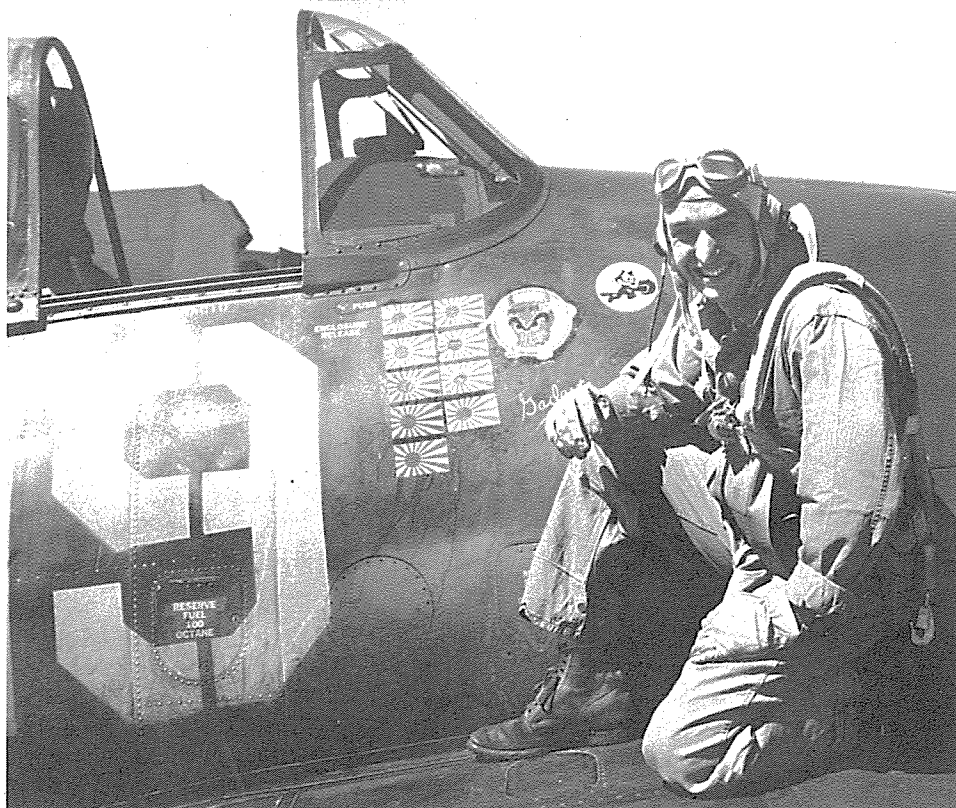




Alex Vraciu by his airplane, 40467, aboard the U.S.S. INTREPID in February 1944. Number 19 was the clue to the identification of this airplane in 1970. Significance of the word "Gadget," partially obscured by Vraciu's hand, is unknown. (Photo — Nat'l Arch. 80-G-227172.) Fuselage is shown below at Earl Reinert's, Mundelein, Ill. (Author photo)

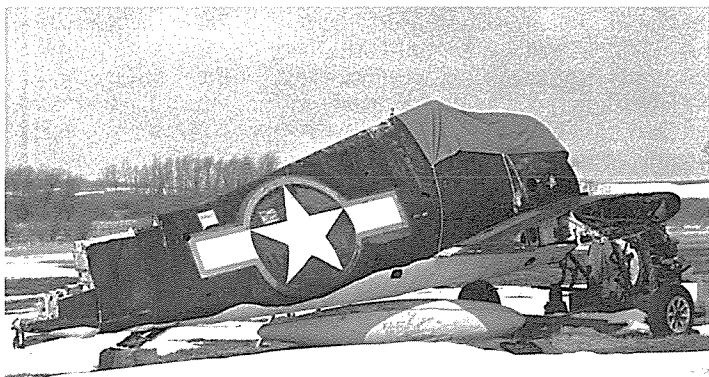
HELLCAT 40467

THE HISTORY OF ONE F6F

By RICHARD M. HILL

It is seldom that one has an opportunity to trace the history of a specific airplane from its contractor's test flight, through combat in World War II, and into the present era. Even less probable is the expectation of finding one with any real historical significance, other than its being one of the few remaining examples of its type. Such an opportunity recently presented itself in the form of a Navy F6F-3 fuselage accompanied by its original Aircraft Log Book. Although the log presents only fragmentary information, piecing this together with data from other sources provides the basic combat history of one of the 12,275 Hellcats produced by Grumman Aircraft Engineering Corp. during WWII.

The author traces herein the story of Bureau Number 40467 and its link to one of the Navy's top-scoring aces. Richard M. Hill's findings were originally presented in a paper before the meeting of the Mid-West Aero Historians in October 1970, at the E.A.A. Air Education Museum, Franklin, Wisconsin.¹



The F6F Hellcat was first introduced to combat in late August 1943, and within a few days Lt. Loesch of Navy Fighting Squadron VF-6 shot down the first of its many victims, on 1 September.² It was more than a month later, on 5 October, that the F6F first encountered Japanese fighters in the air. That day F6F-3's of Fighter Squadrons 5, 6, 9, 16 and 22 eliminated the defending Japanese fighters at Wake Island in the first of several strikes at the island base. Butch O'Hare, already famous as a Medal of Honor winner, and now commanding officer of VF-6, shot down a Zeke and a Betty, and Alex Vraciu, his wingman, shot down a Zeke. It was the first of Vraciu's 19 victories.

At that same time, halfway around the world in Bethpage, Long Island, an F6F-3, BuNo 40467, was taking shape on Grumman's production line. It was the 1,733rd on line, and this particular Hellcat was destined to play a major role in Alex Vraciu's 19 victories, and a somewhat lesser role in the combat careers of several other Navy aces.

By 4 Nov. 1943, 40467 had been completed and on that date passed its contractor test flight and the Naval Inspector's check flight without incident. A short ferry flight the next day to NAS BROOKLYN completed delivery to the Navy. These log book entries thus began the service life of 40467, and within a few days further items were listed: a gunnery test flight on 9 November; the ferry flight to San Diego with pilot A.W. Stewart, Jr.; and, on 17 November, to Alameda and preparation for shipment overseas by surface vessel.

At almost the same time Alex Vraciu was shooting down his second enemy aircraft, a Betty, on Nov. 20th. He had flown off INDEPENDENCE, and on that same evening the carrier was crippled and put out of action by a Japanese torpedo, 40467 was coming, and arrived at Pearl Harbor on December 3rd.

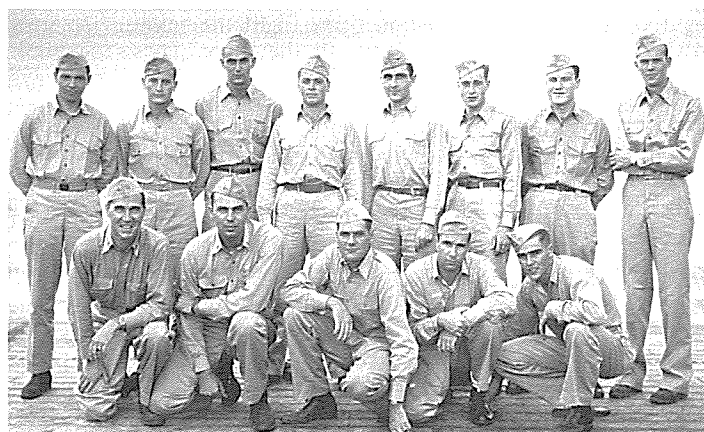
The several detachments of VF-6, separately based aboard the INDEPENDENCE (CVL-22), the BELLEAU WOOD (CVL-24), and the COWPENS (CVL-25) were soon shorebased at Kaneohe.



In need of several replacement airplanes, VF-6 acquired at least one new F6F-3 on 17 December. It was 40467, with a total flight time of 20.5 hours, and it was immediately assigned to Alex Vraciu. By the first of the new year 1944, the pair had accumulated another 21.5 hours. Although the total time on the Pratt & Whitney R-2800 engine was now 50 hours, the engine was replaced by another, BuNo H.P.201355. The engine run-in test flight was made by another pilot.

VF-6 had moved from Kaneohe to Barbers Point on December 20th. Papers with the logbook of 40467 were many years later to be the key to the identification of 40467 as Vraciu's airplane. These showed that the Number 19 was applied on 20 December; Vraciu is shown here in a photograph, with No. 19, made soon afterward aboard the INTREPID.

VF-6 and the other squadrons continued practice at Barbers Point for the first two weeks of January 1944, during which 40467 was flown by several VF-6 pilots. On the 10th, Air Group 6, including VF-6, was assigned to the newly commissioned INTREPID (CV-11), which had arrived that day. Immediately, from 12 to 14 January, INTREPID conducted qualification landings for her new air group. Vraciu made two flights on the 12th (he was already considered well qualified), both originating on shore and the second culminated in a night landing on the big carrier. On the 13th he made three flights in 40467, apparently returning to Barbers Point.



Some of VF-6's pilots aboard the INTREPID, 8 Feb. 1944. (L. - r. rear) — J.B. Nichols, J.D. Butler, A.T. Kerr, G.C. Bullard, C.J. Chambers and J.F. Moynihan. Center row — H.A. Fairbanks, J.D. Robbins, Alex Vraciu, L.G. Little. Front row — C.N. Seaver, M.F. Loesch, H.A. Paul, and W.H. Hutt. The F6F had transferred to VF-6 from FV-16 after the LEXINGTON was torpedoed. The Dice are a personal marking, origin unknown. The three victory flags are mementos of VF-16 service. (Photo — U.S. Navy, courtesy of H.G. Odenbrett)

INTREPID put to sea on the 16th with Task Group 58.2, which also had the ESSEX (CV-9) with Air Group 9, and CABOT, with Air Group 31. En route to the Marshall Islands where an invasion of Kwajalein was planned for 1 Feb., 40467 participated in tactical training flights and CAP's (Combat Air Patrols). The logbook entries showed the names of several pilots who were subsequently to be added to the list of Navy aces. There were Ltjg Thaddeus T. Coleman (2 victories with VF-6 and 8 more with VF-83 in 1945); Ltjg Lindley W. Godson (5 with VBF-83 in 1945); and Ens. Henry E. Mitchell (6 victories with VBF-17 also in 1945).

Task Group 58.2 conducted a day-long series of strikes at Roi and Namur Islands in the Kwajalein Group on January 29th, but by the time Vraciu took off on CAP in 40467, virtually all the Japanese fighters in the area had either been shot down or destroyed on the ground. However, the Official History of Fighting Squadron 6, told that 40467's first combat flight was not uneventful:

"Lt.(jg) Vraciu and Ens. Hall, his wing man, were circling north of Burlesque Island at seven thousand feet when they saw a Betty emerge from the smoke of Tokyo Pier and head south at about four hundred feet. The section dove fast and Vraciu made a flat high side (approach) firing a long burst. The Betty flamed up around the starboard wing root and almost immediately crashed into the sea.

Recovered from this attack, the pilots saw another Betty flying southwest over the lagoon away from Burlesque at about three hundred feet. It dove to one hundred feet and Vraciu and Hall came in on the stern. On Vraciu's first burst the port engine and wing exploded and the Betty crashed into the lagoon... Going on back up to altitude and at 3- to 4,000 feet two Bettys were seen flying south over the lagoon. As the section dove on them one turned west and the other held its course. Hall pursued the latter.

Vraciu made a run on the Betty flying west with no visible effect. On the second run he found that only one of his guns was firing. He continued to attack, using mostly flat high sides, with the Betty jinking and turning in. On one run Vraciu's guns failed to fire at all and, even with constant charging, only one gun was operative throughout the rest of the attack. After eight or nine runs, the last being made approximately twenty-five miles west of Burlesque, the Betty finally nosed into the sea and crashed from an altitude of about eighty feet. No smoke or flame was observed and Vraciu believes that the Betty's pilot was killed."³

Vraciu went hunting again on February 1st in 40467, over Roi and Namur, but by then Japanese air opposition in the Kwajalein area was non-existent. Several CAP's over the Task Group on the 2nd and 3rd failed to produce any further action. When INTREPID dropped anchor in newly taken Majuro Lagoon on 4 February, 40467 was destined to make only two more combat missions, but the climax of this short combat career was yet to come.

Task Force 58 reassembled for the run on the Japanese Naval

The BELLEAU WOOD detachment of VF-6 in October 1943. (l. - r., rear) — C.A. Palmer, E.J. Phillipe, A.A. Roberts, R.B. Trimble, R.L. Loesch, A.W. Nyquist, J.D. Robbins and T.T. Coleman. Front row — W.A. Searle, H.G. Odenbrett, P.C. Rooney, J.P. Altemus and L.W. Godson. (Via Odenbrett).



INTREPID enroute to the Marshall Islands on 26 January 1944 with VF-6 Dauntlesses and VB-6 Avengers on the forward flight deck. On the starboard outrigger is an F4U-2 of VF(N)-101. (Nat'l Archives 80-G-227123).

fortress at Truk, in the Carolines on 14 February. The two-day operation began at dawn on the 16th with a fighter sweep by 72 Hellcats.⁴ It was a new experience for the F6F pilots, all fighters with no bombers to protect. There were 45 to 50 Japanese fighters in the air over Truk when the Hellcats arrived, and more took off as the wild dogfight developed above. Alex Vraciu was there, in 40467, and, again, the Squadron History reads:

"Three divisions of VF-6 took off at 0640 (LZT) to rendezvous with 12 VF from CV-9 and join the task force fighter sweep, totalling 72 fighter planes, which had as its mission the destruction of enemy aircraft in the air over Truk Atoll and the fields over Moen, Eten, and Param Islands. The VF-6 flight circled the carrier at 1500 and then moved over to the rendezvous point of the ESSEX flight. At 0725 the entire group of fighter planes was ordered by LCDr Kane, Flight Leader of the VF sweep, to proceed to the target.

Our flight approached Truk on a heading of 239°, at 1000' until about 45 miles out and then began to gain altitude. At 6000' the atoll could be seen and a circle was made to gain further altitude. Twelve planes of VF-10 and the same number of VF-5, which had been assigned low cover, were observed below, and twenty-four of FV-18, though not sighted, were above our flight. The planes, then at 13000', arrived over the atoll just before sunrise and at about 0805 hours began circling over Moen Island, preparatory to beginning strafing attacks on its VF airfield on the north side of the island.

From this position the enemy planes could be seen on the field and two Bettys were observed taking off. AA (anti-aircraft) fire had already commenced and had found the level range of our flight although the bursts were off to the sides. Ten of our fighters started to spiral down to strafe and the last two, Ltjg Vraciu and Ens. Little, his wingman, were about to push over when they saw at about 2- to 3,000' above them and on the port side, a group of enemy planes. Vraciu tallyhoed, but the other planes in our flight had by that time proceeded far down towards the airfield. The leader of the enemy planes, by then known to be Zekes, wagged his wings and the group headed towards Vraciu and Little who turned in to the attack, getting bursts at the leader and causing him to break off his attack and head downward. From that time on there were enemy planes all around the two F6F's.

The Hellcats pulled up in a steep chandelle, and aileron-rolled down on a Zeke which had tried to stay on their tail. The Zeke pulled up into a climbing turn and spun out at the top, whereupon the Hellcats jumped him but had to let him dive on down because of other Zekes preparing to strike from above. Finally by scissoring with another friendly plane the Hellcats were able to work all the Zekes down to their level and below. Until this time our fighters hadn't had much opportunity to press home the attack, but from then on the picture changed. In the words of Ltjg Vraciu, 'We noticed that the Japanese pilots weren't reluctant to attack, but once they were cornered they'd dive steeply for

the water or cloud cover. The Hellcat can definitely outmaneuver the Zero at speeds of 250 knots and better, so we began to follow them down. I was able to follow three planes in this manner, two being Zeros and one a Rufe, and set them afire. All hit the water inside Truk Atoll. While climbing back up for altitude after one of these attacks, I noted a Zero skirting a not-too-thick cloud so I made a pass at him. He promptly headed for a thicker one and, after playing cat-and-mouse with him for several minutes I climbed into the sun and let him think I had retired. When I came on down on him for the last time, from five o'clock above, he never knew what hit him, I'm sure. His wing tank and cockpit exploded.' "

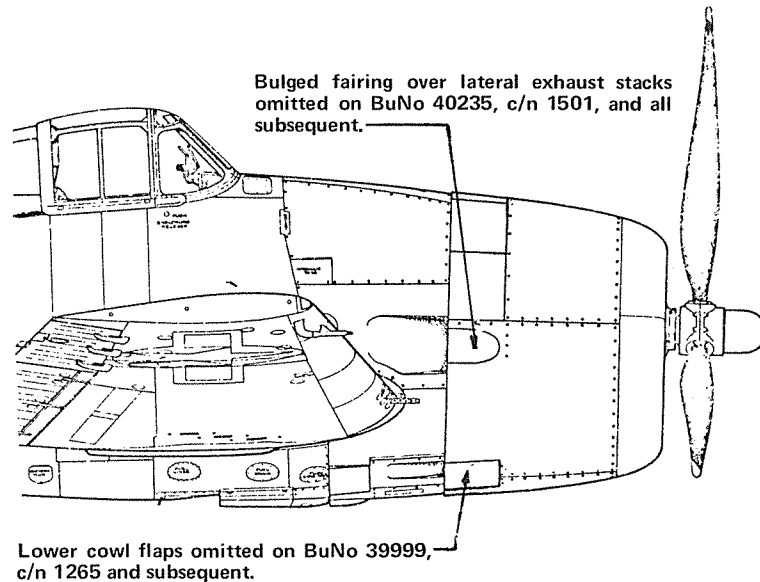
40467's second and final mission over Truk the same day, with Ens. Joseph F. Moynihan in the cockpit, produced no significant action. Although the Japanese had been deprived of the major portion of their airpower during the daylong attack, they managed to launch six or seven Kates after dark for torpedo attacks on the Task Force. Kept at a respectable distance by AA fire, the Kates were generally ineffectual. One, however, managed to elude both night-fighter interception and the AA fire and to hit INTREPID portside with a torpedo at 2211 hours.

The interception of the Kate, by an F6F-3N from YORKTOWN, was by Lt. Russell R. Reiserer of VF(N)-76, and it was the first attempted night interception by a carrier borne night fighter in the War.

Crippled, with a large gash in her hull, and the rudder jammed hard to port, INTREPID was forced to retire from the combat zone. Steering with the engines, and with a makeshift sail rigged on the forecastle to counteract the tendency to weathercock, INTREPID's course to Pearl Harbor was anything but straight. Nevertheless she made port by 24 February.⁵

Air Group 6 personnel were detached from INTREPID and boarded WHITE PLAINS (CVE-66) for the trip to Alameda and home. The airplanes were off-loaded and transferred to other units at Hawaii. On 27 February, with a total 115.7 hours' flight time and seven Japanese aircraft victories shown on the fuselage, 40467 was assigned to (a new) VF-18, then in training at Hilo.⁶

VF-18 had previously been scheduled to go aboard the INTREPID

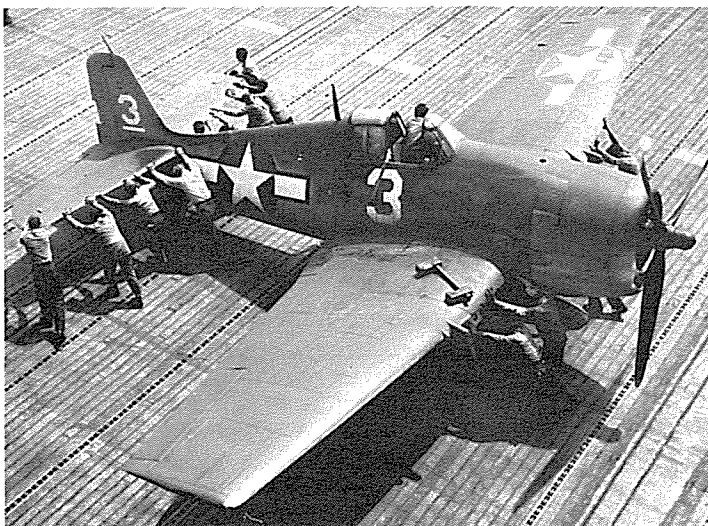


in May, but their training period was unavoidably extended as INTREPID limped back to Hunter's Point Naval Shipyard for repairs.

40467 remained with VF-18 at Hilo and Kaneohe at least until June and during that period accumulated another 200 hours' flight time as VF-18 pilots flew tactical, gunnery and bombing training missions. The logbook shows further entries of VF-18 pilots who later became aces: Cecil E. Harris — 24 victories; Charles M. Mallory and Harvey P. Picken with 11 each; Robert E. Murray — 10.3; Franklin N. Burley and Frank E. Foltz with 7; Anthony J. Denman — 6; and Frank C. Hearell, Arthur R. Mollenauer, and Rudolph D. Van Dyke, all with 5 victories.⁷

40467 took to the air for the last time on June 2nd for carrier landing practice. The aircraft logbook does not provide an explanation of why this F6F, with only 318 hours' flight time, should be retired. A brief entry on the "Record of Transfers" page shows receipt by NAS PEARL HARBOR on June 14th and immediate shipment to Alameda, arriving 22 June.

As INTREPID limped into Pearl Harbor from Truk Alex Vraciu had no thought of taking a recess nor of accompanying VF-6 to Alameda. Requesting an immediate transfer to a combat operational squadron, he left VF-6 for assignment to VF-16. Dedicated to participating in the war to the best of his ability as a fighter pilot, Vraciu had already expressed a vow to avenge the death of VF-6's commander, Butch O'Hare.⁸ He now went aboard the venerable LEXINGTON, just arrived at Pearl Harbor



Underlining of the aircraft number on the vertical fin was unique to VF-6 on the INTREPID. (Nat'l Arch. 80-G-227275) At right, two of Hellcat



40467's pilots, Ltjg Charles M. Mallory (l.) and Lt. Cecil E. Harris, photographed aboard the HANCOCK. (Courtesy of Capt. A.J. Denman).

from Bremerton following repair of torpedo damage sustained off Kwajalein on 3 December 1943.

With FV-16, Vraciu found the opportunities he was seeking. In the second attack on Truk, 29 April, he claimed two more victories. In the Marianas he shot down a Betty on 14 June, and during the great "Marianas Turkey Shoot" of June 19th he shot down six Judys. His 19th and final victory was attained on 20 June 1944. At this point, Vraciu had become the Navy's leading ace, an achievement in which 40467 had played a prominent role for seven of his victories.

Over a month later, 40467 was one of 54 Hellcats ordered disassembled for shipment to the Naval Air Technical Training Command. The engine, wings, guns, camera, tail surfaces, antenna mast and center section were removed and packed for shipment. Additional brief entries show receipt at NAS GLENVIEW on 15 August, and subsequent transfer to NATTC, Chicago, on 29 August.

Vraciu and 40467 were to meet once more. In July 1944, Air Group 16 was relieved by Air Group 19 and headed home. Vraciu arrived at his home in East Chicago a few days following 40467 at the NATTC. A few weeks later, on a Sunday in early September, Wrigley Field was the site of a large rally at which the Navy honored the radio and radar industries of Chicago with a certificate of achievement. Part of the program was indeed a "publicity man's dream," the personal appearance of Vraciu, the Navy's leading ace, and his airplane, Hellcat No. 40467.

40467 was hurriedly removed from the packing crates and reassembled. The same markings were present as when off-loaded from the INTREPID at Pearl Harbor in February. Vraciu's name was still stencilled beneath the cockpit rim, and the nine Japanese flags, for his first nine victories, remained visible. An additional ten flags were applied for the appearance at the rally, and Vraciu's Hellcat was placed on display at the entrance to Wrigley Field.

After the War the NATTC, Chicago, was closed by the Navy and the facilities and material, including 40467, were taken over by the Chicago Vocational School. More than 20 years later, having outlived its usefulness as an aircraft sheet metal repair and hydraulic system training air, 40467's fuselage was acquired by AAHS Member Earl Reinert and put on display with the Reinert Collection in an open field adjacent to Paul Polidari's airstrip, west of Mundelein, Illinois. The forlorn appearance offers no hint of a proud past. The cockpit is bare, long since having been stripped of all instruments and fittings. The original skin panels in the cockpit area are gone, replaced with various others during many years of service as a cadaver for sheet metal repair. The engine, cowling, empennage, canopy and outer wing panels were disposed of long before Reinert acquired the fuselage.



Restoration of this warbird would be a major undertaking, even if replacements for the missing components could be found. Our determination of its production sequence as C/n 1733 indicates that even such information as cowl configuration (as described in the accompanying sketch) would be important data.

On the other hand, even more disconcerting is the thought that such a historically relevant relic of World War II Naval Aviation may eventually meet an ignominious end on the scrap heap.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author must acknowledge the assistance, both direct and indirect, of the following people for piecing together this bit of history: Captain Anthony J. Denman, USNR, Howard Ervin, Jr., William E. Hess, Captain Harvey G. Odenbrett, USNR, Earl Reinert, William L. Strahan, Adrien O. Van Wyen, and Commander Alex Vraciu, USN (Ret).

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

1. Aircraft Log Book, Aircraft Model F6F-3, Airplane No. 40467.
2. Lt. Richard L. Loesch, USN, of VF-6 off U.S.S. PRINCETON, (CVL-23).
3. *Fighting Squadron Six History, March 15, 1943 to December 24, 1944*. U.S. Navy Dept., Historical Division.
4. The date, 16 Feb. 1944, is in question. Several historical accounts give it as 17 Feb., e.g., Morison's *History of the United States Naval Operations in WWII, Vol. VII, Aleutians, Gilberts and Marshalls*. Other accounts, including the Squadron History, and the Aircraft Log Book, state the date as 16 Feb. 1944. This could occur because of the International Date Line.
5. History of the U.S.S. INTREPID (CV-11), U.S. Navy Department, Ships Data Section, courtesy of Capt. A.J. Denman, USNR. CV-11 was the fourth INTREPID. The first, a ketch, was captured from the Tripolitans in 1803, and after taking part in the burning of the Frigate PHILADELPHIA in Tripoli harbor, was later used as a fire ship and blown up by Lt. Somers when he and his crew of ten sailed into the harbor of Tripoli amidst the corsair fleet. Somers and his men sacrificed their lives. The second INTREPID was a steam torpedo ram of the late 19th century with little peacetime service. The third was a bark used as a training ship and receiving ship, sold after WWI. CV-11 was launched in 1943 and became one of the Navy's longest lived carriers, taking part throughout WWII, being damaged as described here and also by kamikaze attacks three times, and survived the war to be converted, with angled deck and the most modern equipment, to an anti-submarine warfare carrier. INTREPID was again completely modernized in 1961-63 and took part in the Vietnam War from 1966 on.
6. VF-18 mentioned here was not the same as that which took part in the raid on Truk in February 1944 (as part of Air Group 17 on BUNKER HILL. The VF-18 at Hilo had been VF-36, redesignated VF-18 when assigned to Air Group 18.
7. Letter, Capt. A.J. Denman to Author, 22 July 1968, and *Fighting Squadron 18 History*, U.S. Navy Dept., Historical Division.
8. Letter, Cdr. Vraciu to Author, 23 Nov. 1970.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard M. Hill enlisted in U.S. Navy in 1945, age 17, entered the flight training program, and received his wings in July 1949. He flew AD-3's with VA-75 and F8F-1's with VS-72. A graduate of Yale University ('52) with B.E. in Mechanical Engineering, he is now a sales engineer for electrical equipment. He is a Member of AAHS since 1962 and a Charter Member of IPMS/USA and of the Richard I. Bong Chapter of IPMS in Milwaukee which published his *Chronology of Camouflage and Markings for U.S. Naval Combat Aircraft, WWII*. He is also author of *Grumman F6F-3/5 Hellcat* (Aircam) and *Markings of the Aces - U.S. Navy* (Kookabura).