

# AIRPLANE vs. MOUNTAIN

By: Jim O, Malley USN 1951-1955

VP-22 was a Naval Patrol Squadron based on the island of Okinawa, flying patrol on the coast of China. Although we were not in a declared war with China, we were fighting Chinese troops in Korea. It was considered necessary to provide intelligence on movement of Chinese troops and vessels in the straight between the mainland and Formosa, (Taiwan). We were to fly three miles off the coastline, so as not to violate Chinese air space.

In order not to provide gunnery practice for the Chinese YAK and MIG-15 fighter planes with our lumbering Patrol Bomber we flew a good portion of our patrol at night. As a deterrent to our observation by Air Search Radar we had an operational ceiling of 500 feet. This meant we were low enough to get our feet wet, and low enough to be below the overcast so we were rained on when the weather was inclement. In the winter the weather was inclement virtually every day and every night. Since our sturdy craft, a P2V-5 Neptune leaked everywhere, we got more than our feet wet.

My job was as the radar operator. We had a long range navigational radar, and a short range bombing radar. Since the long range radar could be picked up and tracked by the forces on the ground, we were limited to using it only a few seconds at a time. Since we flew so much of our mission in the dark, our radar was the eyes of our gallant, if fuzzy, aviators.

There were several reasons we were to avoid flying over the Chinese land. We were to avoid provocation, even though we were fighting them face to face a few hundred miles away. The Chinese mainland had a great deal of anti-aircraft weaponry everywhere. The coastal area of China was very mountainous with peaks well over 1000 feet, remember we flew below 500 feet.

So it happened one dark moonless night that an unexpected cross wind along with some questionable navigation, (remember we were only 500 feet off the deck, below the overcast, which made conventional "star shot" navigation impossible.) we found ourselves several miles inland over China.

This was a bad thing for several reasons. If we were spotted by the Chinese anti-aircraft gunners, we stood a good chance of being shot down. Since we were flying at 500 feet and the surrounding mountains were well over 1000 feet we could fly right into a mountain. In every aircraft - mountain collision the mountain always won. In the dark it was literally impossible to see what was in front of you.

Our only hope of survival was to pick our way through the mountains without detection until we were once again over open water. We could not use our powerful navigation radar, since it would be picked up by the Chinese and give away our position. We could

not climb to a higher altitude since we would then appear on the enemy air search radar also giving our position. We would have to rely on our weaker, directional bombing radar to guide us out.

The more sophisticated technology that presents topographical information had not yet been invented. Our radar did however show the presence of high altitude mountains. The trained eye could detect a “shadow” behind a land mass indicating that whatever it was, it was higher than you were. Radar is line-of-sight. Our intrepid crew hoped that I possessed such a trained eye.

And so we began our tedious journey back to safety. Staring into the radar screen, I began a litany of course corrections to keep us away from the mountains and on a heading that would take us to the coastline.

All was going pretty well, when our bow gunner in the turret in the nose of the plane reported “Mountain dead ahead !” The pilot asked “O’Malley, what do you see?” I responded after staring so intently at the radar screen that my eye balls practically slammed up against it, “Clear ahead.” Minutes later, with panic creeping into his voice, our bow gunner repeated “mountain dead ahead!” Again the pilot asked what I could see. I repeated that all was clear ahead. The pilot asked if we could veer to the left or right. My response was that if we did, we would indeed hit a mountain. We pressed on.

A third time the bow gunner screamed “MOUNTAIN DEAD AHEAD!!!” Again I assured the pilot we had to continue on our course. Now the bow gunner abandoned his turret and came up on the flight deck and shrieked if I didn’t turn the plane he would kill me himself. Just then the plane shuddered and bucked a little. Bow gunner, “What was that?” Pilot, “We just flew through a thunder cloud.” Me, “I am trying to resist the urge to throw you out of the plane if you don’t get away from me.”

As our hearts started to beat again, we continued to pick our way, gingerly until I gleefully reported we passed the coastline and we were now over open water, out of range of the foes guns.

To show how this experience desensitized us, we had another mountain experience. Near the duty runway on our home field on the island of Okinawa there is a mountain that rises 1600 feet in the air. We were returning from a patrol on a foggy day when I spotted the familiar “shadow” on the radar screen. We were flying at about 1000 feet. In a rather matter-of-fact voice I reported” Pilot from radar, there is a mountain dead ahead.” The response was, “Radar from pilot, will we go over it or around it?” “Pilot, if we continue this course and altitude, we will go through it!” “What do you recommend.” “I recommend an emergency right turn.” This prompted the plane standing on its right wing as we lurched to the right and idly watched the mountain as we passed by. All this took place with the intensity of a discussion of what movie was playing at the mess hall.

Fortunately in these instances the final score was Airplane 2, Mountain 0. Otherwise I

would probably to this day be a part of the Asian landscape.