

A Tale of Two Warriors

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The information and illustrations for this essay were gleaned from a few books and a lot of web sites. If the author had pulled it all from one source, it would be called plagiarism. But since I used a bunch of resources, it's called research. I invite readers to find two books listed at the bottom and run down any of the ship and plane references on the internet where there is a wealth of information about everything from typhoons to torpedoes. This is a story about two American Presidents who served with distinction in World War II. They would never have called themselves part of "The Greatest Generation" as Tom Brokaw's book proclaimed and many have repeated. They were young men who saw their duty to their country and performed it with honor. They were not war lovers. They served their nation and moved on to distinguished careers that culminated in the Presidency.

Introduction

Photo # 80-G-701512 Carriers Saratoga, Enterprise, Hornet & San Jacinto at Alameda, 1915



They were called Jeep Carriers. Two Presidents served aboard them. Here, with three far larger ships, CV-3, CV-6 and CV-12, is the tiny CVL-30, USS San Jacinto. The new "CVL" class was born of the exigency of war. First built (or rather rebuilt mostly on light cruiser hulls) to ship a squadron of ASW aircraft ... usually little Grumman F4Fs ... to scout for Atlantic convoys as far-reaching submarine spotters. Proving their worth, these ships were built by the dozen and found their way to Pacific fleet service. By

October, 1942, the US Navy had lost six of her eight Pacific carriers including the Hornet (CV-8) for which the Essex-class fleet boat, CV-12 in this photo, berthed nearest San Jacinto, was renamed. In the later stages of the Pacific campaign, these small carriers catapult launched, and recovered the Navy's largest ship-borne aircraft, the Grumman TBF Avenger. To this and the USS San Jacinto, we will return. (I shy away from MacArthur's expression, "I shall return.")

1

Lt jg Gerald R. Ford



Just a notch above Ensign, Lieutenant Junior Grade Jerry Ford jumps, bare-chested and facing camera, in a shirts-skins pickup basketball on CVL-26, the USS Monterey. A graduate of the University of Michigan and two-time All-American football player, for a two-time national championship squad, he was certainly equipped to play a little hoops, right on the elevator, lowered to the hanger deck of his ship. On a sunny day in the South Pacific far from harm's way.



But harm came to the Monterey in the form of a famous typhoon that swamped several vessels and killed hundreds of sailors. CVL-26 pitched and bobbed like a cork and planes stowed below on that hangar deck tore from their moorings and crashed into each other and adjacent bulkheads, severing gas tanks and spewing av gas everywhere.

A huge fire erupted and in the teeth of the storm, Admiral Halsey ordered the captain and his crew to abandon ship. Captain Ingersoll thought otherwise and Jerry Ford led the fire control parties into the inferno first to rescue the injured and then to fight the flames which, in time they overcame. Relays of sailors entered the fire-swept hanger deck but Lt. Ford stayed throughout and until the fires were extinguished.

USS Monterey came through when many other ships foundered and sank. Without the courage of a young, junior officer and the teams of sailors he directed, she would have been abandoned. As it was, she was so badly damaged that she was written off the active roles for the rest of the war. You have probably never heard about the future President's role because it was not in Jerry Ford's nature to see himself as a hero. But we can ... and should.

3 Grumman TBF-3 'Avenger'



The United States Navy found itself, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, by outstanding aircraft and experienced pilots, with an obsolete and totally hopeless torpedo bomber which was aptly named the "Devastator" because that is what happened to her crews. John Waldron's famous "Torpedo-8" squadron, flying off the USS Hornet (CV-8) at the Battle of Midway, was totally destroyed ... all sixteen aircraft ... without scoring a single hit. There was one survivor, Ensign George Gay, out of 48 aviators. Grumman already had the answer to that dreadful machine in the TBF-3.

The designers started with a monstrous, 1,900 HP, Wright Cyclone, 14-cylinder radial engine to lift a far larger plane with far superior performance, payload, range and defensive armament. Significant were two rear-firing .50 caliber machine guns, the top mounted in an electrically driven turret. The Avenger, like Grumman's famous shipboard fighters, employed a unique, side-folding wing design which allowed more aircraft to be stowed either on the flight deck or below. And, unlike the lumbering Devastator, she carried her torpedo or other ordnance inboard, in a bomb bay, or under-

wing. Like other far-sighted Grumman designs, the Avenger served throughout the war and well beyond ... flying in the colors of many nations. As noted earlier, the TBF was the United States Navy's largest ship-borne aircraft of World War II.

The Grumman engineers never intended their beefy bomber to serve aboard the little CVLs, the jeep carriers. Though they employed steam catapults, they were far slower than the fleet boats of the Essex class and so, even steaming into the wind, they could not generate the same wind over the deck to help lift a heavily loaded plane, with a crew of three, into the air. Far worse, that lack of steaming speed reduced the wing lift of the big Avengers as they approached the tiny, often pitching deck, to land.

4

Lt jg George H. W. Bush



Nevertheless, this was the airplane (and crew) that George H. W. Bush piloted. He was, at the time of his graduation from flight training, the youngest pilot in the United States Navy. After he rotated to the little USS San Jacinto, he flew fifty-six missions from that ship. Few were milk runs ... easy, undefended targets.

His last target was an island named Chichi Jima, about 100 miles north of far more famous Iwo Jima. Though the island was larger than her southern neighbor, the Empire of Japan never considered building airfields on this little group of steep mountains, jutting out of the sea. Still the Japanese garrison was larger and occupied Chichi Jima longer than Iwo because it became the Emperor's Navy's primary radio communications center long before Pearl Harbor. The island's powerful radio facilities connected Tokyo with ships and garrisons across the whole Pacific. As such, it was identified and

monitored by American listening posts as far away as Dutch Harbor, Alaska, (The author adds a third book to the bibliography to indicate Chichi Jima's critical tactical, if not strategic importance to America's war planners.) Because of its importance to the Japanese Navy, the craggy island was heavily (and successfully) defended by anti-aircraft crews and weapons, large and small, until the end of the war. Marines who studied the island after the war said that taking Iwo was a daunting task but taking Chichi Jima was absolutely impossible.

Photo # 80-G-284708 Arming a TBM with a torpedo aboard USS San Jacinto, 25 October 1944



Returning to my subject, Lt. Bush, hauling his big Avenger off the San Jacinto and returning aboard *just once* was no mean feat. For all the Navy's efforts, Chichi Jima was never subdued ... surrendering only after the war was over. In the meantime, George Bush Sr. left the San Jacinto fifty-six times and returned fifty-five. His last missions were flown with four 500 lb. bombs against that island. On his last, off CVL-30, he glided in, through a blizzard of AA fire to hit those radio facilities. His plane was hammered and set afire.

Still, he bored in and dropped his bombs before veering away and wrestling his crippled Avenger in a crabbing, sideways attitude to allow his two crewmen clear air to open the hatch and get out before he did. Neither he nor anyone else ever saw his radioman or gunner again. Waiting as long as he could, he finally dove out of the crippled bomber, striking a trailing surface before his parachute deployed. With his head bleeding from that blow, he drifted to the ocean, just four miles from his Japanese-held, island target while his Avenger exploded before it hit the water.

To finish the story of our 41st President's last combat mission, his squadron mates dropped a raft and strafed boats leaving the island to capture him, before departing and radioing a picket sub, which rescued him after four hours in the drink.

Neither of these gentlemen ever thumped their chests, on numerous campaign trails, about their World War II service to their country. But their courage under pressure

exemplifies the best that a generation of men and women had to offer to their nation when IT was under its greatest pressure.

Sources

HALSEY'S TYPHOON, Bob Drury & Tom Clavin, Atlantic Monthly Press, NY, 2007

Typhoon Cobra caught Admiral Halsey's fleet off guard in October, 1944. Several destroyers, very low on bunker oil, were tossed around, capsized and sank with great loss of life. It is a troubling tale but great background for Jerry Ford's story because USS Monterey was buffeted by that same storm. With gasoline fires raging from stem to stern on the hangar deck, Admiral Halsey ordered Captain Ingersoll to abandon his ship. He chose not to. His young officer played large and hazardous part in saving ship and crew.

FLYBOYS, James Bradley, Little, Brown & Co., Boston, 2001

By the same author as FLAGS OF OUR FATHERS, this book tells the sad tale of eight American flyers who were shot down and plucked from the waters around Chichi Jima by the Japanese. By war's end, all eight had been executed by their captors. George Bush Sr.'s exploits and aviation career, and his candid comments about shipmates and missions, are sprinkled throughout this volume.

DAY OF DECEIT, Robert Stinnett, Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, NY, 2000

Worth a look because it identifies Chichi Jima as a critical communications hub for the Japanese Navy which explains why the US Navy expended so many men and planes trying to knock it out. We never did. This book, by a patient and thorough researcher, records the shameful cover-up of FDR and his planners successful efforts to goad the Japanese into attacking us before we struck at them. While all the intelligence, gathered by cracking both diplomatic and naval ciphers, was forwarded to General MacArthur and Admiral Hart in Manila much of the most critical information was denied to General Short and Admiral Kimmel in Honolulu. While most expose-type stories are crap, this is a beaut.

Wikipedia/Amazon/Google

Google worked for general searches, Amazon let me peek at their books and Wikipedia is terrific on aircraft young, old and older (like the author).

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Indiana Soldiers and Sailors Research Website
Uniting grave photos with families

<http://fizkid.tripod.com/>