

Float-plane pilot from USS South Dakota plucked 2 downed pilots from the sea

It was Jan. 22, 1945, and American forces were already making air strikes on Okinawa. The captain of the battleship USS South Dakota got word that a carrier plane had crashed into the sea off the Pacific island.

Lt. Ted Hutchins was dispatched in his Kingfisher float-plane and Lt. J.g. George Cooke, flying a second OS2U pontoon plane, was also catapulted off the stern of the battleship to find the downed pilot. While one rescue pilot made the pickup, the second plane circled overhead and stayed in communication with the South Dakota.

The 89-year-old former aviator, who now lives in Rotonda, picks up the story from there: "They launched me and another float-plane, and we were immediately joined by two Hellcat fighters who were our escorts. They flew cover for us when we picked up the downed pilot.

"We found Ensign Stark floating in a one-man, yellow life raft five miles off Okinawa. I landed my 01 in the sea near him and taxied over close to Stark, a fighter pilot from the tamer USS Wasp.

"He grabbed my float struts. I wanted him to climb up the ladder to the wing, but he was so weak I had to shut off my engine, climb down on the wing and help him up the ladder. Stark got into the rear cockpit vacated by my radio operator, who was back on the battleship," Hutchins said.

"After I got him in the cockpit I saw a splash near my plane. Then I saw some more splashes. Japanese gunners were shooting at us with 5-inch cannons from Okinawa," he said.

To make matters worse, Hutchins was having trouble getting his engine started.

"My engine started with shotgun cartridges. I was supposed to have a box of a dozen cartridges, but I only had three. The first two cartridges fizzled. I had one left. I put the last cartridge in and held my breath. It fired and the engine started," he said.

The flight back to the South Dakota was uneventful.

"The downed pilots who we brought back to our ship only stayed a couple of hours. They'd send a destroyer over to pick them up and take them back to their tamer," Hutchins said.

His second rescue came about a month later, when a Marine pilot flying a Corsair fighter was shot down but landed safely in the sea off Okinawa. Like Ensign Stark, 1st Lt. Simkanus took to a one-man life raft.

When I first got there, I was circling around looking for the downed pilot, and I saw this plane heading right toward me. Lights on the leading edge of his wings were flashing on and off. It was then I realized they were his guns and he was shooting at me," Hutchins said.

"Fortunately for me, he wasn't shooting too straight. As he passed by I realized he was a Corsair pilot who had mistaken me for the enemy," he said. "My escort plane came up on the radio and I heard him say, 'Knock it off. He's one of ours.'"

The confused Corsair pilot stopped shooting immediately.

"I had no problem picking up the pilot. He climbed up the ladder, walked across the wing of my plane and got into the rear cockpit," Hulchins said. "We flew back to the South Dakota. Lt. Simkanus was taken back to the carrier LISS Bunker Hill he had flown from a few hours earlier"

In mid-March, the South Dakota and the rest of the 5th Fleet sortied from Ulithi Atoll, a nearby supply base, and began their attack on the Japanese main islands. The fleet's primary job was to knock out the Japanese air bases on the home islands to reduce kamikaze attacks.

Hutchins explained the pontoon planes on battleships served mainly as artillery spotters. When a battleship was firing its main 16-inch guns at a target, a pilot in an OS2U would circle the target and tell the ship's gunners how effective their fire was.

They could also be used as patrol planes for submarine warfare and for towing targets for the battleship's gunners to shoot at.

Fifth Fleet fighter planes were involved in attacks on five Japanese airfields on the home islands. Three days before Gen. Douglas MacArthur and the Japanese signed the surrender document that ended World War II aboard the Battleship Missouri in Tokyo Bay, the South Dakota was anchored nearby.

After the war, Hutchins completed engineering courses at Georgia Tech and got a job working for Scientific Atlanta, a small communications company. Over the years, the firm became a giant in the industry.

Hulchins and his wife, Sarah, retired to Rotunda in 2001.

If you have a war story or a friend or *neighbor* has one, e-mail; at donmowe39@gmad.com or call him at 941-4262120.

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