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by W.L. White

W.N.U. FEATURES

THE STORY THUS FAR: Lieut. Col. Frank Kurtz, pilot of the Flying Fortress known as "The Swoose," which escaped from Clark Field, tells of that fatal day when the Japs struck in the Philippines. Old 99, another Fortress, is struck down before it can get off the ground. The field is littered with the skeletons of U. S. planes. Buzz Wagner, air ace, is chased by Japs in his P-40. He meets Lieut. Russ Church and together they bomb a Jap field. Church fails to return. Other pilots are given their targets, including Colin Kelly. Kelly's plane settles for a Jap battleship, but the plane is ablaze. Eight bale out. Kelly bales out but is so close to the ground he never had a chance.

CHAPTER V

"Of course when I heard all this I also heard about the whopping big target he'd hit and sunk. But I didn't think much of this at the time, and I don't think Colin did either."

"If I know the boy, and I think I do, after he saw his oxygen system was on fire, and had given orders for the other guys to jump, and was sitting there hanging back on his stick and fighting his rudder in order to give them a chance to do it, he wasn't thinking about how many gross tons that Japanese ship displaced, but about his parents and Marian and little Corkie. And later when he was trying to crawl out of the upper escape hatch before his clothes caught on fire, it was the same, and still later, when he cleared the hatch but saw the ground coming up at him, too close and too fast for his chute ever to have a chance to crack open, I don't think he was worrying about how big his posthumous medal was going to be, but only worrying about Marian and Corkie."

"A little later in the afternoon one of our fighters came in and began to circle the field, fluttering like a wounded bird. I could see it was something serious—guessed even then an aileron might be shot away, so I gave him the green light to come in and land. He began to make passes at the field, cutting his throttle to pick out the strip of straight sand through the bomb craters, marked by a maze of red flags we'd put up. But each time he'd throttle back his left wing would drop and he'd have to gun her again, making a slow climbing circle up off the field."

"It began to get me. 'Come on, son, come on, put it down, before we get into trouble.' On the last trial he gunned it, came around, and then tried to pull up straight, but too late. Teetering down the field, he caught one wing on one of our slightly damaged Fortresses, tearing it off, and then himself cartwheeled off into the trees—killing a sergeant who had been working on a plane back there. The pilot wasn't hurt much himself, but one more of our precious few P-40's was gone."

"But, following orders, I was still giving the Fortresses the red light to stay in the air, and I began to worry about this. Maybe orders had been issued to bring them in, but someone had failed to notify me. Some of them would circle for a while, and then would head on back for Del Monte, more than six hundred miles away, while they still had enough gas to get there."

"Finally old Jim Connally said the hell with it, and came on in without my giving him any light at all. He needed more gas to get back to Mindanao and couldn't perch up there all day, and a little after this the Colonel said I could give the others the green light to come in and gas up, although any hour, any minute, we were expecting the Japs back. He wanted to save those remaining Forts at any cost."

"We got out of bed just as dawn was breaking and, folding our sheets inside our brown blankets so no white would show, stuffed them under the khaki coats—we didn't want anything that would indicate on a Jap recon picture that we were now sleeping in that field. The Japs were reconing the hell out of the place with high-altitude cameras, two or three times daily."

"I spent the next day in the tower and it was much like the first, except it was plainer and plainer that we would have to abandon Clark."

"I'll never forget my last trip out. It was at night of course—it wasn't safe to leave a plane on the ground by day at Clark any more. We were taking off at three in the morning in order to be through the danger zone by dawn, and I'd had almost no sleep at all. But while they were warming the motors they came running to me with the news that there was a pretty bad leak in my fuel line. So what in hell to do? I could wait while they ripped a fuel line from one of the semiwrecked Forts standing around on the field, and installed it in mine. But by then it would be

well after dawn, and if we encountered Jap fighters, there I'd be, with sergeants stuffed into every corner of the plane, so that we wouldn't have room to swivel a machine gun in our own defense.

"Or we could tape up our leaky line, get the hell out of there in the darkness, and pray the leak didn't get worse or a hot exhaust stack didn't set it off in mid-air. We chanced it, and made it all right, but it turned out to be my last trip, because the next day the Japs came back and put out of commission what was left of Clark Field."

"I got the story from Eddie Oliver, who had been my navigator on Old 99—he and I were the only survivors of the entire crew—when he got down to Del Monte a few days later."

"The Japs, having reconed Clark Field thoroughly, came over all ready for business. Some guy had carelessly left a pillow exposed in the cornfield, so they knew we'd been sleeping there. They blew hell out of it with their high-altitude stuff, and didn't touch the regular flying field, which they'd put out in the first day's raid. Then their fight-



He wasn't thinking about how many gross tons that Jap ship displaced.

ers came over and with incendiaries set fire to the nipa shacks which had been our quarters. In them was everything I owned, including the watches, diaries, and wallets which had belonged to the crew of Old 99."

"It was now hopeless to operate from Clark, everyone saw. Anyway, the Japs had landed light tanks on the coast at Apari, so five hundred rifles were issued to what ground personnel we had left there and they went off with infantry units to chase them out if they could. The poor devils ended up on Batan. Each time we moved, we had to leave some of the ground crews behind."

"So here we were now at Del Monte, about fifteen Fortresses in all, but patched up and in such bad repair we were lucky if we could get half a dozen off the ground at any one time."

"But otherwise it was a lovely setup. A pretty turf field right up against the big pineapple cannery—the executives had used it for their little private planes before the war. A country club these executives had built, swell food (until we ate it all up), a swimming pool, turf tennis courts—even a few white women, which set all the boys staring—but not an anti-aircraft gun or a fighter plane to protect us for hundreds of miles around."

"Pretty soon we improvised our own ack-ack. A couple of ships cracked up, and we jerked their .50-caliber guns out of them and installed them in sandbag pits."

"And one of the first things that happened was that we lost our squadron commander, Major Gibbs. He had taken off under cover of darkness on a secret mission—and did not come back. We never knew what happened. Weeks later the native constabulary of Negros Island was to bring in the cushion of his plane—it had cracked up against a mountain in the dark."

"But, sweetheart," said Margo, "you're forgetting your first cable."

"No, I'm not," said Frank. "I got it off as soon as I could."

"All it said," Margo explained, "was: 'Beloved Doing all right under

circumstances! Wire Eddy's brother, Frank."

"Of course I sent the wire, but I couldn't understand at all. Eddie, of course, was Frank's navigator on Old 99. But what about the other boys? Why hadn't Frank told me to wire their families of all the sergeants. It wasn't like Frank to forget."

"Then I had to do something about myself—I could see that. Sitting in my room thinking, I would go to pieces. And I wanted to get started doing something useful before Christmas. Back in October Frank promised me he'd call on Christmas Day, and now I realized I'd been building on hearing his voice then more than I knew. I also realized that maybe he wouldn't be able to. If that call didn't come through, it would be hard for me to take."

"My little brother (he's a fighter pilot now) was getting married out on the Coast during the holidays. They were asking me to go out. But suppose Frank did call me Christmas, and missed me? I decided to wait in Omaha for that call."

"But just waiting would drive anyone crazy. I wanted to help—to get close to the Air Corps. So I went down to Colonel Houghland's office—he was air officer of our 7th Corps area in Omaha—and put it up to him."

"He didn't laugh because I wanted to work without pay—he couldn't have been nicer. He showed me huge piles of applications for aviation-cadet assignments in the Air Corps that were coming in. I could help, he explained, by classifying and filing these, getting them in their proper groups, help speed up the stream of reinforcements which the boys out East would need so badly—we didn't dream how badly."

"We needed everything," said Frank. "Ground crews, pilots, copilots. And to make it worse, our own group commander, Colonel Eubank, had been hurt and was in a Manila hospital."

"But here at Del Monte we saw people who didn't seem to know a war was on. The only military around was some kind of a transportation outfit. The first day we were there I got hold of a couple of privates and gave them orders to dim out the headlights of every car—no matter whose—that approached the field. But the transportation officer decided he'd stop all that. It seemed the boys, carrying out my orders, had even stopped a staff car, and the transportation officer explained that they needed more light."

"Well, our planes were on that field, and I knew the Japs were headed down the coast and would be here soon enough anyway, and I didn't want to attract them any sooner than necessary."

"But before they did come, the old 19th Bombardment Group—or what was left of it—got in some mighty hard licks at them. For instance, there was the Le Gaspi Bay mission. Our Intelligence reported a big concentration of Jap ships moving south toward us down the coast of Luzon. Of course that meant the handwriting on the wall for us, particularly if one was a carrier with Zeros which would presently be in range of us and could strafe us on the ground—remember we hadn't a single American fighter within five hundred miles."

"Sure enough, Intelligence presently reported that they thought one of this concentration was a carrier, and now they were just off Le Gaspi. It was up to us to take off and do what we could. We'd been working like hell to get the planes in shape, and finally had six which we thought could complete the mission and get home. But remember Old 99 was back on Clark, and I was a planeless pilot. So it ought to be Harry's story—he was navigator on Jack Adams' plane."

"Well," said Harry Schrieber, the navigator, "it was like this. The six of us were to start at ten o'clock, and Jim Connally rolled out first, and got a flat tire right on the runway—throwing one wing into the ground and crumpling it. That left five, and it wasn't so good, because there is safety in numbers in Fortresses—the more of them that go over a target together, the more fire power you can bring to bear against the Zeros, and the more Forts will get back home."

"But anyway we started. The pilots were Shorty Wheelless, Pease, Lee Coats, Vandevanter, and of course Jack Adams—I was his navigator."

"We are flying in formation to our agreed rendezvous, in case we got lost in heavy weather—a point thirty-five miles due west of our target—and we are due to be there in two hours and fifteen minutes after our start."

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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