

I suddenly felt as if the fury of the whole war had been turned on me.

WHEN a usually reticent United States Navy officer looks you steadily in the eye and says, quietly and seriously, "Action? I've seen plenty of action," you may be sure that he has.

It was Lieutenant Jack Gibson, U. S. N., lean, sandy-haired, with sea-green eyes and a tanned face, who said this to me in this way. A moment later, as he went on, it was plain that in his mind the twenty-eight-year-old lieutenant was at sea again, at the hour of the attack on Pearl Harbor. And then, with hushed, at times almost inaudible words, he projected his own vivid mental picture of falling Zeros, their trailing smoke plumes crisscrossed against the sky. He told of Japanese bombers, hit by American shell fire, literally vanishing in mid-air. And he made me see, as he himself did, a dramatic battle picture—heavy cruisers slugging it out in the dark on a sea that was lighted by flares and by the fires of burning ships that cut circles of destruction through helplessly floating men.

It was action in the Pacific being unfolded in a quiet corner of a coffee shop in Brooklyn. Lieutenant Gibson was telling me about it:

I WAS radio officer on the heavy cruiser Astoria, on a routine patrol off Hawaii, when a dispatch reached us: Pearl Harbor was being bombed. Everything at sea was ordered to intercept the Japanese carriers. Our task force scouted the sea and the air for ten days, but nothing was sighted. At last we turned back for Pearl Harbor. Not a man had spoken of his wife and children left in their neat white bungalows at Pearl City, but we sure were thinking of them.

Coming up on Pearl Harbor, we were met by our own patrol planes. What surprised us was that Japanese submarines were still active in this area. Destroyers were tearing around, dropping ash cans; empty shell cases littered the sea, and strange and alarming debris was

ACTION IN THE PACIFIC

A naval officer who fought through the big Pacific sea battles talks of cruisers slugging it out off the Solomons, how we mowed 'em down at Midway, and the last hours of the Astoria—told as you have never heard it told before

BY EARL SCHENCK

ILLUSTRATED BY PVT. JACK COGGINS

floating out to meet us. We were in "Torpedo Junction," as the waters off the harbor entrance are now called.

We expected to see a sunken battleship and a few damaged destroyers, for by the grace of God our carriers and cruisers were at sea at the time—but nothing had prepared us for the hell that was Pearl Harbor.

"How could they do all this in so short a time?" was everybody's question. Then we thought of our fellow officers, our men, and our wives.

"Somebody is going to pay for this," our captain said through his clenched teeth.

The men went down the gangway with tears in their eyes.

I found our bungalow abandoned, the roof and lanai full of shrapnel and machine-gun holes. The tail of a plane stuck out of the attic of a house two doors away. June and our little Sally had seen the whole show from our sea wall. The Utah was going up in smoke when they were ordered into a cane field and finally evacuated from Pearl City Peninsula. I found them, by telephone, safe and sound in Honolulu, and June drove out to meet me.

It was not all as confusing as you might think. The Navy had taken a belly blow, but we had a job to do now and we were anxious to get at it. In five days we were at sea again on running patrols. I was in charge of "control aft." That handled the main battery. There were fifty men under me, trained down to the pink and sharp-edged for action.

"It's hard to believe," I said to Lieutenant Don Willman one night, "that not so very long ago we were carrying Ambassador Saito's ashes back to Japan—had the 'sacred remains' right up there in the band room on the upper deck."

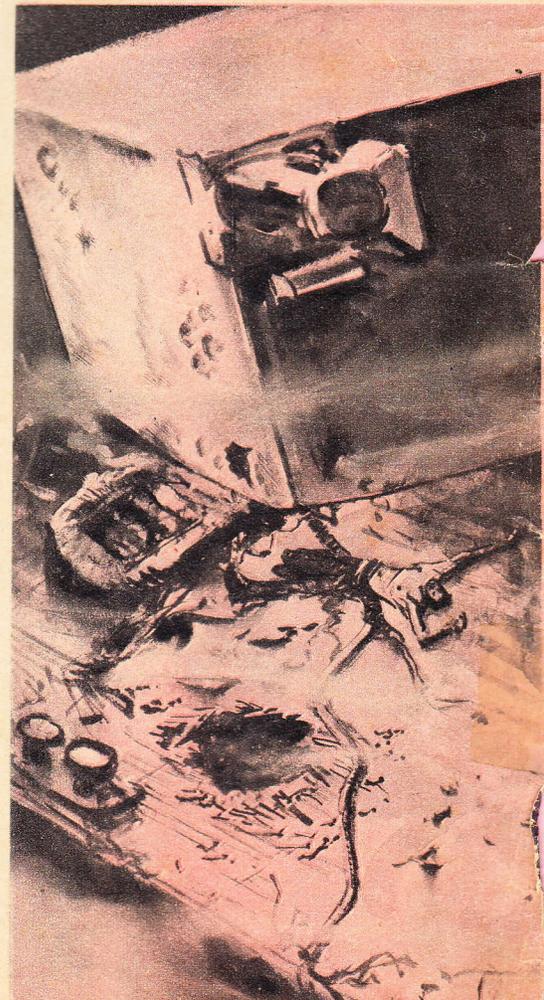
"Do you remember all those pretty toasts and speeches they gave us in Yokohama?" he asked. Then his face hardened. "Boy! I'd like to see the Astoria going up to the Yamashita pier tonight—but with everything we have wide open!"

We never clinched with the Japanese until the Battle of the Coral Sea, the first encounter between carrier forces in the history of the

world. The Astoria was protecting the carriers and our fire brought down two Japanese planes. The men cheered when they saw our torpedo and bomber planes taking off with real "eggs" to lay and not the usual practice powder and sandbags.

The Lexington sank that afternoon, and next morning we took on nearly a thousand survivors. Many of them were singed from fires, rope burns, and torpedo blasts, but we had paid the Japs off plenty and the men were cheering as though they'd won the Thanksgiving football game.

This return to Pearl Harbor was something better. We were bringing in the damaged Yorktown and pro-



ceeding at maximum speed to save our wounded. We entered the harbor with all crews at quarters, while the shore bands were playing and cheers swelled up from every ship we passed. You could tell by the grins on the men's faces and the trim of their backs that they were proud to be standing there in Navy shoe leather with their feet on a U. S. deck.

Things were humming in those times. We'd had only a few days ashore when scouting planes reported a large Japanese force steaming eastward. It was said to be the greatest armada of fighting ships ever assembled, and we knew we were going up against them without the heavy guns of our capital ships. Repair crews scrambled off the Yorktown with their job half done and we were soon at sea, heading into history and the Battle of Midway Island.

Probably no one will ever know what actually happened at Midway. The engagement was on too vast a scale. But we took the Japanese by surprise when they thought our whole fleet was somewhere in the Southwest Pacific. Their force was divided into two parts, and the first one cleared its carrier decks for an aerial attack on Midway Island. Those Japs believed they were going to have another Pearl Harbor holiday. Few of their planes ever re-

turned. They were knocked down over Midway or picked off by our fighter planes.

In the meantime TBDs from our own carriers had found their flat-tops and sent them gurgling to the bottom. Our men were about out of gasoline when they sighted the Jap carriers. Just the same, they went down for the kill, knowing they'd have no gas to take them back.

In the next stage we fell on the reserve force in a two-day running attack that sent the Japs high-tailing for Tokyo. The battle was all in the air, without any surface action, but ships were burning and sinking all around the horizon. Thousands of swimming Japanese sailors were abandoned in their life jackets when the Japs began to run.

In this action the Astoria was fighting off a swarm of Japanese planes that kept coming over in waves. I was busy directing machine-gun fire at a stream of bombers, torpedo planes and, later, fighters that swooped down to strafe our deck. At times the air seemed filled with falling planes, for our own fighters were "upstairs," dropping the Japanese on our heads.

Meanwhile the fleet was zigzagging through a sea churned white for miles and spotted with the white geysers of bomb misses. The Astoria had a near miss from a pair that dropped heavy water to our

decks, but we went on with the formation that was weaving like a troop of dancing elephants.

The ship was alive with activity. Flags were running up and down the halyards, ammunition was coming up the hoists, men with message blanks came tearing in and out. Word was passed that the Yorktown was sinking, but we kept on fighting. Our anti-aircraft fire was a continuous drone.

"Enemy planes bearing three-three-eight . . ."

It seemed it would never end. We wiped the sweat out of our eyes and adjusted our earphones. A new flight of dive bombers was peeling off after us. We got them as they came in. A plane would be there, and then it would break into a ball of flames and not even a stick or a strut would be left to come down.

One plane got through and we peppered it with machine-gun fire. Its motor conked, the Jap pilot slumped over, dead, and the gunner sagged out of the cockpit with one arm dragging. The plane continued on its glide with a free machine gun still firing. A bullet hit the starboard bulkhead of the Astoria's communication office. It dug a groove in the paint and dropped harmlessly to the deck just as the plane dived into

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