

For a long moment in time we were 11 men hanging on for our lives. Nobody said anything. Suddenly someone on deck threw a life raft from one of the torpedo bombers overboard and it floated down and landed near us. All ten of the guys lower on the rope let go and swam to the raft. I remember they somehow managed to get a few wounded inside the raft and, then they just floated away into the darkness.

I stayed with the line wondering if I should have joined them. Desperation gripped my soul. I again tried to inflate my life preserver, but it didn't inflate. I was glad I had not depended on it.

Out of the darkness I suddenly made out a person face-down in the water. His Mae West Life Preserver was keeping him afloat, but he appeared to be dead. I could tell by his uniform that he was an Airdale. I grabbed hold of him and checked for any visible signs of life still keeping one hand on the monkey line. I had to make sure he was dead or I knew God would punish me for taking his life preserver. I felt for his pulse, but there was nothing. His body was already cold. I told myself he really had no further use for the life preserver so I might as well help myself, but I couldn't get it off of him. In my haste and panic, I forgot that one of the straps of the Mae West life preserver goes between the legs. I ended up letting him float away in the darkness.

Chapter 6 - Into the Sea

February 21st - continued

I have no idea how much time elapsed after I let the dead Airdale go, maybe 30 minutes. I just wasn't ready to go into the ocean without some sort of support.

Then another raft came floating by surrounded with guys. I asked them politely, "Do you mind if I hang on?" (My folks had taught me to be polite.) No one said a word, so I grabbed hold and off we went.

There were still explosions going on from the magazine of the ship. Flames shot hundreds of feet into the black sky. I saw a white-hot, five-inch cannon fly into the air. People were joining together and trying to help others who were in worse shape, often risking their own lives. But I wasn't aware of anyone else but the men on my liferaft. It was just us against the sea.

Our raft floated under the sponson (catwalk), and we were afraid we would get blasted by all the magazines* exploding above us. We worked very hard to get clear of the ship. When we were a safe distance away, our next thought was "**Somebody help us!**"

It was very hard to watch our wounded ship go down. We had lived and worked onboard this board for many long months, and watching the USS Bismarck Sea blow up, and turn over, and sink in just 90 minutes left us in black silence trying to deal with the grief of losing what we thought was a safe home, almost a friend..

Now we were surrounded by black rolling swells that were unbelievably cold. We knew that we couldn't survive very long in our present situation because of hypothermia and shock. Many of the men were wounded and would need help soon. Someone had the idea of signaling to the rescue ships with our one cell Navy issued flashlights. We tried that, but to our distress we attracted more Japanese fighter pilots who saw all of our lights as a wonderful target for strafing.

*containers of ammunition



The final explosion that sunk the USS Bismarck Sea, taken by a Navy photographer from the USS Saginaw Bay. Andy was still on the ship at this time.

Things couldn't have been much worse. Is this where our lives would end? Having these fighters shooting at us was giving the word FEAR a totally new meaning.

Whenever the Japanese dive bombers came at us, I would get under the water with just my arm holding on. What most people don't know is that when bullets leave the guns, they are rotating, and when they hit the water, they bounce off. It seemed to me to be a good idea to get myself as well covered by water as I could, so I ducked under.

I'm sure the Japanese fighter's attack didn't last that long, but it seemed forever. The fighters actually strafed us five times. As far as I was concerned it was five times too many.

I noticed suddenly that I had lost the engagement ring Nelvina had given me. The water was so cold it had just slipped off. But the cold water didn't wash off Nelvina's name, tattooed on

my arm in Honolulu before shipping out. I thought about Nelvina, and of my life, good and bad. The images that went through my mind were like a fast motion pictures, with the swelling waves in the background reminding me that the vast, dark, rolling cold ocean was trying to pull me under.

After the Japanese fighters left, we went back to our survival training. One sailor was quoted later as saying that our survival depended on fervent flailing of our arms, and fervent praying. Another sailor had the same problem with his life belt that I did. Fortunately, he remembered seeing a scene in a movie about survival. Treading water steadily he kicked off his trousers, tied the end of the legs and the waist and used his own pants for a flotation device.

We tried to help those who were wounded, and we tried to encourage each other. Another man and I held one wounded sailor out of the water. Several times we changed sides to keep this sailor out of the water. When one of us would get tired the other would take over. But sometime during that long time in the water the wounded sailor got away from us. We don't know what happened to him or how he slipped away from us. He was just unbelievably, gone.

The destroyers in our group had scattered when we were hit, but about 3:00 AM they started coming back to pick us up. Suddenly we became aware of their dark shapes appearing quietly in the black night water. Then, joy of joys, we saw their wonderfully welcoming searchlights of the USS Edmonds. To say that we were very glad to see those friendly beams of light is an understatement.

A captain of a rescue ship shouted encouraging words to the survivors, "Hold on! We'll have you on board in no time." With nothing but a life belt between him and eternity one sailor yelled back, "Captain, I love you." A sense of humor helps relieve stress under horrific conditions.

Some of the guys hanging on to our raft let go of the raft and swam to the rescue ship. I didn't. I hung on for dear life.

Another guy next to me suddenly swore loudly. I had

known this guy on board. He was the storekeeper, a profane individual. His language and his persona were offensive to everyone. Now, after we had a rescue ship in sight, he suddenly gave up, let go of the raft and disappeared beneath the dark sea never to be seen again with a curse on his lips. **I can still see him go.**

I was so weak by this time; I hardly noticed what was going on around me. Then my raft started to sink. I tread water and finally maneuvered myself within reach of the cargo net the rescue ship had let down. I reached for it, but I couldn't climb it. It was like I had no strength in my body. Finally a couple of guys came down to help me up. I had to be carried. (Six weeks later my shoulders were still so exhausted that I couldn't raise my arms.)

When I was finally safely on board, I was trembling from head to foot and couldn't stop. They wrapped me in blankets and put me in a bunk, but I still couldn't stop shaking. Someone placed me in an officer's bunk. Finally the officer whose bunk I was in came to me and said, "I see you're cold. We've got to get you warmed up. Do you like whiskey?"

"No sir," I stammered.

"Never mind," he said, "You're going to like this."

He handed me a bottle and said, "Take a deep breath and tip the bottle up and drink as much of this as you can."

I hated whiskey, but I thought I would do what he asked. That whiskey burned down my throat and made me feel like my head was on fire. But I stopped shaking, and I didn't wake up for hours.

The morning after I had found safety, some of our fellow crew members who did not live through the night were buried at sea...a sight I will never forget. Their flag wrapped corpses, each weighed down with a 50 pound projectile, slipped silently into the deep. **That was very tough to witness. I can still see it now.**

The next day we were taken to a hospital ship. When I went up for lunch, someone accidentally dropped a stainless steel tray. I can't describe to you the terror all of the rescued sailors felt when that happened. It was like, "Here we go again!"

Chapter 7 - The War goes on Without Me 1945



Back on Iwo Jima the marines finally landed. We heard they used flamethrowers to get the operators of the giant cannon on top of Mt. Surabachi.

But for now we were out of the war.

We sailed to Pearl Harbor on a hospital ship. During that cruise I ran into Commander Born one day, and interestingly enough, he asked if he could borrow my watch that he had given me. He promised to give it back in Pearl Harbor.

I was feeling extremely fortunate at this time. There had been 947 men on the USS Bismarck Sea. Over 321 men died and I was one of the over 600 survivors.

What happened to Eddie Milota? He made it too, but I didn't find out he was alive until we got to Pearl Harbor. When we saw each other, we both yelled, "I thought you were dead!" We were very glad to see each other and remained good friends for the rest of our lives.

News of the sinking of the *Bismarck Sea* made it home before we did. I was not able to contact Nelvina or my parents until I was at Pearl Harbor. Then the letter that I sent was pretty sketchy. We were ordered not to tell our parents and friends at home any details because of fear that these facts might aid our enemies. (See Andy's actual letter on the next page.)

When we got to Pearl Harbor they had a parade to honor all of us who had survived. Commander Born reviewed us all, lined up in our dress whites, and then actually pushed his way through the crowd to shake my hand and thank me. As we shook hands, I saw the watch on his wrist, but I was too chicken to ask for it, and it was gone forever.