

THREE WARS AND THIRTY YEARS

The Story of Navy Fighter Squadron III

by Barrett Tillman

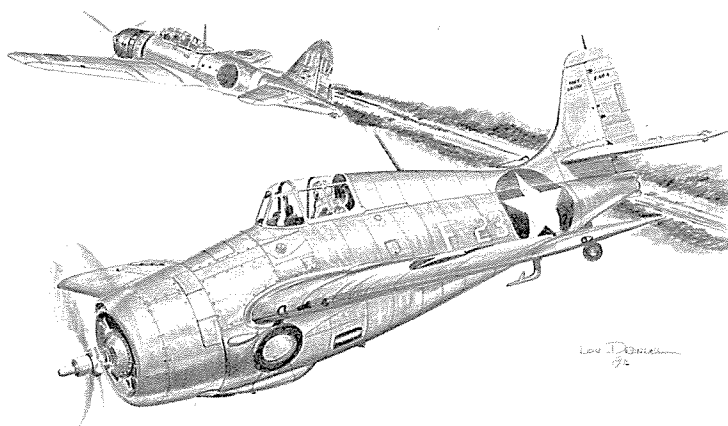
A new fighter squadron was being formed at San Diego's North Island Naval Air Station in the first week of August 1942. Commissioning a new unit was nothing unusual at the time, as it was a hectic expansion period for the U.S. Navy. The first American offensive of WW II was barely underway in the Solomon Islands, at a 90-mile-long island called Guadalcanal. Since the Battle of the Coral Sea in May the Navy had lost the aircraft carriers Lexington and Yorktown, putting most of their aviators ashore for reassignment.

North Island's new fighter squadron was designated VF-11. It was the recipient of several displaced pilots, including the commanding officer, Lt. Cdr. Charles R. Fenton. A 35-year-old native of Annapolis, Maryland, Fenton had previously been C.O. of VF-42 aboard Yorktown, sunk at Midway in June. His flight officer, Lt. William N. Leonard, was one of the top-scoring carrier pilots from the first phase of the Pacific War. Leonard had four confirmed victories and two probables to his credit while flying with VF-42 and VF-3 at Coral Sea and Midway.

Two other combat-experienced pilots were Lt. Frank B. Quady and Lt.(jg) Walter J. Hiebert, both formerly of VF-6 aboard Enterprise. Quady became the squadron engineering officer while Hiebert took charge of communications. The remaining three senior pilots had seen no combat but were experienced fliers. Lt. Clarence M. White, Jr., was designated executive officer and Lt. Raymond W. Vogel became operations officer. Lt. Gordon D. Cady ran the gunnery department, and VF-11 was fortunate to have him. Cady was developing the boresight gun pattern for the Grumman F4F Wildcat which the squadron flew. But in addition to being experienced aviators, four of VF-11's six senior pilots were graduates of the U.S. Naval Academy. This depth of leadership was unusual.

Fighting Eleven was operating F4F-4s by August 11 and slowly began adding new, younger pilots. When Air Group 11 was commissioned on October 10 under Cdr. Paul H. Ramsey, Fenton's squadron had about 27 pilots. This included one "white hat," Chief Aviation Pilot Chester A. Parker, who was later commissioned. Future standouts in the squadron were Ensign James S. Swope, a tall, blond Texan; and Ensign Vernon E. Graham, a rugged, good-looking Colorado pilot. Ensign Charles R. Stimpson's nickname was "Skull," after his thin appearance, but it would prove appropriate for another reason. Lanky, tough and personable, the 23-year-old Utah native would become the deadliest of all.

After barely two months at North Island, the air group deployed to Hawaii, departing the West Coast on October 23. Most personnel went by transport ship but the more experienced fighter pilots and 13 Wildcats (half the authorized strength) embarked in the escort carrier Long Island.¹ Upon arrival in Hawaii the bomber, scout and torpedo squadrons were based at Barbers



Art sketch by Lou Drendel

Point on Oahu but VF-11 went to NAS Maui, decidedly less crowded.

Fenton began accumulating more aircraft and VF-11 embarked upon a comprehensive training program emphasizing aerial gunnery, strafing, and later "group gropes" with the other squadrons. But it wasn't all work. Fighting Eleven was adopted by a prosperous Maui couple, Boyd and Maria von Tempsky, who operated a large cattle ranch. The von Tempskys had two sons in Europe with the USAAF, and with Boyd's sister Alexa had become fond of Navy fighter squadrons. Fenton's pilots quickly came to appreciate "the civilized chow, sports, music and other reminders of home," which the estate on the upper slopes of Haleakala Mountain afforded.²

While on Maui some of the pilots took steps which are felt today in the squadron's heraldry and terminology. Bill Leonard, Charlie Stimpson and one or two others decided VF-11 should have a squadron insignia, and devised the concept of two stubby Grummans shooting a "rising sun" into the ocean as representative of their mission. With the help of Alexa and Maria the insignia was rendered in color and squadron mechanics devised a multiple stencil system so each Wildcat could have identical emblems. Lt. Cdr. Fenton approved the idea, and thus was born one of the most enduring insignia in U.S. Navy Aviation.

Numerals were not allowed on unit insignia, but along the bottom was printed the legend "Sundowners," the name by which VF-11 would become popularly known. It referred mainly to the squadron's job of shooting down Japanese "suns," but actually

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

This is Barrett Tillman's fourth Journal contribution during the Bicentennial Year, bringing his total AAHS articles to eight. He has published over 40 other articles in addition to his first book, an operational history of the Douglas SBD.

The VF-11 history originated in a previous Journal story, "A Sundowner's Adventure" (Winter 1975) which prompted Barrett to investigate the squadron in depth. He has been a frequent guest at annual meetings of the American Fighter Aces Association, where he met several Sundowners. Naval Aviation has long been his favorite subject, and he hopes to continue with a series of books on U.S. Navy aircraft. Meanwhile, he maintains a fully restored 1940 N3N-3 on his grass airfield at Athena, Oregon.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Lou Drendel has managed to combine a lifelong interest in aviation with a career in the retail lumber business. In his spare time he has authored and illustrated books on The Air War in Vietnam, and several monographs on modern military aircraft including the following: The F-4, F-8, A-4, F-100, F-105, F-106, A-6, A-7, B-52, F-104, Helicopter Gunships, New Luftwaffe, and the B-47. He has contributed paintings to the Air Force Art Collection, as well as several previous JOURNALS. He makes his home in Naperville, Illinois, in a subdivision built on an airport. He is part owner of a restored T-34A.



VF-11 during training in Hawaii, 1944. First row: Savage (4th from left), Fairfax and Cady (8th and 9th from left); second row: Stimpson (6th from left), Swope and Cyr (8th and 9th from left); third row: Moranville (center).

that was only part of the story. "Sundowner" was an old nautical appellation which referred to a diligent worker; a sailor who toiled till day was done. It originated in the days of sail when grog was customarily served on ships, but a strict captain might withhold the ration until dark while others relented when the sun sank below the main yardarm.³

Training ended in February, 1943 when the squadron, now filled out with about 35 aircraft and 40 pilots, once more boarded Long Island and headed southwest. On March 6 the F4Fs were catapulted off the CVE's short deck for Nandi in the Fiji Islands. The Sundowners were put on short notice for deployment to Guadalcanal but at almost the same time lost their skipper, Charlie Fenton. Recalled for duty in Washington, D.C., after six months as C.O., Fenton turned over command to his exec, Clarence White, while Raymond "Sully" Vogel took White's previous job. Bill Leonard assumed the combined duties of flight and operations officer.

Air Group 11 was now combat-ready under Cdr. Weldon L. Hamilton. The pilots were all qualified for carrier operations, but during the period VF-11 spent at North Island the U.S. Navy had lost the services of three more carriers. When the Sundowners had organized in August and September the early battles around Guadalcanal had sent Saratoga to dockyard with torpedo damage and WASP fell prey to a submarine. Then barely two weeks after the air group left San Diego, Hornet was lost in the Battle of Santa Cruz. By the time Air Group II arrived in the combat zone only Enterprise remained in combat of the surviving American carriers. Cdr. Hamilton's squadrons now knew they would go to Guadalcanal to operate with the Marines.

It was disappointing to the fighter pilots, who were aware that their F4Fs were now outclassed by a faster, more versatile aircraft in the form of Vought's F4U Corsair. The Marine fighter squadrons at Guadalcanal would fly Corsairs by the time VF-11 arrived because the "U-Bird" was considered unsuitable for carrier operations. The Wild cat was a well-proven carrier aircraft, but now that the Sundowners were to operate from a land base they would have preferred F4Us. The Grumman lacked not only the Corsair's speed, but its range, rate of climb and ammunition capacity. Furthermore, the F4F could be tricky as a gun platform—it tended to skid while firing.

One advantage was that there would probably be no shortage of Wildcats. Fighting Eleven was the last F4F squadron engaged in prolonged combat, and the Fleet Aircraft Replacement Pool

was well stocked with Wildcats from other units. As Ensign Vern Graham said, "We were concerned about being selected to 'use up' the remaining F4Fs . . . however, we were confident in it."⁴ Bill Leonard as flight and operations officer probably summed up the pilots' feelings when he said, "Committed to the F4F, we would not let our minds dwell too much on its deficiencies. VF-11 felt sensitive flying an obviously outdated machine but we were loyal to the F4F."⁵

On April 25, 1943 Air Group 11 departed the Fijis for Guadalcanal. White took his Wildcats to Espiritu Santo that night and arrived at "The Canal" on Monday the 26th with 34 aircraft. Two had been delayed en route with mechanical problems but both shortly rejoined the squadron. White, Cady and Vogel each led one of VF-11's three elements to the destination with TBFs acting as navigation planes on the 600-mile flight. Fighting Eleven settled down at the Lunga Point strip, better known as Fighter One, while Cdr. Hamilton's other three squadrons were based at nearby Henderson Field.

The ground echelon had previously arrived by ship or transport plane, and established a tent camp "in a delightful oasis of mud and mosquitoes in a coconut grove."⁶ The next day VF-11 was briefed by Col. Sam Moore, the colorful, swashbuckling Marine fighter commander. The Sundowners were to fly under the tactical control of the Marine Corps, as the Leathernecks had been operating from the island for the past nine months. Later that morning, the 27th, VF-11's first patrol from "Cactus" was flown by Lt. Cdr. Vogel, Lt.(jg) Robert N. Flath, Lt.(jg) William R. Maxwell and Lt.(jg) Cyrus G. Cary. It was a local flight with nothing to report, but two days later Lt. Cdr. White led two divisions on an escort mission to Munda. The only enemy opposition was AA fire.

At the end of the first week on Guadalcanal—Sunday, May 2—VF-11 suffered its first loss. Sixteen Sundowners escorting a strike to Munda were south of Vangunu at 14,000 feet when the exec, Sully Vogel, ran one of his fuel tanks dry and lost altitude while switching tanks. His element leader, Bob Maxwell, moved to port in order to regain sight of Vogel when the two Wildcats collided. Vogel's propeller sliced off the last six feet of Maxwell's fuselage.

Maxwell's F4F nosed up in a half-loop and fell into a flat spin. He managed to bail out and open his parachute but the other Wildcats had to continue the mission. At 1700 returning pilots spotted Maxwell in his life raft and reported his position, though



by then it was too late to summon help. Vogel had aborted the mission, returning with a smashed canopy and rubber marks on one wing from Maxwell's tires.

"Maxie" was nowhere to be seen the next morning, nor anywhere for two weeks. A PBY brought him back to Guadalcanal on May 18 after a harrowing but safe 16 days in enemy-occupied area. The intrepid South Carolinian had sailed his raft to Tetipari, arriving on the fifth. He walked the length of the island in seven days, encountering a crocodile which claimed dominion over a channel on a coral beach, but otherwise met no opposition. On the 13th he launched his raft for Rendova, where he knew he stood a chance of contacting an Australian coastwatcher. He was met by friendly natives who took him to safety near Segi Lagoon on the 17th. Maxwell's fifth mission had been his last with VF-11, for he was flown to New Zealand where he spent two months in a hospital recuperating from his adventure.⁷

Meanwhile, operations continued and despite lack of enemy aerial opposition, the losses also mounted. On May 6 during another strike against Munda, Ensign Leroy Childs' aircraft dropped behind the formation, his engine smoking badly. The F4F splashed down north of the Rendova hook, and though Maxwell talked to natives who saw a parachute that day, only Childs' seat cushion was found. A couple of days later three Sundowners led by Lt. Lester Wall found enemy shipping in Blackett Strait. They blew a landing barge out of the water and thoroughly strafed a Japanese ship which was dead in the water. It was a Kagero-class destroyer which recon aircraft reported sunk next morning.

On May 26 the skipper himself achieved "the dubious distinction," as Don Meyer the squadron diarist noted,⁸ of being the first VF-11 pilot to qualify for a Purple Heart. A 20mm shell went through White's cockpit while he strafed Suavanau Point at Rekata Bay, causing a gash on his left hand. But he was on flight status again in a week.

Though things were slow in the air, the squadron's living area was improved considerably by the industrious Sea Bees who built quonset huts and new shower stalls. Two pilots had been temporarily evacuated to New Zealand during the first couple of weeks, suffering from jaundice, but otherwise the squadron enjoyed largely good health. Dysentery was the most troublesome ailment but it grounded few pilots, and none for very long.

By the first week of June, VF-11 had been on Guadalcanal a month and a half, without a single claim for an enemy aircraft. The Sundowner appellation was beginning to seem unduly boastful, particularly in comparison to the achievements of the Marine squadrons. Gordon Cady's division finally broke the ice when a 32-plane escort to Vila was abandoned due to weather. Cady had climbed his four planes to 10,000 feet and, seeing the route was clear further west, received permission to continue.

The Wildcats were 10 miles south of Segi when an estimated 24 Zeros were sighted approaching them overhead at 15,000 feet. At the same time Lt.(jg) Dan Hubler, the number four man, reported at least eight more directly above. Outnumbered eight to one and at a serious tactical disadvantage, Cady wisely decided to evade into clouds over Vangunu before it was too late.

But it was already too late for the other three. Hubler's plane was so badly shot up that he had to bail out, and even then the

Japanese strafed him in the water. Fortunately all of them missed. Meanwhile, Lt.(jg) Terry Holberton, Cady's wingman, found himself with a dead engine and made a water landing. Lt.(jg) Edward "Smiley" Johnson had little to smile about, as he was the only one left. Coaxing a damaged engine, he made a couple of inconclusive head-on passes at some Zeros before he too bailed out. He landed in a clearing on Vangunu while the enemy pilots tried to kill him on the ground just as they tried to shoot Hubler in the water, with a similar lack of success.

Cady meanwhile had reached the cloud unharmed and dodged from cover to cover en route to base. But he was twice presented with opportunities he couldn't resist, and thereby lived up to his formidable gunnery reputation. On both occasions when Cady emerged from a cloud to find a Zero in front of him, he shot them down. Then he raced back to Guadalcanal to help organize rescue efforts.

Amazingly, all three downed pilots returned safely. Hubler came by native canoe the next day and Holberton the following day when Frank Quady's division spotted him on the beach of Vangunu. A J2F Duck retrieved Holberton the same afternoon. But Smiley Johnson had a more adventurous trek. Thinking he was on New Georgia, he nearly strolled into a Japanese camp and was almost seen by the enemy a second time. A PBY picked him up at Segi on the 19th.

Later on the seventh, Ray Vogel led his division to Vila for some strafing and hedge-hopped the way home via New Georgia and Gatakai. But between Gatakai and the Russells, Vogel's wingman Lt.(jg) Bob Flath was bounced by two Zekes which badly shot up his plane. Vogel boresighted one Zero and shot it off Flath's tail and Flath dived for home. Vogel managed to elude the second bandit. In these first aerial encounters of June 7, VF-11 had come out even at three for three, but lost no pilots. However, it was painfully obvious that the Wildcats could not hope for much better than a draw when outnumbered and caught at a disadvantage.

The next combat came only five days later, with much better results. Four divisions under Bill Leonard were near the Russells, returning to base from a long PBY escort when the fighter director reported a large bogey on radar at 0940. Leonard, Les Wall, Ken Viall and Charley Wesley reported their divisions available for interception and spent the next 35 minutes following radar vectors. Visual contact was made shortly after 1000 a little northwest of the Russells. Stacked from 23,000 to 26,000 feet the 16 Wildcats saw some three dozen Zeros both above and below them. Leonard evaluated the situation, mainly concerned about the F4Fs' depleted fuel, as they had been in the air well over three hours. He radioed, "Make one pass and use remaining fuel to get home," which was 70 miles away.⁹

As was so often the case, it wasn't possible. Leonard exploded two Zekes, raising his career total to six, and then disengaged. But the Japanese pressed their numerical advantage and drew most of the other Wildcats into dogfights. Lt.(jg) Claude Ivie splashed a Zeke but was soon forced into a ditching near the Russells. The other pilots became scattered and fought singly or in pairs.

Leonard's second section didn't make it clear of the Zeros. Lt.(jg) Vern Graham and his wingman, Bob Gilbert, "became involved in assisting Marine F4Us who were severely outnum-

(Left) U.S.S. Hornet (CV-12) was Sundowners' home Oct. 1944 to Jan. 1945. USN

bered.”¹⁰ The Corsairs had been drawn to the combat and, with more fuel, stayed to fight.

Gilbert remained as long as he dared, claiming three kills, then broke off, rejoined Leonard and landed with less than four gallons of fuel. Lt. Ken Viall's division was bounced by several Zekes but Viall disregarded bandits on his tail and drew a bead on one of two Japanese dogging Lt.(jg) George Ricker's F4F. Viall fired and watched the Zero dive into the water. Les Wall's wingman Teddy Hull bagged two Zekes, one of which he literally shot out of Wall's sights. Then Wall was wounded by a 20mm shell and ditched 100 yards offshore in the Russells. Lt.(jg) Lowell Slagle landed on the rough Russells strip, dangerously low on fuel.

But the standout performance was recorded by Bill Leonard's element leader, Vern Graham, who disregarded his fuel problem and stayed in the fight. Though it would be Graham's only combat in his 33 missions, it would make Sundowner history.

“I was separated from Lt. Leonard on that first pass, and from Gilbert very soon thereafter,” Graham recalled.¹¹ He dived on a Zeke slow-rolling behind an F4F and disintegrated it with a short burst. He set a second afire with a high side run and exploded a third head-on.

Graham now joined two Corsairs of VMF-121 and the mismatched trio attacked four Zekes and initiated an offensive weave. One F4U drew a Zeke straight across Graham's sights and his guns chopped large pieces from it. After that Graham had to give in to his rapidly diminishing fuel supply and he turned towards the Russells. But another Zeke appeared at his 12 o'clock high so he pulled up, fired, and saw it smoke and roll over. Then it was lost to sight. At this point Graham's engine quit and two more Zekes jumped his tail. The Marines were still on hand and shot down one, driving the other away.

Completely out of fuel, Graham made an approach on the narrow landing strip cut into the coconut plantation on Russell Island. This field demanded a power-on approach for a successful landing, but Graham had no choice but to attempt it dead-stick. He overshot the runway and piled into the palm trees at the far end. His Wildcat was demolished.¹² Graham suffered serious injuries which ended his brief but spectacular career with VF-11. He was “battered but feisty” when Leonard and Gilbert stretched a CAP the next day and landed to visit their friend.¹³ Graham went to the Navy hospital in San Diego for six months, eventually returning to flight status in F4Us.

While recovering, the Colorado pilot learned that VMF-121 confirmed the last two Zeros as both destroyed. It made a total of five definite kills for Vern Graham, making him VF-11's first ace and the seventh Navy or Marine “ace in a day”—also the only Navy flier to achieve that distinction as a land-based pilot.

The Sundowners could now justifiably claim their self-appointed title. In this action they were credited with 14 Zekes for four F4Fs (including Graham's) and no pilots. It looked like a hard record to beat, but in merely four days VF-11 would have another chance.

At 1230 on June 16 Marine fighter command alerted VF-11 of a very large incoming Japanese formation. Between 1310 and 1340 the Sundowners scrambled seven divisions—28 Wildcats—which dispersed to meet the estimated 120 bandits. Actually there were 24 Val dive bombers escorted by 70 Zekes, their obvious target being the crowded American shipping around Tulagi. Sully Vogel, Ken Viall, Walt Hiebert and Charley Wesley's divisions went to orbit Cape Esperance while Frank Quady and John Ramsey's divisions took station over the ships in the bay. Lt. Cdr. White set up over Henderson Field with his four planes.

By swinging wide to the southwest the Japanese eluded early interception from the Russells and were reported only 25 miles south of Fighter One at 1400, heading northeast. Frank Quady sighted the dive bombers with Zekes deployed on either flank at 15,000 feet. Leading Henry White, Homer “Red” Schild and John Cooke out of the sun in high overhead and stern runs, Quady shot down two Vals and damaged a Zeke. The others

claimed two Vals, two Zekes and two probables. The Sundowners had made first contact and had drawn first blood.

Lt.(jg) John Ramsey, approaching the Japanese from the northwest with a considerable altitude advantage, exploited it fully. His division knocked down six Zekes from the top cover and then Ramsey broke through to claim a Val. Lt.(jg) John Pressler splashed two Zekes but then himself landed in the water with sudden engine stoppage.

Lt. Cdr. White contacted the dive bombers just as they pushed over on the ships 15,000 feet below. White and his wingman, Lt.(jg) Teddy Hull, started on the Vals in line astern and White hit two which fell away smoking, claimed as probables. After a brief tussle with a Zeke, White looked around and Hull was nowhere in sight.

But White's second section had a field day. Charlie Stimpson and Jim Swope made repeated runs on the diving Vals and did nearly as well as Vern Graham had in his combat four days before. Skull Stimpson splashed four dive bombers and Swope bagged three; the first time either of them had scored.

By now the dive-bombing attack was over. Two U.S. ships had been hit by bombs and the Vals were fleeing north at low level. Vogel's 16 Wildcats slammed into the combat over the Savo-Tulagi-Lunga area and the sky was immediately filled with dog-fights from 20,000 feet on down. Lt. Ken Viall knocked two Vals into the water and then got a Zeke. Lt.(jg) William J. Masoner¹⁴ claimed two Zekes while George Ricker pursued one with Chandler Boswell low on the deck. But the two F4Fs collided and hit the water. Both pilots were lost.

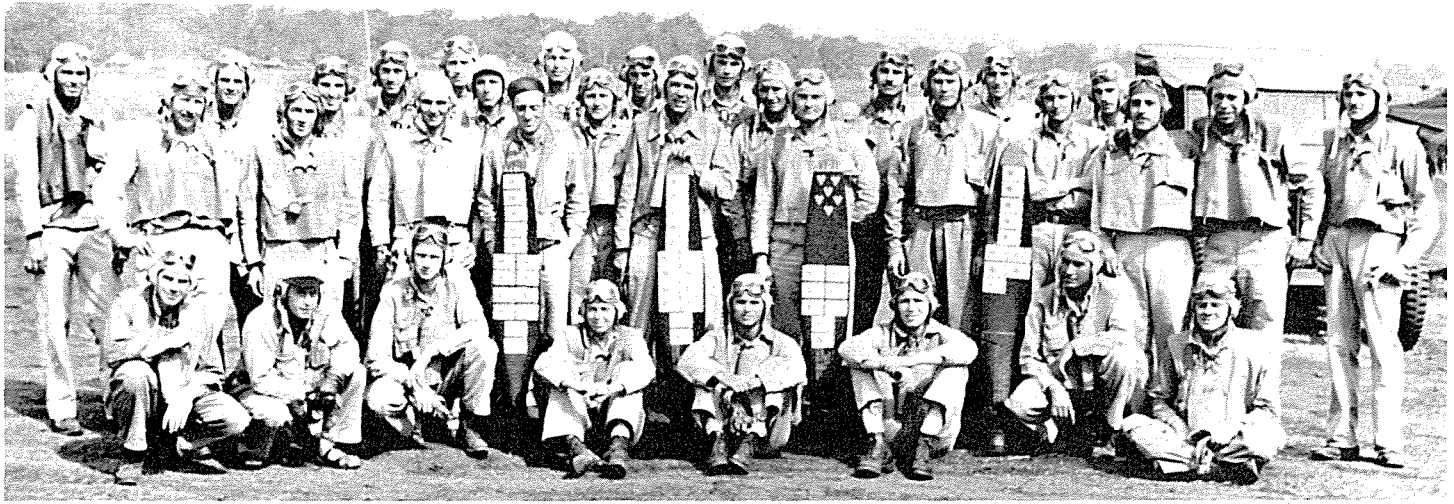
Then it was over. Army, Navy and Marine fighters wheeled around, temporarily alerted by a false alarm of more bogies, and began landing at Henderson Field and the two fighter strips. It was thought that 94 of the estimated 120 enemy aircraft had been shot down, with VF-11 claiming 31, the largest share of the kills. Since it is known the Japanese dispatched exactly 94 planes, some overclaiming evidently resulted, but not very much. Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison relates that the enemy formation was almost completely annihilated, losing the equivalent of almost two carrier air groups.¹⁵

In return for 31 kills by 17 of the 28 Sundowners flying the mission, four Wildcats and three pilots were gone. It was another indication of VF-11's major role in the battle, as only two other U.S. fighters had been lost. John Pressler made it safely to shore from his ditched F4F, and Army pilots reported a P-40 colliding with a Wildcat, almost certainly White's wingman Teddy Hull. Apparently none of the three missing Sundowners fell to enemy aircraft; collision was the often unavoidable result of so many planes crowded into such a limited airspace.

Rear Admiral Marc Mitscher, Commander Air Forces Solomons, was so appreciative of VF-11's contribution to the record victory that he sent two cases of whiskey by way of congratulation. The Sundowners employed Mitscher's gift to convince two war correspondents that VF-11 was the only outfit on Guadalcanal worth writing about.

A single kill was registered on June 21 when Lt.(jg) Homer Schild of Frank Quady's division found a Nell bomber near Santa Isabel. Separated from the others, Schild made three passes and shot the bomber down for his third victory. But VF-11 lost another aircraft when Lt.(jg) Henry White, the colorful West Virginian, overshot the runway while making a forced landing and nosed into the Tenaru River. Long flying hours, heavy combat and general fatigue were taking their toll. Despite the fact that VF-11's excellent mechanics had actually presented the pilots with a “new” Wildcat built out of spares, both aircraft and pilot availability declined. Dan Hubbard wiped out an F4F in a landing accident, damaging three others, and was evacuated with injuries.

Admiral Mitscher said VF-11 was due for rotation, but not immediately. On July 6 the Sundowners escorted TBFs to Kula Gulf and a division composed of Charley Wesley, Chester Parker, Charlie Stimpson and Jim Swope tangled with six or eight Zekes. The Japanese pilots must have had a grudge against Texans, for they all tied on to Swope's tail. Stimpson destroyed one from directly astern while Wesley and Parker made overhead runs on the others as Swope engaged in violent aerobatics. A superior



VF-11, Guadalcanal, June-July 1943. Standing (l to r) Parker(1), Hiebert(1), Holberton(2), Leonard(2), Ogilvie, Flath, Wall, Ivie(1), Gaston(2), Cady(2), Work, Martin, Cook(1), C.M. White(2), Stimpson(6), Swope(5), Vogel(1), Masoner(2), Quady(2), Hubler, Pressler(2), Hubbard, Pimentel(1), Johnson, Viall. Sitting (l to r) Cary(1), Gilbert(3), Schild(3), Wesley(2), Ramsey(2), H.S. White(2), Coppola(1), Jones. Not shown: Graham(5), Boswell, Childs, Hull(2) and Maxwell. *Figures in parentheses indicate the 47 victories at Guadalcanal.*

airman, Swope shook the Zekes after Wesley and Parker each splashed one. Jim then bagged a Zeke but his Wildcat was so badly shot up that he could only fly it back to the junk heap.

Fighting Eleven's last combat at Guadalcanal occurred three days later, July 9, when Lt. Cdrs. White and Vogel led two divisions on CAP over Rendova. An estimated 40 to 50 Zekes in two waves were reported, but Bob Flath developed a rough engine just then so Bill Masoner was ordered to escort him home. In the dogfight which followed, Skull Stimpson repeated his performance of the sixth by shooting a Zeke off Jim Swope, who shortly splashed one himself for his fifth victory. Vern Gaston and Clarence White teamed up to destroy a third Zeke, but it wasn't one-sided. During the hassle, White glimpsed an F4F in a vertical dive off Rendova. It was Cy Carey, Vogel's wingman, who failed to return. Vogel was also hit, taking three 20mm shells in one wing.

The Sundowners continued the strenuous Rendova CAPs through July 11. These missions averaged over 3½ hours each, and some pilots (Bill Leonard, for example) flew two sorties some days, logging as much as eight hours, much of it on oxygen. Finally, on the twelfth, launching for the last time from Fighter One, VF-11 began a deployment south from Cactus, homeward bound.

In 11 weeks the squadron had been credited with 55 enemy aircraft: 37 Zekes, 17 Vals and one Nell. Five pilots had been killed in action but only Carey was actually lost to enemy aircraft. Three other pilots—Maxwell, Graham and Hubbard—were evacuated with injuries. Twelve Wildcats had been lost in aerial combat, for a kill-loss ratio of 4½ to one. Probably another half-dozen F4Fs were destroyed or wrecked in accidents and a couple of others were written off with extensive battle damage.

In their first tour the Sundowners had produced three aces: Stimpson with six kills, Graham and Swope with five each. Graham may have identified the source of VF-11's success when he said, "Many times I was grateful for the opportunity of flying with so many well-trained, talented Regular Navy men."¹⁶ Fenton, White, Cady and the others had done their jobs well; the results proved it.

During a two-week stop at Espiritu Santo, the pilots encountered the airplane most of them yearned for, the brand new F6F-3 Hellcat. Bill Leonard and some others were anxious to try out the new Grummans, which were being accumulated for VF-12. "The F6F-3 was almost as good as the F4U in fighter performance and alleged to be as good or better than the F4F in carrier behavior," Leonard recalled. After flying the Hellcat, Leonard and some others hoped to take them to Guadalcanal for introduction to combat.¹⁷

But it wasn't to be. The squadron went aboard the escort carrier Chenango in early August and arrived at NAS Alameda on the 21st. Many of the pilots were dispersed and assigned to other duties. Quady and Leonard, who had completed their second tours, went to Admiral Mitscher's staff at ComAirWestCoast. Clarence White joined the staff of ComAirPac while Vogel returned to Annapolis for medical treatment and duty at the Naval

Academy. Gordon Cady was promoted to Lt. Cdr. and took over as C.O. of VF-11, effective September 25, 1943.

The Sundowners began a training and re-forming cycle with a nucleus of veterans such as Stimpson, Swope, Henry White, John Ramsey and a few others. At the same time a number of SBD pilots who had flown with Bombing 11 and Scouting 11 at Guadalcanal transferred into Cady's unit. One of these was Lt.(jg) Bob Saggau, an All-American halfback on the 1938-40 Notre Dame football team. Saggau and the other dive bomber pilots simply decided they wanted a chance to fly fighters and "it was actually very simple," he recalled. "We requested through channels to transfer to VF-11 and were so authorized."¹⁸

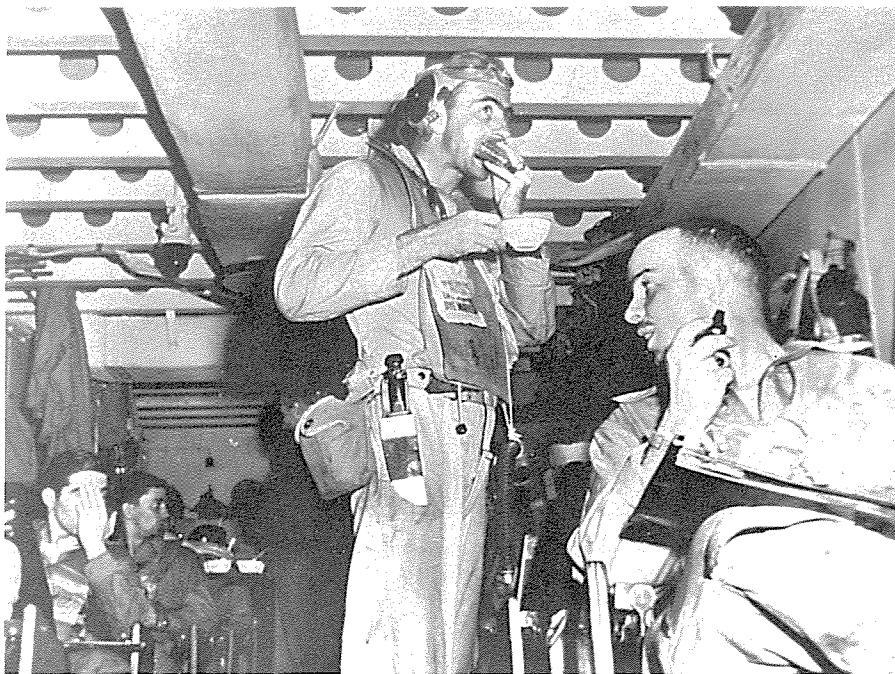
Another pilot with a harder time getting transferred in was the new exec, Lt. Eugene G. Fairfax. A determined, aggressive 27-year-old, Fairfax had enlisted in the Navy in 1934. He entered Annapolis in 1935, eventually became captain of the boxing team, and graduated in 1939. First assigned to battleships, he transferred to aviation and received his wings in March, 1942. Fairfax flew OS2U floatplanes from USS Tennessee but soon tired of the rather tame life of an observation pilot and, in the words of the fleet air personnel officer, "stuck out his neck about 40 feet" by going out of channels to request a transfer to fighters.¹⁹

The request was granted and Gene Fairfax joined VF-11 in September, 1943. But though he arrived with 675 hours in his logbook, his work was cut out for him. The phrase "arrogant fighter pilots" has been overworked, but some Sundowners' initial reaction to receiving an OS2U pilot as exec was less than enthusiastic. However, Gordon Cady was on top of the situation. He had Jim Swope introduce Fairfax to fighters, and before long the new exec was accepted by the old hands.

Many of the middle-grade pilots came from instructing duties, such as Lt.(jg) Jimmie E. Savage, the easygoing Texan destined to become the Sundowners' number three ace. Cady gave Jim Swope his pick of the young ensigns for a wingman and Swope selected H.B. Moranville, a 20-year-old Nebraskan who had quit college when the flying bug bit. But the new pilots weren't all reservists. Lt. Robert E. Clements, the flight officer, had been a year behind Fairfax at Annapolis and was six months out of Pensacola. Originally assigned to SBDs, Clements had gone to Bill Leonard at San Diego to arrange a transfer to VF-11. The squadron trained on F4F-4s until early October when F6F-3s became available.

Not long after acquiring Hellcats the Sundowners also acquired a mascot. All pilots had to qualify on the pistol range, and the instructor gave Gordon Cady one of a litter of Boston bull terrier pups. The dog was christened Gunner and Cady delegated Blake Moranville, then the youngest pilot in the squadron, to be its official caretaker. Blake and Gunner were soon virtually inseparable.

In January 1944 VF-11 moved briefly to Crow's Landing for night flying, then back to Alameda in February for initial carrier qualifications aboard the escort carrier Copahoe, where Gunner first tried out his sea legs. Finally in late March reorganized Air



(Above) Three Sundowners Aces hold postmortem on a kill. (L to R) Swope, Stimpson and Moranville. Moranville

(Left) Cdr. R.E. Riera, skipper Air Group II aboard Hornet. Hill

Group 11 deployed to Hawaii, with aircraft, aboard the new fleet carrier WASP. Fighting 11 went ashore at Barbers Point where Cady soon initiated an intensive training program. In order to obtain maximum experience from each flight, three divisions took off before dawn on most days for an average duration of three hours. This provided training in night flying and navigation. One division acted as bombers while the other two practiced escort technique based on Cady's "roving weave."

The 12 Hellcats practiced air-to-air and air-to-ground gunnery at the firing range before turning for home. But an added touch of realism was added whenever a radar director could vector the Sundowners onto a formation of Army fighters, most often P-47s. The Hellcats usually had the best of these mock combats, for an F6F could nearly always turn inside a Thunderbolt, though the "Jugs" were noticeably faster. Other practice missions included a few "group gropes" with VB-11's SB2Cs and VT-11's TBMs.

Subsequent moves were made to Maui and Hilo with more carrier landings in July on the escort carrier Kadashan Bay. The air group was in Hawaii for five months, which to some eager youngsters like Blake "Rabbit" Moranville seemed "like forever."²⁰ But the time was made immensely more pleasant as the Sundowners renewed their friendship with the von Tempskys. The first-tour pilots were naturally well acquainted with the family, and the new pilots soon felt at home on the sprawling estate. So much so, in fact, that three Sundowners were constantly at the plantation, rotating every two days when the relief arrived in three F6Fs. Cady and the crew presented Alexa with a four-star flag symbolic of her position as "ComWolfPack" and whenever the ensign was flown it was interpreted as the all-clear signal for arriving pilots to indulge in a spectacular buzz job. If the flag was not visible, it meant that potentially unappreciative visitors were aboard and the pilots were to conduct themselves as Congress intended for officers and gentlemen.

In mid-August Gordon Cady was relieved as C.O. and ordered to Admiral John McCain's staff with Task Force 38 as operations officer. Gene Fairfax, now a Lieutenant Commander, took over and Bob Clements became Executive Officer. They only had about three weeks to settle into their new jobs before shipping out, for the air group had orders for the Western Pacific. A final few deck landings were made aboard Ranger in the first few days of September, by which time most of the Hellcat pilots had about 300 hours logged in F6Fs. The more senior pilots had from 900 to 1200 hours total time.

But the squadron was divided for the trip west. The maintenance personnel, minus aircraft, boarded WASP while most officers were delegated the entirely unwelcome chore of serving as armed guards on a transport ship loaded with former prisoners from the Navy prison at Treasure Island. Air Group II under Cdr. Fred R. Schrader was reunited at Manus Harbor in the Admiral-

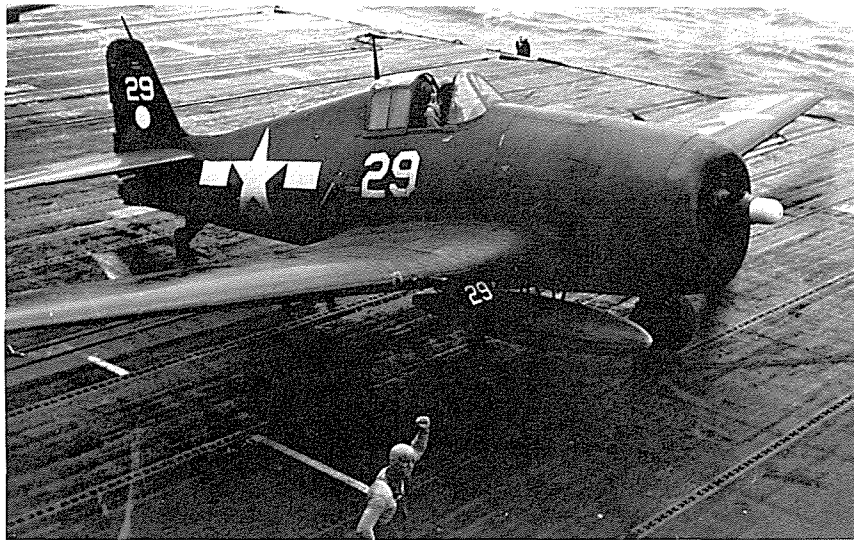
ties during mid-September. Gene Fairfax had 45 pilots under him, young men from 33 of the 48 states whose ages ranged from 19 to 28. Seven Sundowners remained from the Guadalcanal tour: Nelson Dayhoff, Bob "Cac" Flath, John Ramsey, Charlie "Skull" Stimpson, Jim Swope, Henry White and Dan Work. Schrader's squadrons were to replace Air Group Two aboard USS Hornet (CV-12) and received most of their initial aircraft from the veteran unit. Fighting 11 inherited VF-2's Hellcats, a mixture of F6F-3s and -5s, all sporting the white ball on the tail. For this reason, Air Group II retained identical markings to Air Group Two. A night-fighter detachment flying radar-equipped Hellcats was permanently assigned to Hornet, but would share some of VF-11's facilities once aboard ship.

Hornet's skipper, Capt. A.K. "Artie" Doyle, welcomed the new fliers aboard and used the time available to exercise the air group in a shakedown cruise. Meanwhile, Gordon Cady had been conscientiously working on an operations plan for the Fast Carrier Task Force and, though fatigued from long hours, flew from carrier to carrier putting his customary personal touch on the preparations. While landing aboard WASP his arresting hook broke and his aircraft slammed inverted into the barrier. Cady died in the crash, a serious blow to the Sundowners' morale. He was replaced as task force operations officer by his friend Bill Leonard.

Task Force 38 sortied from Manus in early October, taking Air Group 11 back into the war for a second time. But it was over a week to the operations area and there were other distractions. On the fourth, Lt. J.S. Brown of VF-11 made the 10,000th landing on Hornet and Captain Doyle presented the Sundowners with a cake to mark the occasion. The next day Ensign S.J. Richardson was forced to ditch with a broken oil line. He suffered a slight cut on the head but was rescued by a destroyer.

On October 9 Gene Fairfax counted 46 Hellcats available for operations. He was going to need them, because the next day would be VF-11's first combat mission from Hornet.

The target was Japanese shipping in the Nansei Shoto group between Okinawa and Japan. The fourth fighter mission of the day, October 10, demonstrated VF-11's proficiency even though nearly all the pilots were new to combat. The Sundowners averaged 19 seconds between each launch, only one-quarter second short of the record. Armed with bombs and rockets, the F6Fs went low over Miyako Jima's anchorage to get at enemy shipping. Lt. J.E. "Doc" Savage took his division down on a 5,500-ton transport, pressing through AA fire to skip-bomb the vessel. Ensign Ken Chase, the baby of the squadron, got a direct hit with his 500-pound bomb but was almost immediately shot off Savage's wing and crashed in the water. Lt. John Ramsey and Lt.(jg) W.H. Boring rocketed a destroyer tender which beached itself and burned. The Sundowners had probably sunk two ships, though Chase was lost. During the day Ensign George Lindesmith evened



"Ginger 29" prepares to launch from Hornet in January 1945. USN via R.M. Hill



Lt. Charles R. Stimpson, Sundowners' top scorer with 16 victories. Hill

the score when he caught a Val dive bomber and shot it down, the first kill of the tour.

Operations continued the next day, and this time VF-11 proved the near-record launch of the 10th was no fluke. Thirty-one Hellcats and three SB2Cs were launched with an average 17½ seconds separation. The teletype in the ready room clacked out a message, "The boys set a new record on that launch. . . . The captain is tickled."

On October 12 the Fast Carrier Task Force went to work further south, launching strikes against Formosa. The first fighter mission of the day launched at 0545 for Takao and Hieto. The Sundowners damaged some shipping but were mostly concerned with shooting up airfields. Ensign Lindesmith, who had notched the first aerial victory of the cruise only two days before, was last seen strafing Hieto Airfield. Lt. Cdr. Bob Clements, the executive officer, notched the second kill by downing an Oscar. Lt. G.L. Morris was the only other pilot to engage, claiming a Tony probably shot down.

The next day was Friday the 13th, and it was no joke. It started badly when one of Hornet's night fighter Hellcats landed with guns charged, and the bump set off several rounds. Another night fighter and some SB2Cs were damaged.

Strike 1-C launched shortly before 1300 against Takao City, led by the CAG, Cdr. Schrader. While strafing the seaplane base Schrader's Hellcat was hit by light AA fire and splashed into the water. Doc Savage shot down a Tojo, but the 13th ended on as sour a note as it had begun. Late that evening while several Sundowners were practicing night landings, Ensign Leon Lee ditched out of fuel in the landing pattern. He could not be located in the darkness, nor was he found the next day.

The 14th would be one of the Sundowners' best days, but it was also the worst. Five fighter pilots were lost, the first at 0430 when Lt. Ed Helgerson's F6F-5N taxied off the flight deck in the dark. The early sweep found airborne targets and three pilots scored singles—two Judys and a Tony—while Lt. Morris repeated his score of the 12th with a probable Tony. But Ensign Henry Ptacek was last seen in combat with a Tony and failed to return.

The main combat of the day resulted when seven Hellcats under "Nellie" Dayhoff and Doc Savage were vectored onto a large enemy formation approaching the task group at 1420. But trouble cropped up almost immediately. Dayhoff's radio went out so he turned lead over to Charlie Stimpson. Then Savage's compass failed and his planes fell in behind Stimpson. Doc tallyhoed the bandits at about the same altitude, 17,000 feet. There were 15 to 20 fighters flying top cover for eight to 12 Judy dive bombers.

Stimpson called out Zekes overhead and climbed to engage them while Savage went after the Judys. The element of surprise was with Stimpson, and he closed in behind the Zekes, which carried drop tanks. He expertly flamed three in succession before the enemy pilots could even jettison their tanks. His wingman,

Ensign Fred Blair, also got one. Stimpson then related, "As I pulled up I saw a Zeke below me diving on my second division. I rolled over in an overhead and he exploded after a short burst."²¹ Skull lost one Zeke which evaded with a split-S then, checking to note Blair was still with him, dived into the battle.

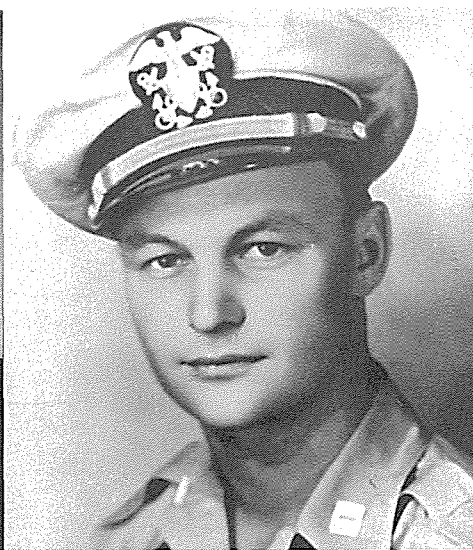
Doc Savage had splashed two Zekes but then found a Tony behind him. He gratefully saw Stimpson shoot the bandit off his tail, which fell smoking but was not seen to crash. Blair had meanwhile shot a Zeke off another Sundowner. Stimpson and Blair now scissored on each other and Skull got a good burst into another Tony close behind his wingman but like the first one, it only smoked and fell away. Blair returned the favor by flaming a Zeke which was behind his leader. Reversing his turn, Stimpson saw another Zeke firing at Blair, hitting him badly. Stimpson fired at wide deflection and blew one wing off the Zeke, his fifth certain kill of the combat.

"Blair had been hit and I saw his belly tank on fire," Stimpson said. "I told him to drop it and dive for the deck. I crossed over him but only one Zeke attempted to follow and he scared off when I fired my remaining ammunition in front of him."²² Stimpson then watched his wingman ditch the crippled Hellcat, which sank quickly in the rough sea. Fred Blair did not get out.

Back aboard Hornet noses were counted and the hassle was evaluated. Three other pilots were missing. Lt.(jg) Sam Goldberg was never seen after the fight began and his wingman Ensign Lepianka, wounded in one shoulder, flopped down on the deck without flaps or wheels. "Nellie" Dayhoff, one of the veterans of the Guadalcanal tour, was also missing. His number two, Lt.(jg) J.A. Zink, reported that both had splashed Judys on the first pass but then were jumped from above by Zekes. Dayhoff killed one of them and Zink torched another Judy. Then a Zeke hit Dayhoff from overhead and Zink followed his leader all the way down to the water, watching him crash.

Doc Savage returned later than the others, but only barely. After Stimpson cleared the Tony of his tail, Savage attacked two more and hit one before he was again jumped by more Zekes. They chased him about 30 miles before he plunged into a thunderhead. That shook the Zekes but without operable instruments Doc spun out and only recovered 200 feet above the water. Still flying with a failed compass, he initiated a square search pattern and fortuitously came upon a pair of F6Fs which guided him back to the task group, and shot down three Japanese aircraft to clear the way. It had begun to look as if Doc were MIA, and when he landed aboard, "The fellows gave me a royal welcome," he said. "I was so happy to get home I just couldn't hold back the tears. I think all hands understood how I felt."²³

The final verdict on the combat was 14 definite kills and two probables for three pilots and four aircraft. Later during the day Ensigns Jake Robcke and George Anderson both splashed Frances snoopers near the task force. Fighting 11 had shot down at least 19 enemy aircraft on October 14. Three Judys were added the



(Left) Lt. Cdr. Charles R. Fenton, 1st C.O. VF-11; (center) Lt. Jimmie E. Savage, credited with seven kills during Hornet cruise; (right) Lt. Cdr. Eugene G. Fairfax, VF-11 C.O. during Hornet's deployment, Oct. 1944 to Jan. 1945. Credited with two Tojos, one Jake and a Zeke. Hill

next day but Ensign Robert C. Dance, who got one Judy, was shot down in the dogfight which followed. He bailed out but that was the last seen of him. Another F6F was lost when Ensign Jacobsen hit Hornet's island in a landing accident but the pilot escaped serious injury.

On the 16th four divisions on CAP engaged Tojos and Oscars, and came out nicely on top 12 to nothing. John Ramsey splashed two Tojos while Jim Swope, also breaking into the scoring column again, got a confirmed and a probable, as did Lt.(jg) Clyde Parsley. Swope's element leader, "Rabbit" Moranville, made his first kill by downing one of the four Oscars claimed. Lt. Henry White claimed the only Zeke of the day, joining Stimpson, Swope and Ramsey as the only Sundowners to score on both tours.

By the 18th the Fast Carriers were launching against Manila in support of the Philippines invasion, and VF-11 cut down nine more bandits. Bob Clements raised his score to three with a Tojo and an Oscar but Lt. Dick Cyr, a former SBD pilot, was belle of the brawl. It seemed he outshot both Vern Graham and Charlie Stimpson for the squadron's one-day record when he returned with claims for six Oscars. But subsequent evaluation reduced the figure to four confirmed and two probables. It was a heart-breaker, for Cyr never had another opportunity to score. Ensign Warren DeRolf failed to return, and was last seen near Manila. Then during recovery of the evening CAP George Anderson's F6F splashed into the water, probably from heavy battle damage. He was the 11th fighter pilot Hornet had lost in nine days of combat operations.

By now Hornet had a new air group commander, 32-year-old Cdr. R.E. Riera. A veteran aviator, Emmett Riera was an Annapolis grad and "kissing cousin" of Gene Fairfax's wife Juliana. He already had a Navy Cross as C.O. of Bombing Squadron 20 but flew only one mission as CAG-11 in an accustomed SB2C before gaining approval from Capt. Doyle to check out in an F6F while still at sea. From then on he flew regularly with VF-11, leading his own division.

The task group was near Yap en route to the fleet anchorage at Ulithi on October 24 when word was received that major elements of the Imperial Japanese Navy were in Philippine waters. Hornet immediately put about and hurried back west. Air Group 11 missed all of the intense action of the 24th in the Battle of Leyte Gulf, but at 1030 on the 25th, 16 Hellcats and 12 Hell-divers were launched 350 nautical miles east of the enemy's reported position. It was one of the longest strike missions of the war, but every air group was needed to take advantage of this final opportunity.

The Japanese force off Samar was one of three which approached Leyte Gulf from the west. Admiral Jizaburo Ozawa's carrier force well to the north was a decoy to draw U.S. carriers away from San Bernardino Strait where Admiral Kurita's powerful surface force hoped to trap American shipping. The Japanese

southern group had been severely defeated in Suriagao Strait during the night of the 24th-25th.

Originally composed of five battleships, 13 cruisers and 15 destroyers, Kurita's center force had been reduced to four battle-wagons, four cruisers and seven destroyers by the morning of the 25th. The Intrepid and Cabot air groups had already arrived when the Hornet strike sighted the still-formidable armada. But Cdr. Smith of VB-11, the strike leader, ordered VF-11 down to suppress AA fire while the SB2Cs prepared to attack. The Sundowners pressed through spectacular flak, making repeated runs, only to be bitterly frustrated by negligible results. Few bomb hits were made, and TBMs from other air groups suffered extremely poor torpedo performance. Some Sundowners reported that "tin fish" turned as much as 90 degrees off course, or ran too deep. Follow-up strikes found only one crippled cruiser and a destroyer to finish off, though VF-11 added to its tally later in the day when an Oscar and a Tojo were shot down by Lt.(jg) W.H. Boring and Lt.(jg) L.S. Hardy.

Strikes against Japanese fleet units continued for the next two days. Attacking warships near Panay, Sundowners damaged two light cruisers and a destroyer on the 26th, the same day the skipper notched his first victory. Fairfax and Ensign H.H. Moore each shot down a Jake floatplane for the squadron's 49th and 50th kills of the tour; only five short of the 1943 record. Fourteen search sorties were flown on the 27th as Admiral McCain tried to locate more of the widely dispersed Japanese fleet but the VF-11 teams found nothing remarkable. Ensign Charles R. Bratres spun in during launch and stood up in his cockpit to signal he was all right. But after the F6F sank a rescue destroyer found only his back pack; he was probably snarled on the Hellcat's tail when it went down. The next day Task Group 38.1 headed for Ulithi and a short rest, departing again on November 2.

A new series of strikes was planned to begin November 5, but operational losses still mounted. While landing the morning CAP on the third, Ensign John McVeigh spun in and was killed. He was the 11th VF-11 pilot lost in less than one month, the fourth in an accident unrelated to combat.

November 5, 1944, would be the biggest day in the long history of the Sundowners. In two large dogfights around Clark Field, VF-11 shot down 26 planes for the loss of one plane and pilot in combat. At 0615 Gene Fairfax led 11 F6Fs off Hornet as part of a large fighter sweep, and eight more as strike 1A against Clark. In all, Fairfax had 87 aircraft from three carriers, including 52 Hellcats from Hornet, Wasp and Monterey. The elements of seven squadrons quickly formed up and headed west towards Manila, 160 miles away.

The fighters dispersed and VF-11 shot up eight twin-engine transports on Tarlac Field, but pilots reported six of these were badly damaged from earlier attacks and may have been left out as



Lt. James S. Swope became Ace in both the Wildcat and Hellcat. Swope



Lt. (jg) Vernon E. Graham shot down five Zekes on June 12, 1943. Graham

dummies. Fairfax then led his divisions south to Mabalacat where Jim Swope noticed aircraft taking off. Blake Moranville, the aggressive young Nebraskan, tallyhoed a Betty far below, rolled over and made a fast overhead run on it. He knew he hit it solidly, but overshot and didn't see the result of his attack. His wingman, Ensign Eddie Kearns, saw the Betty crash.

A large dogfight broke out as Oscars and Tojos appeared. Moranville pulled up to 4,000 feet and got a Tojo but then his guns jammed. He left the hassle to see if he could clear his guns when he spotted a lone Tojo fleeing low on the deck. "I decided I'd better get him before he saw me," Moranville said, and dived down behind him. "Rabbit" fired with only one gun operable, but it was enough. The Tojo caught a wingtip on the ground, cartwheeled and disintegrated.

Meanwhile, the rest of the squadron was having a turkey shoot. Fairfax, Swope, Ensign Jack Suddreth and Lt. (jg) Mike South all got two Tojos while five others bagged three more Tojos and two Oscars. The one loss was due as much to equipment as to enemy fighters. Lt. Bill Sisley was flying an F6F-3 without water injection while his wingman, Ensign W.M. Mann, flew an F6F-5P photo plane. An Oscar attacked Mann, setting his belly tank on fire. Sisley turned into the Oscar but could not get close enough for accurate firing because his dash three lacked sufficient speed. He fired at long range, and though Oscar broke off, Mann was killed. Fairfax regrouped the Sundowners and established a CAP over the strike area, then escorted the 35 bombers back to the task force. VF-11 had bagged 16 confirmed and two probables.

Hornet's Strike Baker had launched at 0900 and, because of the opposition encountered by Fairfax's Strike Able, joined several Wasp Hellcats of VF-14 and proceeded on a sweep to Clark Field. The formation arrived over Mt. Arayat about 1015 and, seeing several Oscars below, dived to the attack. A short dogfight followed, after which the flight regrouped, strafed Clark Field North and climbed out only to find a second batch of enemy fighters below. These were also attacked successfully and the Sundowners returned to base with two new aces. Bob Clements got two Zekes and Doc Savage three Oscars, raising their tallies to five and six respectively. But Charlie Stimpson was still top gun; downing two Oscars and a Tojo for a total of 14. Dan Work killed two Zekes and Lt. (jg) Boring claimed a Tojo probable. The only other loss of the day came at noon when Ensign Matt Crehan, waiting to land aboard, had to ditch astern of the ship. He was rescued by destroyer Blue, mindful that four other Hornet fighter pilots had been lost in similar circumstances.

Sweeps and strikes continued for the next two weeks but relatively little air combat resulted. Sundowners splashed three snoopers on the 13th, though two Oscars bounced Swope's division while escorting Cdr. Riera and badly shot up Ensign Charley Boineau's F6F. He landed aboard without the use of his flaps. Skull Stimpson made his last two kills on the 14th with a Zeke and a Tony, the only pilot to score that day. "Rabbit" Moranville became the sixth VF-11 ace when he shot down a Dinah on the 19th while Ensign J.V. Pavela got a Betty.

Bob Saggau, the former All-American, diverted to Tacloban airdrome after an anti-shipping strike on November 10 due to a worrisome oil pressure reading. "As MacArthur had just landed on Leyte I thought I might have the chance to tell him what the *real* war was about," Saggau recalled.²⁵ But the only person he talked to was the G.I. jeep driver who led him to the parking area. It turned out that both were from the same county in Iowa.

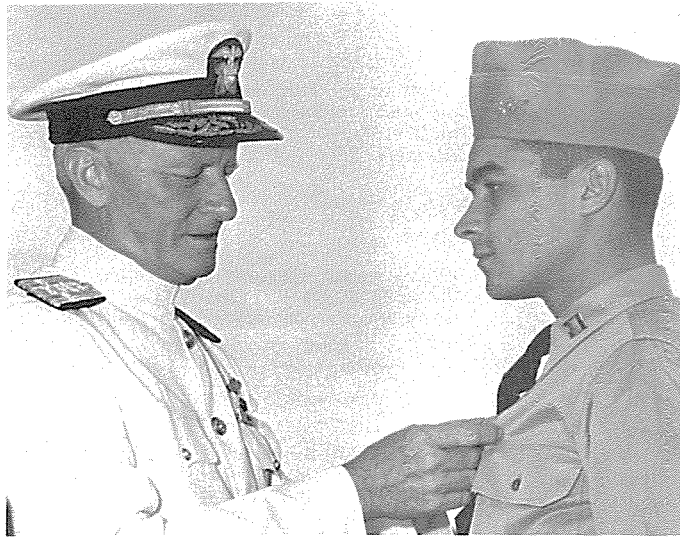
On November 20 Hornet's task group prepared to return to Ulithi, but 26 junior pilots were transferred with aircraft to other carriers. Though some of them eventually rejoined VF-11, it was a shock to the squadron and Gene Fairfax looked upon it as the loss of a large part of his family. While in Ulithi for three weeks, however, VF-11's pilot strength was doubled as a matter of policy in the Fast Carrier Task Force. After the appearance of Kamikazes in the Philippines, increased demands on fighter squadrons resulted in authorized strength being established at 105 pilots and about 75 aircraft. Consequently, in early December the Sundowners received two more lieutenant commanders; Fritz E. Wolf and Edward H. Bayers. Wolf was a combat-experienced veteran of the American Volunteer Group in the CBI Theater of 1941-42, where he was credited with 2½ confirmed victories. Bayers was an old friend of Bob Clements, who described him as "the best fighter pilot I ever knew."²⁶

Clements might have obtained his own command at this time, as some air groups were dividing their enlarged fighter squadrons into two units, one designated a fighter-bomber outfit. Emmett Riera and Gene Fairfax discussed the situation and decided there was no need to change; Clements agreed. With more missions to be flown, the workload remained the same for each division and administration proved no major problem.

The Fast Carriers returned briefly to the Philippines where a series of strikes was flown from December 13 to 16. Four more aerial victories were added to VF-11's total during this period, making 87 to date for the WestPac deployment. But flight operations completely ceased on the 17th and much of the 18th due to a terrific typhoon. During the height of the storm two destroyers astern of Hornet rolled over and sank. Search missions were flown for crippled ships en route back to Ulithi where the task force spent the holidays.

Hornet exercised her aircraft in pre-dawn operations on January 1, 1945, and then headed west again to the now-familiar hunting grounds of Formosa. In a pre-dawn mission on the third, Gene Fairfax led two divisions against Tainan during which he spotted a Mavis flying boat low on the water, providing anti-submarine protection for a convoy. Fairfax and his wingman Jack Suddreth both attacked unsuccessfully before Jim Swope exploded it. Later in the day VF-11 damaged a transport and an oiler.

By January 6 the task force was back in the Philippines, with sweeps over Mabalacat and Bambam airfields. Two Zekes were shot down and two more claimed as probables, bringing the Sundowners' total to 90 destroyed in the air. Next day saw more combat over the same area, and Lt. (jg) John Sims lost formation



Lt. William N. Leonard receives D.F.C. from Admiral Nimitz USN

in some heavy clouds never to be seen again. The second of the morning's strikes encountered Zekes and Tojos, with Henry White claiming two of the latter to become the last Sundowner ace. Jake Robcke also bagged a Zeke, but Ensign James H. Bethel, Jr., was killed when he tried to follow a Zeke in a split-S from 800 feet. Other pilots reported that Bethel hadn't even reached the vertical when his Hellcat hit the water. That afternoon another F6F was lost when Lt.(jg) M.J. Hayter ran out of fuel, but Hayter was rescued.

Two days later the Sundowners were back at Formosa for a highly successful anti-shipping strike. Cdr. Riera led a division which sank a destroyer escort while Lt. Cdr. Ed Bayers' division was largely responsible for another destroyer. A 10,000-ton oiler and 3,000-ton transport were also sunk by bombs and rockets while three more ships of 16,000 gross tons were badly damaged.

During the night of January 11-12, Task Force 38 entered the South China Sea for the first carrier strike on French Indo-China. Fairfax's pilots flew four strikes and two sweeps during the 12th in addition to CAP and photo flights. Two destroyer escorts were sunk in Camranh Bay, one by the proficient team of Ed Bayers and Ensign F.C. Onion. Five other destroyers were damaged, as were two transports.

No enemy aircraft were encountered by the Sundowners, but for the first and last time a VF-11 ace was lost in combat. On the second sweep "Rabbit" Moranville's F6F was hit by 20mm while rocketing Tan Son Nhut airport. Jim Swope led him southwest into the delta area where the faltering engine gave out and Moranville splashed down in a rice paddy. The squadron's concern was somewhat alleviated by the fact that "Rabbit" was seen safely walking around his plane, but Gunner the mascot was despondent over the loss of his master. Happily, they were reunited several months later in Nebraska. Picked up by the Vichy French, Moranville became the only U.S. Navy ace POW and was interned in Saigon. But when the Japanese turned on the French, Blake and five other fliers were helped to safety in Kunming, China after an almost incredible series of adventures.²⁷

On the morning of January 15, VF-11 launched sweeps against Formosa while Gene Fairfax took two of his own divisions and four from other squadrons for a look at Hong Kong. About 50 miles east of the target area, Fairfax noticed a Tabby transport, the Japanese-built DC-3 escorted by four Zekes. This indicated an important passenger aboard the Tabby, and the C.O. instructed his pilots to "Leave the transport alone until we have the escorts." Fairfax, Jake Robcke, Ensign H.H. Moore and Ensign J.P. Wolf each got a Zeke, then Fairfax and "Soapy" Suddreth went after Tabby. "We probably overkilled it," Fairfax said,²⁸ and the only way to decide credit was to flip a coin. It was squadron policy not to split a kill, and Suddreth won the toss. The Tabby went in the records as his third victory; Fairfax now had four. The only other aerial victory on the 15th was a Jill downed by Jim Swope, his fifth kill of the tour and tenth of the war.

Next day the squadron was back over Hong Kong in force, suffering two losses from 54 sweep and strike sorties. A 10,000-ton oiler was severely damaged by an estimated 12 rocket hits while Charlie Stimpson's division set afire the oil storage area and Dick Flath's pilots worked over Kowloon Docks. Ensign Matt Crehan's Hellcat was damaged by flak over the harbor on Strike Charlie and he bailed out near Tamkan Island while his division leader, Bob Clements, circled overhead.

With no other Hellcats in the area, Clements got hold of a bomber pilot who dropped a life raft, as Crehan's had drifted away. But this raft failed to inflate so Clements somehow managed to drop his own, and Crehan climbed in. Calling for a rescue submarine, Clements meanwhile scared away fishing boats and sampans until his ammunition ran out, only to discover the sub couldn't go in close enough to shore. The conscientious exec remained overhead until his radio quit and he had 30 gallons of fuel remaining. He sweated all the way back to Hornet, landing with the gauge reading empty. Crehan was not found by subsequent searches and therefore appeared in the VF-11 cruise book among those killed in action. Not till after the war did Clements learn from Crehan himself that the young Bay Stater had been fished out of the water by friendly Chinese who helped him get to Kunming, where he met Blake Moranville. It was a small war.

But it was still a shooting war, and Ensign Richard Wilson fell to AA fire during strike 1-D. He was the 17th and last Sundowner killed during the deployment.

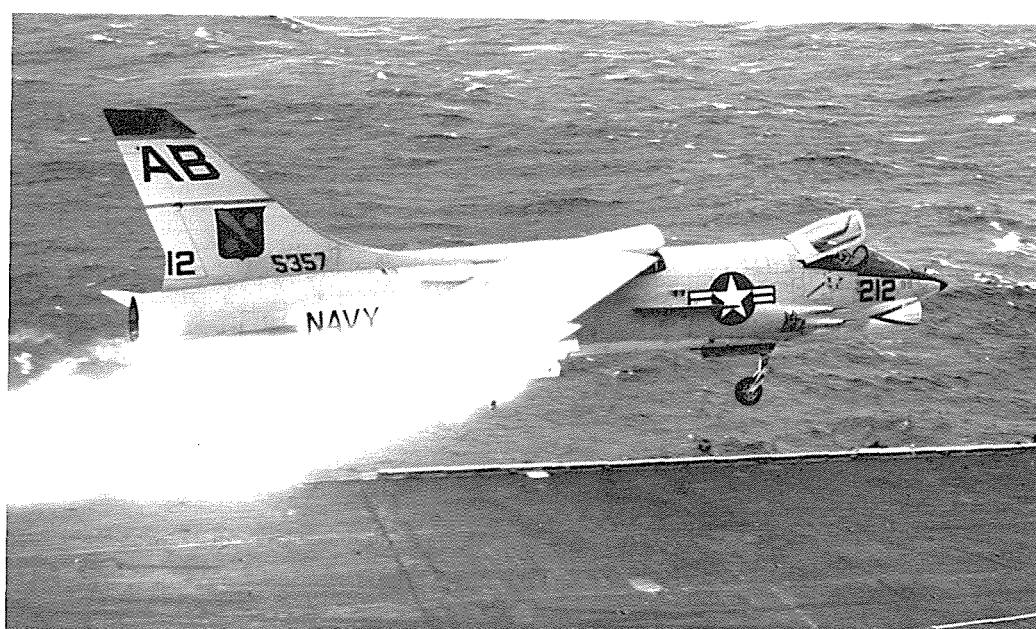
After Hong Kong it was back to Formosa on the 21st. Five support vessels totaling 25,000 tons were damaged, as were two destroyers. In the squadron's final dogfight, Lt. W.R. Sisley led Ensigns Knott, Williams and McReynolds into a formation of Zekes and Judys. Knott splashed a Judy and the others each got a Zeke. One more Hellcat was lost when Lt. Cdr. Fritz Wolf splashed down after launch with zero oil pressure but was rescued by a destroyer. The next day VF-11 flew its last combat missions of the war against targets on Okinawa.

From October 10, 1944 to January 22, 1945, the Sundowners were credited with 103 Japanese aircraft shot down and 18 probables in addition to 288 destroyed on the ground. A destroyer and three destroyer escorts were sunk with 21 similar vessels damaged to varying extents. Over 27,000 tons of merchant shipping was sunk by Fairfax's Hellcats and nearly 180,000 tons damaged. Excluding aircraft damaged beyond local repair, VF-11 lost 27 F6Fs including 12 to operational causes. Eight were shot down by AA fire and seven in aerial combat; a total of 15 lost to enemy action. Pilot losses amounted to 20, including Cdr. Schrader who was killed and Moranville and Crehan who both safely returned to the U.S. Of these, the seven lost in air combat represented the single largest cause while five were killed by anti-aircraft fire. Two pilots were lost to unknown causes but both were believed inflicted by enemy action; DeRolf near Manila and Sims over Luzon. Additionally, the Hornet night fighter detachment lost one pilot and two aircraft in accidents but these casualties were not attributed to VF-11.

The 103 victories scored under Gene Fairfax established VF-11 as the 17th-ranked Hellcat squadron among over 80 which flew F6Fs in combat. Thus, the seven Sundowner Hellcats known lost in aerial combat resulted in a kill-loss ratio of nearly 15 to one. But one fact the Sundowners could be particularly proud of was that no Air Group 11 dive bomber or torpedo plane was lost to enemy aircraft.

From 1943 to 1945 VF-11's box score was 158 aerial victories against 17 Grummans and 11 pilots lost in air combat. Charlie Stimpson set the pace on both tours with a total of 16, followed by Jim Swope with 10. Then came Doc Savage with seven, Blake Moranville with six and Bob Clements, Vern Graham and Henry White with five each. These seven aces accounted for 54 victories, or over one-third of the total. Sundowners had shot down a variety of 15 Japanese aircraft types, headed by 65 Zekes or Hamps, 26 Tojos, 20 Vals, 19 Oscars and 10 Judys.

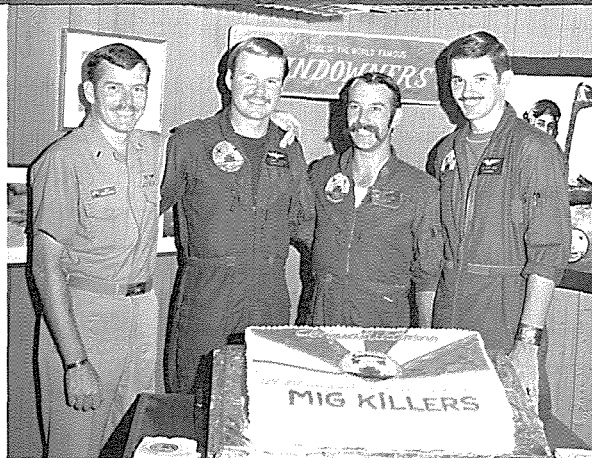
Fairfax took Jim Swope to NAS Los Alamitos when he assumed command of VF-98, the West Coast fighter training squadron, and Doc Savage went to VBF-98. Swope and Cyr later went



(Left) Lt.(jg) John Kryway's F8U-1 suffered a ruptured fuel cell in hard landing aboard Franklin D. Roosevelt (CVA-42), Oct. 1961. He ejected safely. USN via R.L. Lawson

(Below, left) Celebrating downing Mig-17, March 6, 1972. (L to R) William Freckleton, Garry Weigand, James Stillinger, and Reik Olin. USN

(Below, right) Sundowners skipper W.T. Amen claimed first jet to fall to U.S. Navy aircraft when he downed Mig-15.



to VF-66 and flew the Ryan FR-1 Fireball. Blake Moranville rejoined VF-11 briefly at NAS Fallon, Nevada, for a boisterous three-day reunion in Reno and finished the war as an instrument instructor. Bob Clements returned to the Naval Academy.

The squadron reorganized and was based at San Diego shortly after V-J Day and transitioned to F8F-1 Bearcats, being designated VF-11A. The Sundowners made a world cruise aboard Philippine Sea with their F8Fs during this period. Then in July of 1948 in accordance with a Navy-wide designation system change, the squadron became VF-111.

The Sundowners entered the jet age in 1950 with transition to the F9F-2 Panther and completed initial practice landings aboard Boxer. In July of that year VF-111 embarked aboard Philippine Sea for the first of three Korean War deployments. The first mission was on August 5 with fighter sweeps over Communist airfields. In September a 111 pilot had the rather dubious honor of being the first Navy flier to use an ejection seat in combat. Lt. Carl Dace and Ensign Polosky were scouting the airfields of western North Korea on the 24th when Dace's jet was hit by flak. He headed for the water and punched out about 12 miles offshore. After seven hours in the water he was picked up by the destroyer Chevalier.

The next month the Sundowners recorded a more noteworthy Naval Aviation first. On the morning of November 9 the C.O., Lt. Cdr. William T. Amen, led three divisions as top cover for the air group's strike against the Sinuiju-Antung bridge. About six MiG-15s contested the strike, resulting in the U.S. Navy's first encounter with enemy jets. Amen engaged one of the MiGs at 4,000 feet and, in a vertical combat, chased it upwards for 11,000 feet. The MiG then attempted to disengage by diving but could not escape Amen's Panther. The Sundowner skipper completed the kill at low altitude, and none of the other MiGs cared to press the issue. Amen had scored the Navy's first jet kill and the first of five scored by F9Fs over MiG-15s. The squadron received a Distinguished

Unit Citation for this first Korean War tour. Sundowner F9Fs were active till the last day of the war, participating in the final mission of July 27, 1953.

In 1954, VF-111 won the ComAirPac Safety Award, by then flying F9F-8s. But in June 1957 the squadron's 16-year love affair with Grumman aircraft was over. North American FJ-3s replaced the Cougars, though by the results of the 1958 Fleet Air Gunnery Meet the new Furies sat well with the squadron. In April of that year the C.O., Cdr. F.E. Miller, led three other Sundowners to the top spot of the Day Fighter class of the competition, narrowly outshooting VF-13 and VMF-232.

But late that same year it began to appear as if the Sundowners had no future. Rumors had it that VF-111 was to be decommissioned, and on January 19, 1959, the rumors came true. However, the very next day VA-156 at Moffett Field was redesignated VF-111 and almost as if to reinforce the point, the squadron transitioned into a brand-new Grumman, the F11F-1 Tiger. However, this tenure was short-lived, and in 1961 the Vought F8U-2 Crusader arrived. It would remain for the next full decade.

The Sundowners returned to war for the third time in 1964 with the outbreak of hostilities in the Gulf of Tonkin. In 1967 the squadron sent a detachment to Intrepid's Air Wing 10, and thus set the stage for VF-111's first kill in nearly 18 years. Lt. Anthony J. Nargi and Lt.(jg) Alexander C. Rucker were on an intercept mission in F-8Cs on September 19, 1968, when Nargi spotted another aircraft. He identified it as a MiG-21 and followed it into a loop, closing the range.

Nargi got to the MiG's six o'clock and fired one Sidewinder heat-seeking missile. "The 'Winder' tracked perfectly," Nargi said. "It flew right up the tailpipe of the MiG and blew the whole tail end of the airplane off, creating a large red fireball. The pilot ejected and I saw his orange and white chute open."²⁹

The two Crusaders then engaged a second MiG sighted by

Rucker. Both pilots fired Sidewinders which exploded close to the target, but the MiG was not seriously damaged and evaded by heading north at high speed. Appropriately, Nargi's kill (the squadron's 160th) was scored on his 111th mission. It was the 19th and last F-8 victory.

In 1969 VF-111 earned a Meritorious Unit Citation for its cruise aboard Ticonderoga. Then in 1971 came transition to F-48 Phantoms prior to joining Air Wing 15. That November the Sundowners prepared for their seventh and final Vietnam War deployment, flying from the attack carrier Coral Sea.

On March 6, 1972, one section of F-4Bs escorting an Air Wing 15 strike into North Vietnam was vectored by a radar control ship to a single bandit near Quang Lang. The lead pilot, Lt. Jim Stillinger, dived on the MiG-17 while Lt. Garry Weigand stayed high to provide cover. Stillinger made four yo-yo passes but the MiG's tight turns prevented him from gaining a favorable firing position. The F-4Bs were armed only with missiles, and the one Sidewinder Stillinger fired went wide. Stillinger then called that he was disengaging and broke off as Weigand came down.

The MiG was straining to stay within gun range of Stillinger at about 500 feet altitude and apparently did not see the second Phantom. Weigand's first 'Winder knocked off the MiG's tail; there was no ejection. Notified of four more bandits in the vicinity, both Phantoms departed the area low on fuel and returned to Coral Sea. Weigand's kill was the Sundowners' 161st in three wars, nearly a unique record for U.S. Navy fighter squadrons.

Six weeks after Stillinger and Weigand's successful combat, strikes were ordered against major cities in North Vietnam for the first time since 1968. VF-111 Phantoms were among the first Navy aircraft to penetrate the Red River Valley in four years. They also flew top cover for Air Wing 15's part in the mining of Haiphong Harbor and other coastal waters in May 1973, winning another Navy Unit Citation.

In the spring of 1974 the squadron was back in the South China Sea aboard Coral Sea, supporting the evacuation of South Vietnam and Cambodia. Sundowner Phantoms flew patrol and recon missions, and also provided air support to Marines on Koh Tang Island during recapture of the freighter Mayaguez.

More recent honors for VF-111 came in 1975 when the squadron won the Chief of Naval Operations Safety Award and was selected as the West Coast entry for the Admiral Joseph Clifton Award, presented annually to the Navy's outstanding fighter squadron. Now flying F-4Ns, the Sundowners are well into their third decade with a history and tradition which might be the envy of any fighter squadron in the world.

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4. Correspondence with V.E. Graham, 1976.
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6. Lt. Don Meyer, informal account written in 1943.
7. Maxwell returned to combat with a vengeance, flying with VF-4 off Ranger and VF-51 off San Jacinto, where he gained eight victories in 1944.
8. Meyer, Op. Cit.
9. Leonard, Op. Cit., 1976.
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11. Ibid.
12. BuAer number 03430, squadron number F-23.
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14. Masoner flew with VF-19 from Lexington (CV-16) in 1944, gaining 10 more victories.
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16. Graham, Op. Cit.
17. Leonard, Op. Cit., 1975.
18. Correspondence with Saggau, 1975.
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21. VF-11 action report for November 14, 1944.
22. Ibid.
23. Diary of J.E. Savage.
24. Moranville interview, 1976.
25. Saggau, Op. Cit.
26. Correspondence with R.E. Clements, 1976.
27. See AAHS Journal for Winter, 1975. "A Sundowner's Adventure" by B. Tillman.
28. Correspondence with E.G. Fairfax, 1976. Dr. Alvin Coox of San Diego State Univ. established the VIP's identity as Vice Admiral K. Hatakeyama, on an inspection of Japanese defenses in southern China.
29. "Crusader Fighter Report" of 1968.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many individuals have been extremely helpful in piecing together the Sundowners history, but none more so than Richard M. Hill of Milwaukee, Wis. Himself a former Navy fighter pilot, Dick actually began work on a VF-11 history before the author started this project, and Dick's generosity has been exceptional.

Lt.(jg) Ben Forrest, Public Affairs Officer of VF-111, contributed most of the material from which the post-WW II portion was compiled. And William N. Hess, secretary-historian of the American Fighter Aces Assn., was as helpful as always.

Nearly all the former Sundowners contacted for this project have responded enthusiastically. Their time and assistance was crucial to proper documentation of the long history of the squadron: Capt. R.E. Clements, Rear Adm. E.G. Fairfax, Cdr. V.E. Graham, Rear Adm. W.N. Leonard, Cdr. W.R. Maxwell, Lt. Cdr. H.B. Moranville, Rear Adm. R.E. Riera, Lt. R. Saggau, Capt. J.E. Savage and Capt. J.S. Swope. For prolonged and in-depth cooperation, special thanks must be accorded Gene Fairfax, Bill Leonard and Blake Moranville.

A 44-YEAR-OLD SALUTE TO ROBERT SHORT



Nokiji Ikuta as he appears today.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Readers will recall Martin Cole's "Robert Short; The Making of a Hero," that appeared in Volume 15, Number 1. It tells the story of an American volunteer pilot, flying for China in 1932, being shot down by Japanese when he alone was involved against six enemy aircraft. His courageous bravery resulted in China honoring him as a national hero, and erecting a commemorative monument. (For monument, see page 240, Volume 19, Number 3.)

It is not known whether the monument still stands, but the memory of Robert Short's bravery still lingers with ex-Lieutenant Nokiji Ikuta, who is credited with the victory. In 1974 Ikuta learned that the dead flier's brother, Ed Short, lived somewhere in Washington state. He decided to try to reach him, giving a letter to a Japanese newspaper editor who was headed for the Pacific Northwest. The editor didn't stay long enough to learn that Ed Short was living in Seattle, and consequently the letter went undelivered.

Sometime later in Japan the editor met the Japanese wife of American Air Force Colonel Ellis B. Craig. Recently, Mrs. Craig returned to her home in Lakewood, Washington, bringing with her Ikuta's undelivered letter. She managed to locate Mr. Short and gave him the two-year-old letter, which reads:

"You may be surprised to receive this letter, so I will first introduce myself to you.

"My name is Nokiji Ikuta and I was a Flight Lieutenant of Japan.

"Now I would like to inform you the following: I confess it was I that staged a big air battle against your brother, Mr. Robert M. Short at Soshu, China and knocked his plane out of the sky on February 22, 1932. Then your brother was a guidance teacher belonging to China Air Force. It is 42 years since then. The year(s) flowed on. How time flies!

"The drift of affairs in the world has been changed and I have been spending a routine life as a common citizen. But my heart is still high in the air and I always [will] remember your brother. Though I shot down his plane, but at heart I respected your brother, First Lieutenant Short.

"What's more, we all the Japanese airmen praised Mr. Robert M. Short with all our heart[s].

"When I looked back over the years, I realize that your brother fought bravely. In addition, his exploit has always lived in my memory.

"Anyway, he challenged [us] with only one plane against our six ones. I am sure his valor would be handed [down] from generation to generation. We had no superior in courage. . . . Sincerely yours, Nokiji Ikuta."