

Life on the *USS Manila Bay*

Navy photographer remembers Wildcats, TBMs and kamikazes

STORY AND PHOTOS BY STEPHEN E. KANYUSIK



A Wildcat flies off the deck of the *USS Manila Bay*.

When World War II was in its early days, the U.S. Navy had to rely on the Grumman F4F Wildcat for its fighter support. The naval fleets were reluctantly replacing their biplanes with the stubby single-wing fighters made by Brewster and Grumman. But even as the early Wildcats were just beginning operations, the Navy set about replacing them with the Grumman F6F Hellcat design.

To bring about the Hellcat's production, however, the Navy had to find a place that could maintain the improved F4F that

the service needed as a stop-gap plane for the CVE "Jeep" carriers that were going to be outfitted with Grumman Avenger TBMs and the new F-Fs. General Motors had several plants in New Jersey that were inactive because automobile productions were being curtailed, due to the commencing of America's entry into the conflict. These GM production models were referred to by the servicemen on board the Jeep carriers as "Flying Chevys." The Wright Whirlwind engines had the familiar sound: "Hutta, hutta, pow, hutta pow, hutta pow." After 50 years, I can tell a

"Chevy sound"!

I served as a Navy photographer on "Kaiser Jeep Carrier" CVE 61 *USS Manila Bay* during the latter part of World War II, and had the experience of photographing enemy aircraft attacking us. One memorable attack occurred October 25, 1944, during the invasion of the Philippines, with *USS Manila Bay* experiencing constant air assaults from the Japanese forces on the island.

The CVE Jeep Carrier Group 77.4 (see sidebar) was being engaged in surface activity from a Japanese task force that was shredding the Taffy 3 group and

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starting to get in range with their large bore guns. We were protected by three "valiant tin cans," small ships that maneuvered together to make a large blip on the aggressors' radar screens. This would hopefully draw the fire away from the carriers.

The Japanese interrupted the maneuver and had to eliminate the small ships' obstacle prior to picking us off. This went on for an hour or so, and then they broke off the chase. This gave Taffy 2 and Taffy 3 the time needed to receive their planes, and rearm them with fuel and ammo and whatever else that was available, such as torpedoes, rockets, and bombs. Then it came into a slaughter, and the Japanese lost all of their combat punch.

During the night, the "Old Battleships" that were damaged in Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, mauled the Japanese forces. They extracted a revenge that will go down in naval history. These heroic battleships with destroyers and PT boats were in the "Crossing of the T," a naval maneuver that brings all the firepower in a surface engagement, with the oncoming ships restricted in maneuvering in a confined area and limiting its forward firing guns.

The next afternoon the remaining Taffy task forces were the target of 40 or more aircraft from land bases. Now a new drastic tactic was being directed at us,

kamikazes—suicide planes. We were invading Leyte, and Japan was becoming desperate in the defense of these islands. The new tactics of the kamikaze were tried and incorporated into their scheme of things.

Flak...if you want to see flak, try being on a carrier when the kamikaze planes are zeroing in on the flattops. We carriers were the targets sought out as prime stuff. The sky would be dark with splotches as if an artist splashed his brush against the sky. The smoke would flow over the deck while the carrier heeled over as if a drunken elephant was trying some ballet movements. The smell of acrid odors would also fill the air with pungent aroma. We photographers had to cope with the scene and get a clear shot of the surrounding activity with still or motion picture cameras. These scenes are on my memory tapes . . . forever!

On this October afternoon, the USS *Manila Bay* was under attack from a kamikaze plane that had slipped unnoticed through the radar and combat patrol. The enemy would fly close to the surface of the water to escape detection. With the ship listing from side to side on zigzagging turns, the gunners on the mounts had difficulty in keeping their balance. The lookouts and the crews on the gun mounts were frantically searching the sky for a trace of



The author in his Navy uniform, circa 1944.



USS *Manila Bay* TBM damaged by blast from kamikaze hit on January 31, 1945.

the target. The gun barrels were waving in the sky, like hunting dogs sniffing on a hunt.

Then the guns erupted like a volcano rupturing the silence. The noise was thunderous. When 5-inch guns went off, we felt a concussion as if a giant hand was squeezing our clothes and then releasing its hold to allow us to catch our breaths. The smoke clouded our vision momentarily, but the frantic maneuvering of the ship helped to blow it out to the sea. We could smell the burning powder; it was heavy in our nostrils.

The cracks of the Marines' 5-inch guns were like the drums in a symphony, setting the tempo. The "Quad Forties" with their "barbar-room, barroom," set the medley, and the rhythm was felt throughout the harried ship. The suicide pilot was evasive in his attempt to hit the carrier, his priority target. These one-way pilots at times dis-

played daring in their flying, and other times they were less skillful in their flying. We later found out that some of these selected and volunteer pilots were from the inexperienced ranks.

They, in turn, were the focal point of our gunners and combat patrols. The entire task force pinpointed them, with all of the firepower in their sector, as if they were magnetically drawn to them. The bursting shells weaved a black necklace around a kamikaze plane, ever so close and finally tightening.

The Marines on the aft 5-inch gun made the first hit on the plane. It rolled over on its back, and for a few anxious moments it was heading toward our ship. Then the 40 mm guns cut the plane in two, and the plane dove harmlessly into the sea, followed by the tail section.

Some of the crew gave a loud

cheer, and others give a silent prayer of relief. It was then silent or a few moments, and then we got ready for the next one. We knew that there would be more, many more. We were invading the Philippines, and they were desperately trying to stave off the landings by our forces. They were going to stop the carriers with the kamikaze planes. We, as the crew of the USS *Manila Bay*, knew this, and we were prepared and ready for battle.

Editor's Note:

Although no kamikazes were successful in hitting the Manila Bay during this incident, one kamikaze was successful on a January 5, 1945, attack that killed 14 men, wounded 52 more, and wiped out communications on the carrier. All repairs were complete by January 10 allowing the Manila Bay to return to full duty less than a week after the attack.



Ensign Ray Crandall and his TBM crew being returned after ditching.



One of the "flying Chevy" Wildcats assigned to the USS *Manila Bay* circa 1944.



Wildcat pilots from the USS *Manila Bay*. From left, Fischer, Beattie, Eason, Barrow and Ditchman.



Ens Ray Crandell ready for cat shot to attack the Japanese fleet Oct. 1944.





Clockwise from left a Wildcat pilot makes his approach, follows the signalman's instructions, and makes a successful landing.



TBM crash landed on Leyte after the Taffy Battle, October 1944.

