

75 years ago on 2 September 1944, 20 year old Lt. (jg) George H. W. Bush sat down to a fine Navy breakfast of powdered eggs, bacon, sausage, dehydrated fried potatoes and toast. At 0715, he departed the carrier San Jacinto for a raid on the island of Chichi Jima, in the Bonin Islands, north of Iwo Jima.

Bush was an experienced naval aviator, piloting a TBM Avenger torpedo-bomber. The Grumman Avenger (TBF if it was built by Grumman or TBM if built under license by General Motors) was either armed with torpedoes for action against ships or with bombs for land targets. On this mission Bush's TBM was armed with four 500 pound bombs.

Aboard the aircraft were his radio operator, Radioman 2/c John Delaney, who had flown with Bush many times. On this mission, Lt. (jg) William White, the carrier's intelligence officer flew in the tail gunner position. White wanted to get a first-hand look at Chichi Jima and that morning outside the ready-room, he begged George Bush to take him along. Bush had seen heavy anti-aircraft fire from the island the day before and protested, "it could be a rough trip," but White convinced him that he was willing to take that risk. (There is a discrepancy between two books I consulted for this essay, one says White was the carrier's intelligence officer and the other says White was the squadron's ordinance officer.)

Chichi Jima was not a target for invasion but it had an vital radio relay and intercept station and a radar installation which made it an important target for bombing raids. Chichi Jima was also used initially as a transshipment point for building supplies bound for the fortification of Iwo Jima. After the Battle of the Philippine Sea, the U. S. Navy gained control the sea lanes in that area and forced the Japanese to abandon this activity. The Japanese had no aircraft in the vicinity to oppose the carrier-based bombing force, but they had an ample supply of anti-aircraft batteries on the island. Japanese radar tracked the inbound aircraft, there would be no element of surprise as Bush's squadron approached.

The two lead aircraft made their dives and dropped 8 bombs on the radio station. Bush was next to dive, but by now the Japanese AA gunners "had the range." Bush knew he was "zeroed in" but as any naval aviator would do, he put the danger out of his mind and did his job. As Bush commenced his bombing run, flak (shell fragments from a bursting anti-aircraft projectile) hit his engine setting it on fire. As the cabin filled with smoke and flame crept up the wings, Bush continued his run and dropped his bombs. After the run, he maneuvered his aircraft away from the island to set up a water landing. Fearing an explosion, he gave the order to "Hit the silk!" Bush valiantly maneuvered his plane in a "skid," flying slightly sideways to take air pressure off the crew door - facilitating their escape but delaying his own. Only one of the crewman was seen bailing out but his parachute did not open. The body was never found and it is still not known which of the two aircrew this was.

When George Bush himself bailed out, he was unable to avoid the tail of the Avenger which struck his head, causing a severe laceration above his eye. Worse than that, he observed his 'chute getting caught on the tail, tearing out panels which caused him to fall faster than normal. Bush had the presence of mind to unhook his harness and slip out of his parachute just before hitting the drink, freeing himself from being entangled under water in the parachute.

A life raft was dropped by another Avenger and Bush hauled himself aboard. Now he realized that the prevailing winds were blowing him toward Chichi Jima and he had no paddle. He paddled furiously with his hands, still bleeding from his forehead and regurgitating the seawater he had swallowed. Then he, and fortunately two other Avengers of the squadron, saw that the Japanese had sent some boats out to capture him. The Avengers attacked the boats and expending some 1,460 rounds of machine gun ammunition to save him from being captured. Running low on fuel, they contacted the submarine USS

Finback with Bush's position and departed. The Finback was patrolling the area to rescue downed pilots.

Four hours later, the Finback, under the command of CMDR Robert R. Williams Jr., rescued an exhausted George H. W. Bush. Bush remained aboard the Finback for a month, assisting with other rescues and taking the midnight to 0400 watch whenever the sub was on the surface. The sub returned from patrol with another 3-man Avenger crew, a fighter pilot and Lt. (jg) Bush.

George H. W. Bush was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for this mission and in total flew 58 combat missions in the Pacific War, sinking ships and surviving heavy anti-aircraft fire on Wake Island, Guam, Saipan and Marcus Island (Minamitorishima) and had ditched in the ocean one time before. He logged 1,228 flight hours and made 126 carrier landings – he was the youngest pilot in his squadron. Bush suffered from survivor's guilt for the rest of his life and when sitting for frequent interviews about his rescue he often became quiet and introspective, usually turning away to hide a tear.

Bush's guilt resulted not only from the loss of his crew, but for the 5 other pilots, shot down and captured on Chichi Jima. These men were murdered - and eaten - by the Garrison Commander, Lt Gen. Yoshio Tachibana. Tachibana held a distorted view of Bushido in which he believed that eating the liver of one's enemy made him a more fierce warrior. After the war, Tachibana was tried for these murders, convicted and hanged. There was no military law covering cannibalism so along with the murder charge, Tachibana was charged with failure to provide a prisoner a proper burial. Cannibalism was occasionally practiced out of necessity by starving Japanese soldiers on bypassed islands, particularly in the jungles of New Guinea. In desperation, they consumed fellow Japanese troops who succumbed to starvation.

After leaving the Navy, George H. W. Bush went on to a career in business and later public service and politics, culminating in his election as the 41st President of the United States. He was my commander-in-chief during my civilian deployment to Saudi Arabia during the Persian Gulf War. I would be untrue if I didn't admit that a deep chasm existed between my politics and those of President George H. W. Bush, however I hold the deepest respect and admiration for the man, the naval aviator, the President and the commander-in-chief. I honor his memory with this 75th Anniversary essay.