

Avengers at Midway

By CAPT Albert K. Earnest, USN (Ret.)
and CDR Harry Ferrier, USN (Ret.)

When they flew to the Midway Islands on 1 June 1942, the public didn't know the six-plane group of Grumman TBF-1 torpedo bombers existed. Public announcement of the Avenger came after the battle. How this small group of torpedo

planes from Torpedo Squadron Eight (VT-8) came to be land-based at the Battle of Midway is an interesting sidelight to that historic battle, and is the subject of this story.

I finished my flight training in November 1941, at Miami (Opa Locka) Fla., and received my Navy wings and ensign's commission. I also received orders to VT-8 at Norfolk, Va. I wasn't particularly overjoyed — at Opa Locka we'd flown fighters and dive bombers but torpedo planes weren't even mentioned. I knew, of course, what torpedo planes were supposed to do — penetrate the screen and drop a torpedo, low and slow, at an enemy vessel — but it didn't seem like a recipe for long life. Nevertheless, those were my orders.

VT-8 was formed in summer 1941, assigned to the newest fleet carrier, USS



TBF-1 Avenger in flight similar to the ones flown at Midway, circa 1942.
Photo courtesy Emil Buehler Naval Aviation Library.



ENS Earnest and RM3/c Harry Ferrier on Henderson Field, Guadalcanal, September 1942. Photo courtesy CAPT A.K Earnest.

Hornet (CV-8). When I reported to Norfolk on 10 December 1941 — just after Pearl Harbor — the ship and squadron were busily preparing for their shakedown cruise, so I was sent to the Advanced Carrier Training Group (ACTG) on hold until the squadron returned. While there, we flew mostly SNJs, but I did check out in the TBD-1, which VT-8 was flying.

The ship and squadron returned on 3 February 1942 and all of us ensigns on hold — including George Gay — reported in, then immediately started flying. Our C.O., LCDR John Waldron, believed that any time in the air was good time, so in field carrier landing practice, we always had three pilots in the plane — one in each seat. After scaring the other two to death the first pilot would land and we'd shift seats. Three flights a day was standard, and my log book shows five flights one day. We also flew bombing and torpedo runs, but FCLPS were the main order of business, since *Hornet* was leaving for the Pacific about 1 March, and the squadron needed a few more carrier-qualified pilots.

VT-8 was slated to get the first of the new Grumman TBF-1s, a much superior aircraft to the TBD, but it was obvious that they wouldn't be ready in time for the squadron's deployment. It was decided to split the squadron in half, with the C.O. and most of the experienced pilots going to sea with the TBDs. The X.O., LT Harold (Swede) Larsen, would remain behind at NAS Norfolk with a few experienced pilots and the rest of the new pilots to receive the new TBFs and get them ready to bring to the squadron.

Originally, I was scheduled to go to sea with the squadron, but *Hornet's* departure was de-

layed a week and, during that time, the plan was changed and I was left behind with the VT-8 receiving detail. I guess that's the first bullet I dodged!

We started receiving TBFs late in March, and by the first of May, had 21 aircraft. Grumman set up a modification line in our hangar to put in changes that hadn't been installed at the factory, including bulletproof fuel tanks. We flew the planes as much as we could, and were impressed with its performance and load-carrying capabilities as compared to the TBD.

Most of us made carrier qualification landings in the TBD in April onboard USS *Long Island* (AVG-1) in the Chesapeake Bay.

In early May, a group of us flew to NAS Quonset Point for torpedo drops on the range in Narragansett Bay. While there, we were pleased to learn that, with plywood fairings on the nose and tail of the torpedo, they could be dropped at 125 knots vice the old maximum of 80 knots.

We had to cut the runs short, however, because the receiving detail had been given orders to join the rest of the squadron as soon as possible — expedite!

We left Norfolk for the West Coast in the middle of May with 21 TBFs, but lost one in a forced landing. At NAS North Island, the planes were put through another modification line and then flown to Alameda, where they were loaded aboard the USS *Hammondspoint* (AVP-2) a railroad car transport that had been pressed into service to carry airplanes.

The detachment and planes arrived in Pearl Harbor on 28 May — one day after *Hornet* had sailed with VT-8 and their TBDs.

A decision was made by the AIRPAC staff to send six new TBFs to Midway to bolster the defenses of the islands. Although Swede Larsen wanted to lead the group, he was told he would have to remain at Ford Island to command the larger part of the detachment. Accordingly, the Midway group was to be led by our second-in-command, LT Langdon K. "Fieb" Fieberling. Practically all of us volunteered to go, and I was one of the ones selected. The others were: Ensigns Ozzie Gaynier, Charlie Brannon, Vic Lewis, and AMMI/c (NAP) Darrell Woodside.

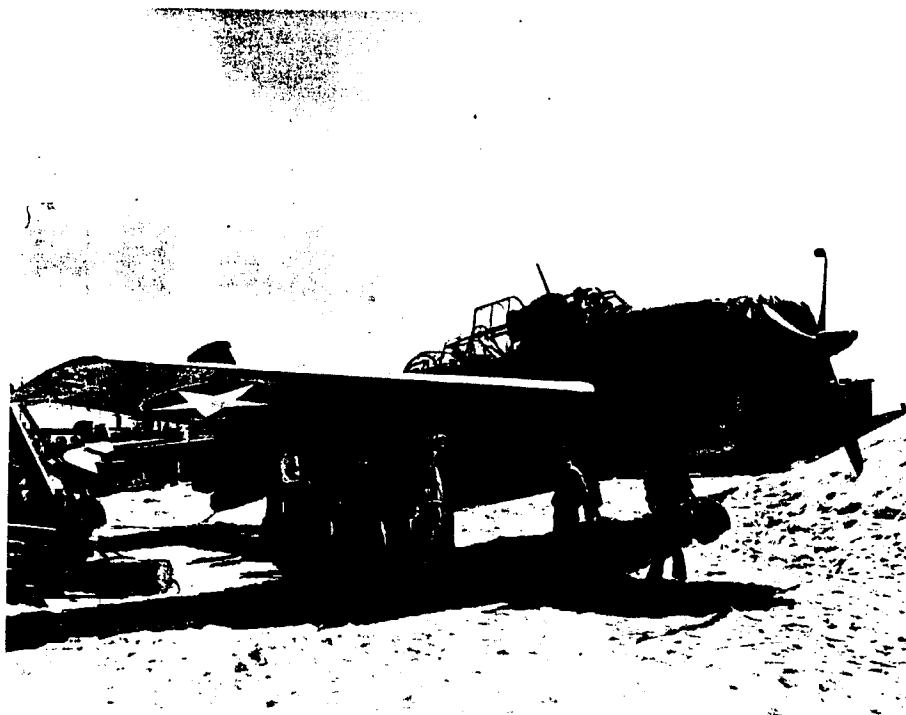
Since it was 1,200 miles to Midway, with no navigational aids enroute or on the island, which was observing strict radio silence, we were happy to learn that two VP-24 patrol plane commanders had volunteered to fly with us as pathfinders, using our Norden bombsights as drift sights. They were Ensigns Jack Wilke and Joseph H. Hissem. Both volunteered to go with us on any combat flights from Midway.

Since we'd never trained as a squadron, we had no regularly assigned crewman. I was happy to be teamed with RM3/c Harry H. Ferrier, as my radioman and tunnel gunner, and SEA1/c Jay D. Manning, as my turret gunner. Both were fine

young men whom I'd known around the detachment, about 18 years old — I was the old man of the crew at age 25. Our aircraft, TBF-1 BuNo 00380, (Swede's plane), was the first TBF delivered to the fleet. Although the squadrons in the combat area had painted out their air group numbers, in view of our late arrival we hadn't had time for that.

We left Ford Island early on 1 June and had an uneventful flight to Midway (thankfully, since it was the first time I'd flown out of sight of land). We landed on Eastern Island, which was teeming with aircraft — Army Air Corps Boeing B-17 *Flying Fortresses*, Martin B-26 *Marauders* configured as torpedo planes, Marine Corps Brewster F2As and Grumman F4F-3 *Wildcats*, Vought SB2U-2 *Vindicators* and Douglas SBD-2 *Dauntless* dive bombers, Consolidated PBV-5A *Catalina* patrol planes. With them, there were now six Grumman TBF-1 torpedo bombers.

Our first order of business was to drop the bomb-bay fuel tanks and load torpedoes. We were again happy to learn that our maximum dropping speed and altitude had been raised to 200 knots at 200 feet. After LT Fieberling had conferred with the Marine staff, he told us that a



ENS Earnest's TBF-1 at Midway Island, 25 June 1942. Photo courtesy Robert L. Lawson.

Japanese attack was imminent, and the island had to be defended by the forces on it — our carriers were to the east protecting the Hawaiian Islands. It was planned that we would join with the Marine dive bombers, and make a joint attack on any enemy forces.

For the next three mornings we manned our planes an hour before dawn, warmed them up and cut the engines, but remained in the aircraft until the morning search planes had reported no sightings in their areas. We then spent the days checking our equipment, wandering around the island (which was just one big airfield) or chasing gooney birds. I found that I knew a number of the Marine pilots from flight training — they were as green as we were!

On the morning of 4 June at about 0600, a Marine officer rode up in a jeep, climbed up on Fieberling's wing and told him something — what it was I've never found out. Another Marine came over to my aircraft and shouted up to me, "Enemy forces at 320 degrees, 150 miles." We immediately started our engines and taxied out. The fighters were already taking off and we were right behind them. We joined up and headed out on course 320 degrees, climbing above scattered clouds to about 4,000 feet. For some reason, our joint attack never materialized.

Shortly after we joined up, Manning, my turret gunner, told me he could see firing from Midway. Just then, a Japanese aircraft made a pass at us but did not fire. I thought it looked like a Me-109, which we'd heard the Japanese had. From later information, however, I believe it could have been one of two Yokosuka D4Y *Judy* fast reconnaissance planes that were in the Japanese force.

We stayed on course 320

degrees and, after about an hour, I sighted one ship ahead — it looked like a transport. Suddenly, however, I saw a large force ahead of us, with at least two carriers. Almost instantaneously, Manning called that we were being attacked by enemy fighters. It quickly became obvious as they were all around us, so many that they seemed to be getting in each other's way. Manning fired the turret gun a number of times, but soon it fell silent.

Ferrier looked up to see why, and saw Manning hanging limp in the safety harness, obviously dead. As Ferrier said later, "Quite suddenly, I was a scared, mature old man at the age of 18."

Ferrier tried to fire his .30-cal. tunnel gun, but our hydraulic system had been shot out and the

VT-8 Detachment (Grumman TBF-1)

First Section

- 8-T-16 (BuNo 00399) LT Langdon K. Fieberling
ENS Jack Wilke, A-V(N)*
RM2/c Arthur R. Osborn
- 8-T-19 (BuNo 00398) ENS Charles E. Brannon, A-V(N)
AM3/c William C. Lawe
AOM3/c Charles E. Fair
- 8-T-1 (BuNo 00380) ENS Albert K. Earnest, A-V(N)
RM3/c Harry H. Ferrier
Sea1/c Jay D. Manning

Second Section

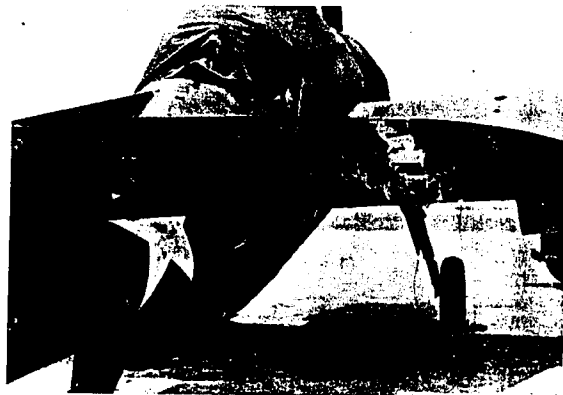
- 8-T-12 (BuNo 00391) ENS Victor A. Lewis, A-V(N)
AM3/c Nelson L. Carr, USNR
EM3/c John W. Mehlretter
- 8-T-4 (BuNo 00383) ENS Oswald J. Gaynier, A-V(N)
ENS Joseph M. Hissem, A-V(N)*
Sea1/c Howard W. Pitt
- 8-T-5 (BuNo 00384) AMM1c(NAP) Darrel "D" Woodside
Ptr2/c Arnold T. Meuers
AOM3/c Lyonel J. Orgeron**

* Indicates on temporary duty with VT-8, from VP-24
** Indicates on temporary duty with VT-8, from VP-44. He replaced AMM1/c William L. Coffey, Jr., who had flown in Woodside's crew from Ford Island to Midway.

Of the six TBF-1s which were launched into battle from Midway Island, ENS Earnest piloted the only *Avenger* to return. His aircraft had only the trim tab for longitudinal control, only one wheel would lower and the torpedo-bay doors were hanging open. SEA1c Manning was killed, and RM3/c Ferrier was wounded.



Midway Island, 5 June 1942. Photo courtesy CAPT A.K. Earnest.



A close-up look at Earnest's aircraft, showing the large hole in the starboard elevator, 7 June 1942. Earnest earned one Navy Cross for participating in the attack on the Japanese fleet, and another for bringing the shot-up airplane home for evaluation. U.S. Naval Historical Center photo.

tailwheel dropped down, blocking his fire. A bullet grazed his wrist, then he received a stunning blow on the head and lost consciousness.

As soon as we were attacked, we all opened our bomb bay doors, dove down to about 200 feet and headed for the nearest carrier. As scared as I was, I couldn't help but be amazed at the maneuverability of the *Zeros* as they swarmed around us. Bullets were clanging off my armor plate and cannon shells began hitting the wings. Something flew through the canopy and hit me in the neck. Though blood was everywhere, I don't remember it hurting.

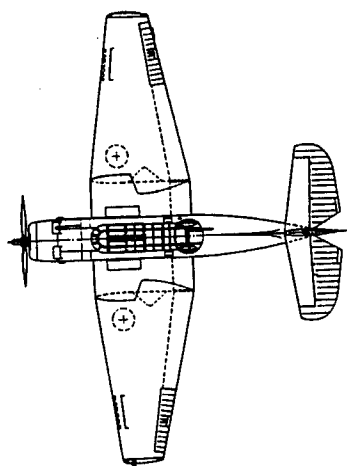
We were still quite a way from the carrier when I lost elevator control, and the plane started gently down. It seemed obvious that I was going into the water, but I wanted to drop that torpedo. There was a Japanese destroyer or light cruiser to port, so I kicked the airplane around with rudder and ailerons and dropped the torpedo at it.

As I was about to hit the water, I instinctively rolled the elevator tab back, and the aircraft jumped into the air. I realized that I could fly the plane with the elevator tab; however, two *Zero* pilots thought I'd flown enough and made continual firing runs on me. The TBF was being peppered with machine-gun bullets, but it continued to fly beautifully.

After what seemed hours, but was probably less than five minutes, the *Zeros* left. I couldn't believe it. Either they ran out of fuel or ammunition, or they were called back to their ship. I looked and saw that they had chased me northwest, so the Japanese fleet was between me and where I thought Midway should be. I didn't see any damage to ships, or aircraft in the water.

I took stock of my situation, and it was not good. My compass was inoperative — the early TBFs had only one compass, a fluxgate mounted in the vertical fin, which was full of holes. My

Grumman TBF, TBM Avenger



After its debut on 4 June 1942 in the midst of the Battle of Midway, the Grumman Avenger became the Navy's standard torpedo-bomber throughout World War II. To meet production requirements, General Motors Corporation established a second source for Avengers at its Eastern Aircraft division, this version designated TBM-1.

hydraulic system was shot out, so I couldn't close my bomb bay doors or lower my flaps, but that was not an immediate concern. The engine was running smoothly and I had fuel. I repeatedly called my crewmen, but there was no answer.

Since I was not about to fly back over the Japanese fleet, I decided I'd fly due south until I thought I was west of Midway, and then fly due east. The sun was still low — in the east, I hoped, as it was my only navigational aid. My wound had stopped bleeding.

So I started out on my southerly course, climbing to about 3,000 feet. Suddenly, Ferrier called me on the intercom — he had just come to and realized that, although wounded, he wasn't going to die. Manning, he told me, was dead. I asked if he could see whether the torpedo had dropped, but he couldn't, as blood was covering the viewing window into the bomb bay.

Ferrier climbed up into the middle seat behind me while we flew on. Eventually, I decided it was time to turn to the east. After seeing nothing but ocean for what seemed hours, I decided to climb above the clouds to get a better view. And sure enough, there in the east was a huge cloud of black smoke. I went back down below the clouds to see if I could determine where the smoke was coming from. Dead ahead was Kure Island, which I knew was about 50 miles west of Midway. So for the first time I knew we could get home.

On approaching Midway, I attempted to lower my wheels with the emergency release lever, but only the left wheel dropped down. I went up a

little higher and pulled positive g in an attempt to shake the right wheel down, but it remained retracted (we later found that a cable which centered the wheel in the wheel well had been shot away, so the wheel was stuck in the well). I went in to land, but was twice waved off. I heard later that they were telling me to go up and bail out over the island, but I never heard the transmission. It was just as well, because I had no intention of bailing out. I approached for the third time, ignoring the wave off. Considering that I had no flaps and only one wheel down, the landing was quite smooth until the starboard wing lost lift and dropped to the runway. We spun around about 270 degrees, parking quite conveniently just off the edge of the runway.

Immediately after we landed, there was an air raid alert when everyone thought that the enemy was back. Instead, it was a VB-8 aircraft from *Hornet* who had run short of fuel searching for the Japanese force. It was the first time I knew that U.S. carriers were in the vicinity. Later that day, we learned of the great victory they had won.

We stayed at Midway for about five days, hoping that some men from our flight would be rescued. PBVs were picking up survivors, including George Gay, but none of our detachment's people. Manning was buried at sea in the lagoon between Eastern and Sand Islands. It was our sad duty to inventory and pack our squadron mates' personal belongings.

Of the 51 torpedo planes that attacked the Japanese that day — 41 TBDs, six TBFs and four

B-26s; only four TBDs returned to their carrier, *Enterprise* (CV-6), two B-26s and one TBF returned to Midway. There were 26 surviving pilots and crewmen of the 120 men who flew into battle.

The sacrifices made by torpedo planes at the Battle of Midway had not been in vain. Although not planned, the TBD squadrons came in one right after the other and the Japanese Zeros left high altitude to attack the VT aircraft at extremely low altitude. As a Japanese fighter pilot said at a symposium in Pensacola in 1988: "They just kept coming — and coming — and coming!" Consequently, when the U.S. dive bombers arrived, they had little fighter opposition. The Japanese loss of four carriers at Midway was the turning point of the war in the Pacific.

My aircraft, 8-T-1, was taken back to Pearl Harbor for battle damage assessment. Among the findings was that the aircraft had been hit by at least 64 7.7 mm machine gun bullets and nine 20 mm. cannon shells.

The popular name *Avenger* had been adopted to emphasize that the mission of the TBF airplanes that would follow was not only attack but vengeance! The TBF/TBM *Avengers* became one of the workhorses of World War II. →

CAPT Albert K. (Bert) Earnest was born in Richmond, Va. on 1 April 1917. He graduated from the Virginia Military Institute in 1938 with a B.S. degree in civil engineering and a 2nd lieutenant's commission in the U.S. Army Reserve. He gave up the Army commission to join the Navy in February 1941.



*After the events detailed in this story, Earnest supported the Guadalcanal landings with VT-8 from USS *Saratoga* (CV-3) and, after *Saratoga* was struck by a torpedo, he flew numerous missions from Henderson Field on Guadalcanal before returning to the U.S. in December 1942. He later returned to the Pacific in VC-7 on USS *Manila Bay* (CVE-59), where he earned another Navy Cross.*

*In his naval career after World War II, Earnest commanded VA-14A, Air Task Group 181, USS *Estes* (AGC-12), and NAS, *Oceana*. His shore duties were spent at NATC, Patuxent River*

Md, BUAER/BUWEPS, Naval War College, Industrial College of the Armed Forces and SACLANT staffs. He retired in July 1972., and lives in Virginia Beach, Va., with his wife, Millie.

*Earnest was awarded three Navy Crosses, and was inducted into the Carrier Aviation Hall of Fame on USS *Yorktown* (CV-10) in October, 1990.*

*CDR Harry H. Ferrier USN (Ret) enlisted in the Navy on 28 January 1941. His first fleet assignment was with VT-8. Following the Battle of Midway, he was attached to VT-3 on USS *Enterprise*, (CV-6) for the Guadalcanal invasion. In 1943-44 he was attached to VB-5 on USS *Yorktown* (CV-10). First commissioned an ensign in January 1945 he served in a PB4Y-2 training squadron. He reverted voluntarily to Chief (ACRM) in 1946 and served in the Hurricane Hunters, VPM-3/VP-23 for three and one half years. Commissioned as an ensign again in 1951 he taught electronics of nuclear weapons at AFSWP Albuquerque, N.M.*



*He reverted from lieutenant (temporary) to accept a permanent commission to ensign LDO in 1955. He served in heavy attack and patrol squadrons and made three combat cruises to Vietnam aboard USS *Princeton* (LPH-5) supporting Marine Corps troops.*

Following retirement in 1970, he was elected the Island County, Washington auditor and served in that position for 10 years. He and he and his wife Evelyn enjoy golfing and travel. His awards include the Distinguished Flying Cross, Air Medal with two gold stars, Purple Heart and four Presidential Unit Citations.

Following two pages: Craig Koder's "Only One Survived," © 1995 the Greenwich Workshop, depicts ENS Bert Earnest in 8-T-1 having spotted the Japanese Midway invasion, fleet is attacked by a swarm of Zeros which inflicted 70 bullet and cannon shell hits. All other TBFs in the flight were destroyed and Earnest's turret gunner SEA1/c Jay D. Manning was killed. Earnest and his radioman, RM3/c Harry H. Ferrier, were the only survivors of the VT-8 Midway-based detachment. They returned to Midway Island where their aircraft was a total loss.