

# TWENTY

*I HAVE SEEN WAR. I HAVE SEEN WAR ON LAND AND SEA. I HAVE SEEN BLOOD RUNNING FROM THE WOUNDED. I HAVE SEEN MEN COUGHING OUT THEIR GASED LUNGS. I HAVE SEEN THE DEAD IN THE MUD. I HAVE SEEN CITIES DESTROYED. I HAVE SEEN TWO HUNDRED LIMPING EXHAUSTED MEN COME OUT OF LINE—THE SURVIVORS OF A REGIMENT OF ONE THOUSAND THAT WENT FORWARD FORTY-EIGHT HOURS BEFORE. I HAVE SEEN CHILDREN STARVING. I HAVE SEEN THE AGONY OF MOTHERS AND WIVES. I HATE WAR.*

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT  
ADDRESS AT CHAUTAUQUA, AUGUST 14, 1936

**I** imagine a book titled *WAR*. Seemingly benign and innocuous, it is black-bound and filled with a litany of human conflicts. Its flyleaf should bear a warning label: *BEWARE WHEN OPENING*. Turn only one page of this volume's list of inescapable tragedies, and one may neither reach the end nor close the cover on pervasive sorrow. It is inevitable that as time passes, wars become

remembrances and battles become chronicles, but for those of us who have lost a loved one, the pain haunts us for the remainder of our days.

Some years ago, I sat for lunch with Captain Jack Reid, USN (RET), and Lieutenant Commander Brian Foss, USCG helicopter pilot and former port director for the Santa Cruz Small Craft Harbor. It was a sunny and quiet afternoon, and our table overlooked the harbor entrance and an ever-present gathering of gulls. We spoke of many things, mostly about our war experiences, and more specifically about Reid's scouting flight in his PBY-5A on the fate-filled morning of 3 June 1942....

*Jack Reid's patrol squadron, VPB-44, had been deployed to the Midway Islands to conduct a series of extended combat patrols north, west, and south of the atoll. The United States had intercepted and decoded Japanese transmissions and was aware not only that a naval and air attack was imminent, but also of the planned date of the attack and relative strength of the Japanese forces that would be used to launch the assault.*

*In response, the US Navy had hurriedly dispatched to the area three carriers: the USS Yorktown (CV-5), USS Enterprise (CV-6), and USS Hornet (CV-8), along with support vessels. Meanwhile, the atoll itself hosted an airfield and a sketchy group of US fighters, scout planes, torpedo and dive-bombers, and a contingent of B-17s and B-26 Marauders ready to defend against the invading enemy. The stage was set—but one critical fact remained: To hit the enemy, we had to find them first! That was then-Ensign Reid's*

*mission: to detect Japanese naval presence in the vicinity.*

*Although the assigned search area on the morning of 3 June 1942 was at the extreme range for the fuel capacity of Reid's aircraft, he and his crew agreed to "stretch things a bit" and fly a longer search pattern in hopes of locating the Imperial Japanese Navy. At the edge of a sixteen-minute extension, Reid and his copilot suddenly identified a large number of ships far to the west and heading toward Midway. It was Japanese forces bent on invading the islands and eliminating the US threat in the Pacific—a victory that would decisively answer the Doolittle Raid and Battle of the Coral Sea and cast a severe psychological blow to our nation.*

*Reid immediately radioed Midway: "Sighted main body, Bearing 262 Distance 700."*

*Midway Radio immediately responded: "Amplify."*

*Unaware of Japanese code disclosures known only to United States Navy top brass, Jack Reid assumed the invasion vessels he had spotted constituted the main Japanese attack force; but beyond the horizon, there were several Japanese attack groups approaching Midway. Also mistakenly assuming there were carriers in the group he'd spotted, Reid expected an attack from their shipboard fighter cover that would down his clumsy PBY like a lame duck in a shooting gallery.*

*In response, Reid dove to a low altitude and remained at a distance using sparse cloud cover as he shadowed the Japanese force, all the while relaying definitive*

*information to Midway. Finally, Command ordered Reid and his crew to return home. It had been nearly two hours since they'd first sighted the enemy force, and it was a flight that would change the course of history.*

We lingered over a final cup of coffee that sun-kissed afternoon while Reid finished his story: He'd made his final approach to Midway that fateful day with both fuel-pressure warning lights burning and a prayer in his heart. After he landed, the launch ramp crew checked his fuel tanks. The stick came out dry—the tanks had completely drained. This was an unforgettable luncheon with a truly historic figure.



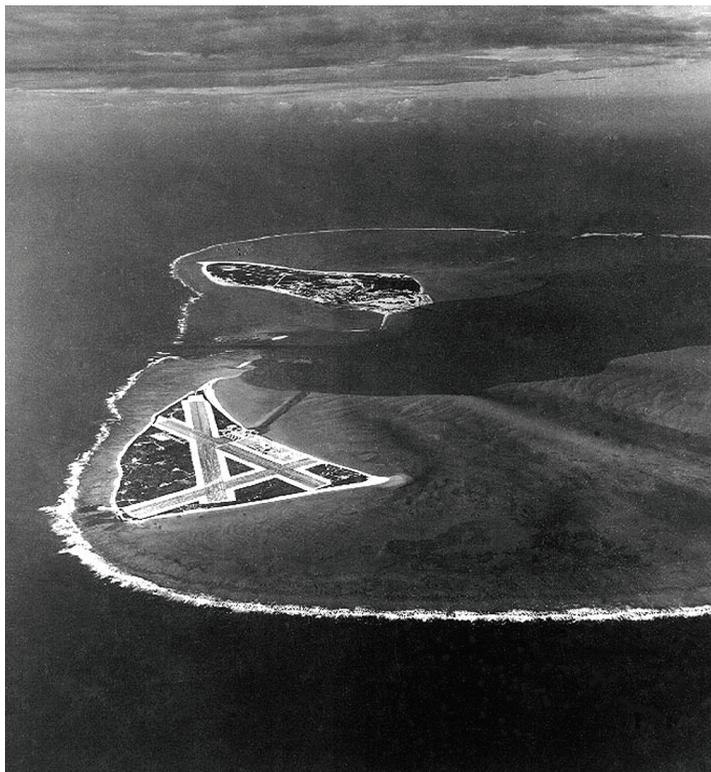
On 3 June 1942, Japanese vessels covered the sea around the Midway Islands like fleas on a homeless 'possum. Kaigun Taishō<sup>51</sup> Nagumo's four carriers, *Akagi*, *Kaga*, *Hiryū*, and *Sōryū*, were the four aces in Emperor Hirohito's poker hand—quite possibly, the winning hand that would pick up all the chips.

*WE ARE ACTIVELY PREPARING TO GREET  
OUR EXPECTED VISITORS  
WITH THE KIND OF RECEPTION THEY DESERVE,  
AND WE WILL DO THE BEST WE CAN  
WITH WHAT WE HAVE.*

~ ADMIRAL CHESTER W. NIMITZ<sup>52</sup>  
COMMANDER IN CHIEF, US PACIFIC FLEET

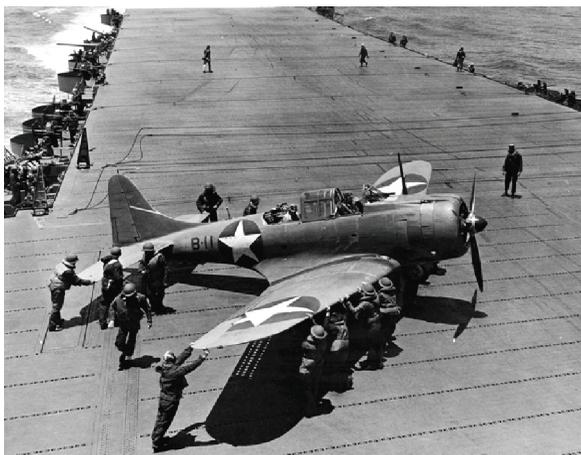
At 1230, land-based US military aircraft were launched from Midway. Their attack, which included Army Air Forces<sup>53</sup> Boeing B-17s, was ineffective, inflicting only light damage on the Japanese fleet.

Before dawn the next day, Nagumo answered with a sizeable attack force of carrier bombers, Nakajima B5N torpedo planes, and A6M Zero fighters. The sortie resulted in considerable damage to Midway's defense installations and to aircraft on the ground. In addition, the attacking Zeros shot down three F4Fs and thirteen of the obsolete and ineffective F2A Buffalos.



Midway Atoll, 24 November 1941.  
(US Navy photograph. National Archives #: 80-G-451086.)

*View from southwest across the southern side of the atoll. Naval Air Station Midway Islands is in the foreground. Sand Island, location of most other base facilities, is across the entrance channel.*

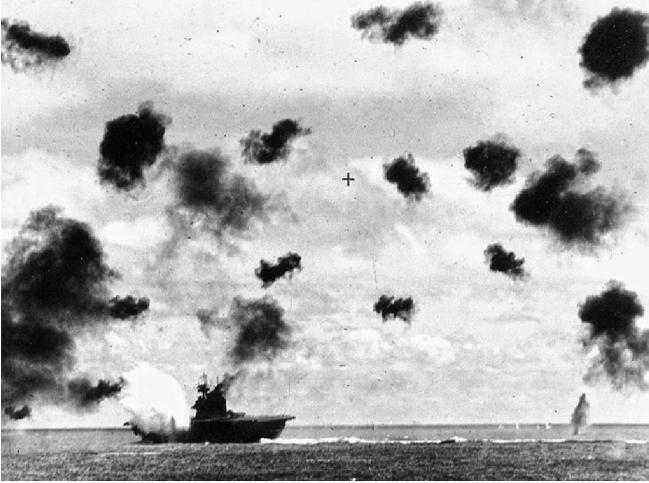


An SBD-3 Dauntless dive-bomber of Torpedo Squadron 8 prepares for launch from the USS *Hornet*, Battle of Midway, 4 June 1942. (National Naval Aviation Museum photo No. 1996.253.648 [1].)

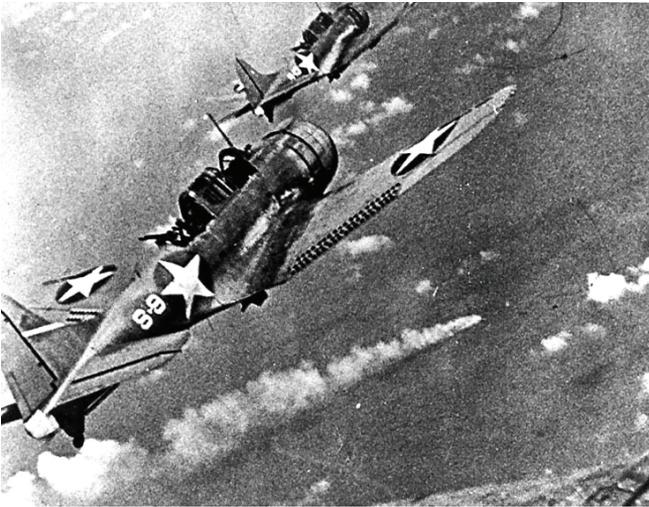
By 0600, US scouting planes had located Nagumo's carriers; and at 0800, two squadrons of fighters, five squadrons of dive-bombers, and three squadrons of torpedo bombers were on their way to destroy them. On this morning, a "Divine Wind"<sup>54</sup> would blow, and it would propel American forces. Before the sun set, there would be tragedy and triumph in the Pacific...and I would suffer a personal loss that I have yet to forget.

Even as our aircraft were closing the gap between our carriers and the Japanese flattops, Nagumo was in a quandary. Midway had not been neutralized, and a second attack was essential to allow his planned invasion to proceed. Nagumo considered the possibility there might be American carriers in the vicinity, but that issue was not confirmed by Japanese scouting reports. *Should he plan for a strike against US carriers or neutralize Midway?*

CHAPTER TWENTY



USS *Yorktown* (CV-5) is hit on the port side by a Japanese Type 91 aerial torpedo during the midafternoon assault by planes from the carrier *Hiryū*, Battle of Midway, 4 June 1942. (US Navy photograph #: 80-G-414423.)



SBDs from the USS *Hornet* over the burning *Mikuma*, early afternoon, 6 June 1942. (United States National Archives #: 80-G-17054.)

Nagumo's decision was fateful: strike the islands a second time. He ordered all of his reserve aircraft to be armed with contact-fuse land bombs to further destroy Midway's capability to resist invasion.

The rearming of reserve aircraft was well underway when Nagumo received communication from one of the Japanese scout planes indicating they had sighted a "...sizeable American naval force to the east."<sup>55</sup> There was no mention of carriers in the initial report, but a subsequent message sent from the scout plane mistakenly stated that one carrier was detected in the force. Now frantic, Nagumo countermanded his own orders, directing all aircraft be rearmed again—this time with torpedoes. The attendant confusion of this effort, coupled with the need to refuel and spot aircraft for takeoff, filled the decks of the four Japanese carriers with a spaghetti-like labyrinth of fueling hoses; torpedoes; bombs; and running, bewildered men: a recipe for disaster.

Meanwhile, Nagumo's carriers were a far reach for attacking US aircraft. The fighters, whose escort was essential for the protection of the torpedo and dive-bombers, were decimated by lack of fuel. Ten F4F Wildcats from the USS *Hornet* had to ditch after running out of gasoline. Fighters from *Enterprise* and *Yorktown* also had to ditch or turn back. Now, a coordinated attack by US forces was only a broken dream, and it would be up to the torpedo and dive-bombers to cripple or kill Nagumo's ships.

In one of the most dramatic incidents of the war, three squadrons of Douglas Devastator torpedo bombers attacked the four Japanese flattops. Without fighter protection, the slow and clumsy Devastators were fair game for Japanese fighters. It was, in all aspects, a suicide mission.

*Hornet's* Torpedo Squadron 8, under the leadership of Lieutenant Commander John C. Waldron, was the first to attack. The entire squadron of fifteen Devastators was shot down either by shipboard fire or Zero Fighters from Nagumo's combat air patrol. More tragically—with the exception of Ensign George H. Gay Jr.—every man in Squadron 8 was killed.

Following Gay's torpedo run, his Devastator pancaked into the sea. He floated for hours, witnessing firsthand the ensuing battle.

Among the dead on that fateful day was Aviation Radioman 3rd Class Robert Kingsbury Huntington, gunner in the rear cockpit of Gay's Devastator. He died in the run-in attack on *Kaga* as he and Ensign Gay experienced intense machine gun fire from five pursuing A6M Zeros.

Bob Huntington had just turned twenty-one.



Half the world and an entire lifetime away from the riddled gunner's cockpit of Gay's Devastator lay Parsons Field at the Lakeside School where Bob Huntington and I played football during the 1939–40 school year.

Bob was a rugged kid, a senior, and one of the stalwarts of the team. I was new to the prep school, a very poor athlete, and a terrible football player. Being lightweight and very slow were not attributes for football success; and I contributed nothing to the Lions' lineup during my short tenure at Lakeside, except to turn out every day in the rain and cold in the futile hope of somehow becoming something better.

Despite my self-perceived ineptitude, Bob always treated me with kindness and made me feel a part of the team...it was a brand of kindness that a teenage kid never forgets. I was deeply grieved by Bob Huntington's death, and it is a feeling that has stayed with me the duration of my life.



The USS *Robert K. Huntington* (DD-781), Puget Sound Naval Shipyard, 30 May 1945. (Official US Navy Bureau of Ships photo 19-N-84107. Public domain.) Photo of Bob Huntington from the Lakeside yearbook.

Bob Huntington was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for heroism and extraordinary achievement for his service at Midway; and in a singular honor, Destroyer DD-781, the USS *Robert K. Huntington*, was christened in his name. An Allen M. Summer-class destroyer, she was commissioned on 3 March 1945, and like her namesake, served her nation well. She was decommissioned on 31 October 1973, after earning two battle stars for service in Vietnam.



The narrative of the battle at Midway draws only the Xs and Os, the strategic field positions and first downs of this historic conflict. But let us consider the massive emotional drama—the terror experienced by those who actually fought

and lived or died there. Let us climb into the front cockpit with Ensign George Henry Gay Jr....

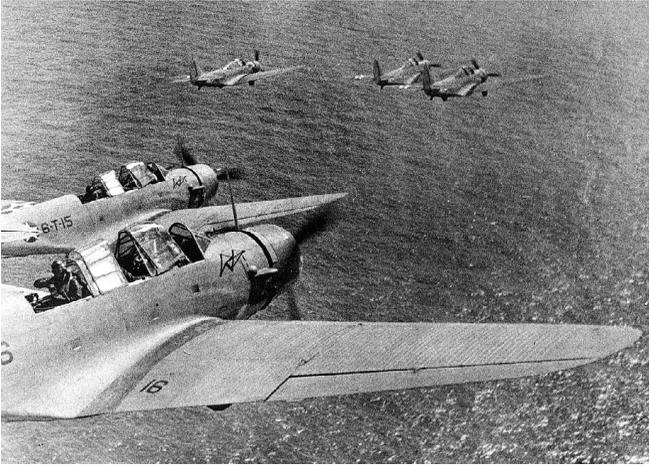
*This Devastator has become a refuge for me...like the tree house in the backyard where I grew up...and the sky is filled with warm sunshine on this tropical Pacific morning. There's great beauty here amongst the misty sea clouds—but today, my mouth is dry, and I know not whether in the next hour I will live or die....*

*My hand is sweaty on the throttle quadrant; behind me, Bob is sweating, too. My stare constantly returns to the cold-faced fuel gauges, hovering lower and lower and lower, telling me that even now, the flight deck of home may be forever just beyond our reach. Manifold pressure, cylinder head temperature, oil pressure all check out...fuel gauges again...lower.*

*Now, I see the Jap carriers below...gray, flat-backed rats with long white tails, slithering across the ocean blue; in search of crumbs, they sully this sun-filled day with their smoke...nemeses of evil....*

*Zeros EVERYWHERE! Dropping on us like flies, two TBDs splash on my right. Machine gun bullets through the canopy sound like gravel on a tin roof...rear view: Bob—stretched over the flex mount...all red...all blood...Jap carrier closer now, I'm flying down a gun barrel toward a wall of hell fire....I will die here...Instrument panel shot out...BASTARD ZEROS...cordite stink and hydraulic oil...over the deck...SOBs running helter-skelter...fuel hoses...roll left...level out...*

SPEAR-CARRIER IN A BACKWATER WAR



Formation of US Navy Douglas TBD-1 Devastators from Torpedo Squadron 6 (VT-6) operating in the Pacific off the aircraft carrier USS *Enterprise* (CV-6). (National Naval Aviation Museum photo No. 1996.253.1000.)

*Launched on the morning of 4 June 1942 against the Japanese carrier fleet during the Battle of Midway, the squadron lost nine of fourteen aircraft during their attack.*



Gunner's compartment. (From the author's collection.)

*NO GODDAMN AILERONS... NO RUDDER... CUT  
THE THROTTLE... STICK BACK... HERE COMES  
THE DITCH! Water is cold—I'm still alive....*

As the attack advanced, other squadrons fared nearly as badly: the USS *Enterprise's* Torpedo Squadron 6 lost nine of fourteen aircraft; *Yorktown's* Squadron VT-3 lost ten.<sup>56</sup> Massive casualties and loss of aircraft had made this a devastating run...and not one torpedo had struck a Japanese carrier.



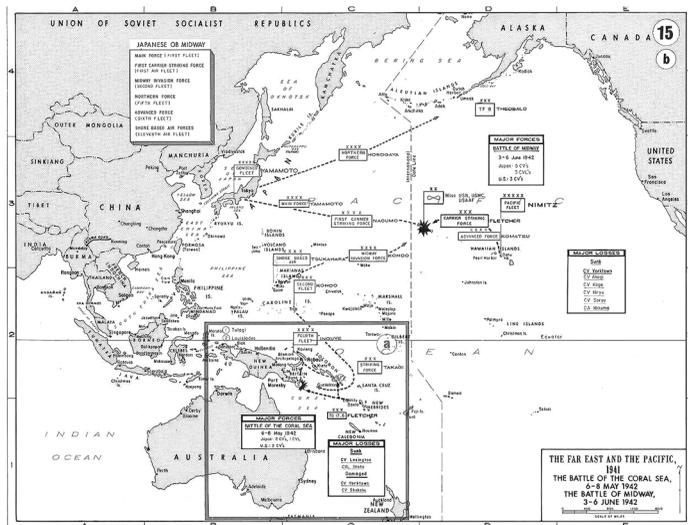
In truth, the Douglas TBD Devastator was not a bad airplane, only an airplane that was made deficient by virtue of newer, faster, and better naval aircraft. Its dismal performance at Midway was partially due to lack of coordinated attack, utilizing fighters to protect the torpedo and dive-bombers. It was quickly withdrawn from service following the Battle of Midway to be replaced by the newer and more effective TBF Avenger.



Locating the Japanese carriers had been a fuel-costly and difficult endeavor. Five squadrons of US dive-bombers were running low on fuel when *Enterprise* air group commander C. Wade McClusky Jr. spotted the four Japanese carriers and their attending vessels underway. The dive-bombers began their attack immediately at 1022 hours on 4 June 1942, with three squadrons simultaneously attacking the Japanese fleet.

The Divine Wind had begun to blow.

## SPEAR-CARRIER IN A BACKWATER WAR



Map showing the vast area of the Pacific covered during the battles of the Coral Sea and Midway Islands. (United States Military Academy, Department of History.)

Screaming down, McClusky's unit scored hits on *Kaga*. Meanwhile, another bomber group pierced *Akagi's* hanger deck, igniting a catastrophic fire and series of explosions—a near hit badly damaged her flight deck and disabled her rudder. *Sōryū* took three lethal hits to her hanger deck at the hands of *Yorktown* bombers, and in all, *Kaga* took four to five. Within minutes, three of the four Japanese carriers were burning like blowtorches.

As the American dive-bombers turned away from their attack, the besieged carriers were quickly abandoned and scuttled. The battle had been joined. Japanese domination of the Pacific was history.

*Hiryū*, the remaining enemy carrier, launched an immediate counterattack against USS *Yorktown*.

In the ensuing battle, the US carrier took several hits and was gravely damaged.

*Hiryū* in turn was set ablaze in a final strike by dive-bombers from *Enterprise*. The Japanese carrier was so severely crippled she was unable to land or launch aircraft. Desperate attempts to stop raging fires were unsuccessful, and she was spotted the next morning abandoned and sinking. Shortly afterward, she vanished beneath the sea. Her commander, Kaigun Shōshō<sup>57</sup> Tamon Yamaguchi, who had attended Princeton University, went down with his ship.

In a poignant postlude, *Yorktown* suffered an attack by Japanese submarine I-168, which scored two torpedoes hits while the carrier was under tow. Though valiant efforts were made to save her, the USS *Yorktown* sank on 7 June 1942.

In the days that followed, the opposing ships that were still operational snapped at each other's heels like wild dogs. But on this Divine Wind, American forces had decisively defeated the Japanese, and their victory would ultimately lead to triumph in the Pacific.

## TWENTY-ONE

While Bob Huntington and his squadron mates were dying at Midway, I was preparing to graduate from Roosevelt High School. All the pomp and circumstance surrounding commencement seemed out of step with the marching feet now covering most of the globe. Kids my age were going to war everyday in places that were not even in our geography books.

In the six months following Pearl Harbor, there had been a staggering change in the attitude of our country. We had been lifted from the depths of the Great Depression, a war of want, to the drama of a war of survival. It was as if America had been dropped into a crucible of malevolence and annealed into a terrible sword of righteousness and retribution, and there was in everyone a consuming unanimity of purpose—a magnificent obsession for victory. Old and young, pauper and prince, the able and feeble joined hands in a pledge of vengeance against the dark forces of the evil Axis. The spirit of American freedom never burned brighter. It was both a beautiful thing to see and daunting in its intensity.



Graduation Day came and went, and my buddies and I put our futures on hold while we awaited the call for military service. I was only seventeen and not yet eligible for the draft, so I began working with Johnny Condon and Frank Nolan at Pacific Marine Supply Company as soon as school was out. Pacific Marine was a staid old company located on Seattle's waterfront. The company furnished items of all kinds to Northwest marine interests and the Alaskan fishing industry; and like everyone else, they had taken on defense contracts to assist in the war effort. Their specific contribution was the manufacture of portable pumps designed for use aboard naval vessels and at on-shore installations, mostly for fire protection. Johnny, Frank, and I assembled the pumps and packed them for shipment. It was a great job, and that summer cemented our camaraderie into a lifetime of abiding friendship.

Frank Nolan was the funniest guy I had ever met. His humor was both instinctive and swift. I always thought his brilliance ran on two tracks across his mind. One track he used for ordinary communication while the other track ran on ahead searching for and always discovering something funny to say. Frank's wit is a priceless gift. I am blessed. He still shares it with me today.

Johnny Condon and I had been friends for a long time, and early on, I'd had a crush on his sister. Johnny was the consummate waterman: sailor, navigator, mechanic, and deckhand...the finest I have ever known. Together, we had fun shooting pool and messing around with our cars and girls. We smoked too soon and drank beer too soon. The war would make us grow up too soon.

As a trio, we worked well together—we were productive, but at the same time, we still had fun. Since Pacific Marine was close to the waterfront, we had as coinhabitants of our workplace a surprising number of rats scurrying around in search of such goodies as may have fallen from our lunch boxes. In an effort to diminish their population, we each kept a small cardboard box nearby filled with nuts and bolts that became ammunition in our own private war on rodents. Collectively, we fired hundreds of missiles at the creatures; and to the best of my remembrance, we never scored a kill. Our failure to reduce our enemy's numbers was a deep concern to each of us considering the fact that we would soon be defending our country against people who could shoot back.



Volunteering for military service formed a major part of the daily thinking of everyone eligible and able to serve, and I was no different from the rest of my peers. Growing up as I did around planes and boats, I was obsessed with becoming a Navy fighter pilot; and since I was fully conversant in all types of planes, I was naturally convinced that a couple of days of cockpit time would sufficiently qualify me for carrier landings.

Since I was only 17 years old, I needed my parents' permission to join up. With their signatures in hand, I went to the Navy Recruitment Center. The day was lengthy and involved. I first had to pass the required mental exam. That was immediately followed by a rather intense physical exam. By 2:00 p.m., I had passed both examinations and was now

ready to complete the final papers. I recall the ensuing few minutes with a lifetime of regret.



"Keep 'em flying" WWII recruiting poster. (Office of Government Reports, 1932-1947. National Archives Identifier: 513525, Local Identifier: 44-PA-37.)

I was seated in a chair in the office waiting to sign my final papers when, after looking at my responses to questions on the physical exam, a yeoman at the desk said to me, "Better look over the list of diseases you've had and be sure to check all of them."

I took the paper, looked it over, and remembered some years before when my mother had taken me to an allergist who ascertained that I had a slight hypersensitivity to

grasses. I checked the box labeled “Hay Fever/Allergy” and returned the form to the yeoman. That simple act changed my fate and my war. I was immediately rejected and left the recruiting office in a state of stunned regret. My dream of becoming a Navy pilot was over.

*Goddamn it, I'm going to fly!*

The next day, I made an early morning trio to the Army Air Forces Recruiting Office and picked up the application for entrance into the Aviation Cadet Program. The day after that, with the application bearing my parents' signatures in hand, I underwent the required mental and physical exams, and by 5:00 p.m., I was officially enlisted in the United States Army Air Forces Aviation Cadet Program. Needless to say, there had been no mention of hay fever or asthma. I was advised that I would not be called up until at least late spring 1943, so now I just had to wait.



The halcyon days of the summer of '42, Pacific Marine, and transient rat packs ended in early September. As yet, Johnny and Frank had not committed to military service, and the Army Air Forces (AAF) had assured me there would be no call-up for at least six months, so we enrolled at the University of Washington. Frank and I pledged the same fraternity, although, for me, it was all pretty meaningless. It was difficult to concentrate on blue books and quizzes when the local papers delivered want ads for workers and obituaries of kids, many dying before they were old enough to drink beer. Like Kirby Ryan, killed on some goddamn island in the western Pacific; Bob Huntington at Midway; Arlo Wells, dying in the explosion of a B-24 near

Albuquerque; Ken Jensen, dead in the crash of a C-47 off Kenai—these were only a few of the early casualties. There would be many more. These valiant young men vanished more than seventy years ago; and yet, I still remember their names and their faces....

I left the university at the end of the fall quarter. My folks had moved to San Francisco where my dad's job had taken him, so I figured I'd go south for a little sunshine. While I was there, I signed up for a few short art classes concentrating on aircraft illustration, and I remember the rendering of a new P-39, which turned out well; but after a week or two, I dropped out. The only compass in my head pointed toward the AAF and active duty, and I vegetated on the back burner of impatience and ennui.