1945 January 29-February 4

Aircraft carriers rule the Pacific

Bice Tells Of Fighting With Mitscher's Task Force In Pacific Area Adjoining Philippines

Sporting a big grin and stars for four major Pacific battles, James E. Bice, aviation radio technician, arrived at the home of his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Ray Bice, 1707 Avon street, on leave Jan. 12.

Bice was attached to a fighter squadron aboard an aircraft carrier. His tour of duty overseas began at Pearl Harbor with advanced squadron training in June, 1944.

"There are three squadrons on a carrier—torpedo, dive bomber and fighter," said Bice. "Our fighter squadron was assigned to Vice Admiral Marc Mitscher's Task Force 58 with the 3rd Fleet after two months at Pearl Harbor."

Began Palau Attack

Early in September, Bice's carrier, along with others of Task Force 58, began its air raids on Palau, 600 miles south of the Philippines. The Japanese had developed the islands as a powerful naval, air and seaplane base but their defenses built under 25 years of Japanese supervision were badly shattered under an almost continuous nine-day American air bombardment of carrier planes.

The day before the Palau invasion Halsey's powerful fleet, still unable to bring the reluctant Japanese navy to battle, wound up a crushing three-day aerial assault by its carrier planes on the Central Philippines islands of Cebu, Panay, Negros and Leyte.

After the Palau landing Sept. 15, Mitscher's task force roamed on the alert for the Jap fleet. On Sept. 21 and 22, carrier planes from Mitscher's task force knocked out 205 Jap planes and 37 ships in one of the greatest air victories in the Pacific.

Bice's carrier began its raids between Japan and southern Formosa on Oct. 11. It continued attacking the Ryukyu islands within 200 miles of Japan, then went south toward Formosa into the Philippines, until the Leyte landing on Oct. 17.

Chase Jap Navy Units

The carrier chased units of the Jap fleet which were hindering the Leyte landing. "Both fleets—ours and the Japs'—were divided and we fought each other all over the Philippine sea," said Bice.

During a battle Bice becomes a standby fire fighter in case flames break out as a result of an attack. On several occasions he took part in search missions, giving him an opportunity to fly off and land on the carrier. He becomes a radioman and rear gunner on these missions.

"You always can count on two or three crash landings during a day's attack," said Bice. "A few planes always crash while landing or come in crippled."

Bice was a frequent listener to Tokyo Rose. "As a matter of fact," he said, "it was the only program we could get. She was especially clear near Formosa.

"Usually her program consisted of popular American music, Jap news broadcasts, a prisoner of war roll call, a Jap song played on one chord and talks on Jap philosophy. Near Saipan we tuned in on Saipan Sue, a gal who played popular music for the men stationed there."

A mimeographed daily newspaper published by the radiomen contained Pacific and European war news, the latest sports events, stories concerning the presidential election and other data. "For about a month each day, we were kept informed of the Chaplin case," he said. "Guess they just used it to fill in."

Meets Local Sailors

While at Pearl Harbor, Bice met Bob Smith, Bill Carroll, Joe Snyder and Wallace Black, all of La Crosse. Smith was training with the infantry. Carroll, who is in the Seabees, was building the air base on which Bice was stationed. Black was going to school and Snyder was waiting for assignment.

Bice's carrier has received two unit citations. He wears them along with the Asiatic-Pacific theater of operations ribbons with four stars.

Bice entered the navy Nov. 11, 1942, and completed his boot training at the Great Lakes naval training station.

After two months of pre-radio school in Chicago, Bice was transferred to Washington, D. C., for primary radio training. He spent eight months at Corpus Christi, Tex., and four months at Quonset, R. I., before going overseas in June, 1944.

Two brothers are in service, Ensign Ray, Jr., and Richard, seaman, first class.

—Tribune Photo
JAMES E. BICE, ART

La Crosse Tribune, 1945 February 4, page 3

James Bice may not have realized it at the time, but he was playing a small part in a revolution in naval warfare.

Naval battles for centuries had been ship against ship, slugging it out with the weapons they carried on board. These weapons progressed through history from rams to cannons to huge naval guns.

World War II in the Pacific was different than the European war. In Europe, most of the fighting took place on huge land masses. Once the Allies landed in Italy and France, for example, it was all land to Berlin. Except for the Asian mainland (China-Burma-India), the war in the vast Pacific Theater was mostly fought in the air, on sea, and on islands---some very small and others very large. There was no land route to Tokyo, so aircraft and ships were the essential to traverse the expanses of ocean between islands. Ships that could carry aircraft would rise to prominence in this environment.

The first United States aircraft carrier was the *U.S.S. Langley*. It had been launched in 1912 as a coal and oil supply ship. In 1922, the superstructure of the ship was removed and replaced with a flat deck that could accommodate 33 aircraft. It was the only aircraft carrier that the United States had for five years. After two more aircraft carriers were added to the fleet, the *Langley* was converted into a seaplane carrier in 1936.[1]

Even before the Langley became an aircraft carrier, Milwaukee native General Billy Mitchell was showing that ships could be destroyed by airplanes. In 1921, his aircraft sank an old German battleship in his zealous quest to prove that the navy was obsolete. A report he wrote in 1924 after a tour of the Pacific even laid out a scenario for a Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.[2]

The United States entered World War II with its Navy still centered around battleships, the most powerful warships of the time. The Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, with planes delivered by aircraft carriers, devastated the U.S. Pacific Fleet by sinking or damaging most of its battleships. If the U.S. aircraft carriers had been docked at Pearl Harbor instead of out at sea, the attack could have been crippling.

Although Pearl Harbor had demonstrated the vulnerability of docked ships to air attack, no battleship had ever been sunk by aircraft while at sea. That changed just three days later on December 10, 1941. A British task force of six ships had sailed from Singapore to attack Japanese invasion forces, and the British commander refused air cover from the Royal Air Force. Japanese bombers and torpedo planes sank the battleship *H.M.S. Prince of Wales* and the battle cruiser *H.M.S. Repulse* with the loss of 840 men.[3]

In May 1942, American forces scored a strategic victory in the Battle of the Coral Sea, the first naval engagement in history where the opposing ships never saw each other. The entire battle consisted of aircraft attacking ships.[4]

The Battle of Midway in early June 1942 is widely regarded as the turning point of the Pacific war. Through a combination of intelligence work, courage, skill, and some luck, American planes from aircraft carriers sank four Japanese aircraft carriers and destroyed 322 Japanese aircraft.[5]

The next three years saw Allied ships, aircraft, Marines, and soldiers on the offensive against Japanese-held territory. The strategy of "island-hopping" meant attacking some islands while bypassing others. Ships and aircraft cut off supply lines to the bypassed Japanese strongholds so they would, in General Douglas MacArthur's words, wither on the vine. Each conquered island served as a naval and air base for the next attack on the way to Japan.

Aircraft carriers, such as James Bice's ship, were vital in this campaign. Aircraft from the carriers cleared the skies of enemy fighter planes, attacked their ships, and bombed their troops. They also protected friendly forces from air and ship attacks by the Japanese. Aircraft carriers became the main force in naval operations, with other ships mostly in supporting roles.[6]

The United States had 105 aircraft carriers of all types in World War II. Sixty-four of them were of the smaller escort carrier type. The larger attack carriers had crews numbering from 1,000 to 3,500 men. [7] The large majority of these were in action in the Pacific.

Bice's ship, the *U.S.S. Intrepid*, was one of 17 Essex-class aircraft carriers commissioned during World War II. Each of these 17 ships was home to 3,500 men and 100 aircraft.[8]

Japan had just 22 aircraft carriers during World War II.[9]

Vice Admiral Marc Mitscher, the commander of Bice's task force, was born in Hillsboro, Wisconsin. He graduated from the United States Naval Academy in 1915. After serving in World War I, Mitscher became heavily involved in naval aviation. He was the commander of the aircraft carrier *U.S.S. Hornet*, the ship from which Jimmy Doolittle launched his famous retaliatory air raid on Japan in 1942, and it was an important combatant in the Battle of Midway. In his later commands, his ships and aircraft were instrumental in destroying the Japanese navy and its aircraft.

Admiral Marc Mitscher (left) visiting Hillsboro in July 1945

(Wisconsin Historical Society)

What is not mentioned in the article above is that James Bice was injured on November 25, 1944 when a Japanese airplane crashed into the aircraft carrier *Intrepid*, killing 32 men. Bice was working in the hangar deck when it was engulfed in flames caused by the crash. While these fires were being fought, another Japanese plane crashed into the flight deck of the *Intrepid*, killing and wounding more sailors. It looked like the ship might have to be abandoned, but the fires were brought under control after one-and-one-half hours. After repairs, the *Intrepid* rejoined Task Force 58. James Bice received the Purple Heart medal for his injuries in this incident.[10]

After his three years in the Navy, James Bice studied electrical engineering for two years at the University of Wisconsin. In 1950, he earned a bachelor's degree in industrial arts at Stout State University and joined the faculty at the Coleman Vocational School in La Crosse (later Western Technical College) as an instructor in the trades and industries department.[11] He taught driver's education,[12] home mechanics,[13] cabinetmaking,[14] and electronics.[15]

His father, Raymond Bice, was a veteran of World War I, co-founder of a lumber company, home builder for many years, and a member of the Wisconsin State Legislature from 1946 to 1968.[16] Raymond Bice also wrote two memoirs: *A Century to Remember* and *Years to Remember*.

Aircraft carriers and thousands of men like James Bice were a big part of winning World War II in the Pacific.

Bice's ship, which was launched in 1943, remained in the fleet during the Cold War and the Vietnam War. The *U.S.S. Intrepid* was also used as a recovery ship for space capsules during the manned space program in the 1960s. It was decommissioned in 1974, but it can be visited in New York City as part of the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum.[17]

(Bill Ingalls, NASA)

Battleships continued to serve during the Korean War, Vietnam War, and smaller conflicts into the 1980's. They are no longer part of the active Navy inventory. Some can be seen in various cities around the country preserved as museums, while aircraft carriers remain the centerpiece of United States naval power to this day.

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Sources & Notes:

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[1] Anthony Bruce and William Cogar, *An Encyclopedia of Naval History* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1998), 221. The Langley served in World War II until it was sunk by the Japanese near Java in January 1942.

[2] Nathan Miller, *The U.S. Navy: An Illustrated History* (New York: American Heritage and Annapolis, Maryland: United State Naval Institute Press, 1977), 279-280. Mitchell International Airport in Milwaukee is named after Billy Mitchell. See: https://www.mitchellairport.com/airport-information/history.

[3] Gabe Christy, "The WW2 Sinking of Two Mighty Warships--HMS Prince of Wales and HMS Repulse," *War History Online*, July 15, 2017, https://www.warhistoryonline.com/instant-articles/end-battleship-hms-prince-wales-repulse-sunk-10th-december-1941.html.

[4] Lisle A. Rose, *Power at Sea, Volume 2: The Breaking Storm, 1919-1945* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 252-256.

[5] Alan Axelrod, *Encyclopedia of the U.S. Navy* (New York: Checkmark Books, 2006), 238.

[6] For a more detailed analysis, see: Thomas C. Hone, "Replacing Battleships with Aircraft Carriers in the Pacific in World War II, *Naval War College Review*, Volume 66, Number 1 Winter, 2013, https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1318&context=nwc-review. For an organizational chart, see: "United States Pacific Fleet Organization, 1 May 1945," *Naval History and Heritage Command*, accessed January 31, 2020, https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/u/us-pacific-fleet-organization-1may1945.html. See also: John Hamill, "Aircraft Carrier Tactics of World War II," *Johnsmilitaryhistory.com*, 2017, http://johnsmilitaryhistory.com/AircraftCarrierTacticsofWorldWarII.html.

[7] John Ellis, *World War II: A Statistical Survey* (New York: Facts on File, 1993), 294.

[8] Ellis, 294.

[9] Ellis, 295. Germany had some feared battleships, but it had no aircraft carriers.

[10] "ART1c James Bice," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, August 2, 1945, page 18.

[11] "Vocational School Fall Term Enrollment List Greatest In History; Classes Begin Thursday," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, September 3, 1950, page 12.

[12] "2 Agencies Assist Vocational School in Driver Training Plan," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, January 21, 1951, page 2.

[13] "Offer Wide Variety Of Homemaking Subjects This Year To City, Area Women At Vocational," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, September 27, 1951, page 21.

[14] "3 New Teachers Added To Vocational Faculty," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, September 1, 1957, page 7.

[15] "LaCro Plans Expansion of Electronics," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, page 10.

[16] Raymond C. Bice obituary, *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, December 15, 1994, page B3.

[17] "Aircraft Carrier Intrepid," *Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum Complex*, accessed February 2, 2020, https://www.intrepidmuseum.org/AircraftCarrierIntrepid.aspx.