



(L-R) MOST OF THE AG-20 BRASS: DAN F. SMITH, CAG; FRED BAKUTIS, CVF; SAM PRICKETT, CVT; EMMETT RIERA, CVB; GEORGE GIBSON, XOVB; JOE LAWLER, XOVF; JAY MANOWN, XOVT

## SURVIVAL NARRATIVE

by COMDR. FRED E. BAKUTIS, *Commanding Officer VF-20*

### FIRST DAY

ON the morning of 24 October 1944, two search teams, each consisting of 6 SB2C's and 6 F6F-5's, were launched to locate a formation of Japanese warships reported to be in the Sulu Sea approaching the Philippines. I was leading the fighters on one of these teams. As we approached the end of our search sectors a formation of 7 Jap warships, consisting of 2 *Fuso* class BB's, 1 *Mogami* class CA and 4 DD's, was sighted approximately 70 miles southwest of Negros Island steaming northeast. Our two search teams joined up and made a coordinated attack, concentrating on the two battleships and heavy cruiser.

My wingman and I made a rocket attack to neutralize AA for the bombers on one of the battleships and retired over one of the escorting destroyers which we strafed. As I passed over the destroyer at about 700 feet, I received a hit from medium AA in my engine which immediately began to smoke and lose oil. I turned southwest to get as far away from the Jap ships as possible and noticed as I did so that the oil gauge registered zero. The engine ran smoothly for another minute, then lost power and soon froze. I broadcast my difficulty and heard in reply, "We're all for you, Skipper" which boosted my morale considerably. I dropped my belly tank

and set the plane down on a smooth sea at 80 knots, headed south. The shock on landing was no more severe than in a normal carrier landing, but I was a little surprised at how quickly the cockpit filled with water.

Climbing out of the plane onto the wing was no problem even with my backpack and parachute still buckled on. The plane remained afloat for approximately 1 minute allowing me plenty of time to get organized, but I neglected to grab my canteen and binoculars.

When I saw that the plane was about to sink I somewhat reluctantly jumped into the water, unfastened my chest strap and inflated my lifejacket. I then unbuckled my parachute which was still buoyant but hooked my arm through a strap, knowing that it would soon become water-logged. I next inflated my liferaft after experiencing some difficulty with the CO2 bottle which is threaded the opposite way from what you would normally expect. When the liferaft was inflated I fastened the parachute and backpack to it, took off my life jacket and fastened that to it, and climbed aboard on the second try.

The other planes were still circling overhead and one of the SB2C's dropped a two-man liferaft, which broke apart on hitting the water spilling out some