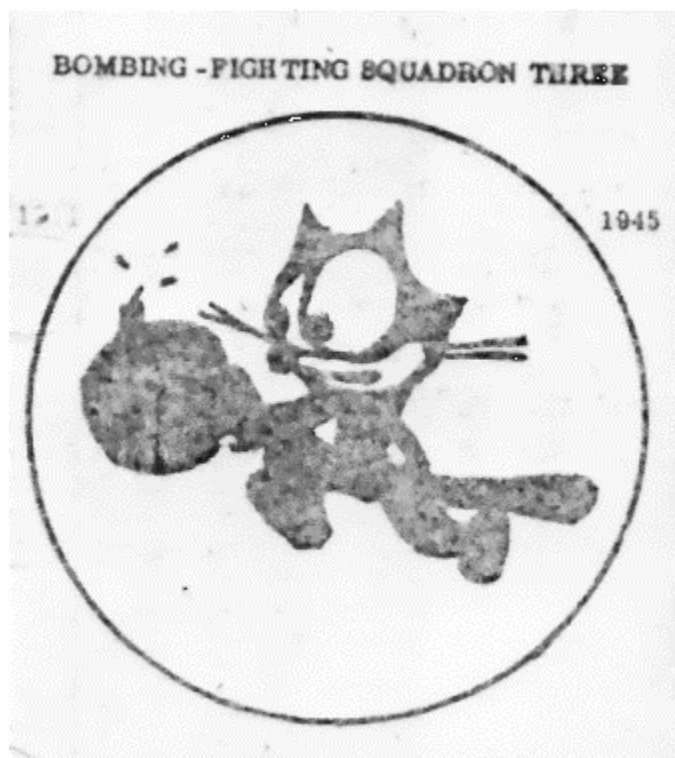


NARRATIVE HISTORY OF BOMBING-FIGHTING SQUADRON

THREE

Author: Unknown



**VBF-3**

**Crazy Cats**

### NARRATIVE HISTORY OF BOMBING-FIGHTING SQUADRON THREE

(Note: Although in chronology and in broad outline the history of VBF-3 coincides with that of Air Group Three and has been treated in the historical documents submitted by the Group, it is felt that the brief experience of the squadron as an independent unit is singular enough to merit separate, and perhaps more detailed, consideration in this narrative.

Presumably VBF-3 will continue to exist, with an identity and a function of its own, as a component of the Air Group. If for no reason, then, that to tell later personnel of the squadron about its origins and its first days of combat, this story is submitted.)

Commissioned on 1 February 1945 by the Commanding Officer of the USS YORKTOWN, in accordance with secret despatch order which cannot be quoted here, VBF-3 had little time to establish its identity as a fighting team--to achieve a mature squadron personality--before entering battle. Within nine days of its official christening, the squadron had shoved off on the YORKTOWN, headed north from Ulithi lagoon, and was intensively polishing its tactical organization and rehearsing its combat tactics in a series of training flights at sea. Yet even in these initial trials, it appeared that the prodigious infant had come of age: the squadron was ready for the enemy.

The credit, of course, for this early maturing goes to its personnel, all battle experienced but none battle weary, and all flexible enough, as pilots and as men, to fit easily into a new organizational plan. The Commanding Officer was a new-comer,

Lt.Cmdr. Fritz Wolf, veteran of the AVG in China and newly transferred from VF-11 aboard the HORNET. The executive officer, lately come from VF-81, was Lt.Cmdr. John McBrayer, who had fought before in a combat tour aboard the old WASP. Each of these pilots brought with him a combat team, a division trained as a unit and already battle-experienced in the China Sea engagements. The rest of the squadron personnel came from VF-3 and although they were by no means all charter members of that outfit, even the most recent replacement pilot had already worked into their divisions and their tactical roles. Division leaders, without exception, retained their divisions. One pilot, Lt. Hopp, was back from his enforced tour of Jap occupied Luzon, an authority on evasion and survival. These people, with a crowded ready room to live in and a crowded flight schedule to look forward to, discovered, a little to their surprise, that made up a smoothly working combat unit, tempered and matched for the fighting ahead.

One element alone was an irritant -- the ambiguous initial B in their title. In practise, the B for bombing did not alter their function to the slightest degree: they carried no more and no fewer bombs or rockets and they flew no fewer and no more CAP's. They shared the same F6F's with the other fighter squadron. But the B implied a distinction, a step in the wrong direction, toward mere explosive-lugging and bomb-dumping, which they secretly resented. Despite official directives, many a pilot quietly refused to add the dubious letter to his address - or, if he added it at all, he stuck it in after the F.

It was, at least, as fighter pilots, primarily, that the men of VBF-3 flew over their first target. On the morning of 16 February Lieut. Comdr. Wolf led a flight to that target--the Kasumigaura area northeast of the city of Tokyo--and established, if our information is correct, an impressive first. This sweep was the YORKTOWN'S 2-A flight, launched immediately after the 1-A sweep at 0718 (K). The earlier hop suffered the same fate which, so far as we are able to discover, met all the other A flight from the force-- a heavy blanketing overcast which turned back short of the Honshu coast. Lieut. Comdr. Wolf took his fighter in low, flying in the base of the clouds, and from there attacked Konoike Airfield. While the attack was in progress the weather began to break, and, for the rest of the day, the target was open. Thus the flight was, to the best of our knowledge, the first to get in that day. If so the VBF-3 pilots were the first carrier-based Navy pilots, and the first fighter pilots, ever to attack the sacred soil of the empire of Japan. And they drew first blood in fair quantities--4 enemy planes shot down, 1 airborne damaged, and on the ground, 9 destroyed, 4 probables, 17 damaged. Konoike and Hokoda were the airfields offering up their sitting ducks and, in the process of accepting the offer, none of our planes was damaged.

The fighting encountered and engaged in by this flight set a pattern that was to be repeated, with few exceptions, on all subsequent hops over the area. Airborne opposition was met, of course, and in substantial quantities, but it never proved too hot to handle. The Jap pilot were indi-

vidual runs from in or at the base of the cloud cover, diving down into our formation. The runs were met and countered and, in most cases, the attacker was shot down or damaged. At no time did the enemy make coordinated attacks or division or section runs. His tactics were aggressive but ineffectual, and his approaches were often embellished by aerobatics on the way in. Occasionally he would not open fire at all, but simply dive into the midst of our fighters. He had a few tricks up his sleeve--dummy pilot on parachutes and, on one later flight, an attempted suicide ramming--but these were poor substitutes for valid offensive tactics or accurate shooting.

The difficulties encountered by our pilots were also repeated on later flights. The area was a strange one and, to a large extent, unknown. Intelligence, before the operation, had only the small scale, high altitude photographs of the area which Army B-29's had taken. Ground intelligence was entirely lacking. Briefings based on this meager material had to be sketchy and provisional, and a result. pilots went into the target with only a general idea of the lay of the land. Orientation had to be made on the flight itself and, in one or two instances, prior information proved to be inaccurate. Again, for many of the pilots this was the first heady taste of aerial combat after weeks of attacking ground targets and dodging flak, and they were eager to sieze every opportunity. This not altogether commendable eagerness often made rendezvous a slow process and, time and again, left juicy ground targets untouched while airborne stragglers were chased off into other areas. Finally the weather, while never

bad, was never clear and unlimited, and there were always some clouds for the Nipponese interceptors to retire into. But the troubles were incidental. The richness of the prize compensated for all that.

A second sweep, a strike, and a RAPCAP were still to be flown on this day and, when they were over, the score had grown splendidly. Lt. Williams led the second sweep, the fighter this time carrying rockets, and succeeded in taking them to Mawatari Airfield for a ground attack before the airborne opposition grew so intense that they were forced to stay aloft. Again our tactics proved superior to the enemy's. The section proved to be a strong unit, both offensively and defensively. The standard weave was used to advantage. The 7-0 score of airborne kills and the fact that no F6F was hit at any time by enemy fire substantiates this. It was on this flight that Lt. Williams met the anti-social character who tried to ram him, and got a smoking engine for his pains. When the hop returned to base it left 18 of Mawatari's deckload of planes destroyed or damaged.

The strike, launched in the afternoon, was deflected to a secondary target because of insufficient time after a delayed take-off. The extensive facilities at Kasumigaura Airfield were hit by the bombers. Lt.Cmdr Wolf led the fighters and, again, they found plenty to keep them busy aloft. Our VF were jumped both on approach and retirement but no attackers go through to the VB. On this flight our fighters encountered the closest approximation to coordinated attacks that the Japanese could offer. An attacking enemy would be followed at 100 to 200

yards by another, who would attempt to reach a firing position on whatever plane or planes attacked the leader. Once this device secured hits. Lt(jg) Chamber (on loan from VF-3) was on the tail of a probable Jack, firing into him, when a following Tony came down in a high-side on him. Lt.Cmdr. Wolf saw the second enemy firing at the F6F and turned into him and shot him down. More often, however, the interceptors came one at a time. The split, was their favorite evasive device, and would seem to be the only defensive maneuver they knew. The flight came back with 8 kills to its credit, 3 probables, 7 damaged - all airborne. Two of our planes had been slightly damaged.

Lt. Hopp's division, on RAPCAP, had in the meantime contributed a Jill and a Tony to the day's score. The final results were: airborne - 21 destroyed, 6 probables, 10 damaged; and on the ground - 15 destroyed, 5 probables, 28 damaged. We had lost no planes or pilots, had minor damage to two planes.

To that total one more item must be added. Lt(jg) Jones, loaned from the squadron to fly in the Group Commander's division, turned in a brilliant solo performance by shooting down 3 Zekes on a single hop. The mission was target coordination and the division was launched with a flight from VF-3. But VBF-3 proudly claims its own and modestly adds Jone's Zekes to the total, making the airborne kills 24.

If the operations had been continued throughout the 17th, The second day's score would probably have surpassed the first in all categories. As it was, VBF-3 flew only two hops and boosted the totals impressively. The first flight was a sweep

in to Ishioka and Tsukuba Airfields, led by Lt.Comdr. Wolf. On this mission Lt.(jg) Jones, again flying with the target coordinator's division, again turned in a multiple kill, this time getting a Hamp and a Oscar. Ens. Stroder, a photopilot, flying wing on Jones, matched this exactly, even to the identities of his victims. Lt. Williams led the second sweep and bored farther inland than any of his predecessors had gone, attacking Utsonomiya Airfield and reaping heavy damage there. Airborne opposition was about what it had been on previous flights, and the sweep shot down 7 with 3 probables and 3 damaged. All later flights were canceled and the force retired. The second day's score, then was: in the air: 13 shot down, 3 probables, 3 damaged; on the ground: 5 destroyed, 4 probables, 28 damaged. And, for the second day, our losses were none.

On the 20th and 22nd, VBF-3 joined in direct support missions over Iwo Jima, justifying the B in their name but finding little opportunity to embellish the F. As ground support for the embattled marines the flight were successful. Perhaps their most striking feature was the smooth coordination between air and ground forces. The targets were ordered by Commander Air Support Control Unit and located by means of gridded charts and photographs with which each pilot was supplied. There were no short drops, no projectiles falling outside of the target area, and consequently no accidental casualties inflicted on our own forces. Since air superiority had long since been established over Iwo, there was a complete lack of airborne opposition. Reconnaissance sweeps were also flown by the squadron on these two days over the other islands of Nanpo Shoto and Chichi Jima and Haha Jima were

heavily strafed, although targets were meager. No damage was suffered by our planes.

On the 25th the force was back in striking position off the Honshu coast and the squadron faced another full day of sweeps and strikes, but circumstances were to alter plans and the high hopes for another fat bag of airborne kills proved to be vain. Only one flight was actually launched against Japan that day, a sweep led by Lt. Cmdr. Wolf. The expected airborne opposition did not appear, the only enemy planes seen aloft being at great distance and already engaged by another group. The flight proceeded to Tsukuba Airfield and made its attack there, rocketing hangars and parked aircraft and strafing extensively. On the return to base, the hop caught a large fleet of small craft apparently searching or patrolling off the coast. These were strafed and thoroughly mauled, with several burning and sinking when the attack was over.

After this flight, once again hops were cancelled and the fleet withdrew. But, on short notice, one more mission was launched, a 16 plane sweep of Hachijo Jima, led Lt. Moore. Although no pilot were lost, this hop proved to be a grim business. Attacking the hilly and formidable little place at 1630 in the afternoon, the flight encountered probably the worse weather conditions the pilot had ever encountered over a target. A solid overcast sagged down over the rocky mountains almost to sealevel. Under it, the light was so meager that the intense AA burst and tracer trails showed up with nigh-time brilliance. The flak was concentrated

and accurate. Despite these hazards, Lt. Moore took his 16 fighter in to attack the airfield and Hachijo felt the sting of strafing and rockets. Three of our planes were hit by the AA and one pilot, Ens. Noel, had to make a water landing when he reached the force on his return. The COTTON (DD669) picked him up and, a few days later, he was back aboard uninjured.

Thus the brief tour ended for VBF-3. The return to Ulithi, the indecisive period of waiting, and the transfer to the USS LEXINGTON for return to the United States have been treated in other document. At the risk of long-windedness, a recapitulation of the score may be in order.

Aircraft destroyed in the air:	37
Aircraft probably destroyed in the air:	9
Aircraft damaged in the air:	13
Aircraft destroyed on the ground:	20
Aircraft probably destroyed on the ground:	9
Aircraft damaged on the ground:	56

In addition, extensive damage was inflicted on airfield Facilities, hangers, gun positions, pill boxes, small craft, And ground targets of opportunity. The happiest wish that The present VBF-3 can pass on to after-comers in the squadron Is that they may find targets as ripe and hunting as good.