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U.S. Navy Aces of WW2

F4F Wildcat and F6F Hellcat Pilots

By [Stephen Sherman](#), June, 1999. Updated July 1, 2011.

The Navy's fighter pilots fought the entire war in the Pacific, from Pearl Harbor to the Home Islands. In 1942, flying F4F Wildcats, the Navy fighter pilots barely held their own against the Japanese Zeros. A handful of heroes like O'Hare, McCuskey, and Vejtasa scored some notable successes. The Navy contributed fighting squadrons to the Guadalcanal campaign, but did not achieve big results until late 1943, when the F4U Corsairs and F6F Hellcats arrived.

The Hellcats in particular, operating from the simultaneously-arriving Essex-class carriers, began to decimate the outclassed Japanese fliers. From the Gilberts, up through the Marshalls and the Marianas, the carrier-based Hellcats swept the skies. (One notable unit, VF-17, the [Jolly Rogers](#), under its CO, Tommy Blackburn, flew F4U Corsairs from land bases in the Solomons. I've included its fascinating story.)

In the huge aerial battles of the Philippine Sea (Marianas Turkey Shoot) and Leyte Gulf, the navy aces essentially destroyed the Japanese aerial forces. After that, in the tough campaigns for Iwo Jima, Okinawa, and the Home Islands, the U.S. naval aviators faced poorly trained, but deadly, kamikaze pilots.

I have prepared two detailed data tables:

- [Navy's Fighting Squadrons in World War Two](#) changed frequently, and have always confused me. Based on Barrett Tillman's excellent book, I have prepared this [summary table](#) for them, showing deployments, CO, top ace, carrier, and number of aces.
- [Aerial Victories of Naval Fighter Planes](#), showing claims by month for Land-based and Carrier-Based Wildcats, Hellcats, and Corsairs.

Here are stories of some of the high-scoring U.S. naval fighter pilots.

Top Navy Aces (12+ Kills)	Kills	Medals	Squadron	Plane
David McCampbell	34.0	MH	VF-15	F6F
Cecil E. Harris	24.0	NC	VF-18	F6F
Eugene Valencia	23.0	NC	VF-9	F6F
Alexander Vraciu	19.0	NC	VF-6/VF-16	F6F
Cornelius N. Nooy	19.0	NC	VF-31	F6F

Patrick D. Fleming	19.0	NC	VF-80	F6F
Douglas Baker	16.3	SS	VF-20	F6F
Ira Cassius "Ike" Kepford	16.0	NC	VF-17	F4U
Charles R. Stimpson	16.0	NC	VF-11	F4F/F6F
Arthur R. Hawkins	14.0	NC	VF-31	F6F
John L. Wirth	14.0	NC	VF-31	F6F
Lt. Elbert McCuskey	13.5	NC	VF-3/VF-42/VF-8	F4F/F6F
George C. Duncan	13.5	-	VF-15	F6F
Roy W. Rushing	13.0	-	VF-15	F6F
John R. Strane	13.0	-	VF-15	F6F
Dan R. Rehm	13.0	AM	VF-8/VF-50	F6F
Wendell V. Twelves	13.0	-	VF-15	F6F
James A. Shirley	12.5	-	VF-27	F6F
Daniel A. Carmichael Jr.	12.0	-	VF-2/VBF-12	F6F
Roger R. Hedrick	12.0	DFC	VF-17/VF-84	F4U
William J. Masoner Jr.	12.0	-	VF-19/VF-11	F6F
Hamilton McWhorter III	12.0	-	VF-9/VF-12	F6F
P. L. Kirkwood	12.0	-	VF-10	F4U/F6F
Other Noted Navy Aces	Kills	Medals	Unit	Plane
Frederick E. Bakutis	11.0	-	VF-20	F6F
John T. "Tom" Blackburn	11.0	NC	VF-17	F4U
James B. French	11.0	-	VF-9	F6F
William A. Dean, Jr.	11.0	-	VF-2	F6F
Donald E. Runyon	11.0	NC	VF-6	F4F
Stanley W. "Swede" Vejtasa	10.3	NC	VF-10	F4F
Charles Mallory	10.0	DFC	VF-18	F6F
Harris A. Mitchell	10.0	-	VF-9	F6F
Whitey Feightner	9.0	-	VF-10/VF-8	F4F/F6F

Arthur Van Haren, Jr.	9.0	DFC	VF-2	F6F
Ralph E. Elliott	9.0	-	VC-27	FM-2
Butch Voris	8.0	DFC	VF-2	F6F
Edward "Butch" O'Hare	7.0	MH	VF-3	F4F
Bert DeWayne "Wayne" Morris	7.0	DFC	VF-15	F6F

Alexander Vraciu

He was born in East Chicago, Indiana, and attended DePauw University on a scholarship where he enrolled in the Civilian Pilot Training program. He started naval flight training in late 1941, winning his wings in August, 1942. He qualified as a carrier pilot on *USS Wolverine*, a converted Great Lakes steamer. His first combat unit was VF-3 (later redesignated VF-6) where he spent 5 months as wingman to Ed "Butch" O'Hare and shot down his first Japanese plane, a Zero over Wake Island in October 1943. He soon downed another Betty over Tarawa, and "made ace" on January 29, 1944 when he got three more Bettys over Kwajalein.

His next combat occurred with *Intrepid's* VF-6, on the February 16-17, 1944 strike against Truk airfields on Moen, Eten, and Param Islands. The day started with a large fighter sweep, 72 Hellcats, over the Jap bases. Vraciu arrived over Moen at 13,000 foot altitude just before sunrise. Amidst the anti-aircraft fire, the Hellcats began diving toward the airstrips for their strafing runs. Looking all around, Lt. Vraciu spotted some Zeros above and to port, which he swung toward and attacked. Using the superior maneuverability of the Hellcat at high speeds (over 250 knots), he successfully gained altitude on the Zeros and chased them into clouds and onto the deck. During this action he hit and set afire 3 Zeros, which splashed inside Truk lagoon. He then got another after a bit of cat-and-mouse in a cloud. The afternoon saw little air-to-air action, as Vraciu and the other Hellcat pilots escorted bombers and torpedo planes on their runs. That evening, when the planes had returned, *Intrepid* was hit by a torpedo and was



withdrawn from combat for repairs.

He was then assigned to VF-16, and scored two more kills when he downed two Zeros in another raid on Truk on April 29, 1944. His twelfth victory was a Betty 'snooper' that he downed over Saipan on June 12. On June 14, he didn't add to his "air-to-air" wins, but he achieved the spectacular feat of sinking a Japanese merchant ship with a direct hit on its stern!

Marianas Turkey Shoot

On June 19, 1944 during what came to be known as the "Marianas Turkey Shoot," he was assigned to CAP over the US fleet, and engaged an attacking Jap air group about 25 miles west of *USS Lexington*. He shot down a remarkable 6 Japanese 'Judy' dive bombers in just eight minutes using only 360 rounds of ammunition.

In that frenetic interception, Lt. Vraciu wove his way through the enemy formation to pick off six enemy aircraft. He downed his initial quarry from a distance of only 200 feet and quickly reacted to avoid damage from the dive bomber's debris. He then crept toward a pair of dive bombers and shot down the trailing Judy before splashing the lead plane. Every minute brought the action continuously closer to *Lexington*, which meant that not only was the carrier in danger, but Vraciu and other American pilots would have to fly directly into their own ships' anti-aircraft fire to chase attacking enemy planes.

Vraciu scanned the skies, which by now were dotted with speeding Hellcats, plunging enemy planes, and hundreds of lethal bursts of anti-aircraft fire. He warned *Lexington*: "Don't see how we can possibly shoot 'em all down. Too many!" But he nevertheless chased after, and downed, a fourth dive bomber. Three other Judys zoomed into view as they began their final runs on ships below, and Vraciu followed them. He quickly downed the first but was forced into a perilous vertical dive to stop the second before it dropped its bomb on a destroyer. With anti-aircraft fire intensifying, Vraciu caught up to the enemy plane and destroyed it, then pulled out of his dive to avoid crashing into the water. Battleship anti-aircraft fire downed the final enemy dive bomber.

Vraciu headed back to *Lexington*, where he was almost killed by his own ship's fire. Shouting into his radio that he was an American, Vraciu finally landed. As he walked away from his plane, a tired Vraciu glanced toward Admiral Mitscher on the bridge and smiling widely, held up six fingers to indicate his success, a scene captured in a well-known photograph. His nineteenth (and last) victory came the next day when he got another Zero.

He was referred to as "Grumman's Best Customer" after surviving two carriers being torpedoed, two ditchings and two parachute jumps. In December, 1944, he was shot down on a raid over Manila's Clark Field, and hid out with Filipino guerrillas for five weeks, before meeting up with American forces. Alex Vraciu ended WWII as the U.S. Navy's fourth-ranking ace with 19 enemy aircraft shot down plus 21 more destroyed on the ground. He spent the last few months of the war as a test pilot at the Navy's Patuxent River facility. After the war, he commanded VF-51.

Patrick D. Fleming

Fleming was an "Army brat" and an Annapolis graduate, the only ace from the class of 1941. He did a surface tour in cruisers, then applied for flight training. He won his wings in 1943 and was promptly assigned to be an instructor. He joined VF-80 in March, 1944.

His brief fighter career demonstrated the dominance of the U.S. Navy's carriers and Hellcats in the later stages of the Pacific War. Fleming engaged only nineteen targets

during six combat missions between Nov. 5, 1944 and Feb. 17, 1945; he shot down all nineteen. His first kill was a Zero, over Manila, his only single victory.

Fleming's carrier, *Ticonderoga* (CV-14), gave aerial support to the Mindoro landings in the Philippines in mid-December 1944. At dawn on Dec. 14, the Hellcats started things with a series of fighter sweeps. VF-80 was one of the few squadrons to find combat when its fliers caught 27 Zeros trying to reinforce Mindoro. "Vorse's Vipers" shot down nineteen of them, four by Pat Fleming. On Jan. 3, 1945, the fast carriers went after Formosa, but bad weather prevented most squadrons from getting through. VF-80 did get to its objective and swept the area looking for targets; "P.D." Fleming found and shot down three.

As the kamikaze threat grew, the Navy increased the number of fighters on the carriers. When the VF squadrons exceeded 70 planes, they became increasingly awkward to administer, and many squadrons split into more manageable VF and VBF (fighter-bomber) squadrons. Frequently the two squadrons ran the same type of missions and both usually flew Hellcats. So it was with VF-80; on Jan. 10, 1945, VBF-80 was established, with Pat Fleming as its exec. While the distinctions between the two squadrons were mainly administrative, the records show that Fleming scored ten with VF-80 and nine more with VBF-80.

The carriers struck at Formosa again on the 21st, fiercely engaged by kamikazes. Three groups came at *Ticonderoga*, one hitting it with a 550-lb. bomb. As fires raged from this hit, another one crashed into the carrier's island, bringing the fatalities to 143. Several VF-80 pilots, including Pat Fleming manned the AA guns after the first attack. When the second Zero hit, a piece of falling debris hit Fleming on the helmet and knocked him overboard. A nearby destroyer rescued him. Due to the extensive damage to *Ticonderoga*, the air group transferred to *Hancock* (CV-19)

In mid-February, the carriers hit the Home Islands themselves, for the first time since the Doolittle raid of April, 1942. Fleming led nine VBF-80 Grummans on a Feb. 16 fighter-bomber attack on the Mobara airfield; they successfully bombed three of its five hangars. He spotted three Zeros high above and zoomed up to engage them. Approaching from behind, he burned two immediately, then chased and exploded another pair. He also hit another from behind (for a confirmed or probable kill, depending on the source). Fleming's Navy Cross citation for the mission credited him with five kills. The next day, Feb. 17, he closed his score with four more victories over Japan. VBF-80 went home in March, 1945.

After the war, he served at the Navy's famous Pax River test center, where he lived near Marion Carl's family. In January, 1947, General Curtis LeMay invited him to transfer to the new USAF Strategic Air Command (SAC) as a Lt. Col. He died in 1956 when he bailed out of a B-52, but his chute caught fire.

Charles R. Stimpson

One of only four Navy fliers to "make ace" in both the Wildcat and Hellcat

Born in Salt Lake City on Aug. 24, 1919, Charlie Stimpson grew up in Santa Barbara, California, and graduated from Pomona College. He completed Navy flight training in June, 1942, and was assigned to the newly established VF-11 "Sundowners" at San Diego. They arrived at Guadalcanal in April, 1943, by which time Stimpson was a Lt.(jg). In only three combat missions in the Solomons, Stimpson scored six confirmed victories in Wildcats, four coming on June 16, his first combat mission when the Japanese staged their last big raid on Guadalcanal. Flying a Hellcat with the carrier *Hornet's* VF-11, Lt. Stimpson, nicknamed "Skull" because of his emaciated appearance, scored 5 kills on October 14, 1944, during the big raids on Formosa. Stimpson was one of eight Hellcats under the leadership of Lt. Jimmy Savage, assigned to the *Hornet's* CAP. They took off and climbed to 20,000 feet. Shortly after detecting the enemy, Lt. Savage discovered a defective compass; Stimpson took over the lead role. Stimpson's division went after the fighters; Savage's for the bombers. Stimpson's division surprised the enemy; all four of them (Stimpson, his wingman Blair, Dayhoff, and Zink) all scored on the first pass. Stimpson quickly brought down another two Hamps, as did Zink, but this time the Japs struck back, downing both Dayhoff and Zink. Savage's division had also been cut up. Very quickly only Stimpson, Blair, and Savage remained in the battle. Stimpson intercepted a Zero threatening a wounded pilot; his deflection shot caught the Zero perfectly. It exploded for Stimpson's fourth victory of the day. He scored one more kill that day, but not without the loss of his wingman Blair.

Stimpson had another big day on Nov.5, getting three kills over Manila's Clark Field.

He finished with war with 16.33 confirmed kills.

Donald Runyon - enlisted naval aviator

The highest scoring Navy F4F pilot was a VF-6 warrant officer - Machinist Donald Runyon, who originally was an enlisted NAP (Naval Aviation Pilot). He scored eight times in just three sorties during August, 1942. Supporting the invasion of Guadalcanal, on the 7th he shot down two Val dive bombers, and on the 8th a Zero and a Betty bomber. On the 24th, during the Battle of the Eastern Solomons, he destroyed three more Vals and a Zero. He later returned to combat as a commissioned officer in 1943, and scored three more kills while flying Hellcats with the *Bunker Hill's* VF-18.

Stanley W. Vejtasa

"Swede" set a record for Wildcat pilot by scoring seven victories in one mission. He started as an SBD pilot on the *Yorktown*, and shot down three Jap planes while flying with VS-5. Lt. Cdr. Flatley then recruited him into Fighting Squadron 42. With the passing of VF-42, Lieutenant Vejtasa served with VF-10, on the *Enterprise*. During the crucial Battle of Santa Cruz, on October 26, 1942, the *Enterprise* and *Hornet* were repeatedly attacked by large numbers of Vals. The 'Grim Reapers' of VF-10 had their hands full. Leading the "Red Seven" division, Swede caught a string of Vals headed for the *Hornet* and quickly knocked down two of them, while his wingman got another. Then he turned his attention to some Kates just arriving from the *Zuikaku*. Dodging their fire as well as American AA, he downed five more of the low-flying torpedo planes. Out of ammunition, he could only watch as the *Enterprise* was then hit by two bombs.

But the 'Big E' didn't sink, although 23 Wildcats and 10 pilots from the two carriers were lost defending them. The Battle of Santa Cruz was a draw, or perhaps a slight tactical victory for the Japanese. However, the Americans weren't driven off Guadalcanal, and the 150 lost Japanese fliers couldn't be replaced.

Ralph E. Elliott

The Wildcat's career did not end when Grumman switched production over its successor, the F6F Hellcat. The Eastern Aircraft Division of GM produced a license version of the Wildcat, the FM-2, which operated from the smaller escort carriers, CVE's or 'jeep' carriers. Starting in early 1944, FM-2s flew with the CVE's composite squadrons, which included both bombers and fighters. The Battle of Leyte Gulf gave the escort carriers and their Wildcats ample opportunity to prove themselves, and they did, downing 65 Jap planes on the 24th alone. Of course, on the next day, the Japanese surface ships pounded the jeep carriers, sinking the *Gambier Bay*.

The most successful composite squadron was VC-27, based on the *Savo Island*, scoring over 60 air-to-air victories. CO of the squadron, Lt. Ralph Elliott was the leading ace, claiming nine victories. (This made him the Navy's top Wildcat ace of the war.)

Sources:

Barrett Tillman,



Butch O'Hare, Wildcat pilot, Navy ace, Medal of Honor recipient



F6F Hellcat taking from USS Yorktown

Photo # 80-G-K-16953 LCDR Paul Buie briefs pilots of VF-16 aboard USS Lexington, Nov-Dec, 1943



LCDR Paul Buie and VF-16 pilots, briefing on USS Lexington

Photo # 80-G-K-2178 (Color) Commander David McCampbell, USN



The US Navy's highest-scoring ace, David McCampbell, sitting in F6F Hellcat

Photo # NH 100320 U.S. Navy Fighting Squadron Fifteen (VF-15) on board USS ESSEX (CV-9), Dec. 1944



Pilots of VF-15, a very successful squadron, on USS Essex

Photo # 80-G-74510 F6F fighters on board USS Enterprise, July 1943



F6F Hellcats on USS Enterprise

Photo # 80-G-205473 F6F-3 crash landing on board USS Enterprise, November 1943



F6F Hellcat crashing on USS Enterprise, Nov. 1943