

SURVIVAL UNDER FIRE IN THE LAND OF STONE MONEY

One of the strangest aspects of primitive life in the Pacific and possibly the world is its money. If a stroller on Broadway, instead of jingling the coins in his pocket, were to come down the street rolling a coin as tall as himself, he would achieve a sensation. But such coins are common on the small cluster of five closely grouped islands in the central Pacific, called Yap. In fact, some coins are twice this size; placed on edge, a tall man would have to stand on another tall man's head to reach the top.

In the center of each coin is a round hole. In an important coin, this is as large as a man hole. When the coin is to be payed, a tree is thrust through the hole and a crew of perhaps one hundred men, half of them at each end, partly lift and partly drag the coin over the ancient stone-paved jungle trails to the creditor. There are no wheeled vehicles on Yap except one or two ox-carts in the port town. Even with coins only two and three feet in size "going shopping" is no slight matter.

How did Yap get such an unwieldy coinage? The tradition is that a thousand years ago one of the more disreputable gods thought to cause dissension among men. They were at peace because they had nothing to war over; he would give them something to war over, money.

He whispered to a king of Tomil a plan to make him great and powerful. Obedient to the heavenly vision, the king sailed south over unknown waters to islands of the Palau group. There he found shining rock (calcite) which the malicious deity instructed him to have his men hew out with their shell axes into flat pieces rounded like the orb of the full moon. These were loaded into the canoe and brought back to Yap, not without many perils. The god cast a spell over the people that caused every man of them to desire nothing so much as one of these heaven sent stones. To obtain them, they paid the king of Tomil

great riches in the form of coconuts, canoes and houses. So the wheels became a medium of exchange for goods.

And.... Those who tell the legend go on to say that there has been no peace in Yap since then. The golden (or stone) apple of discord disrupted the island paradise. Formerly there had been no covetousness, for there was nothing to covet. No man desired his neighbors coconuts, for he had his own. There was food enough for everyone and no one wanted clothing. Greed was born when money came in. There was quarreling among relatives as to who should inherit which rock, feuds between neighbors and wars between villages.

There was only enough of the first money to be tantalizing. Expeditions set out to get more. They went not only to Palau, but to Guam where an even finer stone could be obtained. But it was four hundred miles to Guam and the seas were stormy. Many canoes were lost, particularly on the return voyage when loaded to the danger point with great stone wheels. It was not uncommon for twenty canoes to set out for Guam and only one return.

Of course the difficulty and danger in securing the stone kept up its value. There could be no counterfeiting, for there was no similar stone to be found in Yap. It is calcite or crystallized carbonate of lime which form in veins filling the cracks in limestone or other rock. There is nothing inherently precious about it. It has value to the Yap native only because it is the accepted medium of exchange.

It was into the realm of this strange primitive land that the USS Cabot was to wander as a member of a great task force on its way to victory over Japan in WWII.

On the afternoon of 26 July, 1944, four torpedo planes and eight fighters took off from the USS Cabot CVL 28 for an attack on the island of Yap. They rendezvoused with flights from two C.V.s and approached Yap from the southeast. This attack by Air Group 31 planes, followed attacks by larger air groups which had utilized VF bombing and strafing of gun positions and VT bombing of buildings in Yap Town with frags, incendiaries, and 100 pound G.P. bombs. On recovery, all planes were directed to the rendezvous point with the exception of one T.B.M., piloted by Lt. (jg) J. B. Russell, of Portsmouth, Ohio.

Russell had been directed to make photographic obliques of the town of Yap to determine if gun placements had been installed in a Shinto Shrine on the waterfront of the town. He made two runs at 1,500' and one at 500' , and then proceeded northeast, past the airfield, his photographer combat aircrewman, Howard Webster of Chicago, Illinois, taking pictures as they went. After passing the northern tip of the island, he turned south again to take pictures of some apparently undamaged aircraft on the field. After circling the field Russell made this run at 500' and had turned at the northern tip of the field when the plane was hit by what is believed to be a three inch AA shell (if so, this crew is the only one ever to take a direct hit by a three inch shell and live to tell about it). The plane burst into flames immediately indicating a hit in the main gas line or gas tank, and smoke and flames filled the cockpit, completely obscuring the instrument panel.

Russell prepared to abandon ship, but before doing so he attempted to tell his crew to "hit the silk". This action was really not necessary. There was little doubt in the minds of the two well trained aircrewmen as to the proper action to be taken. The aircrewmen flying T.B.M.s as a

general rule do not wear their parachutes during combat due to space limitations. They simply wear a harness and attach the parachute to this when they need it. This however takes a few seconds to accomplish. The turret gunner must climb down from the turret before he can accomplish the chuting up process. Warren Bennett of Jackson, Michigan, the turret gunner, made the climb in one combination leap and slide to land along side of Webster who had stepped back from the open hatch because flames from the outside of the plane were coming in the open hatch. Both air-crewmembers received severe burns on all exposed parts of their bodies during this short period of time. The flames lapped up around Russells feet and the control stick, making it so hot that he was unable to hold it for more than a few seconds at a time, even with gloves. Finally, when the cockpit had become entirely unbearable, Russell was forced to bail out, cutting a severe gash in the top of his head as he went. As his parachute opened, he found himself alongside his photographer, Webster. Due to the difference in their respective weights (Webster weighed 123 pounds, Russell weighed well over 200 pounds, and was referred to as the "Beast" by his crewman), Webster seemed to hang in the air, while Russell dropped like a stone.

Russell had his back to Webster and seemed to be hurt , hanging limp in his chute. Webster called to him, "Are you all right?" Russell turned and looked up at Webster and yelled "Whoopee!" The Jap shore batteries opened up on the three airmen during the descent. Bullets tore past them as they floated to the water, but all three landed safely, about a mile off shore in a sheltered bay protected by land on three sides. The first phase of survival was successfully completed.

Russell and Webster landed about 40 yards apart and Bennett hit the water about 300 yards away from his comrades and closer to shore. Russell was wearing his seat pack life raft, but was unable to open it because of the severe hand burns he had received in the cockpit. He called to Webster for help, and Webster, though also painfully burned on the hands and face, swam to Russell's aid, opened the raft and helped his pilot into it. The pain of salt water on open wounds now took a telling effect on all three men. Russell went temporarily blind as a result of his ordeal in the cockpit, so Webster assumed command of the situation. For some time Russell was not aware of the fact that Bennett had survived until Webster directed Bennett to head for open sea to get out of gun range. Webster then began to plan a course of action to be taken in case his pilots injuries were to keep him from taking command again. He counted on rescue in about two hours, but if this did not take place he planned to stay in the water until dark and head for shore to dig in until our forces landed the following day. He proposed the plan to Russell who agreed somewhat reluctantly. The prospect of trying to land virtually alone on a Jap infested island did not set to well with the experienced pilot, Webster's calculations were based on his limited knowledge of the island of Yap, their position in the water, location of the fleet some 150 miles away, incorrect information about a landing on the following day, type of equipment available for rescue and last but not least complete confidence in the United States Navy to come to their aid.

As Russell began to recover slightly and his confidence began to return, he proposed that "If we go ashore tonight, in the morning we will put them all under arrest". By the term "all under arrest," he was to his knowledge referring to some 10,000 Japs. Today Webster says that, "Stupid as it sounds, at the time I thought we could do it". This is a

direct result of Navy propoganda fed to aircrewmn, that they could do anything and that they were the best of the best, resulting in a slight case of over confidence.

Meanwhile, the shore batteries continued to fire and several of the shells landed perilously close to the raft. Shortly after hitting the water a torpedo plane dropped a raft to Bennett, and a division of fighters covered the downed airmen until they were forced to return to the fleet by lack of fuel. When the overhead fighter protection become evident to the men in the water, Webster grew cocky, and proceeded to stand up in the raft and wave a thoroughly water soaked and useless .38 pistol over his head, challenging the Japs to come out and just try to get them. Each time he would stand up the shore batteries would open fire with another volley.

As the airmen settled down for the wait for rescue a new problem came into focus. They soon discovered that they were in shark infested waters and that the sharks were rapidly becoming interested in the activity going on in the area. Webster immediately broke out the shark repellent and began to spread it on the water. He directed Bennett to do the same. Bennett began to show some apprehension about the one particular shark eyeing him. Webster assured him that sharks were cowards and asked Bennett if he had read the Navy book on shark sense. Bennett replied that he sure had but he was not so sure that this shark had read it. Bennett however did calm down a bit and here again Navy propoganda paid off in instilling confidence.

Although it was not known by the airmen at the time, they discovered later that they actually would have been safer on land than they were in the water. The natives for this area are not noted for their swimming

abilities, and for good reason. They do not care to swim in these waters. Among the many species of life in the water around Yap are of course the man eating sharks. Next come the barracuda, particularly dangerous to man, along with the manta ray or devil fish. There is also a species of robber crabs that can husk a coconut in one snap of their claw. This crab can crush a man's skull with ease.

The airmen had landed in a shallow bay on the East side and about the center of Tomil Island, one of the main islands of the Yap group. As they faced shore, on their left, although out of sight to the airmen, was a small native settlement or village called Umung. In the center was the Jap airfield and its nearby gun placements, and on the right, also out of sight was another small native settlement or village called Ueloi. All three shores of the bay were lined with a very dense growth of mangrove swamp, exceedingly difficult to penetrate on foot. The island of Tomil was the main stronghold of the Jap forces and would have been the most dangerous of the islands in the Yap group on which to attempt a landing, even in force. The two northern islands gave more promise of possible survival if they could be reached. Only the two main islands, Yap Island and Gagil Tomil Island were occupied by the Japanese military to any great extent. The others were still occupied by the original Micronesians or Kanakas. "Kanaka" is an indefinite word to describe reddish-brown, black-haired, deep-eyed, wide-nosed, and large-mouthed race, but we have no better word. According to the dictionary, "Kanaka" means "loosely, any South Sea islander". Therefore the significance of the word differs in different parts of the Pacific. The smaller island of Rumung would have been the best choice for a safe landing but this was not known at the time.

The bay in which the airmen had landed had but one narrow outlet

THE NAVY IS PROUD OF ITS

AIRCREW MEN

AIRCREW MEN FILL DOUBLE JOB AS
TECHNICIAN AND AERIAL GUNNER

"TRIPLE THREAT" MEN STAR IN NAVAL AVIATION



RADIOMAN SHOTS DOWN 3 JAPS IN BATTLE

Naval aviation has thousands of men who go the old phrase one better and actually "triple in brass." First of all, these men are sailors with a background in seamanship. Second, they are technicians with a knowledge of airplanes and the thousand-and-one maintenance tasks required to keep planes in the air. Third, they are flight crew members and gunners. In this capacity, they treat mechanical troubles aloft

and know the satisfaction of personally pouring steel at the enemy.

It takes plenty of training to qualify as one of these triple-threat men. After boot camp indoctrination in seamanship and traditions of the Navy, the trainee volunteers for aviation duty. If selected, he is sent to NATechTra schools to study for an aviation rating and further lessons in seamanship. Then, if he is 5 feet 10 inches tall and less than 160 pounds in weight, he volunteers for flight duty. It requires more schooling to give him the split-second know-how of aerial gunnery. But it is this final ability that makes him a three-edged threat to the Axis.

Generally, the men who "triple in brass" are AMMs, ARMs, and AOMs. All of them are enlisted personnel. They wear air crew wings as a mark of distinction and ride right behind pilots as the "back-seat heroes" of naval aviation.

Aircrewmen Have What It Takes

YOU FIRST, SIR

Three Navy airmen narrowly escaped death in a flaming TBF when each member of the crew insisted upon delaying his jump until the others had bailed out. This tale speaks of heroism.



THE mission was photographic. The location—Jap airfield at Yap Island. As they skimmed along at a low altitude, ack burst in the air around them, and they were struck just as they pulled out for the homeward flight. The *Avenger* shuddered, lurched, and great quantities of smoke filled the cockpit. The instrument panel became almost invisible. . . . The pilot fumbled for the controls.

Struggling to keep the plane on an even keel, the lieutenant called his crew. "We're hit, dammit. . . . Bail out."

Warren N. Bennett and Howard M. Webster, Jr., aircrewmembers, both received the command, but Bennett shouted back, "You

first, sir." The pilot never heard that message, for rapidly spreading fire had damaged the microphone wire.

The pilot waited for them to jump. No one stirred. Seconds ticked by, and the control stick became hotter and hotter. Even with gloves on, he was unable to grasp it for any length of time.

Finally, the smoke became so unbearable and the flames so engulfing that all three hit the silk at the same time. Jap bullets tore past them as they floated to the water. Shore batteries opened fire. Despite the shelling, they landed in the water without casualties. Two hours later, an OS2U sighted the crew and rescued all.

Aircrewmen have what it takes!