Ditching plane into the sea

* By The Bakersfield Californian

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This story is about the late Capt. Harris Taylor of Bakersfield -- pilot of a B-25 Mitchell bomber -- named the "Island Queen," who saw combat action in the South Pacific in World War II. Taylor's unit was the 396th Bomb Squadron, of the 41st Bomb Group of the 7th Air Force in the Army Air Corps.

The story is a compilation of eyewitness accounts of crew members, a Distinguished Flying Cross citation and a book written by the commanding officer of the 41st Bomb Group. This story is told by me, his son Dick Taylor.

In 1943, the 396th began its missions of bombing and strafing Japanese-held islands in the Gilbert and Marshall island chains. This was part of the "island hopping" campaign that concentrated Marine Corps and Army infantry in amphibious assaults on some islands, then bypassed other islands to be finished off with aircraft and naval bombardment.

During such missions, then 2nd Lt. Taylor's B-25 squadron flew toward their targets from a landing strip carved on an island previously won in ground battles. By early 1944, the squadron was flying off the island of Tarawa, won by Marines only weeks before. The stench of rotting bodies of Japanese combatants still lingered in the air and lone Japanese bombers randomly bombed Tarawa at night, earning the nickname of "bed check Charlie."

The strategy was to fly very low over the ocean toward the target, then strafe fortified military targets, like anti-aircraft emplacements and parked aircraft.

These B-25s were equipped with as many as 14 .50-caliber machine guns that typically were fired all at once on a target. They also dropped bombs from these low altitudes. These aircraft flew so low that it was not uncommon for returning planes to have pieces of palm trees lodged in their engines.

It was on such a mission on Jan. 29, 1944, that Taylor's B-25 had just successfully completed a low level strike mission on the heavily fortified island of Wotje and was hit by anti-aircraft fire and attacking fighter aircraft, causing Taylor's plane's right engine and fuel tank to catch fire.

Three crewmen were wounded, including Taylor, who was hit in the left leg just below the hip by one of the bullets and was bleeding profusely. They made a water landing during very rough seas. The crew scrambled to exit the burning plane into the emergency life raft, as the plane sank in less than a minute.

The crew's bombardier-navigator, 2nd lt. Dan Kritz was killed during the attack. It was Kritz's first mission as he was there to replace another crewman grounded by dengue fever.

The crewmembers were picked up by the destroyer USS Gatling, then transferred to the aircraft carrier USS Enterprise.

Harris Taylor was the founder of Taylor Tire & Brake and passed away in January 1995. It is interesting to note that Taylor and his wife, Suzy, moved back to Bakersfield and lived near a fellow crew member of his squadron, the late Rollin Laird. Dick, and Laird's children later attended school together.

***Dick Taylor, a former Marine, is the owner of Taylor Tire & Brake in Bakersfield. He recalled his father's World War II adventure to call attention to the Veterans History Project, a congressionally sponsored project of the Library of Congress that is collecting stories from U.S. combat veterans. More stories from local veterans will appear on Sunday's Viewpoint page. For more information about the project, go to the Internet site***[***www.loc.gov/vet***](http://www.loc.gov/vet)***.***