



Screaming through the broken clouds, four Skyhawks rained simulated death on a small rocky island just out of Subic Bay, Republic of the Philippines. As each aircraft dropped its 25-lb. blue Mk 76 practice bomb, it jinked away from the simulated flak and sped off to rendezvous and do it again. As the last plane disappeared, a flotilla of small wooden boats watched and waited at a safe distance. When they were sure the planes had gone far, far away for good, they would paddle furiously in to collect the bomb guts and feathers to be turned into I-Been-There aviator metal belt buckles back in Olongopo.

The trick was patience. These planes with orange snakes on their tails would be back several more times. The paddlers waited, chattering in Tagalog while they carved Monkeypod wood into water buffalo and such to sell to the airplane drivers. Getting bonked by premature paddling might smart some.

## BEAVER SINKS THE ROYAL PHILIPPINE NAVY

The *Snakes* of VA-86 had come a long way for this practice to become Yankee Air Pirates. They had survived banana daiquiris in the Virgin Islands after doing the ORI thing; they had endured endless All Pilot's Meetings as USS *Independence* (CVA-62) thrummed across the wine dark sea, and they had dutifully gotten whacked and kissed the hairy belly of the Royal Baby when they crossed the Equator. There were only a few casualties during the stop at the Black Hole of Singapore, but they were definitely Frabbing New Guys amongst the steely-eyed veterans at Cubi Point, and they listened respectfully.

The upper Rocket Numbers had decided that the rust from all that steaming must be chipped off their aviators, so there had been some aviating, like assuring the air wing Paddles persons that the ball could still be flown acceptably in the darkness while witnessed by their peers from the Cubi Point O'Club. While the various pilots got shuttled off to jungle survival school, and the blackshoes did their thing to render the Boat ready, the *Snakes* were dropping some practice bombs and shooting the guns some.

The peacetime tactics they were practicing would practically guarantee their mighty war eagles would get pierced with any projectiles Uncle Ho's boys cared to toss in the way of the division's low level approach, pitch up, and thirty-degree bomb run. But, wot the hell, it was practice. There would be strafing, also, using the same tactic, and happiness was a warm gun or two.

Beaver came to fly with the Snakes because he was CAG LSO and needed an A-4 to drive. He was an aw shucks, Buddy Ebson sort of calming LSO, and Puresome knew that everything would be all right when he heard Beaver's drawl on the radio during dark and stormy nights.

So, having Beaver along on today's bombing and shooting was Ticked-Boo with Puresome. Of course, pretty much everything was tickedy boo with Puresome, having escaped Training Command screamers and being graded on by RAG folks. The fleet was a joyous thing.

LCDR Paganuch was leading the flight, and, since they were dry landers, he didn't get to brief that the duty runway was sixty-two, as he did for every hop at sea. Puresome was number two, and Raypat and Beaver rounded out the division. The mission was simple enough, just drive out low level, find the target rock, go away, come back the same way, individually pop up, do a 30-degree dive, and kill the rock. The usual other stuff was covered, with mil settings and switchology, since it was not considered nice to litter the ocean with drop tanks. The strafing runs would be performed the same way. Bomb, shoot, return to base, look good in the break. Go to Club. Real good, thought Youthly.

The rubber bands powering the four Scooters worked as usual, and launch, rendezvous, and motoring out to the target was a piece of pie. The only problem in otherwise beautiful weather was a layer of broken clouds that would be between the pop up and the target, so the attackers would have to have a timely sucker hole or come through the clouds in the right place to pickle and pull. No hill for a trained professional stepper, Puresome thought.

Since the rock target wasn't exactly as small as a pickle barrel, it didn't really matter if the dives weren't exactly 30 degrees or that some Kentucky windage had to be used for different drop altitudes. The audience of paddlers was happy enough to watch the little puffs of smoke emerge from the splats! on the rock.

With six bombs each dropped, it was time to arm the guns and fire them out in two passes. This was hosing designed to make gomer skeet shooters duck, and Puresome never got to shoot as much as he wanted, so he gave out a "Ratsfannies!" when he went Winchester shortly after he started his second run. He turned off his switches and headed to the rendezvous. He heard Raypat make the same call shortly thereafter, and Beaver's run would complete the exercise.

Time went at least a couple of potatoes. A hostile cloud had inconveniently covered up the target, and Beaver wagged about a bit, looking for a hole. Ahah! Down came Beaver. Unfortunately, the hole he picked was a couple of miles from the rock. He leveled out at a hundred feet or so and steamed into the target. And started shooting.

The first problem was that the Royal Philippine Navy had figured that the planes were gone and had started paddling like mad to be first to the prized bomb guts and feathers. The second problem was that Beaver's hosing from his level strafing run walked big spouts in the water to the target for about a half-mile out. Through the flotilla.

It was unclear if any captains went down with their canoes. Beaver didn't bother to get an accurate count. Since the rest of the flight had formed up and was making a wide orbit beneath the clouds as well, Puresome did not consider it prudent to volunteer being a witness.

Not much was said during the debrief, fog of war and all that. After all, it was time to clean up and go bother the Fantoom and Intruder pukers at the Club. And badmouthing paddles might put you on the ramp some dark and stormy night. Beaver didn't even mind not being put in for an Air Medal.

And even the saltiest paddler, musing over his evening balute, had to wonder whether souvenir belt buckles were worth it.