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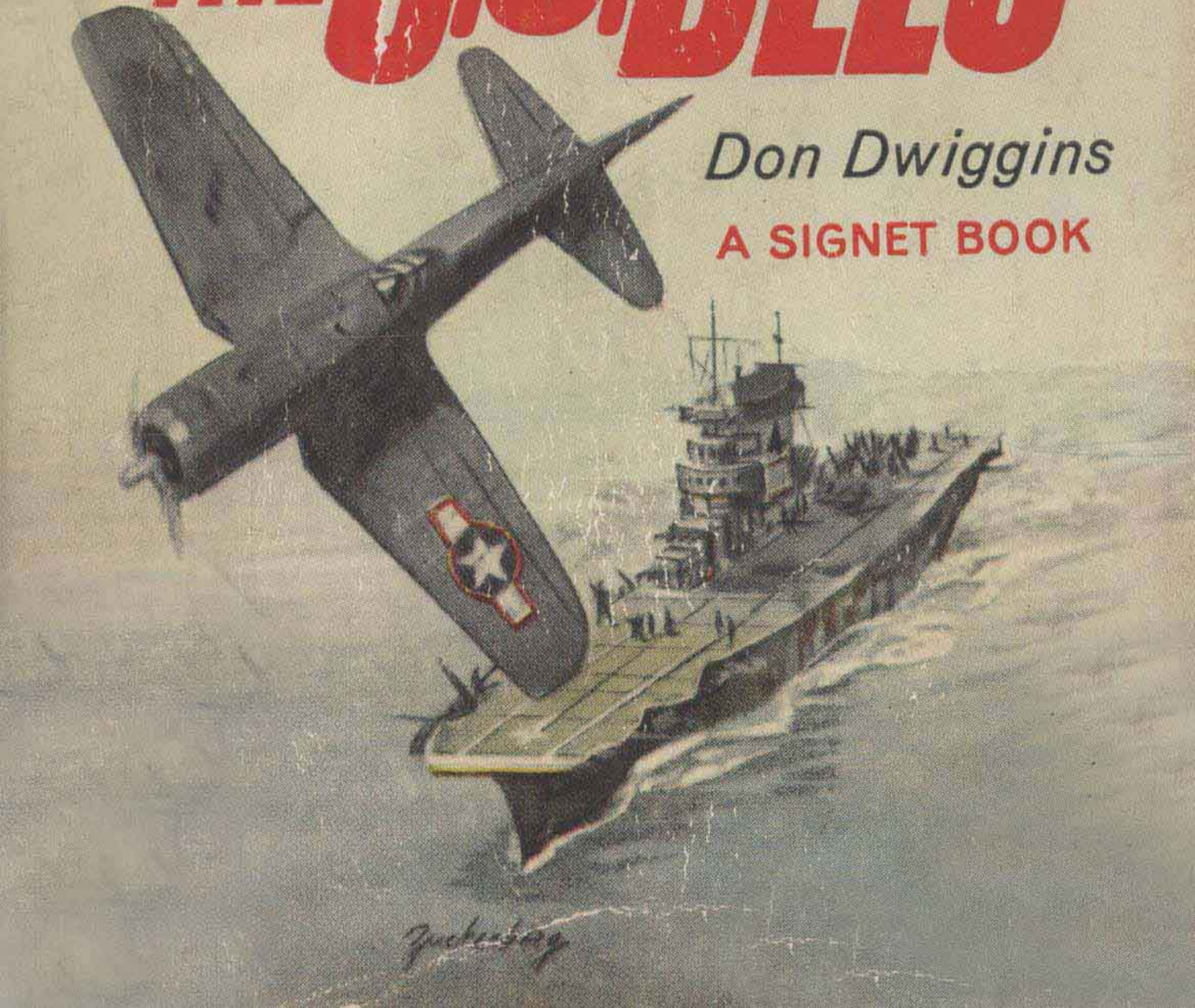
THE F.O.B.ERS

Don Dwiggins

A SIGNET BOOK



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THE S. O. BEES

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SIGNET BOOK

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THE S. O. BEES

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There have been few career Navy officers who could truthfully say they were born to the service or that their entire being was directly geared to its functioning. Such a man was John Thomas Blackburn, a trade-school officer with a unique distinction—throughout her pregnancy, his mother had been at Annapolis, so that he had never known anything but Navy life.

He was not inclined to be philosophical about the accident of his birth, but from early childhood Blackburn had rebelled against wrongs—real and imagined—that seemed to entrap him. Most of those early situations had been of his own making, and looking back, he found it quite simple to shrug and to blame everything on the Navy and its rigid discipline.

Not that his father had jammed the Navy down his throat. A hard-headed Scotsman, the elder Blackburn felt a man should follow his own star, chart the course of his life according to his own interests. Blackburn's father was the son of a successful insurance lawyer in Omaha, Nebraska, who had developed a deep interest in the sea and in navigation from reading books on maritime heroes. In 1899 he'd left the plains country and gone to Annapolis as a midshipman.

A classmate of his father was William F. Halsey, who at the beginning of World War II was already carving his niche in the halls of great American naval heroes. Graduating in the Class of '04, Blackburn's father chose to develop new theories

of navigation and write books on the subject. The books carried such authority that he stayed on at the Academy as an instructor.

Hence, Blackburn already bore the stamp of U. S. Navy when, in 1911, he was born on the grounds of the U. S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland.

He vaguely remembered, during the excitement of the First World War years, hearing his Irish mother reading letters from an uncle, Casper K. Blackburn, who had gone into submarines and was injured under enemy attack and invalided out.

Instead of going down to the sea himself, Blackburn decided on a career in law, like his grandfather. He disliked the frugal life his father led as a naval officer, as a boy listened in awe to tales his grandfather spun of great courtroom battles that ended with greater riches for the victorious counsel.

He once stooped to burglary, during his first year in school, in kindergarten. He'd come home with his first report card and shown it to his mother and father and there hadn't been any gold stars on it. He lied and said the stars had come off, and he got his first whipping. The next week, on a Saturday, he climbed through a window at school and ransacked the teacher's desk. He found her box of gummed stars and stuck them all over his report card. Inadvertently, he put on more stars than was permissible and thus earned a second whipping.

Blackburn was a good student and learned quickly. In prep school he scored highest in his class in final exams, winning a ten-dollar gold piece. Instead of graduating with honors, he brought fresh disgrace to the Blackburn name by getting thrown out of school. He'd driven a Model T Ford across the school campus, breaking up a lacrosse game and chasing screaming coeds into the swimming pool.

One day an older brother came home in a brand-new midshipman's uniform and strutted proudly before him.

"Too bad you can't wear one of these," the brother said, grinning. "Boy, do the girls go for it!"

The next day Tom Blackburn filled out an application for a competitive Presidential examination. He passed with flying colors and got himself a uniform just like his brother's.

Even then, Blackburn's facility for getting into jams marred his career. His roommate at the Naval Academy, Fred Purdy, had a date with a girl in Washington but had been confined to quarters over the weekend for getting into a fistfight.

"Why don't you go in my place?" Purdy pleaded. "I can't keep her waiting at the station. I may never see her again!"

As a friendly gesture, Blackburn and a classmate, Midshipman Russ Douglas, went out of their way to drive to Washing-

ton to rescue her. Purdy's girl introduced them to her pretty roommate. Together, the two couples toured the capital, had dinner, and went back to the girls' apartment.

At reveille Monday morning, instead of showing up at muster, he and Douglas were still in Washington. They finally sneaked back to the Academy, after being forty-eight hours AWOL, and were called on the carpet by Captain Halsey.

"If your father weren't a classmate of mine, for which reason there must be one drop of good Navy blood in your veins," Halsey snapped, "you and Douglas would be drummed out of this trade school by sundown. As it is, you are confined to the Prison Ship for sixty days."

Blackburn thought of appealing to his father to intercede, but the old man was riding around somewhere in Philippine waters as skipper of the battlewagon California. By the time a letter could get there and back, he would be out. He decided against it.

The rebelliousness of Blackburn's youth found a challenge in naval aviation, after graduation from Annapolis in 1933 and a tour on battleships. In the high sky, he found the freedom of physical and spiritual release that came when he could shake the world with a control stick, tilting the horizons and making earth and sky change places.

His indoctrination to the world of the sky came when he rode the back seat of a Navy bomber as an aviation gunnery observer, pounding a radio key. There was the thrill of slamming skyward on catapult launches, of buzzing low across vast stretches of coastline. He put in for flight training, and in February, 1937, he won his gold wings.

But those were the days, too, when the Navy flew fighters for dive bombers because they didn't have any dive bombers. He climbed into the sky in the cockpit of the first fleet monoplane, the SBZU-1, and pushed over into exhilarating dives until time to release the bomb on target and sweep skyward again.

It had been a bitter thing to Blackburn to watch Hitler's *Luftwaffe* terrorizing Europe with deadly Stukas. That technique had been developed by the United States Navy, and now the Army Air Corps was sending people down to Norfolk to learn how the Navy did it. He knew the feel of such awkward dive bombers as the Brewster SB2A-1 Buccaneer, the Curtiss SB2C-1 Helldiver, and the newer, faster Douglas SBD Dauntless.

But dive-bombing was one thing, and fighting in the sky, in swift, deadly fighters, was another. Blackburn wanted to meet the enemy in personal combat, to pit his flying and shooting skill against the best they could put up.

In the summer of 1941 he felt certain his country was going to war, and he meant to go in fighters. There were fewer than 1,600 regular Navy pilots and even fewer reservists, and the Navy's objective of 25,000 planes and 30,000 pilots was a paper goal. But The Naval Aeronautic Organization had begun its big buildup, and Blackburn was ready.

He was a natural pilot, an airman who flew his plane and didn't let his plane fly him, who had instinct and feel for air, the hard air of high-speed flight, the soft air of slow flight; like an eagle, he knew how to make the most of each.

An airplane to Blackburn was more than something to fly around the sky in. It was a weapons system, a platform for guns, an integral part of a man-machine relationship that carried death far beyond the range of a battleship's big guns. He'd gone to the Navy's gunnery school at Miami as an instructor in the fighter section, and he'd learned important trade-school tricks from Jerry Bogan, the station's skipper, and from Joe Clifton, his squadron boss, and from Bob Pirie, who taught him the only right way to shoot—to kill.

Blackburn's rise as a naval aviator did not go unnoticed. In the grim switch from peace to war, when the men of his profession were called upon to go to work in dead earnest, it was Blackburn who sent into combat thoroughly trained students who had learned well their lessons in death-dealing. And he could sleep well nights, knowing he had given them everything he had in the murderous art of sky gunnery.

When the day came for Blackburn to go into combat himself, along with former students, twenty-year-olds a full decade his junior, he was top gun. They handed him a squadron of F4F-4 Wildcats, VF-29, and told him to report to Bill Sample, skipper of a converted oil tanker at Norfolk, the CVE-29 Santee. It was the summer of 1942, a year of great tragedy in the world, a year that had seen Hitler's troops overrun Europe, and the beginnings of the Allied effort to strike back on the long road to Berlin, one that began somewhere in North Africa in a brilliant tactical stroke called Operation Torch.

But before Torch would light the freedom road once more, before history's mightiest sea invasion of the African coast could take place, Blackburn knew the time had come to take a final look inside his mind and soul and know that he was ready. He prayed that he would meet this responsibility the right way because he knew that in his whole lifespan, he had never really been put to the test. And then he went off to war.

The rehearsal for Operation Torch was carried off in Bermuda, and it was there that his war troubles began. VF-29 had an even dozen pilots, an even dozen Wildcats, and with

these he hoped to impress Captain John Ballentine, the task-force commander. Instead, he lost one Wildcat in a landing accident, leaving a dozen pilots and 11 planes.

The fault really hadn't been his, but Blackburn was a perfectionist. Loss of an aircraft on an operational, not a combat, flight was inexcusable to him. He'd chewed out the pilot, but relented when a message came from Captain Ballentine on the Ranger that Jocko Clark was coming down on the Sangamon with eighteen extra Wildcats aboard for replacements.

Eagerly Blackburn asked the Santee's skipper, Bill Sample, to request two extra F4U's.

"We might bust up another one crossing the Atlantic," he pleaded. "It's better we have one too many than not enough."

When the request went through and ferry pilots brought over two new ships from the Sangamon, Sample scratched his head and said, "Look, now we've got thirteen planes and a dozen pilots. You got me into this mess. You straighten it out."

Blackburn grinned. He rode a launch over to the Ranger to see Ballentine.

"Captain," he said, "as chief of staff of this operation, you can expect full support from VF-29, if we're up to strength."

Ballentine wanted to know what Blackburn wanted.

"Another pilot, sir. If we have one extra standby ship, doesn't it stand to reason we should have a standby pilot?"

Ballentine laughed. He agreed to draft one from another, less enthusiastic, squadron.

When Blackburn climbed in the launch and headed back to the Santee, Ballentine watched him from the Ranger's bridge. He liked Blackburn's aggressiveness. He would keep an eye on him.

En route to North Africa and the war, Blackburn restlessly paced the Santee's flight deck and wondered if it would be possible to get all his Wildcats into the air without another accident. Compared to the monarchs that would join later task forces as carriers, the Santee was a matchstick. Her deck was crowded with fighters and dive bombers, lashed down against the rolling and heaving of the seas.

On the horizon were other ships of the invasion fleet, 102 vessels steaming directly from the United States to launch the initial ground offensive against the Axis powers. They were headed for northwest Africa, the Moroccan ports of Lyautey, Safi, and Casablanca. A second force of American and British ships at that moment was steaming down from England, on a coordinated strike at the Mediterranean ports of Oran and Algiers.

On the night of November 7, 1942, Blackburn sat drinking

coffee in the Santee's ready room. Sample was running through a final briefing on a wall map.

"This is our target—Safi," Sample said. "Our job is to provide air cover in this sector while the landing craft go ashore and strafe the airfield ten miles inland. We can expect French air opposition—P-36's—and there's a chance the *Luftwaffe* may show up. That's remote, though. Rommel's Afrika Korps is in retreat. Any questions?"

Blackburn ground out his cigarette and stood up. "Yes. How in hell are we supposed to get airborne? You've got the flight deck half covered with ships so spotted there's only thirty-five feet to drive through. It's risky enough in the daytime, but at night—"

Sample shrugged. "That's your problem, Commander. You feel up to it?"

Blackburn flushed and sat down. The Navy had pressed everything it had into this operation. It was up to him to make do. Someday he'd fly from a super carrier, but on this night, rolling in a calm sea in a blacked-out converted oil tanker, somewhere off the coast of Africa, for the first time he was on his own.

Already, Allied convoys had prepared the groundwork for the Africa attack of Operation Torch, pouring supplies into Egypt to reequip General Sir B. L. Montgomery's Eighth Army for his death duel with Hitler's brilliant tank commander, General Erwin Rommel. Since October 23, Rommel had felt Montgomery's powerful offensive, and he was in retreat. British and United States troops, led by General Dwight D. Eisenhower, were closing the jaws of a giant trap, hoping to catch the Desert Fox in the heart of Tripolitania.

Blackburn left the ready room and made his way to the blacked-out flight deck. He walked over to where his Hellcats were spotted and studied their black silhouettes. There was no wind. They'd need every inch of deck to get to flying speed, or they'd stall off into the sea.

He went back to the hatchway, through the blackout curtains and below decks, to the radio room. A slender young radioman looked up and grinned.

"Hi, Commander. I hear you're leading Black Flight One."

"Yeah. First off. And no wind."

"Wish we had an automatic direction-finder lashup for you."

"That would help. Think you can bring us back without ADF?"

The radioman lighted a cigarette and shrugged. "We've only got a Mickey Mouse rig on this jeep, you know. The hayrake. The best we can give you is a beam 30 degrees wide. Fly across it and you'll pick up the beam edge, and then you can home

on it. Only, the hayrake hasn't been working too good. It sends out a 'dit-dah' in a full sweep around the compass, so there's no solid beam. Maybe we can back it up with the radars, if they can find you."

"You just get us back," Blackburn said, "and the drinks are on me."

At 3 A.M., after a short nap, Blackburn sat over coffee in the ready room once more. It was stifling. With all hatches and portholes blacked out, he felt an oppressive weight on his chest. He breathed heavily, waiting impatiently for the scramble alert. He glanced around at the other pilots of VF-29. They were youngsters in khaki flying suits, nervous kids, like himself about to face death for the first time.

A bell rang. Over the Santee's intercom he heard the command: "Black One Flight, man your aircraft." Blackburn felt his heart pound. He got to his feet. "That's us. Let's go."

He hurried topside and emerged from the hatchway into the cool night air, and sucked his lungs full. As he did he stared for one brief moment at the spectacular sight before him. The big guns of the task force had opened up, laying down a barrage to soften opposition on the beach at Safi. As far as he could see, the bright flashes of the six and eight inchers lighted the sky. He felt the waves of concussion that swept across the water like thunder.

Blackburn ran to his Hellcat, squatting with wings folded back along the fuselage, like some ungainly bird. He slid open the canopy, swung into the cockpit and buckled on his parachute, pulled down his shoulder harness and hooked his seat belt.

The excitement that had welled inside him vanished. Now he felt only a sense of urgency to get airborne. On the Santee's bridge, he saw a signal light from the air officer. Start engines. To the left of his nose he caught a glimpse of a tightly helmeted figure, dancing a weird ballet, his right hand moving in quick circles, repeating the signal to start. He busied himself inside the cockpit.

Smoothly, efficiently, his lean fingers swept through the starting ritual.

His engine caught with a roar.

From the bridge another signal came—launch aircraft.

Blackburn followed the helmeted figure, leading him into takeoff position. Okay, Fly One, make it good—half a deck is better than nothing.

Fly One's arms folded across his bright red shirt, then opened wide. He caught the signal, spread his wings.

Now, line up for takeoff, jam the brakes hard, and ram on full power. The engine's roar became a whine, rising in pitch

until Fly One jammed a thumb skyward. He snapped a starting flag to the deck. Blackburn released the brakes. With a surge the Wildcat leaped forward, streaking precariously along the deck edge, one wing over the water, the other flashing past the parked SBD dive bombers.

He felt the controls harden. The next moment the end of the deck flashed beneath him. He held his breath. He was airborne, mushing slightly downward, then climbing for the sky as his gear came up. The light of dawn was already breaking in the east, and as he circled over the Santee he saw the coast of Africa in the distance. Seaward he could see storm clouds piling high. He hoped the mission would end before the Santee socked in.

Down below, the Santee was black against the cold grayness of the sea. He pressed his mike button.

"This is Black One leader. Form up. . . . Form up."

He glanced anxiously around the sky, searching for the others of his eight-plane flight. One Wildcat moved up, ghostlike, sliding in close on his left wing, and then another joined him. He held the rendezvous position until two more ships tacked on. He glanced at the panel clock. There was no time to wait for the others. The LCI's would already be hitting the beach at Safi. He advanced his throttle to cruise power and banked away from the Santee, toward Africa.

This was what he had trained for, all the years of his life. On his first combat air patrol, streaking shoreward toward enemy-occupied territory, war was still something hardly real. He bent forward, eager to reach the coast. In the distance he could see the armada of ships moving toward the beaches, leaving long, white wakes. He swung north, toward the Casablanca sector, then ran down along the Safi beachhead, scanning the sky for enemy aircraft and finding none.

Flak bursts appeared on his left. He watched them curiously—black puffs that were his first experience with enemy fire. He led his flight out over the sea and continued south, then banked around to begin a sweep northward. Looking down at the massive landing operation, he felt a personal pride in the smoothness with which it was being carried off. This was his sky, and all those men down there were his responsibility.

Something slammed into his right wing. He snapped his head around and stared at a jagged hole, outboard of the gunport. Other flak bursts ringed the flight, and then they were through the stuff.

"Let's go find that field," he called to his wingman, Lt. Frank Chase, and to the other pilots. He dropped the nose and began a curving dive, around behind the red tile roofs of

Safi. As he did, the others pulled up, line abreast, in battle formation, widely separated.

Blackburn frowned. Intelligence reports said the airfield lay in a valley ten miles east of Safi, but there was no field to be seen. So far, Fighting Twenty-Nine had pulled a blank. No air opposition, one flak hole in his wing, and now, no airfield, no target of opportunity. He led the flight on a long sweep up the valley in the other direction. He half expected to see a runway hidden under camouflage, but none appeared. In disgust he waggled his wings for the others to re-form and headed back to the coast.

Ahead, he saw something that startled him—the weather front was building up more rapidly than he had anticipated. Ominous clouds towered in the sky. Beneath them hung a gray curtain of rain. To return to the Santee, they'd have to fly under the stuff, in visibility near zero.

"Let's go in on the hayrake," he called. As flight leader, Blackburn switched on his receiver, tuned it to the Santee's frequency, and heard a faint "dah-dit" in his earphones. He paralleled the coastline, heading north, to intersect the beam.

Nothing.

He swung west again, plunging through a curtain of rain and groping blindly to find a ship he only knew was somewhere in the North Atlantic. Still the elusive beam did not appear.

A red light glowed on his instrument panel. In alarm, he twisted his head to check his fuel gauges. The auxiliary tank was nearly dry. He swore at himself: the flak had punctured his tank and he had not noticed it. Quickly he switched tanks. The red light blinked out. He made a rapid mental calculation. There was barely enough fuel left to reach the Santee—if he could find her. He looked down through the driving rain at the cold gray water, whipped into whitecaps by the rising wind.

He pressed his mike button and broke radio silence.

"Santee, this is Black One leader. Your hayrake is inoperative. Can you give me a radar fix?"

"Roger, Black One. Turn to zero-nine-zero and fly one minute, then turn to one-eight-zero. We'll look for you."

He put the Hellcat in a gentle, one-needle-width turn, rolling out on an east heading. One minute later he rolled into another turn toward the south.

"We've got you, Black One," the Santee radarman called. "Your bearing from the Santee is one-six-zero. Fly the reciprocal bearing, Black One. Fly three-four-zero."

Blackburn felt the tension dissolve. He swung into the north-

west and settled down for the run home, on economy cruise. He leaned out the engine until his rpm's began to fall off, then added barely enough power to hold altitude. Minutes dragged by. He peered ahead through the squall line, but saw nothing. Only the wide expanse of water and low scud beneath the ominous sky. He didn't want to appear jittery, but this was folly. If the Santee had given him a bum steer, his chances of surviving a ditching were growing slimmer each minute he flew seaward.

"Santee, this is Black One leader," he finally called. "Do you still have us on the radarscope?"

After a pause the Santee answered, "Black One, yes, we have you. We've got you orbiting the carrier right now!"

Blackburn felt a shock. They were following another flight, not his.

Cursing his luck, he called the others in his flight.

"This is Black One leader. Abandon search for the Santee. Return to the coast and pick your best landing spot. There's a field at Mazagan, between Safi and Casablanca, if you can make it—and good luck. I'm about out of fuel and have to ditch."

"So long, skipper, and luck to you," Lt. Chase called. He watched them streak off for the African coast, then began to count. When he got to ten, he started to count once more. Each ten seconds, he was half a mile closer to land. His engine finally sputtered and coughed. He worked the primer and shot a last burst of fuel to the carburetor. The engine caught hold, and again he started his count. One . . . two . . . three . . . and that was it.

"Son of a bitch," he said. He glided down through the cold rain until the whitecaps were breaking just beneath his wings. He hauled back on the stick and pancaked. The Wildcat planed off the top of a wave, then plunged violently into the next trough. With a severe jolt it upended, then settled.

He yanked at his seat-belt release, threw back the Sutton shoulder harness, and jumped from the cockpit with his parachute still buckled on. He yanked the cord on his Mae West CO_2 bottle and felt it quickly inflate.

Then he slid off the wing into the icy water. He fumbled with the survival pack and got out the one-man life raft. He pulled the inflation handle sharply. With a low hissing, the raft began to inflate. He shucked off his parachute and half fell into the raft, shaking uncontrollably.

The shock of immersion in the cold seawater left him coughing violently. He felt nausea. The rubber raft rose and fell sickeningly as the water surged beneath him, great rollers