

May 10, 1944 Excerpt from WWII Journal of Captain James Hobstetter – 307th Bombardment Group

“My 4th strike and by far the most exciting was directed at Truk. The two groups joined squadrons making a total of 40 planes on this raid. We were hoping for a fighter escort but to no avail. We proceeded to Truk and made our bombing run at 20,000 feet. The AA fire was heavy and extremely accurate. Just as we were about halfway on the bombing run I noticed the concentrated flak burst in the squadron directly ahead of us. The heavy AA was bursting right in the squadron formation. I could see the ships rocking with the bursts most of them must have been hit and why none of them were knocked down is completely enigmatic. The flak burst and then seemed to burst again with additional smaller flashes or pieces of metal flying everywhere. We were next and directly behind the squadron. We got through without mishap.

The Zeroes and Tojos were waiting for us as we came off the target. More were climbing to hit us on the way home. Our squadrons pulled in and formed a very tight box which looked like suicide for the Japs to attack but they did. I could feel our ship quiver as we opened fire. Tracers from the ships formation were spewing out in every direction. The gunners and Walter (bombardier) who was acting as fire control officer from the navigator's dome were calling the angles of attack the Zeroes were making. We were well closed on our flight leader who was pulling in tight under the lead element when it happened. I happened to glance up as the Tojo made a vertical dive from 12 o'clock. He was diving with tremendous speed down through the formation between the first and second flight. I was flying left wing of the second flight and got a good look at him. I glanced quickly at my flight leader and then back to the Tojo just in time to see him blow up. His plane made a violent twisting flip and then scattered into little pieces of confetti which drifted by our ship as we passed. I saw the pilot fall out, he was the largest remaining piece of the plane. It happened right in front of our plane. I thought he had been shot because our nose gunner was firing at the time. I was stunned. I couldn't believe that a gun could blow a plane into pieces in a split second. But that isn't what had happened.

In his violent dive which I estimate must have been five or six hundred MPH, he went out of control and crashed into Lt. Willock's plane. Willock was on the right wing of the lead element, the crash tore his left rudder and elevator from his plane and the last I saw of him he was out of control and going down. The tail turret gunner was still firing as he went down. From the waist gunner's report he pulled out about 10,000 ft. and in doing so the tail turret and gunner was torn from the plane. The Zeroes jumped him immediately dropping phosphorous bombs and making passes at him from all directions. He kept his plane under control although she was listing badly to the left side.

For a minute it looked as if he might be able to climb back into formation. The Zeroes followed us and we kept up a running battle for about 45 minutes. I heard Willcock calling the rescue Catalina as he was expecting to go down. As we neared the equator about 200 miles from the target our radio operator intercepted a message. Willcock's

plane stated his position and that they were going to bail out. Having plenty of gasoline we got permission to leave the formation and cover Willcock's crew when they bailed out. We rigged up a life raft and emergency rations to drop to them. When we arrived at their position we found a PB4Y and another B24 circling the spot where they had bailed out. I thought I saw several heads sticking out of the green sea marker. The water was too choppy for the PB4Y to land but several rafts were dropped. Being of no further use and running low on gas we returned home. The PB4Y was still circling when we left. The story runs that six men bailed out. The navigator refused to jump because he couldn't swim. The pilot, reluctant to leave him, attempted to water land the crippled plane. It exploded on impact. The other two were apparently killed in the flight. Three survivors were picked up, the others apparently drowned in the rough sea. Total losses three ships."