

All Guts, No Glory

What they lacked in strength, World War II escort carriers made up in numbers...and the perseverance of their crews

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LIEUTENANT JOSEPH CASTELLO DROPPED HIS FM-1 WILDCAT out of the morning sky and, with a waggle of his wings, lined up on the U.S. Navy Escort Carrier the Liscome Bay. One of 36 pilots practicing landings that October day in 1943, Castello was preparing to join U.S. Forces in trying to dislodge the Japanese from strongholds in the Solomon Islands.



October 25, 1944: As Japanese shells explode near U.S. ships (background), the Kitkun Bay launches its fighters. (Naval Institute Photo Archive)

Perched on a platform off the stern, the landing signal officer raised his paddles and guided Castello in. Even the best landing was little more than a controlled crash on the largest fleet attack carriers, but on the much smaller deck of an escort carrier, the feat was even dicier. Everyone on the Liscome Bay's flight deck and bridge tensely watched the fighter's approach.

He's coming in a bit too high, thought Jim Beasley, one of the ship's quartermasters. Beasley was no aviator, but he knew a bolter coming when he saw one.

Castello hit the flight deck fast and hard, bouncing over the arresting wires. For a moment, the Wildcat tried to keep flying. Then it smashed back down. Its left landing gear was sheared

off as the aircraft skidded across the deck. With a screech of metal, the mangled fighter disappeared over the starboard side and into the Pacific Ocean.

Beasley ran to the ship's edge and saw Castello struggling in the cockpit. Before the pilot could squirm free, his Wildcat nosed over into the foaming water. Castello's death on October 16 marked the Liscome Bay's first casualty. "It left an unforgettable imprint on my mind," Beasley wrote in an unpublished memoir 50 years later. "I had seen him kiss his wife and child goodbye on the dock in San Diego."

Castello's fellow Wildcat and TBF Avenger torpedo bomber pilots in Composite Squadron 39 (VC-39) were horrified. If an experienced pilot like the lieutenant could lose his life in a training accident within sight of the California coast, what chance did they stand when the shooting started? As fate would have it, not much of a chance at all. Seventy-seven pilots and crewmen of VC-39 crossed the Liscome Bay's gangplank for the first time in San Diego. For over half of them, it would be a one-way trip.

The Liscome Bay set a grim record during the war—for the greatest loss of life in the sinking of a U.S. carrier—yet few people know about the ship. (More men died in a Japanese air attack on the Essex-class carrier Franklin, but that ship remained afloat.) I heard the Liscome Bay's story only because I was doing research for a book that involved one of the survivors, but the more I looked into it, the more I was convinced that the history of the Liscome Bay should be told. The resulting book, *Twenty-three Minutes to Eternity*, was published last month by the University of Alabama Press. It joins a surprisingly small body of literature on the escort carriers, but I have found that these ships' histories, individually and collectively, provide a perspective on World War II naval history that isn't found in books on the larger attack carriers.

The escort carriers—formally "carrier vessel escorts," or CVEs—were conceived as the solution to a problem President Franklin Roosevelt faced before the United States entered the war: Ships carrying supplies to Great Britain and the Soviet Union were being sunk in the Atlantic by German U-boats. Beginning in January 1941, Roosevelt pressured a hesitant Navy to convert merchant ships and oilers into light aircraft carriers capable of escorting the vulnerable convoys. It designated the converted merchant ships the Bogue class, after the first escort carrier commissioned from those conversions, and labeled the covered oilers the Cimmaron class. By the time these converted carriers entered the fray in 1943—carrying a typical load of 27 Wildcat fighters and TBF/M Avenger torpedo bombers—the U.S. Navy had begun to engage the Japanese in the southwest Pacific, and the war's tide was turning slowly in the Allies' favor.

But the increasing number of naval operations demanded more escort carriers. In 1943, industrialist Henry J. Kaiser secured a contract to build 50 carriers over the course of a year—a seemingly impossible feat. Kaiser's 500-foot-long CVEs would be just over half the length of the Essex-class fleet carriers and, with a top speed of 18 knots (21 mph), would be only half as fast. The Navy intended these warships, the first escort carriers designed from the keel up,

to escort convoys, hunt U-boats in the Atlantic, and provide close air support for Allied invasion troops in the Pacific. But how would such small, slow ships fare when they sailed into battle?

As far as Kaiser was concerned, that was the Navy's problem. "Eighteen or more by '44," his shipyards pledged. Kaiser was already cranking out cargo-carrying Liberty ships in under 60 days each. He applied the same techniques to his escort carriers, assembling much of each ship from prefabricated sections.

The U.S. public had dubbed the escort carriers "baby flattops" and "jeep carriers"; the British called them "Woolworth carriers," after the chain of American dime stores. The cookie-cutter qualities of mass production and the hurried schedule made the sailors assigned to the ships uncomfortable. At least one old salt complained that the escort carrier designation "CVE" stood for "combustible, vulnerable, and expendable."

Kaiser launched his first escort carrier, the *Casablanca*, on April 5, 1943. The ship's name was also bestowed on the class of CVEs that followed. The second, the *Liscome Bay*, came two weeks later. And by the end of the contract, Kaiser had delivered all 50—roughly one a week. Mindful of that record, and eyeing the carriers' welded hulls, thin bulkheads, temperamental steam engines, and pell-mell construction schedules, skeptical sailors labeled them "Kaiser coffins."

But the *Liscome Bay*'s officers and sailors had little time to dwell on possible shortcomings. A hasty shakedown cruise followed the carrier's August 7, 1943 commissioning, but the pilots and their 28 Wildcats and Avengers did not embark until mid-October, and steamed for Pearl Harbor on the 22nd. There the crew received its first orders for combat—to provide air support for the Army's invasion of Makin Atoll, a tiny island 100 miles north of Tarawa in the Gilbert chain, which lies about halfway between Hawaii and Australia.

For four days, the *Liscome Bay*'s aircraft, joined by others from sister carriers the *Coral Sea* and the *Corregidor*, strafed and bombed Japanese positions on Makin. No enemy fighters challenged them, but, as the days passed, the *Liscome Bay*'s crew grew nervous. How long would their slow, thin-skinned carrier have to remain off Makin?

In the pre-dawn darkness of November 24, the crew's worst fears were realized. A torpedo launched from the Japanese submarine I-175 smashed into the carrier's aft starboard quarter and exploded in the worst possible place—a magazine in which nearly 70,000 pounds of bombs were stowed. A little over a mile away, the skipper of the battleship *Mississippi* watched in shock:

"The first indication of the hit was a bright quick flash of fire," the captain wrote later, "followed within two or three seconds by a great explosion and towering mass of fire which seemed to engulf the ship and brilliantly illuminated the surrounding area. This column of fire rose to a height of several hundred feet carrying with it burning wreckage and fragments which showered down into the sea for several minutes on all sides. A second heavy explosion was seen and heard about twenty seconds after the first.... When the cloud of fire lifted from the ship she was seen to be a blazing wreck with fires raging throughout her structure."

Ensign Selden N. May, one of VC-39's Wildcat pilots, was asleep in an upper bunk when the torpedo hit. The blast knocked him onto the steel deck. "I was stunned," May recalled in a survivor's statement, "and woke up when [men] started running through my room. I slept in the raw, but I grabbed my life preserver and started running to find a way off the ship. There were continuous explosions. I finally climbed through a hole in the port antiaircraft [guns' ammunition] clip room onto the port catwalk. The ship was listing about thirty degrees to the starboard. I saw two men with a rubber raft just below me [and] I went down the rope and joined them."

All along the flight deck, on the catwalks, and through holes blown in the side of the ship, men slipped down lines or simply jumped into the dark sea to escape the spreading conflagration. Twenty-three minutes after the torpedo strike, the Liscome Bay sank, along with 644 men. Among those lost was Cook Third Class Doris "Dorie" Miller, the first black sailor to receive the Navy's highest award for heroism. During the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Miller had been a mess attendant aboard the battleship West Virginia, and his actions that day—firing an anti-aircraft machine gun he had never been trained to use, plus moving his wounded captain and shipmates out of harm's way—earned him the Navy Cross.

The Liscome Bay's skipper, Captain Irving D. Wiltsie, last seen scouring the ship for survivors, also went down with the ship.

The same day that the Liscome Bay sank in the Pacific, the Block Island, a Bogue-class escort carrier converted from a merchant ship hull, stood out of Norfolk on an assignment that demonstrated the versatility of the baby flattops. Serving as the nucleus of an anti-submarine hunter-killer group (usually consisting of a CVE and four or five destroyers and/or destroyer escorts), the Block Island was tasked with destroying German U-boats in the Atlantic. The pilots newly assigned to the ship, the VC-55 squadron, had claimed their first enemy sub a month earlier.

Lieutenant Denny Moller was VC-55's assistant engineering officer. Like all of the squadron's pilots, he endured a demanding schedule of both day and night flying. The Block Island operated within a screen of four destroyer escorts, launching patrols of four aircraft. Each airplane took a quadrant and carved it into 30-degree slices—out, across, and then back in to the carrier. Because the pilots had to observe radio silence at night, they had to find their way back to the moving carrier by relying on dead reckoning—flying a compass heading for a calculated time and hoping to spot the carrier when the time was up.

"We would try to work out our navigation beforehand," Moller explains, "so on takeoff, you always hated to see the flight deck crew holding up a chalkboard that said, 'The course of the carrier will be so-and-so, the wind direction is so-and-so. Good luck!' That meant you had to figure out a whole new set of navigational figures on the go. That wasn't easy in a dark cockpit at night."

On March 19, 1944, VC-55 claimed another German sub, the U-1059. But on May 29 near the Canary Islands, the Block Island's prey turned hunter. As dusk fell, the U-549 slipped through the destroyer escort screen and launched three torpedoes into the carrier.

Moller dashed topside with a group of pilots from his squadron's ready room. The torpedo strikes had put a massive fracture in the Block Island's flight deck. Standing precariously on the listing deck, Moller soon heard the inevitable order: "Abandon ship."

"I wasn't much for swan dives from that height," Moller says, "so we took off our shoes, tied them together by the laces, hung them around our necks, and slid down ropes into the water. Of course our shoes floated away immediately."

Moller and his companions inflated their Mae West life jackets and soon found a cork float net. Before the night was over, the destroyer escort Ahrens plucked them from the chilly Atlantic. In contrast to the Liscome Bay, only six men were lost. After 30 days of survivor's leave, Moller was back in action with a new hunter-killer group on board the Croatan.

Moller was not the only aviator seeking a shipboard home in the summer of 1944. In the Pacific, ensigns Ken Snyder and Darrell "Smoke" Bennett were looking for a carrier squadron. Finally, two slots opened up on escort carriers.

"We flipped for it," Snyder recalls. "Smoke got Gambier Bay, and I got Kitkun Bay." Soon after, Snyder joined VC-5 in the Kitkun Bay as a Wildcat pilot. "Oh my gosh, they were solid little devils," Snyder says, "but a little lively on their narrow landing gear. Still, it was a good plane. It could take an awful lot of punishment, and dish it out too."

That summer in the Kitkun Bay was a busy one for Snyder and his comrades, flying in support of the bloody landings on Tinian, Guam, Anguar, and Peleliu as U.S. forces drew ever closer to the Philippines. With each invasion, the escort-carrier-based squadrons proved their mettle. Over Peleliu they disrupted a rare Japanese tank attack against a vulnerable U.S. Marine beachhead. Their finest hour, however, was yet to come.

As U.S. forces converged on the Philippines in the fall of 1944, Japan's admirals pieced together an audacious counterattack. In a complex operation, the Japanese lured the larger U.S. carriers from their posts guarding the approaches to the U.S. beachhead on Leyte. Their departure left the task force unit known as Taffy 3, which included Snyder's ship, the Kitkun Bay, directly in harm's way in the waters east of Samar.

On October 24, 1944, as the Kitkun Bay's sailors grabbed a quick breakfast, a Japanese force of nearly two dozen battleships, cruisers, and destroyers approached, concealed in a morning mist. Only the lightly armed escort carriers, destroyers, and destroyer escorts of Taffy 3 stood between Vice Admiral Takeo Kurita's armada and the transports gathered along the Leyte beachheads.

Ensign Hans L. Jensen, piloting a TBM Avenger from the escort carrier Kadashan Bay, was the first to spot the Japanese force. At 6:30 a.m., anti-aircraft fire exploded around Jensen's Avenger, giving Rear Admiral Clifton A.F. "Zippy" Sprague and his skippers the first sign of impending disaster. Moments later, Ensign William C. Brooks, a pilot from the CVE St. Lo,

radioed: "Enemy surface force of four battleships, seven cruisers, and 11 destroyers sighted 20 miles northwest of your task group and closing in on you at 30 knots!" For the poorly armed and armored escort carriers, which barely made 18 knots, this was grim news. Sprague ordered his baby flattops to launch all airplanes.

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Snyder and his section leader, Jack Krouse, headed for the enemy ships. Elsewhere in the overcast sky, in disorganized clusters and even alone, U.S. pilots were hurling their Wildcats and Avengers against the enemy fleet.

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Snyder pointed his Wildcat's stubby nose at the first Japanese ship he saw. Anti-aircraft shells burst around his aircraft and punched holes in its wings and fuselage. Still he roared on, answering its gunners with his .50-caliber machine guns. Then on to the next ship. "We hardly had time to pick out targets," Snyder recalls. "It was just like one big daisy chain."

As the morning passed, Japanese gunfire took its toll in the running duel. Shells straddled the escort carrier White Plains, missing it but striking close enough to temporarily knock out the steering control. Japanese guns pummeled the CVEs Kalinin Bay, Fanshaw Bay, and Gambier Bay. Mortally wounded, the Gambier Bay—the ship that, but for a coin toss, would

have been Snyder's home—rolled over and sank. Taffy 3's destroyers and destroyer escorts valiantly attacked the far larger Japanese warships and suffered grievous losses as well. The destroyers Hoel and Johnston were literally blasted out of the water, as was the destroyer escort Samuel B. Roberts.

Before long, Snyder, like so many other pilots engaged in the chaotic battle, ran out of ammunition. Still he harassed the Japanese, with mock gun runs, and even "bombed" an enemy ship with his empty drop tank—anything to draw the Japanese away from the practically defenseless escort carriers.

"By then, the gas gauge needle was bobbing around zero," Snyder says. "I knew that meant I had about 20 minutes of fuel left. Krouse, my section leader and wingman, was facing the same situation. He decided we should head for the airfield the Army had just captured ashore at Tacloban.

"When we got to Tacloban, it was full of wrecked airplanes. There was nowhere to land. Then we remembered another airstrip at Dulag, 15 miles to the south, and turned for it. It was a mess too, but we made it in safely."

Snyder's buddy Smoke Bennett was among the survivors of the Gambier Bay.

Meanwhile, the CVE pilots' swarming attacks, coupled with bold maneuvers by Sprague's destroyers and destroyer escorts, had thrown Kurita into disarray. Demoralized after losing three cruisers to the outgunned Americans, he withdrew his ships. Thus ended the so-called Battle off Samar, which naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison later christened "the most remarkable of the Pacific war."

The naval actions around the Philippines that October spelled the end of the Imperial Japanese Navy as a mortal threat to the U.S. fleet. But the advent of Japan's suicidal kamikazes, which claimed the St. Lo the day after Taffy 3's ordeal, demanded the continued attention of the escort carriers and their pilots. So did future amphibious assaults.

On May 3, 1945, a brand-new escort carrier, again christened the Block Island, arrived off Okinawa. It was one of the new Commencement Bay-class escort carriers: larger, faster, and sturdier than Kaiser's ships. In command was Captain Francis M. Hughes, who had skippered the original Block Island, lost to the U-549 a year earlier, and among the crew were many survivors of the sinking. Despite the connection to the past, the new Block Island represented a step toward the escort carriers' future: Rather than U.S. Navy aviators, the CVE carried the first Marine Corps carrier air group, MCVG-1, flying Avengers and F4U Corsairs and F6F Hellcat fighters. This concept was born of the Corps' longstanding desire for its own pilots to support the leathernecks battling the Japanese on such islands as Okinawa and Iwo Jima.

Major R. Bruce Porter initially served as the executive officer of the Block Island's fighter squadron, VMF-511. Before the war was over, Porter would become an ace and earn acclaim as one of the Marine Corps' most accomplished night fighter pilots. But even he never took night landings on the escort carrier lightly. "I logged 43 night landings," Porter says, "but I didn't do any of them by myself. The good Lord was helping me on every one."

Marines like Porter, flying off the Block Island and three other CVEs, joined the Navy's aviators to provide critical air support during the battle for Okinawa. Later, in the Korean War, escort carriers such as the Sicily, Rendova, Bairoko, and Badoeng Strait supported United Nations forces. Nevertheless, the force reductions after World War II resulted in the end of the escort carriers.

In 1947 the Navy's Project 27A focused on modernizing Essex-class carriers to enable them to handle larger, heavier jets, capable of delivering nuclear weapons and launching guided missiles. In this future, escort carriers had no role. One by one the Navy sold them off as scrap metal. Today the Navy's fleet of small-deck Wasp- and Tarawa-class amphibious assault ships, launching Marine aviators in SuperCobra helicopter gunships and AV-88 Harrier vertical/short-takeoff-and-landing "jump jets," offers the most vivid reminder of the escort carriers' heyday in the Pacific, when scarcely an amphibious landing was made without Wildcats and Avengers launched from a CVE screaming overhead.