



WARREN THOMPSON '43 TAKES TIME OUT ON THE BEACH AT HONOLULU

# HYDROGRAPHER FOR THE NAVY

By LT. (j.g.) WARREN THOMPSON '43

When I graduated (geology) in February '43 my draft status was 1-A, so I knew my "life of Riley" would soon be over. The Army found me a sufficiently fit specimen to accept into its folds, and in a few weeks I arrived at a reception center near Riverside. A week later I was shuttled off to Texas for basic training in the Coast Artillery at Camp Wallace. This wasn't exactly a coincidence, I believe, for I spent two years in the Coast Artillery of the ROTC unit on campus.

One day I reported to my commanding officer, and he asked if I would like to accept a commission in the Navy or remain in the Army as a private. After a phenomenally speedy deliberation I made a choice, and was given a discharge several days later. It so happened that I had applied for a commission in the Navy just before I was drafted, and it took some time for the wheels of progress to begin turning.

A short vacation at home followed my Texas tour before I was called to active duty by the Navy, then I was sent to the indoctrination school at Quonset Point, Rhode Island for two months. There I was chosen

platoon leader, I think because I was the tallest in our platoon, but I did feel sort of funny being the youngest too. My petty officer was a Princeton professor, twice my age.

At that time the Navy needed weather men, and promised to send anyone to the school of his choice if he would apply for training in "aerological engineering." So what else could I do but return to our beautiful campus for nine more wonderful months! Upon graduation in June '44 I was presumably: a full-fledged weather man.

The next two pleasant months I spent at La Jolla studying surf and swell forecasting at the Scripps Institute of

Oceanography, the University of California's strictly southern campus. Lectures occupied the mornings while the afternoons were reserved for swimming and lounging on the beach. It was an easy life, but what I learned at La Jolla turned out to form the basis for most of my subsequent work in the Navy.

After La Jolla my orders sent me to Hawaii, and when I arrived in Pearl Harbor I was attached to the amphibious forces. A plan was brought forth to train several men to fly over landing beaches to make last minute observations of surf and reef conditions. it was really an experiment, and if the plan worked successfully the observations would be continued in future operations. The job fell to three of us, so we made practice flights over the beaches on Oahu. One day I was summoned to the intelligence office, and was completely briefed on the coming landings on Pelelieu in the Palau Group. I felt quite honored that I was to become the first "hydrographic observer."

I boarded a big transport headed for Guadalcanal, and 21 hours later I stepped onto Henderson Field in a tropical rain storm. A boat took me to Tulagi

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

EDITOR'S NOTE -- Since writing this story, Warren Thompson flew to Japan from San Francisco—42 hours actual flying time—where he spent two months as hydrographer aboard the Mt. Olympus, flagship of the 3rd Amphibious Force. He returned home in November, arriving in San Francisco on Thanksgiving Day. With ten days leave Warren was able to take in the Berkeley' mud battle, Homecoming, and the SC game. His new orders call for his services as weatherman aboard the carrier Vella Gulf which will train pilots out of Bremerton, Washington. He expects to be in the Navy until the summer or fall of 1946. On Navy Day in Yokahama Warren received the Air Medal and a Gold Star in lieu of a second Air Medal from Vice-Admiral T. S. Wilkinson commander of the 3rd Amphibious Force known familiarly as the "Tokyo Force."

where I went aboard the carrier I was to fly from. After four solid days of dreary rain we put to sea bound for the Palaus.

We arrived off the islands in the early morning of D-3 day, and in the blackness before dawn I felt my way out onto the rainy deck. When I was well strapped into the torpedo bomber we taxied forward and were catapulted from the deck. I don't think I'll ever get used to the sudden jolt of the catapult, nor to the 20 or 30 foot drop to the narrow carrier deck when coming in for a landing.

Soon we were over Pelelieu, and below I could see the sporadic flashes of gunfire from our battleships and cruisers which bombarded the island night and day. When it became light enough to see, I asked the pilot to fly low over the beaches so I could get a good look, and he did! In a few minutes we were buzzing the breakers at 20 feet with the throttle wide open. I almost forgot to look at the surf and reef. We made several more passes below palm tree height before I had gained the necessary information. I still wonder why we weren't shot at.

Before dawn on D-day, September 15, we were in the air again for the most important observation, the one which would possibly determine whether or not the landings would be made that morning. With several more low flights as soon as we could see, I found the landing conditions very good, and reported my results. We then climbed to 2000 feet and flew around waiting for the landing. One of our planes went down in flames over the island a short distance from us, - so we quickly decided to move a little farther away. We could see just as well from farther out.

We watched the hundreds of small boats join up in circles around the mother ships, then start out for the landing beach in waves. At the last minute, the LCI's launched their rockets and carrier planes dropped fire bombs on the beach. Billows of smoke towered thousands of feet into the air. Then I saw the first wave of boats cross the reef and hit the beach, only one minute from the time planned weeks before. Mortar shells exploded among the craft and tracer bullets ricocheted from the water around them. I had a grandstand seat for the whole operation, and after the successful landing my job was done, and I returned to the ship.

I soon received orders to return to Pearl Harbor, so ten days after D-day I took a boat ashore through rough seas. A storm was threatening and I was very lucky to find shelter in a hospital tent before the incessant rains began. The tent was located near the front lines on Bloody Nose ridge, and right in the middle of everything it seemed. All day long a battery of mortars pounded away outside the tent, heavy artillery fired overhead from across the airfield, and our planes dropped 500 and 1000-pound bombs on the hills nearby. In the evenings after sunset, machine guns rattled away at the front until dark—they were entirely too close for comfort. And after darkness fell none dared stir from his tent until dawn.

I fared well except for a little scare I got one morning while I was lying on my cot. A slight scuffle occurred in the tent and I noticed a hole in the tent top that wasn't there before. A search, out of curiosity, revealed a small hole directly under the center of my cot, and a little digging brought up a sharp, twisted piece of shiny shell casing. The shrapnel weighed several pounds and was

too hot to handle. It had entered the tent at a good angle, nicked my cot, tore through a blanket hanging over the edge, and buried itself directly beneath me. It is a very lucky thing for me that I wasn't lying on a stretcher that morning like the fellows on each side of me!

The only transport plane on the airfield, and the one which I expected to take, had an aileron blown off by a land mine the morning I went ashore. When I finally got news four days later that the plane was repaired and ready to leave, I thumbed a ride to the field and stood under a wing out of the rain for several hours to make sure I would get aboard. At eleven o'clock at night we took off in the rain. The Jap airfield was very short for the transport, there was a line of trees at the end of the field, and last but not least, the pilot wasn't sure he could take off. He tried anyway, and we all breathed more easily when we skimmed the tops of the trees. But that was just the beginning, for we were up and down from 3,000 to 10,000 feet all night long, flying through a rough thunderstorm. In the morning when we landed on the peaceful little island of Emirau, everybody was visibly relieved.

Emirau is a tropical paradise, located on the very western end of the Solomon Islands, and the most beautiful island I have ever seen. I was very sorry that I couldn't stay longer. The next morning I took a plane to Bougainville and back to Guadalcanal. This time Guadalcanal was a completely different place. Instead of the dreary tropical rains, the weather was wonderfully clear and pleasant. I shall long remember the first evening there as one of the most beautiful I have ever seen. When the sun slipped below the western horizon, a

huge tropical moon rose in the east across the bay. The full moon became even more beautiful as it climbed through the coconut palms and cast a silvery path upon the sea. A balmy breeze rustled gently through the palms, and small puffs of clouds floated lazily across the evening sky. That was one night I was 'sorry I had to enjoy alone.

After four more beautiful days on Guadalcanal I finally caught a plane back to Pearl Harbor, and soon was busy drawing weather maps again. I certainly enjoyed my duty in the Hawaiian Islands, and took advantage of the wonderful weather by swimming and traveling as much as possible. This is a swell spot for a Chamber of Commerce gag. I managed to spend four days on the island of Hawaii and saw Hawaii National Park with its snowy crowned volcanoes, steaming craters, fern forests, and high waterfalls leaping into the sea.

One day last December I received word to report again to the intelligence office of the amphibious forces. I was glad to know that my observations at Palau had been so successful, but I was sorry to hear that I had to go on the next two operations. This time I was briefed on the coming assaults on both Iwo Jima and Okinawa. I spent the next couple of weeks studying maps and reports of all kinds in order to become thoroughly familiar with the islands and with all phases of the operations.

Again I headed westward bound for godforsaken Ulithi atoll, where part of our fleet lay at anchor. Ten days later we steamed out through the reef and headed toward the land of the rising sun. Our ship arrived off Iwo Jima early on the morning of D-3 day, as at Palau, and I made

my regular predawn surf and reef observations each day, ending with the landing in calm water on D-day morning, February 19th. Flying at Iwo Jima was quite different from Palau, however. We didn't go below 1800 feet, partly because of the continuous naval bombardment and partly because of the risk involved. As it was we drew some moderate 90 mm. anti-aircraft and 5 in. shell fire. Again on the morning of D-day, after my job was done, we watched the whole landing operation, and I must say it was really an impressive sight.

In the afternoon two days later, I received orders to fly to another carrier. I packed hurriedly, climbed into the plane, and was catapulted off before I even had time to fasten my safety belt. We made a hard landing aboard the USS Bismark Sea about sunset, and I went into the pilot's ready room to take off my flight gear. The ship was at general quarters and every man was at his battle station, since enemy aircraft were known to be in the area. I stayed in the ready room and exchanged scuttlebutt (rumors) with the pilots. Twenty minutes later, general quarters was secured, and most everybody went below to supper. I remained behind to talk to a pilot, and a minute or two later a terrific explosion shook the ship and the bulkhead (wall) next to me blew in. The three or four of us in the room were momentarily stunned, but fortunately none were injured. I had no idea what hit us, but I knew we were hit aft and decided to go forward to keep out of the way. I quickly strapped on my mae west, which was still beside me, and went through a passageway to the opposite side of the ship. I started down to the hangar deck, but saw it was being flooded by the sprinkling system. I could hear men screaming below and decided it wasn't the place to go, so I

returned to the ready room and sat down to think what I should do. Suddenly an even more terrific explosion rocked the ship. I and my heavy leather chair were lifted off the deck, the lights went out, and book cases and flight gear tumbled down around me in the darkness. Then I knew it was time to get out

I made my way into the dark passageway, which was filled with confused, excited men. Clearly over the loud speaker system came "abandon ship," barely three minutes after the ship was first hit. Things never happened to me so fast in my life.

Again I crossed to the opposite side of the ship, and climbed out onto the flight deck in the middle of the ship. Flames billowed from the entire after third of the deck, so I ran forward with a lot of other men and made my way between the parked planes. The ship formed a huge flaming torch in the evening darkness, and for safety our sister carriers continued onward into the night

Men crowded the forward part of the flight deck and swarmed down the ladder to the bow. I couldn't wait so I slid down a few feet to a cross-bar and swung down onto the deck. Men lined the rails on both sides of the bow and were going down life lines into the water. The tension was high, and several men said they were going to get off before "the gasoline blows up." I argued, but they wouldn't listen to reason. Heavier explosions tore the rear of the ship sending billows of flame and sparks high into the air. A mass hysteria gripped the crowd, and men jumped blindly into the sea. I even saw men jump 42 feet from the flight deck into the black water beneath. The wind was blowing across the carrier, and men who abandoned ship on the leeward side were engulfed in the

flames and smoke which blew out over the water as the ship drifted by them. Some men lost their lives this way. It's hard to think of all the angles in a tight spot.

Fifteen minutes later only two of us remained on the bow, for I managed to convince a little Philippino, named Mendoza, to stay aboard with me. For the next half hour, we remained on the ship, warm and dry, and looked around for things we might use. We stayed under cover of the overhanging flight deck, and donned steel helmets we found on the bow for protection against falling shrapnel, I cut off a life line, brought it forward, and tied it to the bow so we could get off on either side we wished. Now and then I climbed the ladder and looked cautiously over the flight deck to keep an eye on the progress of the fire.

Meanwhile we were joined by a pilot who had gotten into the water, had grown cold and tired of hanging onto a life line, and climbed back onto the ship. I went into the smoke-filled officer's quarters behind the bow and got some blankets for him to bundle up in.

For a half hour after the captain and every able man had abandoned ship, except for the few of us on the bow, I was the senior officer aboard and therefore, captain of the Bismarck Sea. My duty was short and restricted, nevertheless I actually was skipper of the carrier, and now and then the fellows still kid me about it.

About 45 minutes after the ship was hit, it became dead in the water and began to list slowly to starboard. In a few more minutes the planes on deck snapped their lines and slid off into the water with a loud crashing and crumpling. The ship bobbed back

and forth as if it were a toy, then began to list rapidly. My gear (baggage) was still in one of the planes when it went into the water.

Again things began to happen fast, and I knew we had to abandon ship quickly. The carrier was steadily rolling over, and by the time I started down the life line one edge of the flight deck was in the water. It was impossible to stand up without support. I left my shoes on deck because I thought I might not be able to take them off in the water if I wanted to (I'll leave them on next time), and went quickly down the rope. I inflated my mae west in the water, and swam forward as fast as I could to avoid any suction. When I was two hundred feet out, I looked over my shoulder and saw the searchlights of the destroyers playing through the rain upon the upturned hull. In a few seconds the great carrier slipped like a gray ghost beneath the waves.

Greatly relieved, I turned toward one of the destroyers which had moved in close, and swam eagerly toward it. I hoped that it wouldn't decide to move away before I reached it, so I poured on the steam and passed men to the right and left of me in the water. Waves washed over my head but my life jacket kept me well up. The ocean was cool and rather refreshing, but when I reached the destroyer about ten minutes later, I had just about enough. I was pleasantly tired from swimming and was just beginning to grow cold. When I was pulled aboard the destroyer, a sailor laughed, "sure, we saw you coming way out there!" I was bundled below to the hospital ward, and turned out to be the first survivor taken aboard, Boy, was I eager! I was again very

fortunate, for some men were in the water as long as four hours.

I took off my oil-spotted clothing, and was warmed with blankets and a little welcome brandy. Several minutes later Mendoza was brought in, and when he saw me he beamed with thanks. I was sure happy to see him too, and grinned back.

The next morning all survivors were transferred from the several destroyers to a transport at Iwo Jima, which was about to return to the states. However, my hopes of going home with the rest were dampened when I received orders to report to a flag ship nearby. There I found that I was to take part in the Okinawa campaign.

Before our ship left the area the next morning, it was announced that the national banner was flying atop Mt. Surabachi, and a cheer went up around the ship. Sure enough, Old Glory was waving in the breeze over Iwo Jima, and a profound feeling of thankfulness warmed my heart.

After several days at sea we sighted land, and were soon at anchor in Leyte Gulf in the Philippines. During our ten days there I went ashore several times to a native village on Samar. The people do little all day but gather food, and most of them speak Spanish, so I practiced up a little. I also hiked into the areas behind the village and found all kinds of exotic flowers and unusual birds and insects in the lush tropical forest.

My visit to the Philippines was short, and soon we were steaming back to Ulithi. I spent several pleasant days lounging on the beaches of Mog Mog, the recreation island of Ulithi atoll, and enjoying an occasional can of cold beer. After a couple of weeks of rest I was again transferred to a

carrier, and we put to sea bound for Okinawa. Our ship arrived off the island a week later, and before dawn on D-7 day I took off in a torpedo bomber and headed for the Kerama Rhetto, a small group of islands off the southwest end of Okinawa, where the first landings were to be made. At dawn we saw land ahead of us and my pilot and I looked at our maps to find out just where we were. The land looked unfamiliar, and by the time we got to it we discovered we were over Naha itself, the principal city on Okinawa. We immediately turned about and hi-tailed it out to sea.

In a few minutes we were over the Kerama Rhetto, and I made my usual surf and reef observations and returned to the ship. The following mornings I completed the Rhetto and also covered some of Okinawa's beaches. My job was again over on D-day.

Two days later, in the sunny afternoon, general quarters was suddenly sounded. I was in my quarters below deck in the forward part of the ship, and hardly had time to put on my flight jacket and mae west when a strong explosion shook the carrier. Immediately my experience on the Bismack Sea flashed into mind, and I prayed, "not again."

I raced up the ladder to find out where we were hit, and was hurrying through a crowded passageway toward the bow when an even heavier explosion

rocked the ship. The lights went out and confusion reigned for several minutes until we found out what had happened.

I went out on the bow to inspect the damage, a gaping 18 foot hole below the waterline. The explosions were caused by two kamakasi planes, the first being a near miss off the bow, and the second having blown up under water against the side of the carrier. Parts of Jap plane were scattered around the deck and the crew was already picking them apart for souvenirs.

The two compartments directly below my quarters were flooded, and damage-control crews rushed in to timber up the bulkheads for protection against expected heavy seas. I went down onto the hangar deck to see if everything was all right, and found 500 pound bombs rolling around the deck. They had been jarred loose by the force of the explosions and had dropped out of the planes. Salvage crews loaded them onto carts and dumped them overboard as fast as possible, and I got as far away from the hangar deck as I could in a hurry.

Again my hopes of going home soared, but they vanished the next day when I was ordered to another carrier. I spent the next two months at Okinawa, transferring from one carrier to another as they returned to the states. Because of my temporary status I lived "out of a bag" all the time, and had to be ready to pack

and leave on short notice. One morning I was awakened by an announcement over the public address system, "Lt. (jg) Thompson, report to the fantail. A destroyer is waiting to take you aboard." I jumped up and dressed, packed, paid my mess bill, returned some library books, grabbed my pay account and orders, and said goodbye to the executive officer on the fantail in five minutes! I had breakfast on the destroyer.

Orders arrived one morning directing me to proceed to Guam, so I flew ashore to Okinawa and spent the night at Yontan airfield. It was the first clear night in over two weeks and everybody expected a heavy Jap air raid, but instead of enemy planes only eager mosquitoes arrived to keep me awake through the night, thank goodness. In the morning I climbed aboard a giant transport and bade farewell to Okinawa.

The next day at Guam was a happy one for me, for everything seemed to happen just right. First of all, I got two letters from home—the first I had received since February, almost four months before. Then I learned that I was to be sent home at last for my survivor's leave. My morale hit its ceiling and you couldn't have found a happier fellow!

The very same afternoon I left for Hawaii. Soon I was again bound for God's country, and a few days later I arrived home, a very happy and very thankful person. And a little wiser, too.

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