

Event: An Unusual Day For Vince Lipovsky



Place: A South Pacific Island Named Bougainville ♦ Time: March 8th 1944
Phone Organization: Marine Fighter Squadron # 223

For those of you who don't know me, I was a USMC Fighter Pilot in WW11 and a Jet Fighter Pilot in the New York Reserve when I was recalled for the Korean War in 1950. I flew 69 missions in the So. Pacific Area and 33 missions in the Korean War. For today, I've decided to try to quickly recount "one" of the several unusual days I had in WW11. Two different photo prints of what happened that day are to found on your tables.

To set the scene, we were on a large hogback mountain-top island named Bougainville. It is about 300 miles northeast of Guadalcanal where our forces started our counter offensive action against Japan. The Marines landed on Bougainville in early Nov. of 43 and I flew my first mission over the landing site on Nov. 28. Because of events of the whole day, it wasn't until late that nite, when I finally relaxed, that I realized that I turned 23 yrs. old that day. After the Marines secured the beach toe-hold and established a protective perimeter, the Navy's Construction Battalion filled in a swamp area and built us a steel-mat landing strip.

We moved there later on and were warned that the Japanese would soon attack our base and that we should be on the lookout for them as we flew out and in during our offensive missions against other more formidable centers up the chain of islands.

March 8 started out at about 4 am when, in almost total darkness, my division of 4 planes taxied out to take off for another north bound mission. As we were taxiing, I was the third plane in line, I saw a large bright flash and saw a Marine running away from a fuel truck which had the word INFLAMMABLE painted on it's side. Because of engine and radio static noise, I couldn't tell what happened, but I immediately thought that the Marine was smoking near the truck and thereby caused the explosion. The next thing I knew, my division leader and his wing man pulled over to the side of the taxi-way and hand signalled that they had to abort because of some problems. Since we had a rule that the next leader in line should take over and continue the mission, I continued on. While doing so, I sensed that something was wrong with my plane, but I had no idea or info as to what the prob. might be, and because of darkness and no one was around to inspect my plane, I decided to pull over to the side of the taxi way near the takeoff point so that I could get out and check out the plane myself. When I got out, I noticed that my tail wheel was flat, but it was so dark that I could'nt see anything else that may have caused the flat. Again, with policy in mind that the mission is to proceed in spite of probs., I decided to go back to our operations tent and get another plane so's to carry on. As I stood there still wearing my parachute I saw a Marine speeding towards me in a 4x6 truck and I hailed him to give me a ride back to our ops. area. However, before getting back, I asked him to stop at the place where the flash occurred. When we got there, I noticed, with advancing daylight, that there was a crater in the ground with pieces of shrapnel scattered around it. Shortly after that, the plane that I just left exploded and burned furiously in place. I can't recall all that followed, but I do remember getting back to our ops area and then finding out what was happening. In summary, the Japanese, who were logistically isolated and unable to mount much of an offensive, decided to do what ever they could. So they dug some caves in the mountains overlooking our airfields, we had 3, and hand carried pieces of artillery to those places with night and trees for cover. Then on March 8, 5 mos. after the Marine landing and subsequent forays to keep them at bay, they regrouped and decided to shell our base. That of course explained the explosion flash which took out 3 planes with the first round. While in the ops area the shells were still coming in so, without any plans or provisions for the situation, I wound up in a large sand bag bunker with 7 or 8 of us looking for shelter. It was so crowded that I had no place to sit or stand so I propped myself on the corner of some bag outcroppings and held on with my hands to prevent falling on the others. I soon got very tired and wanted to sit down. I then noticed that a Marine had a spot to sit but wasn't doing so, so I asked him why and he said he couldn't and I asked why, and he then showed me his bottom which was full of small shrapnel punctures. Later when the shelling stopped after sunrise, I observed a good deal of damage in our camp area and also saw one of our mechs. who was killed when a round fell in front of him when he was coming out of the mess hall. I got a jeep and went back to see what was left of my plane. I then learned that a second round hit my plane in the wing root near the cockpit and blew the wing about a hundred yards away leaving the rest of the plane to burn in place. We then took the pictures which I placed on your tables. While doing so, the japs in the caves

were obviously glassing us and decided to lob some more shells at us. We dove behind a big fallen mahogany tree for shelter until they stopped due to their not wanting to give away their cave locations in the brightening daylight.

After supper, about 5 of us were looking together at pictures of pretty girls in a well worn copy of an Esquire magazine when the sound of an incoming shell was heard, and at world record 100 yd. dash speed, we all raced for the nearest fox hole. Even though I was on the track team in high school, I was the last one to the target hole and couldn't get in because there wasn't any room for me. I obviously should have been a sprinter instead of a pole vaulter. Later I and Ed Firestone and Ray Mumme found a vacant hole. The shells were coming in about every 15 mins. and were exploding above us as they hit the trees thereby raining shrapnel downward toward us. So, we had to stay in for the night. It was long and tiring and sleep was impossible so ED and Ray decided to tank up on some Australian spirits they got on our January R&R to Sidney. They soon slept soundly. I declined the option as a cope out and then suffered the consequences because it was raining and the hole cover of coconut logs covered with a poncho and further covered with coral sand was leaking. As I sat there fatigued from the lack of sleep while catching the water in my helmet, my bodies waste water holding system was sending strong signals for relief. I didn't want to do it in the hole, of course, and I didn't want to do it in my helmet either, so I finally, in a half dazed state of mind decided to climb out and water one of the mahogany trees. While doing so and still draining, I suddenly realized that about 15 mins. had passed and just then the sound of another incoming round forced me to dive for the hole while still draining. I spent the next night in a large, well prepared and somewhat comfortable bunker which some Australian pilots built.

For some time after, our divebomber planes would take off, circle the field and bomb the suspected cave locations in hopes of ending the shelling. About a month later, our squadron moved to another island up the chain after New Zealand troops landed there and secured it for another stepping-stone airfield. There were other unusual days of course, but, at last, after a year overseas I got orders to report to the Naval Air Station at Corpus Christi as an advanced flight instructor. As a Connecticut Yankee I found it to be very hot and humid but interesting, thereby setting myself up for the opportunity of being Avco's representative to Nasa's for whom we built the Apollo heatshield amongst other equipment and studies.

SEMPER FIDELIS.



VINCE LIPOVSKY USMC
MAR. 8 '44 - BOUGAINVILLE IS.
SO. PACIFIC AREA