

In the middle of the night— maybe it was 3 or 4 AM,— the GQ klaxon woke us and we stumbled up to the ready room. Maybe we got some breakfast— I don't remember, but we were on the edge wondering how combat would feel. There was word that they had at least four carriers; we had only three. Were we really going to be able to surprise them? How scary would it be? We on the Hornet were still untested. In the ready room, there was the false joking and savoir-faire; really everybody was apprehensive—scared. In time, somewhere between 6 and 7 AM, word came down on the ticker screen in the ready room that a large flight of Japanese planes had been spotted 165 miles northwest of Midway—approaching. Immediately the respective squadron skippers got together to plot a course for the air group to take. As a very junior ensign, I sensed heavy confusion on their part. Where should the air-group head—should they head to where the planes had been seen, or maybe to where they would anticipate the Japanese carriers to be? Or what? Three of the squadron commanders seemed to cluster in our ready room with the air-group commander; I didn't understand why the VT skipper didn't seem to be part of the discussion. Nevertheless, the consensus seemed to be that we would head for the spot where the planes had been spotted by the PBY, 165 miles from Midway, then look for the carriers. Navigation was figured by all of us and the planes were manned. I noticed that walking down the deck, my knees were shaky and I wondered if my stomach would settle. However, climbing into the SBD, things straightened out and we had a job to do; we had practiced methods to meet and to counteract whatever problem presented itself. In every successive combat situation after this over the next two years, the events became a game of chess—there was move and countermove, albeit the stakes were high if the opposition were not outsmarted.

At about 8 AM on the 4th, we got our ten VF and our 25-30 VB (all SBDs) into the air. Since the torpedo planes would be short on fuel, they were to be launched last— but they were spotted on the hangar deck below the flight deck. Each TBD had to be brought topside, pushed back down the deck, and positioned before it could join us. This time was spent circling the ship and while it may have been 30 minutes, it seemed interminable, —and all the time we were expending gas. Prior to combat, we all had practiced a coordinated group attack where the fighter would go in strafing as the dive bombers would pour down from above, and the torpedo planes would time it so that they would be coming in low, the target ships having been wounded and diverted. This was well and good, but no one had taken into account that with the planes we had, and with no radio communication between squadrons, a coordinated attack would be impossible. We, without the torpedo planes would go to high altitude (here we went to 19,000 feet—being inexperienced), and sight contact would be lost. There we were circling the Hornet, using valuable gas and waiting for the TBDs whom we would never be able to keep in sight anyway. When the TBDs were airborne, we headed for the spot where the Japanese planes had been seen an hour or two before! Contact with Waldron's torpedo planes was lost after 15-20 minutes; our altitude separation was too much and was compounded by an intermittent cloud layer between us. These problems seemingly had never occurred to our Naval Academy trained seniors! Some of us wondered later if the Naval Academy had not been used as a personal Country Club by a number of the senior officers.

As a wingman flying on our Exec, Gus Widhelm, I did try to track the route on my plotting board. Too, I watched for the TBDs as long as I could, perhaps ten minutes, but the altitude we were taken to was 19,000 feet. At this altitude we had to go to using oxygen, a system never as yet practiced by us in VS-8. Further, the equipment was antiquated and I doubt it was even working for me— I developed the grandfather of all headaches. We went to the 165-mile spot, I think, as I tried to plot where we were being taken, and we continued to fly past it. Finally I think we turned south towards Midway, searching for carriers! This seemed wrong to me if we were looking for the Japanese ships. They would have launching somewhere north of the 165-mile spot—in my mind. Anyway, we Hornet squadrons did not make contact and it was with some disgust that I heard we should jettison the 1000# bomb load and go back to the Hornet. By this time, both VB and VF squadrons had left us; they were getting low on gas— as were we, but our VS-8 opted to try to get back to the ship. We did finally get back aboard, low on gas and without bombs. As for the VB-8 outfit, they tried to get their planes to Midway itself; two of their SBDs dropped into the lagoon out of gas. Every one of the VF-8 F4Fs went into the water out of gas; only seven of the ten pilots were rescued by patrol planes later. Sad to say, our Hornet did not participate in the attack on the Japanese carriers at the Battle of Midway wherein four carriers were sunk. I feel our senior squadron commanders on board the Hornet, with the exception on John Waldron, did a poor job of leading us on that initial attack at Midway. As said before, John Waldron had his men well trained but he had poor equipment and no help from us. His men paid the full price and Torpedo 8 is in the history books.