

FLYING EARLY WARNING FOR TASK FORCE 77

By Jack Sauter

We were wiped out. It was June 1953 and our flight was nearly over. For four long hours, the two of us had sat immobile, tightly jammed into the cramped confines of an AD-4W Skyraider's rear compartment. Gazing intently at a five-inch radar scope, straining to pick out air targets as sweep followed endless sweep, our eyeballs were ready for overhaul and repair. Once airborne, there was no stretching or standing. We were literally locked in, unable to shift position.

It seemed as if every bone ached. The constant weight of a crash helmet, .38 revolver and the ubiquitous "Mae West" with myriad ornaments pulled on our necks and shoulders like yokes on beasts of burden. Headaches came with the territory—the roar of the nearly 3,000-horsepower engine and its accompanying vibration took a toll.

We had launched in the predawn darkness at 0500. Now, at 0840, the sun had come up, but our curtains concealed the light. Our radar clearly showed the main body of Task Force (TF) 77 steaming below: *Princeton* (CVA 37), *Boxer* (CVA 21), *Philippine Sea* (CVA 47) and our own home away from home, *Lake Champlain* (CVA 39). The only illumination was the faint reflection from the scopes, bathing us in an eerie gray glow. Soon, we would secure the radar and prepare to land on board *Champ* in the Sea of Japan, with one more airborne early warning (AEW) flight to enter in our logbooks.

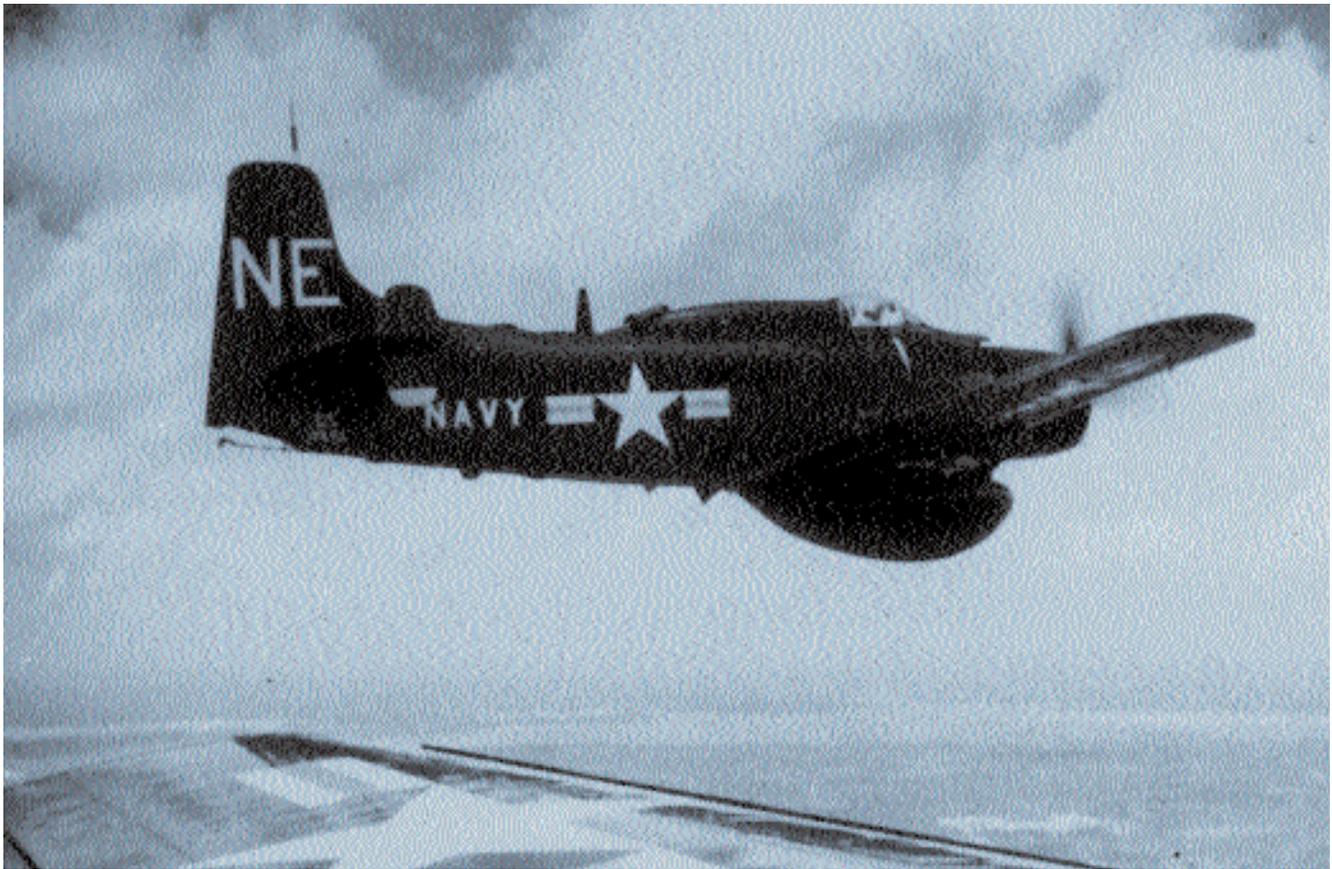
Flying from the carriers of TF 77, a few radar planes were all that stood between security and surprise from the air. For every day of that 37-month "Forgotten War," AEW was the fleet's first line of defense. The vital need for carrier-borne AEW became evident during WW II. Waves of Japanese kamikazes, flying just above the water, would often overwhelm the picket destroyers designed to warn the fleet, and then hit the carriers before fighters could be launched. Shipborne radar had little effect against low-flying aircraft.

In the 1940s, General Electric developed APS-20, a relatively long-range airborne radar that the Navy first mounted in TBM Avengers. Later, the AD-3W and AD-4W took over this mission when composite squadrons,

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Right, this photo taken by an F2H-2P Banshee from VC-62 shows an AD-4W (foreground), with the author on board as an aviation electronics technician, in the company of an AD-4N from VC-33. The ships of TF 77 can be seen in the distance.





Above, a VC-12 AD-4W flies near NAS Quonset Point, R.I., in October 1951. The bulbous structure under the aircraft's belly housed the search radar's antenna. Below, Jack Sauter's first deck launch was from *Midway* (CVA 41) in September 1952.

VC-22 on the West Coast and VC-12 on the East Coast, were entrusted with the important role. Neither of these squadrons went to sea as a unit; they sent teams to every fleet carrier. VC-12 embarked AEW units aboard *Leyte* (CVA 32), *Bon Homme Richard* (CVA 31) and *Lake Champlain*, each comprised of 3 ADs, about 5 pilots and 30 men. What made the units unique was the nearly exclusive use of enlisted aircrewmembers to interpret the radar and then vector the combat air patrol (CAP) aircraft to intercept the target. All of these controllers were aviation electronics technicians.

If it appeared unusual to employ enlisted personnel for such a critical task, there was a simple reason. Carrier-based AEW was developed at a time of great military austerity just after WW II, and there weren't enough

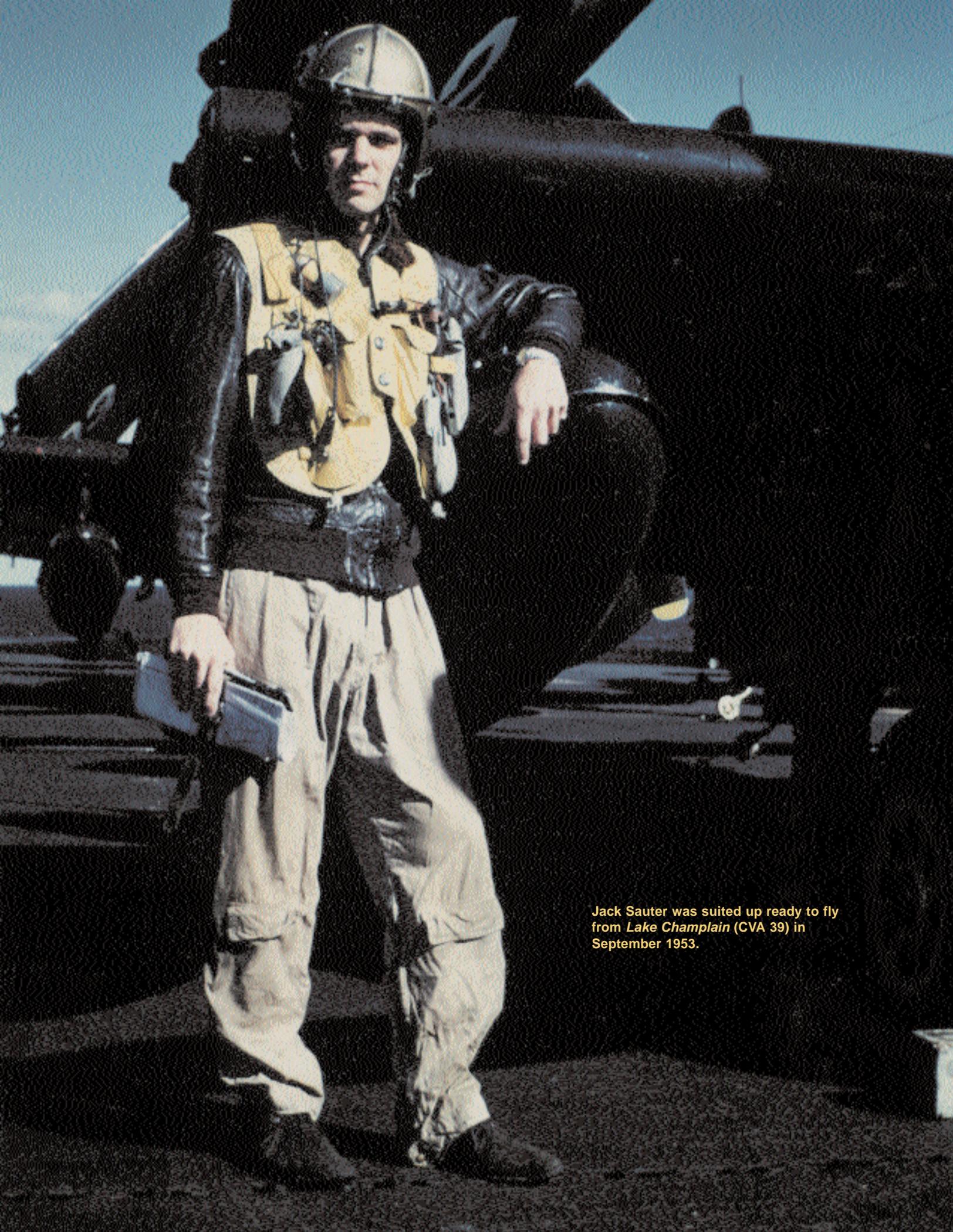


officers either available or interested in the program. The responsibility thrust on these aircrewmembers was tremendous, but as they had done in the past, all rose to the challenge.

At that time, carriers were considered at great risk when operating within the range of land-based bombers. The Korean littoral proved the urgent necessity of airborne early warning. Starting with *Valley Forge* (CV 45) in July 1950, up to the later norm of four *Essex*-class CVs on the line, the AD-4Ws were invaluable. Since this modified version of

the Skyraider had two crewmen seats in the rear compartment, and we often flew with only one operator in order to save our eyes, sometimes this meant carrying a passenger. Generally, it was one of our pilots or chiefs becoming familiarized with the radar, but in some

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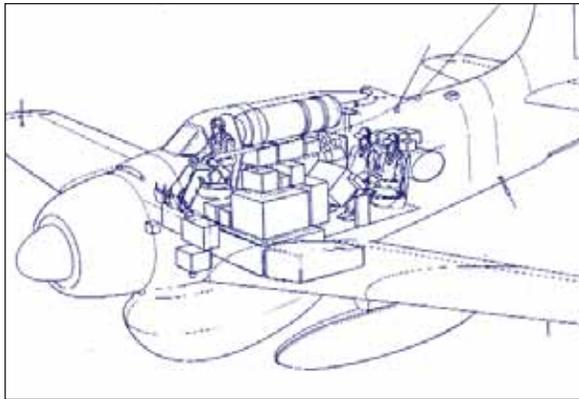


Jack Sauter was suited up ready to fly from *Lake Champlain* (CVA 39) in September 1953.

instances it was a high-ranking officer getting in his flight time.

On one mission I had the Chief of Staff to Commander Carrier Division 1, a four-striper. That day consisted of flying a 50-mile circle around the task force perimeter and plotting all air and surface targets. The captain was very inquisitive. Had I ever picked up any bandits? No. Did I find it difficult to interpret this five-inch screen, hour after hour with no relief? You bet! Then he turned to me and said with great seriousness, "I came along today to see for myself just how good our AEW was.

I've always been uneasy about the Chinese. Ever since they surprised [General Douglas] MacArthur in November 1950 and nearly threw us into the sea, I have had the feeling that they might pull another surprise attack—this one on Task Force 77. If that happens, you



Above, this diagram of an AEW AD shows the location of the radar operator and his relief located apart from the pilot in the fuselage behind the wing. Below, a flight of F2H-2 Banshees streaks over Lake Champlain (CVA 39) in a photo taken by an accompanying destroyer of TF 77 in July 1953.

and a few other radarmen could be the most important people in this whole fleet."

I don't consider myself a top controller (I was primarily a technician, but we all doubled up), but if the Chinese ever sent a large force of bombers against us, I figured even I could track that.

The possibility of a bomber attack on TF 77 was often a topic of conversation in the ready room. The Chinese planes were of WW II vintage, but then so were our ships and many of our aircraft. I often think that Korea should be called the "Secondhand War." *Lake*

Champlain, just out of mothballs, had come over from Norfolk, Va., with F3D-2 Skyknight jets, but they were ruining the flight deck. They were replaced by F4U-5N Corsairs, which were more practical for the war being fought in Korea.



An interesting theory was bandied about. Since the introduction of MiG fighters into the air war, our planes could chase them to the Yalu border but no further. Those were the current rules of engagement laid down to avoid expanding the conflict, but this stricture was very unpopular with our fighter pilots. However, many of the officers felt that perhaps it was this very limitation that had kept the Chinese from launching an attack on us. Their MiGs enjoyed a “Manchurian sanctuary”—perhaps the Sea of Japan was ours. Considering the havoc our air groups were wreaking on enemy supply lines and installations, one could imagine the pressure being brought to bear in Peking to seriously damage that capability. Fortunately for us, TF 77 was left undisturbed.

During my 21 missions we often vectored CAP aircraft, usually a Skyraider or Corsair, to investigate unidentified air or surface targets. In every instance, they turned out to be our own planes or a Japanese transport off course. Once, one of our AD-4Ws picked up a surfaced submarine in international waters, apparently tracking our ships, but again the rules of engagement precluded any attack.

The only threat to TF 77 occurred on 26 July 1953, the night before the truce was signed. Many bogies were seen closing on the force and we all went to general quarters. Aircraft, including one of ours, were launched, but whatever was out there disappeared before our planes got close.

If our missions appeared mostly dull and tedious, that was true. On the other hand, carrier flight operations were anything but dull, especially on straight-deck CVs or at night. During one predawn launch, an AD-4N from VC-33 was the victim of a cold cat shot that effectively dropped the plane just in front of our speeding carrier. The pilot and two aircrewmen only narrowly missed being turned into mincemeat by the four screws as the ship was deftly maneuvered around them.

Once in life rafts, the aircrew attempted to signal our plane guard destroyer with their WW II-vintage flares. The first five fizzled, but fortunately the last one ignited and the crew was soon drinking brandy on board a

destroyer. Seeing this, one of our aircrewmen became very concerned about the unreliable flares. He convinced our parachute rigger to give him another dozen, along with a heavy-duty flashlight. He felt quite confident, but we told him he wouldn't have to worry about being picked up if he ditched. Once he hit the water, he'd sink like a rock!

After flying long missions, we were often pressed into service maintaining the very radio and radar gear we had just employed. The Navy got more than its money's worth out of the aircrewmen! Despite the long hours, hot and uncomfortable compartments, enormous

burden and general lack of recognition, none of us would have traded places. Looking back, I think each of us exhibited the skills, dedication and resolve necessary to locate the targets and keep all of our electronic equipment in top form. In the end, that's what counted.

One of the best things about the Navy was that it taught you quickly, it taught you well and it taught you all the time.

Suddenly, you

woke up with a tremendous responsibility, not only for your own aircraft but for the lives and planes you sent across the ocean. Flying early warning missions positioned us on the cutting edge of the task force and charged us with its safety. What better duty can an airdale ask for?

Compared to the sleek F9F Panthers and F2H Banshees, or the heavily armed and ordnance-laden Skyraiders and Corsairs, we certainly weren't glamorous. Our team leader was the lowest ranking skipper in the air group, our planes were slow and ungainly, and we carried no bombs, rockets or machine guns. But aboard each carrier, we were indispensable. I don't think I'd be stretching a point to say that the AEW teams in Korea could have neatly filled Winston Churchill's description of his airmen in the Battle of Britain when he said, “Never before have so many depended on so few.” ✈

Jack Sauter was an aviation electronics technician during the Korean War. More of his recollections can be found in his book, *Sailors in the Sky*:



Jack Sauter revisits an AD in Pensacola Fla., in October 1999.