



THE TERRIFYING TALE

High in the air, two rocket-firing jets vs. an old, pilotless World

BY MICHAEL FROST

■ THE BATTERED NAVY Hellcat fighter taking wing from the naval test center at Point Mugu on a bright California morning last August might be said to have been treated unfairly by her country.

After all, she was a Pacific veteran, quite possibly the victor of aerial battles over Guadalcanal or the Marianas; she might have earned a well-deserved rest in one of the Arizona graveyards to which the

OF THE RUNAWAY DRONE

War II Hellcat. On the ground, 25 miles of fiery destruction

Navy abandons its obsolete planes. A sentimentalist might even feel a tiny thrill of admiration and awe at the havoc she wrought during her reluctant exit. For hers was to be a flight which would turn suddenly into a nightmare for the brass of the Continental Air Defense Com-

mand, draw howls of anger from the officials of Los Angeles County, and leave a 25-mile trail of blazing destruction.

There was no one in the cockpit of the stubby Navy fighter that morning, nor was there supposed to be. She was on a suicide mission,

doomed to die under the wallop of an experimental guided missile somewhere safely off the California coast. Painted red as a warning to piloted aircraft, she was a "drone," a robot target denied for this last hop even the comfort of a human hand on the stick.

But, as the Hellcat tucked up her wheels, crossing the coastline and swinging to sea, something went wrong. No one knows what mechanical synapse malfunctioned, but somewhere in the drone's electronic stand-in for a flesh-and-blood pilot, a component failed. The Hellcat, as if angry at her fate, burst the invisible shackles and began a turn toward the southeast, climbing at full power. She was bound for the sprawling industrial complex of Los Angeles, fifty miles away. She had become suddenly an airborne monster.

The Navy had launched over a thousand drones in the past ten years, without such an emergency. Nevertheless, the mother plane was armed for just this catastrophe. Its veteran pilot, Lieutenant Commander J. J. Kurowski, turned quickly on his errant ward and snapped off a fast 200 rounds of .50 caliber machine gun fire, as the Hellcat swung back for shore.

The Navy explains that standard instructions cautioned him to fire only over water, and that "it was like trying to grab the brass ring on a merry-go-round. He was barely faster than the drone, complicating his problem. Kurowski expended all his ammunition, and missed. The drone continued toward the most widespread metropolitan area in the world.

Responsibility for the Hellcat still

rested with the Navy; after all, the Navy had launched her. But this was no time to quibble. The Navy called the Air Force; specifically, the 414th Fighter Interceptor Group, a few jet-seconds inland.

Thus, suddenly, the Hellcat became the immediate and practical problem of two young Continental Air Defense Command jet pilots in an "alert" hut at the Oxnard, California, Air Force Base.

When the klaxon in the hut at Oxnard sounded, 1st Lieutenant Hans Einstein, 25, a stocky New Yorker of the 437th Fighter Interceptor Squadron, was lighting an after-lunch cigarette. Outside, gleaming in the sunlight, his two-seater F-89D *Scorpion* interceptor stood poised at the head of a two-mile runway. Next to it rested the plane of his wingman, 1st Lieutenant Dick Hurliman, 26, of Miami, Florida. Neither *Scorpion* had machine guns but each was armed with 104 "Mighty Mouse" rockets, almost three inches in diameter.

Three minutes after the klaxon, Einstein, Hurliman and their radar operators were blasting aloft. On orders from his own controller, Einstein switched his radio to the Point Mugu Navy tower and roared toward an intercept.

Point Mugu had the Hellcat spotted on its radar screen and was nervously following her as she swept toward the east. Lieutenant Commander Kurowski in the rejected mother plane still had her in sight, following to warn other aircraft away. At 30,000 feet, with Hurliman tight on his wing, Einstein saw the Hellcat. She was in a turn, chugging near her maximum altitude, fighting to stay aloft in the

thin air. The Hellcat might stall at any time and spin into the populated area below, but providentially the wind was carrying it in the general direction of the desert area north of Los Angeles.

In the rear seat of the lead plane, Einstein's radar observer, Lieutenant Clennon D. Murray, had tuned in on his radar. In the other jet, Hurliman's radar man, Lieutenant Walter Hale, had contact with the Hellcat too. Now a problem presented itself. The two *Scorpions* were night-fighters, instrumented for radar intercepts and electronically-controlled firing. But these radar control systems, with which a pilot could fire night or day at an enemy he might never see, were built to destroy fast-flying targets; jet bombers flying at the speed of sound. The Hellcat was churning along at World War II speed making perhaps 180 miles per hour. The complex electronic systems, with which both pilots had been trained, could not calculate efficiently the archaic speed of the drone.

Obviously, any rocketry that would be done would have to be by eye. Here another headache arose — a monumental one. These particular *Scorpions*, night fighters, had no optical sights; not even the simple ones of World War II.

Einstein and Hurliman began to sweat a little under their oxygen masks. They orbited and asked the Navy for instructions.

By now the circling drone had blown eastward to a more unpopulated, almost desert, area. If she continued east the chances were small that her inevitable crash would hurt anyone. Conversely, the area above which she now wan-

dered seemed a relatively safe one to shoot over, and the drone might turn back to Los Angeles.

Should Einstein and Hurliman assume that their rockets would not damage anything in the blank area below and shoot down the drone while they could, or should they let it run out of gas and crash?

The decision involved a calculated risk. According to the Air Force, it was made both in the air and on the ground. They would shoot down the drone.

Einstein and Hurliman began to make their passes.

The F-89D *Scorpion* carries its 2.75-inch rockets in two large, streamlined "pods", placed at the very end of its wings. The rockets nestle in a honey-comb pattern in each pod, their noses jutting ahead. There are 52 rockets in each pod. Each individual rocket, it is claimed, is "capable of downing the largest jet bomber with a single hit."

Einstein, given by the Navy what was considered a safe bearing, banked toward the turning target. Now the modern jet, built for high speed, has relatively less wing area for its weight than older prop-driven aircraft; it must therefore travel faster or stall. The *Scorpion* is a big fighter, too; it weighs almost 20 tons. Einstein was like a heavy downhill skier with highly waxed skis trying to pick a handkerchief from a steep slope.

The drone, being unarmed, presented a target which he might approach more closely than an enemy one, but there was still the danger of overrunning her, colliding with her, or even passing through the debris of the explosion when he successfully hit her. The

Hellcat grew quickly in size in his windscreen. He broke off his run and banked to watch Hurliman.

Hans Einstein and Dick Hurliman made ten passes each at the battered Hellcat. Each broke off seven runs because the bearings chosen were too awkward, or because there might be danger below, or because the run didn't "feel" right.

Each made three firing runs. On the last, Hurliman claimed a hit on the Hellcat's wing. Einstein claimed a "possible" on her belly-tank.

Each fired his 104 rockets at the drone.

Thirty thousand feet below, unknown to the men aloft, all hell began to break loose.

When the last run had been completed, the Hellcat, apparently unscathed, thrashed defiantly on.

Einstein and Hurliman circled helplessly.

At two o'clock in the afternoon, two hours and twenty-five minutes after she had flung her defiance at an ungrateful government, the tired but triumphant Hellcat coughed, sputtered, and ran out of gas. Warily, she began to spin.

She crashed in the desert twelve miles east of Palmdale, California, pulling down power lines as a last gesture. Then she burned.

Einstein and Hurliman roared back to Oxnard.

Thus would have ended the saga of the doughty Hellcat, a story to be restricted to the ready-rooms and officers' clubs of the world. It is doubtful that the Air Force or the Navy would have advertised the incident. Einstein and Hurliman might have escaped with a little ribbing from squadron mates, except

for the 208 rockets they had fired.

As jets touched down at Oxnard, reports began to pour in.

The country over which they had fired had not been as bleak as it had appeared.

Einstein's and Hurliman's rockets had laced the area.

Mrs. Bernice Kempton and her son Larry had been clipping across the desert east of Palmdale in their new station wagon when they came under fire from aloft.

The vehicle was riddled with fragments, the front tires blown, the windshield shattered.

Mrs. Kempton and Larry were untouched.

Twenty-five miles west of the Kemptons, Mrs. Tom Murphy, of Placerita Creek, heard explosions outside her house. She stared out the window as rockets raced across a nearby canyon, starting fires. "It was just like the 4th of July," she said later.

Workmen helped her save her home when the wind shifted flames in its direction.

J. R. Johns and Curtis Bobbitt were working on a power line 100 yards from their truck when five rockets straddled the road. They sprinted to the truck and found its engine and cabin perforated.

Mrs. H. E. Boyes saw oil sumps close to her home explode. She fled with her daughter Betty and the family dog.

A house and an abandoned oil rig were damaged. Oil storage tanks were burned.

Einstein's and Hurliman's "Tiny Tims" had ignited a chain of fires twenty-five miles long.

350 forest service fire fighters battled a 300-acre blaze on the

slopes of Mount Gleason; another 100 men fought a 150-acre conflagration. According to the Los Angeles Fire Department, 435 acres of watershed were destroyed.

Roads were blocked. Trains were stopped.

A day later, fires were under control but sheriffs were warning parents to keep their children at home; only 28 rockets had been accounted for; presumably, others might be lying unexploded in the area.

No one was injured.

Shortly after Einstein and Hurliman landed on the Oxnard runway, the story hit the air. Shortly thereafter, it hit the streets. The press was in an editorial uproar which would not die down for days.

Los Angeles papers wanted to know why rockets were fired which could endanger innocent citizens, and why highly skilled jet pilots assigned to protect vital areas could not shoot down an antiquated, prop-driven drone.

The Air Force believes that the situation over Los Angeles that day was an unrealistic one: the drone too slow, the pilots working outside the framework of the established Air Defense System.

But still, Einstein and Hurliman failed to destroy the Hellcat. If we

accept the Air Force's claim of one hit and one probable, we wonder why the drone stayed aloft considering the lethality of the "Tiny Tim." The Air Force's answer is that the pilots held their fire to so close a range that the rocket had no time to "arm" itself.

Whether Einstein and Hurliman actually touched the drone or not, they were unable to bring it down. Were they too dependent on modern electronic gear which, after all, can fail? Was their equipment lacking in a "standby" system? Was their training so technical that they were unable to adapt to the older, more intuitive marksmanship of World War I and II?

These questions remain unanswered. The Air Force does have some Scorpion night fighters with optical sights. Its day fighters all have optical sights. Its pilots are given training in optical firing, and we can hope that it is sufficient.

The "Battle of Los Angeles" brought considerable fame to the rebellious Navy Hellcat and some possibly unfair notoriety to Lieutenants Hans Einstein and Dick Hurliman. However, at their expense, the country may have learned some interesting, and perhaps some alarming, facts. ■■

AND HOW!

■ THE INDIAN RAIN dances were weaving and circling and swaying, their feet pounding out the intricate rhythms of the great tribal dance. One young woman in particular caught the tourist's eye. Her torso gyrated with greater abandon, her hips swiveled more sensuously than any of the others. Turning to a brave near by, the tourist said, "Who's that girl there?" "Oh, her," replied the brave. "She's a great dancer. Even as a child she was sensational. Back on the reservation she was known as the Papoose with the Loose Caboose."

—Marian Barker