



The Quarterly Newsletter of USS ASTORIA CL-90

This newsletter is distributed four times a year, containing announcements and content surrounding the light cruiser USS ASTORIA CL-90 and the men who served aboard ship during her career, 1944-1949.

FEATURE ARTICLE: RESCUE MISSION OFF FORMOSA, JANUARY 1945

When Lt. Charles Tanner catapulted from the deck of USS ASTORIA in January 1945, he set out on a rescue mission to find a downed fighter pilot. He got more than he bargained for. As darkness fell that evening, Tanner found himself alone in the vast reaches of the Pacific Ocean with no hope of reaching his ship.



Shipmates watch as Lt. Tanner catapults from the deck of Astoria on January 21st, 1945. His Kingfisher floatplane would never return.

-Herman Schnipper photo

After two hours in the air, the three cruiser floatplanes arrived on station and began their search patterns. Long minutes of frustration followed as each plane turned up nothing. One of Tanner's responsibilities was to monitor radio traffic during the mission. After a half-hour over the reported position, Tanner picked up a radio transmission from a nearby American submarine assigned to "lifeguard" duty. The sub reported that it had recovered the downed pilots. Satisfied that their work was done, Tanner and the *Pasadena* planes headed back toward the fleet.

However, a problem developed as the formation began its return flight; both *Pasadena* pilots reported that their planes were running very low on fuel. One *Pasadena* pilot, Robert Brownfield, was so low that he headed back early and unescorted. Tanner watched him disappear over the horizon. Brownfield subsequently radioed that he had set down on the water, out of fuel and short of the fleet.

The other *Pasadena* plane carried two men, pilot John Bowser and crewman Donald Jones. They maintained formation with Tanner and the escort fighters as long as possible. Ultimately the plane ran out of fuel and

In the afternoon sun of January 21st, 1945, USS Astoria Senior Aviator Charles S. Tanner strapped into his Kingfisher floatplane for the type of mission he was trained for: the rescue of downed American aviators. Two planes were reported down in Japanese waters, and there were precious few hours left in the day before the task force left the area.

Once airborne, Tanner joined up with two rescue planes from sister cruiser *Pasadena* and a fighter escort. The formation headed west toward Japanese-occupied Formosa (modern Taiwan). They had 200 miles to cover where they would try to locate the men in the water, land in rough seas and attempt a rescue. Each plane would subsequently take off from the surface, return to the fleet, and find their ship where a large crane would hoist them aboard.

With darkness approaching and the fleet steaming away toward their next mission at Okinawa, there was no time to waste.

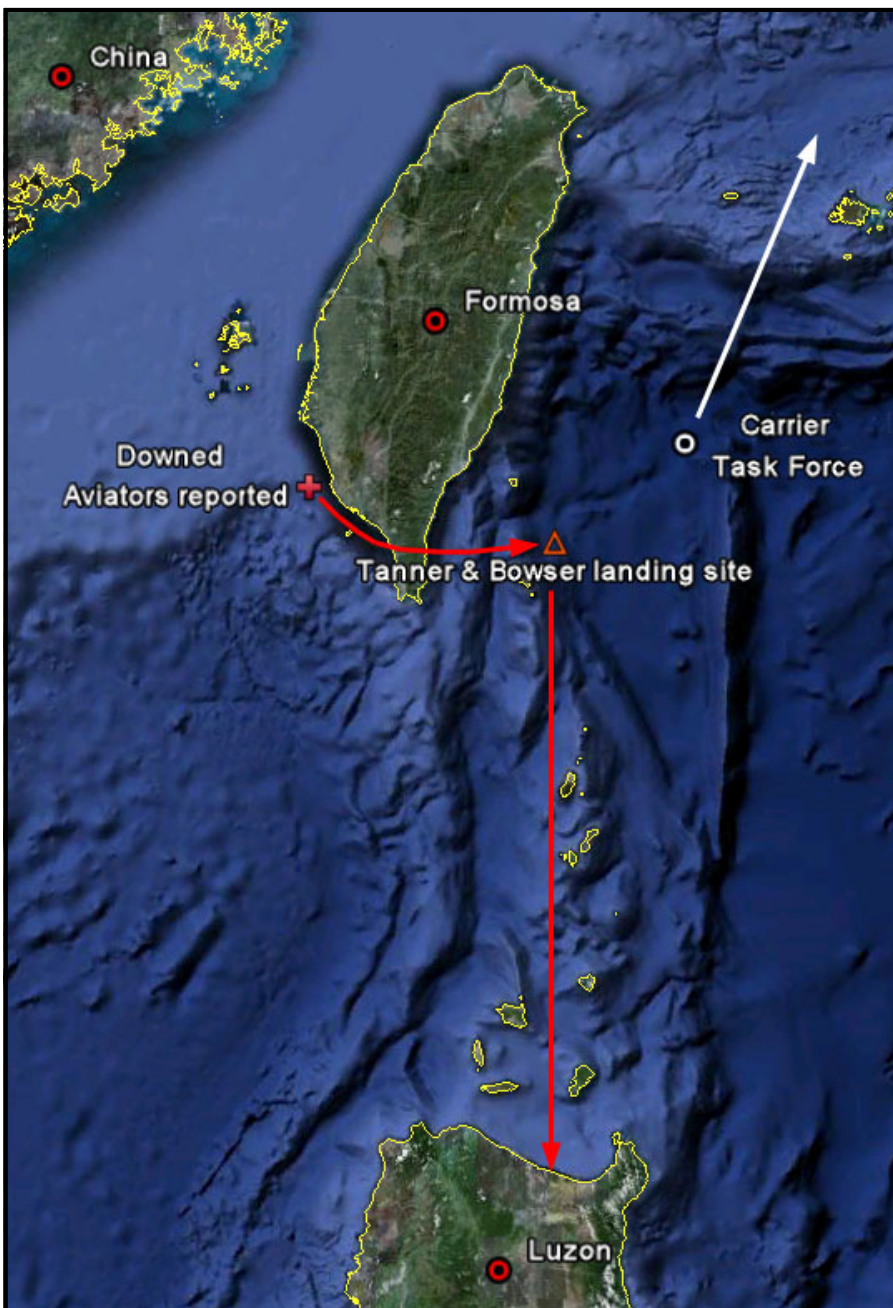
MIGHTY NINETY

FEATURE ARTICLE: RESCUE MISSION OFF FORMOSA, JANUARY 1945

had no alternative but to land on the ocean 50 miles short of the fleet. Though he had plenty of fuel, Charlie Tanner elected to put down on the water next to his fellow cruiser aviators. Over the radio he instructed their fighter escort to return to the fleet without them. Tanner's plan was to recover the second *Pasadena* crew, take off at dawn, radio the fleet and hope for the best. He was not about to leave men behind.

The fighters made it back to their carrier after dark and reported in. As Tanner, Bowser, and Jones settled in for a night on the water, Captains Dyer and Tuggle aboard *Astoria* and *Pasadena* worked into the early morning hours to secure a rescue mission for their missing men. Their request eventually made it all the way to Admiral Halsey, but with the fleet steaming overnight for Okinawa, options were limited. Ultimately, Halsey ordered a rescue submarine dispatched to the last known coordinates of the three downed planes.

When dawn broke the next morning, the task force was hundreds of miles away. The seas surrounding the



two Kingfisher floatplanes of Tanner and Bowser had turned extremely rough. The third pilot, Brownfield, was many miles away and out of radio contact.

The crews made emergency preparations in case they needed to exit their planes. Tanner watched Jones climb out onto the wing of his plane to prepare a life raft should it be needed.

Suddenly a large wave struck Bowser and Jones' plane, turning it over and sending them scrambling for their raft. Tanner exited his cockpit to get his engine started, but heavy swells made it impossible for him to reach his own plane's engine and wind the prop. He had no choice but to sit in his cockpit, ride the waves, and watch as wind and sea carried the *Pasadena* aviators and their raft over the horizon.

He rode out the rough seas for the rest of the day and a second night. No rescue submarine ever located him. With nothing but empty ocean in front of him and an enemy-held island behind him, Charles Tanner drifted on the open water. He was utterly alone.

With the sunrise of January 23rd, the seas had calmed. Tanner came to the realization that he was short on food and water with no prospect of rescue. He decided he only had one shot for

FEATURE ARTICLE: RESCUE MISSION OFF FORMOSA, JANUARY 1945

survival. Tanner fired up his engine and headed for Luzon, the Philippine island where American soldiers had been fighting for the last two weeks. Luzon was a fair distance away and was far from liberated, but Tanner saw it as the only logical option. He cruised due south over Japanese-occupied islands. Fuel was going to be tight, and there was no room for error.

Tanner hit heavy weather and thick cloud cover as he approached the Luzon coastline. He timed his approach flying completely from instruments. Six minutes inland, with his plane on its final drops of fuel, Charles Tanner bailed out into the dense overcast.

He plummeted down into the Philippine jungle and landed in a clearing. He buried his chute and set out, moving cautiously until he came across a small village. He hid nearby and waited, listening to voices and evaluating the situation. Once he concluded that the occupants of nearby huts weren't Japanese, Tanner simply walked through the front door.

None of the Filipino villagers inside spoke English, but they recognized the label on his jacket and survival pack: "U.S. Navy." The villagers summoned a local man who spoke English. They subsequently put him in contact with Filipino guerillas, fighters in the local resistance against the Japanese and staunch supporters of their American allies. So effective were their methods, Captain Dyer and *USS Astoria* received word via the U.S. 6th Army that Tanner was alive and well on January 25th, only four days after he had gone missing.

Returning Tanner to the ship was another matter altogether. The Filipino guerillas shepherded the Naval Aviator south across Luzon, through enemy lines and finally into the hands of the American 6th Army. On February 21st, one month to the day after he set out on his rescue mission, Charles Tanner finally found himself back aboard a U.S. Navy ship, the seaplane tender *Currituck*, where he was debriefed and prepared for his



Seaplane tender *USS Currituck AV-7* off the coast of Luzon in a photo taken within days of Tanner's debriefing, February 1945.

-U.S. Navy photo in National Archives collection

MIGHTY NINETY

FEATURE ARTICLE: RESCUE MISSION OFF FORMOSA, JANUARY 1945

return to the *USS Astoria*. The same day Charles Tanner composed the debriefing statement of his adventure over Formosa and Luzon, the *Astoria* performed a heavy shore bombardment of Iwo Jima in support of invading Marines.

It was March before Charles Tanner saw his ship again. In the months of Okinawa operations that followed, Tanner went on to perform three of *Astoria's* seven successful rescues of downed American aviators. The ship finished the war "First in Rescue," tops in her cruiser division.

The three Naval Aviators from *USS Pasadena*, Robert Brownfield, John Bowser, and Donald Jones, were never seen or heard from again. Analysis of the incident surmised that their aircraft were improperly fueled before they ever left their ship. All three were declared lost at sea one year later, on January 22nd, 1946.

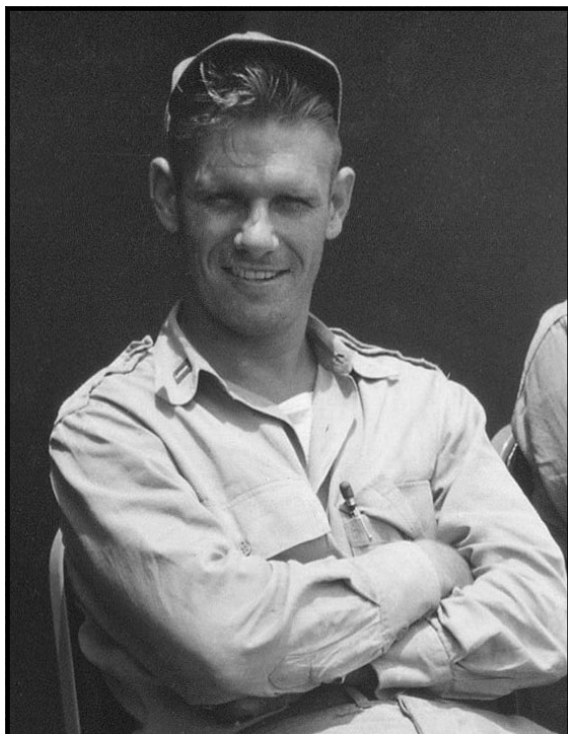
These three fine Americans are memorialized on the Wall of the Missing at the Manila American Cemetery and Memorial, Philippine Islands. Their sacrifice should not be forgotten.



Charles Tanner (right) with USMC Corsair pilot Walter Goeggel from VMF-221, USS Bunker Hill, aboard Astoria in May 1945. Tanner conducted three successful rescue missions in the months after his return to the Astoria.

-Herman Schnipper photo

SHIPMATE SPOTLIGHT: SENIOR AVIATOR CHARLES S. TANNER



Tanner relaxing aboard ship in July 1945.

-Herman Schnipper photo

Charlie Tanner, sole survivor of the January 1945 rescue mission, completed the war with distinction. For his selfless actions in attempting to save fellow aviators off Formosa, Tanner was awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Medal, a lifesaving medal distinguishing heroism not involving direct combat.

Tanner went on to rescue three downed pilots during Okinawa operations, including the first and only known surface rescue ever conducted in the Inland Sea of Japan and the first known night recovery of a floatplane. For his valiant efforts he was awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross and Air Medal.

After the war, Tanner volunteered as one of the Navy's first developmental helicopter pilots. He participated in 1947 Antarctic operations, surviving a crash in sub-zero waters. It should also be noted that he remained dear friends with Gerard Armitage, *USS Astoria's* Marine Captain, who kept their old skipper George Dyer abreast of his exploits. In later years, Tanner stayed in touch with the men whom he rescued and their families.

Charlie Tanner is properly remembered as a prominent reason that *USS Astoria CL-90*, the "Mighty Ninety," was as fine a cruiser as the U.S. Navy had afloat in 1945.

Mighty Ninety Website Updates

The CL-90 website has been renewed and paid for through 2011! For those of you who are a bit more computer-savvy, this means that the domain names and site hosting have been guaranteed for another two years. It is the goal of this project to maintain the Mighty Ninety website as an online museum and monument for perpetuity.

Credits and Acknowledgments

Contributions included in this newsletter:

- Mr. Herman Schnipper, N Division (photographs on pages 1,4, and 5)
- Mr. Dean Caswell, VMF-221 (assistance in identifying pilot Goeggel in Tanner rescue photo)
- The staff at the National Archives facility in College Park, MD. Thank you for your assistance and professionalism.

Many thanks to the shipmates and family who made financial contributions to help offset costs of the Mighty Ninety project and newsletter. John Graffigna, Kathy Moriarty, Carl Theaker, and Corey Bullard—on behalf of the recipients of this newsletter I thank each of you very much.

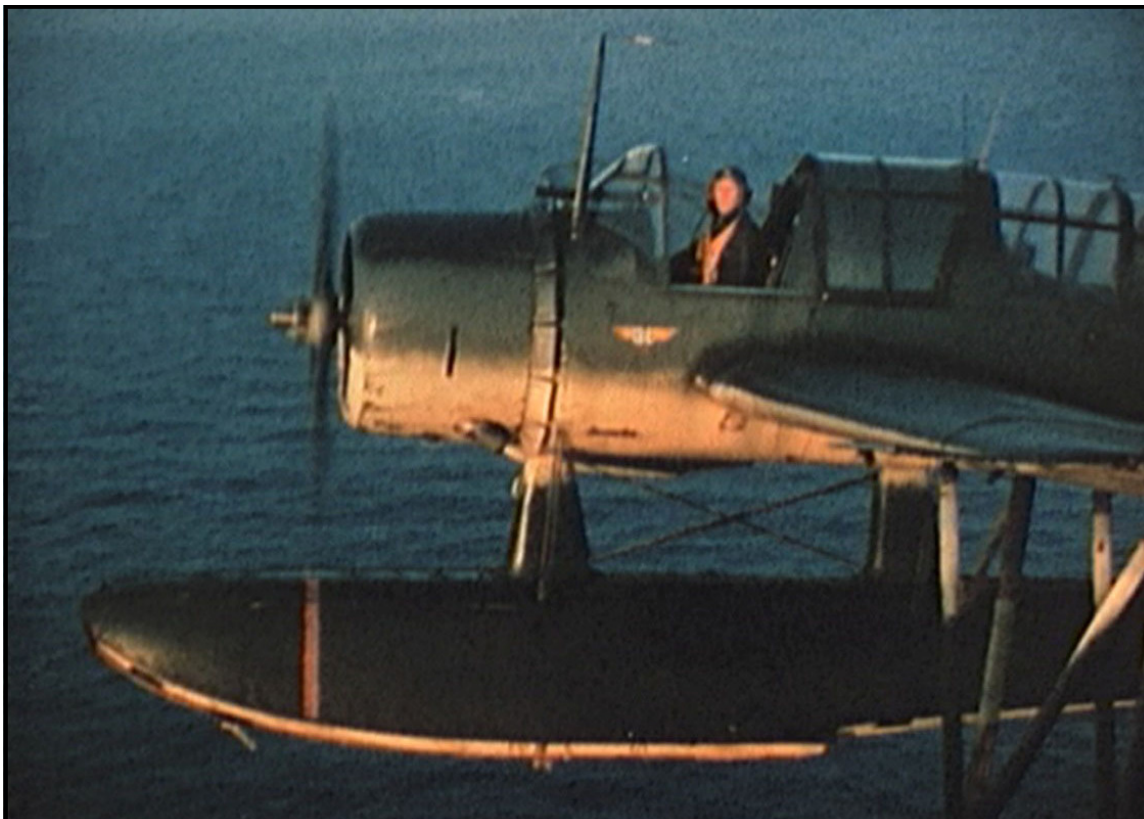
A MESSAGE FROM BRENT



The Mighty Ninety website and newsletter are primarily written and maintained by Brent Jones, relative of E Division plankowner Lawrence C. Jones.

Brent is looking to contact as many Mighty Ninety shipmates as possible to share the website and newsletter with them. If you can help locate someone new, please share!

Brent can be reached at (214) 995-9224 or via email: brentj@mighty90.com



Still frames from color film footage of Astoria CL-90 in April 1945. Top: LT Charles Tanner in his Kingfisher floatplane. Bottom: Astoria and Bunker Hill CV-17 fuel from Chikaskia AO-54. -National Archives Film Records

