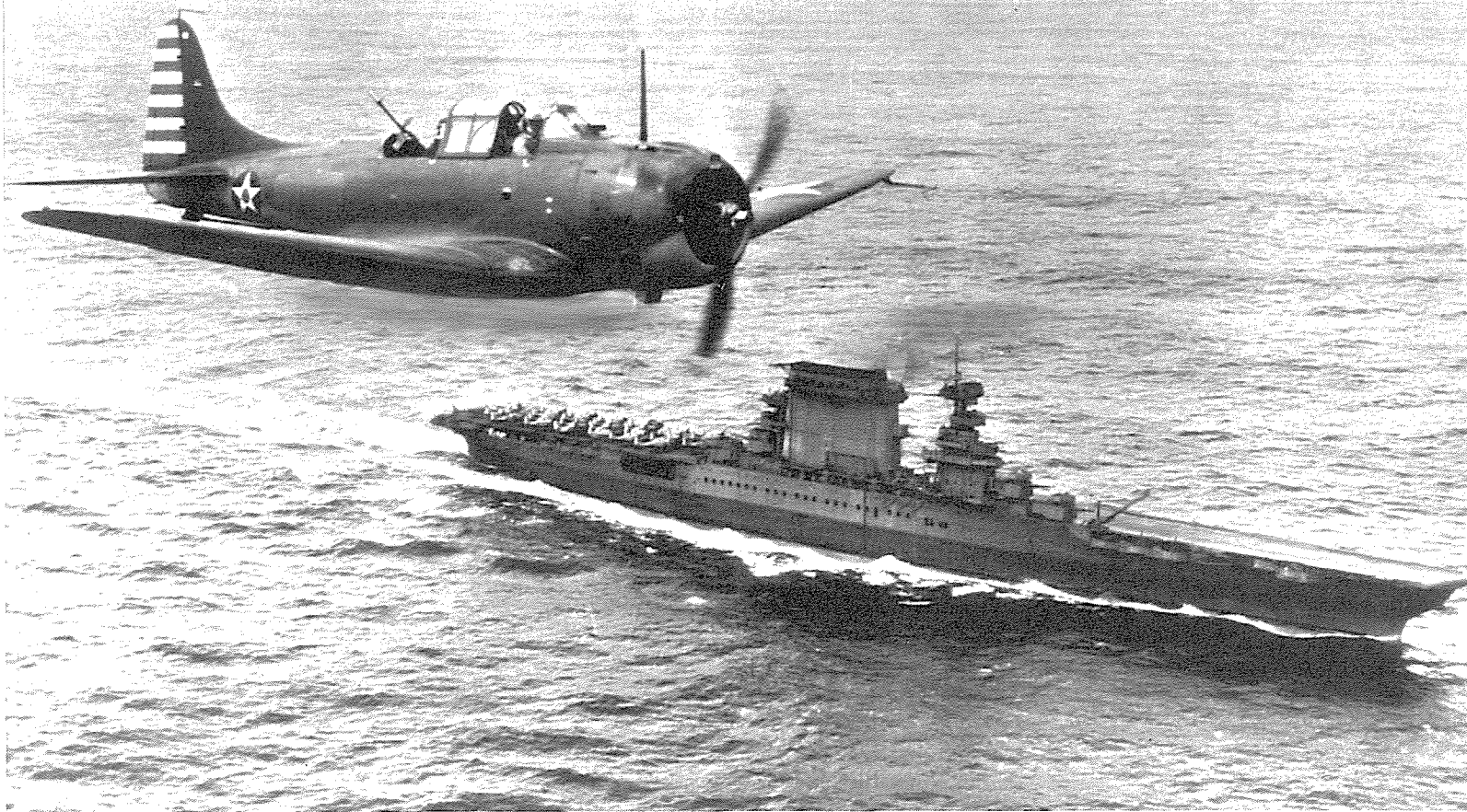




December 7, 1941: Search and Attack!

by L.P. Gunshol

Eight and one-half hours after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Admiral Halsey launched a torpedo attack against the Japanese fleet. Before the day was over, two torpedoes had been dropped: one within the perimeter of the vessels guarding the USS Enterprise, and one on the deck of the Enterprise itself!

AT 1630 HOURS ON DECEMBER 7, 1941, THE CALL TO Flight Quarters once again blared over the USS *Enterprise* loudspeakers. Torpedo Squadron Six (VT-6) pilots were just sitting down to eat their full evening meal. All pilots, including Ensign Irvin McPherson, ran to their planes.

VT-6 AOM1c¹ George Burchfield reached the Flight Deck and had climbed into the middle seat of T-9. ARM1c² Robert White climbed into the third seat of T-12 recalling that a shipmate had tried all day to get takers for a \$100 bet that the day's many alerts were not "the real thing." \$100 was a princely sum for a sailor, and the entrepreneur didn't get any action.

Lt. Richard Best of Bombing Squadron Six (VB-6) climbed into the cockpit of B-10. Admiral Halsey had assigned VT-6

Commanding Officer LCdr. Eugene Lindsey as the leader of a 30-plane strike force. VT-6 would launch 18 three-seated Douglas TBD *Devastator* torpedo bombers armed with Mark 13 aerial torpedoes. Lt.(jg) Francis "Fritz" Hebel would lead the fighter escort comprised of six F4F *Wildcats*. Best would command the VB-6 contingent of six SBD *Dauntless* dive-bombers configured as "smokers." A "smoker" was a conventional SBD that was equipped with an 850-pound tank containing chemicals for laying an aerial smoke screen.

Shortly after 1600 hours, the *Enterprise* had received word that a Japanese aircraft carrier and cruiser had been sighted about 60 miles south of Dahu. All operational VT-6 TBDs had been armed with torpedoes in the morning, and although it was late afternoon, a strike group could be launched in time to reach the reported contact point in daylight. If no contact was made, the group would nominally have sufficient fuel to land at night at Pearl Harbor or optionally aboard the *Enterprise*.

A risky venture? Certainly! Whether or not contact was made with the Japanese fleet, the strike force would fly for some time in total darkness. True, Air Group Six personnel were versed in the "group grope" concept. However, no one had ever practiced a "group grope" at night fully loaded with ammunition, torpedoes, and smoke tanks. Additionally,

many of the VT-6 pilots had not qualified for night landings aboard a carrier, although most had some Field Carrier Landing Practice experience at night. Finally, no one had ever landed aboard a carrier, day or night, carrying a torpedo with a live warhead.

When McPherson reached his plane, T-17, his regular radioman, Lied, was not present. McPherson could hear other planes' engines in the squadron sputter and roar. With time running out, McPherson eyed one of the squadron's aviation mechanics who was checked out in using the flexible .30-cal. machine gun and who regularly got flight time. McPherson requested that the individual accompany him. The aviation mechanic didn't have a flight helmet or flight gear, but obliged McPherson by climbing into the third seat of T-17. (The third seat position of each TBD was always equipped with a parachute.)

In the enlisted men's mess hall, VT-6 ARM3c³ Ronald Graetz and ARM3c Lied were eating a full meal. Earlier, during a lull, ACMM⁴ "Jake" Utley told Graetz and Lied to go below and get some dinner. Having missed the call, Graetz and Lied were surprised when one of their shipmates entered the mess and informed them that Flight Quarters had sounded minutes before!

At 1642 the first plane of the attack group, F-1, piloted by Hebel took off. Graetz was breathless as he reached the top of the ladder leading to the Flight Deck, with Lied closely behind. Just as he stepped onto the catwalk, Graetz observed that his plane, T-9, was heading down the Flight Deck to take off.

When airborne, T-9's pilot, Ensign Severin Rombach, spoke over the intercom (I/C) to his radioman/gunner, Graetz. Burchfield noticed that Graetz did not respond, and glanced back. He saw an empty seat and the single .30-cal. flexible machine gun sliding to and fro on its track. Burchfield informed Rombach.

Lt. Donald Morison White, the leader of the second section of the VT-6 Second Division, turned up for takeoff. He felt a slight bump from the rear, but paid no attention, since the deck crew waved him on for takeoff.

McPherson took off without incident. Lied watched glumly as T-17 rolled down the Flight Deck for takeoff. Turning around, he sought out Graetz. Standing on the catwalk below the Flight Deck, Graetz expected to be court-martialed, or even worse, "hung by the yardarm" along with Lied.

The last plane in the strike group, T-18 piloted by Ensign Flourenoy Hodges, left the Flight Deck at 1659. The *Enterprise* Flight Deck was promptly respotting to receive any of the strike group planes forced to abort because of mechanical or other problems precluding the conduct of a successful mission.

In T-2, radioman/gunner ARM3c Earl Clark suddenly heard over the I/C that a torpedo was smoking and burning! In T-5, Ensign Jaime Morris heard "Drop it! Drop it!" over the I/C. In T-8, Albert "Walt" Winchell (AP1c⁵) heard "Drop it before it burns the end of your plane!"

The problem was McPherson's. When airborne, McPherson reminded his temporary gunner to connect the starting

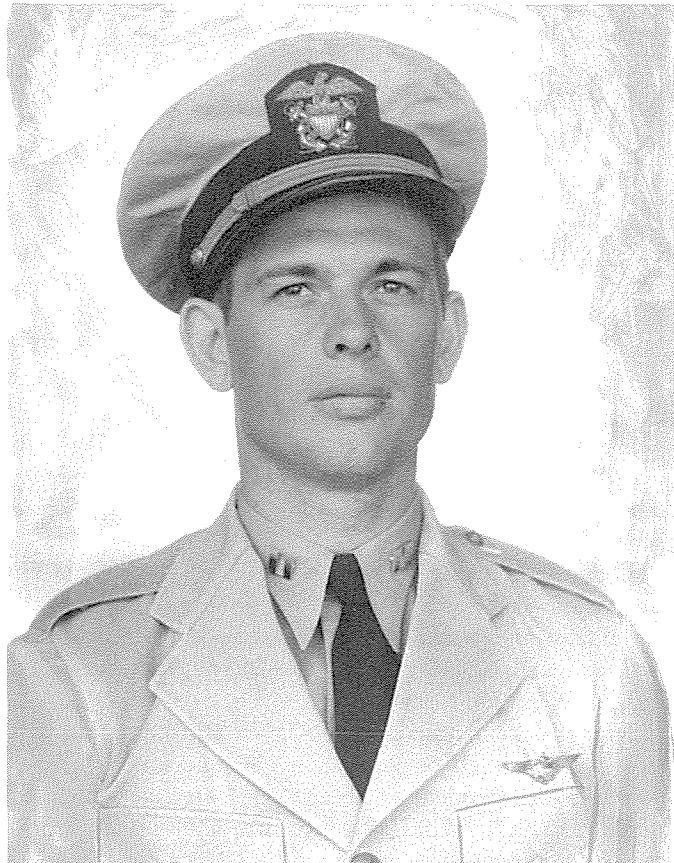
lanyard to the Mark 13 torpedo. McPherson had begun to smell smoke. He happened to look over to his section leader, Lt. Paul "Pablo" Riley's plane. Riley was frantically pointing toward the tail of McPherson's plane. McPherson looked around and was astounded to see vast flames shooting out of the back of T-17, accompanied by surges of smoke rising from the bottom of the plane!

McPherson once again looked over at Riley for help, who made the motions of someone who was pulling on something on the instrument panel. Comprehending, McPherson reached over to the lower left side of his instrument panel and pulled his emergency release handle and released his torpedo. McPherson later learned that his stand-in gunner had accidentally tripped the starting lanyard. The steam turbine inside the torpedo started, became overheated, and finally flew to pieces. The fuel inside the torpedo ignited, and the burning fuel was seen and smelled by McPherson.

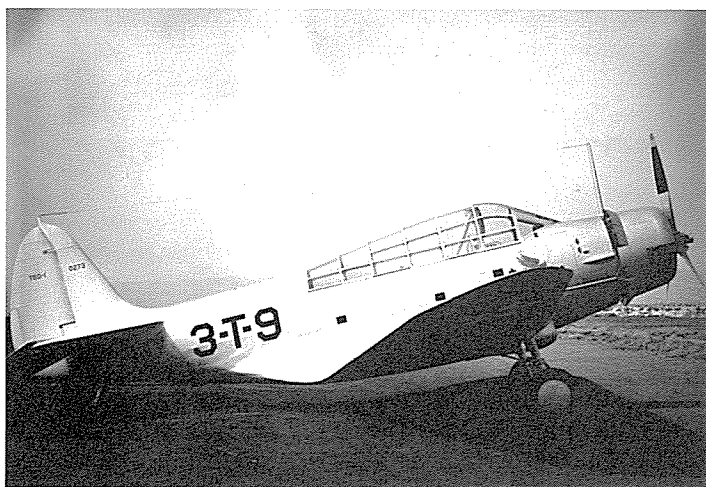
In T-5, Morris saw that McPherson had dropped the torpedo, and noted that the TBDs were still within the perimeter of the guarding destroyers. He hoped that the torpedo would not strike one of Halsey's ships. There is no record that the *Enterprise* was ever aware of McPherson's torpedo problem.

In T-9, Burchfield volunteered to try to find a way back to the third seat. Rombach gave him permission to do so, saying, "See if you can go back there."

On the *Enterprise*, Graetz and Lied breathed a sigh of



Lt. Richard H. Best, whose photo was taken in the spring of 1941 by Admiral Halsey's staff photographer.
(Dick Best)



Douglas TBD-1 *Devastator* (BuNo 0273) assigned to USS *Saratoga*. It was obsolete at the start of WWII. (McDonnell Douglas)

SBD *Devastators* and crews awaiting the call to action. (Harry Gann)

VT-6 pilots and crewmen on the flight deck of the USS *Enterprise* on 30 December 1941. (L-R) they are: 1) John Wiley Brock, AP1c; 2) Ens. Edward Heck, Jr., A-V(N), USNR; 3) Ens. John Porter Grey, A-N(N), USNR; 4) Lt.(jg) Thomas A. Aspell, Jr., A-V(N), USNR; 5) Ens. Severin L. Rombach, A-V(N), USNR; 6) Ens. Irvin H. McPherson, A-V(N), USNR; 7) Albert W. Winchell, AP1c; 8) Steven B. Smith, CAP; 9) Ens. W.W. Creamer, A-V(N), USNR; 10) Ens. Flourenoy G. Hodges, A-V(N), USNR; 11) Ens. Jaime S. Morris, A-V(N), USNR; 12) Ens. Samuel L. Prickett, USN; 13) Lt.(jg) Lloyd Thomas, USN; 14) Ens. Randolph M. Holder, A-V(N), USNR; 15) Harry A. Mueller, CAP; 16) R.J. Newman, AP1c; 17) Lt.(jg) John T. Eversole, USN; 18) Lt. Paul J. Riley, USN; 19) LtCdr. Lance E. Massey, USN (X.O.); 20) LtCdr. Eugene E. Lindsey, USN (C.O.); 21) Lt. Arthur V. Ely, USN; 22) Lt. Donald M. White, USN; 23) Lt.(jg) Robert E. Laub, USN; 24) Thomas E. Schaeffer, CAP. (from Mark Horan)



relief as they were absolved of any wrongdoing. Wishing to resolve their fate as quickly as possible, they sought out Chief Utley and told their story. Utley responded in his characteristic drawl, "Well, after all, I did tell you to go below for chow." Graetz and Lied would later see action with VT-6 during the raids on the Marshall and Gilbert Islands (February 1, 1942) and Wake Island (February 24, 1942).

Approximately one hour after launch, the strike force neared the reported contact point. Not seeing the enemy, Lindsey turned the group approximately 135 degrees, setting a course to the west.

Shortly thereafter, Lindsey descended to 1,000 feet. The squadron spread out into a scouting line, with all planes in line abreast and separated by a distance at which sufficient plane-to-plane visibility was retained. The right-most TBD was able to see land to the north.

Hebel maintained his position within his 10,000-foot-high "foxhole" centered on and slightly behind Lindsey. Best's "smokers" descended to about 1,000 feet and took up station to the left of Lindsey and slightly behind him. Hebel's F4Fs weaved to avoid overrunning the TBDs which flew even slower closer to the deck. Best's SBDs performed easy left and right turns to keep the TBDs ahead of them.

Lindsey flew west into the fading sun, and then turned south. Daylight was rapidly fading when Lindsey again altered course to head east. With darkness falling, the scouting line closed in toward the center. Lindsey did not turn on his running lights. Following Lindsey's direction, none of the pilots in the attack group turned on their running lights.

In T-9, Burchfield had at last inched his way through the opening between the second seat and third seat positions on a third attempt. After removing the direction finder (DF) loop, he had tried to squeeze between the small aperture head-first with his backpack parachute on. Next, he made a feet-first try with his backpack on. Finally, he removed his backpack but held tightly to the retaining straps and then maneuvered through the opening feet-first.

He secured the swinging flexible .30-cal. machine gun, picked up the third seat I/C, plugged it into the jack, hooked the microphone onto his flight jacket, and looked around. Only the luminous exhaust plumes from several planes were visible. He released the machine gun, charged it, and pointed it aft while firing several rounds to check the operational status of the weapon.

Rombach startled Burchfield by screaming, "Expletive! What was that?" over the I/C. Feeling bad that he forgot to notify Rombach as promised when he reached the third seat, Burchfield apologized while assuring him that the plane was not under attack.

CAP⁶ Harold Dixon peered into the darkness from the second seat of T-13. Dixon served as observer for the squadron Executive Officer LCdr. Lance "Lem" Massey. Dixon thought to himself, "This is darker than a sack of black cats!"

In Lindsey's T-1, CAP Thomas Schaeffer momentarily disconnected his I/C. He picked up the fire extinguisher that was stored below the second seat, tapped the metal extinguisher on the aluminum panel between the second and third seats, and said, "Flip."

ARM1c Dominic DiFilippo ("Flip" to his friends) faced rearward. He had been counting the exhaust plumes of the "smokers" and fighters for some time. The fighter escort flew above and behind the TBDs, and DiFilippo could clearly see the plumes on both the port and starboard sides of the F4Fs. Best's SBDs were not flying as high as the F4Fs and to the port side of T-1. DiFilippo could only see and count the



starboard exhaust plumes on these “smokers.” During the last several minutes, DiFilippo had observed that the fighter escort was no longer there!

DiFilippo turned around to look at Schaeffer, who pointed toward Lindsey’s seat saying, “This guy’s crazy! If he doesn’t turn us around soon and head for home, I’m going to hit him on the head with this bottle!” DiFilippo smiled wryly, and continued counting the exhaust plumes.

Unknown to Schaeffer and DiFilippo, Lindsey had already made a turn to the northwest. This turn indicated to Hebel that the search was now off, and the strike force was returning to the *Enterprise* rather than to Pearl Harbor. Hebel had ceased escorting and had headed his group home to the *Enterprise*. The F4Fs could now cruise efficiently at 140 to 150 knots, and would be able to reach the *Enterprise* and land before the TBDs and SBDs arrived.

Shortly after turning for home, Lindsey initiated a slow climb toward 4,000 feet altitude in order to obtain a clear electronic homing signal from the *Enterprise*. After climbing faster than Lindsey for about 10 minutes, Best noted that Lindsey had either increased throttle or had eased toward level flight. In other words, he had locked Lindsey into position and could again ease into something approaching normal flying speed.

Suddenly, Best became suspicious of a blue flame about the size of a candle at 20 feet. He started gentle turns right and left and realized that he was guiding on a star!

Lindsey had been on Best’s starboard bow when Best had lost him. Best turned 30 degrees to the right and scanned the murky skies. Soon, Best became aware of a greater darkness abeam, a phenomenon called the loom of objects in the

darkness.

In T-2, Clark looked up and saw several aircraft pass over at a bearing of 8 o’clock. He knew they were SBDs by the light given off by their exhaust flames. The SBDs passed within 50 feet!

In T-6, Morris was startled as his cockpit lit up brightly from intense exhaust flames as the SBDs flew transverse to him. His pupils dilated, readjusting in about 10 seconds.

Ensign Ward Powell, pilot of T-7, was concerned with the cloud cover which exasperated the difficult flying conditions of a moonless night. He suddenly heard the frantic call, “Duck! Duck! Duck!” over his I/C. Instinctively, Powell shoved his control stick forward, and sensed an object to his starboard side. Powell thought that the object was T-9 flown by his wingman Rombach. Powell’s cockpit was lit by the intense bluish glare of exhaust flames, and he estimated that he had missed a midair collision by about six feet!

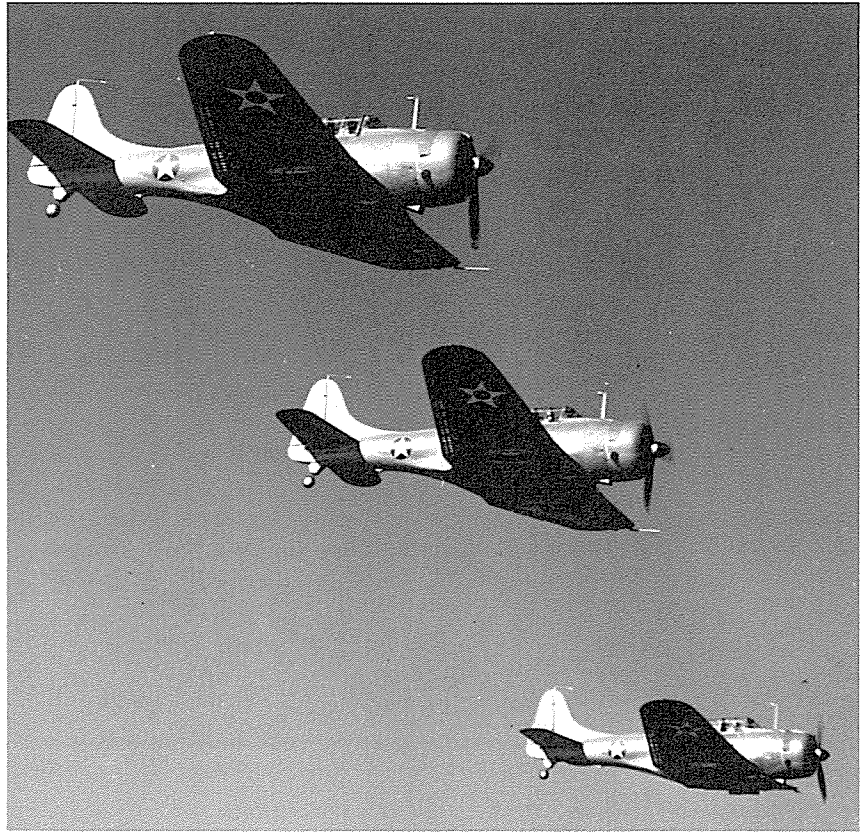
Tens of feet above Clark and Morris, and less than 10 feet above Powell, Best was witnessing his six SBDs fly through Lindsey’s First Division, like the shuffling of a deck of cards! Years later, Best would note that this maneuver could not have been performed in broad daylight if all pilots involved knew what was happening.

After recovering from the near midair collision, Best maneuvered to reacquire station behind Lindsey. However, when Best would turn right, Lindsey would turn right. When Best would turn left, Lindsey would turn left. Best presumed that Lindsey had turned over the lead to him.

Best attempted to reach Lindsey by radio, “Tare One from Baker 10. Are you leading or am I?” Receiving no reply, he made a second transmission: “We are lost. I am dropping



Aviation Ordnanceman First Class George M. Burchfield patiently completed the nearly impossible task of transferring inflight from the second seat of T-9 to the third seat.
(George M. Burchfield)



smoke tanks to increase my range and lighting up." The six "smokers" dropped their smoke tanks and turned on their running lights.

Best had mixed feelings about turning on the running lights. He knew that the proper flying mode for wartime conditions was with running lights off. However, given the near collision, Air Group Six lives were now at stake, and this overruled propriety.

Presuming that he was now leading the attack group, Best directed his radioman/gunner, ARM1c Lee McHugh to turn on the electronic navigation gear. When McHugh tuned in the receiver, B-10 was within 10 miles of the *Enterprise* and perhaps already within the fleet perimeter!

At 1948, the *Enterprise* radar picked up Hebel's approaching F4Fs. Hebel requested permission to land. For reasons unknown, Halsey was surprised to see Hebel. Perhaps Lindsey was to have notified Halsey if he chose to return to the carrier. Given the unreliability of the airborne radios in use, it is possible that Lindsey had sent a message which was not received.

Lindsey and Best would shortly arrive, both low on fuel. VT-6 represented Halsey's knockout punch, and must be saved for future encounters with the enemy. What if one of Hebel's *Wildcats* crashed? Some or all of Lindsey's TBDs (with scarce torpedoes and warheads) and Best's SBDs would have to ditch as they ran out of fuel.

Following a pause, Hebel was directed by a coded voice message to fly on to Ford Island. Miles away, both Clark and

Burchfield heard the message. Pearl Harbor was also notified that the six F4Fs would be arriving.

Minutes later, Lindsey requested permission to land. No response was received. Following a second and third try the *Enterprise* responded with "Orange [the *Enterprise*] will turn the lights on and give position."

Night operations required shielded landing lights on the Flight Deck which were visible at altitudes greater than 50 feet and within approximately 30 degrees of the stern (i.e., nearly "in the groove"). The TBDs and SBDs were mixed within a landing circle with a diameter of approximately one mile. At 2004, the dim yellow-white deck lights were turned on. In T-9, Rombach exclaimed to Burchfield, "Hey, there it is!"

Pilots kept one eye anxiously on the fuel gauge, and the other eye looking for the ramp lights to be turned on, the signal that planes could land. The ramp lights were turned on at 2010, and SBDs and TBDs which saw the signal immediately maneuvered toward the stern of the carrier regardless of their position in the circle. Some pilots low on fuel found themselves jockeying other pilots out of the way in the groove.

Cool judgment won out in the end. More than one pilot in this first wave voluntarily took a wave-off when they saw that they would either get in the way of or otherwise embarrass another pilot. The first plane landed at 2017.

Lt. Hubert "Bert" B. Hardin, the ship's Landing Signal Officer (LSO), used illuminated green wands rather than the flags that were used during daylight operations.

Two of the first TBDs to land were piloted by Lt.(jg) Robert Laub and Powell. Powell and Laub were very good friends, and Powell was aware that Laub had a minimum number of

flying hours in the TBD and was not qualified for night carrier landings.

Rombach's plane landed shortly after Powell's. After taxiing forward, Rombach noted that he had only eight gallons of fuel left. Lindsey's radioman/gunner, DiFilippo was standing on the Flight Deck as Burchfield exited from the third seat of Rombach's plane. Glancing at each other, DiFilippo and Burchfield spontaneously knelt and kissed the wooden deck! All who witnessed the impromptu routine appreciated the humor.

As Lt. White landed and throttled the engine to taxi forward, the engine died as the fuel was exhausted! The deck crew pushed the plane toward the forward elevator. As the plane came to a stop, White egressed onto the wing, and then leapt to the deck and fell flat on his face! His legs were very stiff from the rigors of the four-hour-plus flight. Someone helped White to his feet, and then the Engineering Chief pointed out that his rudder was fluttering in tatters. Even though the TBD was of all-metal construction, all control surfaces were made of fabric. White recalled that he had been bumped from behind prior to takeoff, and this was the likely cause of his damaged rudder.

Suddenly, a TBD made a very hard landing. Both straps securing the Mark 13 torpedo broke, and the torpedo slithered up the Flight Deck toward the bow. As the torpedo lost momentum during its run, Lt. William "Slim" Townsend, the Flight Deck officer, leaped onto and straddled the torpedo with his legs. By applying "body English" in the form of feet, hands, legs and buttocks, Townsend was able to keep the "fish" sliding straight ahead until it stopped short of the wire barrier on the port side. The ship's chief torpedoman was present carrying a brass propeller lock. He secured the propeller lock on the torpedo, and members of the deck crew then strapped the "fish" to the port gunnel.

As soon as the deck was "fouled," Hardin waved off approaching planes. The ramp lights were turned off, and landings were suspended for about 20 minutes. Best observed only himself and three TBDs in the landing circle. When the ramp lights came on again, Best held back until he saw the TBDs make their breakout. He then initiated a circling maneuver above the trailing TBD, planning to come up the groove 400 feet above it and just abaft of its beam. Suddenly several more TBDs showed up in the circle "out of nowhere" and managed to merge in front of him, taking his landing position.

Best followed on the heels of the late-arriving TBDs, and made the "worst approach" of any of his 333 carrier landings. He prided himself as a number one wire specialist, and had never landed beyond the number three wire. Best had to dive for the deck, and picked up the number six wire!

Only Morris remained aloft. He had no idea where the carrier was located, and could not see the deck lights. His radioman/gunner, ARM2c7 David Butler signaled, tapping out his Morse Code dots and dashes using his blinker (aldis lamp).

Morris finally descended to approximately 50 feet and saw the dim white-yellow deck lights as he approached from the

port side of the carrier. A relieved Morris maneuvered into the groove and Hardin brought him home at 2113.

Epilogue—As Eugene Burns would later write, the 18 TBD pilots had been at their best this night.

Tragically, Hebel and two of his pilots (Lt.[jg] Eric Allen, Ens. Herbert H. Menges) were killed by friendly fire as they attempted to land, Ens. David R. Flynn was injured when his F4F ran out of fuel, and Ens. James G. Daniels III and Ens. Gayle L. Hermann were shot at but not injured. Daniels made significant contributions to this article. Ironically, the contact report that precipitated the launch of the attack group was false: the pilot had misidentified friendly vessels and aircraft! □

NOTES

1. Aviation Ordnanceman First Class
2. Aviation Radioman First Class
3. Aviation Radioman Third Class
4. Chief Aviation Machinist's Mate
5. Aviation Pilot First Class
6. Chief Aviation Pilot
7. Aviation Radioman Second Class

SOURCES

VT-6: George M. Burchfield, Earl H. Clark, *Dominic J. DiFilippo*, Harold F. Dixon, Ronald W. Graetz, William C. Humphrey, Jr., *Robert E. Laub*, Jaime Morris, *Ward F. Powell*, Donald M. White, Robert L. White, Albert W. Winchell.

now deceased

VB-6: Richard H. Best, Lee McHugh.

VF-6: James G. Daniels III.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lawrence P. Gunshol is a Senior Principal Engineer for the Computer Sciences Corporation, Systems Engineering Division. He is a member of the U.S. Naval Institute and the American Aviation Historical Society. He has independently researched the Mark 13 aerial torpedo and the Douglas TBD-1 *Devastator* for 11 years. Mr. Gunshol received a Bachelor of Engineering Science degree in Mechanical Engineering from the Johns Hopkins University, and a Master of Science degree in Mechanical Engineering from the Drexel Institute of Technology.

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