



Pilots of VF-2 pose together on June 18, 1944, the day before the Marianas Turkey Shoot. (Photo courtesy of Thomas McKelvey Cleaver)

ESCAPE FROM AGANA HARBOR

WHEN THE OCEAN BECOMES THE ENEMY

BY THOMAS MCKELVEY CLEAVER

On June 6, 1944, while the Allies landed at Normandy, the greatest American combat fleet yet seen in the Pacific sailed from Majuro anchorage. Its goal was the Mariana Islands, 1,800 miles to the north-northwest. Seven heavy fleet carriers and eight light carriers of Task Force 58 under Admiral Marc Mitscher would support 535 ships and 127,000 assault troops in the invasion of Saipan.

Welcome to “the Hornet’s Nest”

Among the carriers was USS *Hornet* (CV-12), with Air Group Two aboard. *Hornet* had arrived in the Western Pacific in late March, commanded by Captain Miles Browning and flying the flag of Rear Admiral J. J. “Jocko” Clark. Air Group Two had suddenly received orders to go aboard *Hornet* on its arrival at Pearl Harbor on March 4, Captain Browning having declared Air Group 15 “unfit for operations.” Ensign Don Brandt, newly arrived in “The Rippers” of Fighting Two, remembered, “The guys from Air Group 15 seemed awfully happy to be getting kicked

off that ship, which seemed rather strange to us.” Air Group Two was entering “the hornet’s nest.”

Miles Browning was one of the chief architects of the carrier strategy developed in the 1930s, and a man whom Ken Glass of Torpedo Two would recall as “the worst officer I ever met in 30 years in the Navy.” Browning was disliked by nearly every officer in the Navy other than Admiral William F. Halsey of the Third Fleet, and had managed to antagonize Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox. After two months in the Western Pacific, Browning had finally gone too far and been relieved the week before departure for the

Marianas. Air Group Two had first experienced combat at the end of April, covering the Hollandia landings in New Guinea, followed by the last Navy strike against Truk. While they had yet to encounter Japanese aircraft, the flyers looked forward to the coming operation.

Opening the Score

The invasion was the most important one to date. With air bases built on the Marianas, the new B-29 Superfortress would be in range of Japan. The Japanese were aware of the result if they lost here, guaranteeing a maximum effort by the Imperial Navy.

The fleet arrived on June 11, 1944. Rather than the traditional dawn strike, the first preinvasion strikes were launched at 1300. While Saipan was the main target, Air Group Two struck the airfields on Guam to keep Japanese land-based air units from responding. Fighting Two's commanding officer, Lieutenant Commander William E. "Bill" Dean, led the sweep, followed 30 minutes later by Helldivers and Avengers. While en route, the CAP (combat air patrol) division over the Hornet led by Lieutenant L. E. "Tex" Harris dispatched three Betty snoopers to open The Rippers' score.

The Orote Peninsula on northwest Guam was the target. Flak was heavy, and two SB2Cs were shot down. Fighting Two's Lieutenant (junior grade) Howard B. "Duffer" Duff Jr., was hit by flak and forced to ditch north of the island. When his wingman, Lieutenant (junior grade) Dan

AS HE OPENED HIS CANOPY TO BAIL OUT, I CALLED TO HIM NOT TO DO SO ... PARACHUTING ONTO SHORE WOULD MEAN CERTAIN CAPTURE AND ALMOST CERTAIN DEATH AT THE HANDS OF THE JAPANESE.

Carmichael, circled to check Duff's condition, Zeros came after him at low level, while others dove on the rest of the formation. In the melee, Carmichael shot down two planes, but when he returned to the crash scene, Duff was gone. In the meantime, Dean had shot down four. Combined with his victory when the squadron was aboard USS *Enterprise* during the Tarawa invasion, he became Fighting Two's first ace. Several future aces began their scores in this flight. Lieutenant Mike Wolf scored three; Ensigns "Irish" Harrigan, Davey Park, Landis "Blood" Doner, and Arthur Van Haren each scored two; and Lieutenant Butch Voris and Ensigns Leroy Robinson, Warren Skon, Lester Sipes, and Lieutenant (junior grade) Charles Carroll scored singles. With a score of 23 in this fight, followed by 10 during a second mission, with nine scored by the CAP, Fighting Two had 52 for the day, a new fleet record. The victories were tempered



by the loss of "Duffer," one of the most popular men in the squadron, known as a pilot with a quick and wicked wit who was always ready to volunteer for tough missions.

On June 12, Japanese fighters again rose to give combat over Guam. Fighting Two scored 11 more,



with two each to "Tex" Harris and Dick Griffin, with Franklin E. Gabriel, Gene Redmond, Ross Robinson, Leroy Robinson, W. L. "Bill" LaForge, Richard B. Blaydes, John L. Banks, and Mike Wolf getting one each. Banks and Wolf also shared an Irving night fighter that they ran across

while inward-bound on the strike. On a second strike, Lieutenant John Searcy was hit by flak, but he managed to ditch and get picked up by the lifeguard submarine USS *Stingray* (SS-186). Lieutenant (junior grade) D. "Demi" Lloyd was shot down and killed.

"Ole 95" was the most reliable and successful TBM-1C in Torpedo 2, flying more missions with fewer aborts than any other airplane in the squadron. (Photo courtesy of Thomas McKelvey Cleaver).

Plane 13—Hour 13—Angels 13

June 13 saw three strikes against Guam. The second found a Japanese convoy of four cargo ships and two destroyers, which were attacked with one cargo ship and the two destroyers left burning. A third strike was flown by volunteers. Air Group Commander J. D. Arnold led the mission,



Ensign Don Brandt of VF-2 arrived as a replacement shortly before Hornet left Majuro for the Marianas invasion. (Photo courtesy of Thomas McKelvey Cleaver)

with Ensign Don Brandt as his wingman. Brandt checked his watch as they approached Orote Point at 1013. "It was 13 minutes after the hour, and I was at 13,000 feet in Hellcat number 13," Arnold remembered. "As we pushed over in a bombing run, antiaircraft fire intensified, and Brandt's plane was hit almost immediately. As he opened his canopy to bail out, I called to him not to do so. I didn't think that he could land in the water from his position, and parachuting onto shore would mean certain capture and almost certain death at the hands of the Japanese, who, we had been briefed, were taking no prisoners."

As Brandt remembered, "I dove to get away from the flak, increasing speed to 360 mph. I was afraid I couldn't get out at that speed, but when I unfastened my harness and slid open the canopy, wind pressure sucked me out immediately." Flung

upside down when the parachute opened because one riser was jammed beneath the backstrap, Brandt struck head first and went under. "I had to pull my knife and slash at the harness to escape to the surface. The 'chute billowed and pulled away, taking my raft with it, then sank as it became waterlogged."

At 1014, Arnold called the Stingray, operating only a few miles offshore, to request it pick up his wingman. He then ordered the dive bombers to hit the shore positions, where there were several large guns that could endanger the submarine. A division of Hellcats strafed a Japanese boat that tried to set out from shore to capture Brandt.

In the water, Brandt managed to inflate his Mae West and discovered that the wind was pushing him away from shore. "I was one unhappy ensign when I saw the planes turn back to the carrier." The Japanese didn't fire at him during the next hour as he drifted in the bay, waiting for his rescuers to arrive.

At 1115, another Hornet strike force appeared overhead, with SB2Cs going after Japanese warships in Agana harbor. Helldiver pilot Lieutenant (junior grade) LeMoyné spotted Brandt and abandoned his attack in order to drop a large raft to Brandt. Stingray's captain, Lieutenant Commander Sam Loomis, learned from radio reports that Brandt was still within range of the guns. The submarine continued her submerged run toward the bay.

Alone in the raft in the middle of harbor, Brandt figured that it would only be a matter of time before the Japanese would send a boat to get him, but he continued paddling toward the harbor entrance. "I knew if the sub was coming, it couldn't pick me up, being this close into shore and in the middle of the harbor."

Fortunately for Brandt, there was a way to be rescued. The Marianas are the product of the collision of two tectonic plates, so the islands have steep drop-offs leading to the Mariana Trench, the deepest place in the ocean. With such deep water close to shore, Stingray could enter directly into Agana harbor submerged.

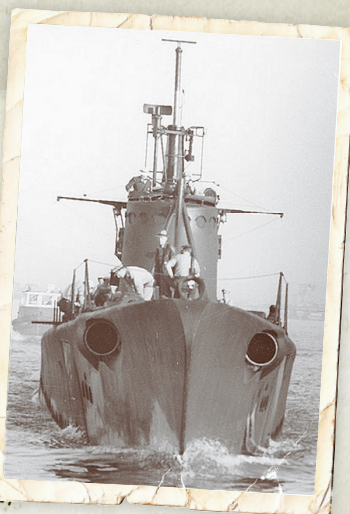
"I suddenly noticed this periscope rise out of the water about two feet high. It slowed to a stop, and I paddled over. I took the life rope on the raft and looped it around the periscope, and we started moving toward the harbor entrance! I later learned the submarine ran in reverse all the way since there wasn't room in the harbor to turn around."

In the meantime, Arnold had quickly refueled and rearmed. He later recalled, "We returned about 1430 and spotted Don still in his raft in middle of the harbor. We commenced runs on the beach to keep their heads down. I was cussing out the skipper of the submarine for his lack of action, then I flew low and realized Don was moving through the water a lot faster than the wind could

13 June 1944

- 0500 On station.
Working toward island.
- 0835 "Chickens" finally arrived.
- 0946 Received word that pilot had landed in chute about 500 yards off AGANA air strip.
- 0950 One of our "Chickens" shoved off to locate pilot. Commenced 40 mile run to designated position. Asked planes over AGANA, in what condition the shore batteries were. Answer came back that there was one dual purpose still in action. Shortly thereafter, word came from our "Chicken" that he was circling downed pilot and undergoing intense AA fire. During our end around OROTE Pt. we asked planes over AGANA if pilot had drifted very far. Our "Chicken" came back with the answer that he was still about 500 yards from the beach and not making much headway. Someone piped up over VHF and said, "Don't tell them that, they'll never go in". Immediately thereafter we received the report that pilot was at least a mile off the beach and drifting nicely.
- 1215 "Chickens" lined us up for approach on pilot.

USS *Stingray* (SS-186) was a prewar "Salmon" class fleet submarine, the first of the new "fleet boats" that would fight World War II. Her war began on December 7, 1941 in Manila Harbor and extended over 16 war patrols between 1941 and 1945, the most war patrols ever by any American submarine. The rescue of Don Brandt occurred on her 11th patrol. With shells exploding on either side, she made four submerged approaches until the pilot was finally able to grab one of the submarine's periscopes and was towed safely clear. (Photo courtesy of Thomas McKelvey Cleaver)



U.S.S. STINGRAY (SS 186)

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Subject: USS STINGRAY - Report of Eleventh War Patrol.

13 June 1944 Cont'd.

- 1436 Heard another closer one.
- 1436 Heard another close shell.
- 1437 1/2 Heard two more.
- 1438 Heard one shell.
- 1440 Heard and saw 2 splashes close aboard.
- 1453 Pilot missed the boat again. On this try, he showed the first signs of attempting to reach periscope. Maybe shell fire has made him think that a ride on a periscope might be all right after all.
- I am getting damned disgusted, plus a stiff neck and a blind eye.
- 1500 Heard another shell.
- 1516 Fourth try. Ran into pilot with periscope and he hung on! 13°-35'N 144°-44'E.
- Towed him for one hour during which time he frantically signalled for us to let him up. His hand was cut badly and it must have been tough going hanging onto the bitter end of the line with one hand while bumping along in the white caps. Making 2 knots. However, at this stage of the game, I wasn't feeling one bit sorry for him.
- 1611 Lowered towing scope, watching pilot's amazed expression with other periscopes.
- 1613 Surfaced.
- 1618 Picked up Ensign Donald Carol BRANDT, A-V(N), U.S.N.R., File No. 315147, suffering from deep wound in left hand. Glad to finally get him aboard. Said that during first and third approaches he was afraid periscopes were going to hit him and he tried to get out of the way and come in astern of them. He had been

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13 June 1944 Cont'd.

- 1227 Shell splash on starboard beam, distance about 400 yards.
- Dived.
- Manned scope as we were going down and saw two splashes dead ahead, about 200 yards.
- Watched TBF drop a rubber boat and had word soon after, that pilot was in boat.
- 1233 Sighted pilot dead ahead. Had to approach from lee or across wind. Velocity 10 - 12 knots.
- 1235 Two shell splashes ahead.
- 1238 Two more splashes and burst of AA near pilot. Can see him ducking in rubber boat.
- 1240 Pilot has sighted us and is waving. Holding up left hand which shows a deep cut across its palm.
- 1303 Approached with about 10' of #1 scope and about 3' of #2 scope out of water. Pilot very close and no signs of line ready for scope. Pilot so close I have lost him in #1 field. Headed directly for him. Missed.
- Posit 13°-33'N 144°-46'E.
- 1319 Three shell splashes on port quarter.
- 1347 Heard shell land close aboard.
- 1349 Heard another close one.
- 1352 Almost on top of pilot. Now, he's paddling away from scope. Missed.
- 1418 Planes commenced bombing AGANA field and shore batteries.
- 1423 Shell splash, about 500 yards.
- 1424 Heard shell splash.

... he showed the first signs of attempting to reach periscope. Maybe shell fire has made him think that a ride on a periscope might be all right after all.

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13 June 1944 Cont'd.

- briefed on periscope rescue procedure; but guess the shock from getting hit at 14,000 feet and falling upside down in his parachute from 12,000 feet was too much. And then the shell fire shouldn't have done him much good either. He's taking quite a running, and taking it well. We're on speaking terms now, but after the 3rd approach on him; I was ready to make him captain of the head.
- 1629 F6F passed overhead with half of its horizontal stabilizer shot away. Said he could make it home.
- 1633 Shell splash about 1500 yards on port quarter.
- 1730 "Chickens" shoved off.
- 1825 Sighted BETTY heading for us, distance about 7 miles.
- Dived.
- 1945 Surfaced.
- Had no word of downed pilots in water, but carried out search, firing rockets at various times thru out the nite.
- June 1944
- 0445 On station.

carry him. I made a second pass and spotted the silhouette of the submarine under him. They were towing him out of the harbor!" Arnold and the others circled to protect the submarine and Brandt, who remembered, "Finally, after what seemed like a very long time to me, we were about three-quarters of a mile offshore and they lowered the periscope, then surfaced and picked me up." Brandt and his friend John Searcy, downed the day before, were reunited aboard *Stingray*. For the next 30 days, they had quite an odyssey in returning to the group. Dropped off at Eniwetok at the end of June, they were able to convince authorities not to return them all the way to Hawaii, and they hitchhiked their way to Majuro and then on to Saipan in an adventure that lasted more than three weeks.

While Brandt was aboard *Stingray*, Fighting Two participated in "the Marianas Turkey Shoot." Over two days, June 18–19, the Imperial Navy lost 433 carrier-based and 200 shore-based aircraft and irreplaceable pilots. Although the Americans didn't realize it at the time, it was the death knell of the Imperial Japanese Navy Air Force. The Rippers' contribution was 115 scored in the two days, making the squadron number two in the fleet after VF-15's "Satan's Playmates" aboard *USS Essex*.

Fighting Saburo Sakai over Iwo Jima

Brandt and Searcy were still aboard *Stingray* when "Jocko" Clark headed his task force north to strike Iwo Jima on June 23 and 24. On the 24th, Fighting Two discovered the Imperial Navy's pilots were still willing to fight. Fifteen Hellcats of VF-2, accompanied by other fighters from the Yorktown, Belleau Wood, and Bataan, headed toward the island in a cloudy sky. When they

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were detected by Japanese radar, 80 Zeros of the Yokosuka Air Group—38 led by the legendary one-eyed ace Saburo Sakai, and the other 42 led by top-scoring ace Kinsuke Muto—took off to intercept.

As strike leader Lieutenant Robert R. Butler spotted Mount Suribachi through a break in the clouds, Muto's 42 Zeros burst out of the clouds, diving on the Hellcats. Muto dove on a section of Grummans and reported flaming both, then went after a third, setting it aflame quickly as he turned into a fourth F6F and set its engine afire. While a veteran like Muto could show what a trained Japanese pilot was capable of, his performance was singular. The rest of the Zero pilots were flying targets for the Americans. Bob Butler flamed three, while "Kid" Lake shot down two and Roy O'Neal

scored three. "Stinky" David, R. G. Shackford, "Tex" Vineyard, and Connie Hargeaves each scored four in the fast-moving fight. Hargeaves, who had not previously seen an enemy airplane, remembered, "The enemy pilots didn't show a lot of skill. I found a flight of four and just worked from tail-end Charlie to the leader without any of them taking any evasive action." He spotted a fifth Zero and opened fire, but as it fell away, Hargeaves was forced to take evasive action against others and was unable to confirm a fifth victory; that would come a few hours later, when he shot down a Nakajima Jill attempting to attack the task group.

Below the clouds, Sakai endeavored to lead his formation in a surprise attack but was surprised by Hellcats appearing out of the clouds. He maneuvered away as the F6Fs fastened on his neophytes and realized his major disadvantage having only one eye, when he momentarily lost sight of the fight. Spotting a formation in the near distance, Sakai flew toward it. He was too close to turn away when he suddenly realized that they were Hellcats. In a fight that became legendary, Sakai proved his superior flying skill, eluding every attack for more than 20 minutes.

As Sakai recalled after the war, "The first Grumman tried to match the turn with me. For just that moment I needed, his underside filled the range finder and I squeezed out a burst. The cannon shells exploded along the fuselage. The next second, thick clouds of black smoke poured back from the plane, and it went into a wild, uncontrolled dive for the sea. At least a half dozen were on my tail as they opened fire. Another left roll—fast! The six fighters ripped past my wing and zoomed in climbing turns to the right. I slammed the throttle on overboost and rolled right. Fifty yards away I opened up with the cannon, watching shells move up the fuselage and disappear into the cockpit. Bright flashes and smoke appeared beneath the glass, and the Hellcat swerved crazily and fell off on one wing trailing a growing smoke plume." The two Hellcats marked Sakai's 63rd and 64th victories, but the fight wasn't over.

As Sakai twisted and turned, never stopping his maneuvers, the F6Fs broke in divisions and sections to come in at the one-eyed ace. After several minutes, Sakai became angry at their clumsy attempts and turned on one division that came at him, attacking them head-on. The leader fell away smoking, but the others were quickly on him. He only escaped by throwing his Zero into a spin and falling into a huge cumulus cloud, where he was suddenly in fear of his life as the thunderstorm shook him. He gained precious seconds to get away, while the Hellcat pilots thought they had gotten him.



The Navy's Leading Fighter Squadron

The Rippers scored 67 victories on June 24, just short of Fighting 15's record 68 1/2 on June 19. They had now scored 187 since June 11, making VF-2 the Navy's leading fighter squadron at the moment, with a faster rate of victories than any other. The squadron had suffered one loss, Lieutenant (junior grade) Conrad Elliott, shot down by a Zero. Given that Muto and Sakai were the only pilots known to have scored, one was the victor.

After a quick turnaround at Eniwetok, Admiral Clark returned to Iwo Jima with a strike on July 3. Fifteen Fighting Two pilots, led by Bill Dean and including Hargeaves, met a force of Zeros north of Iwo Jima and returned with claims for 33. On July 5, as the fleet departed, Sakai was ordered to lead the 10 surviving Zeros to escort the 10 surviving Jills in an attack on the American fleet. He considered it a death sentence because the weather was such that he doubted that his pilots could survive. They were intercepted by the American CAP which shot down all the Jills and seven of the Zeros. Sakai led his two wingmen back to Iwo Jima, where they were issued rifles in expectation of a coming invasion.

Brandt and Searcy returned to the squadron on July 23. After hitching a ride to Saipan, they spotted a Hornet TBF on Isley Field and were taken back to the ship. The Hornet subsequently

launched strikes over the Lesser Carolines on July 25. Forty aircraft were spotted on Yap and strafed. The task group then struck the Bonins on August 4–5 without aerial opposition. Hornet and her task group dropped anchor in Eniwetok on August 7, having completed the most successful carrier sweep yet.

Halsey Sweeps the Philippines

At the end of August, Air Group Two, now led by Admiral Halsey, put in its final month of combat as Task Force 38 shredded Japanese air power in the Philippines. During the wild battles over Luzon and the central Philippines, Don Brandt scored five victories to become one of the 28 aces spawned by Fighting Two, a testament to Dean's tactics and leadership. After the war, Connie Hargeaves recalled, "Commander Bill Dean could have been a very high-scoring pilot had he taken all the flights when opposition was anticipated. But he always tried to keep the scores for all his pilots as even as possible, not catering to a favored few, as some of the other fighter-squadron skippers did. Often, Bill took assignments for the combat air patrol or bomber escort instead of leading all the fighter sweeps. That gave us all an opportunity to get into action. Thus, Fighting Two produced 28 aces in our one tour of duty, a Navy record that still stands." ✚

This restored Hellcat is one of four still able to fly 70 years after the great battles of the Pacific War. (Photo by Bill Crump)