

Quail Shoot

AS TAYLOR LOOKED BACK at the shrinking carrier the thought that had been nagging his mind for months became a physical thing that made his legs tremble and his stomach twist into a knot.

Thou Shalt Not Kill — Reverend Gunn used to preach that — that was his favorite sermon. The Sunday mornings in the little hill church came into his mind and especially that Sunday he was baptized. He'd stood there after it was over, an excited and happy fourteen-year-old, embarrassed but proud of the attention, and of the new life that was before him. Ten years ago, but those days were still vivid.

Then there was Pensacola and the Korean veteran standing before the assembly of cadets. *Your job is one thing — a fighter pilot's only aim is to destroy enemy aircraft — think of it as a machine — forget there's a man in it.*

Could he ever forget it?

Thou Shalt Not Kill

Your job . . . Dear God! He shook his head to clear his mind and leaned back in the seat, trying to stop time, trying to relax and forget, dreading the flight ahead.

When the Korean War ended, he had still been in the States and he'd selfishly been glad there would be no decision to be made — and now!

He glanced at the instrument panel to reassure himself that he was still on heading and at the proper climb speed. Five knots too fast. He eased the nose up, taking refuge in the familiar action.

This was to be a peace-time cruise — a showing of the big stick only, until this morning. He had been in the ready

room when the pilots from the morning patrol came back, flushed and exhilarated, unable to sit still and laughing at anything.

News of their tangle with the Red planes had been broadcast all over the ship, and the ready room was filled with sweaty humanity when they got back. Every pilot on the ship had been packed in there, and the atmosphere of excitement was almost a physical force. Amidst the confusion the story came out.

The LA-7's had come at them from out at sea and out of the sun. Two dirty-brown, blunt-nosed airplanes, firing before the two Corsair pilots had seen them. They'd made no hits on the blue planes, and in a couple of minutes it was over. Neither LA had burned when hit. Both had dived into the sea with no attempt at a bailout.

The Corsair pilots had still been excited as they used their hands to describe the splashing of the Communists. A jet pilot, standing near Taylor, had expressed his disappointment at being too high to get down and mix it up before it was over, and Taylor looked at him and felt hatred and disgust. Listening, he had felt trembly and sick, frightened and repelled but unable to leave.

Now the crackle of his earphone startled him and brought him back to the Corsair cockpit; the crumpled cigarette package he was fishing from his flight suit fell to the floor unnoticed.

"Bearskin Control. This is Bearskin Three! Jumped by four LA-7's and Bearskin Two was splashed! No sign of survivor yet. Any planes in the area give me a hand! MAYDAY! MAYDAY!"

Bearskin Two — Good God, that was Jack!

Taylor pressed the mike button on the throttle.

"Bearskin Control, this is Bearskin Four. I'm still climbing after launch but have you in sight." He turned and looked back at the gray speck. "I have no wingman, but give me a steer for the area!"

Bearskin Control's reply was brief and concise. Taylor turned to the heading. His left hand pushed the propeller-

pitch control forward and the throttle wide open. The Corsair shuddered at this mistreatment.

The coast of China appeared as a low bank of clouds on the horizon. Slowly it moved closer. The hills and valleys suddenly came into focus in the setting sun.

Taylor turned on the master armament switch and charged the four 20-millimeters. He squeezed the trigger on the stick, testing the guns. The buffeting and the flickering on the leading edges of the wing showed that all guns were firing.

“This is Bearskin Three! Any planes in the area for God’s sake get over here — I’m taking hits!”

Taylor’s hands trembled on the controls, and his knotted stomach twisted more as he pushed against the already wide-open throttle.

“Three, this is Bearskin Control — we are launching four AD’s but there will be a delay. Bearskin Four is approaching the area. Hang on! Bearskin Four, you are fifteen miles south-east of . . .”

Bearskin Control was interrupted by the near-hysterical voice of the attacked pilot. “. . . the Chinks broke it off. My engine’s running rough. Returning to the ship . . .!”

The swine! He’s running off and not even checking for sure to see if Jack got out. “Run, Mendel, you yellow bastard, run!” He clicked the mike in anger.

“Watch your radio discipline, Four. You are now five miles southeast of the downed pilot’s position. Advise if you see a survivor. The AD’s should be there to cover you in about fifteen minutes.” The metallic unemotional tones of Bearskin Control came through his earphones.

“I’m going down. Leaving Angels Ten for Angels Two. I can see better down there.” Taylor throttled back and eased the nose down toward the new altitude. The sea was glassy, and he strained to see a raft or dye marker as evidence of a survivor.

Still too high to tell much.

Jack. Pensacola and Corpus. Beer drinking and girl chasing and talks of religion and sex. He’d have washed out if Jack hadn’t spent all those hours helping him with naviga-

tion and theory of flight. And that time they stopped in New Orleans on the way back to Pensacola to get their wings. Lord, what a night that was! It was Jack's idea to call a sorority house at Tulane and ask for a nonexistent girl. It worked out very well. In fact, they finally picked up two of the girls, and they had made quite a night of it.

Brennan's for supper, then Bourbon street and finally Pat O'Brian's, where the four of them wound up singing with the fat girl that played the piano. Things got a little hazy after that. They got the girls home O.K. What was that little brunette's name? Donna Somebody or other, and promised to write.

The next day's drive to Pensacola had been murder. On the way out of town he'd made Jack stop the car, and he'd run over to a "Keep Our City Clean" barrel on Canal Street and lost all his breakfast. A real pair of hungover cadets had reported into the Air Station that day. It was funny later. Then they'd gotten the same squadron. And now!

Now. The present. Taylor pushed against the throttle again, but it was still wide open.

I'd like to get those bastards. No. The little country church came back into his mind. The hours spent there. His father saying grace and the nightly Bible reading when he was a boy. The deeply religious atmosphere of his family. His Dad would be shocked if he knew about that time in New Orleans.

Reverend Gunn's sermons came back. Thou Shalt Not Kill!

Ensign L. T. Taylor, faint-hearted fighter pilot.

Did the Chinese worry about shooting Jack down? What excuse could anybody give for killing?

As he let down, he scanned the ocean, eyes moving back and forth.

Did Jack get out? How long could he stay afloat? Be dark soon. It'd be harder to find him tomorrow. Awfully close to the coast.

A speck in the corner of the windshield caught his eye and Taylor saw it was an airplane, angling in toward the

coast, down lower, and flying in the same direction as the Corsair. Ours? No — as he looked closer he saw the dirty brown outlines of an LA-7 and the red star and bar of the People's Republic of China. Because of his faster airspeed in the letdown he was gaining rapidly on the Communist plane. The brown plane flew on apparently unaware of the gull-winged plane moving down behind him.

Taylor looked in all directions. There had been four LA's. Was this a trap? No other planes in sight. Where were the AD's from the ship? They were still ten to fifteen minutes away. His thumb stayed off the mike button. If he pressed that button and reported the LA, the die would be cast. There would be no choice then. The remote voice of Bearskin Control would order: "Splash him."

He hesitantly turned the gunsight on. The mingled fear and sickness was overpowering now. He swallowed the bile that kept rising in this throat.

Thou Shalt Not Kill.

But they shot down Jack!

Dad had said on that last hunt during his last leave, "War is legalized murder, son." They'd been resting on the way home, gamebags full, and a feeling of contentment was all about them in the crisp fall air. Dad had hauled out his old corn cob pipe and was packing it. "Some people would think no more of killing a person than you and I thought about shooting these birds this evening. God grant that never happens to you. Maybe the war will be over before you get there."

After a while they'd called the dogs and walked back to the house. He still remembered the look in his father's eyes as he talked — this World War I veteran who had seen people die until his soul was sick with it. Thirty-five years later his father still remembered Belleau Wood and the Argonne. Would he ever forget?

Taylor looked behind again, covering his tail. This wasn't a trap. The Chinese pilot didn't know the Corsair was on his tail. He was a straggler. Still he kept his thumb off the mike button. He was in firing range now, dead astern of the Russian-built plane that flew as on a sightseeing tour,

straight and level. A squeeze of the trigger and he would have a plane to his credit. The thought excited him. He suppressed the guilt feeling and gripped the stick tighter.

His father's face came in his mind and he pushed the image away, back into his subconscious. The brown plane was all important now — nothing else.

Five hundred feet behind the other plane and he throttled back, matching its speed. From below, the two planes would look like a sloppy formation as they moved closer to the China coast. He tried to remember everything they had said in training and how the pilots with planes to their credit had been lionized.

He'll see me any minute — do something. Taylor could turn the Corsair around and never mention the incident. What if somebody found out? Charges of cowardice and desertion? *No.*

If he turned he'd expose his tail to the LA, and if the pilot happened to look back as the Corsair turned, would the American plane be spared in the same situation? They were crossing the coast now. He took a deep breath and said, "God forgive me," as he lined up the darkening silhouette in his gunsight. He squeezed the trigger.

Four streams of tracers arched out, some disappearing into the other plane, others lazily moving past it. The brown plane jerked as the pilot tried to take evasive action. Flashes against the wings and fuselage showed the plane was taking mortal hits.

Taylor matched every twist and turn of the now crippled aircraft. Hadn't they said at Pensacola that he was a lousy navigator but a born acrobatic pilot? The fear and nausea was changing to an exhilaration he had never known before.

A bright orange flash ahead told him that a wing tank had exploded. The wing fell off, fluttering, and the LA whipped over and over and down, streaming black smoke, disappearing into the sea in a column of white water. As Taylor rolled over to look, the column subsided and the sea slowly reassumed its glassy slickness. There was no debris or marker.

He was shaking with excitement, and his feet danced against the rudder pedals as he turned away from the coast. He pressed the mike button and shouted, "This is Bearskin Four. Splash one LA-7, by God!"

"Well done, Four!" Bearskin Control allowed some warmth in his tone.

"This is Bearskin Eight, a flight of four AD's. We witnessed the kill. Good work, Four!" The shadowy AD's moved up alongside, and he could see the leader wave. *Well done.*

Why, it was just like shooting quail — only much better. There's no hunting that could compare to this.

We must find Jack. It's too late tonight but we'll look tomorrow and the next day and the next. Whatever it takes.

The little church and Dad's face were hazy memories to Taylor as he thought of the reception he would receive in the ready room. With impatient hands he turned back to his patrol sector. Now he knew why the other Corsair pilots this morning had seemed drunk.

"This is Four returning to the assigned area."

"Roger, Four." The voice of Bearskin Control was respectful, and it gave him a heady feeling.

He lighted a cigarette, thinking. *We must look for Jack tomorrow. Perhaps they'll be out here again to stop us, the other three.*

He leaned back in the seat with the air of a hunter who knows where there is plenty of game, and he has unrestricted shooting.

— William Kershner, S. Jr.