

# My Favorite War Story

How "Blessed Event" came back with her wounded and dead

By E. K. GREEN

"Blessed Event" was a Liberator, and the climax to its career came last year when Rabaul was still too strong.

Eight of its crew of 10 men were still alive when I talked with them—but the "Blessed Event" was a shattered wreck.

It began almost over Rabaul. No. 3 engine coughed out. The other planes seemed to shoot ahead and, within seconds, Zeros attacked the straggler. For 40 minutes afterward the Liberator fought a losing running battle—but she fought. Again and again, 20-mm. and 7.7-mm. cannon shells exploded within, or hit, her. Half the tail was shot away, a gaping hole was blown in the waist. The navigator was killed with the first shell. Controls were shot away.

Below was the unfriendly Pacific; above, below and on all sides were Zeros spitting fire and death.

"No man ever had a better crew," said Lt. Harry P. John, of Crowley, La., the pilot. "Each had a job to do and each was doing it."

As he fought to hold the plane in control after a 20-mm. had ripped his control board, John felt rather than heard the gasp of his co-pilot, Ray Green, of Sayre, Okla., who had been hit in his shoulder and neck.

"Hurt bad, Ray?" John asked. And Ray's cool voice answered, "I'm O.K."

"He's plenty tough, that Ray Green," John said to me. "Guess it's the Indian in him. He's mighty proud that he has a streak of redskin."

From nose, turrets, waist and tail, John felt the chatter of his guns. At first there was no time to tally scores, but twice, at least, it seemed that Zeros took mortal wounds.

Now nose gunner S/Sgt. Bill Barlow, of Redlands, Cal., felt a thrill



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of triumph wipe out the pain of a severe skull wound as he caught a Zero and saw it burst into flames. Ball-turret gunner S/Sgt. John Lemon, of Kent, Ohio, hit one and saw it fall.

Every man but three was fighting. In the dead navigator's seat slumped bombardier Lt. Lester Kornblow, of New York, his face ashen, bleeding from wounds in his right arm, shoulder and leg. In

the waist, radioman S/Sgt. Tom Craven, of Kalispell, Mont., lay unconscious beside his gun, mortally wounded. By the other waist gun lay S/Sgt. Dennis Ryan, of Palsade, Minn., both collar bones broken and a splinter of shrapnel in his back. He was aiming and firing with one arm.

At the tail gun, S/Sgt. Joe Dispenza, of Buffalo, N. Y., had wounds in his face and hands. S/Sgt. Charles Derrick, of Westminster, S. C., came down from the turret seeking aid for a serious abdominal wound; he took one look and went back to his guns. Lemon, wounded in the foot, came up from the ball and took over the waist guns. He got another Zero from there. Dispenza got still another.

John himself had wounds in the right arm and face but he scarcely realized it. By the time the last Zero turned back, a second engine was out of action. There was no chance to make his home airfield. It was an emergency field landing—or else.

He made it, on a too-short runway, and with only one wheel down. Green cut the ignition as their belly touched, and the ship slithered to a stop.

They had lost two men—Craven died that night—but the "Blessed Event" had accounted for four Zeros and six probables out of a hunter that had taken the sky that day.



GLEN THOMAS

Pilot Harry John, his ship wrecked and crew shot up, fought the controls.