

TOM, CLEAR of the roaring fire, gradually became aware of a serene and heavenly peace as his parachute blossomed open and he floated earthwards.

Looking down, he glimpsed the flying boat as a flaming comet, with engines screaming at full throttle, plummet steeply into the jungle below.

Still aboard at their posts were the dead Australian crew with their American captain slumped mortally wounded over the controls.

Thus RAAF Catalina A24-9 passed into history, becoming our first reconnaissance aircraft shot down in the New Guinea area during World War II and its pilot, Lieutenant George Leland Hutchinson, of the US Legation in Canberra, the first American to give his life in that theatre of conflict.

The long-range eyes and bombers of Australia at the beginning of the Pacific war were its ponderous but faithful Catalina flying boats.

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In the latter, there were five survivors who were picked up by a Japanese cruiser and became POWs for the duration. However, in A24-9 only one man parachuted clear, Tom Keen. This then is the story as told by the sole survivor.

The mission for that fateful day was a delivery flight of radio equipment to Salamaua, on the north coast, which would then proceed on a search for a Japanese fleet thought to be somewhere off Rabaul, and attack if located. The Cat was to be fully armed, with eight 250lb bombs slung under the wings.

In each side blister were the main means of defence, twin Lewis guns with standard ammunition, because incendiaries and tracers "wore the barrels out too quickly".

Sergeant Doug Coote had joined the crew that morning as the only really qualified gunner on board. The rest were surprised to hear that he had never fired a Lewis gun in his life! Corporal Tom Keen gave him as much instruction as he could on the weapon before they departed.

The previous day the Cat crew had nearly collided head-on with a giant four engine Japanese flying boat at Soraken, in Bougainville. Then, flying onto Rabaul with their radio not working, they had swept in under the smoke from burning fuel tanks and blazing ships, narrowly avoiding the last wave of departing enemy bombers.

Extra insurance

The crew were, naturally by this stage, beginning to become a little apprehensive. It would only be a matter of time before they would see real action. "Hutch", their American skipper had finally managed to obtain nine parachutes for the day's operation. What a prize. Just a little extra insurance, as on their previous missions they didn't have any parachutes at all.

At 0735 hours, the Catalina lifted slowly off the harbour and began tracking down the east coast of Papua before swinging north and crossing a low point in the range. Somewhere near Baniara, on the opposite coast, they banked left again and began tracking west up the adjacent coast. Their course had, in fact, been three sides of a rectangle. The Catalina was only a few miles offshore and droning steadily along from point to point some 1500 feet above the tropical sea.

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Disposition of the crew at this moment was Meadows on the bow gun, Lieutenant Hutchinson at the controls, Downes and Sergeant Coote on the radio, Murphy up in the engineer's seat under the fuel tanks, Craigie on the twin guns portside, and Tommy Rowe, the second pilot, between the perspex blisters to act as fire controller. Tom Keen was with his twin Lewis guns on the starboard side and newly arrived Jack Wyche on the single weapon in the rear tunnel compartment.

At first it appeared as if they had not been sighted from the seaward side. Hopefully their camouflage was blending against the jungle and mountain backdrop.

In an instant, however, the ragged pattern of dots tightened formation and bored in towards them. They'd been seen. Tom felt then that each man on board considered that death was only minutes away for some or all of the crew.

Hutch pushed the throttles forward to emergency power in an attempt to escape. It was a desperate effort to try to climb into some clouds hanging at 7000 feet on the tops of the nearby mountains.

The Australians and the American waited without speaking, each man absorbed in his own thoughts. The tail swung a little and there they were, astern and closing rapidly. At 800 metres the leader on the right side veered out a little, his Number Two shot up higher, and the Number Three dropped slightly. A fourth swung out wide on the opposite side.

The Catalina suffered a simultaneous at-

tack from four points. Converging fire with the Cat in the apex of the cone. A quick glance forward and Tom noticed they were only a thousand feet below the first layers of cloud.

The effective range for the Cat's 303 guns was 400 metres, so the gunners held their fire. As Tom sighted on his target, the leader, he saw two small puffs of grey smoke form near the centre of his engine, then two shrill whistles past the left side of his face were followed by explosions and a roar.

Voices were shouting, a noise like hail was hammering against the hull. Tom got sick of waiting for the order to fire and let go a few bursts at his target. He saw the fighter wobble badly, recover and come on.

His Zero was now very close, only a couple of hundred feet away and beginning to shear off. He could clearly see a crimson strip that ran from its engine nacelle down the fuselage and below the red ball.

Tom squeezed both triggers and swung his guns up and down the fighter. It seemed to shudder, the nose jerked up until it stalled and fell. He fired again and again as it dropped off into a dive.

A voice in his ear was shouting: "You've got him. You've got him". It was young Tommy Rowe, who had his chin on Tom's shoulder watching the attacker plunge.

All hell broke loose again as explosions burst very close around the flexiglass canopy. Tom thought he was hit. He turned and saw Rowe falling. It seemed like everything was happening in slow motion. Over at the other guns, Bruce Craigie was also mortally hit and had fallen back in his gunner's seat, right hand clamped on the triggers and the weapon firing aimlessly into the sky.

By now, flames and smoke were everywhere and it was impossible to see overhead. A sudden jarring shock tore Tom's mouth. He tried to aim again, but the left foresight was gone and the barrel bent.

One of their shots had hit the end of the Lewis gun singing the butt end into his face. Then the remaining weapon jammed. All this time, faithful old A24-9 had droned along on an even keel gamely but vainly seeking the shelter of the clouds. The trailing fabric edges of the mainplane were alight and the flames, as they swirled and eddied under the wing, were licking the

paint off the bombs below. Even with the engines roaring the stricken ship was mush-



Lt George Leland Hutchinson: the US Navy pilot of Catalina A24-9.

Tom grabbed the intercom, saw the red light blink, and told Hutch that those in the rear were also dead and the two had better hurry up and jump. The American acknowledged and was midway through a sentence about dropping the bombs when there was another clatter of bullets tearing into the Cat. The voice cut off and the plane nosed over into a steep dive. Tom thought the final burst had killed the pilot and he had fallen on the controls. They were about 4000 feet above the coastal range.

Leaning out the hatch, Tom was suddenly sucked through and the parachute pack tore loose from the harness as he fell. Panic seized him. He thought the parachute was gone. Looking up he saw it above him still in its envelope. The webbing straps had

been ripped out of their press clip tabs. Tom, however, still had the parachute attached, but streaming above him as he plummeted.

Climbing up the straps hand over hand, he got his chin over the pack, grabbed the ripcord and pulled. It had been a fall of some 1500 feet before there was a flash of white silk and the chute finally opened.

The high-pitched buzz of radial engines made him glance up. Several of the Zeros were circling above, with the leader diving directly at him. The peculiar screeching and whistling noises were bullets whizzing past his left leg.

Tortured grinding

Then a flash of inspiration. Tom shammed dead. It was easy to do, he was nearly dead with fright anyway! His attacker roared past and the others followed, not firing.

Tom heard rather than saw his Catalina impact below. There was a tortured grinding noise as she hit a mountain spur. It was followed by a sudden updraft which tore at his body and skin. It must have caught the Zeros too because he heard them climbing away rapidly. Below, an unbroken green sea of interlocking tree tops. Above, quite high, the Zeros still circled. A small black hole

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It was just on midday when the internal klaxon suddenly blew "action stations" and the flying boat swung steeply towards the coastline. Arthur Meadows, the wireless operator, dashed through and reported, "We've been recalled to base, the Japanese are attacking Lae and Bulolo so we're getting out of danger".

The Catalina was now retracing its course along the coastline, only this time closer inshore. A few minutes later a shout came through the intercom, "Thirteen or more enemy aircraft on the port bow, about five miles".

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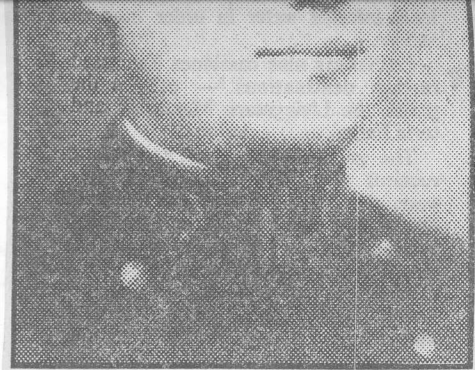
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paint off the bombs below. Even with the engines roaring the stricken ship was mushing down with a third of its wing gone.

Tom heard Hutch say over the intercom: "They're all dead up forward. They're all dead." At the same time he realised the guns on all sides had ceased firing. There was only the roar of the flames over his head sounding like a giant blow torch. Through the open door of the tunnel compartment he could see Jackie Wyche was also dead. Looking down, Tom saw the parachute jammed between the seat and hull where he'd stowed it earlier. He slammed it on.



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appeared in the canopy below and Tom manipulated his chute to head for it.

Rolling into a ball he fell through, received a few sharp scratches on his bare back and ended up bouncing like a yo yo suspended five metres above the ground. Turning the release lever, he dropped out of the harness, hit the soft ground with a thump and rolled down a slope until he collided with a small tree trunk.

Bootless, Tom initially tried to head inland to where he thought the wreckage lay, but the slopes proved too steep and he continually fell back. Taking the easier route, he followed the gully down, reasoning that it would eventually run to the sea.

The ground did finally flatten out, and he soon crossed a small swamp at high speed, to elude any crocodiles. Then, crawling through pig tunnels became necessary to penetrate the thick undergrowth. Several times on the way out Tom climbed trees to study the lie of the land. Occasionally he thought he smelt the salt of the sea. Eventually

after crossing a path, he reached the coast.

A swim in the beautiful cool sea. Tom washed off the caked mud and blood, in the process discovering his wrist watch was still functioning and reading 1420 hours.

Wishing to locate a native village as soon as possible — the area wasn't yet occupied by the enemy — Tom made towards a rocky headland where he had seen two small figures moving off in the distance. Thirst was troubling him constantly. In the bush there had been water holes, but now out here only small salt water creeks existed. A heavy passing shower helped, and he found he could suck drops of moisture off the wet leaves.

One moment he was walking and then miraculously, the next instant, the path became a little village. Something was wrong though. It was as quiet as a tomb. Where were all the people, the children, the pigs, fowls and dogs? Then, natives shyly emerged from hiding and indicated they had seen the battle overhead and one man fall slowly to the earth. One of them had been given basic medical training, and as a "lik lik doctor" treated Tom's wounds.

The coastal people promised to help the injured airman and began to assist him from village to village. As the sun dipped low on the horizon the same day, they came towards a huge white man in pith helmet, khaki shorts and shirt. It was Mr Lehner, the German Lutheran missionary at Hopoi. He kept saying "you poor boy" over and over again as he put his arms around tom and hugged him like a hurt child.

Column of smoke

Lehner had seen the whole action from his house and told Tom that 17 fighters had been involved. Later, from his verandah, he pointed to a thin column of smoke about eight kilometres away in a direct line. It was drifting up from the last resting place of Catalina A24-9.

The kindly old missionary saw that the Australian was bathed, fed and placed in a comfortable bed. Several times during the night Tom awoke screaming about flames and each time his host was beside him to reassure the airman through to the dawn.

Down the coast to Lae by canoe and old ute, then back to Moresby via Nadzab and Wau. Although it was only a ten-day absence since he left, it seemed like several lifetimes.

Tom Keen survived the war and retired at Gladstone in Queensland.

Bad health, as a result of his escape, plagued him for much of his latter life and he died late in 1985.

It would be unfortunate if Australia forgot Lieutenant George Leland Hutchinson USN and his crew. In his short attachment to our air force, he had also participated in long-distance raids on Truk and had been one of the pilots in the air search for HMAS Sydney off West Australia.

Hutch now lies at the Golden Gate National Cemetery at San Bruno in California. Efforts to contact his relatives through the American press have not been successful.

However, it is planned, in the near future, for an appropriate plaque to be installed at the US Embassy in Canberra to honour this pilot, the Australian crew who perished with him, and the sole survivor.



Corporal Tom Keen, the sole survivor of Catalina A24-9. ABOVE:

Bob Piper recalls the tale of a survivor from an early air battle over New Guinea in 1942.