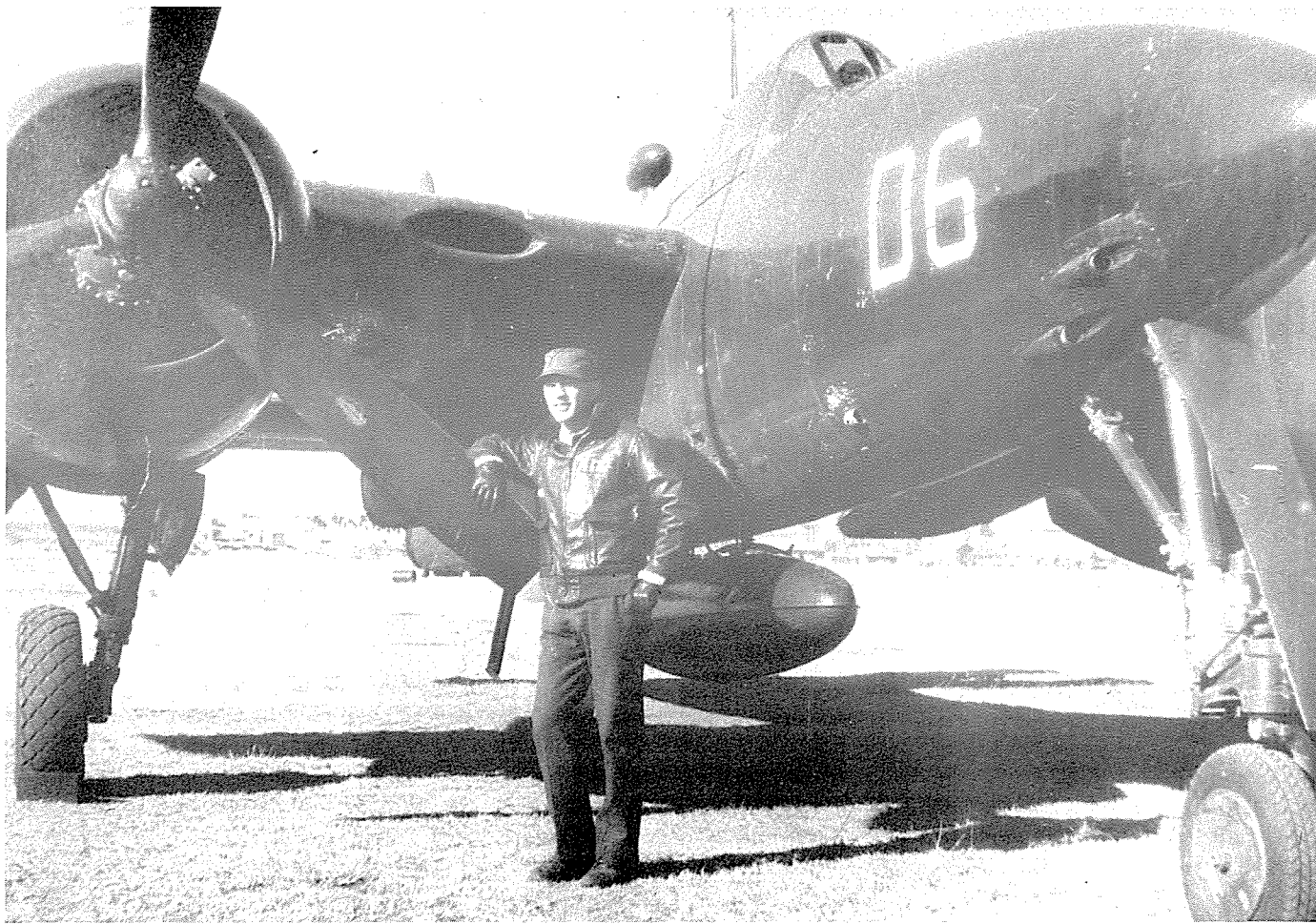




FLYING A TIGER!

by L. Dan Sheridan, Jr.

(All photos are from the Author's Collection)

What in the world is that? was the chorus shouted by the group of Marine pilots mustering at MWSS-9, Cherry Point, North Carolina, there for assignment to squadrons for overseas duty against the Japanese. Having just finished operational training in the Vought *Corsair*, we had thought we were beyond being impressed by another aircraft, let alone one from the Grumman "Iron Works." F4U men one and all looked down on the *Wildcat* F4Fs, and the *Hellcat* F6F as *Housecats* with build-in headwinds.

Now here was a surprise as a silver streak buzzed the west-east runway in front of operations at the huge Cherry Point Marine Air Station.

The sleek twin-engine fighter pulled up into a high wing over, dropped its gear, and twisted around into a landing approach, flaps down, touchdown gently, with a short roll-out. The Grumman test pilot at the controls, the famous Corky Meyers, taxied in to the chocks and shut down the two Pratt & Whitney R-2800 engines both developing over 2,000 horsepower.

Lieutenant Sill, the mustering officer at MWSS-9, dis-

missed us and we doubled time to the flight line to get a look at the fighter.

We were not alone. The whole base had turned out and surrounded the F7F, making one recall Lindbergh at the Paris aerodrome in 1927. Pilot Meyers climbed out of the cockpit, walked over the wing to the trailing edge, and with a deft motion of his foot in a slot, he descended a ladder that had slid down into place as if by magic.

This was not all the magic of this silver aircraft. It was almost in the supernatural realm to this group of young college-boys-turned-fighter-pilots for the duration. If we could get to fly this aircraft we would all forgo even the beloved *Corsair* without a second thought.

Many asked but few were chosen. I was one of the lucky ones, and now as I headed north over the Shantung, China area to my assigned photo target, that episode at Cherry Point—the introduction to the F7F—seemed years ago. September 1945 saw us with our 15 F7F fighters specially

Author at Tsingtao, China, in December 1945.

modified as photographic aircraft arriving at the end of the war, missing out on the upcoming invasion of Japan that we were slated to cover because of the Big Bomb. Two other F7F squadrons, also slated to cover the October invasion, were left high and dry on Okinawa: a Nightfighter Squadron and a Dayfighter Squadron. Only the Nightfighter Squadron flew any missions against the Japanese in August. They arrived at Okinawa 30 days ahead of our F7Fs and the Dayfighters. That was all of the F7F squadrons activated, since when the atomic bombs were deemed successful in mid-1945, the F7F production contract at Grumman was canceled.

The *Corsair* boys at both Awase Field at Okie, home of the Dayfighters, and Chimu, where our squadron, VMD-254, and the Nightfighters roosted, put up huge signs across the front of Operations: NEVER HAVE SO MANY ARRIVED SO LATE WITH SO MUCH!

Only my squadron had any further actual highly classified missions. Marine Photographic Squadron 254 (VMD-254) was given the top secret assignment of photographing the coastline of North China and Korea.

And here I was doing just that in late November 1945, out of a Nationalist air base just north of Tsingtao. The honest response to control pressure at any speed was certainly remarkable considering the top performance capabilities of the F7F at 18,000 feet down to the deck, at least 480 knots at any of the lower levels. Having only a two-stage, two-speed blower, it was not designed for high altitudes. That was left to the F4U, the P-51, the P-38 and the F6F, all of whom had brilliant war records and win ratios against the Japanese Air Forces.

There was the big rub. In spite of all the long training, from January 1943, and the great expectations and promise of the *Tigercat*, we were unable to put it into combat. All of the F7F pilots suffered a great letdown those last weeks of August 1945 while racing out to the Okinawa area to get ready to invade Japan. The last great battle never came off. All of us died on the vine in September 1945, some of us at Guam, the others en route to Okinawa via Iwo Jima. Only the night-fighter pilots reached Okinawa in time to fly a handful of missions against the Japanese night bombers.

As I sighted my assigned target, a section of the China Communist coastline just south of Chefoo, I turned on my intervalometer and set the camera on ready, letting down to 1,500 feet up and 1,500 feet out from the shoreline. By putting the prop hub of the right engine on shoreline, I lined up the special 45-degree oblique Fairchild camera. Slowing to a constant 180 knots, I began to make my photo run ensuring at least a 60 percent overlap to allow for lens distortion. Film load was enough for approximately 25 miles of shoreline. One run and I headed home. It was a bright sunny day and very cold, even at noon, around 20 degrees.

Yes indeed, a sweet responding aircraft at any speed above 120 knots and 140 knots on single engine. The large rudder was hydraulic boosted to give better single-engine control especially at the critical 140 to 160 area, the minimum flying speed on single engine. If an engine went out on takeoff, the pilot could climb out with no strain above 140 knots. Below that it would roll over into the dead engine. At the below 140-knot range, the pilot had no choice but to pull back on the good engine and land straight ahead as he would in a

single-engine fighter.

The cockpit design was simple, like the F6F which I had flown over 350 hours training for the *Tigercat*. Only difference was the throttles that could be used as one in the palm of the left hand, but split exactly in the middle in case of one engine shutdown. The prop controls and the mixture controls were similarly arranged. The flight control was a standard stick-and-rudder with gun trigger in the stick along with a couple of pickle switches that controlled tank or bomb drop, and photo shutters for pinpoints. Strip mapping was done by setting on automatic, in the lower console between the legs forward, a device called an intervalometer that could be set for required overlap and side lap, 60 percent and 40 percent to reduce lens distortion.

The wings folded outboard of both engines to allow for future carrier storage. The view from the cockpit forward was unobstructed, a welcome change from the blind forward visibility on the F4U and somewhat on the F6F during landing roll and taxiing at the three-point attitude.

The chief engineer and designer at Grumman, Gordon Israel, and his F7F project boss, Robert Hall, had certainly outdone themselves in the design and testing of this aircraft. Israel made a reputation on the West Coast designing small, inline-engined racing planes in the 1930s. Bob Hall was one of the original designers of the famous Gee-Bee racing aircraft of that period. Grumman certainly was lucky to get them, Israel coming to them from Lear. The cockpit of the F7F-3Ps that we carried overseas all had viewfinders in the floor of the pilot's cockpit for sighting and photographing purposes, as

Christmas card in cockpit of F6F-3P at U.S. Naval Photo Recon School, New Cumberland, Pa., December 1944.



Season's Greetings

Danny

well as figuring drift for dead reckoning navigation. There also was a bulb to the rear of the pilot on the top fuselage containing a radio direction finder, the great Navy aid "birddog."

We left the San Diego harbor as the war ended on a carrier whose deck was full of our planes. Each aircraft was equipped with a secret French-designed Sonne camera that took strip maps, dual strips so that with a proper viewing lens the relief showed just like the viewer of pictures found in lots of homes. These cameras were without shutters, a continuous strip twin photograph of an area approximately half-mile wide at 400 feet altitude and less than a quarter mile at 200 feet. The aircraft must be flown at the same speed as the film rolled over the lens; therefore the aircraft had to be able to fly at 450 knots for a 10-mile stretch, otherwise it was all blurred. Only the F7F had this performance capability on the deck. Altitude was controlled by three lights on the gun sight so that the pilot could concentrate on flying the aircraft rather than looking down at the altimeter.

The lights were set with a radio altimeter, a radar device, that gave precise readings plus or minus 10 feet. The pilot selected by a panel switch either 200 feet or 400 feet altitude, and if on the correct altitude the green light on the gun sight stayed on; if too high, it turned yellow; if too low the red light came on. Therefore, on Sonne runs we flew by these three lights full bore. The four 20mm cannons had been removed leaving only the four caliber .50 machine guns in the nose. This reduction in drag and weight gave the *Tigercat* the high performance needed to effectively use the Sonne.

All the Sonne training Stateside was for naught, as the Sonnes were removed at Guam en route to Okinawa and turned over to Navy Headquarters, as no invasion was now in the works. The Sonne spotted underwater hazards for man and tanks making a landing, as well as beach gun emplace-

ments, a vital tool for a successful invasion of the Japanese home islands then slated for early October 1945.

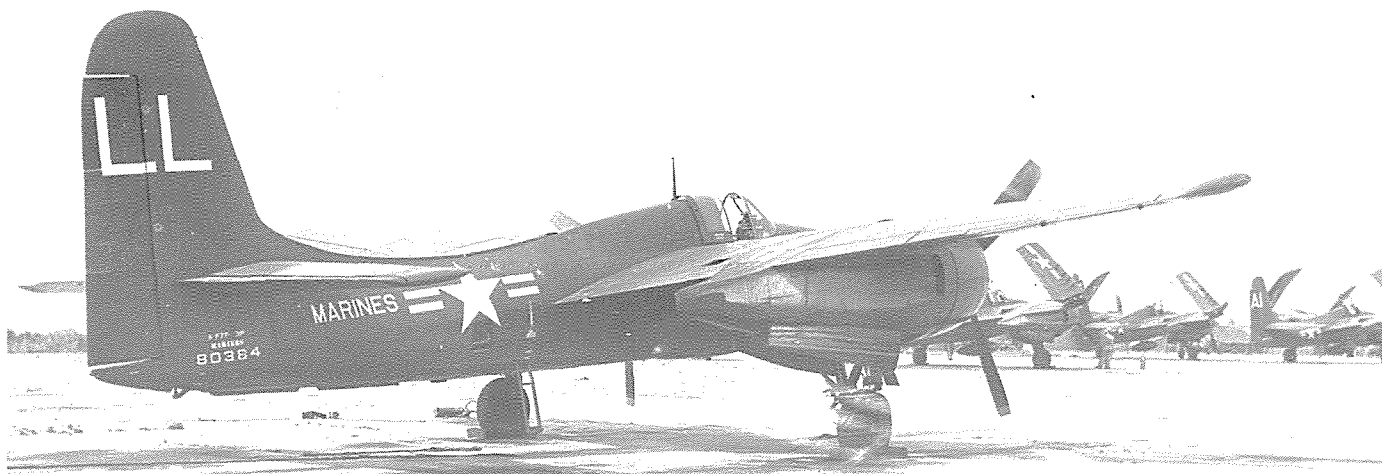
The main camera setup in the Grumman F7F-3P consisted of two vertical cameras and one oblique. They were set in the rear fuselage area and had electric doors that opened by cockpit switch when operating cameras, with the exception of our special oblique camera extending out of the fuselage port approximately 12 inches to accommodate the long focal plane and special lens. This required a cover, made by our parachute loft, that covered the lens when the aircraft was on the ground parked. This led to speculation by observers at our bases at Okinawa, Tsingtao, Shanghai, and Seoul, Korea, that we were hiding a great secret camera. That was not true. It was just to protect the lens from the sun and weather.

The vertical cameras were lined up with the crosshairs on the cockpit viewfinder, allowing the pilot pinpoint accuracy on targets directly below the craft. The oblique was lined up by putting the target exactly on the tip of the right prop hub. Most probably even a monkey could have operated this system, it was so simple, thanks to Le Roy Grumman's crew and Fairchild camera people. Some of Fairchild's Aerial Survey people had been commissioned directly into the Marine Corps and served with our squadron. They were responsible for much of the camera technique success we attained.

From high speed to low speeds, the aircraft did not drastically change trim. What little nose adjustments were needed were easily handled by a rudder, and elevator and aileron trim tabs just below and behind the throttle quadrant at the pilot's left elbow. A full range of four-channel VHF radios was included as well, and the low-frequency bands on a hand crank controlling the radio directional finder.

Immediately behind the pilot was a removable hatch or

F7F-3P at Buoge Field war games, North Carolina, May 1952.



panel, curved over along the lines of the top fuselage. The solid metal hatch in place covered a 35-gallon tank feeding into a main tank of 280 gallons behind the pilot. Filler necks were attached to each. In addition there was a 75-gallon reserve tank in the nose, and the external load generally consisted of three 150-gallon drop tanks. For extended flights two 300-gallon wing tanks and a 150-gallon centerline drop tank could be used giving the craft 1,800 miles range at 280 knots fast cruise. The aircraft's two R-2800-34W engines, each turning a large three-blade Hamilton constant-speed prop, was capable of lifting this load in less than 3,000 feet of runway with a normal climbout. The total weight of the F7F fully loaded was approximately 24,000 pounds—a real fast heavyweight.

Flying back from my photographic target I always practiced single-engine drills, including simulated instrument let-down, single-engine climbouts, steep turns, stalls, with flaps and gear down. I had done this constantly since I started flying the F7F at Greenville on Okinawa and now at Tsingtao. Often I would skim the hilltops coming home late at full power on both engines.

One experience that is etched in my memory is when I approached a ridge top from below barely 50 feet high. In the late sunlight I saw a Chinese peasant outlined on the ridge leading his ox and the ever-present two-wheel cart. He paid me absolutely no heed, which I thought was unusual as I barely cleared him 50 feet. He obviously was not scared. He did not seek cover or even duck. Totally unafraid. This made me doubt all the stories our Intelligence had been putting out, as well as all the Allied news media that the Japanese randomly strafed helpless Chinese work peasants. This episode disproved those reports in my estimation.

The aircraft stalled cleanly, fell through straight down at 80 knots clean without power. With power and flaps and gear

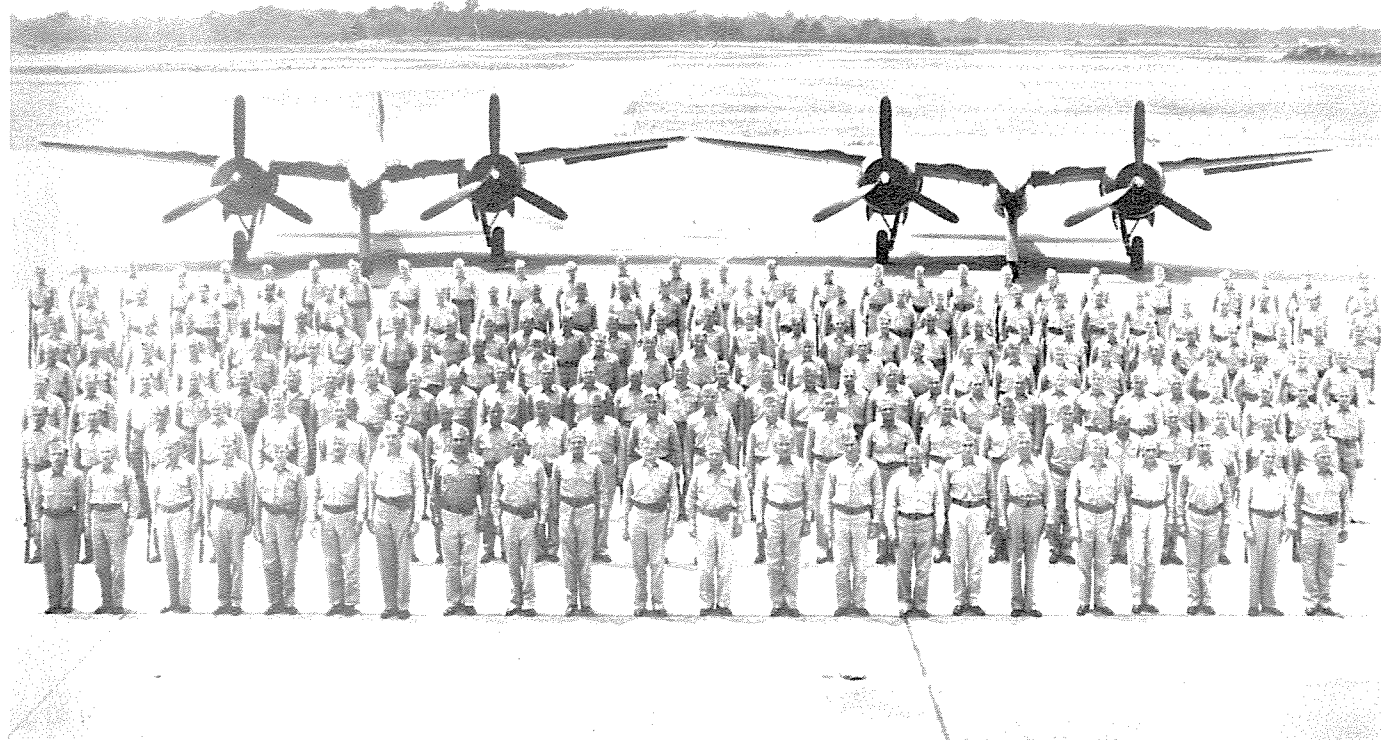
down, 82 knots. With single-engine clean, 140 knots. With single engine flaps and gear down, 160 knots, it had very critical single-engine short field capabilities.

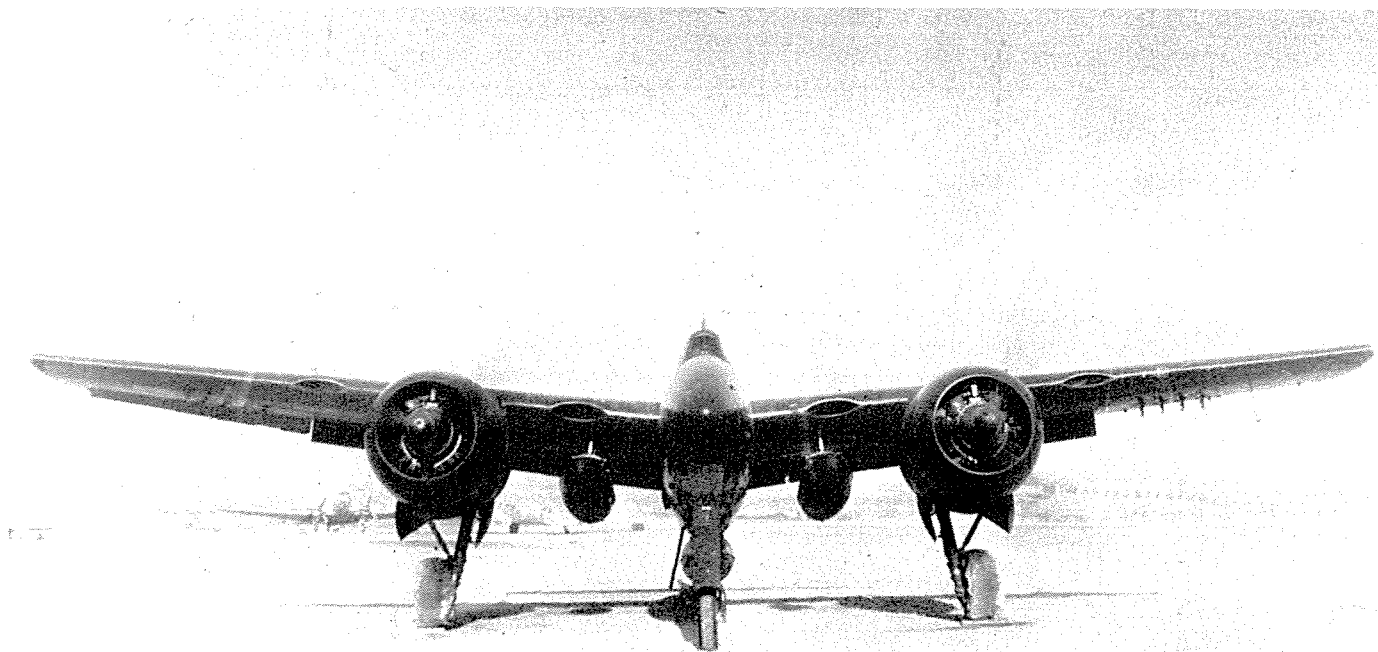
With one engine on stall, the plane rolled rather abruptly into that dead engine and would fall off into a flat spin. Recovery was normal after two turns, but the dead feathered engine had to be turned back on or it would not recover. I did six turns once from 15,000 feet, finally unfeathering the dead engine, gave them both power and opposite rudder, stick forward, and it recovered but I was down to 4,000 feet and the airspeed indicator showed over 550 knots. An enlisted man, Paul Hudson, had insisted on going with me even though I had told him what I was up to. At the high-speed recovery I held it as long as possible to eliminate the risk of pulling out too soon and going into the deadly progressive stall, and the rear plexiglass hatch covers blew away exposing Paul to the high wind and snatching his earphones off. He called me in a frantic tone a couple of times and would not answer my call as we leveled out still going over 500.

He could not hear me answer and he thought we were either crashing or I had gone out. But then he had guts enough to stick with it, not seeing me jump out. I made a quick landing not knowing what I would find after making a wide circle of the area and seeing no parachute. Not getting an answer I now was very scared for his safety.

Landing short, I pulled over in a revetment close to where the crash crew was, jumped up on the wing and found Hudson crouched back against the rear of the compartment, pale as a ghost. Needless to say we were both relieved and I did no more spins around Okinawa or anywhere else in the F7F.

Squadron group picture a few days before departure from Greenville, N.C., to Okinawa. Two F7Fs in background.





Author preparing to take off on photo mission from Tsingtao, December 1945.

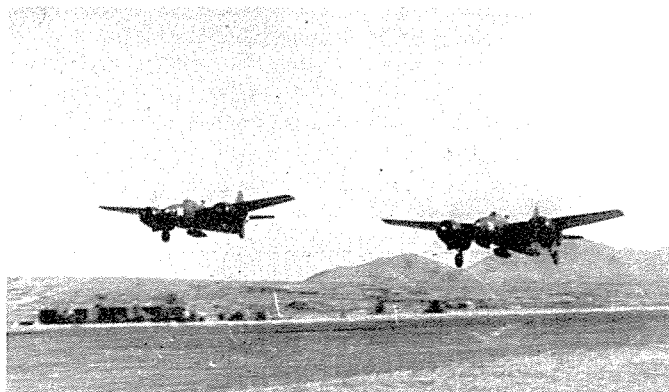
D-2 Lt. Jack Barard, D-6 Lt. Sheridan take off to cover rescue of downed airman on Shantang peninsula, December 1945.

Inspection showed the canopy gone, and all the camera doors blown in and a few popped rivets. We were lucky and the Grumman Iron Works saved us.

While overseas we lost one aircraft at Okinawa early on when an inept pilot was buzzing the ocean near north Okinawa and dug a prop into the water slightly, the right prop. Having no ability or experience on single-engine operation (he later admitted), he panicked and landed straight ahead cutting back on the good engine and landing on a flat spot of land dead ahead. He crashed ahead and lost a brand-new aircraft, when all he had to do was to climb out on a feathered engine with his good engine working fine. At a pilots' meeting after a destroyer picked him up and brought him home, it was revealed that 80 percent of the pilots had no F7F single-engine experience. A bad reflection on our C.O., our Exec and our Operations Officers as they overtrained us in photography but gave us no single-engine instructions. I had by then lots of single-engine time, but I had done it on my own. Belatedly, the C.O. and Operations gave everyone a single-engine checkout, this being in October after we had had the F7Fs since April. Unbelievable! I am afraid most of the pilots were very timid in their approach to flying the *Tigercat*. This fear would cause us to lose four more aircraft.

Two were lost when the leader of the flight somehow got lost going from Okinawa to Tsingtao in December. Another in the flight landed on a large plateau intact. One landed in Chefoo harbor and the pilot and his rear seat riding plane captain were killed. The other, the flight leader, landed on a road and wrecked it in a ditch west of Chefoo still looking for the Tsingtao aerodrome.

We flew top cover with three F7Fs with loaded guns, which I led, as two small Taylor artillery planes flew in and res-



cued the downed pilot and his mechanic and brought them home safe.

Later we made a beachhead landing supported by a battalion of First Division Marines to salvage the plane and fly it out. After running it up my ground crew hand-pumped gasoline into the tanks from five 55-gallon drums we brought with us on our Duck. Our executive officer insisted on flying it out, and even though he knew of the very low (12") clearance of the props from the rough terrain, instead of holding the nose up by elevator control and rolling slowly at first and getting off that way, he held the brakes and ran both engines up full throttle. Right away the ground crumbled and both props dug in, bent all out of shape. He shut down. He had not gone five feet! We removed the cameras and burned this beautiful new F7F—another pilot error casualty. The pilot had been a good friend, but when he found we held him responsible he launched into a long tirade about what a no-good SOB I was. I just listened and tried to avoid the major as much as possible.

In addition to flying daily photo recon missions, I was aircraft engineering officer in charge of all the maintenance and repair of our aircraft with approximately 100 men under my administrative control. I also did most of the test flying of aircraft that had been repaired, or had undergone 30-, 60- or



Lt. Sheridan and Warrant Officer George Thomas, backseat observer, after successful rescue of downed airman. Tsingtao, December 1945.

120-hour checks, as well as engine changes. It was a full-time job, and I was left to my devices, as the ground officer first lieutenant—supposedly in charge ahead of me—was seldom in evidence and was soon en route home. The captain, who was restricted to straight-and-level, no-combat flying, was gone most of the time—to Guam and other points digging up much-needed parts. Much of the time I was on my own and reported directly to the C.O. who had a field phone with a direct line from his tent to mine where he often called me to check on planes all during the night. Yes, I had my hands full.

By the time we started to operate in Shanghai we had lost the four aircraft as mentioned, all from glaring pilot error. Now one more. The executive officer, who messed up the takeoff of the fourth F7F, had a first lieutenant roommate with average all-around ability. He was asleep at the switch, however, on takeoff when he switched from his main tanks to wing tanks as was the standard procedure. Somehow he missed and switched the selector to OFF instead of wing tanks, causing a crash off the end of the Shanghai runway. He survived unhurt, but the plane was totaled. This was number five, which meant we had lost 33 percent of our aircraft, and we were ordered home even though we were only two-thirds finished with our assigned mission. I was glad to be going home and glad I was just in the Reserves and soon to be released back to college. The regulars in the squadron, including the C.O. and the operations officer, would have a very black mark on their record due to lack of training and leadership. All accidents were 100 percent pilot error, and the regulars would never get promoted very high in the Marine Corps. Also, the executive officer major applied and was turned down. Being engineering officer I had to submit an



F4U-5P at El Toro, Calif., Marine Air Base, being readied to go to Korea.

accident report on each loss of aircraft giving full particulars. This passed over our C.O. and exec's desk en route to Group Engineering. To the pilots in error I became *very* unpopular as I called them as I saw them, good friend or not.

One aircraft was left at Tsingtao needing an engine change, again due to faulty pilot technique. Nine aircraft from the original 15 took off from Okinawa en route home on April 13, 1946. I lost an engine halfway to Iwo Jima as the P&W right engine loaded up. Even though I had to make a final letdown from 12,000 feet to a ceiling of less than 500 at Iwo, it was routine due to my self-training. The engine was soon fixed and the next day we flew to Guam.

There we loaded onto a carrier and headed home, arriving in San Diego in mid-May. Except for a few flights flying the F7F from North Island to Miramar Marine Air Station, this was my final experience with the mighty F7F *Tigercat*. It served me and the Marine Corps very well indeed. As a postscript, some surviving F7Fs saw action in the first part of the Korean War in 1950—as photo planes, night fighters, and close support fighters. Also, one of the very best planes I ever flew, the F4U-5, was pressed into service in Korea as a photo plane and close air support. I flew it as aircraft maintenance officer at El Toro during a 17-month recall to duty in the Korean War. Our job was to ready pilots and planes for Korea. Soon, both the F7F, the F8F, as well as the F7F, gave way to the Grumman F9F jets and the McDonnell F2H *Banshee*, both having an outstanding Korean record.

Any reader who would like a full detailed story of this secret mission in Red China is referred to the manuscript, *Red Fucus*, by Sheridan now being put out for publication. ■

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