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5th Air Force Synopsis of P-47 Ditching 21 October 1944

21 October 1944, was scheduled as a maintenance day for the 311th. The other two squadrons sent off routine missions. The 310th sent 15 planes to bomb Haroekoe. The pilots noted a heavy build-up in a front along the south coast of MacCluer Gulf, already closed in up to 12,000 feet. Heavy rain prevented them from continuing to the primary target and they turned to the secondary one, the airdrome at Sagan. These missions did not return until after noon. At 1200 Noon orders were received by the 58th to conduct a fighter sweep to Ambon Bay at once. The fighter sweep was to include all serviceable aircraft. These orders were the result of a reconnaissance report that seven Japanese transports had been seen entering the bay that morning. At 1330 in the afternoon eight planes from the 310th, followed by seven from the 311th, took off from Noemfoor. Major Ed Roddy, 58th Group Operations Officer, led the 310th. Major Odren led the 311th, accompanied by Bob Powell, Assistant Operations Officer, three Flight Leaders, Jack Brown, Steve Benner and George Taylor, and Element Leaders Ken Crepeau and Don Murrie. This appeared to be a choice mission and all the squadron leaders had assigned themselves to make the flight. If they found the shipping as suspected, they were to try the rather new bombing technique skip bombing. Upon arriving over the target a thorough search of the area failed to disclose any shipping larger than luggers and barges.

The 310th, first on the target, reported to have sunk a lugger and damaged others. As Roddy left the target area he spotted a four-engined flying boat, an Emily, anchored on the west side of Binnen Bay. Six pilots strafed the enemy craft, obtaining numerous hits, but the plane did not burn. The 311th claimed another lugger sunk, with two direct bomb hits. Upon leaving the target, the two squadrons were separated. Major Roddy, worried about shortage of fuel and shepherding a crippled plane, headed directly for Middleburg Island, the closest Allied base. 1st Lt. Russell P. "Bucky" Harris, leading an element in P-47D- 16 No. 42-76051, had had a close

call with enemy ack-ack. His left wing was hit as he made his initial run on the concentration of barges and Luggers, and in spite of personal danger as a result of the damage, he continued his attack, making successful strafing runs on enemy craft. Soon he became aware of fire in the wing, and reported this to Major Roddy. The fire continued to burn for about twenty minutes, then stopped. It had burned out all of the hydraulic fluid. The fire also burned out the left aileron control and the connection to the airspeed indicator. Harris managed to keep the plane in the air for the return to Middleburg where he crash-landed without injury to himself. The aircraft was heavily damaged and turned over to the local service squadron for repair or salvage.

Major Odren elected to try to reach Noemfoor, which was reporting good weather at that hour. In New Guinea, in the monsoon season, as the heat of the day increases, the thunderstorms build up rapidly to very great heights. As the pilots approached MacCluer Gulf they found a solid weather front had built up from sea level to an altitude beyond the capability of the Thunderbolts. Odren immediately turned northward along the front, hoping to get around it and into Middleburg. They soon discovered that the front had extended across the Vogelkop and was moving across the water so fast that it was impossible to go around it.

Seeing that it was impossible to get through, Major Odren decided that their best chance of survival would be to ditch the planes as close together as possible and await rescue. The flight had inched its way northward into the Dampier Straits and Odren decided on one of the small islands situated between Batanta Island on the south and Waigeo Island on the north. The first plane in was Bob Powell and he was followed in rapid succession by Major Odren, Steve Benner, Kenny Crepeau, Jack Brown and George Taylor. Only one pilot, Jack Brown, was injured. As Jack brought his aircraft in for the water landing the sudden impact forced his head against the instrument panel, breaking his nose. For some unknown reason Lieutenant Don Murrie had enough fuel remaining to climb to higher altitude and remained aloft in order to establish a radio fix on their position. Accomplishing this, he was the last to ditch, at about 2045 hours. Murrie's action undoubtedly helped to facilitate the

rescue and possibly saved some of his buddies lives.

A radio controller at Sansapor had listened to the plight of the pilots and had obtained the radio fix on Lieutenant Murrie. The next morning the 2nd ERS Catalinas and P-47s of the 58th Group were dispatched to search for the downed men. Before dawn on 22 October the 310th sent four planes off at 0430 mission number 390, the purpose to search for seven missing "Tubby" pilots." These four pilots found nothing. Mission 391 departed at 0830, this time eight planes were sent out. They arrived in the search area and found three pilots in the water northwest of Batanta Island. They immediately called the Catalina flying boats. Two of the 311th pilots were in life vests and the third was clinging to some driftwood. Catalina "Daylight\_13" landed and picked up two of these pilots. Catalina "Daylight 33" picked up the other pilot.

A third (4 aircraft) and fourth (2 aircraft) 310th search missions departed Noemfoor at 1030 hours. Mission number 392 spotted the tail end of one aircraft sticking out of the water on a reef at Mansfield Island, north of Batanta Island. 2nd ERS Catalina, "Daylight 33" was called to the area and picked up a pilot at about noon. A B-25 assisted in this mission. These pilots also found a single-engine enemy fighter crash-landed on the south side of Joe Island, east of Gebe Island. The last mission remained in the area until 1710, when they finally landed at Middleburg and learned that all seven pilots had been rescued.

Steve Benner and Ken Crepeau had reached Batanta Island early in the evening and eventually joined up together. They were rescued first, along with Don Murrie, who had also reached Batanta, being picked up about 1030 the morning of the 22nd. Bob Powell, Jack Brown and George Taylor were unable to remove their one-man life rafts from their sinking planes and had remained in the water in their Mae Wests overnight. They were picked up by another Catalina after spending 15 to 20 hours in the water. Odren, who did not reach Batanta until noon, was the last to be rescued, being picked up by a Cat about 1330. Jack Brown and George Taylor required hospitalization upon reaching Sansapor, for the broken nose, minor injuries and exposure. The other five

pilots were returned to Noemfoor by late evening.

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