

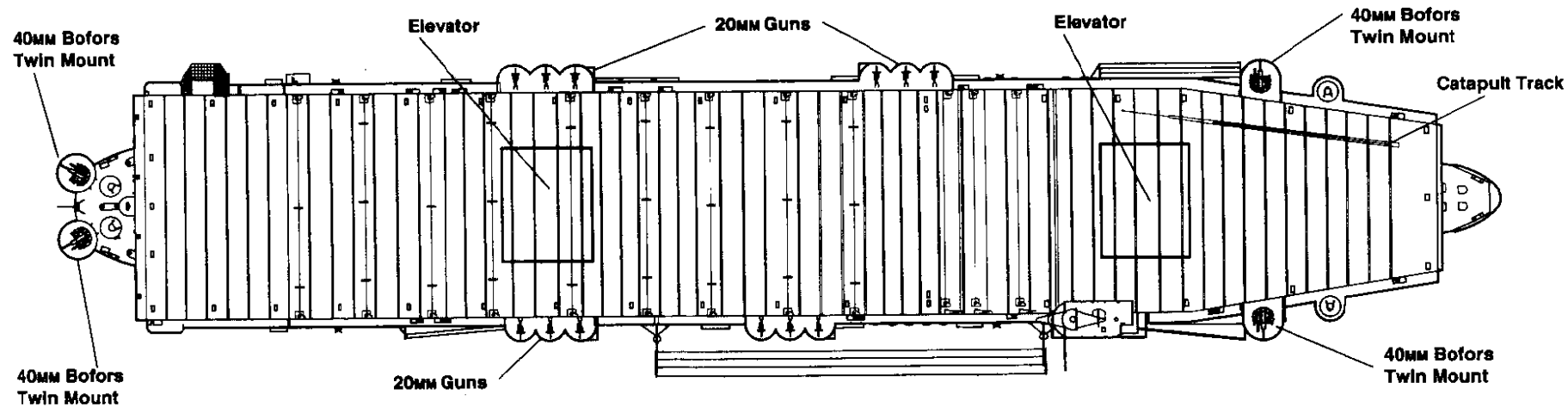
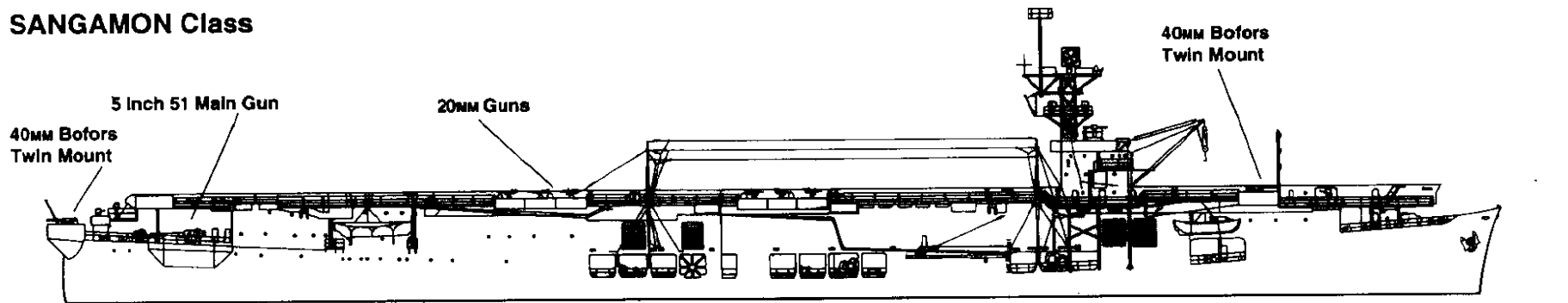
SANGAMON

CLASS



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Saga of the Sangamon Carriers

Our Baby Flattops Were Fighting Ships Through Many a Battle

by J. B. CHICK

AN Aircraft Escort Carrier or CVE may be thought of as an auxiliary by the uninformed, thought of as a ship which goes along with the "Train," or thought of as a ship constantly protecting a convoy. Navy men know that the CVE's may be used in convoys or to ferry planes, some have been fighting ships from their first to most recent trips and have many operations to their credit to prove it. The first news of the fighting qualities of CVE's to be made public came after a group of them helped save the day at Leyte Gulf on October 25th, 1944.

The oldest and "fightingest" CVE's which have been operating together as a group are those of the SANGAMON Class, converted oilers, ships converted at a time when we needed both carriers and tankers but needed airplane carriers most urgently. These rebuilt ships furnished air cover in most of the important landing operations from the one in North Africa to the latest one on Okinawa. That they can both dish it out and take it has been demonstrated again and again. They are all still afloat, thanks to the good team work of all hands, from the workers who constructed them to the men who fought them.

It is too much to expect that a fighter can keep at it constantly without getting some bruises, and this is a story of giving

out tons of explosive and burning hell and taking some back.

Several days before our troops landed on Okinawa the CVE's were on their stations and their pilots were taking off from their flight decks to blast air fields, planes, gun emplacements and barracks buildings on Kerama Rhetto and Okinawa. The flyers took off from dawn to dusk, flying over the spike-like islands of the little Kerama group, dropping bombs through the blue haze and diving to strafe Nip military installations with rockets and machine gun fire. These islands formed a useful harbor not only for Jap PT boats but a harbor that we could soon use, one within sight of but beyond artillery range of Okinawa. At night more fighter planes were launched to heckle these islands and keep the enemy from repairing damage, particularly damaged airfields. There wasn't much sleep to be had on these CVE's and the SANGAMON was one of them.

It is said that in the Pettowatomie Indian language "Sangamon" means "The Place Where There Is Plenty To Eat." In this respect the river in Illinois which gave our erstwhile oiler its name was the giver of a good name as there were few complaints heard on the quantity or quality of the food aboard—but if the crew ever learns the Indian name for "The Place Where There Is No Sleep"

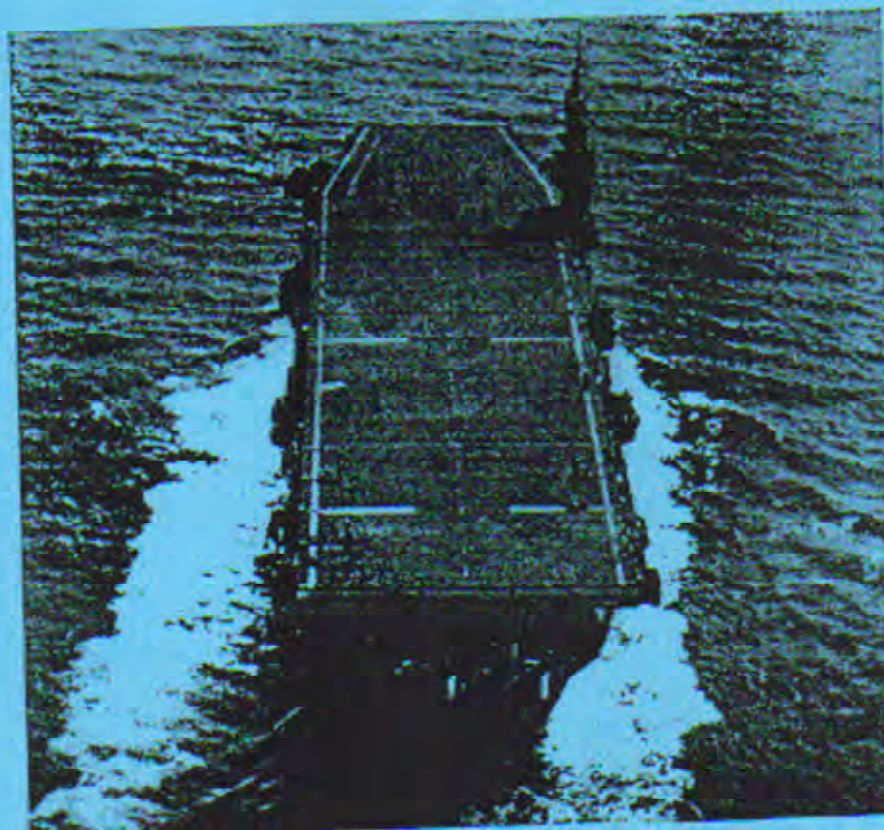
the ship will promptly acquire a hyphenated name.

After being worked over by carrier planes and surface units the Kerama Islands soon became the scene of a landing operation and before long the harbor was considered safe enough to bring in some ships of the train, ships with provisions, ammunition, replacements, and that one most important thing to all fighting men, mail. This does not mean that there was no danger left. Supply ship sailors are trained and equipped to fight too, and they were destined to have some fighting to do. Kerama Rhetto and Okinawa are both part of the Ryukyus or Nansel Shoto—"South-western Islands," in Japanese. Japan and Formosa are both within easy flying distance.

THE Battleships and Fast Carriers struck at southern Japan, the British at Formosa and the planes of our CVE's together with ships of our surface units struck at Okinawa as the Marines and Army made their Easter Morning landing on the western shores. An aerial view of the Battleships, Cruisers, Destroyers and Landing Craft involved off Okinawa alone staggered one's credulity. The SANGAMON's Day Fighters, Torpedo Planes and Night Fighters, continued their around the clock operations. Her crew seldom got more than two hours sleep at a time. The pilots were finding good hunting and their spirits were high. The Captain, A. I. Malstrom, the Air Officer, Lt. Cdr. J. C. Eckhardt, Jr., and the Gunnery Officer, Lt. Cdr. G. E. Dawson, seemed to be always on the bridge. The Executive Officer, Commander E. O'Brien, was ubiquitous. The Air Officer was rapidly developing the voice and manners of a big city traffic cop at rush hour as he directed planes constantly taking off or landing. It seemed only a few days between the time that a cake was served in the wardroom to the pilot who had made the 8,000th landing on the SANGAMON and the serving of another cake for the 9,000th landing. The Gunnery Officer was suspected of being a descendant of Simon Legree, but those who had seen his crews put out anti-aircraft fire in Leyte Gulf stood ready to obey his commands instantly.

Those who had thought the Executive Officer unnecessarily tough in his manner of carrying out the Captain's orders were beginning to think things were clicking rapidly enough to make past discipline worth while. The SANGAMON team was certainly rolling up a score. Now and then we would change goal posts and hit islands to the southwest, the Sakishima group off the coast of Formosa. There were Nip airfields to be destroyed there.

There seemed to be something ominous about the Friday we put into the harbor of Kerama to pick up provisions, ammu-



The USS SANGAMON

nition and mail. True, our ship had been there before in the last few weeks, and more than once; on our first call we had seen firing still going on in the steep hills of the islands, but somehow this visit seemed to have a certain tension with it.

Our Supply Officers soon had LCM's alongside to replenish us, and all possible haste was made in getting things stowed, particularly ammunition, bombs and rockets. All hands were glad to leave the harbor but we had not long finished the evening meal when we heard the ship rending sound of the General Alarm and the call of General Quarters. We had the islands of the Kerama group still in sight and as we manned our Battle Stations we could see a smoke screen settling over our ships at anchor a few miles behind us. There was a certain beauty to the twilight over the jagged islands of Kerama Rhetto but few of us were in a mood to contemplate or enjoy it. We felt that there might be grim business ahead, and soon. The odds were with the enemy too. We were not only in a part of the world they knew well, but low gray clouds with occasional breaks gave ideal cover for hide and seek tactics. We did not have air cover from our own ships' planes as we had not cleared the harbor sufficiently to turn into the wind and launch them. There were friendly planes in the area and the job would be double: to recognize and hold fire on our own planes and to hit the enemy with everything we had, not easy in a fading twilight, not easy any time.

Tension increases as the word gets around the ship that the Combat Intelligence Center has reported a six to eight plane raid moving rapidly toward us. We scan the sky intently. Word is passed over the "Bull Horn" that Corsairs of the combat Air Patrol based on an Okinawa airfield we have recently captured have tallyhoed them and that there is a "Dog-fight" in progress. In a few minutes it is announced that they have "Splashed" four Nip planes. We are grateful to the planes from the beach but wonder where the other two to four are.

WE are maneuvering into the wind and preparing to launch planes when CIC reports a Bogey which has not been shot down, apparently an enemy plane headed our way and closing rapidly. There he is! Those of us who are topside see him! He's in a break in the clouds off our port bow! Our anti-aircraft guns throw a ring of fire out from the ship. Tracer bullets glow in long flashes and bright streams. He disappears into a cloud; our ack-ack continues firing through the twilight at his estimated position and the guns are on him again as he comes out of the clouds in a sharp bank to approach us from the stern. He's smoking! He's over our stern and on us. Not quite! Still in his turn as he dives, he misses our starboard quarter by less than twenty-five feet, exploding as he hits the water and showering us with plane fragments and shrapnel. The ship shakes but the water has absorbed the force of his explosion as neither ship nor crew are hurt. Cheers go up from all who see it. We breathe a little easier and are relieved but not re-



This chaotic scene is the hangar deck of the USS SANGAMON the morning after the ship suffered a hit by a kamikaze plane. The jumbled, fire-blackened and water-soaked wreckage bears testimony to the fury of the flames which raged for several hours.

laxed. We think of the families back home we may see again after all; but we are still at General Quarters. Perhaps one had best forget the nice letter he has just gotten from his wife and keep his eyes and mind alert. Only five of the six to eight planes have been accounted for. As our elation subsides the order is given for all hands to look alive and not be caught napping in any subsequent attack. All eyes were concentrated on the edges of the lowering and darkening clouds and the few spaces of clear sky left in the west.

The Flight Deck crews are busy with several planes which are being warmed up for launching. Two are gotten into the air and watched very carefully so that no shots will be fired at them. They have just gone into a large cloud about three miles off our starboard beam as an enemy plane appears to their right coming out of the same cloud into a clear space off our starboard quarter. "Commence Fire." The noise is deafening and the gun flashes and tracer streams are blinding in the faded twilight. He's into another cloud, a very black one astern of us. Firing is checked to reorient for a renewed attack and to clear the area of tracer streams and smoke for better visibility.

Our guns have not scared the second Kamikaze, a twin engine job. He's out of the cloud, about three thousand yards astern, coming at us in a final dive, probably four hundred miles an hour! Our guns open up again! He's strafing us. We have him afire! He's dropping a bomb but he's still headed at us! Another Kamikaze!

Tracer lines are converging over our stern. We're in for it this time! BANG! The ship shakes and everything aft of the "Island" appears to be a mass of flames with outlines of burning airplanes

barely visible as we become a bright torch illuminating the whole area.

DESTROYERS were now coming alongside to give us more water and small craft were picking up men who had been blown over the side or had found no escape from flames except the forty foot jump from the catwalks into the sea. The flames had now driven the last man, Captain Maststrom, from the Navigation Bridge. Bat Two, an auxiliary control station took over and kept the ship on course, enabling other ships and craft to stay alongside and pump more water to us.

Ammunition in the planes on deck and below and shells for the twenty and forty millimeter guns on the catwalks were exploding with a frequency and din which made the average small boy's dream of Fourth of July in The Morning a lullabye in comparison.

The forward plane elevator platform which probably weighs twenty-five tons had been blown into the air far enough to bounce as it hit the Flight Deck in a crosswise position. Incidentally it had cut off a protruding plane wing as though with scissors. Through the openings around the crippled elevator one beheld an inferno below, a blaze of planes, gasoline, and exploding ammunition. Lt. Cdr. Gus Malmquist, the Air Combat Intelligence Officer, and Lt. Gramling, the A&R Officer, led a fire fighting party into this from forward "Officers Country." Lt. W. K. Cook, the Repair Division Officer, was hit by shrapnel and slightly hurt just as he entered this furnace, but he soon returned to continue the fight. Bosun Judd and the After Repair party cut out a jammed door with an acetylene torch and got into the other end of the Hangar Deck where the flames were ap-



A Jap Tony attacks the SANGAMON at Keroma Rhetto. Plane splashed and exploded on starboard quarter, barely missing ship. The picture was shot from the flag bridge.

proaching a pile of boxes containing five-inch rockets. They wet the pile down with the fire hose and used the pile as a barricade! More men of the After Repair party turned on what was left of the sprinkler system and narrowly escaped a cooking as the first water from it was boiling hot. Someone had presence enough to go below to cut off the risers to the broken water mains and restore the badly weakened water pressure.

"Chips," Chief Carpenter, W. W. Amereson, one of the oldest men aboard, a veteran of World War I and an old Navy man who knows and loves his job, (which incidentally has more metal working and plumbing than carpentry) was a busy man. You can pour tons of water on a burning building but you have to keep a ship right side up and afloat, and pumps must be manned and valves must be turned to eliminate this water. He got the right things done and pronto.

The first news that Captain Masterson received from the after end of the ship came by John Donald Nicholson, Aviation Machinist Mate First Class, of Seattle. Nicholson went to the deck below the blazing and shrapnel punctured Hangar Deck and worked his way forward. This is a feat beset with some difficulties even when things are running smoothly, at least at night! It means getting through numerous passageways, opening dogged down doors, and groping through a jungle of pipes, valves, fuel hoses and winches on the open fuel and weather decks. You must know your ship well to do this at night, and know almost instinctively just when to duck your head and where to lift your feet. Death lurked above in flames, exploding cartridges and falling molten metal, as it did for the men fighting on the Hangar Deck; it could come from below from a magazine explosion, from gasoline tanks or fuel tanks, to say

nothing of the chance of getting blown over the side into the dark deep water, but he made it forward and back aft again as the Captain's orders about jettisoning endangered planes were wanted in a hurry.

The after elevator platform had been blown out, as had the forward one, but it had settled diagonally with one corner high in the air and had formed an effective fire shield. The men fighting fire on the after end of the Flight Deck were able to take full advantage of this shield to get in close and use all available fire fighting equipment. The officers aft were driving the men like demons and getting planes over the side before the fire could reach them. Perhaps driving is the wrong word; it was a team. Seamen and petty officers took over their stations and tasks with initiative and determination.

On the Flight Deck the Air Group Commander was leading men amidships and getting hose lines from forward and from astern alongside. The Assistant Air Officer, Lt. R. L. Van Metre, the big Kentuckian known as "Moose" was fighting harder than in his Western Kentucky football days and he was getting fire out around the Island. In both catwalks the crew was busy rescuing wounded men and getting ammunition over the side ahead of the flames.

SHORTLY before midnight the big fires were extinguished on both Flight and Hangar decks. The teams working forward and those working aft had met and were probably as happy to see each other as our soldiers in Europe had been to meet the Russians a few days before. About this time a Destroyer alongside informed us over its Bull Horn that it had picked seventy-five of our men out of the water and knew other ships and craft had at least eight. This was cheering

news though we knew that many aboard were badly hurt and burned and that some were dead. Some of the injured men had gone right on fighting fire until they were ordered to sick bay.

Daybreak and Quarters for Muster which came later showed decks which only faintly resembled those we were used to and men whose clothes would not have passed any kind of Captain's inspection, dress or undress; but the men had the expressions not only of men glad to be alive, but also the contented features of men who knew in their hearts that they had done a good job and could go on in the face of anything the enemy seemed able to put out.

The Orders for the Day were: "Turn to and clean up ship" and the crew went back to work. We had rejoined the other ships of our Carrier Division in the early morning hours. This morning we saw a new ship in action with us for the first time, a CVE of the Commencement Bay Class, a class patterned largely after the first fighting CVE's, the converted oilers, the SANGAMONS. We steamed with our Division that day and felt proud that all the Carriers of our Division, the oldest CVE Carrier Division were still afloat.

AT sundown we buried our dead and as we turned to leave the formation for a repair base we hoped that we had set an example for the new Commencement Bay Class Carrier which had just joined us, an example which went beyond ship design and construction, an example in fighting.

Our ship had been in eleven major operations. She had helped furnish cover for the Casablanca landing late in 1942, had been in the Gilbert Islands Operation in 1943, done her part in the Roi, Eniwetok, Hollandia and Altpae landings and the Palau Strike early in 1944, in the capture and occupation of Saipan, Guam and Morotai, had then taken part in the Leyte Gulf Landing and great Naval battle and now she had helped again in the capture and occupation of Okinawa.

As we left, most of Okinawa was in our hands and most of our ship's work in the operation had been done and done as always, as a fighting ship. Planes had made almost 10,000 landings on our flight deck and their score against the enemy was good.

We had never lost many pilots. Our ship had been hit only twice though we had been attacked by Kamikaze planes five times. The first of those hits, the one at Leyte, had not hurt us badly enough to keep us from finishing our part of the operation with the landing forces and in the ensuing Naval Battle there. This second hit had hurt us more, but our work in helping give cover for the landing had long since been accomplished, and the Marines and Army were already taking over more and more of the Combat Air Patrol and of target strikes. The big Dumbos had been doing rescue and anti-submarine patrol for some time. At Leyte we had seen other ships in our Carrier Division hit just about the way we had been struck this time. They were back fighting again.

Theirs was a magnificent record.