

Back on the Hornet there was no word of VB-8, VF-8, or VT-8. Only VS-8 was back aboard after the morning flight. At noontime there was an indescribable gloom about the ship; we alone had returned and as far as we knew the Midway situation was dire and we hadn't helped. Before long, things seemed to get even worse. I was in the ready room and the report came down that there were enemy planes in the area—actually attacking the sister ship Yorktown several miles off our bow. Since she was under attack, it was decided to land some Yorktown fighters low on gas on the Hornet. One came aboard with a loud thump of the arresting gear and immediately we heard the staccato firing of nearby machine guns. One of the Yorktown F4Fs had not safetied his .50 caliber guns and they went off when he landed hard on the deck. The report was even worse news: one or two Hornet men had been killed in the accident. Going out on the flight deck, we could see the Yorktown under attack and it looked bad. She had been hit and would not be able to operate. Her airborne planes were now to be reassigned to land with us and those pilots related further stories of attack and loss. Later in the afternoon of the 4th, we on the Hornet were told that some of the VB-8 planes would return; that would be of some help. About that time a group of our VS-8 plane were sent out on an attack but I wasn't with them. On their return, there was only a vague report of "no real results". The 4th of June seemed a total disaster! Some time in the evening, as the Hornet and Enterprise headed east, the news coming in seemed more heartening;—there was some word that one or more of the Japanese carriers had been sunk by the squadrons from the Yorktown and the Enterprise. Nevertheless, our task group—less the crippled Yorktown—steamed east away from the activity to make sure there would be no night surface engagement; the Japanese were better trained and more experienced in that. Somehow, reports of the battle results came in to the Navy and about 2 AM, the Navy, with indications that the Japanese had lost four carriers—sunk—reversed our eastward course, and Lo! The Enterprise and the Hornet were sent chasing the remnants of the Jap attack force although we on the Hornet had only dive-bombers.

MIDWAY BATTLE—JUNE 5TH

On the morning of the 5th, there was word coming in that was even more exciting—the other ship's squadrons had found the Jap fleet on the 4th and there were indications that maybe three—perhaps four carriers had been sunk. Too, the Japanese were abandoning their attempt to land on Midway. While on the Hornet we had only sufficient F4Fs to handle our combat air patrol and no VT squadron, most of our VB-8 SBDs had come back and were available for assignment. In fact our task group was now trying to catch up to the fleeing Japanese fleet. All this was tempered with word that the Yorktown was down—sunk. (Actually, I'm not sure exactly when the Japanese sub torpedoed the Yorktown; she was thought for a short time to be salvageable but she was found dead in the water by a Japanese sub and its torpedoes sank her as well as a destroyer aiding alongside.) We had quite a bit of running west to do; only in mid-afternoon did a report come in giving us a target some 200 miles distant. As soon as possible, fifteen of our Hornet SBDs were put in the air not knowing exactly what our target would be; no fighters were with us. At extreme range, and nearly dark, we found a fast-travelling destroyer which took evasive action—high speed with desperate, zigzagging maneuvers. In the dusk, we Hornet SBDs—a mix of VB-8 and VS-8, dove of the DD and all 15 of us got no more than several near misses. It seemed to me on the pull out, that there were disturbances in the sea surface—I wondered if the DD was there to rescue Japanese personnel from a sinking ship. As we circled on pull out, 15 SBDs from the Enterprise dove on the same destroyer and their luck was no better than ours—they also had 15 misses. As night quickly came, rendezvous was difficult but three of us got together for the long flight back to the Hornet. It turned out that I was flying back with Gus Widhelm (XO) and Ray Davis. With Gus leading us, he decided to climb to altitude hoping to pick up our line-of-sight homing device—"ZB"—which we could sometimes receive to about 25 miles. Lo! With Gus that night, we picked the homing ZB at almost 200 miles—though at 12,000 feet. The problem now, having our direction finder helping us, was one of weaning our gas out to get us home in the pitch-black night. The SBD had four different gas tanks and to conserve fuel we were running on as lean a mixture as possible. As each of the first three tanks ran dry, I left the selector on and rocked the wings to drain the last possible drop, keeping the engine going as long as possible before switching to the next tank. Approaching the ship, my fourth and last tank was showing as almost empty and yet the ship was not in sight. Finally in the distance a searchlight was seen pointing straight up. The skipper, Mark Mitchner, had decided to risk the submarines and help us