



U.S.S. TICONDEROGA (CV-14)

Photographic History of the U.S. Navy

Kamikaze Attack, January 21, 1945

by C. Vern Higman, VT-80

*I'm taking this time to pass along a story, no better yet, a real account of an encounter that happened on January 21, 1945. What follows is the first hand telling of different time, a different war, but just like thousands of war stories out there, this one tells of how quickly life as you know it can change. It involves WWII, an aircraft carrier forever known as the USS **Ticonderoga**, and one ensign pilot, Vern Higman.*

Brian Higman, son of C. Vern Higman

Our ship was part of a strike force located at the sea east of the island of Formosa in the western Pacific. I arose at 0230 on the 21st and had breakfast before dawn. Half of our squadron was scheduled to launch pre-dawn and the other half were scheduled to be launched at noon for a double air strike against Japanese shipping and installations on Toshien Harbor on Formosa. I was scheduled to fly in the second group and spent most of my time before noon in the squadron ready room which was located amidships immediately below the flight deck.

We received pre-flight briefing to be updated when the first group returned from the early flight. I was in flight gear prepared for a launch and was briefed again when the first planes landed. The klaxon sounded shortly after noon with general quarters. Within seconds the ship shuddered with a large explosion and black smoke started pouring out of the air vents in the overhead. It became almost impossible to breathe in minutes. Our phone communications told us that the ship had just been hit by a *kamikaze* aircraft through the center of the flight deck just forward of the forward five inch gun mount. It would be later that we would learn that our beloved ship, the "**Big T**," had been hit by a second *kamikaze* plane severely damaging the superstructure. We attempted to utilize our gas masks. However, they did not filter out the thick black smoke. It was so thick that I could just barely make out a light filament glowing a foot in front of me. We attempted to escape from the ready room through the outer hatch onto the catwalk but could not escape due to debris and burning fuel.

The inner hatch opened onto a steel-grated walk which was open to the hangar deck. The hangar deck below us was an inferno and fifty caliber ammunition was going off continuously.

We had been informed from the bridge that a crew was attempting to cut through the flight deck to reach us. We made the decision to make our way aft to freedom and did so by hanging onto the back of the flight suit of the man in front like a congo line. We burst out into sunlight and fresh air through a hatch aft of the after five inch gun mount.

The forward portion of the hangar deck was completely burned out with many bodies of burned crewmen scattered about. We made our way to our bunk room which was a forty-man junior officers quarters on the fo'c'sle deck and there I found the body of a severely burned stewards-mate

had died in my bunk. We helped care for some of the wounded who had been brought to the fo'c'sle deck for care. Our thoughts focused in on our aircrewmembers who had not been with us during the past four hours and I discovered that my aircrewmembers, E. Wendell Stevens, ARM2c and Lowell Chamberlain, AOM2c had survived and been waiting at our plane on the after end of the flight deck when the first *kamikaze* struck the ship.

I realized that I had been scheduled on a watch as flight deck security watch officer prior to this day's events and so I reported to the fly-1 operations office just off the flight deck. My watch was scheduled for 1600 to 2000 and my first task was to assemble a watch. This was difficult because several of those that had been assigned were missing.

Guards were stationed at several places on the flight deck. It was a most hectic situation with gaping holes in the flight deck that was covered with debris. A station near the five-inch gun mount was where the deceased members of the ship's crew were placed awaiting transfer to the sickbay.

I soon realized that my problems would mount because the officers who were to relieve me at 2000, 2400, and 0400 were either injured, missing or dead. I was most thankful for the flow of black coffee we were able to produce in fly-1.

It soon got dark and the ship creaked and groaned all night because the grease had been burned out of the expansion joints allowing the joints to cry out as the ship plowed through the sea, listing.

Shortly after posting the 2000 watch the petty officer of the watch and I were summoned onto the flight deck by the whistle of one of our watch standee's who had stepped into one of the holes in the flight deck and fortunately was prevented from falling through by the bulky alpaca life jacket that he was wearing. I had to keep one seaman fortified with coffee for four hours to stand watch over the bodies near the five-inch gun mount. Several men were pressed into watch standing in as replacements for shipmates who were missing, wounded, or deceased.

When the second *kamikaze* hit the superstructure of the carrier, it had injured the Captain. We transferred Captain Dixie Kiefer, who had been seriously wounded from his station on the bridge, to the sick bay prior to midnight. During the night we had several electrical fires, however all were promptly contained.

The ship steamed at full speed out of the combat area all night. I was relieved of my security watch officer's duties at 0800 on January 22, 1945, a tired but thankful Ensign after thirty hectic hours which began at 0230 on January 21, 1945.

On added note, the U.S.S. ***Ticonderoga*** docked into the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard in February 1945 for repairs and was ready to go out and fight again just two months later in April 1945.

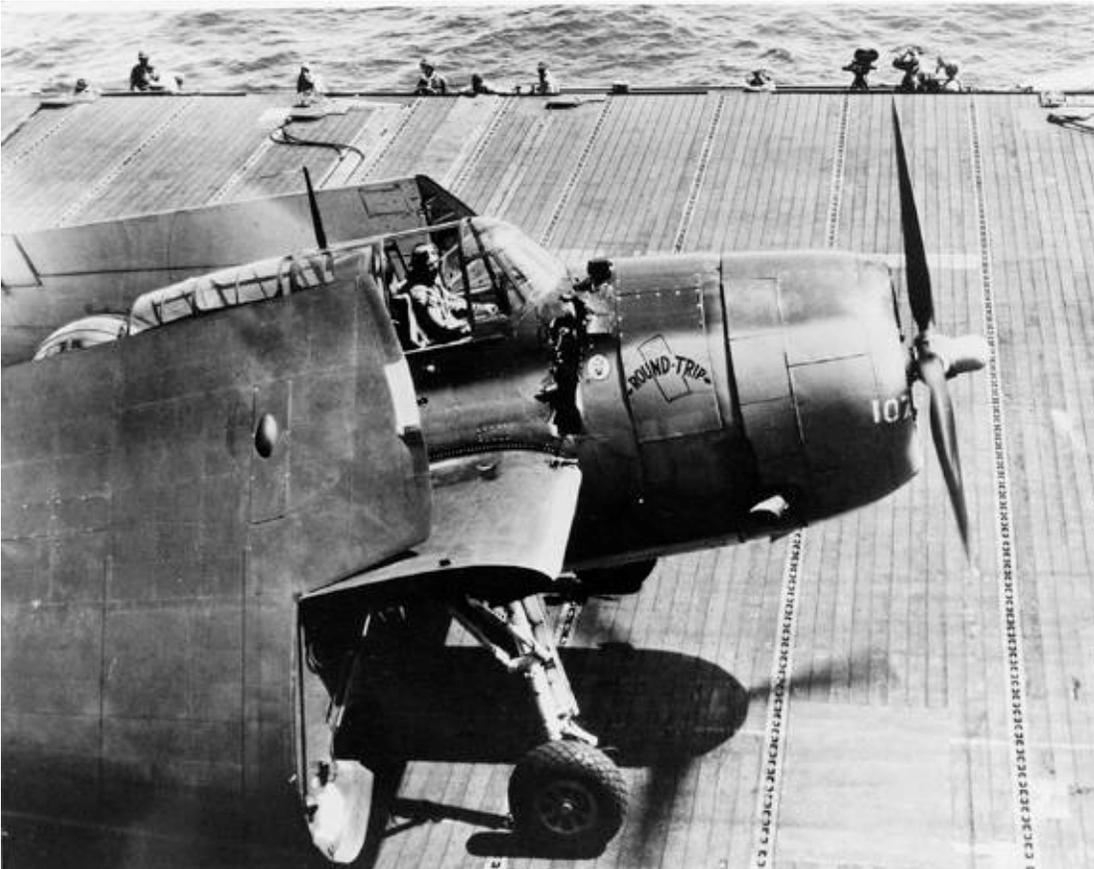
I retell this account in gratitude for not only my father's sake but for the awareness of the cost of freedom. You see just two and a half months prior to this attack, on what is ironically now known as Veterans day, November 11, 1944 another twist of fate occurred that my father later wrote down in a note to all that would hear.

I pause to express my gratitude for the life that I have been given since high noon on November 11, 1944 and to pay tribute to the many thousands of those who made the supreme sacrifice since that date to preserve our "way of life," our freedom. On that day, and at high noon my plane, "Round Trip Ticket" was hit by a four-inch shell from a Japanese destroyer. The shell went through the wing and through the cockpit and exploded after ripping through the fuselage of the plane.

If I had not been spared I would have not been fortunate enough to have been blessed with the wonderful family that I have. I ask that you all pause this day to join me in a tribute to the thousands of our people who were issued a "one way ticket" in combat instead of a "round trip ticket." Without their sacrifices we would not have the "way of life" and the freedoms that we are blessed with.

I urge you all to appreciate this "way of life" and exercise all measures to preserve it. Join with me in remembering November 11th. Veterans Day.

A veteran who was issued a round trip ticket!



*Ensign C.V. Higman of Seattle, Washington, brought this TBM Avenger back aboard the aircraft carrier **Ticonderoga** (CV 14) despite being hit by anti-aircraft fire forward of the cockpit. The aircraft's nickname, visible on the cowling, is ironic given the fact that Higman almost didn't make a round trip on this 11 November 1944 mission over the Philippines*