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RECOLLECTIONS IN SOLITUDE

Often in the still of the night my thoughts sometimes wander to the fateful Idea of March of the year 1944 and again the vivid picture of a mighty carrier, whose lines and curves are graceful as those of a woman's, takes form before my eyes -- a gallant ship, manned by a gallant crew, many of whom gave their lives in order to preserve the liberty we all cherish so much.

Each event of that fateful day passes before my vision and I see myself standing on the flight deck with my buddies, our eyes not yet accustomed to the lessening darkness which contrasted so strongly with the brilliant illumination we had left below decks, each ambling along to our respective stations in the still hush before dawn. And again my ears are startled by the sudden, Bong, Bong, Bong, of the alarm system, mingled with the shrill notes of the bugler, double-timing all men to battle stations. Many were never to reach them in time, for in the space of seconds, a Jap bomber was upon us and had released his three deadly missiles upon the unsuspecting carrier and her crew, leaving in its wake a scene of indescribable horror and suffering. Before my very eyes men with whom I had toiled, slept, and ate beside, many of whom I had grown to love as brothers, were burned to a crisp in the searing white hot flash of flame that swept the flight and hangar decks. Others appeared as giant pyres of flame darting to and fro, zig-zag across the decks. By all laws of science and nature these men were dead, but their muscular impulses had not yet ceased and their agonized faces were their sole resemblance to men. Other scores were ripped to shatters by flying steel and shrapnel and hundreds

blown into the murky sea. Many more suffocated from smoke. Men whom I had known to be once whole and full of life and laughter were now just mutilated hulks of flesh. To top the horror of this sinister ordeal is the picture stamped so vividly in my mind of men who were blown up thru the catwalks and steel decks by the concussion of the explosion and hung dangling by their necks, swaying with every motion of the ship. Other sights that I beheld are too horrible to describe but remain in my heart and in the hearts and minds of those who witnessed these happenings and our solitudes are disturbed by these harrowing memories.

As I ponder this orgy of horrors, I remember myself looking into the waters below, in which I could see floating lifeless bodies illuminated and dismembered by the constant explosions of star shell and rockets bellowing forth from the magazines in the bowels of the vessel, and wondering at what precise time my turn was coming. I said a prayer, which was the only relief I could obtain for myself. Then my thoughts wandered back home and somehow and in some way they made me chuckle for I remember so vividly saying to myself: "If Mom and Dad could only see me now!" As I stood looking out over the waters, beyond the horrors, ~~at-that~~ ~~very-moment~~ I started to wonder what my mother and father were doing and thinking at that very moment and I asked God, in the name of Jesus, to please let me see my Mom and Dad just once more, so that I could tell them how much I really loved and cared for them, for before leaving home, I felt all this, but was too timid to come out and tell them how I really felt, and just hoped that they knew and understood; but now, above all, I wanted them to know, for I had a premonition that I would never see them again.

My thoughts of home were suddenly drowned out by the screams and cries of trapped men, praying and pleading for help, that came up from all ventilators from below decks. My mind was not as yet functioning nor did I grasp the reality of what was occurring about me. I could not make myself think or believe that what was happening was real; I thought it must be a dream, for I could not believe such horrors possible. Events of my past life continually passed before my mind's eye in the space of seconds, and made me feel contrite and sorry for the wrongs which I had done which were many and remember asking and pleading with God that when my turn came He would grant forgiveness and take me into His house that day. After I had spoken, I was not afraid, since I knew that He was near.

Then came the harrowing job of fighting smoke and fire for hours without end, not knowing when or at what precise moment the deck might collapse from under my feet or I'd be blown in shatters into the air or sea. My mind is filled with wonders and awe, for why should I have survived this holocaust, when men I felt were more worthy of life than I, men who had families and children dependent upon them, men whose every thought and action were to help others and give of themselves that others might live, had perished. The Ways of God are strange and not known to me, and I guess it was just His Way of saving me to do a job I had not yet accomplished and my constant prayer is that I shall be worthy of the miraculous escape I was granted by God and daily I am searching to know what is expected of me in life that could have impelled Him to spare me and take the lives of more worthy men.

(This action took place aboard the carrier "Franklin", March 19, 1944.)