

Men Without Arms

An Aircrewman Dofts His Hat to the Guys on the Ground

By BLACK SHERROD

THIS particular bunch of guys I'm going to write about was working along the edge of the coral runway which split, like a long white snake, through the jungle greenness of the island. The narrow strip was named Munda airfield and many men, both Japanese and Yanks, died over that slim streak of coral.

These men were SeaBees of a navy construction battalion, but for all the moral of this story, if it has a moral, they could have been army engineers or pay clerks or mess cooks or barbers or any bunch of guys behind the lines. It just happens they were SeaBees, about eight of them in this particular crew, and they were assigned to filling up the numerous bomb craters around the field, and sometimes on the field if the Nips' night raiders had a lucky evening.

Our torpedo squadron had flown off the carrier the day before and we had a temporary ground-based job of supporting a beachhead recently gained on an island some miles to the north. I noticed them the first morning we took off from the field, heading for the Jap air base of K_____ on B_____ Island. When our planes taxied out of the revetment area to the south end of the field, they stopped work for a second, wiped the sweat from their eyes and watched the Grumman

trundle past. I was looking out from the turret hatch, hoping my expression was the calm, bored one I always try to use before an audience.

One of the guys—a big, gray haired fellow who was leaning against the door of his truck—caught my eye, grinned and gave me a thumbs up and the rest grinned and waved give 'em hell.

They were still working when we came back four hours later. Their shirts were dark with sweat and stuck to their bodies and their sleeves were rolled down against the hellish glare of the sun. They halted and counted us as we taxied past. And I saw one speak to the others and point to the flak-riddled fuselage of my plane's tail surface. Then they looked up at my pilot and waved and grinned. And after they had counted all the planes in, they turned back to work, shoveling dirt and crushed coral. And pausing every few moments to wipe the sweat off their brows and out of their eyes with a fore-finger.

The next day, just after daybreak, they were dragging logs to build a revetment bank alongside the runway. Again they stopped work and waved to us. And again, on our return they paused to count the planes.

I saw them several times in the week

that followed for they lived not far from our hut and our foxholes, big, roomy affairs with two layers of thick cocoanut logs for a roof, were only a few yards apart. But I probably would have never spoken to them if I hadn't stumbled into the wrong foxhole one night when Charlie came over for his nightly bombing practice.

I was still groggy and half asleep and didn't notice my mistake until a strange voice spoke in my ear, "Got the time, Mac? Charlie seems to be a little early tonight." And when the speaker leaned across to look at my watch, moonlight from the entrance enabled me to recognize the big gray haired SeaBee, whom I had seen many times at the strip.

"Guess maybe I hit the wrong hole," I grunted to him.

"Plenty of room. Say, aren't you one of the torpedo plane gunners?" he asked, suddenly very interested. In the dark, I assumed what I thought to be my most nonchalant and war-weary tone and muttered, "Yeh."

"How was it today?" another guy asked. Interested as all hell, the lot of them. I was a flying sailor, a combat aircrewman. I was a little glamor boy Atlas with the war on my shoulders.

Of course I was tickled to be recognized but I had played my part too many times and I wouldn't get conversational with these "old men" who worked in the sun and sweated out a suit of dungarees in a week. It just isn't done. The effect is much better to be noncommittal, hard to get. They put the questions to me and I grunted yeh and naw in a manner worthy of my clique.

Yeh, we put a fish in a tin can today. Naw, we didn't lose any planes, but, yeh, a couple were hit by ack-ack. Yeh, two Zeros showed up and the fighters got them.

Suddenly, Washing Machine Charlie planted a 500-pounder about fifty yards away and it tossed us around in the hole and dust sifted through the cracks and we could hear palm trees falling and cracking. I got the old sick feeling in the bottom of my stomach and the dust in my mouth turned to red pepper and, try as I might, I couldn't keep from shaking.

"Anybody hurt?" the old SeaBee asked in a calm voice. I was afraid to trust my shaking voice so I said nothing while the rest of them counted noses, cursed a little and one guy cracked a joke about having to clean his pants out.

"How about the gunner?" Pops, the old one, asked. And he reached over to feel for me. I told him I was okay but I guess I didn't sound any too convincing because he patted me on the head and said, "You'll have to bear with us, kid, this is the only kind of war we get to see. Guess it's a little tame to you."

(Sure, I thought, I'll bear with you.

Sure, this is tame to me, like hell. One more like that and I'll shake myself to pieces.)

Did you ever find yourself doing something that suddenly turned out very distasteful, when only a few moments before it was enjoyable? That was what was happening to me. Gradually the part that I was playing a moment before completely lost its flavor. The attitude that I had been showing to these men who cracked jokes about a near hit came up in my mouth like bad whiskey and like bad whiskey, it didn't taste so good coming up.

All at once, lying there in that dusty foxhole with the bomber's moon coming in through the chinks between the logs and the occasional bark of anti-aircraft guns breaking through the night, I saw these guys for what they really were. I remembered seeing them working in the hot jungle sun with the blistered skin peeling off their noses and their hands rough and scarred. I saw them as old men—the gray haired one was old enough to be my father—stopping work and counting us in and being proud of us as they mopped their streaming brows.

Darn near every one of them was old enough to miss the draft age limit and they didn't have to be out here in this lousy jungle, living in foxholes half the night and eating out of tin cans. Hell, I thought, they do more work in one week than guys like me do in a whole war. And me, I beat my gums when I have to leave my sack for an air raid or belly-ache about being tired when I fly four hours every other day, but I have an air medal with two Gold Stars to show for it.



"Aw, hey, now! Isn't there something else you can use to plug up this torpedo hole?"

I wanted to tell them the way it was. I wanted to say, "Pops, you do more work with your little finger than I could do with two arms. You sweat more in one day than I have since the the war began. When I sweat it's strictly glamor juice and when you sweat it's just sweat, the same as if you were digging ditches back in the States. I make more dough in a

month than you do in three and, compared to me, you don't even rate a nod from the guys who run the war.

"Pops," I wanted to say, "fergawdsakes, don't look at me as if I were one of God's brave young men because it takes a helluva lot more guts to do your job than mine. My job pays off in medals and press releases and yours pays off only to yourself."

But I couldn't say these things. When a guy is an AIRMAN of the Army, Navy or Marine corps, he is proud and cocky and he accepts these tributes to his courage as commonplace. He hangs a cigarette from the corner of his mouth and squints at his admirer and says yeh and naw and treats matters of a flaked up wing as a triviality when, if the truth were known, it scared the pants off him and he shook all the way home.

Then the all-clear sounded and we crawled one by one out of the hole. And when I stood up and stretched and gulped in some fresh air I decided I wanted to tell Pops and rest that guys like me may be winning the battles but guys like them are winning the war.

"Pops, I—" I started. He turned around and said, "Yeh, kid?"

But I just couldn't say it. Maybe it was the old pride or a habit I just didn't have the guts to break.

"Gotta match?" I finally asked. "Sure, kid," he handed me a box and turned to go. "We'll be sweating you in in the morning."

"Thanks," I said. I should have told them, but hell— They wouldn't have believed it anyhow.



The forward gun platform of a transport bound for the South Pacific.

