

# MIDWAY MELEE

By Commander C.W. McClusky, Jr., U.S. Navy

As told to

William H. Randall

**A first hand account of air battle in which four Jap flat-tops were sunk by squadrons of American dive-bombers**



**OUR CARRIER** was steaming in the Hawaiian area on the morning of December 7. Word of the Jap attack on Pearl Harbor stunned us for a moment but all planes took the air almost immediately. My VF squadron took the air at once. Now that it can be talked about, Pearl Harbor was a pretty tough blow, forcing the Navy to wage a cover-up war until some of the damage could be repaired.

Our first real action came in the Task Force attack on the Marshall and Gilberts Islands on February 1. The objectives assigned my squadron were the islands of Wotje and Taroa. We went in for our attack just 15 minutes before dawn. As we were

flying F4F-3 Wildcats-we didn't get F4F-4 until Midway-our attacks were of a strafing nature, coupled with light bombs and combat with enemy aircraft. We knocked down several in the air and destroyed quite a few on the ground. An accurate count of ground damage to aircraft was impossible because of the visibility at that time of the morning.

Our next action was at Wake Island on February 24, when our air group strafed, horizontal and dive bombed the Japanese-occupied American island. This attack was almost a repetition of our attack on the Marshall and Gilberts Islands insofar as damage was concerned. Hangars, buildings, storehouses and fuel tanks were either destroyed or left in flames, and three four-engine patrol planes were liquidated.

One particularly spectacular action of short duration followed immediately after the bombing of Wake. While our VF escort was cruising at 15,000 feet, a scout bomber reported a 4-engine Jap flying boat at 1,000 feet about five miles east of the island. They were tracking our bombardment force of cruisers and destroyers. I started down with six fighters through massive clouds to make an interception. My course led towards our own surface ships which immediately opened fire at us through the clouds. At 350 knots I soon got out of their range by reversing the direction of our spiral descent. This change of course was a stroke of luck because there, as we pulled out below the clouds at about 1,000 feet, loomed the big Jap patrol boat directly ahead. Without changing course we pressed home an attack at point blank range. The attack was rather tough on the last three fighters, however, because by the time the third fighter attacked the Jap was already going down in flames. The action lasted less than thirty seconds.

We followed this attack with a similar one on Marcus Island, destroyed seven buildings and two hangars and blew up their magazine. Exact damage was difficult to ascertain due to low clouds. Up to this point my job was that of squadron commander of our VF group flying Wildcats. When the Battle of Midway came along I was Group Commander of the Air Group on my carrier. This group included a VF squadron of Grumman Wildcats, two VB squadrons of Douglas SBD-3s and a squadron of VT Douglas TBD Devastators. As Air Group Commander I flew an SBD.

**JUNE 4** WAS by long odds the busiest day for my group - for our whole task force, in fact. An estimated position of a Japanese Task Force was given me in the morning while their planes were

hitting Midway. When my group arrived at this estimated position there was no sign of Japanese ships. With fuel limitations, the distance we had already traveled, and the supposed course of the enemy in mind, it was necessary for me to decide at once just what course to follow.

I reasoned that, in the elapsed time since a known position was taken on the Jap fleet, they couldn't be to the South and they surely weren't behind me. That left the area to the West and Northwest to search. I led my group on a 40-mile Westerly search, then swung to the Northwest for a planned 70-mile leg before returning to our carrier. A second group, launched from a different carrier swung off to search another area. On the second leg of our course, I sighted a Japanese cruiser heading Northeast. We were at 20,000 feet but I was able to tell by watching the wake through binoculars that the ship was heading somewhere in a hurry, apparently effecting a rendezvous.

We changed course to Northeast and passed the cruiser. After thirty miles the Jap ships started looming over the horizon. I counted four aircraft carriers, two battleships, four cruisers and six destroyers, then flashed a contact report to our carrier force before ordering my group in to the attack from 20,000 feet.

I started my dive on the *Kaga*, followed by one squadron of dive bombers. We made eight direct hits on the carrier and pulled out. The second squadron of dive bombers in my group attacked the *Akagi*, with one division of six planes shifting to the *Kaga* because of bomb capacity and effect desired. A third carrier, the *Soryu*, was attacked by a dive bombing squadron from the *Yorktown*. All three carriers were left enveloped in massive flames from bow to stern.

Upwards of twenty-five Zeroes and terrific anti-aircraft fire knocked down seventeen of our dive bombers and ten of our torpedo planes, but six pilots and five gunners were later recovered from their rubber boats.

We returned to our carrier for fuel and reloading to find that an air group from one of the Jap carriers had put the *Yorktown* out of commission. Some of her planes had come aboard our carrier, but their strangeness passed almost unnoticed. After our attack had been completed the sea and air became a maelstrom of planes coming and going from the carriers that had steamed at full speed attempting to reach a position that would place them handy as an operations base for our planes. Pilots didn't pay much attention to which carrier was which-they just slapped their wheels down on the first carrier at hand, when their last few drops of fuel hit the

carburetors. They didn't even ask for fuel and ammunition-the perspiring deck crews gladly gave them service. Everyone was too concerned with the destruction of the Jap Task Force for formalities.

The *Kaga*, *Akagi*, and *Soryu* sank during that day and later that evening our group, with the *York's* planes, caught the fourth carrier, the *Hiryu*, and sank her. It was the air group of the *Hiryu* that put the *York* out of commission. The fire aboard the *York* was under control the next day, but just as a salvage crew was being placed aboard a salvo of torpedoes from a submarine delivered her deathblow.

**MY PRESENT DUTY** entails the interviewing of pilots returning from the war zones with a view toward further duty assignments. The opinion is general amongst these men that the quality of the Jap flier has deteriorated considerably since the Battle of Midway, the cream of Japanese Navy pilots having perished with their carriers in that battle. This must not be construed, however, that the Jap flier is not a determined, aggressive fighter-which he is; but that the present crop of fighters being encountered are less experienced.

The Zeroes will not press home an attack on groups of three, or even two plane formations - their pet attack being two Zeroes to one lone plane. I know from personal experience that this is true. In a dive on an objective I found myself alone when I pulled out. Two Zeroes jumped me immediately, making repeated see-saw attacks until one was shot down by my rear-seat gunner. The other immediately called it a day and shoved off in not too brave a manner. Invariably they attacked half-heartedly when we opened fire on them in groups of three, or more.

The Jap Zero, although slightly faster and more maneuverable than the Wildcat, is highly vulnerable and structurally weak. Almost always, whenever we got in a good burst, either a wing or the tail disintegrated and the ship burst into flames. Our SBDs and F4Fs returned to the carrier many times shot practically to pieces, yet they still flew. One pilot brought an SBD back with a hole in it practically big enough to crawl through, yet its flying characteristics were little affected.

In my own personal estimation the Wildcat is one of the finest fighters in the world. At 300 knots or more you can kick it all over the sky without a worry lest the wings fold over your head, or the tail fly to pieces. I am looking forward to the new F6F Hellcat that is

expected to be far superior to the Wildcat.

The success of the carrier in battle does not depend on the pilots alone. That spirit of fight is in the carrier crew as well.

One instance of this spirit was exemplified by the action of a youngster during the attack on the Marshall and Gilberts Islands when a Jap plane attempted a landing on our deck. Our planes were all grouped together on the forward end of the flat-top when the twin-engine Mitsubishi bomber, partially disabled, was spotted diving directly for us. This youngster, an AMM 3/C, jumped into the rear cockpit of an SBD that was parked at the edge of the carrier deck, swung the free gun to bear on the bomber and cut loose.

**HE WAS UNABLE** to stop the Jap completely -the Mitsubishi crashed into the plane the youngster was firing from, cut the tail of the SBD completely off just aft the cockpit, then flopped over into the water. With the tail of his plane cut clear off, the youngster was still firing his machine gun at the drifting wreckage of the Jap plane. I mention this incident because it is typical of the boys in our Navy today. He was advanced to AMM 1/C on the spot by the commanding officer of the carrier.

The engineering force, sometimes called the "Black Gang," receives very little publicity and is never mentioned in battle communiques, yet without them it would be impossible to maintain the high speeds necessary to carrier maneuvers in battle. All during the height of the Midway engagement, with the carrier cruising at high speed and consequent high boiler room temperatures, the "Black Gang" was rebricking a boiler. Under ordinary circumstances this would call for a Navy Yard trip.

And much credit is due our asbestos-clad fire fighters, sometimes referred to as "Hot Papas" by their shipmates. I remember one instance in the attack on the Marshall and Gilberts Islands when a near miss from Japanese bombers started a gas fire on the port side of hangar and flight deck. The "Hot Papas" extinguished the blaze, which could very easily have cost us our ship, in ninety seconds.

There has been much controversy as to the vulnerability of an aircraft carrier and its value to the fleet. I would like to point out that the aircraft carrier has carried the brunt of the offensive action in this war to date. This country's land-based aircraft are admittedly more efficient than ship-based aircraft, because of the safety features necessary to over-water operations. These safety features

lessen the efficiency of ship-born aircraft in comparison with land-based bombers in whose design such features have not been necessary. It would be fine if we could move the base of these land planes at will to the theater of operation. Since we cannot do this, the carrier serves the purpose of furnishing an operating base for aircraft near the heart of fleet operations. Since the carrier is intended solely as a mobile base to operate with a task force of surface ships, its value becomes inestimable, despite its vulnerability. The auxiliary carriers rapidly being converted from merchant cargo vessels have proven useful, and will continue to prove more useful as the war progresses.

Naval aviation has recovered from the stunning blow at Pearl Harbor and no longer finds it necessary to wage a cover-up war. They hit the Japs wherever they can find them- and hit them *hard!*

## THE END



**COMMANDER McCLUSKY**, born in Buffalo, graduated from the United States Naval Academy in 1926, served on the battleship *Pennsylvania* and the destroyer *Williamson* before transferring to Pensacola for training as a naval aviator. After graduation as a naval aviator he was transferred to VF.1, the *Saratoga's* "High Hat" fighter squadron. Subsequently he flew with the battleship *Maryland's* VO-4 catapult planes; with patrol squadron in the Hawaiian area; on the staff of the Air Base Force Commander aboard the seaplane tender *Wright*, the *Saratoga* again on the staff of Commander Aircraft Battle Force, as well as frequent tours of duty aboard the *Ranger*. For military reasons the name of the carrier which served as his base since December 7 is withheld.

The Navy Cross was later awarded for his decisive action while leading his group to a contact with a Japanese surface task force that resulted in the sinking of four enemy carriers in the Midway Battle. During this engagement McClusky was hit five times in the left shoulder in an engagement with two Jap Zeroes against his SBD.3. The Douglas Dauntless returned to the carrier with more than fifty bullet holes in the wings and fuselage, but it was more easily repaired than was the Commander. Naval surgeons removed

only one of the slugs-the other four are still in his shoulder. Because of these wounds, McClusky will receive the purple Heart Decoration now that it is to be awarded to Navy as well as Army men.

McClusky is credited with four personal air victories-two twin engine Mitsubishi bombers, one four-engine patrol boat, and one Zero, in addition to many destroyed on the ground at Wotje.

Following the Battle of Midway, Captain G. D. Murray, Commanding Officer of one of the carriers, said: "Your air groups, both pilots and gunners, displayed a spirit of fearlessness, resolution and determination throughout all action. This spirit, though shared by pilots and gunners alike, found its highest expression in the person of the Air Group Commander, Lieutenant Commander C. W. McClusky, Jr., U. S. N. McClusky was recommended by his commanding officer for selection as a commander immediately following the Battle of Midway. He is presently serving on the staff of Rear Admiral W. K. Harrill, for Operations, Tactics and Training in Carrier Replacements at the Naval Air Station, Alameda, California.

### Flying Aces, June 1943



"You're quite sure they know where Tokyo is?"