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It was his first night landing, and he came aboard the wrong carrier, but he shook with fright when he heard the captain's tragic announcement in the morning

ABOARD a Pacific Fleet Aircraft Carrier: The five Wildcats were lost. They had run into bad weather after taking off from their escort carrier, and now, as they circled our carrier force, the flight leader sent us a message: Could we give him a bearing back to his ship, which was attached to another force? We had to tell him we were sorry but we didn't know the current location of his "jeep," as the escort carriers are tagged.

Dusk was gathering quickly, as it does down near the equator and, reluctant to do any further searching at night, the flight leader asked if one of our carriers would take them aboard. Our flagship replied that she would. From our own ship we watched the first plane skid around into the landing circle. It was quite dark now, and we knew that the pilot was having trouble setting his plane down, but he finally made it. So did the next two, although their landings were bumpy.

Wildcat No. 4 came in too high, and when the pilot cut his throttle the plane slammed down on the flight deck. The landing gear was carried away; the fighter nosed over.

Meanwhile, the fifth Wildcat of the flight was still circling up there, waiting his turn to land. We worried about him.

"Carrier X, can you take that last plane aboard?" A TBS message came over to us from Flag. Immediately our skipper ordered the flight deck "respotted," that is, all the planes massed on the after end of our flight deck for the night would have to be taxied forward to give Wildcat No. 5 space enough to land. Pilots manned their planes, warmed up their engines and, guided by plane handlers, started taxiing them forward to Fly One.

Our flat-top was blacked out, of course, and moving several dozen planes, one by one, consumed nearly an hour. During this time we couldn't see the lone plane hovering around upstairs, but we could hear the drone of its engine.

Finally, the afterdeck was clear, and the Wildcat pilot was given a signal to land. The first pass he made at the stern ramp was too high, so he circled around again and on the second try he made a rough but safe landing. As the wheels of his fighter rolled up the flight deck to a stop, our hearts started beat-



OVERNIGHT GUEST

By Frank D. Morris

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A crowd gathered on the flight deck of Carrier X to cheer Lt. Wells on his take-off. His Wildcat is dwarfed by the newer, larger Grumman Hellcats

Lt. Maurice E. Wells, smiling below, really appreciates the meaning of Thanksgiving Day

OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPH U.S. NAVY

in this war, while I am still fairly new at combat flying. Blair was in the first Navy squadron to land on Henderson Field on Guadalcanal and he also had flown with 'Butch' O'Hare's squadron. So if he couldn't get down safely on that carrier's deck, I didn't think my chances were so hot.

"Before we sighted your task force, we'd been flying nearly four hours. The gas supply had me worried, so, after that crash I babied the engine, using as little fuel as I could. Boy! When I got the word to come aboard, it was like a message from Santa Claus!"

Lieutenant M. E. Wells, aged twenty-four,

cat's fuselage—Baby Airedale, Orphan Annie.

The next morning, orders came through for Lieutenant Wells to report to Tarawa to be land-based there. Just before noon, his plane was wheeled out to the starting line on the flight deck, and Carrier X's topsides were crowded to watch the take-off. When the starting officer chopped his flag, the on-lookers cheered and Orphan Annie speeded along the flight deck and into the air.

Thanks for Everything

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There were plenty of helping hands as the pilot half climbed, half crawled from the cockpit. He was of slight build, and the weary expression on his thin face was poorly concealed by a growth of sandy beard.

A Twofold Reaction

Down in the wardroom a few minutes later, I saw him trying to put away a bowl of soup, but his hand shook so that he could hardly hold the spoon. His nervousness had two sponsors—the ordeal he had just been through and the joyous excitement of bringing his plane and himself down intact.

"What were you thinking about when you were circling around up there after that other plane crashed?" I asked him.

"I was thinking about my wife back in Joliet, Illinois, and wondering whether she was thinking about me," he replied. "When I saw that plane ahead of me go up, I said to myself, 'Well, I guess I'm cooked now.'"

"The pilot of the plane that cracked up was our flight leader, Lieutenant Blair. His full name is Lieutenant (jg) Foster J. Blair, but we always call him 'the Crud.' I was flying wing on him, and when they signaled us to come aboard the other carrier, I followed him in the landing circle, but we both got wave-offs the first time because we were too high and too fast.

"I'd never made a night landing before, and when I saw the Crud crash, I worried plenty because I knew he was an old-timer



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Lieutenant M. E. Wells, aged twenty-four, had been flying for six years as a civilian and as a Navy pilot. He had experienced the usual number of close calls, but this one, he figured, was his nearest approach to the pearly gates. Now he was dead tired. That last flight had been his third patrol in one day, so he turned in to snatch a few hours of sleep.

About nine o'clock the next morning, I saw him climbing a ladder to the bridge. He told me he was going up to see our navigator to have him lay out a return course to his own carrier. He was anxious to report back aboard to explain what had happened. As we were talking, the ship's public-address system opened up, and the captain made a brief announcement. Young Wells' face blanched. Without saying another word, he turned and went below.

Down on the hangar deck, Carrier X's mechs had adopted the Wells Wildcat. As you watched them refuel it and check its engine and controls, you couldn't help contrasting its dwarfed size with that of the Grumman Hellcat, its younger, huskier brother which our fighter pilots flew.

The Wildcat's wing span was so much shorter, its fuselage and engine were so much tinier, and the retractable landing gear, in comparison, looked like the undercarriage of a baby buggy. The burly outline of the Hellcat made the Wildcat look very puny indeed. Nevertheless, the mechs were giving it loving care and, in addition to one of the fighter squadron's Airedale insignia, there were other new markings on the Wild-

cat's fuselage—Baby Airedale, Orphan Annie.

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Wells "buzzed" our ship a couple of times, flying low past our starboard side, waving a friendly farewell. He was close enough for us to see the grin on his face. And why shouldn't he be happy and grateful? In addition to that narrow escape he had weathered in coming aboard just before taking off this morning, he had polished off a turkey dinner. It was the first time in months we had been served turkey aboard Carrier X, but this was a special occasion—one particularly appropriate for Mr. Wells. It was Thanksgiving Day.

It also was a Thanksgiving Day that Lieutenant Maurice Ellingsworth Wells, U.S.N.R., will never forget for one more important reason—a reason which ties in with the captain's loud-speaker announcement that made Wells turn so white. The message the captain delivered the day before was this: "I regret to announce that the escort carrier Liscombe Bay was torpedoed and sunk early this morning."

The carrier that young Mr. Wells had been searching for the night we took him aboard was the ill-fated Liscombe Bay. Less than ten hours after he had joined our company, a group of us on the flight deck, reporting to our General Quarters battle stations, saw a distant red glow in the early morning sky.

We didn't know then that we were watching the end of the "jeep" carrier after an enemy torpedo had made a lucky hit on her, starting a chain of explosions and fires fed by fuel tanks, magazines, torpedoes and bombs. The ship Lieutenant Wells had tried so hard to find that night sank in twenty minutes. ★★★

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