

MacArthur's Closest Call



Memorial Day recalls a great moment in a dark time—snatching Mac from Corregidor in 1942; here is the PT-boat commander's own account of that daring escape



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as told to Jack Ryan

I WAITED until the four PT boats were drawn in column formation, then flashed a signal to proceed.

Lieut. Robert Kelly's PT 34 was first in column, and it went scudding across the surface of Manila Bay. If there were any mines in our path, Kelly would take the full brunt of their deadliness. The rest of us would live to face the next risk.

The sky was overcast, and a heavy early evening mist stung our faces as we clipped over the choppy sea. Rotten weather, I thought, and that was the only thing that pleased me at the moment.

I wasn't at all sure this would be the most successful mission on the logs of Motor Torpedo Boat Squadron 3. First, we would have to weave through six lines of mines dotting the escape route from besieged Bataan and Corregidor, then sneak past a double column of Japanese warships blockading Manila. Bad weather here was a Godsend, cloaking our flight. But next came 620 miles of open sea in our little mahogany and plywood eggshells—620 miles dominated by Jap aircraft, destroyers, cruisers, with bad weather the worst enemy of all.

One man aboard was confident though. Below me in the boat's pilothouse, Gen. Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Allied Commander, Far East, rode out the kidney-jarring bumps in a deep wicker armchair, legs crossed and eyes fixed on the wake of Kelly's boat just ahead.

Until an hour ago this March 11, 1942, I had been one of the few persons in the embattled Philippines who knew the General's orders from Washington—leave Corregidor and its defenders, proceed to Australia and take command of the Allied Forces in the South Pacific in preparation for a comeback offensive. Reluctantly, he complied. His staff urged him to make the breakthrough by plane or submarine.

"Exactly what the Japanese expect," he had replied. And then with a supreme tactician's in-

stinct for surprise, he had informed me, as commander of his only PT-boat squadron, that we PT men must make the breakthrough and take him to Cagayan, Mindanao Island, on the first and most hazardous leg of his escape. From Mindanao, a plane would fly him to Australia.

His staff was shocked. A 70-foot PT boat is not built for long-range missions. Its light structure combined with the 3,750 horsepower of its three V-12 Packard engines made even a short trip a bruising grind, especially for landlubbers.

But MacArthur believed in PTs. ("Give me 200 of them," he had told me even before Pearl Harbor, "and I can defend all the Philippines.") He had six when war broke out, and now only our four were left. I've thought since that surprise wasn't the General's sole motive for choosing PTs. The daring of his plan was a gesture of defiance to the Japs poised to capture him. He knew he had to leave his men when the second peremptory order came from President Roosevelt, but he was determined to leave as gallantly as his men were then fighting.

I had virtually memorized the mine-field positions, and I mentally ticked them off—four, five, six. Then I flashed a signal to Kelly: "Open up." The PTs lifted under the surge of extra power, and we soon were hitting about 35 knots through darkness and the columns of Jap blockaders toward our first day's rendezvous at tiny Cuyo.

The General had brought with him 21 officers and men vital to our future campaigns, and these passengers had room only to sprawl beside the torpedo tubes of the four boats while crashing waves drenched them and the decks jarred at them like jackhammers.

But they were tough Army veterans. I was more concerned for the passengers in the cramped cabin of my PT 41. The General's wife, their son Arthur, almost 4, and his Chinese *amah* (nurse) must be taking a real shaking, I thought. When the family had stepped aboard at Corregidor's

North Dock, I had warned: "This will be a rough trip, Mrs. MacArthur." She appeared especially small and delicate.

"Why, we expect it, Lieutenant," she replied. I doubt if the youngster thought he was going on much more than a pleasure jaunt, although he seemed to sense the tension.

We had secured 1,100 gallons of 100-octane gasoline on each PT deck for the long journey—enough extra fuel to send a boat up in a whoosh of flames if even a fragment of hot steel struck it right. But early on March 12, the 55-gallon drums began presenting another kind of a problem. Under the heavy jarring, they shifted loose—if one tore free, it could smash men and equipment unmercifully.

Both PT 32 and PT 34 were forced to drop out of formation to lash their drums tighter. I soon lost visual contact with PT 35, under Tony Akers, so we each found ourselves on our own, anxious men in little boats navigating in an almost starless night toward an island not much bigger than some back yards.

A Case of Mistaken Identity

Yet later, when I wiped salt spray out of my eyes and peered into the first dawn light, the shape of Cuyo was almost dead ahead and, happily, I could see PT 34 coming in, too, and then the 35 boat. Some officers, trying to stretch the aches out of their bruised bodies, studied the last boat, PT 32, as she approached.

Capt. H. J. Ray, U. S. Navy, chief of staff to Admiral Rockwell, first spotted trouble. "Say, Lieut. Bulkeley," he shouted, "the 32 boat has uncovered its .50 calibers and swung out the torpedo tubes. Looks like she's attacking!"

I saw it myself. The 32 boat was preparing for action—against us. The gasoline drums had so changed our silhouette that 32's crew had mistaken us for a Jap destroyer. Now they were jettisoning gasoline drums in preparation for