
THIRTEEN**A Race With the Sun**

“Gentlemen, if you’ll look out the windows on the left side of the aircraft, you’ll notice a small island down below. That is Wake Island where, in just a few minutes, we’ll be landing for a brief stopover.”

Once again I was awakened from a deep sleep by the sound of the pilot’s voice over the intercom. I shook the drowsiness from my head and looked out the windows with all the others. I didn’t know exactly how long I’d been asleep, but it must have been several hours because we were now half-way across the Pacific.

The men seated on the right side of the plane were standing in the aisle, looking over the heads of those on the left. We all tried to spot the island the pilot had just announced.

At first it was difficult seeing anything but the greenish-gray ocean. Then I noticed a tiny sand-colored speck, barely visible in that vast expanse. My first thought was that it must be a sandbar just offshore from the island the pilot was referring to. Shortly, however, it became apparent that there was no larger island. That tiny speck was it!

Everyone had about the same reaction at the same time.

“He’s got to be kidding!”

It seemed as if only a crazy person would try to land a huge aircraft like this on such a tiny piece of land.

The plane made a long, descending curve to the beginning of the runway at one end of the island. When it finally came to a stop, at the other end, there wasn't more than a hundred feet of pavement left! If it had rolled the short distance that remained, it would have gone through a chain-link fence, over an embankment and plunged into the water. That landing was truly a testament to the skill of the pilot.

Wake Island.—How often I'd seen or read of it in connection with the Pacific campaigns of World War II. It seemed incredible that so many good men had given their lives to keep such a barren little piece of land from the Japanese. But it's strategic importance as a supply base and landing strip was clearly obvious.

The island was literally no longer than the length of the runway, in any direction, and consisted of nothing but white sand with sparse clumps of scrub grass growing here and there. Situated about half-way down the runway, and to one side, was a small terminal building with a couple of barracks buildings out behind it, presumably for the men stationed there,....and that was it! There was nothing else.

When we emerged from the air conditioned interior of the plane, we were stunned by the intense hundred-plus degree heat. This had to be one of the most desolate locations in the world,...nothing more than a tiny desert in the middle of a vast ocean.

Inside the terminal building, the thing that immediately caught everyone's eye was a huge world map that covered the entire wall behind the reception counter. A red line had been drawn across the Atlantic, from San Francisco to Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam, with a distance of 8,631 miles written beside it. I felt that that map only gave a statistical statement of the distance between the two countries. With the seemingly endless hours we'd spent in the air already, it felt more like we were closer to a

million miles from home. As far as we were concerned, San Francisco might just as well have been on another planet.

Of course, that was only our own impression from lack of experience. It was hard enough to imagine the distance we'd already traveled, let alone the fact that we were still only half-way to our destination.

We were greatly relieved when the call came to go back aboard the plane. There was absolutely nothing in the small terminal building to keep us all occupied and the heat was too unbearable for sitting around and waiting. Little did we realize that this was the kind of climate we'd be operating in for most of the next year.

Aboard the plane, the air-conditioning eventually brought the temperature back down to a comfortable level again. No sooner had we lifted off the end of the runway than that tiny speck of sand vanished and we were over the unbroken surface of the ocean once more.

For another seven hours or so, we raced westward following the sun toward the horizon. By the end of that time everyone was pretty weary of flying, although no one was any too anxious to reach our final destination.

Shortly before sunset we had to make one other unscheduled stop at Clark Air Force Base, in the Philippines, for what the pilot explained would be repairs of a minor mechanical nature. When that problem was corrected, and we were in the air again, I noticed a dramatic change in the mood of the men. Not only did I see it in the others, but I felt it deep in the pit of my own stomach. Some were staring out the window, at nothing in particular but the darkening evening sky. Others had their heads back on the seat, eyes fixed on the ceiling. No one was talking. It was so quiet that the constant thrust

of the engines, a mere background sound for most of the trip, now seemed to fill the interior of the plane.

We all knew that the next stop would be the final one, and that fact was confirmed when the pilot came on the intercom.

“Gentlemen, in less than an hour we’ll be approaching the coast of South Vietnam.”

Needless to say, no one slept for that last leg of the journey. In fact, with every passing moment, the tension grew steadily stronger. In a matter of minutes we’d be actual participants in a war. What would it be like? How would it begin? A thousand questions raced through my mind like a tape recorder on fast forward.

One of the things that puzzled me, along with everything else, was why the flight attendants had been kept aboard when we left the Philippines. Wasn’t it dangerous enough for military personnel to fly into a war zone, let alone civilian women?

When we boarded the plane, back in the Philippines, an older sergeant had taken the seat next to mine. Puzzled by the situation, I turned and asked, “Are they actually going to fly into Vietnam with these women aboard?”

He gave me a kind of annoyed look and answered simply, “Why not?”

I had no idea what to make of that answer, but decided not to pursue the issue further.

It wasn’t long before it was completely dark outside and the pilot came on the intercom a final time.

“Gentlemen, in approximately ten minutes we’ll be landing at the United States Air Force Base in Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam. Our flight plan requires that we make our approach at a high altitude, over

the mountains, and then drop rapidly to the runway. Therefore, please do not be alarmed at our sudden, rapid descent. From here, our next destination is the Hawaiian Islands and we'll be looking forward to having you aboard around the same time next year. Thank you."

With his last comment, about their next destination, an audible grumble could be heard throughout the plane. Of course, he'd meant it in a light manner, but no one was in any mood for levity.