

A DAWN LIKE THUNDER

THE TRUE STORY OF
TORPEDO SQUADRON EIGHT

ROBERT J. MRAZEK



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The Deadly Embrace

Unholy Fire

Stonewall's Gold

For my son,

1st Lieutenant James Nicholas Mrazek, U.S. Army,
1st Battalion, 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment,
Forward Operating Base-ISKAN, Iskandariah, Iraq
(2006–2007)

They did their share.

“An’ the dawn comes up like thunder. . .”

Rudyard Kipling

“Many men who never received mention
gave everything they had — they’re still out there.”

Gregory Boyington (USMC)

“Below the sea of clouds lies eternity.”

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Ensign William Robinson Evans Jr., age 23

Pilot, Torpedo Squadron Eight

Norfolk, Virginia

December 7, 1941

My dear family,

What a day — the incredulousness of it all still gives each new announcement of the Pearl Harbor attack the unreality of a fairy tale. How can they have been so mad? Though I suppose we have all known it would come sometime, there was always that inner small voice whispering — no, we are too big, too rich, too powerful, this war is for some poor fools somewhere else. It will never touch us here. And then this noon that world fell apart.

Today has been feverish, not with the excitement of emotional crowds cheering and bands playing, but with the quiet conviction and determination of serious men settling down to the business of war. Everywhere little groups of officers listening to the radio, men hurrying in from liberty, quickly changing clothes, and reporting to battle stations. Scarcely an officer seemed to know why we were at war and it seemed to me there is a certain sadness for that reason. If the reports I've heard today are true, the Japanese have performed the impossible, have carried out one of the most daring and successful raids in all history. They knew the setup perfectly — got there on the one fatal day — Sunday — officers and men away for the weekend or recovering from Saturday night. The whole thing was brilliant. People will not realize, I fear, for some time how serious this matter is, the indifference of labor and capital to our danger is an infectious virus and the public has come to think contemptuously of Japan. And that I fear is a fatal mistake. Today has given evidence of that. This war will be more difficult than any war this country has ever fought.

Tonight I put away all my civilian clothes. I fear the moths will find them good fare in the years to come. There is such a finality to wearing a uniform all the time. It is the one thing I fear — the loss of my individualism in a world of uniforms. But kings and puppets alike are being moved now by the master — destiny.

It is growing late and tomorrow will undoubtedly be a busy day. Once more the whole world is afire — in the period approaching Christmas it seems bitterly ironic to mouth again the timeworn phrases concerning peace on earth — goodwill to men, with so many millions hard at work figuring out ways to reduce other millions to slavery or death. I find it hard to see the inherent difference between man and the rest of the animal kingdom. Faith lost — all is lost. Let us hope tonight that people, all people throughout this great country, have the faith to once again sacrifice for the things we hold essential to life and happiness. Let us defend these principles to the last ounce of blood — but then above all retain reason enough to have “charity for all and malice toward none.” If the world ever goes through this again — mankind is doomed. This time it has to be a better world.

*All my love,
Bill*

Introduction

Following its devastating attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese Empire embarked on one of the most stunning military campaigns in world history, conquering the American-held Philippines, the mighty British fortress of Singapore, Java, Malaya, the oil-rich Dutch East Indies, Sumatra, Hong Kong, Guam, and Wake Island. In the process, they virtually annihilated the Far Eastern fleets of Great Britain, the United States, Australia, and the Netherlands.

In less than six months, the Japanese killed or captured more than five hundred thousand Allied soldiers, and came to control the destiny of one hundred fifty million new subjects. They had conquered an empire that it took the Western colonial powers almost four centuries to acquire.

Along the Pacific coast of the United States, panic-stricken Americans feared an imminent invasion. In February 1942, President Roosevelt ordered 112,000 Japanese-Americans to be rounded up and sent to detention camps. It was a time of apprehension and alarm. For most Americans, the outcome of the war was in genuine doubt.

In early May 1942, American code breakers deduced from intercepted radio messages that the Japanese Imperial Navy was planning to eliminate the U.S. presence in the Central Pacific by drawing American forces into a final and decisive battle. Their target was Midway Atoll, consisting of two islands and an airfield lying twelve hundred miles west of Hawaii. Gambling that his code breakers were right, Admiral Chester Nimitz, the commander-in-chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, committed his available forces to setting up an ambush.

Midway has been called the most important naval battle ever fought between two great powers. The Japanese thought it would be a walkover, or in the words of one senior Japanese officer, “as easy as twisting a baby’s arm.” After everything their navy had accomplished up to that point, there was little reason to doubt his words.

The Japanese Empire was at the pinnacle of its glory. Having destroyed the last vestiges of European colonial power in the western Pacific, their confidence in their commanders, warships, combat aircraft, and each other was boundless. Many had come to believe that they were racially superior to the “mongrelized” and “decadent” Americans.

Against the five Japanese battleships, eight aircraft carriers, fourteen cruisers, fifty-five destroyers, and dozens of auxiliary ships now heading toward Midway, Admiral Nimitz had a combined force of three carriers, eight cruisers, and thirteen destroyers. Twenty-four ships against one hundred sixty-two.

Only two of his carriers, the *Hornet* and the *Enterprise*, were prepared for battle. His third carrier, the USS *Yorktown*, had absorbed a five-hundred-pound bomb hit in the Battle of the Coral Sea.

Informed that the ship would require at least a month to be made seaworthy, Nimitz gave his repair division seventy-two hours to accomplish the task.

In spite of these fearful odds, on June 4, 1942, the Americans chose to confront the Imperial Navy at Midway. In assessing the battle's importance, former defense secretary James Schlesinger wrote that "it was far more than the turning of the tide in the Pacific War. In a strategic sense, it was a turning point in world history."

Just two months later, the second pivotal battle of the Pacific War was fought on the island of Guadalcanal. Guadalcanal was the land-based strategic equivalent of Midway, a savage and bloody campaign that determined the outcome of Japanese aspirations to secure control of its vast new Pacific empire.

Unlike Midway, the battle took place in malarial swamps and sweltering jungle, as well as in the skies above them. It is doubtful that a more harrowing succession of weeks ever took place in the history of warfare. Guadalcanal was the first of many Pacific campaigns in which the Japanese fought to virtually the last man. The challenge was compounded for the Americans by the fact that they were cut off from support, and existing in part on supplies left behind by the Japanese. "For those who fought there," wrote Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison, "Guadalcanal was not just a name. . . . It was an emotion."

The Americans went into both of these crucial battles with vastly inferior forces. If the Japanese had won at Midway, they would have been free to advance eastward, taking the Hawaiian Islands and threatening the West Coast of the United States. President Roosevelt would have been forced to abandon his strategy of fighting Germany first. History might well have turned out quite differently.

The story of these two pivotal battles has been written many times and far too well for me to replicate them once again. This book is not about the battles. It is about one small group of men who fought in both of them.

A Dawn Like Thunder tells the story of one naval air squadron, a group of young Americans from every part of the country who began the war flying outmoded aircraft that launched unreliable torpedoes against enemy warships.

Through a combination of courage, sacrifice, luck, and timing, it was the fate of these men to help change the course of history. More than sixty years later, the record of their contribution has faded into the past, and the last handful of survivors provide the only living link to their deeds in the first critical months of the Second World War.

This book was not written to mythologize war. In the twenty-first century, that would be a sacrilege. All but a few of the men depicted in the book were fighting to help win what they hoped would be a lasting peace, and then to come home and enjoy the rest of their lives.

The novelist Stephen Crane was once asked why he wrote *The Red Badge of Courage*. "I wanted to be there," he said. That is the goal of this book, to again bring alive on the page these extraordinary young men, who they were and what they did, for a modern generation of readers.

This is their story.

THE SENTINELS



Smiley

FRIDAY, 29 MAY 1942

USS CHAUMONT

TORPEDO SQUADRON EIGHT

His first glimpse of the Hawaiian Islands was just a distant smudge on the sun-splashed sea, but it was enough for him to feel a shiver of excitement. Like many of the Navy pilots crossing the Pacific on the military transport *Chaumont*, twenty-four-year-old Ensign Corwin F. Morgan of Tampa, Florida, savored the prospect of high adventure awaiting him aboard the aircraft carrier USS *Hornet*.

They called him Smiley.

With his rugged, square-jawed face, he didn't look like a Smiley, and he didn't smile more than any other pilot in Torpedo Squadron Eight. Morgan had earned his enduring nickname at a poker game back in Norfolk, Virginia, after joining the torpedo squadron shortly before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

Rain had washed out the afternoon's training flights, and a group of pilots had started playing poker. The game went on most of the night. Morgan was an inspired gambler, and had won more than two hundred dollars when someone started dealing blackjack and he encountered a run of terrible cards, losing hand after hand. The sudden twist of luck struck him as absurd, and he couldn't stop grinning as he gave back half of what he had won.

"I can't believe you, Morgan," said James Hill Cook, the boyish-looking Southerner with the deep drawl from Grand Cane, Louisiana. "You smile when you win and you smile when you lose. From now on, I'm calling you Smiley."

The name stuck.

Smiley Morgan had grown up in Richmond, Missouri, the self-proclaimed mushroom capital of

the world. His father was the local veterinarian. One summer afternoon the boy had been dozing near a swimming hole at his grandfather's farm when he happened to gaze up and notice a flight of barnstormers doing loops and barrel rolls over the county fairgrounds a couple miles away. Like a youth answering a religious calling, he had tramped through cornfields and pastures until he finally reached the fairgrounds, where he stood mesmerized next to his first airplane.

At the University of Florida in Gainesville, he proved to be an exceptional athlete, and a not-so-motivated student. Before he dropped out of college, he joined the Civilian Pilot Training Program and earned his flying license. Deciding to join the Navy, he was accepted for flight training. After he won his wings in Pensacola, Florida, Morgan was assigned to Torpedo Squadron Eight in Norfolk, Virginia.

When he arrived at East Field in Norfolk, he was told to report to the squadron's commanding officer. Lieutenant Commander John Waldron had just returned from a training flight, and was still wearing his flight suit. He kept Morgan standing at attention in his office while he quickly signed a batch of papers. Looking down at Waldron as he worked, Smiley thought he looked old enough to be his father, and then some.

"Ensign," said Waldron without looking up, "I am going to give you your first duty in this squadron. Go over to the blackboard and print your name."

Smiley wrote, "Corwin F. Morgan."

Standing up, Waldron repeated it aloud and came over to shake his hand. His fierce-looking face looked gaunt. The imprint of flying goggles was etched on his cheeks.

There was a lot for him to learn about flying a torpedo plane, he said, and he would have to work hard to master it all. They started every morning before dawn, and worked until well after dark.

"Welcome to the outfit," he concluded.

That was one of the few times Smiley ever talked to the Skipper alone. Nine days later, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. From then on, Waldron ran the squadron like there was no tomorrow, seven days a week without letup. Smiley had never worked harder in his life. As the months passed, he began to feel a deep sense of pride at having mastered flying in every kind of weather and at all hours of the day and night.

Now he was on his way to war.

There had been little for the pilots to do aboard the *Chaumont* as it crossed the Pacific. During the day, they sunbathed on deck, ate their meals in the wardroom, exercised, studied torpedo attack problems, and read the dog-eared books and old magazines in the small wardroom library.

After dark, the ship was always blacked out in case a Japanese submarine lurked in their path. Morgan spent most of the night hours on the fantail with his friend Ensign John Taurman, a big, easygoing pilot from Cincinnati, Ohio. The two of them would sit against a stanchion, gazing backward as the ship's wake cut a crystal path behind them in the roiling sea, wondering what would await them when they finally arrived at Pearl Harbor.

Torpedo Squadron Eight had been temporarily split in half back in Norfolk. In early March 1942, Lieutenant Commander Waldron and most of the senior pilots had gone to sea aboard the carrier *Hornet*, sailing for the West Coast via the Panama Canal, after which the carrier headed out to the Pacific to engage the Japanese. Waldron's squadron was equipped with the Navy's outmoded torpedo plane, the Douglas TBD Devastator.

The second half of the squadron had stayed behind in Norfolk to receive delivery of the Navy's brand-new torpedo attack plane, the Grumman TBF Avenger. After the new planes had been flight-tested, Smiley and the rest of the pilots had flown them across the United States. In San Francisco, the

crews and their aircraft had been put aboard fast transport ships. Their goal was to catch up to the *Hornet* before the next big battle against the Japanese.

The sea was almost flat calm as the *Chaumont* finally turned for the final leg of the passage between Molokai and Oahu, the islands lush and inviting beneath green mountains under the midday sun.

All of the pilots crowded the deck railing to get their first look at Pearl Harbor. Like the others, the twenty-four-year-old Morgan had seen the newspaper and magazine photographs of the devastation caused by the Japanese attack less than six months earlier. He thought he was prepared for what they would see. He was wrong.

After passing through the submarine nets protecting the entrance to the harbor, the *Chaumont* steamed slowly past Battleship Row. Lying upside down at one mooring, the capsized *Oklahoma* was dull brown in the sunlight. More than two football fields long, its rust-covered hull rose above the oil surface like a humpback whale. Next in line lay the battleship *West Virginia*, which had sunk at its mooring after taking six torpedoes and two armor-piercing bombs.

Farther down the anchorage, a small utility vessel was tethered next to the shattered wreck of the *Arizona*, its work party of salvage divers trying to start a gas engine suction pump.

What remained of the *Arizona*'s superstructure above the waterline was nothing more than a rusting mass of battered metal. The officers' boisterous shouting suddenly ceased, and they sailed slowly past it in awestruck silence. If there was any lingering doubt about what they were fighting for, it ended there.

When the breeze dropped, Morgan smelled the reek of crude oil mixed with the fetid water seeping out of the ships. Along with the stench of the oil, he could smell something else.

"Hundreds of guys never made it out of the ships," said one of the officers at the deck railing. "They're all still down there."

Beyond the ships, the cluttered shoreline was fouled by almost a foot of sludge. A slew of dead birds were snared in the coils of barbed wire that had been strung along the beach in the days after the attack.

Suddenly, another shout went up and Morgan turned in time to see a gigantic aircraft carrier towering high above one of the Pearl Harbor dry docks. At ten stories, the ship's island almost blocked out the landscape. Hundreds of workers were swarming over her, the flash of their torches arcing brightly across the water. Along with the welders and steamfitters, Morgan could see electricians crawling past fire-blistered hatches and torn bulkheads, and dragging heavy electrical cables behind them. It reminded him of the scene in *Gulliver's Travels* in which the Lilliputians frantically tied down the giant with heavy hawsers.

"It's the *Yorktown*," someone shouted as the *Chaumont* nosed into its pier at Ford Island and came to a stop.

The *Yorktown* was one of the three American carriers left in the Central Pacific after the Japanese had sunk the *Lexington* a month earlier. But where were the *Hornet* and the *Enterprise*? Morgan wondered as he anxiously scanned the rest of the anchorage. The other two carriers weren't in sight.

Across the dock, anti-aircraft batteries were dug in behind mounds of sandbags. Armed military policemen carrying gas masks were manning a roadblock at the gatepost to Luke Airfield, which occupied most of Ford Island.

Carrying their overseas bags, the seventeen pilots of Torpedo Squadron Eight disembarked from the ship. Lieutenant Harold "Swede" Larsen, the strapping blond Annapolis graduate temporarily in command, was waiting for them near the foot of the gangway with Lieutenant Langdon Fieberling, the

second-highest-ranking officer in their detachment. The pilots gathered in a loose circle.

Larsen told Fieberling to take them over to the Bachelor Officers' Quarters and wait for him there while he went to find out where Lieutenant Commander Waldron and the rest of the squadron were.

They set off on foot across Ford Island carrying their bags. As they passed the transport ship *Hammondsport*, a crane was already extracting one of their new, bluish gray Grumman Avengers from the ship's hold. The torpedo plane rose slowly into the air above them, its retractable wings folded back along the fuselage like a dozing mallard's.

At the gatepost to Luke Field, Lieutenant Fieberling had to produce his Navy identity card before they were allowed through. When they came to the first hangar at the edge of the airfield, Morgan said that it had been reduced to a steel skeleton by Japanese bombs. A bulldozer was scraping together a massive pile of charred timber, concrete rubble, and airplane parts.

They found the Bachelor Officers' Quarters at the end of the runway near the northern tip of the island, its once manicured lawn scarred by newly dug slit trenches. Inside the crowded lobby, the officers dropped their overseas bags and immediately headed toward the bar.

The manager stepped forward to tell Fieberling that the new facility was full. There were men already sleeping in the corridors, he said apologetically. The detachment was welcome to eat its meal there, but that was all the BOQ could provide.

"Where can we find a temporary billet?" asked Fieberling. The manager said that they might still have room over at the old BOQ, which was down near the shoreline along Battleship Row.

Morgan remembered the smell from the sunken battleships as the men plodded over to the older facility in a long, ragged line. Through the trees that ringed the grounds around the building, he could see the tangled wreck of the sunken *Arizona* that they had passed on their way into the *Chaumont's* anchorage.

At the lobby desk, the manager informed them that there was no room for them there either. Fieberling, who was leading-man handsome, flashed a confident grin and asked for the manager's name, telling him that his squadron's orders to lodge there had come directly from Admiral Nimitz, and he would need to advise the commander-in-chief why his order had been disobeyed. It was a bald-faced lie, but the manager nervously disappeared into his office. A minute later he came back out smiling at Fieberling as if he had just won the lottery.

"I've arranged to set up cots for all of your men in the lanai," he said.

The men moved their bags out to the BOQ's screened porch and sat down to wait for Swede Larsen. When he finally arrived, his face was tense. He sought out Fieberling and the other senior officers.

The *Hornet* had left port yesterday with the *Enterprise*, he told them bitterly. No one was saying where they went, but it sounded like the carriers were going into action. They had gotten there just one day too late.

Swede said that he had been ordered to get their planes checked out as quickly as possible in case of another Japanese attack on Hawaii. The city was under martial law, and a curfew and blackout were in place after sundown. Swede said he was heading over to Luke Field to make sure the squadron's mechanics would have the planes ready to be flight-tested in the morning.

Langdon Fieberling called the pilots together and gave them the news. To a chorus of groans, he told them that because of the island-wide curfew they were restricted to the base. There would be no excursions to the nightspots in Honolulu. He then softened the blow by giving them the rest of the day off to explore Ford Island.

Sitting on his newly unfolded cot in the screened lanai, Smiley Morgan watched Ensign Vic Lew

unpack his overseas bag. At twenty-two, Vic was the youngest pilot in the squadron. It looked to Morgan like he had brought a library with him, including hardbound books on military history and ornithology. The prim, open-faced Lewis grinned at him and said he thought they would probably have a lot of time to read when they weren't flying.

Smiley nodded encouragingly, but his own ambitions were decidedly different. When they weren't flying, he wasn't planning to do any reading. As soon as the curfew was lifted, he was going to head straight for the Royal Hawaiian Hotel to hopefully meet a beautiful Hawaiian girl.

Across the porch, the tall, lanky John Taurman tossed his bag down on another cot. Morgan asked him if he wanted to explore the island with him, and Taurman agreed. Together, they headed across the lawn and down to the edge of the anchorage.

Two cage masts that had once adorned the stricken battleships lay piled in a heap near the shoreline. Smiley and Taurman started walking south along the cluttered shoreline. Farther down the anchorage, they came to a long gangplank that led over to the deck of the battleship *West Virginia*. The deck and superstructure were coated with a film of oily scum, as if the ship had recently been refloated. At Smiley's urging, he and Taurman decided to go aboard.

When they crossed the still-sloping deck plates to observe the extent of the damage, Morgan saw that the ship had been hit by a number of armor-piercing bombs. One of them had wrecked the port casemates, causing a big section of the deck to collapse.

Behind a massive gun turret, he and Taurman encountered a team of salvage divers taking a break from their work. The divers confirmed that the ship had been raised about a week earlier, and was to be towed over to a dry-dock facility.

One of them said that while he was searching an air pocket in a watertight compartment deep inside the ship, he had found a 1941 pinup calendar. One of the sailors trapped inside the compartment had marked off the days after December 7 while he waited for rescue. The last date he had scratched off before he died was December 23, more than two weeks after the *West Virginia* was sunk.

Morgan and Taurman decided they needed a drink, and walked back to the bar in the new BOQ at the end of the runway. As they were drinking a cold beer, Smiley heard a booming laugh and his friend Ensign Bob Ries lumbered up to join them. Smiley hadn't seen him since they had gotten into trouble together in San Francisco.

Ries was a relentless skirt-chaser, and with his apple cheeks and reddish-blond hair, he occasionally scored. He and Morgan had been having dinner at the Bal Tabarin restaurant with Taurman and a few of the other pilots when Ries spied the legs on the hatcheck girl. An hour later, he had persuaded her to go barhopping with him.

Smiley was invited to go along, and they had stayed out until four in the morning before the three of them ended up at the girl's apartment. By the time Smiley woke up on the couch in her living room, they were already two hours late for Swede Larsen's final squadron meeting.

When they reported in, an angry Larsen restricted them to the ship until it left port the following day. He thought of an additional punishment the next morning, ordering Ries to vacate the stateroom he was sharing with Morgan aboard the *Chaumont*, and make the Pacific crossing on the *Hammondsport*, the older transport that had once ferried Key West passenger trains. It was carrying the squadron's planes and enlisted men.

Now Ries was glad to be back with Morgan and the other officers.

It was almost midnight when Smiley returned to the darkened porch facing the anchorage. Through an open window above him, he could hear Artie Shaw's "Begin the Beguine" playing on a portable phonograph. It had been his favorite song before the war.

The lanai was already filled with sleeping men when he stripped off his rumpled uniform and dropped onto his cot. Lying there in the darkness, he could smell Pearl Harbor, even if he could no longer see it. An hour later, he was still wide awake.

Rolling over, he stared out into the night. From the far side of the trees fringing the shoreline, he could hear the slow, steady rhythm of the gas-engined suction pump he had seen earlier that afternoon on the buoy tender anchored by the *Arizona*. He wondered what they could still be pumping out at this hour.

Someone had managed to acquire a bottle of whiskey, and a few of the pilots were silently passing it back and forth between swigs. The lit embers of their cigarettes glowed like fireflies across the room, but the smoke didn't mask the sepulchral smell from Battleship Row.

Morgan couldn't rid his mind of the horrible vision of the hundreds of men still entombed just a stone's throw from where he was lying. He forced himself to think of home, and the last Florida Gators football game he had gone to see in Gainesville with his girlfriend, Caroline. It didn't work. As the hours dragged slowly past, his earlier excitement at the prospect of high adventure aboard the *Hornet* was replaced by somber thoughts on the grim reality of death.

He never slept. The pump ran all night.



The Skipper

SUNDAY, 31 MAY 1942

NORTHWEST OF THE HAWAIIAN ISLANDS

USS HORNET

TORPEDO SQUADRON EIGHT

Each of the first days at sea dawned like a South Seas travel poster. Cotton clouds dappled a bluebird sky. The air temperature was almost balmy and cool breezes drifted across the flight deck as the massive carrier plowed through long sea swells at a speed of twenty-two knots.

Now the skies had grayed and it was colder. Gathered in loose formation in the lee of the carrier's island superstructure, the eighteen pilots of Torpedo Squadron Eight were going through their regular calisthenics program under the watchful gaze of their commanding officer.

They all knew where they were going by now, and what they were up against. Soon after the *Hornet* had left Pearl Harbor, the captain had read a statement over the loudspeaker to the entire crew.

"The enemy is approaching for an attempt to seize the island of Midway," he had announced. "We are going to prevent them from taking Midway if possible. Be ready and keep on the alert."

As the impending battle approached, John Waldron took every opportunity to observe the men of his squadron as they went through their daily routines, including the morning exercise regimen. He would stand off to the side with his feet spread, his leathery skin browned by the sun, gazing at them like a fierce bird of prey protecting its young.

Torpedo Eight was the only squadron aboard ship that did daily physical exercise. Every day, pilots from the other squadrons would stand across the flight deck with amused looks on their faces as Waldron's men went through their routine of push-ups and jumping jacks. Often, the others would shout sarcastic comments before disappearing below, laughing.

Waldron was used to people making fun of both him and his methods. Back in his Annapolis days some of the midshipmen had mocked him as the class “Redskin” and a “seagoing cowpuncher.” There was a derisive edge to many of their jibes, as if he were some kind of hayseed with no social graces who had to be tolerated by the scions of the generations-old Navy families. It only made his ambition to succeed in the Navy burn more intensely.

At forty-two, he was almost twenty years older than most of the men he now commanded. Tall and rugged, he had the face and bearing of an Oglala Sioux warrior. In fact, he was descended from two of them on his mother’s side.

Born in Fort Pierre, South Dakota, he had grown up on an Indian reservation where his father sold vegetables to the local tribe in exchange for dried fish. He had never seen an ocean until his appointment to Annapolis in 1920.

Now, twenty-two years later, he was considered to be one of the exceptional air squadron commanders in the Navy. His peers expected him to move up quickly now that America was in a shooting war.

Aboard the *Hornet*, Waldron’s thirty-one-year-old executive officer, Lieutenant James C. “Jimmy” Owens, would assign one of the junior ensigns to lead the calisthenics each morning. Serious and efficient, Owens was so frugal he saved the tinfoil from his empty cigarette packs, carefully folding each square before storing it in his uniform blouse. He was the perfect subordinate to carry out the daily cascade of the Skipper’s orders and requests.

A former quarterback at the University of Southern California, Jimmy Owens had been in the Navy long enough to serve under plenty of tough, uncompromising officers. But none of them had been anything like the Skipper. The old man was like a force of nature, an incredibly hard driver at everything he did, and when he got the bit in his teeth, there was no stopping him.

A few months after the squadron had been formed back in 1941, they had been doing practice carrier landings in their old worn-out Brewster SBN training planes off Norfolk, and a new pilot had been killed trying to land one. That was when the Skipper had stormed up to Washington and told them he wouldn’t allow his boys to go up in those planes anymore. Jimmy Owens was amazed when new replacement planes began arriving a week later.

Most of the pilots in the outfit had been fresh from flight training when they joined the squadron. They had come from every part of the country: Oregon, Texas, Iowa, Massachusetts, California, Missouri, New York, Virginia, and Indiana. A few had grown up wealthy in cities like San Francisco and New York. Others had been Depression-poor and came from hardscrabble towns with horse-drawn buggies for transportation and no running water or electricity.

Nearly all of them had attended college. A few had gone to the military academies like Annapolis and the Virginia Military Institute, some to elite universities such as Yale and Berkeley, many to football powerhouses like Alabama and Texas A&M, and others to tiny schools like Reedly Junior College and Duluth State.

Now they were all John Waldron’s boys, proud to be reflections of the old man’s unique leadership style. In private, they would grouse about his endless training demands, but they wouldn’t brook criticism of him from an outsider, and the squadron was as tight-knit as a big Irish family.

Surveying them across the flight deck, Waldron knew that they had come to trust him with their lives. To a man, they would follow him anywhere. It was a trust he didn’t take lightly, and he didn’t want to ever let them down.

One inescapable fact deeply troubled him. The torpedo planes his men flew were terribly outmoded. Some of his pilots derisively referred to them as “flying coffins,” and by 1942, they

weren't far wrong.

American naval doctrine decreed that each American carrier should have four air squadrons: a fighter squadron, two dive-bombing squadrons, and a torpedo plane squadron. The dive-bombers and torpedo planes were the enemy ship killers, the principal reason for the carriers' existence.

In 1942, there were two ways to sink enemy ships: to dive-bomb them or to put torpedoes in them. The bombers attacked from high altitude, diving on an enemy ship before releasing their payload. The torpedo planes went in at low altitude just above the wave tops to launch their torpedoes. The role of the carriers' fighters was to provide protection for the bombers and torpedo planes against the enemy fighters trying to shoot them down.

Two of the three aircraft types in the American carrier arsenal had recently been upgraded. The fighter squadrons were now equipped with Grumman Wildcats, the Navy's tough new pursuit plane. A new generation of dive-bombers had also been added. The Douglas Dauntless dive-bomber was capable of flying at two hundred fifty miles an hour, and was equally rugged.

The old Douglas Devastator torpedo planes were being phased out. They flew at little more than a hundred miles an hour. The speed of the enemy's vaunted new fighter, the Mitsubishi Zero, was reportedly three hundred.

The Devastator's armament was grossly inadequate in an aerial gun battle. Against the twenty-millimeter cannons of the Japanese Zero, the Devastator had just two Colt/Browning thirty-caliber machine guns. One was operated by the pilot in the nose, and the second one fired by the rear gunner. Popguns, the men called them.

Well aware of the Devastator's shortcomings, Waldron had ridden his new pilots hard from the start, ordering them to fly four hours in the morning and four more in the afternoon in order to master formation flying and torpedo-launching tactics.

He made them fly constant "bounce" drills at all hours of the day and night in order to simulate landing on an aircraft carrier. Meanwhile, he had tirelessly railed to the Navy about the squadron's inadequate equipment, their underpowered aircraft, and the failure to supply him with practice torpedoes.

Thanks to his constant hectoring, Waldron's squadron was the first one chosen to be equipped with the Navy's brand-new torpedo plane, the Grumman Avenger, manufactured in Bethpage, New York.

With its fourteen-cylinder, air-cooled radial engine, the Avenger was almost as fast as a Wildcat fighter and had steel armor plating to protect the crew, along with self-sealing fuel tanks that virtually swallowed bullets, and a swiveling turret for the fifty-caliber machine gun located in the center of the fuselage. It carried a crew of three, including the pilot, who could fire a machine gun from the nose, the turret gunner in the center, and a radioman who could fire a third machine gun from underneath the plane's tail section.

When the *Hornet* departed for the Pacific back in March, the first batch of Avengers was just coming off the Grumman assembly line. Until the new planes arrived out in the Pacific, Waldron's pilots would have to fly the Devastators.

Back in February, the *Hornet* had been chosen to launch the first air attack on Tokyo. In San Francisco, sixteen B-25 Army Air Force bombers were lowered by crane onto the *Hornet's* flight deck. The daring raid was strictly an Army show, led by Lieutenant Colonel James Doolittle. Before the raid, no one was sure that a fully loaded B-25 bomber could be launched successfully off an aircraft carrier, but Doolittle had trained his crews to do just that. After dropping their bombs in Japan, his bombers would attempt to fly on to China, where they would land at air bases in Allied hands.

And they had done their job. On April 18, 1942, the sixteen B-25s had taken off from the *Hornet* in the face of gale-force winds and had hit their targets. After the planes were launched from the *Hornet*, the carrier turned around and headed back to Pearl Harbor.

In early May, the first major Pacific naval battle took place between American and Japanese forces in the Coral Sea, southwest of the Solomon Islands. The *Hornet* did not participate in the action, which led to a Japanese tactical victory. The American carrier *Lexington* was sunk along with two other ships, while the Japanese lost the light carrier *Shoho*.

Waldron was desperate to receive his new Avengers before the next major battle took place. When the planes arrived at Pearl Harbor aboard the transport ship, he was planning to work his senior pilots around the clock to qualify them. If there wasn't time for it, the younger pilots who had trained on them back at Norfolk would fly in combat. Either way, Waldron planned to lead them.

But they hadn't come in time.

Signaling that calisthenics were over, Owens sent the pilots off on a full lap around the perimeter of the huge flight deck, and the Skipper headed down to the officers' wardroom for his daily powwow over coffee with Commander Ed Creehan.

Ed Creehan was the stocky, heavy-jawed engineer officer on the *Hornet*, and a close pal of Waldron's from their Annapolis days. He was also a member of the inner circle of the *Hornet*'s captain, Marc "Pete" Mitscher, and he often picked up the latest scuttlebutt before anyone else. Waldron could share a confidence with him and know that the information wouldn't travel further.

Waldron joined Creehan in the carrier's low-ceilinged wardroom, where the ship's officers ate their meals and gathered for meetings and briefings. It ran the entire breadth of the ship, with parallel rows of white linen-covered tables laid with flatware bearing the *Hornet* crest.

With the Midway battle just a few days away, the *Hornet*'s officers were excited about the chance to put a serious dent in the Japanese fleet and make up for the loss of the *Lexington* a month earlier. The *Hornet* had not arrived in time to participate in the Coral Sea battle. Midway would be her first test.

That morning, the *Hornet* air group leaders would receive their first intelligence briefing from Lieutenant Steve Jurika, the senior intelligence officer aboard the *Hornet*. He would provide the latest information on the Japanese intentions at Midway, as well as Admiral Nimitz's proposed strategy for blocking them. After that, the *Hornet*'s air group commander, Stanhope Cotton Ring, would outline his own plans for attacking the Japanese carriers.

Up on deck, the morning's gunnery practice was inaugurated with the concussive blast of the ship's five-inch guns. The noise reverberated through the ship like successive hammer blows. A few minutes later, the cannon salvos were followed by the stuttering racket of anti-aircraft machine gun fire.

Their coffee break over, Ed Creehan left to resume his engineering duties, and Waldron joined the group assembling for the briefing by Jurika and the intelligence staff. Like John Waldron, the other three air squadron commanders were career naval officers and Annapolis men. They were Lieutenant Commander Samuel "Pat" Mitchell, who led the *Hornet*'s fighter squadron, and Lieutenant Commanders Walter Rodee and Robert "Ruff" Johnson, who led the two dive-bombing squadrons.

The *Hornet*'s air group commander, Stanhope Cotton Ring, had graduated from Annapolis one year ahead of Waldron in 1923. The two men came from different worlds. They were very different men.

Unlike the hard-charging Waldron, who had spent his boyhood years on Indian reservations in South Dakota and Saskatchewan, Canada, the reserved and courtly Ring had been raised in Quincy,

Massachusetts, the son of a Navy commodore.

At six feet two inches, the handsome Ring liked to relax by playing a pear-shaped mandolin, and was an expert at bridge. At Annapolis, he had been a magnet for attractive debutantes. When it came to the ladies, he was considered a “snake” by his fellow midshipmen.

In those days, the homely Waldron had to scrap for female companionship, once spraining both ankles when climbing over the wall after a nocturnal encounter. Later, he was docked twenty-five demerits for being discovered behind Bancroft Hall with two local girls.

Observing Ring aboard the *Hornet*, Lieutenant Steve Jurika thought he would have made a superb Foreign Service officer, and, in fact, Ring had served overseas as an assistant naval attaché. After returning from his embassy posting in London, he began carrying a British swagger stick. Three years later, he was still carrying it tucked under his arm. It had made him an object of ridicule among some of the younger pilots in the group, who thought it was a riding crop.

When the *Hornet* had returned to Pearl Harbor after arriving too late for the Coral Sea battle, its air group had flown ashore on May 26 to their base at Ewa Field. Along with the pilots of the carrier *Enterprise*, they were looking forward to a two-day liberty. While the *Enterprise* pilots headed to the Royal Hawaiian Hotel for two days on Waikiki Beach, however, Commander Ring had kept his entire air group at Ewa Field on full alert. It led to what one pilot called a near mutiny.

Cool and aloof, Ring had no sense of humor to help him establish rapport with the pilots serving under him, and he didn't seem to care. The *Hornet's* captain, Pete Mitscher, was due to be promoted rear admiral any day now. The scuttlebutt was that Ring would soon be leaving as air group commander for a job on his staff.

It couldn't be too soon for the *Hornet's* fliers. Few, if any, of the air group's pilots had confidence in Stanhope Ring's leadership or flying ability. He had made a number of serious mistakes on previous flights, including one embarrassing crash landing. While on a group training mission in the Gulf of Mexico, it had been necessary for him to turn over command to junior officer Gus Widhelm after he got lost while trying to lead the air group back to the ship.

At one point, Lieutenant George Ellenberg, one of the *Hornet's* seasoned dive-bomber pilots, joined with several other fliers to seriously discuss the idea of shooting Ring down before his incompetence cost men their lives.

For better or worse, Ring would soon be leading them into battle.

At Steve Jurika's intelligence briefing, the participants also included Captain Mitscher and the members of the *Hornet's* air staff, including Commander Apollo Soucek, the air officer, and Lieutenant Commander John Foster, the operations officer.

Jurika told them that the Japanese fleet was expected to reach striking distance of Midway on the following Wednesday or Thursday. He then gave them a detailed and comprehensive breakdown of the ships in the Japanese armada, focusing on the aircraft carriers, which were the key to the Japanese hopes for success.

He didn't tell them how the intelligence staff got all of this information, and no one asked, although it was widely suspected that analysts back at Pearl Harbor must have broken the Japanese code.

Midway was located more than twelve hundred miles northwest of Hawaii in the Central Pacific. It was a fortified U.S. territory, and its islands held two important airfields. By invading the islands, the Japanese hoped to lure the American carriers out from Pearl Harbor, where the massive Japanese striking force could destroy them. The Japanese Empire could then invade Hawaii, or simply consolidate its other gains in the Western Pacific.

Admiral Nimitz's plan to defeat the Japanese invasion fleet was simple: ambush the Japanese carriers in the striking force while their air groups were off attacking Midway Atoll.

Once the Japanese carriers were sunk, the enemy pilots returning from Midway would be forced ditch in the ocean. Without air cover, the rest of the Japanese fleet would be ripe for the plucking by the American dive-bombers and torpedo planes.

Lieutenant Jurika went on to brief them about some of the air combat tactics employed by the Japanese carriers. The Battle of the Coral Sea had been fought less than a month earlier, and it had provided many useful lessons.

Although the *Yorktown's* and *Lexington's* After Action Reports had not yet been officially circulated, Waldron and the other squadron commanders knew that the air groups on the *Yorktown* and the *Lexington* had divided their fighter strength in the course of the two-day battle. Half of the fighters had flown cover for the slow-moving torpedo planes, and the other half had protected the carrier's dive-bombers from attacks by the Japanese Zeroes.

On May 8, Lieutenant Commander Joe Taylor had led the *Yorktown's* torpedo squadron in the battle. As the *Yorktown's* air group approached the Japanese fleet, four of its Grumman F4F Wildcat fighters had stayed low with Taylor's slow-moving Devastators as they launched their torpedoes at one of the Japanese carriers. The remaining two Wildcats had flown cover for the *Yorktown's* dive-bombers at a much higher altitude.

A swarm of Japanese Zeroes had come down to attack the Devastators, but were driven off long enough for Joe Taylor and his men to launch nine torpedoes at the carrier, claiming three hits. All of his torpedo planes had returned safely to the *Yorktown*.

The *Lexington's* air group had functioned in precisely the same way. The planes in the fighter escort were split up between the dive-bombers and the torpedo planes, keeping the Zeroes busy long enough for the Devastators of Jimmy Brett's torpedo squadron to make a successful run.

In the two days of attacks, Brett had claimed five torpedo hits, and all but one of his Devastators made it safely back to their ship. Unfortunately, three of the four fighters covering them had been shot down. The dive-bombing squadrons had taken serious losses, too.

Toward the end of his briefing, Jurika stressed to the squadron commanders that it would be a big mistake to underestimate the skill and courage of the Japanese pilots. The Zero was one hell of a fine aircraft, he told them. It would not be a cakewalk. The Japanese were really good.

After Jurika finished, Stanhope Ring informed the squadron commanders that he was planning to approach the upcoming battle differently than the air groups at the Coral Sea. He said that he was going to keep the *Hornet's* fighters together as one unit. There would only be ten of them available, and they would stay up to protect the dive-bombers, which would fly at around eighteen thousand feet.

Ring thought the Zeroes would concentrate their attacks up there, leaving Waldron's squadron of Devastators to go in relatively untouched at around five hundred feet above the ocean surface. The key, he said, was for the whole group to attack with tactical cohesion in a single high-low formation. He would personally lead the air group in a dive-bomber.

John Waldron had flown enough missions since 1927 to know that things didn't always go as planned. What if they got separated by heavy cloud cover or some other circumstance on the way to the enemy? His squadron would be separated from the others by almost four miles of altitude. He immediately spoke up, urging that the *Hornet* air group employ the same tactics that were used at the Coral Sea. When the meeting broke up, there was no final resolution of the question.

Although Waldron was confident that his torpedo squadron could make hits on the Japanese carriers, he was deeply upset about this change in tactics. If nothing else, the briefing had convinced

him that fighter protection would be one of the keys to a successful attack by his slow-moving planes and success was all he was after.

He wasn't about to give up fighter protection so easily. Pat Mitchell, who commanded the *Hornet's* fighter squadron, agreed with him. So did Lieutenant Stan Ruehlow, Mitchell's flight officer.

After the briefing, Waldron returned to his pilots in Ready Room Four. Like the other squadron ready rooms, it was located close to the flight deck so the fliers could reach their aircraft quickly when there was an order to man their planes.

About twenty by forty feet square, it was where they met for briefings, drills, and instruction in everything from torpedo plane tactics to enemy ship recognition. A Teletype machine with a big screen on top of it sat at the front of the room, its keys ready to automatically print out information about enemy sightings and the latest weather information.

The steel-walled room was big enough for each pilot to have his own cushioned chair with a reclining back and a small storage locker beneath the seat to stow personal gear. The right armrest had a retractable writing desk for the pilots to take notes on. As they waited for a mission, the fliers could read, sleep, or eat a quick meal.

Even though it was Sunday, the pilots had spent most of the morning on a torpedo attack exercise. "If you know how to lead a target from any direction at every possible speed, you're almost certain to get hits," Waldron had drummed into them over and over.

A few of the pilots looked up to him like a stern father. He had tried to put the stamp of his determination on every one of them. When he thought they were getting complacent back in Norfolk, he would stage an "enemy attack" exercise, a drill in which the squadron had to arm its planes and take off as if Japanese planes were about to attack. It required them to pitch in together, pilots and crews alike, to launch the planes while he stood by measuring their response time on his watch like a racehorse trainer.

Waldron had toughened them in every way he knew to make them ready for whatever emergency might arise. Working with the plane crews, he had made sure that every aircraft was equipped with canteens, pocket compasses, emergency supplies, and other survival equipment in case they were shot down in the ocean.

"Someday, one of you might be all alone out there when something goes wrong, and at least you'll know what to do," he had told them.

Just before they left Pearl Harbor, he had cajoled the Navy materiel office into giving them twin thirty-caliber machine gun mounts that up to then had been allotted solely to the dive-bomber squadrons. The new mounts were installed on every Devastator.

He was well aware that some of the men had come to resent the amount of work he made them do at least compared to the other air squadrons assigned to the *Hornet*. One of the ensign pilots privately referred to him as "the old goat."

But they were good. They had done everything he had asked of them. It had paid off, all of the hundreds of hours of formation flying, the bounce drills, the carrier takeoff and landing drills, the fighter evasion techniques, the anti-aircraft fire avoidance tactics, the hours of bombing practice, the lessons in navigation, the fitness training, survival drills, and more torpedo firing tactics. Always more torpedo tactics.

Together, they had come to the end of a long road. The training was over. They would be going into action in a few days. Now he would let them rest up, like a finely tuned football team before the Rose Bowl.

When the attack exercise was finished, the Skipper asked for their attention. They would soon be

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