

A Pilot's Story... In His Own Words By Jack Taylor

Reprinted with permission from the Summer 2003 issue of Gateway Heritage, Vol. 24, no. 1.1998
by the Missouri Historical Society.



I joined the Navy in March 1942, just three months after the attack on Pearl Harbor. I was twenty years old and had known for some time that I would have to serve in the military. There was a sense in those days that the situation in Europe was getting to the point where the United States would have to enter the war, and Pearl Harbor was the triggering mechanism that settled the dilemma. I knew that I wanted to be a pilot, even though I had never been up in an airplane at that time.

I applied to the Army Air Corps, but I was turned down because during my physical I admitted I had hay fever at one time, which made me unacceptable to the Army. Fortunately, a friend of mine suggested that I try the Navy, which had an aviation unit that I was not aware of. I followed his suggestion, applied to the Navy, and was accepted into its V-5 aviation cadet-training program. I was sworn in the same day I was accepted. I was told that I would be called when they wanted me for active duty. I was called in December of that year.

My initial training took place in St. Louis, where I was quartered with several young men in an old office building across the street from what is now Powell Symphony Hall. We had ground training in the morning and then about noon each day we'd climb into a bus and go out to a place called Kratz Field, which was near St. Charles. There we learned to fly Piper Cubs.

After about three or four one-hour flights with a civilian instructor, we landed one day, and he got out of the plane and said, "Ok, take her up." I wasn't sure if I was qualified to solo with such a short training period, but I got the plane up in the air, circled the field a couple of times, and landed without too much difficulty. I guess you could say after that I was a qualified pilot, at least in a Piper Cub.

Following our training in St. Louis, I went to pre-flight training in Iowa for a couple of months and then was sent to Glenview Naval Air Station, just north of Chicago. There we flew open cockpit bi-planes, which were officially designated N3N's by the Navy. We called them "Yellow Perils" because a lot of fresh students crashed in them. During the time we flew in the N3N's, we practiced emergency landings, acrobatics, night flying, and formation flying. After I was at Glenview for a couple of months, I was fairly comfortable flying an airplane.

The next step in our training took us to Corpus Christi, Texas, where we first flew Vultee Vindicators. These planes had a radial engine, two-stage propeller, and nonretractable, or fixed, landing gear, a design feature that ensured that new pilots didn't land with their wheels up. After a few months in the Vultee Vindicators, we moved to the SNJ's, another radial engine airplane with variable pitch propeller and retractable landing gear. SNJ's were more like combat aircraft and were equipped with a machine gun for gunnery training. We practiced gunnery runs during which we would fire at a large sleeve that was towed by a target plane. For training purposes, each plane was equipped with machine-gun cartridges coated with a different color wax. After shooting, the instructor could tell the number of hits each pilot had made by the color of his bullet holes in the sleeve. If you passed all of your training and flight checks at Corpus, you were awarded your wings and a commission as an ensign, which I received in December 1943, one year after I had begun my training.

I wanted to be assigned to fly fighter aircraft. I wasn't alone, practically everybody wanted to fly fighters. I was fortunate, and when I graduated from Corpus I was sent to Vero Beach, Florida, which was a flight training base with F6F Hellcats. The F6F had replaced the F4F Wildcat and was the Navy's frontline fighter aircraft. It was a great airplane. I think anybody who flew the Hellcat thought the same thing I did, that it was an outstanding aircraft. It was a very forgiving plane. It had wonderful stall characteristics, it was a good gun platform, and as the war wore on it proved it could take hits and survive. Nothing about the F6F was exceptional. It wasn't particularly fast, and it wasn't the most maneuverable plane. But it had so many positive qualities that the pilots who flew it loved it. If you were going to make it through the war, there was no better plane to fly than the F6F Hellcat!

Once I finished my training at Vero Beach, my orders sent me to Hawaii, where I joined squadron VF-100, stationed at Barbers Point on Oahu. Squadron VF-100 was basically a holding squadron for pilots waiting to go out to the fleet. The carriers operating in the Pacific were losing pilots on a regular basis and they called up replacements from Barbers Point when they needed them. I was there for about a month before being ordered to a Jeep carrier that took me and other new pilots to a large combat carrier. I joined Air Group 15 aboard the USS Essex in June 1944.



I flew over to Essex from the Jeep carrier with a couple of other pilots that were friends of mine, and I settled into life on the Essex quickly. I started flying missions almost immediately. One of my first flights was as wingman to Commander David McCampbell. He was the air-group commander and would end the war with thirty four shoot downs, which made him the leading ace of the Navy in World War II. He was awarded several medals, one of which was a Congressional Medal of Honor. I think McCampbell made a habit of having the new pilots fly wing on him so that he could measure our ability as pilots. Frankly, he was a "throttle to the firewall" kind of pilot, and on my first flight with him he scared the hell out of me. He did everything more aggressively and more rapidly than I had ever done during training.

The United States realized early in the war that the Japanese planes were more maneuverable than our airplanes. However, they were also much more vulnerable to gunfire and would "flame" quickly when hit because they did not have self-sealing fuel tanks. To offset this maneuverability advantage, one of the Navy's combat veterans, Commander Jimmy Thach came up with a plan that was subsequently called the "Thach Weave." Basically, that plan was that the Navy would fly in four-plane divisions made up of two, two-plane sections. The theory was that if you were attacked, the division would split into two sections and scissor, so one section could shoot the attacker off the air comrade's tail. Then if the division broke down again, the two-plane section would split in the same manner, and each pilot would attempt to protect his partner. This system was essential because one-on-one dogfights with Japanese fighters were typically losing fights because of other planes' maneuverability.

My time spent on the Essex was as good as it could be. I was fling with a group of first-class pilots who worked together as a team, and many of them had had combat experience by the time I joined the squadron. There were several senior-level lieutenants in the squadron who were outstanding leaders, and overall the experience with them was positive.

During my experience in the Pacific, I flew thirty-five combat missions. Those were missions where my guns were fired at either flying targets or ground targets, such as parked airplanes, warehouses, and other buildings. I was in two or three melees where our planes were flying in every direction trying to shoot down enemy planes whenever they could without being shot down themselves. I was particularly proud of myself in those melees, as I was able to stay with my section leader. I knew I could protect him in case he was in danger, and I assumed he would do the same thing if the danger fell on me.



When you are in your early twenties and in combat, you have to believe that you are never going to be the one who is shot down. Even though there were ongoing losses of pilots in the squadron because of various combat activities, I always felt that it would never be me, and I believe it was important to think this way. There are times when you are in situations where you think it could happen, but those are fleeting moments and are quickly forgotten when the danger passes. However, there was one particular flight in which my fear hung with me for longer than usual. That was the day that we attacked the middle fleet of the Japanese task force that was coming through the back door of the Philippines during the Battle of Leyte Gulf in October 1944.

We had received a report that this fleet was in the area, and we were out searching for it. There were many planes in our flight. We probably had 24 fighters, 16 dive bombers and 8 to 12 torpedo planes when we spotted the Japanese fleet coming in through the Sibuyan Sea. As we approached the fleet, I could see antiaircraft fire already rising up to meet us. The thing that struck me was the different colors of all the bursts of antiaircraft fire. I learned later that each warship had its own color so the Japanese could identify where their antiaircraft fire was going, but I still remember those bursts as we approached the fleet.

As I got ready to make my strafing run on the fleet, I picked out the biggest ship in their fleet, which happened to be the battleship *Musashi*. The *Musashi* was the sister ship of the *Yamato* and they were the largest battleships ever constructed at that time. I decided to fly down as vertically as possible because it was difficult for the gunners on the ship to raise their guns into a vertical position. As I started my dive, I began firing my guns, and, for some reason, it seemed that every time I fired my guns the antiaircraft fire stopped. I'm sure this didn't happen, but it felt that way to me at the time. As a result, I kept firing and went down as low as I could. I pulled out at about three hundred to four hundred feet and tried as quickly as possible to get out of the gun range of the ships that were firing at us. I joined up with my section leader, a good guy named Lieutenant George Carr, and as we circled the Japanese fleet, it was evident that our torpedo planes had not cleared the fleet on their runs, and they were still taking a lot of antiaircraft fire. Carr indicated to me that we had to go back in on another strafing run. Well, I didn't like that one bit, but I followed him in, and we made another run straight into the antiaircraft fire to help protect the torpedo planes.

When we landed back on the *Essex* that day, neither Carr nor I had a scratch on our airplanes. But that was a hairy afternoon. I was scared. My wanting to get the job done overcame my fear of what might happen while doing it. When the torpedo planes came aboard, most of them had shrapnel damage, and I think one or two were lost. We found out later that the *Musashi* sank that day.

When you are in combat, you can control some things, but there are other things over which you have no control. If you are in air-to-air combat with an enemy aircraft and you are a better pilot than your opponent, chances are you will win. If you have a better aircraft, one that can take more punishment, chances are you will win. But when you make a dive-bombing or a strafing run and you are facing antiaircraft fire, there is practically nothing you can do to make a safer run or deflect the antiaircraft fire. It is simply a matter of chance, and some are lucky and some are not. Fortunately, I was lucky.

I'm occasionally asked how we dealt with the losses of our own men. My answer is that we tried not to think about it. It was a fact of life. I remember standing on the catwalk and watching planes come back from a strike, counting them as they landed and thinking, Where is Charlie? Where is Bob? Then somebody who had been on that flight would tell you that the last time he saw the missing pilot was when he was disappearing into a cloud with an enemy on his tail. But in our reality, losing a pilot was, sadly, a "normal" thing. I tried to put it out of my mind, and I think that is what most of my fellow pilots did. If we hadn't, we wouldn't have been able to do our jobs.

I joined Air Group 15 six weeks after the squadron had disembarked aboard the *Essex*. When the squadron was relieved late in November 1944, 50 percent of its pilots had been lost. When we arrived back in the United States, we were given the choice of staying with Air Group 15 or asking for other duty with another squadron. I elected staying with VF-15. We were assigned to Los Alameda Air Station, which was in the Los Angeles area. We had some new pilots who joined the group who had had no combat experience and we started training together in anticipation of going out with the fleet on another tour of duty. The plan was to attack Japan during that tour, but about the time we were getting ready to ship out, the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and a couple of days later on Nagasaki. To the soldiers and sailors who were getting ready to go out and battle again, and I'm sure to the ones that were already out there, it was without question the right thing to do. There is still conversation today as to

whether we should or should not have dropped those bombs. But if you were going to go back into combat again after having been with a squadron that had lost more than 50 percent of its pilots on its previous tour, there was no question that it was the right decision.

When the war was over, and after thirty-three months in the Navy, I returned to St. Louis and have made my home here ever since. In my time as a fighter pilot, I had thirty-five combat flights and eighty two carrier landings. Combat air patrols and training flights are not counted as combat flights, which is why there is a difference in that number. During my tour of duty; I primarily flew off the USS Essex and also spent a short period on the USS Enterprise. I was involved in campaigns referred to as the Battles of the Philippine Sea, the Battle of Leyte Gulf and in attacks on various other islands in the western Pacific, including Iwo Jima and Okinawa.

In spite of the loss of many of my buddies, my Navy experience was a positive one. It broadened my perspective on the world in general and on lots of things in particular. When I entered the Navy, I was a directionless, callow youth, and when I left I was a mature and confident person. I'm sure the entire experience has had a profound effect on my life, and I know my years in the Navy helped me deal with later problems and opportunities. Looking back, those years were full of experiences that I will never forget.

