

Fleet Carrier Combat Operations, 1943 to

Compiled by Steven Hill

Following the campaign at Guadalcanal, the United State Navy was able to accomplish two important tasks – tasks that were vital to the defeat of the Japanese Navy. First, it reorganized the carrier air groups. The redundancy of having to separate squadrons flying the same aircraft type was not necessary, so carrier-based scouting squadrons (VS) were first redesignated as bombing squadrons (VB) and were then disestablished. Meanwhile, to solve the fighter shortage, the complement of fighter aircraft in the air groups was increased to 36 planes per squadron. Second, new types of aircraft and aircraft carriers were introduced to the fleet. The new carrier-based air superiority fighter, the Grumman F6F-3 *Hellcat*, began replacing the F4F *Wildcat*, and deployment of the new *Essex*-class fleet carriers and *Independence*-class light carriers made up for the loss of the prewar carriers *Lexington* (CV 2), *Yorktown* (CV 5), *Wasp* (CV 7) and *Hornet* (CV 8).

With reorganized air groups, new carriers and improved aircraft, the United States Navy was prepared to begin an offensive that would eventually lead to the very heart of the Empire of Japan – Tokyo.





1944

SBD-5 Dauntless dive-bombers of VB-16 embarked aboard Lexington (CV 16) proceed to their target on Saipan during the invasion of the Marianas Islands, June 14, 1944.



50 Years Ago – WWII

Sep 18: A three-carrier task force (RAdm. C. A. Pownall), attacked Tarawa, Makin and Abemama atolls in the Gilbert Islands.

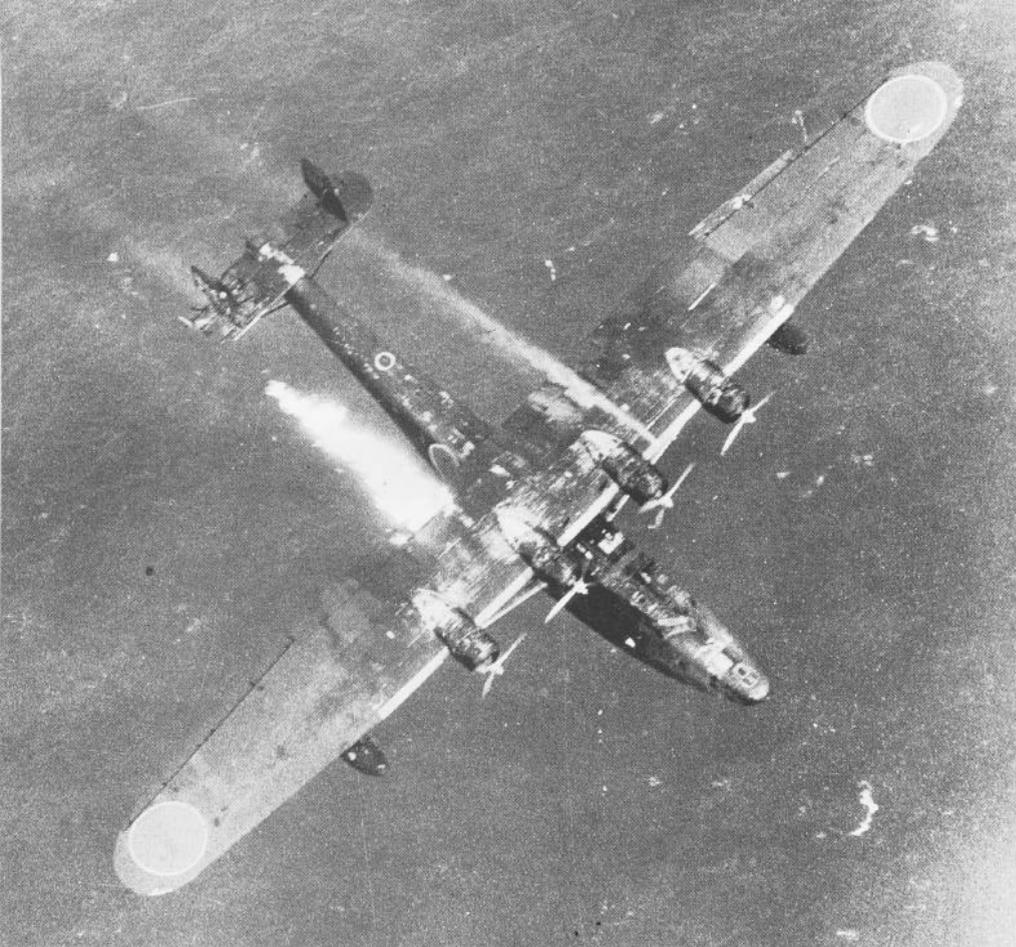
Oct 1: The authorized complement of fighters in *Essex*-class carrier air groups was raised, increasing the total aircraft normally aboard to 36 VF, 36 VB and 18 VT. The authorized complement for CVL groups was established at the same time as 12 VF, 9 VB and 9 VT, revised in November 1943 to 24 VF and 9 VT and remained at that level throughout the war.

Oct 5-6: Second Wake Raid – Task Force 14 (RAdm. A. E. Montgomery), composed of 6 new carriers, 7 cruisers and 24 destroyers – making it the largest carrier task force yet assembled – bombed and bombarded Japanese installations on Wake Island. During the two-day strikes, ship handling techniques for a multicarrier force, devised by RAdm. F. C. Sherman's

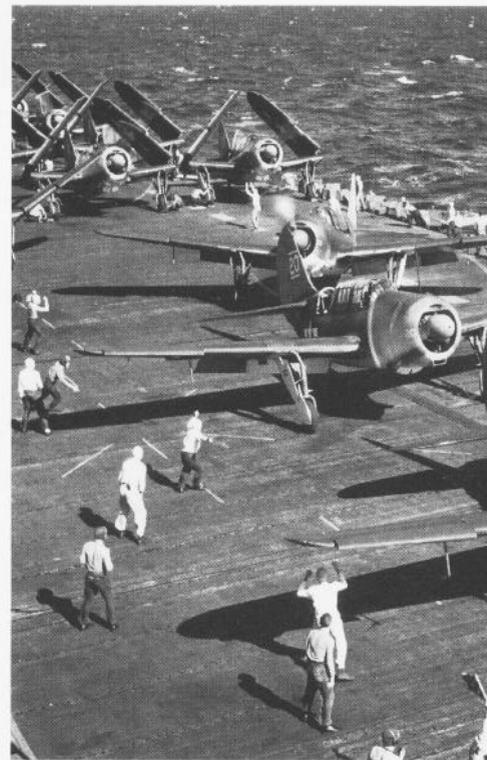
staff on the basis of experience in the South Pacific, were tested under combat conditions. Lessons learned from operating the carriers as a single group of six as two groups of three, and as three groups of two, provided the basis for many tactics which later characterized carrier task force operations.

Oct 16: The Navy accepted its first helicopter, a Sikorsky YR-4B (HNS-1), at Bridgeport, Conn., following a 60-minute acceptance test flight by LCdr. F. A. Erickson, USCG.

Oct 31: Lt. H. D. O'Neil of VF(N)-75, operating from Munda, New Georgia, destroyed a "Betty" during a night attack off Vella Lavella – the first kill by a radar-equipped night fighter of the Pacific Fleet. Maj. T. E. Hicks and TSgt. Gleason from VMF(N)-531 provided ground-based fighter direction.



A Kawanishi H6K5 Navy Type 97 flying boat, code-named Mavis, under attack by a Navy patrol bomber of VB-109, May 7, 1944. Encounters such as these were also common for Grumman F6F Hellcats flying Combat Air Patrols (CAP) in support of the carrier task force.



SB2C-1 Helldivers of VB-8 aboard Bunker Hill (CV 17) are preparing to launch in support of the invasion of the Mariana Islands, June 14, 1944. The Helldiver, replacement for the Douglas SBD Dauntless, was never as well liked as its predecessor and was soon dubbed the "Beast" by the crews who flew it.



Torpedoes intended for VT-2 TBM Avengers are pushed in front of a VB-2 SB2C Helldiver aboard Hornet (CV 12) in preparation for an anti-ship strike.



A Japanese freighter is struck by a torpedo during an antishipping strike. The torpedo's wake is visible in the foreground.

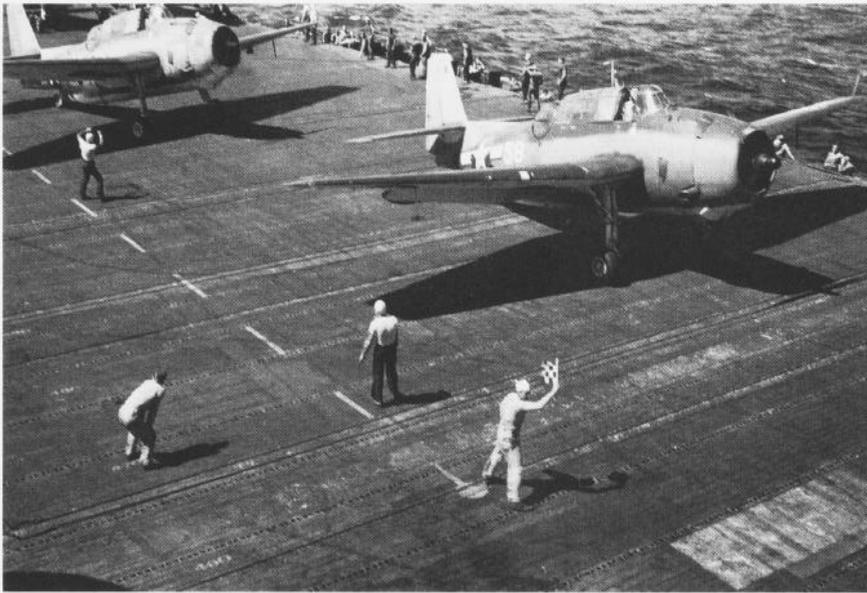


Avenger 86, a TBM-1C assigned to Hornet (CV 12), flies above the task force during the invasion of the Mariana Islands, June 1944.



Lt. Harry "Mule" Mueller, VF-1, is about to engage the barricade aboard Yorktown (CV 10). The Hellcat suffered a tailhook failure following the July 24 raid on the Bonin Islands.





TBM-1C Avengers get the signal to launch during combat operations somewhere in the Pacific. Squadron and ship are unknown.



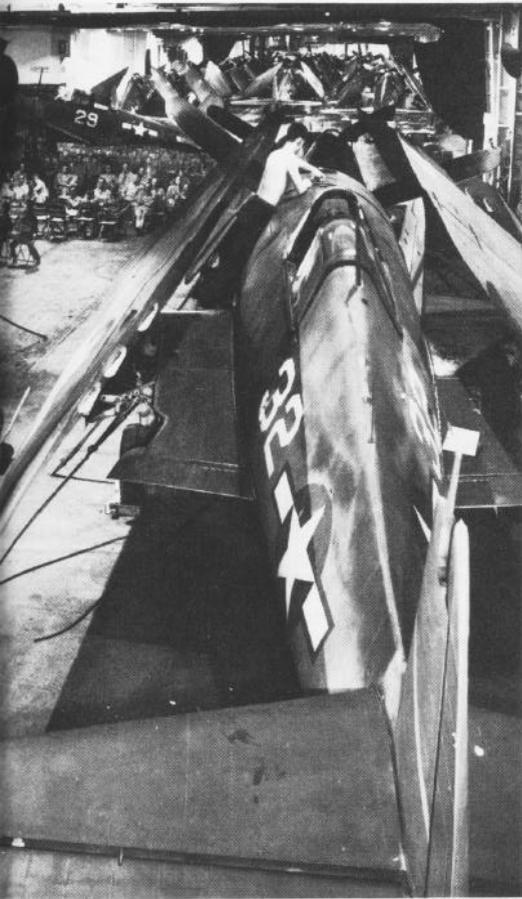
Ordnancemen service 1,000-pound bombs on the hangar deck of Yorktown amidst Hellcats of VF-5, while off-duty officers and men watch a movie in the background.



A very special Hellcat undergoes maintenance while aboard Essex (CV 9), July 30, 1944. This F6F is the personal aircraft of Cdr. Dave McCampbell, Commander of Air Group 15. McCampbell is considered the Navy's highest scoring ace of WW II, being credited with the destruction of 38 Japanese aircraft in aerial combat. Unlike the Air Force, the Navy has never published an official list of its aces.

F6F-3 Hellcats of VF-16 fill the flight deck of Lexington (CV 16), November 1943.





VB-10 SBD-5 Dauntlesses form up over Enterprise (CV 6) bound for the Caroline Islands, March 29, 1944.



VF-1 Hellcats embarked aboard Yorktown (CV 10) escort strike aircraft during combat operations, June 1944.



A view to a kill. A Zuikaku-class aircraft carrier receives a bitter pounding by Navy strike aircraft during the Battle of Leyte Gulf, October 25, 1944. Three light carriers and one fleet carrier, the Zuikaku, were lost by the Japanese during the battle. Zuikaku was the last veteran of the raid on Pearl Harbor at the time of her loss.