



MARITIME PATROL AND RECONNAISSANCE FORCE HALL OF HONOR

Lieutenant Commander Louis Conter United States Navy

20 year old Quartermaster 3rd Class Louis Conter was on duty on the USS Arizona on the morning of December 7th, 1941. He was one of 335 who survived after the ship's magazine catastrophically exploded and sank the ship. He spent that day saving his injured shipmates and the next 10 days and nights in recovery operations. Although previously selected for flight training, his orders were lost with the ship and it was one month before he was able to begin training, earning his pilot wings in November 1942.

Following flight training he was assigned to VP-11, a "Black Cat" Squadron flying wartime night bombing missions in black-painted PBY Catalina seaplanes. He remembers, "We learned to attack the Japanese shipping at 1 AM, as we noticed that was when the ship was most quiet. We would drop our bombs and get out before they would put up much resistance. We would take off at 5:30 every evening and be out for 12-14 hours, return in the morning, eat, sleep on the beach and do it all over again."

Flying one such mission in September 1943, an enemy round pierced his aircraft, causing flares to ignite and forcing the crew to land and abandon the aircraft without survival gear. Conter ordered the crew to "Stay together, hold hands and kick slowly, cause there'll be sharks around. If a shark comes too close, just hit in the nose with your fist as hard as you can." The men helped one another, holding up anyone who weakened. Later that evening, a squadron aircraft which had seen the fire dropped a life raft and the crew was able to make it to the enemy shore on New Guinea. After hiding out for a day the entire crew was rescued by a PT boat and returned to action. Asked years later about the incident, Conter's PPC stated, "I had survival training in the ocean. We had survival training on the job. And my co-pilot, Lou Conter, saved my life." Conter was shot down a second time but was rescued and again immediately returned to duty.

Later that year, over a three night period, his crew rescued 219 Australian coast watchers from New Guinea, flying up the Sepik River, just off the water with 15 to 20 feet of clearance on each side of the aircraft. Conter recounted, "The Japanese were only one mile away. It was one of the biggest rescues in World War II, but no one knew about it because everything about the coast watchers was top secret in those days." He was subsequently awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for valor.

Lieutenant Conter subsequently flew 29 combat missions in Korea and was promoted to Lieutenant Commander in February 1954. He worked until he retired in 1967, establishing the Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape (SERE) program for the military. After first not being able to return to visit the USS Arizona because of the pain it held, he now attends Pearl Harbor day celebrations to honor his fallen shipmates.