

THE FLYER

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Chapter Meetings are held the first Wednesday of each month at the Sport Aviation Center, 3600 Wildwood Ave, Jackson, Michigan 49202-1811 unless otherwise published....

This month's Meeting will be held on Wednesday, May 2nd. at 7:30PM.

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1 – A SAILOR'S DIARY

(One World War II Sailor risked death on the high seas to invent a way to rescue downed U.S. Airmen.)

CHAPTER NOTES

Chapter Minutes, 4/4/07

John Eiler relinquished the Office of Vice President. The membership would like to thank John for his time and service in holding that position...

The appointment of a new Chapter Representative to the Airport Advisory Board was postponed by a vote of the membership. The need for a full time Chapter Representative will be studied and results will be presented at a later meeting...

The April 2007 Meeting was adjourned.

“I’m Just a T-6 Driver”

“*I’m Just a T-6 Driver*” is John Feldvary’s topic as our guest speaker at this chapter meeting....

John’s expertise in aviation has run the gambit from Corporate Pilot to Commercial pilot to the Director of Jackson Community Colleges Flight Center...

John is more than gracious to converse about the *Army Air Corps T-6 Texan* or as known by *Naval Aviators as the SNJ*. John will discuss its’ development, its’ history and the sheer joy of flying this radial engine powered aircraft...

But don’t be surprised if he slips in a few words about the new alliance established by Jackson Community College Flight Center and other affiliate College Flight Centers through out Michigan...

Fly-In 2007 (Sunday, June 10th)

The Fly-In is scheduled for June 10,2007. As usual everyone should know the drill by now, since it hasn’t changed in thirty-eight years...

This year, as last, the aircraft display area will be at the front of the hangar... Our Assistant Treasurer, Chuck Furgason , will be coordinating the placement of the Classic and Antique Cars that will be on display. The first one hundred cars to be registered will receive dash plaques...

Also, as an incentive to attract more and varied aircraft, fuel discount cards will be passed out at the Breakfast to those pilots in attendance...

Ben Jordan of Skyway Aviation, the sponsor of these discount cards, has decided to discount fuel at \$.25 per gallon when shown the card. Of course, this discount will only be available the day of the Fly-In Breakfast, June 10, 2007...

Since our June Meeting is scheduled only three days before Set-up day here is the scheduled so that you have ample notification:

Set-up is set for 9 o'clock on Saturday, June 9, 2007. Hopefully, most of the grunt work will have been accomplished in the previous week, so only the chairs, tables, and minor set-up will be left to sufficiently embellish the hangar for our breakfast guests... We should be done by noon...

On Sunday, June 10th, We will assemble at the hangar at 6:00am sharp. We'll start serving at 7:00AM and we'll be on our way to a successful and fun Fly-In...

FAASTeam Meeting

(May 9, 2007)

On May 9, 2007 at 6-9:30 p.m. the "Michigan FAASTeam" will meet at the Sport Aviation Center. FAASTeam is the FAA Safety Team (a remake of the "Aviation Safety Counselors"). They will meet for a discussion on safety issues and programs. Mostly instructors will attend, but anyone is welcome to attend. The FAASTeam have asked a representative from Prestige to make a short presentation....

Pacer Project

While we've been waiting for our Technical Counselors approval on the right wing, which has been restored and primed with two part Epoxy, we decided to roll the left wing into the shop and begin it's restoration.

The right wing's restoration was a "walk in the park" compared to this left wing. The clean-up process on this left wing seems to demand twice the effort as the previous wing... Unlike the previous wing this wing had been completely primed and has required extensive hand work with scotch bright to peel through the prime coat to inspect for any surface corrosion... Many times what we thought was a spot of corrosion turns out to be more like dirt bonded to the original prime coat.

I think a realistic goal, at this point, is to complete this left wing through prime, and inspect and prime both fuel tanks. Then after the Fly-In Breakfast we can initiate the covering process on both wings...

A Sailor's Diary

By

Brian T. Murrphy

*Published by The American Legion Magazine,
December 2006*

More than 60 years after it was written, *Melvin J. Collins' diary* arrived in my mail-box. It was sealed in a padded envelope. The weathered volume was small enough to squeeze into the back pocket of a sailor's denims, which is where I imagine he stowed it during his tour aboard the *USS Franks*. The faded blue jacket was worn, spotted with oil and badly frayed around the edges. With tens of thousands like it, the book had been printed during World War II and issued to service-men to record their grand adventure – "a token of appreciation for your service to our country," it said inside the cover. .. While others tossed theirs aside, *Mel* filled his with a fascinating firsthand account of the war in the Pacific and his unique place in its history. Written in pencil, the words seemed to have faded with each reading....

Melvin J. Collins, Ottumwa, Iowa. Born September 4, 1924. Entered the Navy April 2, 1943. Tatto on left arm, 5' 10", 155 pounds, blue eyes and brown hair.

The first dated entry brought a smile.

"July 15-16: Went to a fortune teller. Real nice. Had a lot of fine things to say. Hope they come to pass!"

Only 18 years old, *Mel* began his extraordinary odyssey as a Radarman third class aboard the *USS Franks's* Destroyer – or "tin can," as they called them. No fortune teller could have predicted the defining role the young sailor would play during the horrific naval engagements of the Pacific War. His first battle entry was recorded in November 1943:

"Saw aircraft carrier sunk on November 23 in the Gilbert Islands by Jap sub at 5:00 a.m. – a sight I'll never forget. That sight attacked by Jap sub and planes – dropping flares...."

And so it began. By December, the *USS Franks* was operating with the 5th Fleet and had survived hostilities in *Tarawa in the Gilbert Island Group*. As general workhorses for the fleet, destroyers also served as primary rescue vessels for downed carrier

pilots. De-deployed 2,000 yards astern of a carrier during flight operations, destroyers stood ready for any contingency. When an aircraft crashed into the sea, a destroyer rushed to the scene, came to a full stop and launched a whaleboat. More often than not, the pilot and crew – trapped in the doomed plane – would sink beneath the waves before they could be saved...

During the *Tatawa Campaign*, the *USS Franks* was ordered to render assistance to a Navy Fighter that had been downed by enemy fire. The sea was particularly heavy, rough waves tossing the vessel every which way. Aware of *Mel's* Red Cross lifesaving skills, the captain decided to try something bold. Rather than stand by during a painfully slow launch of the whaleboat, he ordered the sailor to attempt a swimming rescue. *Mel* made the following entry in his diary, redefining forever the way downed pilots would be rescued in the open sea...

"....TBF Avenger goes down after bombing. Waves plenty big – ship is really rolling. Too rough to go after them in a boat so officer let me rescue them. Tied a rope around my waist and dove off fore-castle and swam to the plane – exhausted – saw the one who was going down. I towed him in and put him in a stretcher that was over the side of the ship, then went and got the other two who were "OK." All three pilots saved. Officer congratulated me afterwards – I was the big boy for a couple of days. The boys I saved thanked me and said I got there just in time."

Mel received the *Bronze Star* for his heroics, and the *USS Franks* became the first destroyer to use a swimmer to rescue downed pilots. News traveled fast, and before long all the carriers were requesting the *USS Franks* to watch over their pilots. January found the ship the *Kwajalein Islands*, where *Mel's* diary describes the 800 ships assembled, the *Guadalcanal* in March, *Bougainville* in June, *Guam* in July, and finally *Leyte Gulf* during October 1944 – MacArthur's return to the Philippines. The *USS Franks* had earned nine battle stars before the war's end, and *Mel* had performed his swimming rescues over and over – an extraordinary feat...

Following the success of *Mel's* first rescue the *USS Franks* crew worked feverishly to refine the technique. Rigged for a mid-ship rescue, *Mel* was outfitted with a leather belt that had a "D" ring sewn into the back so a lifeline could easily be attached. There was a sheath for a knife to fight off sharks, while sharpshooters stood watch at the rail whenever *Mel* dove in, looking for fins of swarming sharks drawn by blood from bleeding pilots and cuts from razor-sharp barnacles on the ship's hull...

In addition to occasional strafing by enemy pilots while exposed in the open sea, *Mel* dealt with other hazards. On one occasion, a *Cor-sair* returning from a strike crashed nearby, and *Mel* was sent in after the pilot. The *USS Franks* still had headway as it approached the plane, so the captain put the engines full speed astern with *Mel* in the water.

".... I was drawn under the water by the screws... the guy holding my line said it tangled in the guard rail and that saved me from the screws – they thought the line was going to break but it didn't. I finally came to the surface after taking a lot of water then... it took me under again, rolling me like a top. I thought sure I was a goner. Air all gone, I had strength for one more stroke and thank God I broke to the surface. I got some air and tried to wave but they didn't see me and under I went again. Nothing I could do. Finally the guys hollered to the captain to stop. I was weak and ready to drown... never got to the pilot..."

A swimming rescue required *Mel* to dive 15 feet from the deck of the *USS Franks* into the open sea, then battle, cresting waves to reach the downed aircraft – before it sank. If he was successful, he was towed back carrying the dead weight of an unconscious pilot and his flight gear. A stretcher was lowered to water level with 5-inch powder casings attached to the side that allowed it to float – a device contrived by an engineer aboard the *USS Franks*. Once the pilot was inside the stretcher, he was hauled aboard. *Mel* was always last, winched up in a boatswain's chair...

Although it was wartime, rescues became a game for *Mel* and the *USS Franks* crew as they timed each attempt, always trying to beat their best effort. A successful rescue was an occasion for rejoicing. It meant that once the carrier had received its pilot back aboard, 20 gallons of ice cream would be sent over to the crew of the *USS Franks*....

Mel came from an extremely poor family. He grew up during the Depression, with little to eat. The local YMCA became his home away from home, where he found buddies who were better off and shared their lunches with him. It was at the YMCA that *Mel* developed into a well-rounded athlete, and an outstanding swimmer. It was his swimming ability honed at the "Y" that empowered him to rescue pilots in all sorts of weather, even in typhoons. In spite of *Mel's* extraordinary athleticism, not all rescue attempts had happy endings. His diary entry of January 10th:

“Rescued pilot from an Avenger. Only one got out. Lost other two. Bad weather swells like mountains – 50 feet.”

Still, Mel enjoyed his fair share of success:

“Feb 8. Awarded Navy and Marine Corps Medal.”

“Feb 17. After raids on Tokyo one fighter pilot from a Hellcat crashed... I rescued him in really cold water and also wind that was so bad that all hands were wearing fur lined coats and pants. Water really cold. After I got back aboard the captain told all hands, “Hats off to Collins.” A cruiser sent us a message and said ‘congratulations on fast rescue. If all ships used your method there would be more pilots alive today.’ Quite a compliment. Sent our method of swimming rescue to all ships in the fleet.”

In 1945, the famous journalist *Ernie Pyle* watched the rescue of his good friend *Jimmy Van Fleet*, an F6F pilot, from the decks of the aircraft carrier *USS Cabot*. He described the experience in his book, *“The Last Chapter:”*

“...Jimmy had hardly hit the water when we saw a destroyer heel over in a swath-cutting turn. They had been watching the takeoffs through their glasses, and had seen him go over. Our own ship, of course, had to keep going straight ahead... The destroyer had Jimmy aboard in just seven minutes. They didn’t put over a boat for him, but instead, sent a swimmer out with a line tied around his waist. He got there just in time; Jimmy passed out in his arms.... Destroyers keep a box score... and try to set a new record. Their record rescue was three minutes.... This particular destroyer had fished out so many pilots that they had a scroll already printed up, and all they had to do was fill in the name... We got Jimmy aboard and then sent twenty gallons of ice cream back across in the chair... The swimmer(s) were Seaman First Class Franklin Calloway...and ... Radarman Third Class Melvin Collins of Ottumwa, Iowa.” (end0

Postscript: After the service, Mel entered College on the GI Bill. Along with three other varsity letters, he lettered in golf without ever owning a set of clubs or golf shoes... After graduation he taught high school and coached, and not surprisingly, donated his free time to the YMCA, and ended his career as a College Counselor. Author Brian T Murphy is a free-lance writer and photographer from Midway, Utah...

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