

This is an extract from *Fading Victory* by Admiral Matome Ugaki, in particular pages 351 through 360 of the Section "Time is Running Out", 22-Feb-1944 to 31-May-1944 in which Ugaki's recollects the events of 18-Apr-1943 when Yamamoto was killed and Ugaki was wounded.

It is reproduced here in a larger font, with slight expansion to letter spacing and more line-to-line spacing to improve readability

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**Tuesday, 18 April 1944.** Fair. [*This is a special entry giving Ugaki's recollections of the events of 18 April 1943, when Yamamoto was killed and Ugaki wounded.*]

The first anniversary of the tragic event came to greet me on board a battleship. As usual, I went up on the weather deck after saluting their majesties' portraits in my cabin. Facing the rising sun, I prayed for the souls of Admiral Yamamoto and six others who were killed on this day last year and pledged myself to revenge them.

I dictated all the entries in my diary for six months since that day. Specifically, those portions up to my hospitalization were written by Ensign Ebima, to whom I dictated. At that time I dictated only the outline, intending to supplement it some time later. But so far I have failed to do so. On this day of the first anniversary, I'm going to write the account in more detail, retracing my memories.

## **PREFACE**

1. The course of events leading to the advance of the Combined Fleet command to Rabaul and the inspection trip is omitted here, as I dictated it upon my return to the homeland after the event and submitted it to the vice chief of the Naval General Staff and vice minister of the navy.

2. The aerial offensive with the carrier air strengths of the Third Fleet and the land-based air force had been completed with a great result after about two weeks' operations. The Eighteenth Army commander, who had returned from an inspection tour of the New Guinea front, also presented a favorable view that if another battalion could be sent there, we would be able to hold on there. So we, from the commander-in-chief on down,

felt somewhat relieved, though not entirely. And we intended to inspect future important points and the front line to encourage our men and also pay our debts by visiting the Seventeenth Army Command at Shortland before returning to Truk.

3. With regard to maintaining alert, I, as chief of staff, had taken every step possible, so I had nothing to worry about, leaving it to the local command.

4. Before we left Truk for Rabaul, it was decided to take along only those concerned with the operation, as we were temporarily moving our command post to Rabaul. I told the fleet engineer, surgeon, and paymaster not to come this time because accommodations there wouldn't be sufficient.

So I was surprised when the fleet adjutant reported the arrival of the fleet surgeon and paymaster on the day I contracted dengue fever around the 13th. Since they had already come over, I could do nothing about it, so I left the matter without interfering. Only the fleet engineer, who seemed to have a little cold, didn't come down, respecting my words. He said he wouldn't come as long as he wasn't needed for operational reasons.

On the trip to Shortland, it was decided to accompany only the necessary staff officers in two medium torpedo bombers. Though I repeatedly asked the fleet adjutant who was going with us, his answer was vague, except that he asked my approval for two other officers to be taken aboard the same plane. The fleet adjutant had been suffering from dengue fever at that time. He was so sick that Admiral Yamamoto told him in a car that he had better not come, as other staff officers were coming.

5. In a car the day before the event, a discussion centered on whether white open-neck shirts might be worn during the trip. The general opinion seemed to favor wearing them. But I asserted that it wouldn't be very hot, as we were going to go and return by plane, and, moreover, it wouldn't be proper for the commander-in-chief of the Combined Fleet and his staff officers to visit officers and men at the front wearing unofficial uniforms. After we got back to the billet, therefore, I had the fleet adjutant telephone them to wear the regular khaki shirts during the

trip.

I further told him to arrange for a snapshot of the commander-in-chief in khaki uniform as he might not have a chance of wearing it again. But this failed to materialize. Consequently, the last picture was the one taken with the commander in chief, Mikawa, and others on the occasion of our visit to the Eighth Fleet Command on the day after we arrived at Rabaul. Others were only those taken by press photographers when he [Yamamoto] was seeing off departing planes.

6. As I had made up my mind to inspect the front line, I prepared a khaki uniform, boots, and a pair of leather leggings before the trip. But the commander-in-chief and others decided to wear airmen's boots. On the morning of leaving the ship, after contemplation, I changed my mind and had the same kind of boots on as the others did. They were easy to put on and off and quite comfortable. And that fact eventually turned out to help me survive.

## **NARRATIVE**

1. As we were going to take off at 0600, I got up earlier than usual. The sky was quite clear and the early birds sang pleasantly in the trees. I ate breakfast at about 0530 and prepared for the trip. In khaki uniform, I looked gallant. As we were slated to come back on the same day, I brought only a pocket diary, spectacles, cigarettes, and handkerchiefs in my pockets.

2. We left the billet at 0550. I saw the commander in chief in khaki uniform for the first time. It suited him fairly well, but looked a bit strange, perhaps because we were not accustomed to seeing him in such uniform. I myself might have been more so, but I thought I looked all right. We reached the east airfield at 0600.

Then, both air staff officers and others who were to accompany us came from the direction of the field post. I noticed two among them in white uniform. While I wondered what this was all about, eventually they turned out to be the fleet surgeon and paymaster. Though the commander-in-chief thought it rather awkward, too, we couldn't do anything then. We left the car and got on the planes immediately. Since I

followed the commander-in-chief and proceeded to the second plane, I didn't talk to them.

The first medium torpedo bomber: the commander-in-chief, the Adjutant [Commander Noboru] Fukuzaki, Fleet Surgeon [Rear Admiral Rokuro] Takata, Staff Officer Toibana.

The second medium torpedo bomber: the chief of staff, Fleet Paymaster [Captain Gen] Kitamura, staff officers [Commander Kaoru] Imanaka, Muroi, and Weather Officer [Commander Jyunji] Unno.

3. After we enplaned, the communications staff and the weather officers greeted me. I sat on the skipper's seat. I took off my sword, leaving the belt on, and handed it to Staff Officer Muroi, who put it behind out of the way. Both planes then started to roar, taxied to the end of the runway, and took off in the order of first and second plane. Looking down on the volcano at the mouth of the bay, the planes flew in formation heading south-southeast.

The weather was fine, visibility good. From time to time three fighters each were seen escorting to the right and left in the rear above. I remember our altitude was about 1,500 meters.

4. The second plane was flying in tandem with the first aircraft at its left side rear in perfect formation, so I feared their wing tips might touch. I could clearly see the profile of the commander-in-chief in the skipper's seat and other people moving in the first plane. I enjoyed a pleasant flight as I followed the explanation of the topography down below with an aviation map.

5. When we reached the west side of Bougainville and were passing straight over the jungle with altitude lowered to seven hundred or eight hundred meters, the skipper handed me a piece of paper on which was written, "Expect to arrive at Balale at 0745." I looked at my wrist watch; it was just 0730 and I thought it would be fifteen minutes more before we landed.

At this point the plane suddenly started to dive, following the first plane, and went down to fifty meters. We all wondered what happened! I asked the skipper, an air warrant officer, who was in the passage,

"What's the matter?" "May be some mistake," he answered. But it was a great mistake to say so and he was most careless.

One of our fighters flying over us had sighted a group of twenty-four enemy fighters coming after turning back from their southward flight. While it was coming down to warn the medium bombers, our first plane also found the enemy and lost no time in diving to the level of the jungle treetops. This was learned later. Then for the first time the crews took up combat stations and opened gun ports to prepare for firing. It got noisy for a while with the handling of machine guns and the wind blowing in.

6. By the time we lowered altitude to treetop level, air combat had already been in progress between our escorting fighters and the enemy. Four times as many as our fighters, the enemy planes bore down mercilessly upon the bigger game of the two bombers. We made a quick turn of over 90° to evade them. Watching the sky above and noticing an enemy plane charging in, the skipper tapped the chief pilot's shoulder and directed him to turn left or right.

The first aircraft turned to the right and the second to the left. The distance between them increased.

After we had evaded about twice, I turned to the right to see how the first plane was evading. What I saw then was astounding. Lo! The first plane was staggering southward, just brushing the jungle top with reduced speed, emitting black smoke and flame. It was about four thousand meters away from us. I just said to myself, "My God!" I could think of nothing else. I grabbed the shoulder of Air Staff Officer Muroi, pointed to the first aircraft, and said, "Look at the commander-in-chief's plane!" This became my parting with him forever. All this happened in only about twenty seconds.

In the meantime, my plane turned again sharply to evade another enemy attack, and we lost sight of the commander-in-chief's aircraft. I waited impatiently for the plane to get back to the level while full of anxiety, though the result seemed apparent. The next glance revealed that the plane was no more to be seen, only a pall of black smoke rising to the sky from the jungle. Oh! Everything was over now!

7. At that moment our bomber was heading toward the direction of Cape Moira at full speed and soon came out over the sea. Enemy attacks were at first concentrated on the first plane. Looking back, I could see dogfights still going on.

Making a rising half-turn and then a quick turn, a P-38 came upon us at last. Here he comes! Our machine gun opened fire upon him desperately. Though it worked well, it didn't seem to hit him. The enemy P-38 rapidly closed in, taking advantage of his superior speed. His gunfire caught us splendidly, and oncoming bullets were seen on both sides of our plane. I felt them hitting our aircraft from time to time. Now we were hopeless, and I thought my end was very near at hand.

The sound of our machine-gun fire was reduced by this time, and the skipper could not be heard any more. I thought quite a number must have been killed in the plane. Staff Officer Muroi was leaning on a table with his face down and arms outstretched. He must have already been killed. The paymaster later revealed this.

8. The chief pilot sitting in front of me felt bullets hitting the right wing and tried to get down to sea level with a down rudder in preparation for a crash landing. At this moment, our fighter above was said to notice our second plane also trailing dark smoke.

When the bomber was near the sea surface, the pilot lost control. He pulled back all the throttles at once, but it was no use. The ship ditched into the sea at full speed and rolled over to the left by more than 90°.

9. Preparing for an emergency, in case of either being shot down or making a crash landing, I had stiffened my limbs, so I didn't feel hurt by the impact. But when the ship crashed on the sea I was thrown off the skipper's seat and landed in the passage. I think I must have gotten most of my wounds at that moment.

Everything went black and I felt the sea water rushing all over my body with fair pressure. I could do absolutely nothing. I told myself, "This is the end of Ugaki." Since I thought all was over, my mind was a blank. I don't think I struggled or made any impatient effort, but that wasn't clear anyway. (I can't think I became unconscious; I didn't swallow any water. I

suppose it must have been only a few seconds until the next moment.)

Right after I gave it all up, all of sudden it lightened. When I opened my eyes, incredibly I found myself floating on the sea surface. What a miracle! The fuselage had already disappeared and the right wing was standing upside down in the sea right behind me and was still burning fiercely. I couldn't see any men around.

I thought it extremely dangerous to stay there, It was less than two hundred meters to the beach and, although I felt somewhat strange all over my body. I thought I could reach shore somehow. And I made up my mind to swim. But I warned myself that I shouldn't exhaust my strength by too much exertion; I wasn't young anymore.

10. I didn't have a cap on my head then and unknown to me the right boot had come off. As the remaining left boot was troublesome, I kicked in the water and it came off easily. My left leg usually got cramps and I often suffered from it when I was playing deck billiards or while hunting ashore. It was really sheer luck that it didn't happen there. Having rid myself of all this trouble, I now calmly swam with breast strokes toward the shore. I looked back from time to time; the plane continued burning. Nobody could be seen there, however. I felt I was the only survivor.

11. When I had advanced about seventy or eighty meters, I saw boxes come floating toward me. Two of them were small and had a rough surface, while another was painted gray and actually was a gear locker. All of these must have come out of the plane. This was a heaven-sent rescue boat. I thought the bigger one would be better, so I grabbed the gray box with my right hand. But my right hand didn't work. I found it to be hanging from its wrist and blood was dripping. For the first time I realized that my right wrist was broken. Thinking the right hand wasn't enough, I put my left hand on the box, too. Whereupon, I had to propel myself only by legs.

Just then I found one of the crew members with a flying cap on swimming energetically before me, so I called to him "Hey!" in a medium voice. He turned around and noticed me, but kept on swimming toward the beach.

Now that I had hold of the box, I had enough freedom of mind to look around. I saw the wing still burning, but the rest had disappeared. I suppose a rapid current carried it away.

12. As I approached the shore, the current became stronger, seeming to be more than 2 knots. I was drifting with the current more than by pushing the box only by propelling with my legs. The tree I had chosen for a target passed at an angle. But I thought I had no need to hurry. If there was a current I could take advantage of it and should be able to reach shore sometime. I was enveloped in tranquility; I even felt like humming a song.

Meanwhile, four men looking like soldiers came running from the direction of Cape Moira along the boundary between the jungle and the sandy beach. I heard two rifle shots. My eyes seemed hazy and I couldn't distinguish clearly, but they must have been friendly ones as this was our occupied zone.

Thinking that if they were enemies I had no choice but to sink forever, I stared for a while. The crew member who swam preceding me then reached shore and they met him. He seemed to be telling them about me, pointing toward the sea. (I asked them about their behavior after I had recovered, but they remained silent. They seemed to be guards or captors for shot-down enemy fliers. As they didn't know anything about our planes, it might have been a proper step.)

13. One of the men took off his clothes leisurely, got into the water, and approached me. When he came about ten meters from me. He seemed to notice my aiguillette and shouted to the shore in a wild cry, "He's a staff officer!"

The man, who hitherto had approached cautiously, suddenly got lively and pushed my body. "Wait! I'm wounded. Push this box!" I told him, and he obeyed. Meanwhile, another man got into the sea and helped me reach shore.

14. Both planes ended in tragedies and the commander-in-chief and many capable staff officers were lost. I was the only survivor. Though I felt an urgent need to make contact with our friendly force as soon as

possible, I couldn't help squatting down on the beach to rest for a while.

They told me it was only a fifteen minutes' walk to the barracks, so I stood up and started to walk on the sun-scorched sandy beach in drenched clothes without a cap, supported by them. I was feeling faint from the heat and fatigue when they brought a wooden door just in time. I was carried on this to a tin-roofed barracks in the shade of trees. I had my sleeve ripped open, exposing my right arm, and lay on a bed. I received first aid from an army medical orderly, who put a splint on my right hand. His treatment was quite proper.

While I was being treated, I ordered them to telephone the commander, First Base Force, and tell him that "report of this accident should be made by confidential telegram and be restricted as much as possible. This is from the chief of staff."

The chief pilot had only a little scratch on his head. When he came back after reporting the situation by telephone, I sent him again to the beach to confirm the position of the wreck in order to facilitate the future search for missing persons.

15. After first aid was completed, I felt thirsty. Though they said the water wasn't fit to drink, they brought something for me to drink. And it tasted just wonderful! Then I asked them for a cigarette; they lit some cheap brand and handed it to me. Being the first one since I left Rabaul, it tasted grand, too. I didn't care what brand it was!

I thought the chief pilot was the only survivor besides me, but about this time someone told me the paymaster was alive, too. As to his wounds, I was told that both his eyes were blinded and he had a big hole in his throat. While I was thinking that his must be serious wounds, he was brought in beside me.

I couldn't get up, so I called to him from my bed, "Paymaster!" He only groaned "Oh!" I called to him again, "Pull yourself together!" Again he only groaned "Oh!" He was very downhearted. I even feared he might die if he bled too much.

16. The first report of this incident was made by one of the escorting fighters that developed engine trouble and landed at Balale or Buin. It

claimed to have shot down several enemy planes. Then a report from Cape Moira apparently came in by telephone. The Base Force commander was at Balale base to greet the commander-in-chief and his entourage. The Base Force command immediately sent the chief surgeon and others to Cape Moira by a subchaser. They arrived there about forty or fifty minutes after my emergency treatment. They properly treated my whole body. I was very grateful for their prompt assistance.

I asked them to take care of the paymaster first, but they started with me after all. While they were attending the paymaster after finishing with me, I asked the surgeon about his condition. Hearing that "neither eyes nor throat was anything serious," I was quite relieved.

17. On the other hand, the search for the plane wreck seemed to have started by this time, but I didn't know about the details.

My temporary treatment finished, I was put on a stretcher after a little rest and moved to a motor launch, which took me to a subchaser. The glaring sun shone overhead. Every time I was moved to another place, men peered at my face. Everybody seemed to be curious.

The subchaser went alongside a jetty in front of the Base Force command and then I was moved into an ambulance. Here I met [Captain Akira] Itagaki, the commander, Base Force, for the first time through the car window. I was moved to a small wooden room where I dressed in a hospital robe. Up to that time I wore nothing but a white cloth spread over my body.

After the broken part of my right hand was photographed with a portable X-ray apparatus, I was moved to the Base Force command. I got in the ambulance again and was placed on a collapsible bed in an officer's room in a coconut grove. As malaria was prevalent, I had to have a green mosquito net even in daytime.

The Base Group commander came and assured me that all efforts were being made to recover and search for both planes. He also urged me to go back to Rabaul for my treatment as well as to take care of various affairs concerning the incident. But I replied as follows:

Necessary steps will be taken care of by the senior staff officer

who remains there and also the Southeast Area Fleet command. I can't bear to return alone without settling affairs here after the incident, as I accompanied the commander-in-chief. So I shall stay here to await reports of rescue, though it may trouble you. Furthermore, I wish you to arrange to get my approval on any dispatch regarding the accident before it's sent out.

I received various shots this night. I had no appetite except for fruits.

18. My wounds were found to be as follows: four scratches on the top and back of the head; a small bruise in the left eye and the area around it was swollen; many bruises in the upper right part and around the mouth and clots of blood in spots on the face; some abrasions in the back and hip; right forearm sprained and compound fracture; some bruises on the left shin; second rib from the bottom in the left back was broken (found after reaching the homeland).

Though I had so many as listed above, none proved fatal. How lucky I was!

## **EPILOGUE**

1. During the same day, a search plane confirmed the point where the first plane crashed. It reported the burning of the aircraft, but saw no one around the wreck. A native swiftly reported the crashing of a plane to an army unit that was building a road on the west coast of Bougainville. The army at once dispatched a rescue party which reached the spot the next day. They recovered the bodies prior to the arrival of a naval team, which met the former on its way back.

The body of the commander-in-chief was found on the seat outside of the plane, still gripping his sword. It hadn't decomposed yet and was said to be in a state of great dignity. He must really have been superhuman.

A postmortem made while his body was being carried on a subchaser found two piercing machine-gun bullet wounds in his lower jaw and shoulder. Most probably he was killed instantly while in the air. The remains of the fleet surgeon were recognizable as his body was only half burned, but all the rest were difficult to identify as they were burned and decomposed.

The spot where the second plane crashed was about twenty meters deep. In spite of all efforts by divers, only wheels, motor, propeller, machine gun, and a sword were found scattered around, but not the fuselage itself. Two crew members' bodies washed up on the beach the next day and the day after.

2. Among those on both planes, the survivors were only myself, the paymaster, and the chief pilot of the second aircraft. Altogether twenty lives, including the commander-in-chief, staff officers, and the crew members were sacrificed. Though such was usual in war, it was in a way my fault, too.

According to what I heard afterwards, the enemy had employed fighter formations in its morning reconnaissance of that area since a few days before. It was quite a change compared with the enemy's past activities, but the report reached the Southeast Area Fleet as a summary report on the day after the incident took place. That was too late.

Had the report reached us in time, we could have called off the trip or changed its schedule and provided powerful escorts. Or we could have taken refuge in case of an enemy contact by maintaining close contact with the destination base. We should have thought of all these [things], as the trip was decided only with all deliberation. I can never cease to regret.

The enemy planes sighted us and turned back to attack us while they were already on their way south. Had there been a few minutes' difference, we would never have met with such an incident, and everything would have gone all right. It was just a turn of fate.

*[Authors Note: Of course, it was nothing of the sort. It is interesting to note that a full year after the incident, Ugaki still had no inkling that the American attack was a trap based on radio intelligence. He attributed it to sheer luck.]*

At the same time it's always essential to think of unexpected things that can take place in war, and we should always maintain a stricter alert than necessary.

3. The chief pilot had good reason to be saved. The paymaster was sitting at the work desk on the other side of me. Though he was hurt in

his face with his spectacles, he should have been able to escape through the upper window when the ship rolled over to the left.

But as to myself, there was no clue to show how I could have been saved. Seeing that everything went black after I fell into the passage, I must have slid forward as far as under the pilot's seat. How I got out of danger can't be explained. Such aviation experts as air staff officers of the air fleet thought that the fore part of the plane must have broken open upon impact with the water and the opening happened to face outward, through which I might have been pushed out.

I wasn't hit by an enemy bullet in the air, and when the plane hit the water I rose to the surface from the worst situation without any effort. If this is not to be called a work of God, what else can it be? If and when I had been hit in vital parts when the ship crashed, it would have meant the end of my life. All the wounds were off the vital parts and not serious. That I wore airmen's Wellington half-boots instead of boots and leather leggings, that I handed over my sword soon after I boarded the plane, that I didn't get cramps when I got rid of the left boot, that the boxes came floating in front of me while I was swimming, that the spot where we crashed was in our occupied zone so that our force was garrisoned nearby, that the chief pilot reached shore ahead of me, that I could get first aid from the army medical orderly right after I was rescued, that I was given prompt and proper treatment by the chief surgeon of the Base Force, who was a great surgical specialist from my native place, and also that my right arm was able to be put in a clay cast three days after the incident took place—all these were a series of good luck I was given. I couldn't but think that God must have done everything he could to save me.

Contrary to my determination to sacrifice myself for the commander-in-chief, instead I lost him and survived. It was a completely unexpected event. I should be resigned to my fate, deeming it God's will, and do my best to live and serve to repay God by carrying out revenge.