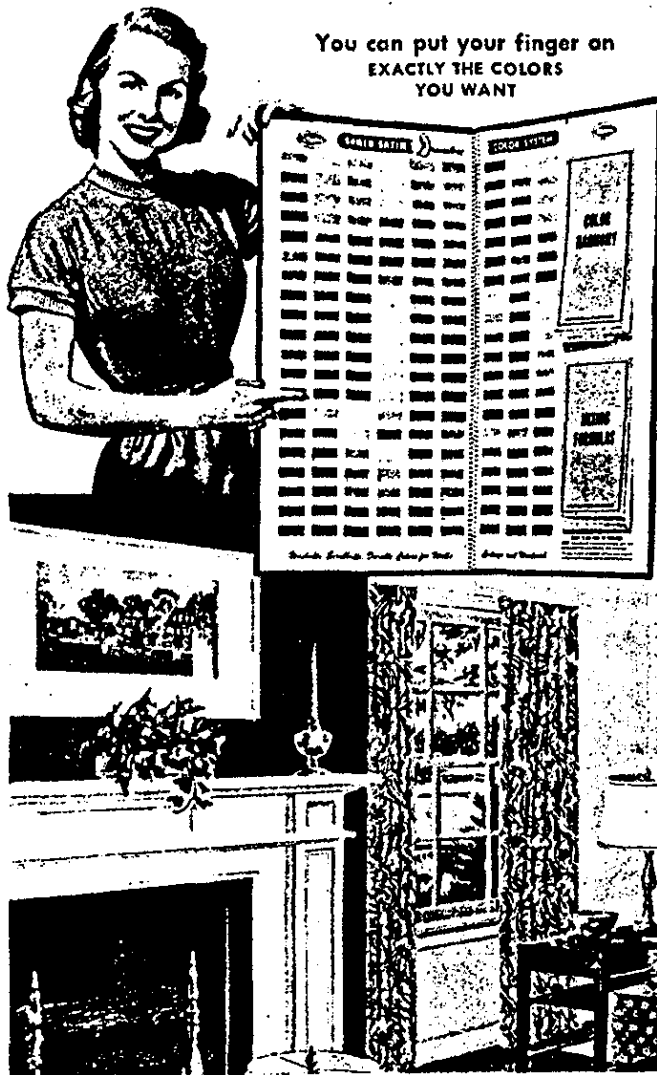
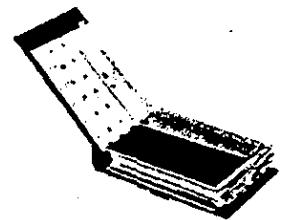




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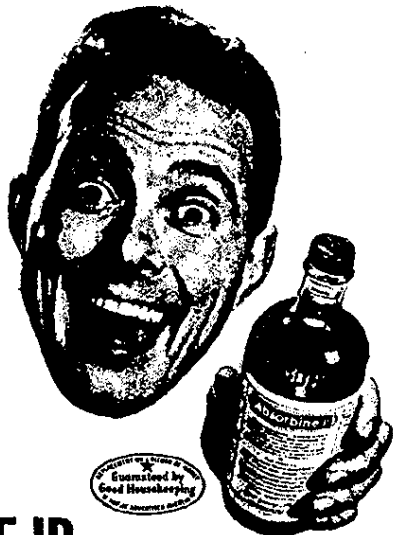
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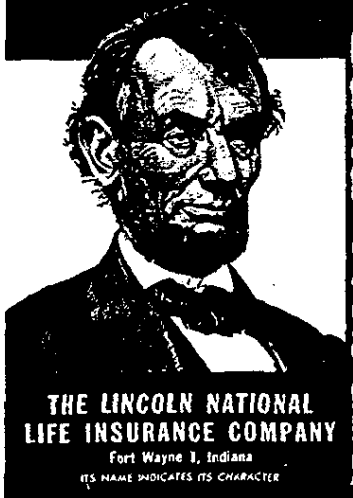


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(Continued from Page 138)
though he couldn't quite reach them. Commander Jones had set the bank knob for a standard-rate turn to the left and the elevator knob for level flight. Joe arrived at the same conclusion that the conference on the bridge had reached—namely, that the plane might not spin when it ran out of gas, and that a lot depended on whether the plane hit the water heading into the wind.

Joe also found that by using a short length of spare whip antenna he could reach the bank-control knob. By twisting that knob a quarter turn to the right he knew he could level the wings and thus set the autopilot for straight flight. As always, he had a big wad of gum in his mouth.

Just before noon the task group arrived under the spot where the radar scopes showed Four Sail One to be circling in the clouds. The Okinawa took station in the center of the formation several miles downwind of this spot, with the destroyers spread out in a ten-mile circle around her. Three helicopters were in the air and all lookouts in the fleet trained their glasses aloft to watch for a parachute emerging from the clouds. The task group turned downwind so as to stay under the plane until its engine quit, and word went out from the Okinawa's Combat Information Center: "Okinawa to Four Sail One. We are directly under you now, all set for you to jump. The instant your feet touch the water, slide out of your parachute harness, inflate your Mae West, and we will pick you up right away. O.K. now. Bail out."

Out of the squawk boxes in Combat Information Center came the startling answer: "Okinawa, this is Four Sail One. Radarman Blueberry speaking. Negative. I'm sticking with the plane."

Everyone in the Combat Information Center goggled for a moment, and then the fighter director broadcast: "Don't get scared, Blueberry. There's no danger at all. The whole task group is right under you. We have three helicopters in the air; we will have you out of the water almost as soon as you hit. Just open the door and bail out."

"This is Four Sail One," said an obviously cool and unflustered voice. "I ain't scared, and I ain't jumping; I'm riding this plane down."

This unforeseen development made no sense to anyone in Combat Information Center. Neither there nor on the bridge could anyone see how Blueberry could do any good by riding the plane down. If he jumped, his chances of coming through O.K. were a thousand to one. If he stayed with the plane, they weren't much better than fifty-fifty.

Soon another voice from the Okinawa came on the air: "Four Sail One, this is the captain speaking. Do as you are told. This is an order. Bail out."

Back came the cool and positive reply: "Captain, sir, negative. I won't do it. I think when we run out of gas I can straighten this plane out and make it hit the water heading into the wind. I'm going to ride her down and maybe she will float long enough for me to pull the commander out of the cockpit after we hit."

The tense group in Combat Information Center mulled this one over incredulously. "Impossible" was the general consensus, but the fighter-director officer said, "Maybe. All the control cables run through the radar operator's compartment. If he knows which ones are the ailerons, and if he pulls hard enough on the right one, at exactly the right time, he might overpower the

autopilot and straighten the plane out. If he bails out, the plane might sink before we can get to it and pull the commander out. The odds are pretty long against this deal, but it isn't impossible."

This conference was interrupted by another message from aloft: "This is Four Sail One. I see other planes all around me on my radar scope now. When our engine quits and we spiral down out of the clouds, somebody is bound to see me. Let the first guy that sees me sing out on the radio and tell me when the plane is headed into the wind. I'll try to level the wings and hold them that way until we hit the water. Acknowledge. Over."

"This is Okinawa. Roger your last message. We advise you to bail out. If you refuse, we will do the best we can to help you."

While the circle of eyes in the Combat Information Center fixed on the fighter director began to light up with gleams of admiration, the fighter-director officer muttered huskily, "That kid has a lot more guts than he has good sense."

Half a minute later: "Okinawa, this is Four Sail One. Engine just quit. Stand by."

Presently the squawk box in the Combat Information Center said: "Four Sail One is O.K. so far. . . . We are still in the clouds, but I think we have slowed down as much as we are going to and she hasn't spun yet. . . . I think the autopilot may hold her. . . . If the cloud base is still at three thousand feet, we should be breaking out any minute now."

A dozen lookouts sighted the stricken plane as soon as she broke out below the overcast. Another plane only a quarter of a mile away came on the air immediately with: "Four Sail One, I have you in sight. You are in a normal left spiral and are headed nearly downwind now. Keep coming to the left and I'll let you know when you are in the wind. . . . Ninety degrees to go. . . . forty-five degrees. . . . twenty degrees. . . . Stand by. . . . Bring her out."

While all hands in the task group watched prayerfully from below, Joe reached forward with his magic gum-tipped whip, gave the bank-control knob a flip into the straight-flight position and brought the plane into a normal glide headed smack into the wind.

Heading into a thirty-knot wind, the bump when the plane hit the water was no worse than a hard landing on the Okinawa. Before the splash had subsided, Joe tore the door off his cubbyhole, scrambled up on the wing and pried the cockpit hood loose. He had the unconscious commander out of there half a minute before the plane sank, and in another minute a helicopter snatched them both out of the water and headed for the Okinawa.

In sick bay, an hour or so later, Commander Jones came to. "Creeping concussive skullular strombosis" was the doctor's diagnosis of what had happened, moaning delayed action from that bump on the head the day before. He would be O.K. again in a couple of days.

The doctor insisted that Joe spend the rest of that day in sick bay, too, under observation. Many official and unofficial visitors who asked to see Joe and find out how he had done the job were told, "That can wait till tomorrow."

The captain of the Okinawa believed in conducting the ship's business without undue delay. Prompt and impartial