

The Crash that Killed Plane Captain JJ Martin

By Janet Foster

Seaman Bill Foster was a plane captain during WWII on the USS Yorktown II (affectionately called *The Fighting Lady* by her crew), and so was his best friend, JJ Martin. Their story, however, began in 1941, shortly after Bill joined the U.S. Navy.

JJ was a young sailor who befriended Bill when Bill joined the Navy and came aboard his first ship, the USS Denebola, in Portland Maine. JJ was a First-Class Boson-Mate who took Bill under his wings while Bill was learning the ropes. The pair spent quite a bit of time together in Maine and then in New York. JJ spilled the beans that Bill could play the bugle, and the next thing Bill knew, he was the ship's bugler while on board the Denebola. It was while they were on the Denebola, off the New England coast, when they received the terrible news that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

The men on the Denebola listened with rapt attention as they heard the voice of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt declare war on the Japanese. The men were rightly angered at the slaughter that took place at Pearl Harbor. The sailors on the Denebola wanted revenge for their comrades, and they had to make decisions about what they wanted to specialize in during the war. Bill and JJ decided on aviation so they could work with the planes.

The next stop for Bill and JJ was Norfolk Virginia, where they went for aviation training. Norfolk is also where Bill met his future bride, Patsy Gill, at a USO dance in 1942. Before shipping out, Bill married Patsy, and she became one of millions of newly married young ladies waiting for their men to come home. Meanwhile, in early 1943, Bill and JJ set sail on the USS Yorktown II; they were headed for the South Pacific, where action, adventure, danger, and death awaited.

Bill and JJ worked hard to become plane captains on the deck of their aircraft carrier, and they faced the enemy with unnerving bravery. There were plane captains in charge of all of the different types of aircraft, such as torpedo bombers, dive bombers, and fighter planes. Bill and JJ were plane captains for torpedo bombers.

Each plane captain was assigned to one plane, and it was the plane captain's job to make sure his plane was in working order and safe to fly. A pilot and plane captain developed a close bond built on trust, respect and devotion to their plane. Each plane captain wrote his name on the side of his plane; except that Bill wrote the name of his new bride instead: *Patsy*.

All of the aircraft on board the carrier left for missions together as a fleet. The fighter aircraft flew high above the bombing aircraft, and they assisted the bombers during engagements with the Japanese. Whenever a mission was over, all of the surviving planes came back to the aircraft carrier at the same time. When the radio broadcasts came through, the carrier personnel were alerted that their aircraft were coming in; the plane captains, along with their deck crews (called the Blue Shirts), would scramble and wait expectantly on deck. Not all of the planes would come back. There were many missions that resulted in loss of aircraft, and so a plane captain never knew for sure if his pilot and plane survived until the plane came in for a landing.

As soon as his assigned plane would land on the aircraft carrier, it was the plane captain who was the first to greet the pilot, who was usually very exhausted after a mission. The plane captain was a sight for sore eyes for the pilot when he unlocked and slid open the cockpit to freedom. The plane captain always offered a hand to the pilot and helped him steady his feet after being crammed in the cockpit. Once the pilot was free, the plane captain would get into the cockpit, and with the assistance of the Blue Shirts, they would move, park, fuel, and rearm the plane. Such became the day-in and day-out routine in the South Pacific, as U.S. naval and air forces battled ferociously with the Japanese. Yet, the routine was never truly routine, and the men never knew what to expect.

It was November 23, 1943. The USS Liscombe Bay aircraft carrier had been torpedoed and sunk by a Japanese submarine. There were four planes from the Liscombe Bay that were airborne at the time of the sinking, and they needed a place to land. They were directed to land on the USS Yorktown, whose own fleet of aircraft had returned from a mission and needed to be moved forward. It was chaos as the Yorktown's plane captains scattered in place to assist the incoming planes and pilots to their temporary home. Bill and JJ waited within feet of one another. Bill watched as one of the planes skidded onto the deck and jarred to a stop when the plane's cable hook grabbed onto a deck cable. Bill helped the pilot out and jumped in the cockpit; the Blue Shirt deck crew pushed Bill and the plane further down the deck, where it would soon be tied down and parked.

JJ was next in line to assist a landing plane. All went as expected, and JJ helped the pilot exit the plane. He crawled into the cockpit, while the Blue Shirts prepared to push the plane forward to park. At the same time, the last homeless plane from the USS Liscombe Bay came in to land. The aircraft was landing too far forward and too fast, and the plane's cable hook did not grab onto a deck cable. The landing plane was not stopped by the deck's barrier stop, and the pilot pushed the throttle forward, causing the plane to violently jump over the barrier stop and land directly on JJ Martin's plane. The fiery crash took the lives of JJ Martin and four of his Blue Shirts.

It was pure terror for the men who witnessed the crash, and all they could do was help put out the fire and clean up the mess. Bill Foster was eventually called to identify JJ Martin's body. Bill said that JJ's body was bloated, charred and unrecognizable except for the tattoos, which enabled Bill to confirm that the body was indeed that of his friend. Bill grieved in the tight quarters of his bunk and yearned for home.

Dying on board an aircraft carrier in the middle of war so far from home meant that the bodies of the fallen often had to be buried at sea. Bill Foster was one of the men who carried JJ Martin's body to the side of the carrier. After a few words from the chaplain, and the playing of taps by the ship's bugler, Bill Foster had to let his friend go over the side of the ship and into the dark waters of the South Pacific. It took him many years to come to peace with the images of the day that JJ Martin was killed, and yet Bill carried the good memories of his first Navy buddy for the rest of his days.

Author's Notes: Bill Foster, in an interview with his daughter, Janet, said many of the planes that flew with the USS Yorktown II were lost in battle. Bill's plane, however, survived the war. *Patsy* flew until the very end of the war and came back victorious, along with her plane captain.

The author did research to validate the story related to her from her father. A first-hand account of the crash that killed JJ Martin was submitted by sailor Angelo Zammuto (former AMM1/c V-2 on the USS Yorktown). The information was found at a memorial page for the USS Yorktown (also affectionately called the *Fighting Lady*):

<http://cv10.com/memorial.htm>

The list of those who died were:

AMM1/c John J. Martin

AOM2/c Joseph Coppi

Amm3/c William J. Cody

Sea 1/c David S. Kasakow

Sea2/c Gilbert R. Howk

With information provided by Angelo Zammuto, the author found that John Joseph Martin was born in Nebraska in 1917. His parents were Burt Patrick Martin (b. 1891) and Winifred Dooly Martin (b. 1890), and he grew up in Sioux City, Iowa. The family was found in the 1930 U.S. Census. Thirteen year old John J. Martin was the oldest child; he had two younger sisters: Mary A. Martin (b. 1918) and Winifred E. Martin (b. 1924).

You can see images of the incredible flying machines from WWII here:

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5143179/The-flying-machines-WWII-brought-life-photos.html>

For more information about plane captains and their role in WWII, please visit:

http://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=75846

<http://www.naval-history.net/WW2UScasaaDB-USNbyNameM.htm>