

FROM A LOST DIARY:

THEY FOUGHT THE PACIFIC AND WON



For 49 days, their small craft drifted helplessly in swelling seas; food gave out — even hope — yet these four Russians survived; now, in an exclusive interview, they re-create their adventure-filled log

By PEER J. OPPENHEIMER and BOB DRISCOLL

WHEN THE CREW of a United States Navy patrol plane from the carrier U.S.S. Kearsarge spotted a derelict landing craft lurching in heavy seas some 900 miles off Midway Island in the Pacific, the final chapter of a great survival story was about to be written. It is a story of undeniable faith and courage, just as it is an object lesson in how two opposite ideologies weigh the value of a human life.

The tiny boat was so rusted and weather-beaten that for a moment the pilot wondered whether his eyes were playing tricks or whether what he saw was a phantom ship, a modern "Flying Dutchman" that somehow had been buffeted about the ocean since World War II. As he nosed his S2F "Tracker" down for a closer look, he was startled to see four men, gaunt and heavily bearded, silhouetted against the superstructure.

The pilot radioed information of his puzzling discovery back to the Kearsarge 15 miles away. In less than an hour, a rescue helicopter had transferred the scarecrow crew to the carrier. The four men—boys, really; the oldest, 21—were Soviet soldiers. The date was March 7 this year. But the story had begun seven weeks before, hundreds of miles from that lonely patch of sea.

It was on Jan. 17 off Etorofu-To, one of the Kurile Islands north of Japan, during routine Russian amphibious maneuvers that Sgt. Victor Zygonschi, 21, Pvt. Anatoly Kryuchkovsky, 20, Pvt. Philip Poplavsky, 20, and Pvt. Ivan Fedotov, 21, began their grim struggle for life.

The sea was running high, and it was bitterly cold. The crews griped about the weather and talked of crackling open fires and red-hot potbellied stoves in their native villages. Conditions were rugged in that lonely ocean outpost, but the crew of the landing craft was accustomed to such, and talk helped pass the time.

That night the temperature plummeted to 15 de-

grees below zero. A sudden gale sprang up and battered the awkward-looking landing craft.

Like a toy tossed by a mischievous child, the ill-fated craft, constructed only for close-to-shore operations, was ripped loose from its moorings and driven into the open seas. Salt water cascaded over the decks and froze. The four miserable young men huddled together in coarse military blankets in a cell-like 8-x-10 cabin that formed the superstructure of the boat. A cooking stove did little to warm the air as the craft pitched and rolled.

Dawn was leaden-gray and uncompromising, but the storm had abated enough so that Sergeant Zygonschi could open the cabin hatch cautiously and step out on the deck. Fine, wind-whipped ocean spray settled on his eyebrows and eyelashes and quickly froze in a white haze.

The horizon was empty.



Sgt. Victor Zygonschi



Pvt. Anatoly Kryuchkovsky



Pvt. Philip Poplavsky



Pvt. Ivan Fedotov

WE WERE AMONG the first reporters to talk with these four young soldiers in San Francisco and later in New York. All had lost more than 30 pounds and clearly showed the strain of their ordeal. Even after shaves, haircuts, hot showers, and more than five days of good food and comfortable quarters, the horrors of their voyage haunted them.

"We hated to leave our boat," Zygonschi told us through an interpreter. (The craft had been cast adrift by our Navy.) "In spite of all we have gone through on it, we think of it as a kind of home. And when the helicopter rescued us, I left behind a diary. Everything is so unclear to me now, as if it were just a nightmare. I wish I had it so that I could always remember those 49 days exactly as they happened."

We attempted to re-create this lost diary in talks with the four boys. Had it been saved, it would

undoubtedly be one of the most moving documents in seafaring history. It not only recorded the physical predicament of human beings under the most elemental conditions, but, by reading between the lines, it told a tale of primitive hope and despair, of human emotions tested to the limit.

During the first few days, Zygonschi told us, the diary was basically a military log, impersonal and precise. All four of them believed they soon would be rescued or find their way to shore. Their log told how they drifted out to sea, their efforts to get back; it recorded their communications with a shore radio station (they were in touch by radio until the second or third day), the procedures they were taking to stretch their limited supplies. It reported, buoyantly and certainly, that rescue was inevitable, although as the days turned into weeks and the first month ran over into the second, the tone became one of hope rather than certainty.

NONE OF THE SURVIVORS can remember the exact entries in the diary; they're not even sure of the sequence of events after the first few weeks. They remember generally what was written, and sometimes perhaps, what they think should have been recorded and wasn't.

One of Zygonschi's first entries noted that they had enough fuel to last them for several days: **We could not live if it were not for the heat of the engine. We take turns lying on it so that we might keep warm. We have been in contact with the shore operator over our two-way radio. He instructs us how to return to land, but it is futile at this time. We cannot steer the boat in these heavy seas. We try, but it is useless.**

Two or three days later (none of the four is sure of the time interval), there was another, more ominous entry: **We can still hear the shore operator, but we can no longer transmit. The wind blows in the opposite direction from which we**

should be heading, and our engine is not powerful enough to counter the drift. It is not as cold as the first night, nor is the storm as fierce, but it shows little sign of letting up.

There was hardly time to get over the disappointment of losing contact with shore when Zygonschi reluctantly made another entry on what he believes was the fourth day, Jan. 21: **Our engine has stopped. There is no more fuel. It is foolish to doubt that we are drifting far away from the Kurile Islands. We have enough food for about 14 days if we ration ourselves carefully. Surely a Russian ship will pick us up before that.**

The small landing craft was provisioned with only three cans of meat (beef and pork), one can of margarine, a loaf of bread, 10 to 12 pounds of potatoes, and enough coffee and tea for two or three days.

On the 16th day, as closely as Zygonschi can calculate, another significant entry was made in the diary: **Today we finished the beef and pork. Still have potatoes and will make soup. Storm has let up a little, but from the look of things, it's a temporary lull.**

When the meat supply ran out, they agreed to conserve the few potatoes left by eating only on alternate days. Inevitably, they grew weaker, but they did all they could to keep up their morale. Anatoly Kryuchkovsky often played an accordion. Later the accordion proved to be even more valuable than it was as a morale-builder.

Often they talked of the things dear to them. Ivan Fedotov, who had been in service for only eight months, was the shyest of the four. He spoke, self-consciously at first, of his Siberian village, Bogorodckoe, on the Amur River; how he had met Irena at a dance there during the time he was working on a river boat with his father. For a year he had courted her, and in 1959 they were married. When he had been called up for service, she was

pregnant. He was proud he was going to be a father, but he worried now because Irena's time was due, and he couldn't be with her. They had decided that they surely would have a son and name him Alexander.

So Ivan Fedotov, age 21, had much to think about while he lay in his narrow bunk as waves threatened to dash the flimsy craft to pieces.

Victor Zygonschi's thoughts, too, were of home, and he spoke fondly to his companions about his village, Shentala, near the Volga River, east of Moscow. He told them how he had been a "tractorist" in a machine-tractor station. His eyes softened when he spoke of his mother and father. With great pride, he recounted how his older brother Michael worked in a hospital and how his 27-year-old sister Nelly had become a nurse. And there was Valja. She taught school in Shentala. Some day, if he got out of this, he would ask her . . .

THERE WAS little time for such thoughts. During the whole voyage, there were only five days of clear weather, so much of their time had to be spent pumping water out of the well deck. At other times, they had to tear up the floor boards—no mean task for men in their weakened condition—to use as fuel for the stove. Then, after the floor boards had been burned, they used their cork life preservers.

Sometimes their blankets got wet, as did the whole inside of the cabin when storms were especially severe. Shivering in soggy, cold blankets was hardly conducive to nostalgic reminiscences. And then, for long hours, they forgot their private thoughts and doubts while they tried to kill sharks, which sometimes followed the boat, or to catch fish with a hook fashioned from a piece of wire and a spinner improvised from a bright piece of metal.

There were many times, too, when they forgot

(Continued)

San Francisco's Mayor George Christopher presents each of the Russians with a key to the city.

