

The Roundtable Forum

official newsletter of the
Battle of Midway Roundtable

www.midway42.org



JANUARY 2025

~ INTRODUCTION ~

Happy New Year and welcome to our 4th newsletter in the Midway Roundtable's 28th year on the Internet. This issue features an update from our long-serving webmaster who has been sidelined for a while with a health issue. Next is news concerning a very interesting new book by one of the original VT-8 TBF airmen, followed by a report on the Navy's attempts to fix the troublesome Mark 13 torpedo, and some feedback on the campaign to award the Medal of Honor to Midway's torpedo squadron commanders. Thom and I hope you enjoy this latest offering and will look forward to your questions and comments.

—Ron Russell
2 January 2025

~ AROUND THE TABLE ~

MEMBERS' TOPICS IN THIS ISSUE:

1. Message from our webmaster
2. New autobiography of a VT-8 airman
3. Colorized TBD photo in the December newsletter
4. Fixing the Mark 13 Torpedo
5. Medal of Honor for VT commanders

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1. MESSAGE FROM OUR WEBMASTER

Ed. note: our webmaster and chief editor Thom Walla is making slow but steady progress in recovering from a stroke in September. He is still a long way from doing any serious typing or extensive computer work, but he managed the following short message for you using just one hand. BZ, Thom, for your perseverance!

20 December 2024
From: Thom Walla
(Editor/webmaster, BOMRT)
Nebraska

Health update: doing well and rehab is working. Walking now pretty well. Don't need a cane or any other hardware. Doing the treadmill to recover endurance. Got back on the tennis court a week or so ago. Can't play anywhere near competitive yet but it was nice to be there just hitting the ball again. Left arm and hand steadily gaining strength and function. It's just going to take a lot more rehab for the arm to make anything like typing and tennis a reality again.
—Thom

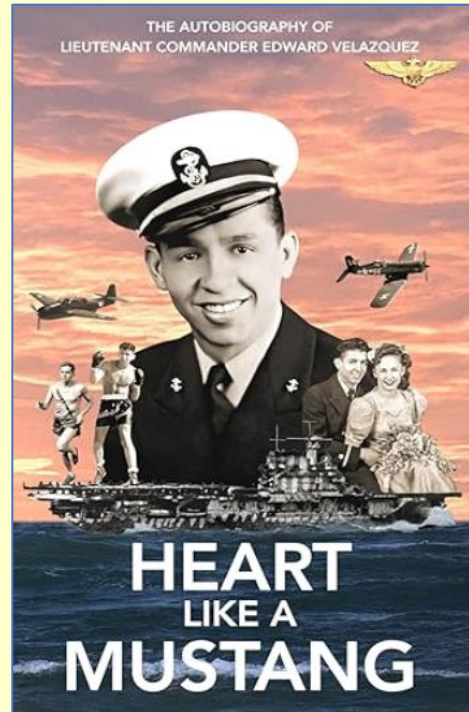
Midway Marine vet Ed Fox presents Thom with a flag flown on Midway during the 77th anniversary of the battle. See the [Aug 2019](#) newsletter.



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2. NEW AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A VT-8 AIRMAN

Here's info on a new book that Roundtable followers should find interesting. It's the autobiography of one of the original TBF airmen, assigned to the VT-8 Avenger detachment prior to Midway. The book is unique in that it's a first-person account from the veteran himself rather than a historian's research.



2 December 2024
From: Don Velazquez
California

My father was an original radioman-gunner with VT-8, and some of his accounts may be of interest. He trained [in the first TBFs] at Grumman/Beth Page under Swede Larsen.

Prior to that, he did fly with most of the original pilots who lost their lives at Midway. He even inserted his name on Fieberling's flight schedule, having not heard about the request for volunteers. He got a chewing out by Fieberling. I likely would not be writing you had he gone with them. He was Larsen's gunner for a bit, then told him he didn't want to fly with him anymore, right in front of the flight crews during debriefing aboard the *Saratoga* before Guadalcanal. Some of his experiences with VT-8 and otherwise may even give you a few chuckles.

Please put me on the mailing list if you would. I'm also pasting in the link for the book on Amazon. I think there should be something in there that the Midway folks could add to their great work.

HEART LIKE A MUSTANG
The Autobiography of Lieutenant Commander Edward Velazquez

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0DMVTVK73>

Thanks for your message, Don, and good luck with the book. The mention of your dad's experience with Swede Larsen will strike a chord with anyone familiar with Robert Mrazek's *A Dawn Like Thunder*, which describes some of Larsen's caustic relationships with his VT-8 subordinates.

(continued next page)

Don sent me a lengthy excerpt from the book, and I was favorably impressed. Here's part of it, describing how his dad tried hard to be included in the TBF detachment bound for Midway:

Larsen was instructed to remain at Ford Island himself and to send six TBFs to Midway Island to fortify Marine and Army air groups there, so he assigned his second in command, Lieutenant Fieberling, to lead them. A flight schedule for Fieberling's group was posted outside the squadron office. I went over to check it and discovered my name wasn't on it, and another name was where I was sure mine should have been. I ought to have inquired first but was certain it was a mistake, so I crossed out that name and wrote in my own. Shortly afterward, Fieberling became aware of the change that was made to his flight schedule and started calling out my name. I hustled over and got chewed out. I tried explaining that there had to be some mistake. I said, "That's my plane and my pilot", then Fieberling practically yelled at me "No, that's my plane and my pilot, and you're not coming!" I was more disappointed than embarrassed. It turned out that a request was made for volunteers, which I missed hearing about.

Heart Like a Mustang is available on Amazon in Kindle and paperback editions and comes with a strong endorsement by Mrazek. —RR

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3. COLORIZED TBD PHOTO IN THE [DECEMBER NEWSLETTER](#)

The following brief message concerning the colorized TBD photo at the end of last month's newsletter comes from a spectator at one of Brock Howe's BOM presentations at the air museum in Houston. (Brock, they're paying attention!)

2 December 2024
From: Robert Rheinboldt
Texas

Should the deck be some shade of blue?



Robert, I think you're right. The software-based colorizing process is amazing, but not perfect. There were some comments on the source website that the deck color and some others weren't authentic. Even so, I thought the modified image was a refreshing variation of the black-and-white original. For another example, see our [March 2024 newsletter](#).

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4. FIXING THE MARK 13 TORPEDO

In our [November 2024 newsletter](#), Don Boyer offered some observations on the woes of USN torpedoes in the early battles of the Pacific War. Tom Wildenberg continues the discussion with more on the problems with the Mark 13 aerial torpedo and the Navy’s attempts to fix them. (The Mark 14 submarine and Mark 15 destroyer torpedoes are separate issues).

Tom is the author *Destined for Glory: Dive Bombing, Midway, and the Evolution of Carrier Air Power* (Naval Institute Press, 1998) and with coauthor Norman Polmar, *Ship Killer: A History of the American Torpedo* (Naval Institute Press, 2010). Tom’s article has been edited for length and clarity.

28 October 2024
From: Tom Wildenburg
Arizona

The Mark 14 submarine torpedo had a variety of flaws including a defective magnetic exploder that tended to go off prematurely, a depth problem due to the incorrect placement of a depth sensor, and a weak contact in the exploder which failed to initiate the warhead’s charge. There is no evidence that the Mark 13 had a depth keeping problem or that it experienced premature detonations to my knowledge (if there are any records of this please advise). The Mark 13-1 aerial torpedo did have a water entry problem that affected its performance.

The following is a long-needed explanation of the development of the Mark 13, the changes that created problems, the Torpedo Station’s long running efforts to correct these problems, and a possible explanation of why the Mark 13 was successful in sinking the Shoho at Coral Sea and the possible misses at Kwajalein.

Looking back at my records I discovered the following document indicating which torpedoes were assigned to which ships in September 1941:

CV	Mark 13 ("Mod 0")	Mark 13-1 ("Mod 1")
Lexington	36	
Saratoga		36
Enterprise		36
Yorktown	36	

Source; ChfBuOrd to Inspector of Ordnance [IO] in charge [Torpedo Station], 15 Sept 1941, File S75 (MK XIII) BuOrd Conf. Corr. Jan. 1940 to April, 1942, RG 74, NA.

This supports my contention that the Mark 13s were employed at Coral Sea, the Mark 13-1s at Kwajalein. The latter needs to be taken into account on any thorough analysis of that action.

Now, regarding the history of the Mark 13, the Mark 13-1, and subsequent mods: when the design of the Mark 13 was initiated in 1930, the Martin T4M-1, having a top speed of 114 mph, was the Navy's front line torpedo plane. The first successful run of the Mark 13 was made in March 1932, two years before the prototype TBD Devastator was ordered. As I wrote in Ship Killer:

"Aerial testing of the Mark 13 torpedo began in 1935. At least 23 torpedoes fitted with bronze exercise heads were launched from aircraft between 27 May and 1 October. The Mark 13 torpedoes were dropped from altitudes of 46 to 105 feet at speeds vary from 85 to 114 knots.

"Twenty additional drops were conducted the next year as part of the proof tests conducted on the first production order of 108 torpedoes, enough to provide two load outs to each of the 18 plane squadrons on the *Lexington*, *Saratoga*, and *Yorktown*.

"A number of drops were made in excess of the 125-knot maximum launching speed now specified for the Mark 13 torpedo. None of the drops resulted in torpedoes diving in the mud at the start of the run due to abnormal initial dives. For the most part the damage sustained on the different torpedo tests were minor and did not adversely affect the torpedo's run.

**"Not surprisingly, the Torpedo Station believed that it had a good torpedo."
[emphasis added]**

It should be noted that these tests were conducted during the height of the Depression when funding for such projects was scarce.

The performance of the Mark 13 was verified during the gunnery practice conducted by Torpedo Squadron 3 on 26 September 1938 when drops were made at less than 90 knots and 50 feet or less, and during the practice conducted on 20 November 1939 when successful drops were made at 100 knots between 40-50 feet. Performance of the Mark 13 in both exercises was described as "excellent." (See VT-3, Report of Gunnery Exercises, 1938 & 1939, ComAir, RG 313, NA).

When the Naval Torpedo Station received an order from BuOrd to manufacture 72 Mark 13 torpedoes in the Spring of 1938, the design was modified to have a non-rail tail in which the propellers were placed in front of the rudder. This modification appears have been make as part of the changes in the design made to improve the torpedo's ruggedness after test shots of Mark 13 torpedoes fitted with then non-rail type tail, launched both

from Test Barge and from airplane, showed satisfactory performance. (See IO to ChfBuOrd, 6 September 1941, File S75 (Mk XIII), BuOrd Conf. Corr., RG 74, NA and a similar undated memo having Subject: Project Order 8449). These torpedoes were designated as the Mark 13, Mod 1.

The evidence suggests that the changes made to the Mark 13-1 reduced the tail weight slightly, which impacted the center of gravity. Whether or not this affected its entry into the water is unknown, but the first gunnery practices with the new torpedo conducted by Torpedo Squadron 6 on 6 November 1940 revealed that there were problems with the new design that caused five of the torpedoes to run erratically. Lt. Cdr. Albert Handly, the squadron's commanding officer, reported that he "believed that the erratic performance of these torpedoes may be related to the location of the control surfaces of the MK XIII-1 torpedo forward of the propellers. In such a position the propellers may be jammed by the carrying away of the wooden tail vanes. This type tail is also conducive to the porpoising of the torpedo." (See CO *Enterprise* Air Group to CNO, Report of I.B.P. Torpedo Practice No. 1, 3 December 1940, File VT-6, RGE 1940-41, Com Air, RG 313, NA).

To rectify the water entry problem the Naval Torpedo Station issued instructions on 18 November 1941 for addition of biplane stabilizers that were to be added to the tail of the torpedo.



A TBF drops a Mark 13 during practice run in 1943. Note the "box-like" wooden stabilizer at the rear of the torpedo.

During the next two and a half years, the Torpedo Station struggled to design changes in the Mark 13 that would make it more reliable. Very little is known about this work. Bureau of Ordnance records on this subject were classified and many of the photographs of the tests were censored by having the stabilizers air brushed out. Available evidence suggests that the Torpedo Station was unable, however, to achieve the degree of improvement needed to make the Mark 13 acceptable for use under the conditions now deemed essential for a successful torpedo attack.

In frustration, the Navy turned to the National Defense Research Committee (NDRC) for assistance. The NDRC subsequently issued a research contract to the California Institute of Technology (Caltech) in the fall of 1943 to conduct research on the high-speed water entry of torpedoes. The shroud ring that Caltech developed along with two other modifications greatly improved the reliability of the Mark 13 torpedo. The first was the addition of a water trip-valve that delayed firing of the igniter until the torpedo had entered the water. This feature caused the torpedo to run cold during the air flight, eliminating turbine failures due to over speeding in the air. The second was addition of a drag ring, commonly called the “pickle barrel” (because of its resemblance to that object) composed of a preformed plywood cylinder made up in three segments that was slipped over the warhead. The drag ring increased the effect of the stabilizer, reduced hooks and the depths of dive during initial water entry, and acted as a shock absorber to reduce the impact of deceleration.



A Mark 13 with drag ring and stabilizer, but no the shroud ring being loaded onto a TBF on board the *Wasp* (CV-18) October 1944.

These and other minor improvements in the Mark 13 torpedo —Mods 2A, 3, 4 and 5— were implemented by the fall of 1944. Torpedoes so modified reached the fleet just in time for the invasion of Leyte in the Philippines and the ensuing Battle of Leyte Gulf.



Shroud ring on a Mark 13 mod 6 torpedo.

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5. MEDAL OF HONOR FOR VT COMMANDERS (See the [October 2023](#) and [November 2024](#) newsletters)

10 November 2024
From: Barrett Tillman
Arizona
author, *Enterprise, Dauntless, Whirlwind*, et al

Maybe I'm repeating myself from some years ago re MoHs for the BOM VTs. Some aspects apparently not widely known:

Until August 1942 the Navy Cross was subordinate in precedence to the Navy Distinguished Service Medal. (A friend who also had a Cross said his DSM was "the senior officer's Good Conduct Medal.") So—officially if not pragmatically—the BOM Navy Crosses were third-tier awards. I calculated

medal totals from John Lundstrom's superb *The First Team* (Vol. One) and found that more Crosses were awarded than DFCs.

BOMers will recall George Walsh's campaign to get The Big One for McClusky, but eventually that effort vaporized—IMO, as it should have. He was like Teddy Roosevelt who DID get The Big One (undeservedly, a century later) because he was a unit commander who commanded his unit in combat. That's what he (and TR Jr., come to think on it) were paid to do. But Politics Uber Alles.

I—we keep bouncing back to the Above & Beyond clause. What is A&B for a combat commander who pursues his assigned mission? (See the previous paragraph.) Having written two MoH books and known-interviewed about a dozen recipients, my conclusion: IT DEPENDS. There is no statutory description for A&B, presumably left to interpretation.

We've probably discussed the Pearl Harbor MoHs....All 15 went USN; none to the Army. As I recall, the PacFleet list was 13 with two added by the decedents' college friends in DC. I refer of course to Van Valkenberg and Kidd whose citations were identical: present on the BB-39 bridge when the ship blew up.

Later in the war a credited hit on a capital ship (including CLs, I think) was an automatic Cross, as was ace in a day. One example: I knew an F4U aviator who hit a Kure CVL with a rocket and received a Cross. By the later-war criteria, no TBDs torpedoed any Japanese ships at BOM although as noted, we're in a sort of twilight zone in that regard.

As a sidebar: the medal process remains erratic and even messy. I met a former Harrier pilot who waited three years for his DFC.

Just FWIW.

Barrett sends

I too am repeating myself here, but also FWIW, I remain of the opinion that Lindsey and Massey were doing what their job descriptions required: lead a torpedo attack with support from their air groups' fighter and dive bomber squadrons. Regardless how well that worked, it was their *plan and expectation*; what they trained for and were directed to do. But Waldron was different: as soon as he broke from Ring's formation, he *knew* that he was going in alone—no fighter nor SBD support; plans and expectations were discarded. Still, he charged ahead anyway, a literal "Charge of the Devastators" as Paul Corio has colorfully labeled it. For me, that propelled VT-8 into the "above and beyond" realm, possibly justifying the MoH for Waldron and maybe all of his pilots as well. (Ironically, that's exactly what Mitscher recommended in his after-action report.)
—RR



Now hear this!

NEWS AND INFO IN THIS ISSUE:

- The Pacific War in “The Great Courses”
- Editor’s Notes

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THE PACIFIC WAR IN “THE GREAT COURSES”

In addition to his short message above, Thom Walla reported that to help pass the time during his recovery, a friend signed him up with [The Great Courses](#), an online video learning resource. That link takes you to their “World War II in the Pacific” offering, which Thom says is outstanding, largely due to its author and narrator, our own Craig Symonds (*The Battle of Midway, Nimitz at War*, et al). Thom says if you don’t have a subscription, consider it—the PacWar series is worth the price, but they have a lot more history courses plus other subjects.

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EDITOR’S NOTES

We have two new BOM-era photos on the next page (new to me, anyway). Howard Ady recently sent in a view of the *Enterprise* from the National Archives (NARA). The caption states that the picture was taken from the deck of the *Hornet* while the two CVs were rushing toward the Coral Sea in May 1942. The second picture shows the *Akagi*, purportedly nearing Midway, as seen by the R/G in a Kate or Val that had just launched. I found no other data regarding that particular photo so if anyone can add something more about it, please pass the word.

Thanks to everyone for your continued interest in and support of the BOMRT, and do keep your comments and questions coming. Our email address is:

midwayroundtable@gmail.com.

—Ron Russell

