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FLYING



Raymond D. Daniel



The Thrill of Flying is about a young man, Raymond Daniel, who wanted to be fighter pilot. Lacking the funds for college, he enlisted in the Army Air Corps to be a mechanic. However, world events brought about a change in the requirement for pilot training. After flying school, he was selected to be a Night Fighter Pilot - his long-time dream.

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THE THRILL OF FLYING

Raymond Daniel

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ISBN 978-1-62646-371-4

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed in the United States of America.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2013

First Edition

SECOND MISSION WAS NEARLY MY LAST

For several reasons, my second mission to Japan was nearly my last and easily the most memorable. It was also the only mission I flew over Japan that was not the last mission of the night. On all other missions, we landed just before sun up. I was 24 years old at the time. (Though I went on to fly 25 years-7550 hours in the Air Force. Nothing else, in the intervening 4 years, has given me quite the level of anxiety.) My single plane mission left Ie Shima about 2100 on 2 August. The weather was clear for this six hour, 1200 mile mission mainly over water. Besides me, the crew included Lt. Gilmartin, radar operator, and Cpl. George Harry Jr., gunner. We carried two 500 pounders and two 310 gallon external tanks, for a total of 1,350 gallons. At about 0100 on 3 August, we hit our IP, the initial point from which we began the bomb run, and that's when I lost communications with the Radar Officer (RO). He sat in the rear compartment and could not enter the pilot compartment. We were totally dependent on the intercom between us and his speech was unreadable. I could hear just enough to understand he was very excited about something. We were very near our maximum range. We were ordered to avoid contact with enemy aircraft and all I could think was that we'd missed the drop point so I dropped the bombs and turned for home. Suddenly the tail warning light came on and the buzzer sounded. Someone was on my tail!!! Without communication with the RO I couldn't do an air intercept, the original mission of a P-61, and now our plane was the target of a Japanese Night Fighter. It wasn't until we landed that the RO was able to tell me that he had a contact with enemy aircraft. Thank goodness for some fine training over Florida that paid off for my crew and me over Japan that night.

During training, we paired off as fighter and then as target, using maximum allowable power and alternating maximum dives, turns, and climbs. This technique evaded the Night Fighter and the tail warning

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light went out and the buzzer stopped. I don't know how long these evasive maneuvers took, but it was too long for me. Alone again, we had a new challenge brought by the intercom problem. The radar couldn't help with navigating our way back to Ie Shima because the RO and I couldn't communicate. That meant I had to navigate home. There were no radio aids to navigation and water at night is not much of a landmark. I recall the forecast winds were light, and so set a reciprocal heading home. When the clock indicated I should be about 30 minutes out, I called for a steer home and an Ie Shima operator verified that my heading was good. About three minutes later, I received a call to transmit for another steer. This was a bit unusual because we generally went about 10 minutes between steers. Remember, this was my second mission and I sure wasn't Mr. Cool at this point. I transmitted and the perfect English voice gave me a new heading of 180 degrees, it was exact opposite of my current course. I recalled a warning that Japanese imposters tried to lure unsuspecting pilots onto fatal courses. So I didn't take the bait. At our altitude of 8000 feet, I could hear the Ie Shima station and the Japanese imposter, but neither could hear each other. I did not hear from the stranger after my last transmission. Unfortunately, our troubles were not over yet. My IFF (Identification Friend or Foe) malfunctioned. So I was told to wait for a night fighter to confirm my identity before trying to land. Whoever was on patrol that night never found me. After holding for 30 minutes, I turned on my navigation lights, something not generally recommended in combat. But I wanted to be easily identified as a friendly. Another 30 minutes passed and no one joined up to verify our identity and the fuel gauges indicated empty. I radioed the controller that we either had to land or bail out. Ditching was out. The P-61s lower gun bay door acted like a scoop, causing the plane to fill and sink rapidly. The controller approved our landing and mentioned that a thunderstorm was very close to the landing pattern. Because of the combat situation, the runway was in a blackout condition.

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This meant that hooded lights were visible only at about 300 feet, or just where you roll out on final. Just as I lined up on final approach, a flash of lighting blinded me. I had to take a missed approach on instruments. The same thing happened on the second approach.

I recalled a helpful comment from Paul Smith, one of our Night Fighter Aces. He told us to close one eye when firing the top turret guns. Located right above the pilots head, those four .50 caliber machine guns created a flash that destroyed your night vision. That was a pretty important warning because you would be at a real disadvantage if you missed the target and lost your night vision!

On the third approach I flew with one eye closed, sacrificing depth perception for night vision. That turned out to be a good trade off. There was another flash, but I was able to land with one good eye. My third landing pass was truly the third swing after two strikes. I didn't think we had enough fuel left to climb back into the traffic pattern, much less shoot another landing. When the engines sputtered and coughed due to lack of fuel, I knew for certain how close we were to running out of fuel. The external tanks were filled until the fuel ran out of the overflow, which took about 10 gallons. We did not have enough fuel remaining to fill one external tank.





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