

FIGHT TO THE END

15 August 1945: the day Japan signed surrender documents, and the Pacific campaign officially came to an end. For US Navy and Fleet Air Arm pilots, however, it meant little let-up in the aerial fighting

WORDS: THOMAS McKELVEY CLEAVER

The first quarter-moon in the western sky gleamed dimly through scattered clouds over the Pacific Ocean, the moonlight sufficient to illuminate the many wakes of the enormous formation of ships below. At 03.00hrs, an observer would have heard the calls to reveille echoing across the still-dark sea throughout the darkened vessels of the US Navy's Third Fleet.

Crewmen in the big aircraft carriers steaming in the centre of the formations crawled out of their racks in humid bunking compartments and began dressing. Young pilots stumbled to their feet in cramped junior officer staterooms and threw lukewarm water on their faces to awaken fully before staggering off to the wardrooms for

a quick breakfast. The Third Fleet had sortied from Leyte Gulf in the Philippines on 1 July for what would turn out to be its final deployment of the war; now, six weeks later, the limited supplies of fresh food were running out. Spam sandwiches and the chipped dried beef in gravy over toast known universally as 'SOS' ('shit on a shingle') once again made their appearance on the menu.

The wail of alarms across the fleet brought crews to pre-dawn general quarters. Anti-aircraft guns, 20mm and 40mm, were unlimbered in readiness as their crews strained their eyes into the western sky. The Pacific sunrise lit building cumulus clouds in all quarters. There had been no kamikaze attack in several days and

the fleet was just returning to the waters off the main Japanese home island of Honshu from a day spent out of range of the suicide attackers, while the carriers refuelled their thirsty escorts.

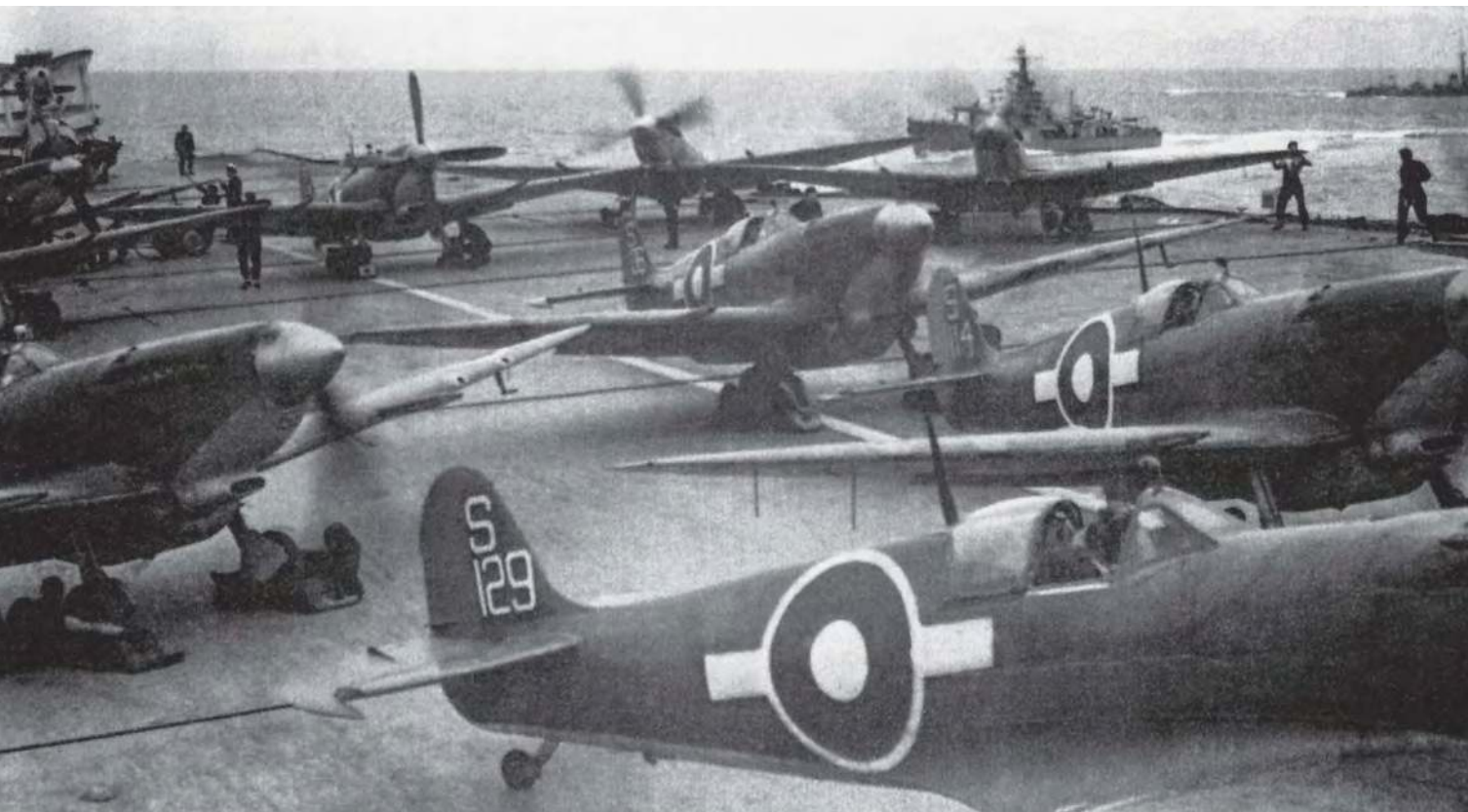
It was Wednesday 15 August 1945, just one more of many long, tiring days faced in the Pacific War, now in its 44th month. In recent days, rumours had raced through the destroyers, cruisers, battleships and aircraft carriers that the war could end at any moment. Those who passed on the rumours were quickly reminded by their salty seniors of the old navy saying, "Believe nothing that you hear, and only half of what you see."

Task Group 38.4, commanded by Rear Admiral Arthur W. Radford ➤

TBM Avengers and SB2C Helldivers of Air Group 84 bomb Hakodate, Japan during the summer of 1945.
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Task Force 38 sailing off the coast of Japan in advance of the enemy's surrender. VIA THOMAS McKELVEY CLEAVER



ABOVE: Seafire IIIs — in the foreground, PP144/S-129 — from 894 Squadron aboard HMS *Indefatigable* circa August 1945.

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with his flag aboard USS *Yorktown* (CV-10) and composed of the fleet carriers USS *Sbangri-La* (CV-38), *Bon Homme Richard* (CV-31) and *Wasp* (CV-18), accompanied by the light carriers USS *Independence* (CVL-22) and *Cowpens* (CVL-25), exemplified the fast carrier striking force in the summer of 1945. Centred around six carriers, it was numerically the strongest task group in Task Force 38.

The squadrons aboard the six carriers included a total of 133 Grumman F6F-5 Hellcats, including 36 dedicated night fighters aboard 'Bonnie Dick'; 137 Vought F4U Corsairs, including 36 brand new F4U-4s, on *Wasp*; 45 Curtiss SB2C Helldiver dive bombers, including 15 of the latest SB2C-5, also aboard *Wasp*; and 80 of the newest TBM-3 Avenger torpedo bombers. Able to strike the enemy by day or night, Task Group 38.4 packed more punch than the entire pre-war carrier force combined. Task Force 38 as a whole had 10 fleet carriers and six light carriers in three task groups as its centrepiece.

The British Pacific Fleet, Task Force 37, had joined the Third Fleet

on 16 July, augmenting the striking force with four fleet carriers carrying 200 additional aircraft: Supermarine Seafire IIIs, Fairey Firefly Is, Grumman Avengers and Hellcats, and Vought Corsairs. Unfortunately, three of the carriers had been forced to retire on 12 August to the advanced British base at Manus atoll in the Admiralty Islands south of the Philippines, known to the sailors of the Royal Navy as 'Scapa Flow with bloody palm trees', due to a

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lack of British tankers available for replenishment purposes.

HMS *Indefatigable*, with her escort, the battleship HMS *King George V*, the cruisers HMS *Newfoundland* and *Gambia*, and destroyers HMS *Barfleur*, *Wakeful*, *Wrangler*, *Teazer*, *Termagant* and *Tenacious*, together with HMAS *Napier* and *Nizam* of the Royal Australian Navy, remained as Task Group 38.5. The Seafires of 24 Naval Fighter Wing, operated by 887 and 894 Squadrons, had the

best low-altitude performance of any fighters in the fleet and were the first line of defence against Japanese low-level kamikaze attacks.

Aboard the veteran *Yorktown*, the young pilots of VF-88, 'Fighting-88', entered the squadron ready room for the morning briefing. The air group was one of the newest in the fleet, having only come aboard *Yorktown* at Leyte in June while the fleet licked its wounds and caught its breath after the battle of Okinawa. The squadron

had taken heavy losses in the six weeks since Admiral Halsey brought the fleet to the waters off Japan, with 10 pilots lost including VF-88's boss, Lt Cdr Charles Crommelin, in a freak mid-air collision with his wingman over

Hokkaido 30 days earlier.

The pilots were unsure about Lt Malcolm W. Cagle, formerly the squadron executive officer, who now led them. The combat-experienced division leaders doubted that Cagle, who hadn't become a naval aviator until January 1944, whose flying experience had been confined to Training Command until he was given the plum XO position, could fill Crommelin's shoes. These experienced men were AvCads —

reservists commissioned for the duration of the war — while Cagle was a ‘ringknocker’, an Annapolis graduate. As a ‘regular’ Cagle benefitted from the rule, ‘the navy takes care of its own’. Over the next 30 years, Cagle would make a name for himself as a senior aviator in the Korean War and a carrier commander in the Vietnam War, eventually attaining the rank of vice admiral and retiring as commander of naval education and training at Pensacola. But that was the future. Today, his leadership was in doubt. When Cagle assumed command, he told the pilots if they had any suggestions, he’d like to hear them. No-one replied, since, as one recalled, “We observed his body language that said, ‘I don’t want to hear it.’”

The men were electrified by Cagle’s announcement that the Japanese were likely to surrender today, though the exact time was unknown. The mission was to prevent an aerial Banzai attack by any Japanese flyers who refused the orders. Two divisions — eight F6F-5s — would join up with eight other Hellcats from *Wasp’s* VF-86 and 16 F4U-1Ds from *Shangri-La’s* VF-85 and VBF-85 to attack airfields around Choshi, the easternmost city of greater Tokyo. The eight Hellcats were to split into two groups when they reached Tokurozawa airfield. Two pilots would stay high to receive and relay the hoped-for ceasefire message that might be broadcast at any time. The others, Lt(jg)s ‘Howdy’ Harrison, Maury Proctor and Ted Hansen, and Ensigns Joe Sahloff, Wright Hobbs and Gene Mandenberg, would strafe anything they found on the airfield. Launch was set for 04.30hrs.

A few miles from *Yorktown*, flight deck crews aboard Task Group 38.1’s two light carriers, USS *Belleau Wood* (CVL-24) and *San Jacinto* (CVL-30), each prepared a division of F6F-5s for a final patrol over Japan. Four Hellcats of the veteran VF-31, the most successful light carrier fighter squadron of the war — now on its second tour — were readied aboard *Belleau Wood*, while on *San Jacinto*, four F6Fs of VF-49 were ready for take-off.

HMS *Indefatigable’s* flight deck was abuzz with activity as men worked in the pre-dawn greyness to ready the Seafire IIIs for their first offensive operation since returning to the waters off Japan in mid-July. Three Seafires of 887 Squadron and four from 894 were assigned to escort six 820 Squadron Avengers and four Fireflies of 1772 Squadron for a

dawn strike against the kamikazes at Kisarazu airfield, 30 miles south of Tokyo. Officially, this would be the war’s last air strike by Fleet Air Arm units. Like VF-88, the mission was to prevent any attempted attack on the Allied fleet as it steamed 100 miles east of Tokyo Bay.



Briefings completed, the pilots and aircrews of the four squadrons manned their aircraft. Sub-Lt Fred Hockley was assigned as flight leader of the four Seafires from 894 Squadron. Son of a foreman with the Cambridge water board and heavily involved in his local church and competitive swimming before the war, Hockley joined the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve when the war broke out and trained as a fighter pilot. He had flown the Seafire III in operations over southern France a year before, and on the missions since the Palembang strikes in January 1945 that marked the arrival of the British Pacific Fleet.

The three 887 Squadron Seafires were led by Sub-Lt Victor Lowden. Born in Bangkok, where his father worked as an accountant, and educated at St John’s College, Cambridge, Lowden had joined 887 in May while the British Pacific Fleet fought the Sakishima Islands-based kamikazes which were attacking the Allied fleet off Okinawa. Since the

fleet’s return from Australia, he had engaged in combat over Shikoku and Honshu and attacks on shipping and shore installations near Sendai.

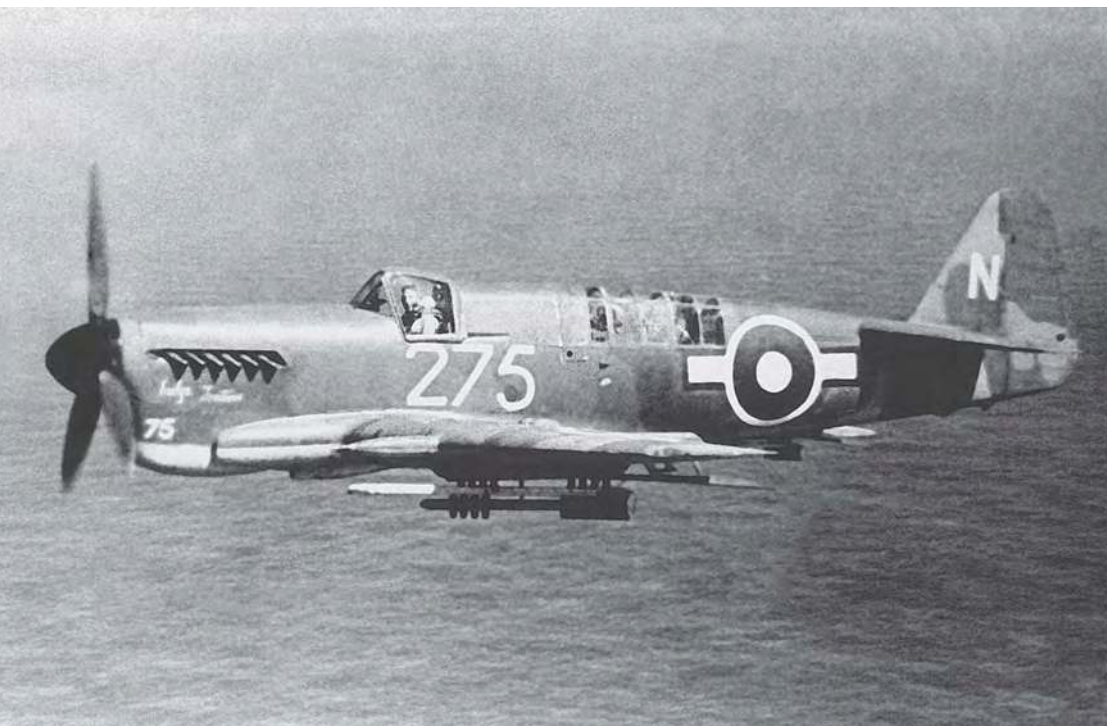
Throughout the fleet, nearly 200 American and British aircraft were headed for the Japanese capital. Pilots lifted off their carriers just as the sun appeared over the eastern horizon, though the sea was still dark. They climbed into the morning light, each man hoping the recall order might come before they arrived over the enemy coast.

At about 05.30hrs, Fred Hockley would just have been able to see the dark mass of Honshu ahead through the thick clouds. At that moment, the Avenger leader passed the word that they were aborting the attack on Kisarazu airfield due to the poor weather and would attack the secondary target, a chemical weapons factory at Odaki. When Hockley pressed his radio switch to reply, he discovered when no-one responded that his radio transmitter had malfunctioned. Moments later the receiver also packed up. Nevertheless, he decided to press on, relying on hand signals to wingman Ted Garvin, who could radio his instructions. He looked over at Garvin and tapped his helmet headphones, to indicate that he had radio problems.

Leading the first division of ‘Fighting-88’ Hellcats inbound to Choshi, ‘Howdy’ Harrison spotted

BELOW: Lt Cdr Richard Crommelin (right) was commander of VF-88. One of four famous brothers who were all naval aviators — three of whom died during World War Two — he was lost during the strikes by Task Force 38 on the Japanese naval base at Kure at the end of July 1945. US NAVY





ABOVE:
Firefly I DK431
Evelyn Tentions was
on the strength
of 1771 Squadron
during July 1945.

VIA ANDREW THOMAS

Fujiyama, its snow-capped peak gleaming in the early-morning light high above the Tokyo plain. The other four VF-88 machines, the eight *Wasp* F6Fs and the 16 *Shangri-La* Corsairs were dark silhouettes in the brightening sky. High clouds were visible in all directions.

Japanese radar picked up the Allied formations and the alert was sounded at airfields that dotted the Tokyo area. Atsugi airfield east of Tokyo was the main base for the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) Air Service in the capital region and home to the 302nd Kokutai (air group), one of the IJN's last remaining elite units. The 302nd had been created in March 1944 to provide defence against the expected B-29 Superfortress raids. Two of the group's three Hikotai (squadrons) were equipped with the Mitsubishi J2M3 Raiden (Thunderbolt), known to the Allies by the codename 'Jack'. Optimised as a bomber interceptor, the J2M3 was at a disadvantage in combat with Hellcats, Corsairs or P-51D Mustangs. Thus, the third squadron flew the A6M5c Zero-sen or 'Zeke', still the main air superiority fighter for the IJN despite its manifest obsolescence, to protect the heavier interceptors. The 302nd pilots saw themselves as dedicated samurai; there was no thought of surrender among these men who were willing to crash their aircraft into one of the silver giants attacking their homeland.

Commander of the 302nd was 23-year-old Lt Yukio Morioka,

youngest Japanese air group leader of the war. Originally trained as a dive-bomber pilot, Morioka missed the great carrier battles and became a fighter pilot in 1944 when he was assigned to the 302nd.

He had trained on the Zero with the group's leading ace, Ensign Sadaaki 'Temei' Akamatsu, a man who was infamous in the Imperial Navy. A pilot since 1932, he had seen action over China where he quickly became an ace, and was one of the high scorers in the early days of the Pacific War. His wicked reputation as an undisciplined rebel and womaniser had seen him broken in rank several times. Now, however, with his wild flying skills he was the only IJN pilot who preferred the Raiden, having once shot down three P-51s in one mission; he downed nine Hellcats in the fights following the first American naval strikes against Tokyo in February. The other pilots considered Akamatsu the 'old master' and listened closely to his advice to use 'hit-and-run' tactics against the Americans. In eight years of combat, Akamatsu had yet to get so much as a scratch from the enemy.



On 23 January 1945, Morioka nearly died when a 73rd Bomb Wing B-29 gunner shot off his left hand. Miraculously, he landed successfully despite shock and loss of blood. After a brief hospital stay, he was fitted with an iron claw with which he could control the Zero's throttle,

and returned to combat in April. On 3 August, he shot down the P-51D flown by 2nd Lt John J. Coneff of the Iwo Jima-based 506th Fighter Group's 457th Fighter Squadron in a wild fight over Tokyo Bay to thwart the rescue of Capt Edward Mikes from the 458th FS. Ten days later he led four Zeros that chased and shot down a PBV-5A Catalina that had just taken off after rescuing a Hellcat pilot in Tokyo Bay outside the IJN base at Yokosuka.

Warned of the coming attack, Morioka manned his A6M5c and took off quickly with wingmen Ensigns Mitsuo Tsuruta, Muneaki Morimoto and Tooru Miyaki close behind, followed by a second flight of Zeros. Akamatsu's four J2M3s trailed Morioka's Zeros as they climbed through halls of clouds.

As they approached Odaki, the *Indefatigable* Fireflies and Avengers dropped to 1,000ft and bored in for their runs. Just at that moment, two Zeros were spotted below. Sub-Lt Randy Kay, leader of the second 894 pair, called out that they were decoys. A moment later, Kay spotted 12 A6Ms that popped out of the clouds and flashed past the three 887 Squadron Seafires 3,000ft above the four 894 fighters.

Fred Hockley didn't hear Kay's shouted warning, "Break! Break!" and only realised the Fleet Air Arm formation was under attack when he saw his wingman breaking sharply away to the right. Hockley was a moment too late in flinging his Seafire after the others. Suddenly, he was wracked by the heavy hits of 20mm shells from the Zero he suddenly saw in his rear-view cockpit mirror, locked on to his tail. Holes appeared in the aircraft's wing and engine cowling, followed by smoke. The Seafire was mortally injured.

As his attacker turned to face another Seafire, Hockley pulled open his canopy and bailed out. Falling clear of the fight, he opened his parachute. A few moments later, he hit the ground hard outside the village of Higashi-mura. When he stood up, he faced a very surprised — and very scared — Japanese air raid warden. Hockley raised his arms in surrender. Engines with their throttles pushed to the maximum screamed overhead, engaged in the Fleet Air Arm's last fight of the Second World War.

When the 12 A6Ms flashed past as they dived on the four Seafires below, Victor Lowden instinctively winged over, followed by Sub-Lts Gerry 'Spud' Murphy and W. J. 'Taffy'

Williams. Selecting a target, Lowden pressed the firing button as he closed to 800ft behind the enemy fighter. Cannon shells struck the Zero until it fell away in flames. Clearing his tail before latching on to a second Japanese fighter, Lowden closed in and opened fire. After the first burst, his port cannon jammed. The Seafire yawed from the recoil of the starboard gun with each shot. Stomping on the rudder and ailerons, Lowden shot down the Zero with three bursts from a range of 250 yards before turning after a third. Lowden's wingman, Williams, also shot down an A6M and opened fire at the third opponent, which quickly went down under their combined fire.

The two Seafires and the surviving Zeros twisted and turned, firing for a brief second as an enemy appeared and then disappeared in their sights. Three of the enemy machines got on Lowden's tail and he hauled around in a maximum-rate turn, firing at each and damaging two before his speed decayed just as his cannon fired its last shot. Lowden quickly nosed his Seafire over into a maximum-performance dive and was able to out-run his pursuers.



The three surviving 894 pilots stuck with the Avengers. Ted Garvin was hit and had one cannon jam when his drop tank failed to jettison. He still managed to damage one that he lost sight of in the clouds. Randy Kay shot down one of two Zeros attacking the Avengers with a 60° deflection shot, then blew the tail off the second while his wingman, Sub-Lt Don Duncan, hit two that retreated damaged from the fight and finished off a third despite a cannon jam.

Murphy found himself behind a pair and quickly dispatched one. He got locked in to a turning fight with the second. He later remembered the battle. "The enemy approached our Avengers in fairly close starboard echelon, but flying in line-astern. They peeled off smartly in fours from down-sun and headed for the Avengers. One section of four appeared to be coming head-on for us, but I didn't observe their guns firing. Their original attack was well-coordinated, but they seemed to lose each other after that, and could not have kept a good look-out astern.



"I opened fire with my flight leader from the enemy port quarter and saw strikes on the fuselage of the enemy, which was finished off by the flight leader. I disengaged from above to attack another 'Zeke' 500ft below. I closed in from above and astern, obtaining hits on his belly and engine. His undercart fell down and smoke and flame were coming from the engine, but I was closing too fast and overshot. I pulled up to re-attack number two and saw a lone 'Zeke' at the same level doing a shallow turn to starboard. He evidently didn't see

“ I pulled up to re-attack number two and saw a lone ‘Zeke’ at the same level doing a shallow turn to starboard. He evidently didn’t see me and I held fire ’til I was some 100 yards away ”

me and I held fire 'til I was some 100 yards away. I observed immediate strikes on his cockpit and engine, which burst into flames. He rolled on his back and plummeted in flames into a cloud."

As fast as the fight had happened, it was over. While the Seafire pilots fought off the Zeros, the Fireflies and Avengers hit their target squarely and made their escape. The six Avengers came under fire from four other enemy fighters with a further eight closing in. One TBM was badly hit but remained in formation while his

wingman's turret gunner hit one of the attackers. Suddenly, four dark blue American Hellcats dove into the fight. The British pilots were unaware of the identity markings on the F6Fs, but they were the four VF-49 machines from USS *San Jacinto*. Their arrival broke up the Japanese attackers, and they quickly shot down four Zeros.

Above, division leader Lt Jim Stewart's four VF-31 Hellcats maintained top cover. Seeing the other Japanese fighters evade the 'Fighting-49' Hellcats, he yelled,

"Let's go!" and dived, followed closely by his wingman and by section leader Lt(jg) Edward 'Smiley' Toaspern, a five-victory ace on his second tour with the squadron and his wingman. Seeing the enemy fighters

split up, the two section leaders broke apart, Stewart going after one pair while Toaspern pulled in behind the second. A burst from his guns exploded one, then he hit the other, which caught fire and fell away. In the meantime, Stewart exploded one Zero while the other quickly retreated into the clouds along with the other enemy fighters. The four VF-31 pilots rapidly joined up with their comrades from VF-49.

Thirty-five minutes later, the air officer on *Belleau Wood* radioed them to abort the mission and return to

ABOVE:
An 820 Squadron Avenger II, JZ444, goes over the side of *Indefatigable* on 28 July 1945 following a port undercarriage collapse. US NAVY

RIGHT: Sub-Lt Fred Hockley led the four 894 Squadron Seafire IIs on the Fleet Air Arm's last strike of World War Two. Shot down in combat and made prisoner, he was executed that night by drunken Japanese Army officers following the Japanese surrender, the last Allied flier to die in the war.

VIA THOMAS MCKELVEY CLEAVER

base. Japan had just surrendered. The war was over.

None of the British or American pilots was checking his watch as he fought, but either Sub-Lt Gerry Murphy of 887 Squadron, or VF-31's Lt Jim Stewart or Lt(jg) Edward Toaspern, was the last Allied fighter pilot to shoot down an enemy fighter before the Pacific War was officially declared over.

That official declaration, however, did not mean fighting stopped. Lt Paul Herschel was leading his division of four VF-6 Hellcats home to the USS *Hancock* (CV-19) after getting the recall order when they were jumped by seven enemy fighters. They shot down a 'Zeke' and two 'Jacks' without loss and continued back to their carrier.

VF-88's Hellcats weren't as fortunate. At 06.45hrs, the eight aircraft were above the target. 'Howdy' Harrison led six F6Fs low over Tokurozawa just as word came that the Japanese had surrendered. Proctor's wingman, Ted Hansen, recalled thinking, "Oh God, let's get our fannies out of here". The six were hit seconds later from behind and above by 17 Japanese fighters, identified as Kawanishi N1K2-J 'George' and Nakajima Ki-84 'Frank' types as well as several 'Zekes' and 'Jacks'. If there were 'Franks' present, they must have been part of an Imperial Japanese Army Air Service (IJAAS) formation that stumbled on the fight at the same time as the IJN attackers, since the two air arms never operated together.

Turning in to the attackers, Harrison opened fire. In the opening head-to-head pass, Hansen shot down what he identified as a 'Frank' that tried to ram him and splashed a second. A third Ki-84 lost its wing to Maury Proctor's fire. Losing track of Mandenberg, Harrison and Hobbs, Hansen and Proctor joined up and soon spotted a 'Jack' on Joe Sahloff's tail, which Proctor exploded. Clearly in trouble, with his fighter trailing smoke, Sahloff turned for the coast but was never seen again.

When Proctor turned away from the exploding 'Jack', he was bracketed with tracers. He made a tight right turn that gave his wingman Hansen the shot to nail the 'Frank' on his tail. Reversing course, Proctor saw two enemy fighters on fire. The six in front of him and one turning behind him were still full of fight. He managed a killing belly shot when



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the six pulled into a climb, quickly ducking into cloud to evade the one behind. When he popped out moments later, the sky was empty. As he flew towards the coast, he attempted to contact the others and thought he heard Hansen. Hansen heard nothing and believed he was the sole survivor until Proctor appeared overhead five minutes after he 'trapped' aboard *Yorktown*.

The fight over Tokurozawa went into the history books as the war's last substantial air battle. While the six VF-88 pilots claimed nine kills, it came at the high cost of four missing and finally listed as presumed dead: Harrison, Hobbs, Mandenberg and Sahloff.

Minutes after Hansen and Hobbs landed on *Yorktown*, Jim Stewart's VF-31 division 'trapped' aboard *Belleau Wood*. At about the same time, Victor Lowden, who had narrowly escaped being attacked by American Corsairs on his return flight by dropping his Seafire's landing gear and rocking his wings to show the prominent US-style roundels, touched down on *Indefatigable* with an overheating Merlin engine due to a hit in the radiator, the last of the

British strike force to do so after the badly damaged sixth Avenger ditched near the plane guard destroyer.

Japanese records are incomplete as to which units were engaged where on this last day of the war. 302nd Kokutai commander Morioka claimed he shot down one of six Hellcats the 302nd came across "near Atsugi", very close to the reported location of the VF-88 F6Fs when they were hit. It is now considered likely that the 302nd fought with both the VF-88 and VF-6 Hellcats, which both reported being attacked by a mixture of 'Zekes' and 'Jacks', a combination flown only by the 302nd. A squadron of the 343rd Kokutai equipped with the N1K-2J and perhaps an unidentified IJAAS unit equipped with the Ki-84 were also involved in the VF-88 battle. The Seafires from *Indefatigable* most likely engaged Zeros of the 252nd Kokutai, which was based at Atsugi. Lt(jg) Tadahiko Honma, a 252nd Kokutai/304th Hikotai pilot, was shot down in his A6M5 by a Seafire. Chief Petty Officer Yoshinari of the 252nd was credited with shooting down Hockley.

While all this was happening, a unit from the Imperial Japanese Army's 426th Infantry Regiment arrived in the village of Higashi-mura to take custody of Fred Hockley. He was taken to the regiment's nearby headquarters and placed in a jail cell and was present when the soldiers heard the voice of their emperor, telling them to "endure the unendurable" and surrender. A colonel came to the jail and informed him of the emperor's orders.

Later that evening, the cell door opened to reveal a group of drunken Japanese officers led by a major. Hockley was removed from the cell and marched into the nearby woods where he was forced to kneel. On the major's order, one of the junior officers beheaded Hockley with his samurai sword. The body was hidden in a shallow grave.

A few days later, fearful that the body would be found when Allied troops arrived, the murderers returned and dug up Hockley's body, then burned it. It did them no good. Other soldiers who disagreed with what had been done informed Allied authorities. The major who gave the order and the junior officer who carried it out were arrested in October 1945. Following a brief trial, they were hanged as war criminals that November.

