

Vice President Bush Calls World War II Experience "Sobering"

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Forty-one years ago, a 20-year-old Naval Aviator named George Bush embarked on a mission which he would later describe as one of the most dramatic moments of his life -- an experience which gave him a "sobering understanding of war and peace."

"There's no question that it broadened my horizons," Vice President Bush said recently. "And there's no question that today it has a real impact on me as I give advice to the President."

It was September 2, 1944. Lieutenant Junior Grade George Bush was a pilot with Torpedo Squadron Fifty-One (VT-51) aboard the aircraft carrier *USS San Jacinto* (CVL-30), a light carrier which was deployed in the North Pacific.

Just two years earlier, on June 12, 1942, Bush had graduated from high school and joined the Navy as a seaman, second class. But, in less than a year, he completed flight training at NAS Corpus Christi, Texas, was commissioned an ensign, and went on to fly TBM Avengers with VT-51. For a time, he was the youngest pilot in Naval Aviation.

On that sunny morning of September, Bush woke aboard *San Jacinto* prepared to fly one of the 58 attack missions he would fly during the war. However, this particular mission would end a little differently than his other 57.

The target was a Japanese radio station on ChiChi Jima, located about 600 miles southwest of Japan in the Bonin Islands. For a time, the enemy on that tiny island had been intercepting U.S. military radio transmissions and warning Japan and occupied enemy islands of impending American air strikes. It had to be destroyed.

Before 0900, Bush and two aircrewmembers (his regular radioman, Radioman Second Class John Delaney, and substitute gunner Lieutenant Junior Grade William White) strapped themselves inside an Avenger and catapulted off *San Jacinto*. Three other bomb-laden VT-51 aircraft, as well as a number of VF-51's F6F Hellcats, joined the mission.

"I was replaced by Ltjg. White at the last minute," said Leo W. Nadeau, then an ordnanceman second class who flew as Bush's gunner on all but two of his attack missions. "As intelligence officer, White wanted to go along to observe the island."

Nadeau, who was 20 at the time, added that the day before, Bush, Delaney and he had flown into ChiChi Jima and destroyed an enemy gun emplacement.

"The antiaircraft (AA) fire on that island was the worst we had seen," he said. "I don't think the AA fire in the Philippines was as bad as that."

"ChiChi was a real feisty place to fly into," Stanley Butchart, a former VT-51 pilot and friend of Bush, agreed. "As I remember, it had gun emplacements hidden in the mountain areas. In order to get down to the radio facility, you had to fly past the AA batteries, which was risky business."

As expected, projectiles belched from the enemy's AA batteries as soon as Bush and his squadron mates were over the island. Tiny black puffs of smoke thickened around his plane as he approached the target and dove steeply -- so steeply that Bush felt like he was standing on his head. But before he reached the radio facility the plane was hit.

Ltjg. Bush, who felt the plane "lift" from the hit, continued his dive toward the target and dropped his payload. The four 500-pound bombs exploded, causing damaging hits. For his courage and disregard for his own safety in pressing home his attack, he was later awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross.

Bush maneuvered the Avenger over the ocean with the hope it would make the journey back to *San Jacinto*. But the plane began to blaze and clouds of smoke soon enveloped the cockpit. Choking and gasping for air, Bush and one of his aircrewmen wriggled out of the plane and leaped from about 1,500 feet. His other crewman, dead or seriously injured from the blast, went down with the Avenger.

Bush parachuted safely into the water, dangerously close to the shore. Unfortunately, the aircrewman fell helplessly to his death because his parachute failed to open properly.

No one ever knew which one bailed out with Mr. Bush," said Nadeau, now a building contractor in Ramona, Calif. "I would assume it was Delaney, because as the radioman, he would go out first to leave room for the gunner to climb down out of the turret and put his chute on.

"There wasn't room in the turret for the gunner to wear a parachute. As a gunner, my parachute hung on the bulkhead of the plane near Delaney. We set up an escape procedure where he was supposed to hand me my chute and jump, and then I was to follow him. The procedure took a couple of seconds."

Nadeau added that he "didn't know what to think" when he heard the plan was shot down.

"I felt bad that Delaney and Mr. White had died," he said. "I just had the feeling that had I been there, Delaney and I might have both made it out alive -- that is, unless one of us got hit by AA. Delaney and I had practiced our escape procedure constantly. He might have stayed to help White get out of the turret and delayed too long. It's one of those things that never leaves your mind. Why didn't I go that day?"

Vice-President Bush said that he chose to finish the bombing run rather than bail out early because as a Naval Aviator, he was disciplined to do that.

"We were trained to complete our runs no matter what the obstacle," he remarked.

Once in the water, Bush unleashed his inflatable yellow lifeboat, crawled in, and paddled quickly out to sea. The Japanese sent out a boat to capture him. Luckily, Lieutenant Doug West, a fellow VT-51 Avenger pilot, strafed the boat.

"He stopped it," said Bush.

Circling fighter planes transmitted Bush's plight and position to the U.S. submarine *Finback* (SS-230), patrolling 15 to 20 miles from the island.

"This was 1944 and there were very few enemy targets left," said retired Capt. Robert R. Williams Jr., 73, who was *Finback's* commanding officer then. "So, the main reason for our being on patrol was to act as lifeguard and pick up aviators."

According to Lieutenant Commander Dean Spratlin, *Finback's* executive officer at the time, the submarine had an area of 200 to 300 square miles to cover, which included Iwo Jima, ChiChi Jima and HaHa Jima in the Bonin Islands.

A few hours after transmitting Bush's position, Williams, then a commander, sighted him on the periscope about seven miles away from ChiChi. He ordered the submarine to the surface.

"I saw this thing coming out of the water and I said to myself, 'Jeez, I hope it's one of ours,'" Bush remarked.

Spratlin, who is now in the real estate business in Atlanta, Ga., said he and Williams weren't worried about surfacing in daylight so close to an enemy island because they had several U.S. fighters flying cover.

"We had a big sub (312 feet long), so we rigged out the bowplanes which gave us a platform where we could step down and pull him aboard," added Spratlin.

While several of *Finback's* crewmen were helping Bush aboard, Ensign Bill Edwards, the sub's first lieutenant and photographic officer, filmed the rescue. The 8mm film later was sent to Bush while he was a congressman from Texas and was shown recently as part of a biographical sketch during the Republican National Convention.

Bush was taken inside *Finback* and the sub submerged.

"Once he was pulled aboard, he was taken to the wardroom," said Thomas R. Keene, a TBF Avenger pilot from *USS Franklin*, who was shot down the day before off Iwo Jima along with his two enlisted aircrewmen. "It must have seemed like a dream to him. One minute he was all alone on the ocean, and the next he was on board a submarine being served food in a red-lighted compartment that had music playing on a record player."

"I thought being rescued by the submarine was the end of my problem," Bush said. "I didn't realize that I would have to spend the duration of the sub's 30 remaining days on board."

The following day, *Finback* retrieved Lieutenant Junior Grade James Beckman, a fighter pilot on *USS Enterprise* who was shot down over HaHa Jima.

"We put Bush and the other four men to work as lookouts," Spratlin said. "Four hours on, eight hours off."

As lookouts, they helped make sure that enemy planes and submarines didn't sneak up on *Finback* during daylight or at night. The submarine did much of its patrolling on the surface in the daytime and always at night because that was when *Finback* recharged its batteries.

"Bush and the other aviators really got into the submarine experience," Spratlin remarked. "Every time an enemy plane would force us down, they'd curse it just like we did."

Bush said that the most beautiful time for standing watch was between 2400 and 0400. "I'll never forget the beauty of the Pacific -- the flying fish, the stark wonder of the sea, the waves breaking across the bow," he remarked.

The 30 days aboard *Finback* weren't all beautiful, however. Some of the more dramatic moments included being depth charged and bombed by enemy ships and planes.

"I thought I was scared at times flying into combat, but in a submarine you couldn't do anything, except sit there," he said. "The submariners were saying that it must be scary to be shot at by anti-aircraft fire and I was saying to myself, 'Listen brother, it is not really as bad as what you go through. The tension, adrenaline and the fear factor were about the same (getting shot at by anti-aircraft fire as opposed to being depth charged). When we were getting depth charged, the submariners did not seem overly concerned, but the other pilots and I didn't like it a bit. There was a certain helpless feeling when the depth charges went off that I didn't experience when flying my plane against AA."

Besides being bombed and depth-charged, Bush was aboard when *Finback* sank two enemy freighters which were trying to get supplies into Iwo Jima a few months before U.S. forces invaded it. By war's end, *Finback* had received 13 battle stars and had sunk 59,383 tons of enemy shipping.

"It was obvious to me that Bush would be a very successful guy in whatever he decided to do," said Tom Keene, now a retired architect living in Elkhart, Ind. "He was always saying something to make us laugh. He kept up our morale."

A month after picking up Bush, *Finback* discharged her five passengers at Midway. Afterwards, the aviators were taken to Hawaii.

"We were supposed to stay at Hawaii for two weeks R&R," said Keene, who became good friends with Bush aboard the sub. "But Bush was concerned about what had happened to his crewmen, and he wanted to get back out to *San Jacinto*. So, we got a ride in a DC-3 and ended up at Guam. We stayed there a few days until we found out where the fleet was."

Once aboard *San Jacinto*, there were few people as happy to see Bush back as his gunner, Ordnanceman Second Class Leo Nadeau.

"I don't know what happened in officers' quarters, but down in enlisted quarters we had the ship's baker make a big cake with the words 'Your First Ducking' written on the top," he said.

Nadeau added that Ltjg. Bush had a lot of friends among the enlisted men.

"Mr. Bush wasn't one of your run-of-the-mill officers," he said. "Being an enlisted man, I couldn't go into officers' quarters and as an officer he couldn't go into enlisted quarters. So we'd meet quite often up on the flight deck by the plane. We'd always be checking our aircraft out. He would look his plane over, and I would look over the armament. We were both very conscientious about the work that we were doing." Once up on the flight deck, Nadeau said the two of them used to talk about most anything, including the women both of them would later marry.

As Bush's gunner, Nadeau said the two of them had some "scary moments" together. He added that one particular moment stands out among the others.

"It was in June 1944," he remembered. "Our plane was taxied to the catapult and tied down. We had to be catapulted instead of making a deck takeoff, because of our heavy load of ordnance. Once we were tied down, a Japanese air wave attacked *San Jacinto*. We couldn't catapult, however, because the ship wasn't into the wind."

While the carrier's guns traded rounds with the enemy planes, Bush, Nadeau and radioman Delaney sat in the Avenger with the engine running, praying they wouldn't get hit.

"It was hairy," Nadeau added. "Finally the wave went through. The carrier turned into the wind and shot us off. We scattered. We just wanted to get that bomb-laden plane off the carrier. We were flying on pins and needles because we didn't know how many enemy planes were still up there.

"At some point we took a hit in the oil line, either from the Japanese when they attacked the ship, or from a stray projectile from the carrier's guns. The plane began spurting oil like mad," said Nadeau.

"(Not long after leaving the ship) Mr. Bush came on the intercom and told Delaney and me to hold on because we were going down. Seconds later, he made a beautiful water landing.

"We got into a rubber lifeboat and Delaney and I started singing 'Over the Bounding Main,' " Nadeau laughed." Mr. Bush turned around and said, 'You guys had better shut up or they're going to think we're having too good a time out here.'"

An hour later they were picked up by a U.S. destroyer, and returned to *San Jacinto* within five days.

"I can't say anything but good things about him," remarked Jack Guy, who was one of Bush's closest friends in VT-51. "In WW II we all felt we could depend on George to do his job. We never had to say, 'Where's my wingman?' because he was always there."

Guy, who is now part owner of an investment business in Atlanta, Ga., added that VT-51 was a small, close-knit group.

"He (Bush) was an exceptionally good pilot," said Legare Hole, who was VT-51's executive officer. "He was a smart fellow who had his head screwed on tight."

"An aircraft carrier the size of *San Jacinto* could only hold nine TBM Avengers for VT-51 and 24 F6F Hellcats for VF-51. Out of the squadron's original 16 pilots, half were killed. Most of our work was to support the ground troops during landings," said Guy, who received a Navy Cross for scoring a couple of damaging hits on a Japanese aircraft carrier during one of the squadron's few night attacks.

VT-51 participated in seven major operations, including the Marianas, the Western Carolinas, Leyte Gulf, Iwo Jima and Okinawa, and made many strikes against the Japanese homeland. It is credited with sinking 17 ships, including the aircraft carrier *Zuiho*. In addition, it damaged the battleships *Nagato* and *Ise* and caused heavy damage to enemy shore installations amidst heavy antiaircraft fire.

During the squadron's fighting years, Stanley Butchart said that "we used to argue like a bunch of young kids as to whose turn it was to go on the next strike."

"I don't think any of us were really scared at the time," added Guy. "We were eager to go into battle. We were sold on the idea that Japan and Germany were our enemy and we couldn't wait to fly out and do our part."

"The cause was clear and there was a great feeling of camaraderie," said Vice President Bush. "There was a gung-ho feeling about the combat missions. But I must confess that there were twinges of fear." Bush, who received three Air Medals by the time he was discharged in 1945, said, "There is no question that having been involved in combat has affected my way of looking at problems. The overall experience was the most maturing in my life. Even now, I look back and think about the dramatic ways in which the three years in the Navy shaped my life -- the friendships, the common purpose, my first experience with seeing friends die ... "

Since leaving the Navy, Bush has stayed in contact with a number of his friends from VT-51. In fact, last September 2, 40 years to the day he was shot down, he had a reunion with eight of them at NAS Norfolk, Va.

"The 40th anniversary was great," said Louis Grab, who was a good friend of Bush's during the war. We (all squadron mates) have lost contact with each other over the years. As a result of our getting together in Norfolk, we've exchanged snapshots and are corresponding again."

"I had hoped that there would be some time in Bush's career when we could all get together," added Butchart, who spent 25 years as a test pilot for NASA. "I had a hard time thinking of him as Vice President. I just walked up and said, 'Hi, George.' Days later, he sent me a little note saying that the reunion was one of the highlights of his career."

During the reunion, Bush put on a leather flight jacket and climbed into a restored TBM Avenger, which had been sent to Norfolk for the event.

"The Avenger was a great, stable airplane," he said. "It was the easiest plane to land aboard the carrier. It was reliable and sound."

Bush, who is credited with 126 carrier landings and 1,228 flight hours, remarked that he's done only a "little bit of civilian flying" since leaving the Navy.

Nowadays, the former Naval Aviator said he is happy to have the pilots of Air Force Two fly him around the world as he fulfills his obligations as Vice President.

"They are A-1 pilots," Bush said. "But their wings aren't gold."

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