

The Roundtable Forum

official newsletter of the
Battle of Midway Roundtable

www.midway42.org

OUR 28th YEAR
ON THE INTERNET



APRIL 2025

~ INTRODUCTION ~

Welcome to the Battle of Midway Roundtable newsletter for April. Thanks to all of our members and readers, whether you're an old hand or just reported aboard, for your continuing interest in all things Midway. This month's issue features an important contribution from our archives: the recollections of VB-8 pilot Clay Fisher on what he experienced and remembered about "the Flight to Nowhere"....especially his perspectives on his commander, Stanhope Ring.

We also have some new video of the wrecks of *Yorktown*, *Akagi*, and *Kaga* on the ocean floor, and we're very pleased to announce the recovery of a vital set of BOM aircrew and aircraft data files that have been MIA from the Roundtable for many years. One of our most important services is identifying and confirming the names of those who fought the battle in the air, and the information in those recovered files is once again available to all.

Webmaster Thom Walla and I hope you enjoy the April issue and will be pleased to receive your comments, pro or con, about anything you find on these pages or concerning any other BOM matter.

—Ron Russell
29 March 2025

~ **AROUND THE TABLE** ~

MEMBERS' TOPICS IN THIS ISSUE:

1. Clay Fisher and Stanhope Ring
2. VT-8 pilot "Frenchie" Fayle—in his words
3. Donations to the Roundtable
4. Video: wreckage of *Akagi*, *Kaga*, and *Yorktown*

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1. CLAY FISHER AND STANHOPE RING

Last month's newsletter featured a colorized photo focused on VB-8 pilot Clay Fisher's SBD, about to launch on the "Flight to Nowhere." The text included a link to an expansive 2004 message from Clay in our archives, but the link turned out to be faulty. To make up for it, here is that exclusive Roundtable message in full, with important first-person perspective by Clay on one of our most enduring topics. (*Editing note: I've added subheads and images in this very long message to improve readability.*)

18 June 2004

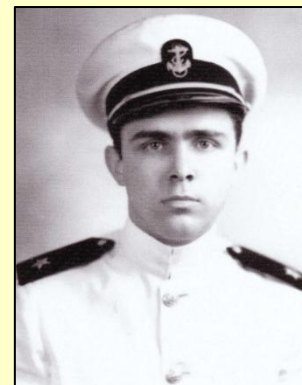
From: Clay Fisher

(BOM vet, VB-8 pilot, USS *Hornet*, CV-8)

In the beginning

I was a dive bomber pilot in VB-8 from a couple months before the *Hornet* air group was officially designated and the *Hornet* was commissioned on 18 October 1941 at NAS Norfolk. I want to review some of the facts about our air group and squadron training or lack of training. I became an operational flight instructor in dive bombers, fighter, and later night fighters in 1943-45, and then realized how badly trained we really were in 1941-42.

I commenced flight training in February 1941, and was commissioned an ensign and received my wings in August. Quite a few of my primary flight instructors were "plough backs"—instructors who had just completed their own flight training. The flight training program was expanding so rapidly that there was a real shortage of experienced flight instructors. I had a "plough back" for a



Aviation cadet Fisher

flight instructor and he wasted some of my flight instruction by "flat hatting"—flying low over some poor farmer's chicken farm and panicking the chickens!

I usually received a down check on my first flight check in each phase of my primary training. My check pilots, the more experienced flight instructors, taught me how to fly correctly. LTjg "Smoke" Stream, who made vice admiral later in his career, gave me a down check because I didn't have a clue on how to correct for crosswinds in landings. He had just returned from a fleet squadron and showed me all the ways to handle a plane in a crosswind. He told me, "do anything you can do to prevent your plane drifting laterally to the runway when you touch down, side slip, get a wing down into the wind, skid, etc." That instruction was to become vital to me later in my career.

The Hornet Air Group: no training, no practice

Forming the *Hornet* air group (HAG) can be compared to an expansion baseball or football team. The *Yorktown* and *Enterprise* air groups were already organized and experienced when the war started. They did not have as many inexperienced pilots. A few senior pilots were ordered into the *Hornet* air group, but the rest had just received their wings.

The two dive bomber squadrons, VS-8 and VB-8 flew obsolete Curtis SBC-4 biplane Helldivers until the *Hornet* arrived in San Diego in March 1942. They then received some very used SBDs.



It takes a lot of time to properly train an air group—carrier qualifying each individual pilot in specific aircraft, etc. Due to our accelerated deployment to the Pacific Fleet and the Doolittle mission, most of the dive bomber pilots received only 8 to 10 hours familiarization time in the SBDs at NAS North Island. We didn't get to try field carrier landing practice in the SBDs until the *Hornet* returned to Pearl Harbor after the Doolittle mission. The wind was very gusty and too dangerous to do simulated carrier landing and we had to stop the operation. Also, no dive bombing practice. The Doolittle mission robbed the air group of our "spring training."

Within days after the *Hornet* arrived back at Pearl, we deployed to the south Pacific. On that deployment the fighter pilots got to fly a few CAP flights and the SBD pilots flew just some 200-mile single plane searches. To my knowledge, the torpedo pilots never flew on that deployment. Only a few of the older dive bomber pilots had any experience diving the SBD.

I asked our squadron C.O. why the dive bomber pilots returning from searches couldn't climb up to 10,000 feet and at least make one practice dive on a destroyer on the rear of the task force screen. I don't know if the idea was ever forwarded to CHAG (Commander of the HAG, Stanhope Ring). I had never made a 70 degree dive in the SBD until the BOM! Dive bombing takes practice and familiarity with the trim characteristics of the SBD. Good rudder trim, to avoid skidding, was probably the main essential for getting a hit. Figuring out the correct lead was always a tough problem. It took practice on a moving target.

Stanhope Ring, the pilot

I met CHAG for the first time on the Hornet's quarterdeck in September 1941 when I was checking in with my orders. He gave me a tour of the hanger and flight deck. I was so green I didn't know you were supposed to ask the duty officer for permission to come aboard and salute the flag! This was my first time on a carrier, and believe me, it looked huge. I noticed an SBC-4, with "CHAG" painted on the side, tied down on the hanger deck. At the time I didn't know this was the group commander's aircraft. The biplane's landing gear was damaged, its "flying wires" supporting the wings were broken, and the wings were drooping. I never heard an explanation, but I assumed that CHAG had wanted to make the first carrier landing on the *Hornet*. It must have been a lulu! You had to work at making a bad landing in the SBC-4!



Looking back at those hectic times of accelerated deployments, it was impossible to properly train our air group. I did read that the Japanese air groups practiced coordinated attacks on their own carrier task forces until they encountered bad weather while headed for Midway. I've never heard of our carrier task forces conducting that type of training. The Japanese squadrons did a better job of coordinating their attacks than we did. In 1942, they just had better trained squadrons.

"The flight to nowhere"

I wish I could remember the compass heading we were flying the morning of June 4th. I do know I plotted in our proposed course and computed the expected time to reach the Japanese task force. When I found out I was assigned to fly the left wing position on CHAG and that he intended to fly above the two dive bomber squadrons to better coordinate

the *Hornet* aircraft, I was totally devastated! We expected to get hit hard by Zeros and I knew they would immediately go after our three plane formation in order to get the flight leader.

I even had a camera mounted in the belly of my plane. I was never checked out on the camera and didn't even know I was the cameraman until I had started my engine. The *Hornet's* chief photographer climbed up on my right wing to show me where the camera switch was located. It was behind my head and hard to reach without turning my shoulder around about 90 degrees. I guess I was supposed to try to get pictures of bomb damage. I assumed that CHAG and us two wingman would dive last. Looking back, CHAG should have briefed his two wingmen in one of the ready rooms and worked out our navigational problem together. From the reported location of the Japanese carriers and our known *Hornet* position, there could only be one course to fly. It was a very simple navigational plot. I don't remember not flying the course I had plotted in the ready room.

As we neared our point of no return, CHAG gave me a hand signal to form a "scouting line" (a peacetime relic in my book), pointing down at VS-8. I assumed he had his other wingman pass the same order to VB-8. Why would he want to break up our tactical formation and make us all sitting ducks if we encountered Zeros?

Smoke on the horizon

We had unlimited visibility while searching for the Japanese carriers. At the time I thought we needed to change course to the north as I thought the huge vertical column of black smoke I observed was coming from Midway. If the smoke was coming from a burning Japanese carrier why didn't I see smoke from the other two carriers?

CDR McCluskey and the *Enterprise* SBDs were approaching their point of no return and he had to make a decision on a change of course. Fortunately, he spotted a Japanese destroyer headed at high speed to the northeast. McCluskey then picked up the same course as the destroyer. If he had not sighted it, he probably would not have found the Japanese carriers. His flight was too low on fuel to do much searching. My point is, was CDR McCluskey's navigation any better than CHAG's? I have a copy of CDR McCluskey's narrative of his flight and he never mentions the course he was flying.



C. Wade McCluskey

Stanhope Ring: flight leader or naval officer?

My conclusion: CHAG would have been a better staff officer than operational flight leader. Most of us younger pilots that flew with CHAG on previous flights considered him a below average pilot. He was just too far removed from his squadron commanders and pilots in converting from peacetime to wartime combat operations.

The C.O. of VT-8 may have guessed the Japanese position correctly, but he doomed his entire squadron when he took it upon himself to take a different course than the air group. The sacrifice of all three torpedo squadrons did draw most of the Zeros down to lower altitudes, permitting the *Yorktown* and *Enterprise* dive bombers to make their dives almost unopposed.



Stanhope C. Ring

Gus Widhelm and VS-8

I considered LCDR Gus Widhelm, the XO of VS-8, to be the best combat flight leader in the *Hornet* air group. I have often wondered what might have happened if he had been CHAG at the BOM. Gus was combat fearless and a superior naval aviator. On the morning of June 6th, the third day of the BOM, Gus was the flight leader of the morning attack on two cruisers and some destroyers. Gus briefed the flight in the VS-8 ready room and told us he was going to drive a bomb down the stack of the biggest cruiser. As we approached the targets, Gus broke loose from our formation and did a solo dive on a cruiser and "nailed" it just aft of the stack. Now that was leadership! I know every pilot in that flight wanted show Gus we could also get a direct hit. We tried, but our results were poor due to our lack of experience diving the SBD.

Gus was an avid crap shooter and poker player who would bet on anything. He won a bet on a golf course that he could hit a ball farther with his putter than his golfing buddies. He won! Gus was once asked by some reporters if he ever got scared flying combat. Gus told them that he bragged so much he had to live up to his words! He was killed in Texas about twenty years after the war, showing off by attempting to do a low altitude slow roll.

The last time I talked to Gus I had crashed his farewell party at NAS Barbers Point in June of 1951. I was XO of VF-53 flying off the USS *Essex*. The *Essex* air group was temporarily staged at Barbers Point waiting for orders to deploy to Japan. Somehow, I think with the help of Divine Intervention, I made it back to my bunk that night!

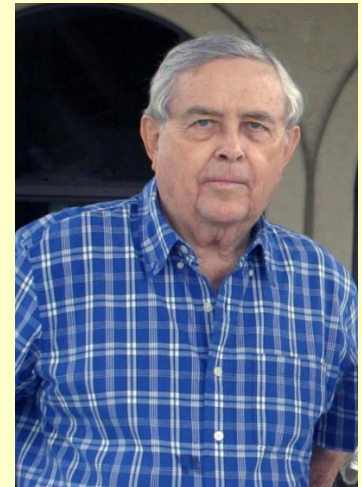
Redemption at Santa Cruz

Lest I forget—a great dive bomber pilot from VB-8, LT Fred Bates. Fred obtained a direct hit on the *Shokaku* during the Battle of Santa Cruz. He dropped his bomb at such a low attitude that he got a small piece of the carrier's flight deck in his cockpit. We always made our dives with an open canopies.

The *Hornet* dive bombers never got a chance to attack the Japanese carriers at the BOM, but I think our four or five 1000 pound direct hits on an aircraft carrier at Santa Cruz while under attack by about 20 Zeros was a very remarkable achievement. Also, fifteen of the sixteen pilots and their gunners survived that flight to kiss some California dirt.

I was always proud of the opportunity to fly off the *Hornet* and to fly the tough old bird, the SBD. Their bombs sank those four carriers at the BOM—four carriers that had attacked Pearl Harbor.

Fighter pilots always seem to get the glory but the dive bomber pilots sunk the ships!



Clay Fisher, 2005

For any newer readers who may not know Clay's full story at the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands: his SBD was shot down, he was knocked cold in the ditching but was saved by his radioman-gunner. They were picked up by the cruiser *Juneau* before its famous loss off Guadalcanal with the five Sullivan brothers.

Credit for images inserted above:
Fisher, aviation cadet: National WWII Museum
SBC-4: scalemates.com
Fisher & Gee, new HAG pilots: Clay Fisher, John Greaves
C. Wade McClusky: NHHC
Stanhope Ring: NHHC
Fisher, 2005: Ron Russell

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2. VT-8 PILOT “FRENCHIE” FAYLE—IN HIS WORDS (See the [March](#) newsletter)

**3 March 2025
From: Andries Visser
Republic of South Africa**

Hi Thom / Ronald,

Thanks for the interesting interview with “Frenchy” Fayle. I once owned a copy of George Gay’s book and if I remember correctly, he made insinuations regarding Fayle’s injury. Every account has two sides and it is welcome that Fayle’ side is now known. His subsequent brave career under Swede Larsen belies the knife injury aspersions.

**Regards,
Andries Visser**

Suspicion about Fayle’s injury came after his squadron’s tragedy at Midway. But if there had been no tragedy (i.e., VT-8 stays with Ring on the Flight to Nowhere), would any such suspicions have arisen at all? In that case, Fayle would have reported an accident and missed an uneventful sortie; so what?

The fact is that there were no witnesses to the injury itself, so our choices are to either accept Fayle’s word or join the speculators. In fairness, though, it would seem that his version of the story is no less credible than an unfounded rumor.

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3. DONATIONS TO THE ROUNDTABLE

**3 March 2025
From: Sam Silberstein
New York**

Dear Ron,

Thanks for another great edition of the newsletter. I can't get over what an unbelievable resource this Roundtable is, and for free! Thanks again and please let me know if I can help with a donation.

**Best to you,
Sam Silberstein**

Sam, thanks for the kind words, but accepting any donations would be a decision for our webmaster Thom Walla, and his policy has been that the Roundtable is strictly voluntary for all hands, including himself. Anyone's best contribution is what you've already done: send in your comments or questions—that tells us that you're out there and continuing to share a common interest in the BOM.

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4. VIDEO: WRECKAGE OF AKAGI, KAGA, AND YORKTOWN

6 March 2025
From: Bob Grove
Ohio

The group might find this interesting.

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/battle-of-midway-shipwreck-photos-180982938/>

Bob's link will take you to a website that's very busy with popup ads and banners. Scroll past all that and find this button for starting the video: It's a recent (2023) underwater exploration feature with good images of all 3 carriers that we haven't seen before. The explorers also provide commentary on what they're seeing on their screens.



Now hear this!

NEWS AND INFO IN THIS ISSUE:

- The SBD in Combat
- BOM aviation data files recovered
- Editor's Notes

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THE SBD IN COMBAT

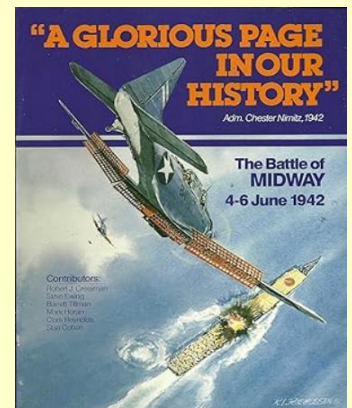
Ever wonder what it was *really* like to pilot an SBD dive bomber in combat, including its signature dive on a moving target? As you might expect, Clay Fisher described that for us in full detail. We've had "The SBD in Combat" on our website for many years, but if you haven't found it yet, check it out [here](#). Read Clay's description and imagine yourself in that pilot's seat, with the R/G behind you calling out rapidly descending altitudes as you plunge toward your target.

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BOM AVIATION DATA FILES RECOVERED

We're very pleased to report the recovery of a vital set of online files that have been missing in action for a very long time. During the Roundtable's earliest years, we depended heavily on Chris Hawkinson's comprehensive BOM website, which helped launch the Roundtable online in 1997. One of the most valuable set of pages on the site was the complete listing of every U.S. aircraft that was available for operation from the atoll plus all three of the carriers. Even more important, the same set of pages included the name of almost every pilot and aircrewman in every operational squadron (or quasi-squadron like the B-26s). There are some exceptions for the B-17 and PBX personnel, but the pilots and aircrew in all the rest are identified by name.

Hawkinson's data was almost entirely provided by Mark Horan, co-author of our top recommendation for a single-volume BOM reference, [A Glorious Page In Our History](#). We especially relied on those aircrew lists when we were asked to research or confirm a particular name as a BOM veteran—they were invaluable for that purpose. The aircraft listings were also helpful to historians wanting to identify or confirm the planes involved in various sorties, and for other purposes. Stated simply, Hawkinson's website was a gold mine for much of what we did on the Battle of Midway Roundtable.



Regrettably, we assumed that the site would be available forever, and that was unrealistic. Chris ultimately passed away and his website with its invaluable data files disappeared from Internet. We spent many years having to do without them, sometimes failing in a research effort that otherwise would have been a success.

Enter our webmaster Thom Walla, who managed to resurrect Chris's files from the obscure depths of an Internet archive. Those files have now been transcribed into PDF format (like this newsletter) and will be available online at some future date when Thom is able to resume full website management for us. In the interim,

we can now respond to any aircraft or aircrew research need like we did before. If you should have such a need, just send us a message with all the details and we'll take care of it. If desired, we can also forward the entire file set to you upon request. There are 9 relatively small PDF files.

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EDITOR'S NOTES

- As you know, the Roundtable is temporarily operating under abnormal conditions, requiring a procedure best described as “make it work somehow.” Here's an example: incoming email to our official address comes to me, and I personally answer any inquiry. However, I must send our reply from my own address—my access to the Roundtable's ID is limited to the inbox. That means that if you would like any type of response, you need to ensure that a message from me doesn't wind up in your spam folder instead of your inbox, and that's very common when you get a message from a previously unknown ID, like mine.

The best way to avoid that is for everyone to add me to the contacts or address book in your email account. A message from me would then bypass your spam filter, and you won't be wondering why your question or comment didn't get a reply—it did, but it's in your spam or junk folder, not your inbox. It's a safe thing for you to do; I obviously don't send spam. So, if you haven't already done it as recommended in past newsletters, please add this entry in your contacts:

Ron Russell
midway.rt@gmail.com

Problem solved, and thank you in advance.

- The March newsletter mentioned a combined event in San Francisco for the annual BOM anniversary and the USS *Yorktown* Club convention in 2007. A link was included to our archived newsletter that described the occasion, but that link gave the same error as the one for Clay Fisher. Here it is again, and it works this time. [Click here](#) and scroll down to “65th Anniversary in San Francisco.”
- Did you check our BOM book review list in the last newsletter, with a handy link to each review? We will eventually get it on the website when that becomes possible, but for now make a note that you will find it in our [March 2025](#) issue.
- Continuing our series of colorized versions of familiar BOM photos, a classic scene from the *Yorktown* appears on the next page.
- Thanks to everyone for your continued interest in and support of the BOMRT, and please keep your comments and questions coming. Our email address is:

midwayroundtable@gmail.com

The Battle of Midway — colorized



USS *Yorktown* (CV-5), 4 June 1942. Photo taken by photographer's mate and future Roundtable member Bill Roy after the three bomb hits. Bill took most of the photos aboard CV-5 that have appeared over the years in nearly every book or other BOM reference. For more about him, [click here](#).

As with the other colorized photos in recent newsletters, the colorizing technique for this photo was speculative, representing the programmer's best attempt to make the software reproduce authentic colors. The result is usually very good, but seldom perfect.

Image credit:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:USS_Yorktown_during_the_Battle_of_Midway_\(34966921235\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:USS_Yorktown_during_the_Battle_of_Midway_(34966921235).jpg)