

"I had well over 1,000 hours of time in the air before I entered combat. Most of that was as an instrument instructor flying the SNJ. Instrument flying really teaches you the finer points of flying an airplane. It also makes you focus and for some reason I found that it carried over to gunnery work in the Hellcat as well. Every time I got behind a Japanese airplane I was very focused as my bullets tore into them!" —Lin Lindsay

Joining the fight

I joined VF-19 "Satan's Kittens" as one of its founding members in August of 1943. We gathered at Los Alamitos, California, and "Fighting Nineteen" was supplied with a paltry sum of airplanes; an SNJ, a JF2 Duck, a Piper Cub, and a single F6F-3 Hellcat. Most of them were not much to write home about as far as fighters go except of course, the F6F. To me, the Hellcat was a thing of beauty. It was Grumman made and damn near indestructible! As a gun platform it was hard hitting with six .50 caliber machine guns in the wings, bulletproof glass up front and armor protection for the pilot. It was certainly better than anything the Japanese had, especially with self-sealing gas tanks, better radios, better firepower and better trained pilots.





Bad Kitty

VF-19 "Satan's Kittens"
Chew Up the Enemy

BY ELVIN "LIN" LINDSAY, LT. COMMANDER USNR (RET.)
AS TOLD TO AND WRITTEN BY JAMES P. BUSHA

The Zero's light weight contributed to its maneuverability. However, that, combined with the lack of self-sealing tanks, worked against it being able to resist the onslaught of six of John Browning's best. The Hellcat, however, could take it as well as give it. (Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)

Our skipper was Lt. Commander Theodore Hugh Winters, a combat veteran fighter pilot and a great leader. He worked our group up with great skill, and increased our Hellcat numbers as we learned how to fight and survive against the Japanese fighters. We also learned one of our primary purposes; stick with the dive-bombers and torpedo planes while on escort duty. Our sister torpedo and dive-bomber squadrons depended on us to shepherd them in and out of harm's way. Tempting as it was, breaking away from them to add a small Japanese flag to the side of a Hellcat meant that those slow-moving torpedo and dive-bombers were sitting ducks. But once released from escort duty, the Hellcat showed its deadly claws when we finally entered the combat zone.

Baptism of fire

By early July 1944, we were combat ready and VF-19 had its orders; report to the USS *Lexington*. By late July, we were hitting and plastering places with our 500-pound bombs like Guam, Palau, Iwo Jima, and Chi Chi Jima. When the bombs were gone, we dropped down to strafe enemy airfields and gun emplacements. None of it was easy work though as the Japanese still had plenty of anti-aircraft gun emplacements all over the place and they were masters at concealing them.

In early September, we began to hit various targets on the Philippines in preparation for the

landings that would take place later on. Many of my squadron mates began to rack up their scores by shooting down Japanese fighters, bombers, and torpedo planes. Unfortunately, I had to wait my turn until late October. I bagged my first one, a Kate on October 21, as aerial opposition really began to heat up. A few days later, our subs in the area began to notice the remnants of the Japanese fleet sailing south toward the central Philippines, and our intelligence people thought they were going to try and make a stand against our landings on Leyte. The battle of Leyte Gulf took place on October 24 and 25 as our Hellcats, dive-bombers and torpedo planes tore into them.

I was part of a flight of Hellcats that launched off *Lexington* on the 24th as small Hellcat-led search teams were sent out all over the Philippine area to look for targets of opportunity; it didn't take very long to find them. My area of operation was near Clark Field, which had always been a hot bed of Japanese fighters and anti-aircraft guns. We weren't disappointed as the Japanese sent up a welcoming committee of fighters to greet us when we arrived overhead. There were Hellcats zooming, rolling, and diving after all kinds of enemy airplanes as the Japanese made a desperate attempt to stand and fight. I bagged a Tojo, followed by a Val, and then ended up slugging it out and splashing two Zekes before we had to turn for home. Our little group of search-and-

F6F-5 #22 of VF-19 is quickly removed the barricade of the USS *Lexington* CV-16 on October 25, 1944. The Hellcat was hit by flak and its pilot, Ens. Brauer, was wounded during Air Group 19's attack on the Japanese fleet during the Battle of Leyte Gulf. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)



F6F-3 #60 flown by Lt. (jg.) Jim Billo of VF-18 traps on board the USS *Bunker Hill* CV-18 during November 1943. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)



destroy Hellcats claimed 10 that day, with the entire squadron bagging a total of 53. Although I was now officially an ace, things would become a lot hotter the very next day.

Shooting fish in a barrel

On the morning of October 25, our recon flights had detected at least four Japanese carriers and their escort ships steaming south off the northeast coast of Luzon. Vice Admiral Mitscher was in command of our carrier task force with our task group the *Lexington*, *Essex*, *Princeton* and the *Langley*. The previous night he had ordered the throttles opened as we closed the gap on the Japanese fleet. By morning we were a little over 100 miles apart when our bomb-laden Hellcats were launched.

Our 18 Hellcats, all sporting a 500-pound bomb, launched from *Lexington* and joined in a loose formation on a northerly course. There were over 60 other strike aircraft from the other carriers in the air with us as we made our way to destroy what we could of the Japanese fleet. Our flight was ordered to climb to 18,000 feet, and as we got closer, we saw Japanese ships everywhere. What I found amusing, however, was that only three Japanese planes were spotted over their naval armada to guard their battle group below.

What the Japanese lacked in airpower, they made up for it with deck guns as the sky opened up with heavy flak. We spiraled down over cruisers, battleships and Japanese carriers, including the *Zuikaku*, which had participated in the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Commander Winters was more like a traffic cop in his Hellcat as he directed our attacks from his lofty perch placing

us over the selected targets below. I saw bombs falling, columns of water rising with near misses and direct hits as ship after ship began to absorb our wrath. When it was my turn to dive I pushed the Hellcat's nose over and filled my sight with the *Zuikaku*. I released my bomb but never stuck around to see where it hit as I leveled off just above the enemy fleet.

Instead of turning for home and the safety of the *Lexington* our squadron went after the deck guns as we made strafing passes on the ships in hopes of clearing the way for the much slower moving dive bombers and torpedo planes that arrived. With six .50 caliber machine guns in

The saying that "carrier landings cause more stress than combat" was probably true in this case of F6F-3 #10 of VF-2 that suffered an engine failure during its landing approach and crashed into the stern of the USS *Charger* CVE-30 in Chesapeake Bay during 1944. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)





Compared to many aircraft, the Hellcat cockpit was big and comfortable with heavy armor plate protecting the pilot's six o'clock. (Photo by Heath Moffatt/heathmoffattphoto.com)

each Hellcat the firepower was devastating as we clawed away at the deck guns; many of them fell silent. By the time the sun had set that day, Satan's Kittens had been a huge participant in helping to sink three Japanese carriers, along with an assortment of cruisers and battleships. For our diligent work that day many of us received some awards and recognition — but the fighting was far from over.

Lunacy over Luzon

On November 5, VF-19's new skipper, Lt. "Smiley" Boles was killed while on a sweep near Manila. I became the new skipper of VF-19 and on November 6 was given attack orders that called for me to lead a 12-plane Hellcat fighter sweep in the Manila area with our primary target as Nielson Field with a secondary target of Clark Field. We took off and joined up on the inbound course, but within a half an hour our flight was just about reduced in half with Hellcats aborting due to mechanical reasons. For each Hellcat that turned back, his wingman had to peel off as well and shepherd him back to the carrier. It occurred to me that my "broom" was losing much of its sweep! But I was confident that we could go in with only two Hellcats—they were that deadly.

As we neared the huge Cavite Navy base the anti-aircraft fire erupted below. We turned our Hellcats from side to side and never flew straight and level. The huge black flak bursts were so close I wondered out loud if we would make it through. We began to fly a northerly course, losing altitude to stay under the 6,000-foot overcast that was developing in the area as our heads swiveled from side to side always looking. It didn't take us long to find what

Contrary to popular legend, the F6F was already headed for production, when an intact Zero was captured in the Aleutians. However, that aircraft confirmed Grumman's design as being correct. Here Planes of Fame pilot, John Hinton, flies the Friedkin family's Hellcat. (Photo by Paul Bowen)



we had been looking for.

Suddenly, the sky opened up and off to our right were 15 Japanese fighters circling a few miles south of Clark Field. Our Hellcats were at the same altitude as we pushed our throttles forward and went into a slight left turn; we could hit them on their blind side. As I made the turn it hit me, "We were outnumbered by more than 2 to 1; maybe we should break off and climb for altitude. These fighters had 20mm cannon with explosive shells and they are so close to their heavily defended base."

But my fighter pilot training took over as I wobbled my wings, signaling an attack to the rest of my flight. The words of my skipper, Hugh Winters, echoed in my mind, "A good offense is the best defense." Our Hellcats were in an "open out" formation with each Hellcat far enough apart from the other and able to turn and help another plane should it come under attack. As we closed in on the Japanese planes, I knew we had to hold our fire until we were within 300 yards—that gave us the most lethal convergence of our .50 caliber machine guns.

A big red meatball appeared so huge in the pip of my gunsight I moved it forward to his engine from slightly left of his plane. With only a very short burst, maybe 10 rounds per gun—poof! A wild explosion, followed by thick smoke, fire and pieces falling all over the sky. I quickly shifted my attention to another Tojo army fighter and another quick burst with the same explosive outcome. I glanced over at my wingman, Ens. Harvey Tatman, just as he explodes a Zeke. I looked to the other side and see Lt. (jg.) L.D. McLaughlin set fire to a Tony, which crashes seconds later. By the time the Tony hits the deck Ens. J.M. Sassman explodes an Oscar. We had just splashed five of them on the first pass as the odds were becoming more even. The surviving Japanese planes churn



The aces of VF-19 pose on the starboard wing of a squadron F6F-5 Hellcat in the hangar bay of the USS Lexington CV-16 at the conclusion of their combat tour. Clockwise from top left: Ens. Bob Farnsworth (5 kills), Lt. (jg.) Del Prater (8.5 kills), Lt. Bill Masoner (12 kills), Lt. (jg.) Joe Paskoski (6 kills), Lt. Bruce "Willie Mohawk" Williams (7 kills), CDR Hugh Winters CAG-19 (8 kills), Lt. "Lin" Lindsay CO (8 kills), Lt. "Bus" Rossi (6 kills), Lt. Al Seckel (6 kills) and Ens. Paul O'Mara (7 kills). The missing ace, Lt. (jg.) Ed Copeland, scored six kills, but was shot down by flak near Manila. He evaded capture and returned to the squadron on December 31. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)

up the sky and scatter.

I latch onto an Oscar that decides to pull into a loop with hopes of shaking me; it was an easy kill as my rounds tore into him. I look around and count noses; I still have my original flight of six Hellcats as we hunt for the stragglers. I find myself relaxing a little bit as I bend my neck back and casually look up through the top of my canopy; my heart stops. I see the red meatballs first and try to identify the enemy airplane. I recog-



As one of 11 aces with VF-19, Lin Lindsay strikes a pose from his front office. (Photo courtesy of author)

Navy Cross

Commander

Fighting Squadron 19 (VF-19), USS Lexington (CV-16)
(Fighting Squadron 19 (VF-19), USS Lexington (CV-16))

Citation:

"For extraordinary heroism in operations against the enemy while serving as Pilot of a carrier-based Navy Fighter Plane and Flight Leader in Fighting Squadron NINETEEN (VF-19) embarked from the U.S.S. LEXINGTON (CV-16), while assigned to strike major Japanese Fleet Units on 25 October 1944, during the Battle of Leyte Gulf, in the Philippine Islands. Skillfully directing his escort group on a strike against major enemy surface units, Lieutenant Commander Lindsay boldly dived through the intense barrage of hostile anti-aircraft fire and expertly maneuvered his plane to deliver a bombing and strafing attack upon a Japanese aircraft carrier, leaving her burning and in a sinking condition. During the ensuing action, he valiantly led his fighters through anti-aircraft fire to deliver a strafing raid upon a light cruiser. By his brilliant airmanship, indomitable courage and inspiring leadership, Lieutenant Commander Lindsay contributed materially to the infliction of overwhelming damage upon the Japanese Fleet during this Battle. Commander Lindsay's outstanding courage, daring airmanship and devotion to duty were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service."

nize it as a George—a brand-new Japanese fighter and he’s make a damn good overhead run on me!

As he closed on me, his tracers looked as if they were close enough that I could reach out and touch them. I stomped my boot down hard on the right rudder, all that my Hellcat could take hoping she wouldn’t snap roll on me at 180 knots. The skid seemed to do the trick and defiantly saved my life as the George’s bullets passed behind and to the side of me. The George dove straight through our Hellcat flight as we all rolled over in unison and split-ess’d after that guy. The



F6F-3s of VF-19 sit on the flight deck of the USS Lexington CV-16 during an air attack on October 24, 1944, during the Battle of Leyte Gulf. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)

George kept on pouring the coal to his throttle and finally leveled off about 20 feet above a large sugar cane field. Lt. Albert Seckel lobbed a few rounds into his smoking engine as his canopy came off. It was an unbelievable sight as the Japanese pilot tried to bail out at such a ridiculously low altitude. He never had a chance as his body slammed into a lone tree that was standing in the field. The George cut a large swath into the cane field before it blew up.

As we climbed for altitude Ens. R.A. Farnsworth became our “Divine Wind” or kamikaze when an Oscar tried to ram him head on. Farnsworth’s Hellcat bore the brunt and brought back part of the Oscar’s wing that had snapped off and lodged in his Hellcats wing. That was a heck of a way to score a victory and save ammunition!

As we turn for home, low on gas and almost out of ammo we climb to an approximate homeward heading expecting to pick up our usual YE homing signal. The navigation signal is dead; no one is picking it up. None us knew that a kamikaze had hit Lexington while we were gone.

VF-19 Scoreboard

Combat	
Planes destroyed	155
Planes probably destroyed	16
Planes destroyed on the ground	190
Planes damaged on the ground	127
500 lb. general purpose bombs dropped:	247
500 lb. semi-armor piercing bombs dropped	19
350 lb. depth charges dropped	64
.50 caliber rounds fired	680,313
Total sorties	2,071



Awards	
Aces	11
Navy Crosses	16
DFCs	32
Silver Stars	9
Purple Hearts	16
Air Medals	25

With no homing device I resorted to my training and slide the Mark VIII plotting board from under the instrument panel and held my stick between my knees. I begin some very rough navigation and plot that in 46 minutes we should see our carrier. I think I aged 20 years (I was only 25 years at the time) in ¾ of an hour. We finally spotted ships ahead of us and found our Number

16 Lexington sitting on a mirror smooth sea.

Some of the Hellcats were very low on fuel as they fell out first to land. With all of us safely onboard, we scrambled down from our Hellcats and head for the ready room to debrief. It’s a very somber sight when we were told that a Kamikaze dove his bomb-laden plane into the island structure and wiped out 50 men, 11 of them from our air group. The enemy airplane also tore away most of the antennas and communication gear, so we knew why we couldn’t pick up the ships signal.

When we told air group commander Hugh Winters of our great hunting success in almost downing all the Japanese planes we encountered except one or two, the only response the CAG gave was, “Why the hell did you let the others get away!” I just smiled and said, “I’ll have a scotch and water please.” That was my last mission of the war as Lexington pulled out for repairs and VF-19 was sent home. I was reassigned to a Corsair squadron and was on my way back to the war but never made it because the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan. †