

Jimmy DeValery Stories

The Day Off

New Guinea, December 1943

Twice a week, a pilot from the 342nd Fighter Squadron flew the mail run from Port Moresby to the advanced base at Dubodura. Today, it was Jimmy DeValery's turn.

He took off at 0640, heading almost directly east. His plane rose slowly above the jungle humidity as the day began to take on its color. It had rained for a week straight, but today would be clear and sunny, with excellent visibility. He climbed steadily. Ahead, blocking his route, the Owen Stanley mountain range rose up ten thousand feet. He expected to see no enemy planes on this milk run. The Japanese had mostly been driven from their once formidable base at Lae, not far from Dubodura. The intelligence shack told him he had nothing to worry about, and his ground chief had agreed:

“Aw, nobody has seen any Zeroes near there in a month. We put a hundred rounds in two of the machine guns, but nothing in the cannon. You won't need 'em, though. Have fun, Jimmy.”

Jimmy planned to. He had flown five combat missions in two weeks and needed a day off.

As the Owen Stanleys loomed up in front of him, he thought through the mission. All he had to do was make the pass. Dubodura was only eighty miles ahead, all downhill. It would only take an hour and a half. He wished it were longer.

He glanced at the altimeter, which read 7,100 feet, then at the mountains ahead. He needed more power.

Jimmy pushed the throttles ahead slightly. The two huge Allison engines responded and he put the P-38 in a steeper climb. Soon he reached the pass, at 8,200 feet, and then angled down for the long descent.

He looked down for enemy troop movements, although he expected none. All he could see was a jungle canopy too thick to see through, except for a few well-worn ridges. No enemy. He thought that was just as well.

He looked up, distracted by a speck on his canopy.

“Must be oil,” he muttered, “I wish they would tune up these old engines.”

He looked more closely. It was not a speck of oil. It was something moving in the sky.

The specks soon multiplied into four. Jimmy, alarmed, realized they were planes high above him, at 10 o'clock, maybe five or six miles to the north. He squinted despite his excellent eyesight. Whose planes were they? Immediately, he pushed the throttles all the way forward and began to climb again.

If they're Japanese, he thought, and catch me below them, I'll be a sitting duck. Maybe they're friendly planes returning to Port Moresby. But then why would they be so high?

He kept watching as they continued directly toward him. Several more seconds passed as his eyes strained.

“They're Japanese!” he blurted out. “They're Zeroes!”

Jimmy pushed the throttles harder, even though they were already at full power. *I need to get higher!* With the great weight of his plane, he could dive away from a Zero. But he didn't have the altitude.

He grabbed for the radio.

“Mayday-mayday-mayday,” he called, “enemy planes jumping me.”

He gave his position. He waited, but there was no response. He knew he could never raise Port Moresby with the mountains in the way, but Dubodura was relatively close.

“Mayday-mayday-mayday, enemy planes headed for Dubodura.”

The pressure built in his mind as the planes came closer and closer. There was no answer. He could see the enemy planes' markings distinctly. *Why isn't Dubodura answering?* he wondered.

As his plane clawed for altitude, Jimmy's mind raced. He was trapped! He couldn't get above them. There was no time! There was only one thing to do: dive away from them and hope for the best. Fear gripped him. *Dive out, dive before they're on top of you*, his brain screamed.

From his experience, he knew better, that altitude meant life.

"Wait, wait!" he yelled.

The enemy planes were very close now, almost within firing range, and still well above him. The altimeter read only fifteen thousand feet, but he couldn't wait any longer. He kicked the pedals over and dove.

The P-38 screamed straight down. His speed jumped: 260, 340, 390, 450. It wouldn't be a long dive, he knew, but it had to be straight down if he was to have a chance. The hills below began to come into focus.

In only a minute it was time to pull out. He grabbed the stick firmly and pulled hard. It didn't even budge! He had never had a P-38 in such a steep dive. The ground loomed up in front of him, and he panicked!

"Pull out now!" Jimmy screamed.

He stood straight up in the cockpit and pulled with all of his might. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the nose, laden with four huge fifty-caliber machine guns and an Oerliken cannon, began to come up.

The ground jumped before his eyes. Gravity pushed him down in the seat. Grey and white spots appeared before his eyes. He saw his wife's face and then briefly lost consciousness.

His vision returned, and he found himself rocketing along just above the trees. Relief flowed through him.

"I made it! I got away. No man on Earth could follow that dive," he called out, laughing.

He rubbernecked.

Four dots still followed him.

That can't be! he thought. As his speed rapidly fell off, 395, 385, 375, the Japanese gained quickly.

Jimmy realized what had happened. The dives of the Zeroes, long and shallow, had been more than the equal of his short, violent one. He pushed his throttles hard again, just to be sure he was getting every ounce of power.

“Mayday-mayday-mayday,” he called into the radio, over and over. *Why aren't they answering? I can't be more than fifty miles from Dubodura.*

He checked every few seconds. The enemy planes continued approaching, growing from specks to larger and larger objects. Sweat began to pour down his face, a face contorted in pain as though his body were being jabbed with pins. He prayed that their dives must be wearing off as well.

In seconds that seemed like an eternity, the Japanese planes' speed did taper off. Jimmy looked back at them constantly, wondering if it would be enough. They would be within firing range in moments.

Then he noticed something else. He was passing from the land of New Guinea out over the Pacific.

“Out to sea,” he mumbled, the sound entirely drowned by the motors. It was almost a death sentence.

Heading away from Dubodura, if he turned even slightly, the Japanese would turn inside him and he would be an easy target for a deflection shot. His only chance was to outrun them. He would have to forget about the radio. Even if it worked, help was too far away to do him any good.

Jimmy looked around again. The enemy was within range now, he judged, as the five planes raced along at about one thousand feet. Then he realized something. They were no longer gaining.

They're no faster than I am, he judged. There's a chance after all.

The enemy planes fanned out behind him. He thought each Zero might get one pass at him before their dives wore off fully. The one on the end was closest and would probably take his firing pass first.

Just as Jimmy realized that, the plane began firing at about four hundred yards. He could see the gun flashes on the wings. Sweat cascading down his face and down the inside of his clothing, he prayed that the shots would miss, but didn't believe they would.

He huddled behind his armor-plated seat, but nothing happened. The first pilot had missed!

Jimmy watched as the first plane faded back, pushed by the recoil of its guns. As he looked back again, the relief he felt faded.

The second Zero angled toward him. He saw the wings twinkle, almost

instantly followed by loud pinging sounds. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw about thirty holes from machine gun rounds appear in his left wing, like a sharp pencil poking holes through aluminum foil.

A bullet came through the back of the Plexiglas canopy, just missing Jimmy's head, and ricocheted about inside.

The cannon shells hit harder. One made a large and jagged hole in the left wing, and two hit the back of the seat, bucking him forward violently.

The giant Lockheed plane flew on, seemingly undamaged. The engines were untouched!

Jimmy looked around just as the third plane made his run, and saw it firing. He ducked again. The seat had a contour piece for his head, but nothing for his feet. He put his tennis shoes up on the pedals as high as he could.

Again, nothing happened. The third plane had also missed.

He looked again. The Japanese planes had receded somewhat, but still hung behind him like pictures on a wall.

There were only three Zeroes now. He looked for the fourth, several times, in both directions. It was gone. It must not have been able to keep up.

Jimmy smiled, though he looked terrible. Here, just above sea level, the insidious humidity of the South Pacific pervaded the cockpit. Sweat was cascading down his body as though propelled from an unseen pump. His T-shirt was completely soaked as continuous beads of water ran down inside it, into his shorts, down his legs, and into his sneakers. He noticed none of it.

All he could think of was the trap he was in. He was well out to sea now, and while the enemy planes weren't closing, they weren't falling behind either.

Minutes dragged on. Jimmy crouched in his little canopy. It was almost like being in a closet. He wondered whether he would ever see his wife, Mara, again.

Thinking of her steeled his determination. *I will find a way out of this!*

No longer panicky, he checked the two fuel gauges at the left of the control panel. The dial marked "Rear" for the fuel tanks in the rear center of each side of the plane showed they were depleted. The "Front" tanks still had

a full forty-five gallons in each: forty minutes left. No, thirty minutes at this speed.

What if he picked up slowly on the ailerons? The plane would rise, he knew, and if he did it slowly enough it would offer the Zeroes very little angle for a good shot.

Jimmy touched the controls, and the plane rose. He looked behind to see the Zeroes doggedly following. He was too afraid to smile, but soon he could see it was working. The P-38 was at its slowest at sea level. If he could just get her some altitude, get into lighter air, the engines' power would be better used.

Over the next few minutes, he rose five thousand feet. The enemy was still hanging on behind him, but got no closer.

In ten minutes he passed ten thousand feet. The superchargers began to kick in.

Soon enough, he reached seventeen thousand feet. The enemy planes began falling back, and as he turned back toward Dubodura, they could do nothing. Soon, they disappeared.

Now his chief worry was fuel. He throttled back on both motors.

The coastline appeared in a few minutes. Twenty more, and he began to recognize familiar landmarks.

Three hours almost to the minute after he took off on the supposed milk run, Jimmy made an uncharacteristically bouncy landing on the field at Dubodura. Once the plane came to a stop and the engines were powering down, he went still in his seat, shaking all over.

He became aware of a figure coming up beside the plane, waving at him to open the cockpit. As he did, he recognized the guy. It was the ground chief, shouting.

"You musta had some trouble, huh? Hey, why didn't you call in on the radio? I just tested it and it's good! We had planes in the air, buddy."

Jimmy looked down at his radio. In a rush of awful clarity, he realized why no one had answered his calls. In his fear, he had completely forgotten to turn the radio on.