

The Battle of Midway

Its' Anniversary

We were too busy on the June's edition to celebrate the Battle of Midway, but the following is a story by Don Kirkpatrick regarding what he was doing during that famous battle. Ye Olde Ed

HEADING FOR PEARL—ANTE MIDWAY

The patrol in the Coral Sea for the several weeks in May was no more eventful than I stated earlier. The long 4-5 hour searches to 200 miles with a 30-mile cross-leg were somewhat wearing—and some days some of us were even slated to fly two of them. They were two-plane junkets, the morning hop manning the planes in the dark with T/O as light broke the horizon. The PM flight got back just at dark. Not all of the pilots were responsible for the lead in these searches—only two of us ensigns led the searches with the other junior pilots doing the anti-sub 30 milers. On the 4-5 hour hops, one thought about whether the single engine would run the whole time; we continually thought about what we would do should we spot a sub— or what if we saw a Japanese carrier or search plane? Then, too, there was the south Pacific weather— were the rain squalls such as we had better navigate around the storm, or go to the wave tops and barrel through. Even when we got back to the ship, it was not always positioned where it had said it would be. Later in the war, we did have rather reliable radio homing gear, but even then it was not 100%; occasionally, we would have to initiate a 'square search' to find the ship. One time it was 50 miles from where we expected it! Such were the pressures, even when we were not in combat. With a week or ten days remaining in May (1942), the Hornet left the Coral Sea and turned full bore for Pearl Harbor. As soon as this came about, we found out why the Navy wished to establish its presence down in the far Pacific. The Japanese codes had been pretty well broken and Japan seemed to be readying for an attack and invasion of Midway Island. If the Japanese could think the U.S. fleet was busy in the south Pacific, they could be surprised when they got to Midway. During the last week in May, we were briefed as to approximately when and where the different Japanese task groups would be making their approaches to Midway. We were given routes, force sizes, and times as best they had established. We found most of the info correct except for two things: they were not sure of the date—within a day because they were not sure which side of the date-line they Japanese had figured. Too, and maybe for pilot morale, we were told that they still had not put the Zero on the carriers yet—it was still a Japanese army plane. Not so! For this week until the ship got to Pearl we digested the code info—by this time the Navy was certain the target was Midway. We flew into Ewa Field for the night of June 1st. No liberty was granted—we all had to stay on the base and some of the personnel on the beach got obstreperous,—especially Skipper John Waldron of VT-8. By midnight at the club, he was roaring and shooting his .45 into the air but it did no good. We had to fly back aboard the next morning, as the Hornet would be ready after the one-day stop at Oahu. It should be said that Waldron probably had the best-trained squadron of the air group, but he had the most ancient planes of the four squadrons—real antiques— to carry a 2000-pound torpedo that was rated later as lousy! Waldron and all his 15 planes were lost en toto and Torpedo 8 became a legend.

BATTLE OF MIDWAY— JUNE 4TH

On the 2nd of June all four Hornet squadrons flew back to the ship, having spent only the one-day ashore. The ship joined the other two carriers—the Yorktown, only partially repaired since it was damaged in the Coral Sea Battle, and the Enterprise— and headed out for a spot perhaps 200 miles north east of the Midway Island, and we commenced our wait. The day that looked most likely for the Japanese raid to start was June 4th. On the eve of June 3rd, Skipper Waldron had every one of his flight personnel to write a letter home. Further, we understood, all the TBDs were stocked with additional water and food (candy bars), all the pilots were aware that they could not deliver their torpedo 200 miles and fly back to ship in their obsolete TBD— they would have to float home. As history developed, only one person of the 15 Hornet TBD crews got back alive—and that was after a harrowing float before he was rescued— Ensign George Gay.