

One hundred miles south-southwest of Puerto Galera (an overnigher on a yacht) lays the island of Busuanga. Today it is internationally famous for the opportunities it offers scuba divers . . . but only because of what happened there more than 60 years ago The following account of the attack is the result of research and transcripts of conversations.

CORON
24th September 1944
by Martyn Willes

“Blue leader, Red leader, I think we are near the mark”

“Red Leader, affirmative . . . we descend to angels three in one minute . . . any sign of that break in the cloud we were promised”

“Blue Leader, Red leader, I saw an island through a gap a second ago . . . looks pretty much like paradise down there”

“Red leader, let’s hope the break is big enough to see the target”

“Blue leader, let’s hope the target is still there”

Mark Zalick could just make out his wingmen through the glare in the cloud tops. As his Helldiver sped forward through the comforting enclosure of water vapor he felt secure and slowly flexed first his feet then his thighs, his back, his arms and finally his fingers, to relieve the numbness brought on by 300 miles of altitude-induced cold.

“Chip, you OK back there” Mark summoned his navigator come rear-gunner on the intercom.

“Yep, and I reckon we are ready for the drop” Chip’s voice came back to him.

They both knew they would soon be replaying the role they had acted out in Palau less than three weeks before.

The four Helldivers were spat out of a wall of cloud at six thousand feet; followed by another four and then another. A gaggle of Hellcats from Air Group 31 were visible a few thousand feet above and ahead of them. Immediately in front and below the eastern edges of Busuanga and Coron Islands shimmered in the morning sun; the deep cobalt blue of the tropical sea offering immense contrast to the last few hours of almost continuous white.

“God that’s beautiful” Chip’s crackling voice came over the intercom; over the radio, “Blue leader, Blue flight, let go the tanks, prepare for attack.”

Almost as one the flight of Helldivers released their long-range fuel tanks. Chip felt a small increase in speed, a slight strain on his seat belt as the drag reduced over the airframe and the long-range fuel tanks floated, tumbled almost gracefully away in the slipstream.

Ahead and below: at least fifteen Japanese ships huddled in the sheltered waters of Coron Bay, to the west of Coron Island. Mark moved his finger slowly over the bomb release as if checking to see if it was still there.

It had only been a day since enemy activities in the Calamyan Island group, including “unusual shipping”, had been reported by Combat Air Patrol. Such was the responsiveness and capability of the US Third Fleet, commanded by William “Bull” Halsey aboard the battleship USS New Jersey, in September 1944.

Taking off at dawn, 22 Curtis Helldivers from Air Groups 18 and 19, supported by no less than 96 Grumman Hellcats from Air Group 31, hoped to surprise the Japanese, but the 340 mile journey would leave them precious little time over the target. This was the longest-range carrier-based attack thus far attempted anywhere in the Pacific theatre.

Air Group 18, with twelve Helldivers, was to be the first bombing wave to be followed an hour later by Air Group 19 with ten more Helldivers. In the first wave each plane carried two 500-pound bombs; in the second wave each carried single 1,000-pound bombs. Half of the fighters also carried 500-pound bombs. This was to be a significant attack.

“Blue flight, pick your targets” Mark commanded “And remember these new bomb sights are set for a two thousand foot release”.

The Imperial Japanese Navy ship Akitsushima was a seaplane tender and rather ungainly, with a tall radio tower amidships and a large crane on her stern for retrieving her charges. Not heavily armed as an aggressor -- sporting only a single forward mounted four inch gun -- the Akitsushima was nevertheless not defenseless, having numerous 0.5 inch machine guns strategically installed amidships and at the stern. She was riding at anchor in-line behind the oil tanker, Okikawa Maru, in the channel south of Uson Island.

Mark could see both the Akitsushima and the Okikawa Maru being strafed by the leading flight of Hellcat fighters -- the long lines of tracer marking the progress of the pilots' aim as they swooped over their prey. Returning fire came from two of Akitsushima's machine guns but it was apparent that the primary motivation of the ship's crew was to raise the anchor and become a moving rather than stationery target. Thick belches of black smoke poured from her funnel as her engines strained at full revolutions and a swirling gush of creamy water billowed from her stern.

The tracer from the fighters showed bright in the fresh morning light and sparkled as it hit the deck and superstructure. Mark knew that between each sparkle there were nine live rounds but he was still too far away to see any damage they may be causing.

Two more machine guns on the stern of the Akitsushima came to life and he thought he could make out the huddled figures of the gunners, focused on his Helldiver's swirling propeller. He flinched as the first bullets popped the fabric covers of his four, wing-mounted browning machine guns in reply; their recoil rattled the instrument panel.

Two thousand five hundred feet and the ship was large in his gun sight: filling it and overflowing around its edges. A pop, pop, pop in rapid succession as a gunner's aim on the Akitsushima came close to perfect, leaving a short trail of holes across Mark's starboard wingtip.

“Shit” shouted Chip.

The bomb release ejected the two 500-pound bombs towards the target. The Helldiver lifted, climbed and banked to the left giving Chip an uninterrupted view of their fall. He opened fire with his own machine gun, the wide sweeping trail of tracer showing his expertise at it slowly arced across clear air and then impacted near the bridge.

The bombs fell apparently effortlessly, almost gracefully Chip thought, towards the deck of the ship and were momentarily obscured -- gray-on-gray -- and then came the explosion. Black smoke and brilliant flame erupted from near the stern. A moment later a second eruption, bigger than the first, engulfed the stern and forced it deeper into the creamy water. It was obvious to Chip that some vital part of the ship had been hit -- maybe munitions or maybe . . . the tanks of aviation fuel used for refueling the seaplanes.

“Holy mother . . .” Chip exclaimed, “look at that!”

“I can see it” Mark replied, “I think we can call that a hit”

“Maybe a kill?”

“We need to take an inventory of what's here for the ‘Bull’”

Continuing to climb in a sweeping turn Mark brought the Helldiver up to three thousand feet and gave Chip a broadside view of Coron Bay and its approaches, so that he could catalog the ships now scattering in all directions. The Okikawa Maru was also on fire, three were making for the western passage, two were going south and another was apparently trying to hide between Uson and Angat Islands.

From previous engagements, Naval Intelligence had created a library of Japanese ships and Chip now poured over the picture cards.

“Olympia Maru, cargo carrier, Irako, a reefer” Chip ticked them off his list as he spoke, “the oiler Kamoi . . . Mark, bring us around to the south west again.”

“These clouds look ugly I think we are in for some weather.”

“Two more supply ships, the Kogyo Maru and Taiei Maru. Why are there so many ‘Marus’?”

“It’s probably the name of a God or something” Mark suggested.

“Hold on, the Taiei Maru is reported sunk in on her way to Manila last month . . . the (USS) Haddo’s going to be pissed that she’s still afloat!”

“We’re close to fuel limits, we should head home” Chip announced through the intercom.

“Affirmative, we’ll swing across the island and recon the other side as we leave” then into the radio, “Blue flight, Blue leader check your fuel and group to the northeast, sector five. We’ll leave the rest to the 19th.”

The Helldiver climbed in a sweeping turn to starboard bringing it west of Angat Island and then headed north across the western half of Busuanga Island. It turned east along the northern coast, its crew alert for enemy aircraft although none had been encountered so far.

“Look, I think there’s another ship down there, camouflaged . . . I’m going down for a closer look.”

“What’s it doing all the way around here?” Chip asked, almost to himself.

“I don’t know but its not escaping us without some damage”

The 170 meter long, army cargo ship, Kyokuzan Maru was secreted in a narrow inlet on the northeast corner of Busuanga Island. On the shore Mark saw a small building beside a busy pier with two small craft making from it towards the Kyokuzan Maru. The building had a large chimney that was obviously in use -- a plume of gray smoke streamed from it. Changing focus back to the ship, Mark dipped his port wing to line up for an attack. He fingered the cannon trigger as the ship came into his gun site. The cloud was low over his target and he would have to get down to a thousand feet or less to be sure of hitting it.

“We are going to slow her down.”

“Watch out for the hills . . . they rise steeply on the chart” cautioned Chip.

“She’s maneuvering.” Mark announced as the Helldiver swooped low under the edge of the dark cloud.

Refining his line Mark regained the target full in his gun site and pressed the trigger. The twin, wing mounted cannon thumped out their rhythm and the line of shells threw up plumes of spray just feet from the hull of the ship and then continued up the sides and over the deck. Metal punctured and shattered wood burst in a cascade as more than fifty shells found their mark.

Zooming over the ship and banking to port, Chip had his own chance to inflict wounds on the secretive prey.

The Helldiver circled out to sea, preparing to make another pass over its victim. A spatter of rain streaked the windshield as the belly of the cloud started to tear, releasing ghostly gray sheets that slowly filled the space between cloud and sea. A waterspout formed near the edge of the cloud, like a thick twisting ribbon, and touched down a hundred feet from the Kyokuzan Maru.

“Let’s leave this one to the Gods” said Mark, realizing the danger of continuing his attack at low level in such turbulent air. He leveled the wings of the Helldiver and continued east towards Mindoro Island away from the ship. A second later . . .

“Jesus!”

Mark craned his neck to see the focus of Chip’s exclamation.

The Kyokuzan Maru was engulfed by the waterspout. Debris from the deck was flying wildly out from the edges of the angry gray ribbon. The lifeboats were torn from their mounts and blown aside as if they were paper cups. The entire vessel was lifted maybe twenty feet above the surface of the water and then thrown down with such force that the decks were swamped never to regain the surface. The whole sequence took just twenty seconds.

“They must have upset someone real important” concluded Chip “Is that another kill?”.