

2D EMERGENCY RESCUE SQUADRON

"The Last Hand" by Colonel Bill Helmantoler

That was the damnedest poker game I have ever played in. It was held in my office (23 December 1944) on an island near the equator in the Western Pacific during World War II. Japanese bombers interrupted play twice during the first hour of the game. Each time, we had to run outside in the rain to a crude bomb shelter where we sat in the dripping darkness and waited for the "all clear."

As bad as the conditions were, the most frustrating factor was that nobody was getting a decent hand. There hadn't been a ten-dollar pot in the half-dozen hands we had played, and that wasn't because of lack of money in the game. Each participant was playing on money he had won during the month, so there were several thousand dollars available for betting without bringing personal pain to the losers.

Finally, as host and dealer I suggested we play one last hand in which each player would ante five dollars. This way somebody would win a few bucks, and we could go back to our tents and lie down on our wet cots for a nervous night's sleep.

But that wasn't the way it went at all. The player to my immediate left opened for the amount in the pot -- \$35.00. The next man raised \$70.00. Each player in turn either called or raised. Nobody folded. By the time the betting got around to Lieutenant Smith who was at my immediate right, he made the bet an even thousand. Smitty was a good friend and a very good poker player; and I knew he had won a lot of money in the last few weeks.

I "sweated" my cards again: three, four, five, six of diamonds and a nine of clubs possible straight, possible flush, and possible STRAIGHT FLUSH. I had to stay and draw a card even though it would cost at least a thousand bucks. I called, and so did two other players. I calculated that there was \$5,000 in the pot. I was having a hard time breathing as I dealt the players their draw cards.

The man who had opened stayed pat as did Smitty. I took one card. I "sweated" my cards again, trying to muster the courage to look at the hand. As I peaked at the new card in my hand and saw that it was a two of diamonds, I thought I

was going to die. A straight flush! I had never held a natural one in my life. I hoped that the other players couldn't see my "poker face."

The first two bettors checked to Smitty, the raiser, and Smitty looked me up and down. "Cap'n," he said with a wry smile, "you look like you just swallowed a canary. I'm going to let you name your poison. But I don't want anybody to look at my hand for nothing, so I bet \$200.00."

I counted my money on the table -- \$710.00. Most of it represented previous winnings but about \$200.00 was my own hard-earned dough. With a deep sigh I pushed it all in to the pot and squeezed out the words, "I raise \$500.00." This was like the movies I was sweating through my pants.

Only Smitty called. I laid down my cards and announced triumphantly, "Straight flush!" Smitty gulped, and said, "How high?" My heart fell. I knew he had won. My two to six was about as low as you can get. He beat me with a seven-high club straight flush. He scooped up the armload of money into his shirt and thanked us for our contributions.

A half-hour later a lone Japanese bomber dropped his load on Smitty's lighted tent. We picked up more than \$8,000.00 strewn around the area and sent it back home to his widow. At his funeral the next afternoon, we got word that Smitty was on the promotion list to captain. We changed the rank on the white burial marker. It truly was the last hand.

As I said at the top, "That was the damnedest poker game I ever played in."