

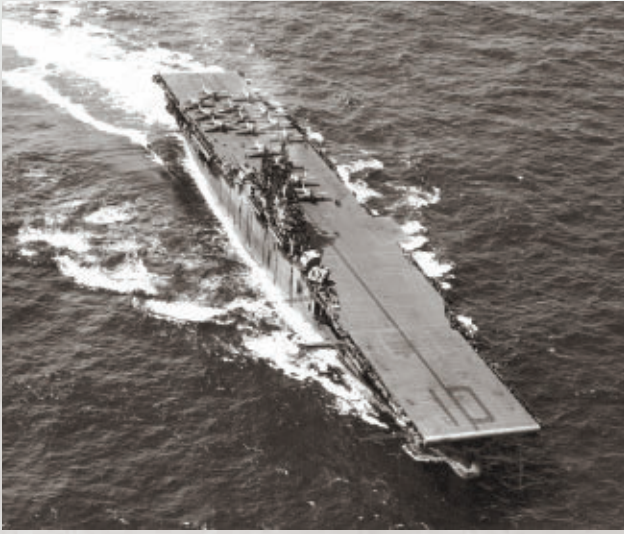
DESTROY

**RAID ON JAPAN'S
"GIBRALTAR OF THE
PACIFIC"**

TRUK!

BY THOMAS MCKELVEY CLEAVER





At the time of the Truk raids, the post-1944 Pacific "new" Navy included nine carriers, including USS Yorktown (CV-10).

As the sun rose over Pearl Harbor on New Year's Day 1944, few who saw that spectacular sunrise could have known that it was the harbinger of the war's decisive year. Roger Bond, who served as a quartermaster on USS *Saratoga* (CV-3) for most of the war, recalled afterward that there was a dividing line in the experience of the Pacific war. "I think that, for anyone who participated in the war, there were actually two wars. If you went out to the Pacific—say, after January 1944—you had a completely different experience and viewpoint than those before, because it really was two different operations."



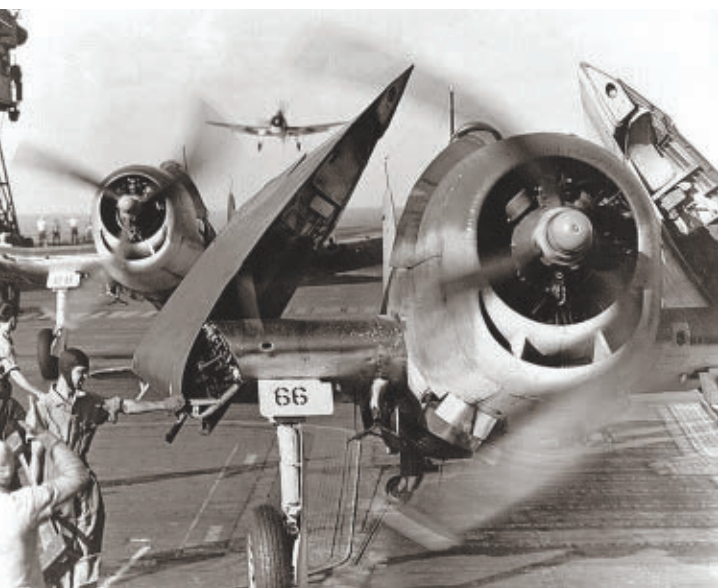
The TBM proved to be everything Grumman and the Navy hoped it would be. At Truk, its torpedoes proved lethal to anchored shipping. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

THE FLEET WAS NOW SO STRONG THAT THE EARLIER CARRIER STRATEGY USED AS RECENTLY AS THE RABAU STRIKES OF “HIT AND RUN” NO LONGER MADE STRATEGIC SENSE.

A New War in the Pacific

With the arrival in Pearl Harbor on January 10, 1944, of the brand-new USS *Intrepid* (CV-11), the Central Pacific Force had five fleet carriers—*Enterprise*, *Yorktown*, *Essex*, *Intrepid*, and *Bunker Hill*—and four light carriers—*Belleau Wood*, *Cabot*, *Monterey*, and *Cowpens*—embarking more than 500 Hellcats, Dauntlesses, Helldivers, and Avengers. Supporting them were seven battleships with numerous cruisers and destroyers, 217 ships in all, the greatest

VF-9 Hellcats land aboard USS *Essex*, with aircraft touching down every 20 seconds, in a choreography of catching the wire, taxiing forward, and folding the wings, each step caught in this photograph. (Photo courtesy of Thomas McKelvey Cleaver)



armada that had yet been seen in U.S. Navy history. The new navy was far stronger than the navy that had fought Japan to a stop in 1942, and almost twice the size of the fleet that led the invasion of the Gilberts less than 60 days earlier. The fleet was now so strong that the earlier carrier strategy used as recently as the Rabaul strikes of “hit and run” no longer made strategic sense. The fleet could take position off any enemy location and maintain air and naval superiority for as long as it was needed. The aspirations of naval aviators over the 20 years preceding the war were now reality.



Following the successful invasion of Kwajalein Atoll, the Navy looked beyond the Marshalls. A thousand miles to the west lay the unknown, mysterious main Japanese naval and air base in the Pacific: Truk Atoll, which, in the 20 years since Japan had taken control, had taken on the name “Gibraltar of the Pacific,” an indication of its



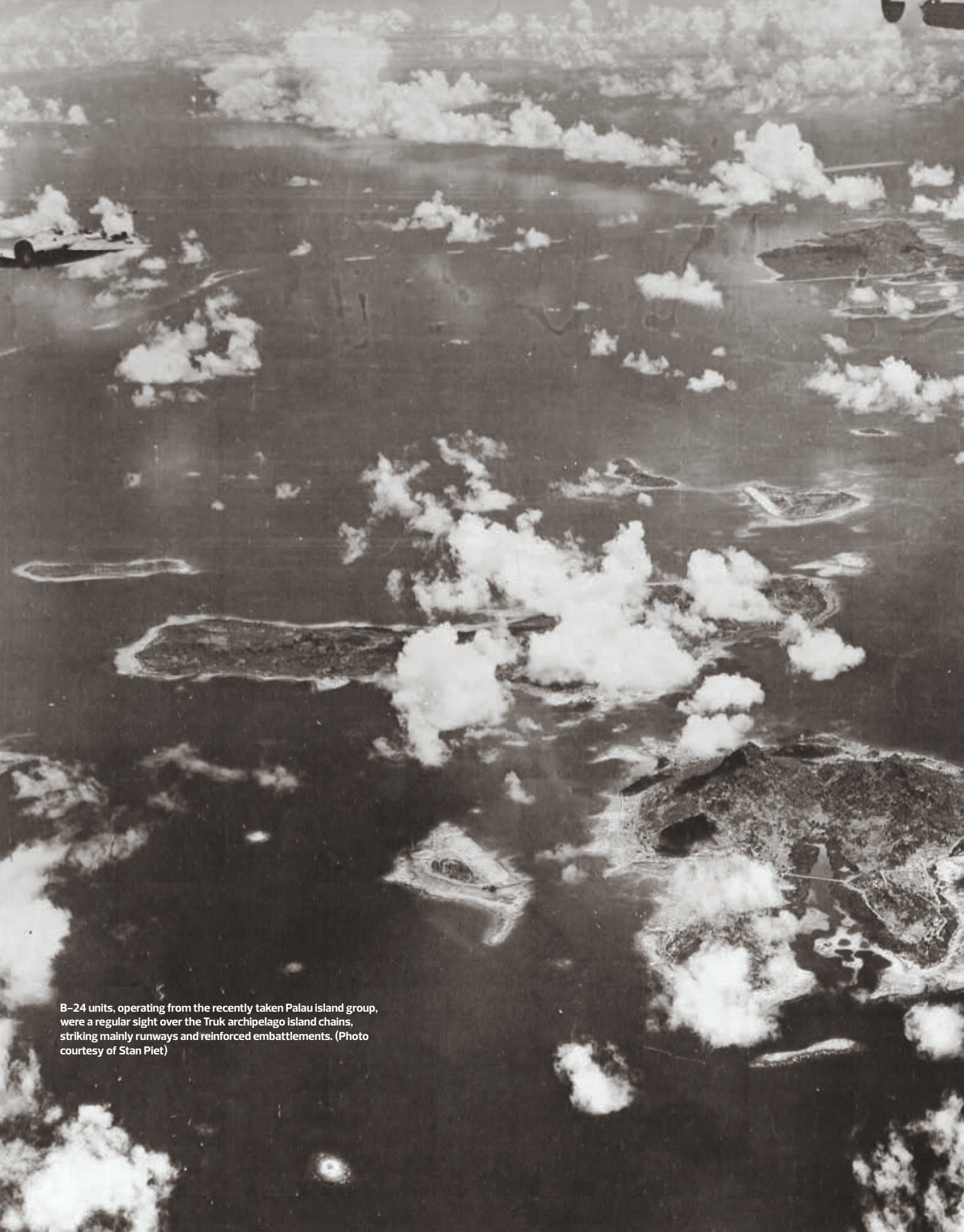
importance to Japanese ambitions. Although the name was correctly pronounced “Trook,” it would be universally known by Americans as “Truk.”

To the U.S. Navy, seeing Truk as the Gibraltar of the Pacific was no exaggeration. It appeared impregnable, and sailors spoke the name in awe-struck tones. Dangerous long-range reconnais-

sance flights by B-24s from bases in the Gilberts in December 1943 had brought back photos that allowed intelligence officers to map out the air bases and the various anchorages in the lagoon. Analysts began to realize that there was not as much there as expected.

Navy planners were not aware of the Japanese

Overhead aerial view of beleaguered Eten Island shows the pockmarked 3500-foot runway and built-up massive cut-stone seawall. Beginning in 1934, half the island was leveled to fill the seawall and construct the 260-foot-wide runway. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)



B-24 units, operating from the recently taken Palau island group, were a regular sight over the Truk archipelago island chains, striking mainly runways and reinforced embattlements. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)



decision to sacrifice the Marshalls, and they expected a possible naval response from Imperial Japanese Navy units at Truk. Thus, it was imperative that the Gibraltar of the Pacific be neutralized. The attack was set for February 16–17, 1944. In terms of audacity, the strike demonstrated how far the fast carrier task force had come since the Rabaul attack only 97 days earlier.

A Battle a Long Time in the Making

When the fliers of Task Force 58 got the word of the proposed attack on Truk, aptly code-named “Operation Hailstone,” they were eager but apprehensive. As VB-10’s executive officer, Lt. James D. Ramage recalled, “For the previous two years of the war, the very thought of approaching Truk seemed fatal.” VF-9’s Lt. j.g. Hamilton “Mac” McWhorter remembered that when he was informed of the coming operation, “My first instinct was to jump overboard.” *The Buccaneer*, the *Essex*’s shipboard newspaper, published a cartoon of the captain announcing the attack, followed by a panel in which the entire crew abandoned ship.

Truk Atoll is composed of dozens of islands surrounded



F4U-2s, of VF(N)-101, take off from USS *Enterprise* against Truk. (Photo courtesy of Thomas McKelvey Cleaver)

by a great barrier reef—although only seven islands, each marked by a volcanic peak (the tallest of which is nearly 1,500 feet above sea level), were of any size. The triangular barrier reef is roughly 140 miles around, forming a vast deep-water lagoon of more than 800 square miles. With abundant rainfall and sunshine and an average year-round temperature of 81°F, the islands are green and lush, making Truk a Pacific paradise.

As a result of the Spanish-American War, the United States assumed control of Micronesia, including the Caroline Islands and Truk. American ambitions, however, focused on the Philippines. Micronesia—with the exception of Guam, the site of the one good harbor in the Marianas—was sold by Spain to Germany in 1899 for \$4.2 million. German rule was little remarked and short-lived.

The Imperial Navy arrived in Truk in September 1914, following Japan’s declaration of war with Germany on August 23, 1914, as per a secret treaty with Great Britain that July, allowing Japan to take control of German territories in China and the Pacific in return for Tokyo



VB-16 SBD-5 over Dublon Island, the site of Imperial Japanese Navy headquarters at Truk. (Photo courtesy of Thomas McKelvey Cleaver)

declaring war and joining the Allies. Japan proceeded to take all of Micronesia, including the Marshall Islands, which Spain had granted to Germany in the 1880s, and the Marianas other than American-controlled Guam. The seizure was finally recognized internationally by the League of Nations in 1919, when Japan was granted control of the South Pacific Mandate.

Although the mandate prohibited fortification or colonization, Tokyo settled thousands of Japanese throughout Micronesia beginning in 1921, when the Imperial Navy established its Pacific headquarters on Dublon Island at Truk. When work was finished in the late 1930s, the atoll was the site of Japan's greatest fleet anchorage outside of the home islands. It was not, however, the great fortified bastion implied in the reference to it being the "Gibraltar of the Pacific." This fact was unknown outside the Japanese Navy.

Adm. Raymond Spruance's planners estimated a total of 185 Japanese aircraft at Truk, but the real number was 365; however, there were no pilots for all those aircraft, and many planes were under repair. Task Force 58 carried 276 F6F-3 Hellcat fighters, 140 SBD-5 Dauntless and 27 SB2C-1 Helldiver dive-bombers, and 126 TBM-1C Avenger torpedo-bombers, totaling 569 aircraft.

The Americans had no way of knowing that the Japanese were even more apprehensive than they were. When word was received that Kwajalein had fallen, the leaders of the Imperial Navy feared that their American opponents were now in a position to launch a strike at Truk. The



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majority of the Combined Fleet was ordered to leave the atoll on February 10. While a dozen cruisers and destroyers remained behind, the carriers and battleships sailed for Palau.

Target: Truk

The U.S. task force reached the launch point, 90 miles east of Truk, two hours before dawn on February 16, 1944. VF-6, which had been reunited as a squadron after the Gilberts campaign, had gone aboard *Intrepid* when she arrived in Pearl Harbor. Lt. j.g. Alexander Vraciu, the squadron's leading ace after the Gilberts campaign, recalled the morning was "clear, cool and beautiful as we launched."

The first of 72 Hellcats launched at 0645 hours. Leading VF-10's 12 Grummans alongside 12 from VF-6 was Air Group 10's Commander Air Group (CAG), Cmdr. William "Killer" Kane. A member of the Annapolis class of '33 that would

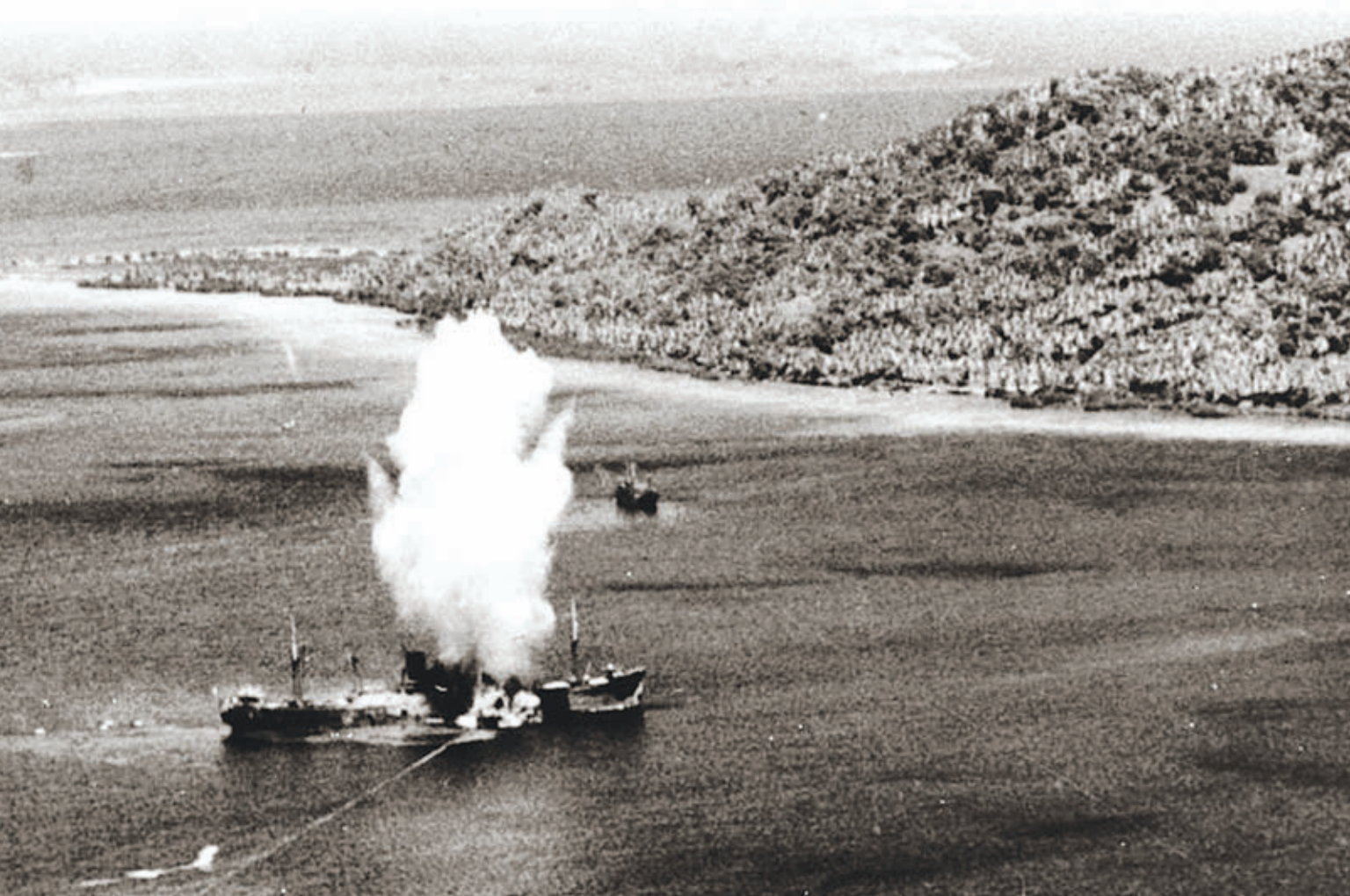
provide so many of the Navy's midlevel leaders during the war, Kane's nickname was the result of his record as a football player and wrestler at the Naval Academy. He had been at Pearl Harbor when the Japanese attacked and had entered combat later at Guadalcanal.

As the golden light of the tropic dawn brightened the sky over Truk atoll, the biggest air battle in the history of the Pacific war to that time broke out.

At 0800, Kane's strike force arrived over Moen Island and spotted Japanese fighters already aloft. The Hellcats fell on some 50 Japanese fighters, shooting the "Zekes" out of the sky by twos and threes. Kane and his wingman, Lt. j.g. Vern Ude, shot down five Zekes in five minutes before turning their attention to strafing planes on the ground.

As the rest of VF-6 dived after Kane's Hellcats,

An aerial torpedo dropped by a Task Force 58 TBM Avenger hits a Japanese cargo ship anchored off Dublon Island. (Photo courtesy of Thomas McKelvey Cleaver)



section leader Vraciu spotted Zekes 2,500 feet overhead. When no one responded to his warning call, he and wingman, Ensign Lou Little, broke into the enemy formation, which scattered in the attack. In a series of quick fights, Vraciu gunned down two Zekes and a "Rufe," while Little also nailed a Zeke. Vraciu then spotted another Zeke that ducked into a nearby cloud. After several inconclusive moments chasing the enemy in and out of the clouds, Vraciu climbed up-sun and waited for the Zeke to reappear. When it did, he dropped on it from six o'clock and set it afire with two bursts. He had nearly doubled his score, to nine. "At that moment, I was the leading Navy ace of the war. The fighting over Truk was the wildest action I participated in, Turkey Shoot included."

Yorktown's CAG, Cmdr. Joe Owen, remembered, "As we started to strafe airfields, quite a melee developed as the Japs began getting into the air. Actually, there were so many Jap airplanes



AAM 1/c A. B. Baxter mans the twin Browning AN/M2 machine guns on his SBD-5 in 1944. A lightweight, rapid-fire version of the standard M2 .30-caliber gun, it had a blistering rate of fire of 1350rpm, giving the Dauntless excellent rearward protection. Baxter flew as gunner for VB-16's well-known "wild man," Lt. j.g. Cook Cleland. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)

moving that it was almost confusing to select a target and stay with it until it was shot down, without being lured to another target just taking off or apparently attempting to join up in some kind of formation. After a few minutes, it was difficult to find uncluttered airspace. Jap aircraft were burning and falling from every quarter, and many were crashing on takeoff as a result of strafing them on the ground. Ground installations exploded and burned—all this in the early golden glow of dawn. At times, it all looked like it might have been staged for the movies."

A Fight Like No Other

A total of 47 Hellcats from five squadrons were quickly engaged as more Japanese fighters clawed their way into the sky. Some American pilots claimed that they saw Japanese parachuting in colorful pajamas, which was claimed as evidence of how complete the surprise was. The fighting was so intense that Vraciu reported seeing one Hellcat shoot down another Hellcat.

At the moment Killer Kane's Hellcats appeared



over Moen, a Japanese "Betty" bomber touched down after a flight from Rabaul. Aboard was Marine Maj. Gregory "Pappy" Boyington, who had been shot down and captured several weeks earlier. The Betty was on the first leg of a trip to Japan, transporting Boyington there for interrogation and torture. As the bomber slowed and turned off the runway, Kane and his Hellcat pilots began strafing.



Boyington and several other American prisoners were quickly hustled off the plane. A Hellcat screamed over low, “spraying .50-calibers all through the Nip aircraft standing there in front of us,” Boyington later wrote. “The piece of transportation we had just crawled out of went up before our eyes in flame and smoke, and so did nearly every other plane we could see around there.”

The Americans scrambled into a slit trench,

just in time to avoid being blown up by an American bomb. Japanese planes up and down the airstrip burned furiously. As their ammunition exploded, lead and shrapnel filled the air. During a lull, a Japanese pilot landed his Zeke and ran for cover. Suddenly, he found the Americans in the slit trench. “He was wearing one of those fuzzy helmets with the earflaps turned up, and he looked at us, as surprised as we were,

Deck crews manhandle an F6F aboard a busy Essex-class flight deck. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)



With three victories scored over Truk, VF-9's Lt. j.g. Hamilton McWhorter, who became the first Hellcat ace during the Gilberts invasion in December 1943, became the first Hellcat double ace. (Photo courtesy of Thomas McKelvey Cleaver)

then composed himself and said in English, 'I am a Japanese pilot. You bomb here, you die,' and patted the gun on his hip." Boyington burst out laughing, stopping long enough to say, "With all the God damned trouble we got, ain't you the cheerful son of a bitch, though." More Hellcats arrived, and the enemy pilot took off running. "The last we saw of him, his short legs were busy hopping over obstructions, the earflaps of his fur helmet wobbling up and down

so that he gave the appearance of a jackrabbit getting off the highway."

The Hellcat in its Element

VF-9's Lt. j.g. William J. Bonneau, with three victories in the Rabaul strike on November 11, was covering a division of Hellcats making a strafing run when a gaggle of Zekes fell on his division. In the ensuing action, he shot down four in flames. His Hellcat was damaged, with flap control and hydraulic pressure shot away; still, he managed to get back and land aboard *Essex*.

Bonneau's wingman, Lt. j.g. Eugene Valencia, got separated and was chased out to sea by six Zekes firing at him without result. Valencia finally decided, "They couldn't hit an elephant if it was tied down for them," and made a head-on pass, knocking down one. Hauling around tighter, he shot down two more, and the surviving three dived away. Back aboard *Essex*, Valencia was questioned by the Grumman tech rep about his feelings regarding the Hellcat. Grumman's publicity department ensured that Valencia's answer was widely quoted: "I love this airplane so much that if it could cook, I'd marry it."

VF-5's Lt. Robert Duncan, who scored his first victories in the October 1943 fight over Wake Island, when he downed nine-victory ace Warrant Officer Toshiyuki Sueda and his wingman, became a six-victory ace while escorting *Yorktown's* Dauntlesses and Avengers. "We saw about 15 to 20 Zekes above, and they came down to engage us. Their front man came head-on at me, which was unusual because Japs usually didn't like to make head-on shots." Duncan proceeded to shoot down both the leader and his wingman. "The third man took off to run away, and I went after him. I got so close on his tail that when I fired he just blew up right in my face. I thought I was going right through that explosion, and I jerked back on the stick and blacked out in the process." As he climbed back to the fight, a fourth Zeke rolled inverted and bored

in. Duncan fired head-on, though only the three guns in his right wing still worked. He banked around in time to see the Zeke strike the hills of Dublon Island.

Vraciu's status as leading ace didn't last an hour. McWhorter and wingman Lt. j.g. Bud Gehoe were escorting an Avenger on a photo mission when McWhorter spotted three bogeys approaching in the distance. Turning into the strangely marked orange-and-black aircraft to get a closer look, they turned out to be Zekes. "I truly couldn't believe it when they came at us head-on and never fired



SB2C Helldivers aboard USS *Intrepid* (CV-11) initially scored two destroyers and several merchant ships in Truk Lagoon until a Japanese torpedo jammed her rudder and forced her retreat to Pearl Harbor. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)



a shot. I don't see how they could have failed to spot us." With economical bursts, McWhorter downed two, while Gehoe got the third. Later, McWhorter saw another Zeke, came in behind it, fired, and it went down in flames. With that, McWhorter was the first Hellcat double ace.

Air Superiority Redefined

At dawn, there were 365 aircraft at Truk. By 1400 hours, the Hellcats had claimed 204 destroyed in the air and on the ground, and 130 in aerial combat. The Fighting Nine claimed top honors with a total bag of 36. The Hellcats owned the air over the Gibraltar of the Pacific from midafternoon on through the final strikes the following day.

There would be hard fighting to come, but with the losses sustained at Truk, combined with attrition at Rabaul, the Imperial Japanese Naval Air Force (IJNAF) was a shadow of the force that had swept the Pacific in 1942. By February 1944, most U.S. Navy fighter squadrons in the Pacific were led by men with combat experience, while their most junior pilots had more than 600 hours in their logbooks by the time they entered combat. There were almost no experienced leaders in the IJNAF, and the average pilot came to his squadron

by February 1944 with no more than 200 hours of training. Most were barely able to take off from and land on an aircraft carrier. The Truk strikes reduced the IJNAF pilot population by so much that they put the Japanese carrier force out of commission until the Marianas invasion, while they tried to train replacement pilots to make up for the losses sustained at Truk.

Not all Gibaltars are impossible targets. †

Lt. j.g. Jake Jacobsen of VB-10 in the landing pattern of the USS Enterprise (CV-6) in March 1944. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)

SBD-5s of Bombing Squadron 10 (VB-10) in formation prior to landing aboard USS Enterprise (CV-6) during 1944. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)

