

LOST AT SEA

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CHAPTER 1

GOING DOWN

The Pacific Ocean churned - its face stirred up by the gale-force winds which knifed across its surface. The vast body of water seemed to practically bubble as massive waves rose from its murky depths, looking akin to mountains made from pure liquid as they raced towards one another. Tonnes of sea water roared as they smashed, kicking up columns of sea spray that easily rose fifteen feet into the air before then splashing down into the vast expanse of water. The face of the sea tossed and turned, randomly cratering and sloping downwards, creating mock valleys. Above it all black storm-clouds brooded over the ocean, tongues of crackling lightning roiling in their shadowy cores. Sheets of rain poured down, reducing visibility to practically nil, slamming into the ocean's surface like bullets. The sea bucked and roared as forks of lightning cracked across the dismal skies, loud as rifle reports, and each clap of thunder boomed and echoed across the ocean like artillery barrages. Amongst the tumultuous mass and confusion of noises, the low and sometimes uneven drone of the four Pratt and Whitney 1830 engines powering the lone American B24 bomber battling its way through the downpour, was rendered practically inaudible.

In the aircraft's diminutive cockpit, craning over the massive control panel which easily dominated over half of the cramped space, looking down at the turbulent sea below, was 27-year-old Army Airforce pilot, first lieutenant Michael Harris. For what felt like (and probably was) the thousandth time, he cast his hazelnut brown eyes down, sweeping them

over the sea's surface from horizon to horizon. He was hoping to at least catch a glimpse of something, perhaps the white beam of a searchlight, anything that could point the bomber's way back to the airfield. Yet all that greeted the US airman's tired, exhausted gaze, was just the swirling turbulent mass of the storm, stretching for as far as the eye could see in any direction. In any case, even if there had been a searchlight, or any other form of illumination for that matter, he'd more than likely have never seen it through the hellish downpour.

He'd dropped the bomber's altitude down to as low as he dared (around 800 feet above the sea's surface). Even now, all that he could see with any sort of clarity through the fogged front window of the cockpit was his plane's snout, the sheets of thundering rain and dense clouds which almost looked like a solid wall, and occasionally through breaks in the storm he could catch a glimpse of the ocean down below. Also, the fact that most - if not all - of the AAF's island airbases stationed in the Pacific operated under strict blackout regulations didn't exactly help matters for lost aircraft like theirs.

"Nothing", he muttered to himself as he leaned back against his seat, sighing half in resignation, and half in disgust at the misfortune which had brought him and the rest of the crew to this situation. He knew that in the rear of the bomber the rest of the men onboard would probably be handing around a pair of beaten up binoculars trying to spot a sign of land in any direction. Even though a small part of him still hoped that they would spot something, the pilot was starting to highly doubt it.

Harris turned to his right, facing his co-pilot, Alex Hue Lopez who was a tall well-built man nearing his thirties from Phoenix, Arizona. He lowered his voice to a whisper so the men in the back wouldn't hear, and asked grimly, "How long do you reckon we can stay in the air?" Leaning forwards and checking the fuel gauge on the control panel, Lopez made a few silent calculations, checked the gauge twice more just to be sure and in an equally quiet and dismal voice, replied, "Around 10 more minutes, I think."

Harris looked away, trying to bury the sick feeling which was steadily making its way up his throat. Then, with a jerk, he felt the plane buck, its nose steadily tilting upwards causing the aircraft to assume an increasingly perpendicular posture. It was only thanks to the combined forces of both Harris and Lopez leaning on the control-yoke, that the plane was kept from stalling, spinning out of control and crashing right there and then. Once they managed to get the aircraft to, at least, a moderately stable state (with both pilots panting with the exertion that it took to save the stricken plane) Harris breathlessly said, "If this keeps on happening, we just might crash before the fuel runs out!"

"Yeah, thanks to the beating the Japs gave us over Saipan," Lopez agreed.

As he recalled the unpleasant memory of the events that had transpired only hours ago, Harris winced, "Don't remind me." he said quietly.

Eighteen hours ago, on the morning of the 17th of June, their B24, known to everybody as Reaper, loaded with around 3,000 pounds of demolition bombs had, along with two dozen other aircraft from the Army Air Force's 50th bomb group, lumbered down a runway in an airfield based in the Marshall Islands and taken off. Rising to an altitude of 20,000 feet under radio silence they had plotted a course which would take them over the Japanese held Mariana Island of Saipan. They were being sent in order to assist the 27th division. Unsatisfied with the performance of the 27th, Marine General Holland Smith had relieved its previous commander Major General Ralph C Smith. Yet the Marine General had failed to inspect the terrain that the 27th division was ordered to advance over. It was a valley surrounded by hills and cliffs which were still under Japanese control, and thanks to this fact, the 27th had taken heavy casualties and was pinned under enemy fire. As such, the 50th bomb group's goals centred around dropping demolition bombs onto Japanese machinegun and artillery emplacements and providing air support for the stricken division.

Harris's plane was one of the B24s which slipped to the front of the procession of bombers after they left the Marshalls and was also the first aircraft to cross the beaches of Saipan.

Once they crossed into Japanese territory the B24s were beset by heavy ground fire. Large flak shells lobbed by anti-aircraft guns exploded in their midst sending shards of metal flying in every direction. Flak eviscerated entire planes as efficiently as a butcher gutting a pig.

Somehow, Reaper managed to escape the mass of ground fire with only a bloodied nose, courtesy of an anti-aircraft shell which exploded in front of the bomber, sending flak deep into the plane's front, but not doing any actual damage. The trouble for Harris's plane really started after their bombardier, a Hispanic by the name of Alexander Rodriguez, dropped the last demolition bomb on an artillery gun and shut the two bomb-bay doors. Free from over 3,000 pounds worth of bombs, Harris raised the bomber to a safer altitude, banked right and started heading back to the Marshalls.

Nobody onboard the bomber saw the Japanese Zero, which had up till then been tailing them, until with a deft movement it swooped up from below, curved up to Reaper's right side and plastered the length of the aircraft with 20mm cannon shells. After the initial attack, the sky seemed to be full of enemy fighters, prowling around the lumbering American aircraft, slicing the bomber's skin open with their wing-mounted 50-calibre machine guns and pounding the plane with massively destructive cannon shells. Inside the aircraft, the front-, waist- and tail- gunners clung on to their M-2-Brownings for dear life, trying to gun down the swift Japanese planes and missing more often than they hit. Knowing that there was little to no chance that the gunners would be able to bring down all the Zeros before Reaper was too heavily damaged, Harris had scanned the skies, trying to glimpse something which would rescue the situation. Spotting a dense barrier of clouds which had formed over the sea east of Saipan, he pointed the bomber's nose towards it, dropped the altitude sharply, dove into it, and managed to hide amongst the clouds long enough to prompt the Japanese pilots to give up the chase and let the bomber go.

Although they had escaped, the mood in the aircraft was far from celebratory. Almost all the crew had received injuries, and those men who could still walk hurried through the bomber, frantically assessing the damage. During the battle, Reaper had lost contact with the rest of

the squadron, and Reece Williams who had once been their navigator and front gunner, had taken a bullet to the lung and was now dead. The hydraulic cables which ran through the bomb-bay walls and gave the pilot control over the landing gear and flaps had been devastated, causing purple hydraulic fluid to pool on the bomb-bay floor. Bullet holes lined the B24 from nose to tail. Part of the right-wing aileron had been bitten off, and everybody was sure that one, if not all, of the landing gear tyres had been punctured. With the plane in this critical state, it was a battle for Harris and Lopez to keep the bomber airborne. Nobody could think of how they would land the aircraft, since the pilots didn't have control over the flaps or brakes, and at least one of the landing gears was out of commission. For a brief period of time, the men considered ditching the B24 when they would be a mile away from the Marshalls, and then trying to swim and/ or use the two inflatable life-rafts which were stored onboard. Yet when it became apparent that they couldn't even locate their destination, the men's hopes all but disintegrated.

Suddenly, with a violent jolt, Harris was snapped out of his idle recollections and back to reality, as the aircraft lurched, rolling halfway onto one side. The motion of the large bomber slammed the pilot against the cockpit wall, and almost in unison, Harris and Lopez snapped their heads around to look at the fuel gauge. Underneath their fearful gaze, the little red needle of the gauge wavered for a moment before then settling on empty. The two airmen looked in silence at one another, each of them seeing their own dread reflected in the other's terrified gaze. Then with a gut-wrenching bang, one of Reaper's right-side engines... died.

CHAPTER 2

LOST AT SEA

The loss of one of Reaper's right-side engines, proved to be devastating for the bomber. For most B24 liberator aircraft serving in the Pacific theatre of World War 2, the loss of one of their four engines could be irreversibly catastrophic, and Reaper (already badly damaged by the battle over Saipan) proved to be no exception. Inside the bomber crew members hurried around, preparing themselves for the inevitable crash, clutching on to the walls and anything else which was bolted down in order to keep themselves from being thrown to the floor of the bucking plane. In the front, swearing softly under his breath, Harris worked over the controls with frantic energy born out of sheer desperation. Painfully bright forks of lightning split the sky around the B24, dangerously close to the plane's delicate wingtips, and the rain crashed against the greenhouse and cockpit windows, drumming on the vast fuselage. The large plane swayed drunkenly from side to side, violently rocking back and forth. The aircraft was almost completely out of control, as it spiralled slowly downwards straight into the heart of the storm, and ever closer towards the wind-swept face of the ocean below. As Reaper's last three working engines struggled to keep the doomed bomber airborne, Harris was trying to wrench the large control yoke backwards, in an effort to pull the plane's nose up.

In the rear Harris could hear sheer pandemonium as the crew scrambled to prepare themselves to retrieve the on-board provisions box, secondary life-raft and racing to pull on May-West inflatable life vests. Over the howling wind, the metallic coughing of the engines and the rhythmic beat of rain on metal, he caught the sound of heavy boots making their way towards the flight deck. Sparing a moment, he threw a quick glance over his shoulder, towards the cockpit door, and glimpsed the plane's serving engineer emerging from the passageway. His normally bright, cheerful 19-year old face was deathly pale, his 2 glittering blue eyes wide with fear as he clutched on to the cabin wall. Reaching up with one trembling hand he fumbled with a small hatch above the doorway for a few seconds, before then

pulling it open and gripping a small lever contained within. As the bomber's on-board engineer, it was his duty to pull the life-raft release handle. Yet in order to ensure that the raft would be close enough to the crash site for survivors to easily reach it, he would have to pull the lever just before the bomber would hit the water. This meant that he'd have little to no time to get to a crash position and thus, little chance of surviving. With his guts tying themselves into knots, Harris turned back around in his seat to face the mass of switches and buttons which comprised Reaper's control panel. He would need to keep the plane as level as possible, that would minimize the impact force from the crash, and thus give the crew the best chance for survival. However, thanks to the typhoon and the damage to the bomber, he was finding it impossible to pull the wooden-control column back for even a single inch.

When they had run out of fuel, the plane had barely been above 800 feet. Now Harris doubted that they were at more than 300 feet ... and dropping fast. The pilot struggled with the yoke knowing that they would, all more than likely, be killed on impact if he didn't manage to pull the plane level. Unbuckling the straps which bound him to the co-pilot's seat, Lopez leaned over to Harris's side and gripping the control-column in his two big hands, lent the Arizonian's own considerable strength to the endeavour. Together the two men heaved on the large stick with all their combined might. To Harris, it felt like trying to yank a truck through solid mud, yet with a long, agonizing groan of metal scraping on wood, the yoke slid backwards for a few centimetres, before then getting stuck again. With his mouth dry, his heart beating against his ribcage, and the sound of the aircraft's screaming engines filling his ears, Harris looked up and out the canopy's front window, gauging their height. The ocean stretched out below the bomber, terrifyingly close and it was then, that the sudden realization came over Harris - there was simply nothing more that he could do. They were going to slam practically nose first into a turbulent sea whilst going at full speed. Seeing a mountainous wave rise out of the depths racing towards the plane's cockpit as if intent on swallowing the B24 whole, the pilot did the only thing that he could do - brace himself for impact.

As the heavy bomber slammed into the roiling ocean, its blunt nose piercing the surface like a speeding bullet soon followed by the rest of the plane's fuselage and tail, its thin bomb-bay doors and delicate Davis wings were ripped cleanly off its body by the raging sea. Temporarily buoyed by the air still trapped within, the aircraft bobbed to the surface for a split second before then being swamped by a massive wave. It smashed over the aircraft like a vengeful mountain of swirling, ice cold water, which crumpled one of the B24's sides as easily as if it was a tin can. The screech of bending and twisting metal and explosion of breaking glass was all but drowned out, as the eager water surged within the cabin, dragging the plane down under the surface.

In the sinking remains of what used to be the cockpit there was chaos as Harris struggled feebly in his seat. During the crash, he had been thrown forwards by the force of the impact, causing his skull to crack painfully against the control board leaving him dazed. Now, his vision was blurred as freezing water swirled all about him, pressing against his eyes, filling his nostrils and ears. He could feel his head swirling, a dull throbbing pain filling his skull as the ruined remains of the plane slowly dragged him further down. He could already feel himself starting to lose consciousness, as his lungs screamed for air and he tried to desperately keep himself from breathing in the ice-cold water. Numbly, he felt the faint pressure of the seat strap which still bound him to his pilot's chair digging into his chest. Clumsily, he fumbled for his release buckle - his sluggish fingers already going numb from the cold. After a matter of seconds, which felt more like minutes, he managed to locate the buckle, and after pressing the release button, he felt the strap slowly slide backwards across his chest ... freeing him. His heart filled with relief, he pushed away from the seat, planning to swim out the rear of the cockpit. However, with a jolt he felt something still wrapped around his throat, pulling him backwards again.

In a panic, his hands scabbled at his throat, trying to feel what was still tied around him. After a couple of seconds of panicked fumbling, his hand came into contact with a number of cables and wires wrapped firmly around his neck and upper torso. They had gotten free as the plane broke apart and the cockpit was ripped from the rest of the fuselage. Now they were snared around him and bound him firmly to the submerged wreck. He struggled,

flailing as terrified panic overwhelmed him. He started ripping and pulling at the wires trying to get free, but despite his efforts, all that he managed to achieve was to wear himself out. As his struggles grew weaker and his limbs became numb, he gradually realised that he was going to die. There was nothing more that he could do to save himself. He was going to drown in his B24 in the middle of the Pacific, never to be found. Slowly he stopped trying to resist. He felt a sudden wave of tiredness coming over him, and as he closed his eyes, he was just about to open his mouth to let the bitter cold water flood his lungs, and to let himself be swept away into blissful unconsciousness when, with a sudden jolt... he felt something grasping his shoulder!

Jumping in shocked surprise, the pilot twisted round and saw that a tanned human hand had grabbed hold of his shoulder and was in the process of frantically trying to yank him out of his seat. Dumb with surprise, Harris could only mutely watch as the hand let go off his shoulder and felt over his chest. Encountering the cables wrapped around the pilot, his rescuer realised Harris's predicament. Grabbing hold of the back of the seat, the man started fumbling as he struggled with something at his belt. Before long, the rescuer reached forward again, only this time he was holding a long-bladed knife, which he used to wildly slash at the cables until they snapped. Pushing himself free, Harris was pulled out of the rear of the sinking cockpit and started to ascend, half swimming under his own power and half being hauled along by his rescuer. However, his heavy boots and aviators' clothes weighed him down as he struggled to the surface. His chest was on fire with pure agony as his lungs begged for oxygen, and he could barely keep himself from involuntarily sucking in a mouthful of sea water. His head spun with dizziness, he felt a wave of nausea starting to come over him and just as he thought that his chest would burst with the effort of trying not to breathe, his head finally broke the surface. He took in a great gulp of air which was promptly followed by him vomiting up what felt like several litres of salt water. His ears were assailed by a cacophony of noises as the storm thundered and boomed overhead, and the ocean raged around his bobbing form. Every inch of his body was shivering with the cold and a fresh cut on his throat, where the wires had been entangled around him, oozed blood down his front and into the swirling sea. However, all that he could care about was simply breathing - filling his aching lungs with fresh air. Treading water beside him, the other man handed Harris an inflatable May-West. The pilot didn't know how or where the rescuer had

managed to find and hold onto the lifejacket, but he gratefully accepted it. After pulling it over his head and inflating the May-West, he was about to turn around to his rescuer and thank him when, out of nowhere a massive wave slammed into him, dragging the pilot under the water again. For a moment, there was only chaos as he tumbled around, his vision blurred under the water. Before long, the May-West managed to buoy him up again. As he came up, spluttering and coughing, he looked around, trying to spot the other man who had saved him, but he was now bobbing in the sea - alone.
