

THE LAST FLIGHT (Tearjerker)



Lockheed PV-2 "Harpoon"

1991 by Kent Ballard

Recently, there was a titanic air show at Genessee, New York. This *gathering of eagles* brought in WWII aircraft from all over the United States and Canada. Aircraft from all American military branches were there, along with combat fighters and bombers from the RAF, the Soviet Air Force, the Luftwaffe, and the Imperial Japanese Army and Navy. It was warbird heaven.

Try as I might, I couldn't adjust my schedule to attend. Feeling somewhat like the kid who didn't get picked for the team, I helped get our bomber tuned up, spit-shined, and polished. I was pretty dispirited when they left. I smiled and waved when they took off, never telling anyone how disappointed I felt. I watched until they flew out of sight, then quietly went home.

When our crew returned several days later, they brought with them a story that put my misery in its proper perspective. Just when you think that you have troubles, you always seem to hear about someone who is facing a real trial.

He was an old man, suffering from serious depression and an incurable illness. His future, such as it was, looked grim. Just a few weeks earlier he had been diagnosed as having Hodgkin's disease.

In an effort to cheer their father up, his sons had driven him from Massachusetts to the great air show taking place in Genessee. Their dad had been a Navy combat pilot in WWII. He'd often told them stories about his days as a younger man, a man they'd never met and perhaps never really believed existed. But they knew how his eyes would light up when he talked about his wartime experiences. Dad became young again, if only for a moment, as he remembered being strong and healthy, fighting against fascism so many years ago. The boys hoped that being around the old warbirds would lift his spirits for at least a day.

His sons, loving and attentive, helped him out of the car somewhere on one of the fields reserved for parking. He'd been glancing up more frequently as they go closer to the airfield. With a veterans practiced eye, he identified the aircraft as they wheeled and banked over the field or taxied to the parking positions. He'd already told his boys that his plane wouldn't be there. They weren't saved after the war like the more glorified Flying Fortresses or Liberators. Still, young men by the thousands had flown and fought in

his type of aircraft, and not all of them had made it home. He knew that the model he flew was only a memory shared by a dwindling band of old men like himself. His own sons had never even seen one of the planes that carried him to war. For the most part, no one knew they ever existed. The old planes, like the old man himself, were fading away.

Once they had been young, the hope and pride of a nation. But now no one cared anymore.

They walked slowly along the crowded flight line. Over the rumble of the engines, Dad gestured for his boys. *That ones a B-17, he'd explain, we had those in the Pacific, too. There's a P-38 Lightning. You can always tell by the twin tail booms. They were good escorts. They went in with us sometimes. We were glad to have them around.*

Further down the line they passed a Japanese Zero. The old man glared at it silently for a moment, some strange emotion passing briefly across his face. His sons didn't know if it was grief, fear, anger, or a combination of all. He turned and without a backward glance continued his slow walk.

The memories were becoming stronger for him. The breeze carried the scent of rubber, aviation gas, and hot oil, just like his base used to smell. Planes jockeying into position along the line revved their engines, sending gale-force prop wash blowing across the tarmac as people clutched at their hats and leaned into the wind. Overhead was the deep-throated roar of ancient propeller-driven fighter formations passing in review, a sound unlike any other. Air show announcers all over the country call it the same thing: The Sound of Freedom.

The father and his sons ambled along, pausing occasionally to look up at whatever was flying over. After one particularly low pass by a British Spitfire, the boys turned to remark to Dad and saw him standing as if he were frozen in place. He had walked around the aircraft they'd been looking at and was staring like a man possessed with the next plane in line. A look of incredulous wonder began to spread across his face

My God, he whispered. My God, there it is. It's someone ... how ... I never thought that I'd ever

What is it, Dad? Are you okay?

He seemed to stand taller and his shoulders squared. *Okay? Hell yes, I'm okay! THERES MY PLANE!*

It just so happened that *his* plane was also *our* plane. Lockheed PV-2 *Harpoons* were never immortalized by Hollywood like the Flying Fortresses of *12 O'Clock High*, the B-25 Mitchells of *Catch-22* or any of a score of other films. Why this is so remains a mystery, for the missions they flew were some of the most heroic...and harrowing...of the war. Flying out of New York, Norfolk, and Pensacola, PV-1s and 2s scoured the Atlantic for Nazi U-boats. The WWII cliché "*sighted sub, sank same*" is attributed to a PV-1 crew. In the Pacific theater, astonished Navy pilots soon realized that the PV-1 could actually outrun the dreaded Japanese Zeros, a feat unheard of for a medium bomber. The Lockheed's phenomenal speed saved scores, perhaps hundreds, of American lives.

With the debut of the heavier and more stable PV-2, Marine Corps pilots and ground crews, as usual, made a few non-standard *field modifications*. This normally meant torching extra holes in the nose and welding in as many .50 machine guns as they could cram into the forward bay. The Marines also tore out the torpedo and depth charge racks in the somewhat pregnant-looking bomb bay and installed hooks for 500 pounders and napalm. As if this wasn't enough, industrious gunneys even bolted rails under each wing and loaded them with air-to-ground rockets! Aeronautical engineers were appalled when they heard this, but soon reports came back from the combat zones of Harpoons taking on everything from subs and fighters to tanks and heavy cruisers, all with disastrous results to the enemy. The Harpoons could ... and did ... fight anything. And somewhere amidst the fire and fury, somewhere between the Philippines and

the Aleutians, there was a young Navy pilot who would live to be taken to Genesee, New York by his sons

The old man stood at the front of the plane and, after a long moment, simply reached up and placed his hand on the underside of the nose. *I never knew they saved one*, he said softly. *I never thought I'd see one again*. To his sons, the man sounded as if he had suddenly found something priceless that he had lost many years ago.

One of his boys slipped around to the port side of the harpoon. He'd seen an open hatch and one of our crewmen standing near it. The younger man had decided to ask, plead ... beg if he had to. ... for permission to let his father climb aboard a Harpoon just one more time. Please, please

To his surprise and delight, he was informed that we welcome visitors aboard our plane. In fact, we encourage them to climb in and take a look around. It's no fun having a bomber if you can't show it off once in a while, right? Besides, we're maintaining a living piece of American history, and we're rather proud of that fact.

The fellow who climbed into the hatch did so with the grace and familiarity of a young naval aviator, not an old man suffering from Hodgkin's disease. Our crewman offered to show the old gent around and point out objects of interest in the plane, a courtesy we perform for all visitors, but one of the man's sons tugged at his sleeve. *Dad knows his way around in here. Can we talk outside for a moment?*

Our crewman was somewhat bewildered, but he was beginning to realize that something out of the ordinary was going on. He'd seen that eerie look in the old fellow's eyes and it was plain that these other two guys wanted to explain his behavior. He hopped out of the hatch and listened to them. They told our man about their dad's crushing depression upon learning of his incurable disease, how they had hoped to just cheer him up a little, and how overjoyed he was to see that a bunch of characters from Indiana were actually flying around the country in a plane that he thought no longer existed.

Our man knew there was more to it than that. There was a lot of happiness and relief in these men, too. Their mission was accomplished: against all odds, they'd broken the black spell on their father.

While the old aviator was still merrily poking about in our plane, a couple more of our crew strolled up munching on hamburgers. *What's up? Anything going on?*

Yeah. Wait'll you hear this

Within minutes, two of our crewmen set out to round up the rest of the gang. The old man was still climbing in and out of the plane, kicking the landing gear and inspecting the bomb bay, when they all arrived. Our whole *away team* shook his hand and took pictures of him and his boys. The old fellow's joy was infectious, and our guys were glad to be a part of it. Then someone in the crew came up with a brilliant idea. It was whispered from man to man and a hasty conference was held under the huge wing. Heads nodded all around. Yeah. It was agreed. They had to do this

We were scheduled to make a flight the next day for *Aviation Classics* magazine. They wanted some pictures of our rare Harpoon doing its stuff. A photographer had been sent, a swift chase plane had been reserved, and takeoff was set for the following morning.

As is always the case, every seat available was already spoken for. Despite its size, and not counting the pilots and flight engineer, there are only five seats aboard our plane. She was designed as a combat aircraft, not a passenger plane. Even among the members of our organization, a flight is a rare treat. To be honest about the matter, at a fuel consumption rate of nearly two hundred gallons an hour we can't afford

much joyriding. At air shows, our fuel and other expenses are paid for by the promoters of the show so every time we lift off five lucky people get to take a *free* ride. These seats are always reserved well in advance, usually for our own people who've spend countless hours of hard work and a lot of their own money to keep 'em flying. Its a privilege we all look forward to every summer.

Our crew looked at the ancient Navy pilot standing beside the Harpoon. He constantly touched the aircraft as if to assure himself that it was really there and not just a dream. There was a haunted look about him, as if he were surrounded by the ghosts of his former comrades. He had survived the Zeros, but there would be no escape from the disease that now had a grip on him. The old veteran was fighting his last battle even as they watched

He can have my seat, one of our guys said softly.

Naw. You haven't gone up for a while. Let him take mine.

Soon there was a near fight among all five over who would give up their seat. It was a point of honor. Besides, people who fly and maintain old warbirds are slightly crazy anyway.

The argument was settled and, beaming delightedly, the whole crew marched over to the man and his sons. They told him about the photo run that was scheduled for the next day and that we just, ah, happened to have a spare seat available. Would he like to ride along on the flight?

The question stunned him. *Are you serious?* He looked from man to man, and their faces answered for them. They were all grinning like idiots and nodding their heads in encouragement.

The aged Harpoon pilot blinked a few times and cleared his throat. Then, with his sons standing beside him, he lifted his chin and answered. *Yes, he said. I'd love to go. Thanks...thank you very much.*

His sons didn't comment on our crew's invitation. For some reason they were suddenly having trouble with their voices. But the way they looked at our people spoke volumes on the subject of heartfelt gratitude. The men from Massachusetts stood with the men from Indiana on an airfield in New York State, and the axiom of a brotherhood among airmen demonstrated its truth once more.

The old aviator arrived at dawn the next day. Only a couple of our people were up and at the aircraft at that time, groggily sipping coffee and still yawning. One of our guys commented that the veteran pilot looked surprisingly wide awake for that early hour. He replied that most of his combat missions had begun at dawn or even earlier. Besides, he admitted sheepishly, he had been unable to sleep the whole night. *I felt like a kid waiting for Christmas morning*, he grinned.

Someone reached into a tool box and produced a thermos of coffee. The old fellow accepted a cup and sat a package down on the work bench. *I thought some of you might be interested in this.* He carefully unwrapped a tattered and patched photo album.

My boys talked me into bringing it from home when we came up here. I'm glad I have it with me now. He opened the cover.

Our crewmen took one glance inside and snapped completely awake, nearly choking on their coffee. They stared at the book, then at each other.

The album was a gold mine. The then-young Navy pilot had taken dozens of black and white photos of his aircraft, both inside and out. Equally important, he'd taken many close-ups of the mechanics at work on his forward island bases. We had only been able to guess at where some of the equipment was

mounted in the interior of our plane, and how some of the field-expedient repairs had been accomplished under combat conditions. This book could allow us to rebuild and refurbish our plane to her exact wartime appearance, the goal of all military aircraft restorers. We have a thick manual for the bird, but its no longer possible to do everything by the book. Lockheed hasn't made parts for this aircraft for over fifty years. We knew that Navy and Marine mechanics had accomplished wonders with baling wire, tin cans, and friction tape: the big question was how? Which backyard repairs could we get away with and which ones could cause a crash? What do you do when a control cable snaps at 12,000 feet or the port engine starts blowing oil or the landing gear jams halfway down?

Our crewmen suddenly realized that the fellow sipping coffee and looking calmly back at them was not merely an old man suffering from Hodgkin's disease. He was also a retired United States Navy officer, a combat experienced aviator, and a government-trained expert on Lockheed PV-2 Harpoons. A few hours earlier, they felt as if he needed them. Now it dawned on our crew that they needed him badly and the knowledge he had carried for nearly half a century.

Sir, when the rest of our people get here, would you consider giving us a, uhh, briefing?

He sat his cup down and smiled. *Be glad to.*

Later that morning they were assembled around the elderly pilot, hanging on his every word. His constant touching and staring at the aircraft had not been the ghostly reminiscences of days gone by, but a careful and professional examination. Instinctively, he'd been giving our Harpoon a pre-flight inspection. He'd been quietly *grading* us on our reconditioning, maintenance, and craftsmanship. He'd noted where we had done well and where there was need for improvement. Our crew jotted down page after page of memos on everything from how the navigators table folded up to which hydraulic lines to inspect frequently. To no ones surprise, he said that some portions of the manual were nonsense, then went on to tell us how to do things the right way.

He gave our pilots detailed information on how to crash-land the plane in the event of total power failure. Harpoons are not noted for crash survivability, something we all keep in the back of our minds. His crew in the Pacific had been lucky to have him at the controls. He ran out of fuel once and had to belly in on a beach. The plane was a total loss, but the young Navy flyer saved his crew. Someday, God forbid, we may have to try it ourselves.

The veteran continued on for some time without any apparent fatigue or effects from his illness. Presently a civilian aircraft noisily taxied up to the Harpoon and braked to a halt. Two men clambered out of the plane, the photographer and his pilot. They exchanged information with our pilots on how the photo flight was to be handled, shook hands, and hopped back in their plane. The Cessna turned and began to taxi back out to the runway.

Flight line workers began to circle the Harpoon, warning spectators away from our bomber and clearing a path for it to roll out from the parking area. Our pilots and engineer climbed up into the cockpit and began their pre-flight checklist. Two of our people, one at each engine, stood guard outside with fire extinguishers while four more eagerly entered the plane.

For the first and only time in their lives, the old mans sons watched him climb into a PV-2 Harpoon. Just inside the hatch, he turned and looked at his boys for a long moment. Something seemed to pass between them for an instant, then he gave them a *thumbs up* and shut the door.

He never thought that he'd see another of *his* planes and certainly never dreamed he'd fly in one again, if even only as a passenger, but fate had reserved him one more takeoff, just one more time.

The last flight was under way

Our pilot shouted out his window. *Clear!* The ground crewmen stood by with the fire extinguishers, just in case. The number one starter motor engaged the flywheel, causing that eerie high-pitched whine that quickens the blood of anyone who ever heard it. Then the pistons fired, coughed, and fired again, blowing out rapid puffs of smoke as the Hamilton-Standard prop began to spin. The engine smoothed and revved to a high idle, pounding out a sound like nearby thunder. Number two engine whined, backfired, and blew out a great cloud of white smoke. Its prop remained motionless. Doubtless cursing under his breath, the pilot initiated a restart while the ground crew eyed the engine suspiciously, extinguishers at the ready.

The flywheel built up speed again, the switch was thrown, and this time the mighty Pratt & Whitney radial roared into life, fairly bellowing strength and defiance. The whole aircraft shook visibly as the great 2,000 horsepower engines warmed up. The brakes strained to hold the ship in place while the preflight was completed, then they were gradually released and the bomber started to roll.

As always, she gained speed rapidly. Halfway down the strip, the barn-door sized tail lifted and the plane seemed to balance on her main gear. Then, with the awesome sound of a warbird “the Sound of Freedom” the Harpoon thundered into the sky.

They circled the field once, gaining altitude. The chase plane fell into formation with them, the photographer taking advantage of a beautiful cloudless day. The Harpoon banked gracefully, easing back over the airfield. Together the two aircraft made repeated passes giving the cameraman every shot he could wish for. When the photo run was over, both planes slowed and dropped into a landing glide path, flaps and gear down. The smaller plane led the way, touching down well ahead of the big blue Navy patrol bomber.

It was the moment our crew had been waiting for. The airspace was now clear.

The Harpoons gear went back up and the engines throttled forward. She picked up speed, streaked over the runway at a breathtaking fifteen feet, and rocketed back up in a tight climbing turn.

One of our ground crew grinned at the old pilots sons. *I think your dad is in for a little treat.* The Harpoon was now going in excess of two hundred fifty knots. The bomber stood on one wing, whirled around in a high-stress turn, and dove like a falcon straight towards the field. Her engines were audible for miles, and the vast crowd of spectators looked up as one. *What the hell are they up to?* Hot dogs and soft drinks were dropped by the score as people snatched for their cameras. The plane shrieked over the flight line, a blue streak above the Mustangs and the Liberators and that thrice-damned Zero. In the wink of an eye they blew past the throng of spectators as babies cried, women covered their ears, and children howled with delight. The slipstream sent hats, programs, and paper cups flying in every direction.

The plane rocked back on its tail and flew into the sun. The crowd squinted and tried to follow it. Eventually even the sound of the engines grew faint. The plane was gone but to where? A few minutes passed, then someone shouted, *There! To the north!*

They’d gone for altitude, and were now diving back in again. But this time something was different. The plan was flying strangely. A teenager asked his father, *Are they in trouble?*

The Harpoon was dodging rapidly left and right and flinging itself up and down in the dive. Experienced combat pilots ... and there are many at air shows ... knew at first glance what the Navy bomber was doing. *Jinking* is how pilots are trained to avoid ground fire in combat. The plane was coming in under evasive action and gaining speed at an alarming rate. Two hundred sixty knots, two seventy, two ninety. Then the aircraft straightened and flew with determined precision, seeming to aim itself at a point just

opposite from the crowd on the other side of the runway.

The bomb bay doors snapped open and half dozen dark oblong shapes spilled out.

Spectators gasped as the objects tumbled and fell, whistling loudly as they came. The missiles hit the field and exploded into a spectacular red and green spray. The crowd sent up a mighty cheer as they realized what they'd seen, and the sons of our passenger laughed and cheered loudest of all.

Genesee, New York had just been bombed by a planeload of Indiana watermelons.

After pulling up from its surprise *bomb run*, the Harpoon slowed to cruise speed, circled, and came back for a final pass before landing. She swooped in low and slow, one wing tipped in salute to the crowd while cameras clicked and video recorders whirred. Then the great flaps lowered, the gear came down, and the tires screeched on contact with the tarmac. The bomber taxied to the parking apron, turned, and rolled slowly to her assigned area.

Flight line workers held back the crowds who surged in around her, waving, applauding, and holding children on the shoulders. The old aviator's sons stood with our ground crew, shielding their eyes from a final wind blast as the port brake was locked, the starboard engine revved, and the plan ground-looped perfectly into exactly the same spot she had left. The engines were cut, number two giving its characteristic double backfire, and the props clattered to a halt. The elevator surfaces on the huge tail lowered and thumped softly down to their rest positions. The flight was over, the bomber now silent.

Our crew formed a semicircle around the hatch, the veteran's sons standing expectantly in the front. For a long moment the hatch remained closed. Then the handle rotated, the door swung slowly open, and a figure appeared at the top of the access ladder. The sons looked up solemnly, as if seeing their father for the first time. He paused there, returning their gaze. Then the emotion became too great for even him to control, and his loving, joyous smile became framed by streams of tears that rolled down both cheeks. He hopped down the short ladder and into the arms of his boys. Our crew surrounded them as they gripped each other, laughing and weeping, in an impassioned, back slapping, three-way hug.

The scene was best described to this writer by one of our female crew members.

Oh, you should have seen it! These macho guys of ours in the plane came out and they were all crying. They were embarrassed by it, but they had to keep wiping their eyes. The old man was the happiest person I've ever seen in my life. He kept on laughing and crying at the same time and asking his boys if they saw the bomb run. They were nodding and hugging him. The ground crew was sniffing and snorting and looking at everything except each other. I finally gave up myself and said What the hell? So I started crying too.

The aviator told everyone within earshot how happy he was to have been with us, even if only for a short while. Another of our ladies appeared at his side and asked if he would like to join our organization. Before she could even finish the question he exclaimed, *Yes!* She pulled an application out from behind her back and, grinning, handed the old fellow a pen. He quickly read the document and signed it on the offered back of our flight engineer. After handing the paper back, he reached inside jacket. *I have my checkbook with me. I can pay my first annual dues right now and*

There was a cry of outrage and our *recruiting officer* steadfastly refused to take a cent. She looked around threateningly at the rest of the team and called for a forum. By immediate and unanimous voice vote, the veteran was made a life member of our crew on the spot, all dues waived forever.

Addresses and phone numbers were exchanged. The retired naval officer was told that he could expect our first organizational newsletter within a week and that wed stay in touch by mail, keeping him abreast

of developments with the plane. He replied that he had many photographs and notes pertaining to PV-2 Harpoons that he'd send us, as well as personal observations and letters answering any questions we might have in the future.

After some time, they had to leave for the long drive back to Massachusetts. Our men shook his firm hand for the last time, our wives and girlfriends each gave him a kiss, and it was time to leave. One of the sons kept repeating to our crew, *You don't know. You don't know what this has done for Dad. This has brought him back. He's his old self again. You just don't know*

Well, maybe we don't. But we have a pretty good idea. We know what he did for us.

Whatever else life may have in store for him the veteran will always know that one of his planes is still flying, crewed by a new generation. And we will know that we have a friend, our senior member, who we can turn to when the skies grow dark and we need advice.

Sometimes people ask me why I love air shows.

I never know what to tell them.