

The sun was barely over the green ridge line to their left as five Marauders flew low and east through the Markham Valley. Their target was Lae, a town and port on the eastern coast of New Guinea on the Huon Gulf. Previously best known as the last place Amelia Earhart had been seen alive, it was now known as one of Japan's most prized possessions in New Guinea. Strategically located at the mouth of the wide Markham River valley, it offered an open path into the interior and a perfect embarkation point for targets south, both for shipping and aviation. That it was an early target of the Empire came as no surprise to anyone.

While almost straight north of Port Moresby as the crow flies, the Marauders had to find their way over the Owen Stanley range first. Climbing to thirteen thousand feet and too often shrouded in clouds, the mountains split lower New Guinea in half, and were as much an impediment as the Japanese themselves. The most advantageous passes for crossing had been found through hard experience, but the potent combination of tropical weather and high mountain peaks ensured that crossing them would never be routine. So far more Allied aircraft had been lost to both, together and individually, than to the Japanese.

This morning the planes, in elements of two with Krell leading in the *Comet*, had made their way across The Gap, a pass northeast of Port Moresby that topped out at 8,000 feet, and then turned north to work their way up an interior valley to the Markham. While for once, thanks in part to their early departure, weather wasn't a factor, the cohort had still dropped a plane along the way. A victim of the miserable supply chain, the wingman of the third element suffered a malfunctioning fuel transfer pump and had to turn back.

Zeamer watched as the *Comet*, hanging in the sky to the left and front of them, crept away from them. He looked to the east. Cumulus was already blossoming along the ridge line.

"Krell is likely to head for those clouds at any moment to confuse the spotters," he told Shepherd. "You might want to close up on him so he doesn't leave you behind."

Shepherd pretended to be placid but couldn't disguise his irritation. "I'll be where I need to be." Zeamer watched Krell

continue to inch away. He looked ahead of them through his side window. The Markham bent a short distance ahead. Krell would make his break by then.

Zeamer retrieved his helmet from below his seat and tightened it on his head, and then prepped his parachute and Mae West, since they'd finish their bomb run over the water. He closed his eyes, remembering the first time his Scout troop had beaten the high schoolers. He could still vividly recall the resentful disbelief on their older opponents' faces. It was discomfiting enough to have the example of a fourteen-year-old Eagle Scout in their midst. Suffering defeat to his troop of grade and middle school boys was simply too bruising to their adolescent egos¹.

Jay had recognized it, but never understood it. He had always been interested in efficiency, in finding the better way, being prepared. It was part of what had drawn him to Scouts in the first place. What's the best way to build a fire? To build a trap? To tie a knot? Where the wisdom came from mattered to him not a whit. He simply wanted the knowledge. And yet the prospect of having a thirteen-year-old teaching juniors and seniors had been too much even to be considered, Eagle Scout or no. But why? If he knew something those high school boys didn't, how could they not want to know it? He had never forgotten it. Ego at the expense of wisdom, especially in combat, seemed the worst kind of foolishness to him.

Zeamer felt the sudden bank and increased vibration through the plane. He opened his eyes and glanced over. Shepherd was turning east, and had run up the throttles instead of asking Jay to do it. Zeamer's gaze shifted to the front window. The *Kansas Comet II* was pulling quickly away from him, Shepherd's place in Krell's slot completely lost. Shepherd said nothing. Zeamer closed his eyes again.

A blunt strike on his chest startled Jay.

"Zeamer!" Shepherd was yelling. "We need power!" Zeamer snapped awake, getting his bearings. He glanced through the front and saw Krell in his dive toward Lae's single airstrip two thousand feet below, stretched out like a ruler in

front of them, the Huon Gulf lapping at the runway's end. His left hand was pushing the throttles forward before he was consciously aware of it. He pushed them beyond the normal 2400 rpm as Shepherd aimed for his slot up against Krell. They couldn't jam it for fear of overrunning Krell when he opened his bomb bay doors.

Leveling out at fifteen hundred, they'd managed to almost get back into position. Now Krell's bomb bay doors began to open. Almost immediately Zeamer heard the electric whir of their own bomb bay doors opening and heard the dull roar of the wind, felt the increased drag on the airplane. Shepherd fought the rudder pedals as they did, a problem compounded by the fact that the doors didn't open in unison².

Five minutes now. That's about how long it always took. It always seemed much longer. Zeamer scanned the skies out his windows. No airborne Zeroes to be seen. *We did manage to surprise them*, he thought, but looking back at the runway he could now see at least three taking off. Flak bursts began puffing around them. That would slack as soon as their fighters got to altitude—they didn't want to shoot down their own—but by that time the B-26s would be done.

Krell's *Comet* disgorged its bomb load. Seconds later their own released. It was like losing groceries through the bottom of a bag. The plane lifted slightly and immediately felt more maneuverable. A *thump* outside, followed by something like gravel on a tin can³—pieces of flak had caught them, somewhere midships by the sound of it.

"We all heard that," Shepherd said through the interphone. "Everyone report." The positions all called in. No one had been hurt.

"Rear turret to pilot. Looks like it was around the aft bomb bay, Lieutenant."

"That's an affirmative," Shepherd replied. "They were just about over the water. "Pilot to tail, how many Zeroes did they get up?"

"Looks like just three, Lieutenant. They're just about to altitude."

"Roger that. Everyone stay tuned. When Krell goes, we

go.”

Shepherd and Zeamer both had their eyes glued on Krell. As soon as the Zeros got to their altitude—

The *Comet's* nose dropped and dove hard for the water. Shepherd pushed theirs down and Zeamer ran the throttles forward. Except for the *Comet* parked outside their left front, the blue of the Huon Gulf filled their windshield. The airspeed indicator passed 350, 375, was approaching 400 mph when Krell pulled out and so did Shepherd.

“Pilot to tail, report.”

“They’re lining up on the right, out of my range.”

“Rear turret to pilot, mine, too.”

“They know the drill,” Zeamer said out loud, more to himself than to Shepherd. The Japs had discovered early on that most American bombers were lightly defended on the front, unlike the tail, and thus would circle around for head-on assaults. In the early days of trial and error, the Japs would line up on both sides, only to discover that if they weren’t precisely coordinated, they’d end up shooting at each other. The experience level of any particular set of attackers could be told by whether they lined up on both sides or just one. This group was obviously versed enough to avoid that. That they were engaging the formation this way, though, showed they weren’t as versed in the 22nd as the 22nd was with Zeroes.

Jay craned his neck to the right. Now he could see them, stretched out single file, a thousand yards out. He followed the lead one as it came even with them and passed them. He knew Krell and Grauer, Krell’s navigator, were watching them, too, as well as Shepherd and the other three Marauders. Jay could see Grauer’s head in the clear bubble in the nose even now. It was a slightly comical sight even under the circumstances.

A glint in the sun told Jay the lead Zero had found sufficient lead on them to begin his attack and was turning into them. Jay wondered how well Shepherd would follow Krell’s lead. He didn’t have to wonder long. Krell suddenly began banking right and falling off. Shepherd had learned well: With little slip, he stayed with Krell. Jay checked behind them. The rest of the formation was stuck right with them. The excellence

and discipline made Jay's heart race a bit.

He looked back to the front. The Zero grew in size fast, closing the distance, the two light machine guns on its nose flashing red, but always just behind them as the Marauders kept inside of its line of fire. The Zero kept banking into them, racing toward them now, clearly straining to put his fixed guns on them. Almost on top of them, his wings were now perpendicular to the water, rolling past the vertical. Suddenly Krell's rear turret guns began flaming. Chunks of wing and vertical stabilizer began streaming off the gray Zero. Their own rear turret joined in, a raucous roar as the Zero hurtled past, now trailing inky smoke, realizing too late the predicament he was in. What the Zero gained in its fearsome agility, it traded in durability. The *Comet* and their own plane, at least, hadn't been hit.

And now they were turning back to the left, readying themselves for the next one, which by now had already committed. Whether he had seen what happened to the leader or simply grasped what was happening sooner, this one opted to discontinue firing and roll over the vertical and dive away from them. The third, who would have seen it all, chose to break off to the south and return to Lae.

The sun was higher now, full morning showing the blue and white of the water and the fertile green of the jungle coast. Krell turned the formation toward the coastline and sped southeast toward home.

The silence was thick as Zeamer methodically switched off the magnetos and batteries. Shepherd hadn't been talkative when they left Woodstock or Moresby, but that was Shepherd simply not having much of a feeling for Zeamer at all, though Zeamer sensed some hesitation. Now it was active dislike, with the added weight of grievance. As soon as the controls were locked, Shepherd wrestled out of his seat restraints and was out of his seat and out of the cockpit. Jay got out a pen and began filling out the post-flight form himself.

When he finally climbed out of the front hatch, Zeamer saw Shepherd at the personnel truck, animated, clearly venting, with no regard to who was around. It was another difference

between the two of them, Zeamer thought. He saw the crew's engineer and tail gunner examining the shrapnel damage to the undercarriage. As he walked that way, he saw Krell heading toward the truck. He could tell by Walt's pace he had something on his mind.

"Shepherd," Krell said as he approached the truck. Caught in mid-sentence, Shepherd looked and saw Krell. "Got a second?" That got a scornful laugh.

"I got more than that," Shepherd snapped, loaded for bear. "Lieutenant—" Krell cut him off with a stern thumb, jabbing away from the crowd. Shepherd stopped with an exasperated sigh and followed Krell a few yards away. Walt mixed some grit with the humor in his voice as he turned to address Doug.

"So Shepherd, do we need to run some practice formations?"

Shepherd was about to burst. "Before you talk to me, try talking with your buddy Zeamer. If you can keep him awake."

This took Walt off-guard. "What?"

"He fell asleep, Walt! I called for power for the run, and it didn't happen because my goddamn copilot was sound fucking asleep! Asleep! Going into a bomb run, for Christ's sake! I had to bust him across the chest just to wake him up! So talk to him, Lieutenant, before getting on to me. And if you think I'll ever fly with that joker again, you're the one dreaming!"

Shepherd was red-faced. Krell had to pause to process it. That was not the angle he was expecting to hear. He glanced over at Shepherd's plane. Zeamer was still talking to the enlisted men by the damaged section, pointing, making small gestures. Everything about the man was studied, serene. Krell realized now just how much he appreciated the quality in this environment.

Shepherd didn't. He looked at Zeamer than back at Krell. "So—are we done?"

Krell remembered something and looked at Shepherd. "You said this happened going into the bomb run?"

"Yeah. I called for power, didn't get a response, called for it again, no response, so I finally looked over and there he was, head tappin' against the glass in that ancient helmet of his." Krell still

couldn't believe it, but he kept to his point.

"All right." Krell paused for effect. "Did he think to remind you about heading for the clouds coming down the Markham?" Shepherd was confused. "To avoid the spotters," Krell clarified. Now Shepherd remembered.

"Oh, yeah, he mentioned it." As soon as he said it, Shepherd caught the import. "That wasn't a *bomb* run, Krell. He fell *asleep* on a *bomb* run."

Walt held up his hands. "I know, I get it. Believe me, I'll be talking to him about it. That's . . ." Krell didn't even want to think about that. "But Doug, the Valley is on you. I had to slow the entire formation down getting out of sight because you were late, even after being reminded. If you think that's not a big deal, you haven't flown straight and level into a bombing run only to find a pack of Zeros overhead waiting for you to start. So be mad—you got a right to be—but maybe dial the self-righteousness down a bit. Frankly, if I know Zeamer, and I have since flight school, if you ignored his advice, he probably figured you had it all figured out and didn't need his help. Picked a hell of a way to show it, but you don't see him bitching about you right now, do you?" Shepherd had his mouth open to argue, but no words to do it with. "You're a good pilot, Doug, but don't pretend you're a veteran before you are one." Krell saw the line burst Shepherd's bubble. Shepherd stood silently, flummoxed. Krell clapped him on the shoulder. "It's done. Lesson learned. Let's get some food and get outta here before the Japs decide to repay us the favor."

The two men headed for the truck. Krell checked on Zeamer. Sure enough, he was still walking the plane with the crew chief. Krell smiled, but it faded. This was bad.