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UNITED STATES PACIFIC FLEET
AIR FORCE, PACIFIC FLEET
NIGHT FIGHTING SQUADRON FIFTY-THREE

VF(N)-53/A9/CO
(ANN: Jah)

c/o Fleet Post Office
San Francisco, California

CONFIDENTIAL

10 March 1945

From: Commanding Officer, VF(N)-53.
To: Commander-in-Chief, United States Fleet.

Via: (1) Commander, CVG(N)-53.
(2) Commanding Officer, USS SARATOGA.
(3) Commander Task Group 52.2.
(4) Commander, Task Force 52.
(5) Commander, Fifth Fleet.

Subject: Action Report - Forwarding of.

Reference: (a) CominCh Restr. ltr. FF1/A16-3/29,
Serial 5085, of 2 August 1943.
(b) First Car TFI-1A, Para. 6400.

Enclosure: (A) Aircraft Action Report (Form ACA-1),
No. 2 for VF(N)-53.

1. Pursuant to references (a) and (b), enclosure (A) is forwarded herewith.

A. N. WAIN

cc:
CominChpac (3)
Joint Intelligence Center,
P.O.A., Pearl Harbor, T.H.
CominCh U.S. Fleet
ComAirPac
File

AIRCRAFT ACTION REPORT

RESTRICTED
(Reclassify when filled out)

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I. GENERAL

(a) Unit Reporting VF(N)-53 (b) Based on or at USS SARATOGA (c) Report No. 2
 (d) Take off: Date 21 February 1945 Time (LZT) 1658⁰⁰ K (Zone); Lat. 25°15'N Long. 141°30'E
 (e) Mission Dusk Combat Air Patrol (f) Time of Return 2045⁰⁰ K (Zone)

II. OWN AIRCRAFT OFFICIALLY COVERED BY THIS REPORT.

* *Same time, see narrative.*

TYPE (a)	SQUADRON (b)	NUMBER			BOMBS AND TORPEDOES CARRIED (PER PLANE) (f)	FUZE, SETTING (g)
		TAKING OFF (c)	ENGAGING ENEMY A/C (d)	ATTACKING TARGET (e)		
<u>F6F-5N</u>	<u>VF(N)-53</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>None</u>	<u>None</u>	<u>---</u>

III. OTHER U. S. OR ALLIED AIRCRAFT EMPLOYED IN THIS OPERATION.

TYPE	SQUADRON	NUMBER	BASE	TYPE	SQUADRON	NUMBER	BASE
<u>F6F-5</u>	<u>VF-53</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>USS SARATOGA</u>				
<u>TBM-3</u>	<u>VF(N)-53</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>USS SARATOGA</u>				

IV. ENEMY AIRCRAFT OBSERVED OR ENGAGED (By Own Aircraft Listed in II Only).

(a) TYPE	(b) NO. OBSERVED	(c) NO. ENGAGING OWN A/C	(d) TIME ENCOUNTERED	(e) LOCATION OF ENCOUNTER	(f) BOMBS, TORPEDOES CARRIED; GUNS OBSERVED	(g) CAMOUFLAGE AND MARKING
<u>Zeke</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>1730 K</u> (ZONE)		<u>None (See narrative)</u>	<u>None observed.</u> (green-brown paint)
<u>Judy</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>1830 K</u> (ZONE)		" " "	" " " " "
			(ZONE)			

(h) Apparent Enemy Mission(s) Attack on United States surface ships.
 Did Any Part of Cloud cover was present, but not involved
 (i) Encounter(s) Occur in Clouds? No If so, Describe Clouds in these encounters; see narrative.
(YES OR NO) (BASE IN FEET, TYPE AND TENTHS OF COVER)
 Time of Day and Brilliance Late afternoon overcast
 (j) of Sun or Moon Late afternoon overcast (k) Visibility 8-10, reducing to 2.
(NIGHT, BRIGHT MOON, DAY, OVERCAST; ETC.) (MILES)

V. ENEMY AIRCRAFT DESTROYED OR DAMAGED IN AIR (By Own Aircraft Listed in II Only).

(a) TYPE ENEMY A/C	(b) DESTROYED OR DAMAGED BY:			GUNS USED	(c) WHERE HIT, ANGLE	(d) DAMAGE CLAIMED
	TYPE A/C	SQUADRON	PILOT OR GUNNER			
<u>Zeke</u>	<u>F6F-5N</u>	<u>VF(N)-53</u>	<u>Pilot</u>	<u>All</u>	<u>Wing roots and fuselage,</u> <u>from 3 to 4 o'clock</u> <u>below.</u>	<u>Destroyed</u>
<u>Judy</u>	<u>F6F-5N</u>	<u>VF(N)-53</u>	<u>Pilot</u>	<u>All</u>	<u>Fuselage & right wing,</u> <u>from 5 o'clock above.</u>	<u>Destroyed</u>

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* Note to para. VIII. Of the L4A/C launched, only 5 returned to base. Ammunition figures for these five are attributable largely to testing guns. All planes actually engaging the enemy were among those landing on other carriers and never recovered by this squadron which left the operating area immediately after the engagement, due to battle damage sustained by the parent carrier.

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REPORT No. 2

XII. TACTICAL AND OPERATIONAL DATA. (Narrative and comment: Describe action fully and comment freely, following applicable items in check list at left. Use additional sheets if necessary.)

ENGAGEMENT WITH ENEMY

OWN AIRCRAFT

Disposition
Altitudes
Speeds
Approach Tactics
Use of Cover, Deception
Angles of Attack and
Their Effectiveness
Distance of Opening Fire
Defense Tactics and
Their Effectiveness

ENEMY AIRCRAFT

Method of Locating, Distance
Disposition
Altitudes
Speeds
Approach Tactics
Use of Cover, Deception
Angles of Attack
Distance of Opening Fire
Defensive Tactics

COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Own Weaknesses
Enemy Weaknesses
Offensive Tactics, Own
" " , Enemy
Defensive Tactics, Own
" " , Enemy
Flexible Gunnery, Own
Escort Tactics
Fighter Direction
Use of Radar
Night Fighting
Recognition, Aircraft

ATTACK

OWN TACTICS

Method of Locating Target
Approach to Target
Altitudes, Speeds
Approach
Dive
Pull-Out
Dive Angle
Strafing
Retirement
Defensive Tactics
Use of Jamming

DEFENSE, ENEMY

Evasive Tactics, Ships
Concealment
Searchlights
Night Fighter Tactics
Use of Jamming

COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Bombing Tactics
Torpedo Tactics
Effectiveness of
Bombs, Torpedoes
Selection of Targets
Fuzing
Strafing Tactics
Defensive Tactics
Use of Radar
Reconnaissance
Photography
Briefing

OPERATIONAL

Navigation
Homing
Rendezvous
Recognition, Ships
Communications
Flight Operations
Search and Tracking
Base Operations
Maintenance

Fourteen F6F-5N aircraft of VF(N)-53 were scheduled for launch from USS SARATOGA at 1700 on 21 February 1945. Of these, twelve were to provide dusk Target Combat Air Patrol over Iwo Jima, and two were to provide dusk Combat Air Patrol over Task Group 52.2.4, of which the flag was in USS SARATOGA. Launch was expedited because of bogeys approaching from the north, and the first plane was airborne at 1653, the fourteenth at 1703.

As rapidly as the planes became airborne they were given vectors by SARATOGA C.I.C. (Beaver base) both to attempt interception and to get them beyond gun range of the Task Group, without waiting for join-up. It had been planned that the Target Combat Air Patrol would fly in three four-plane divisions, operating to all intents and purposes as a day patrol. As it developed, the fourteen planes initially joined up as one four-plane division and five two-plane sections. At 1703 the first Japanese suicide plane struck USS SARATOGA, and several hits were sustained in rapid succession, one near the port catapult. As a consequence all further attempts at launching planes were abandoned.

In the initial phase of the attack, no contacts with enemy planes were made by any aircraft of VF(N)-53. This was probably attributable to the confusion incident to the expedited launch, the presence of an almost solid high overcast and of a broken lower cover at 2500 to 3000 feet, and the lack of time to attain station and an adequate picture of the situation.

The attack on USS SARATOGA continued intermittently for over two hours. During the entire period they were airborne, the fourteen pilots of this squadron saw no aircraft known or believed by them to be Japanese, except for the Zeke and the Judy to which reference is herein-after specifically made, and except also for planes seen in process of being shot down by anti-aircraft. The latter were all at a distance beyond visual identification, with the exception of a Betty observed by Lieutenant Denby-Wilkes and Ensign Wall. They were closing the Betty from a considerable distance astern, as it closed the Task Group, when it was exploded by anti-aircraft fire. The Betty appeared not to be manned except for the pilot's enclosure, leading to the inference that it may have been a suicide plane. It has proven impossible to assess pilot's accounts as to number of enemy aircraft destroyed by anti-aircraft with sufficient accuracy to justify a conclusion.

At approximately 1730, or one half hour after the initial attack, a four-plane division led by Lieutenant W. C. Reinhardt with Lt.(jg) Charles W. Horne on his wing, of which the second section comprised Ensign W. D. Cochran and Ensign J. M. Hurley, made visual contact on a single Zeke, crossing from port to starboard. The Zeke was at 10 o'clock, up 2000 feet, when first seen through a break in the clouds. At this time the VF(N) were at about 3500 feet, 25 miles north of base, flying a vector which had been given by Beaver base. Lt.(jg) Horne and Ensign Cochran pulled up and around to starboard to get on the Zeke. Lt.(jg) Horne commenced firing while he still had a deflection shot, and was observed to be getting hits on the fuselage and wing roots of the Japanese plane. It commenced to burn at once. The Japanese plane had started a diving starboard turn when observed. It took no other evasive

action. The Zeke was followed through the low overcast, which was at 2500 to 3000 feet, by Lt.(jg) Horne and Ensign Cochran, also by Lt.(jg) Knight, who had been flying about four miles away when the contact was called. The right wing was observed to explode below the overcast, and the plane hit the water, further exploded, and continued to burn on the water. Its destruction is confirmed by four pilots other than Lt.(jg) Horne, including Lt.(jg) Knight and Ensign Cochran.

At approximately 1830, Lt. Reinhardt's division made a second visual contact. At this time the division personnel was considerably changed. Lt.(jg) Horne and Ensign Cochran had become separated from the others following the engagement with the Zeke. Ensign Kellenbeck was flying wing on Lt. Reinhardt, and Ensign Hurley was leading the second section with Ensign Skreba on his wing, Kellenbeck and Skreba having joined up during or just after the destruction of the Zeke. Flying a vector given by Beaver base, at angels 7, about 30 miles northeast of base, the division observed a Japanese aircraft, later identified by all pilots as a radial-engine Judy, approaching slightly to port on reciprocal course at about the same altitude. The first section of Lt. Reinhardt and Ensign Kellenbeck immediately pulled around to port, into the Jap. The Judy made no offensive move, and its only evasive action constituted commencement of a gradual dive for the water. With War Emergency Power the F6F-5Ns overtook it rapidly. Messrs. Reinhardt and Kellenbeck opened fire out of range, observed their error, and held fire while closing to about 1200 feet. They reopened fire at about 20° deflection, but Ensign Kellenbeck had a runaway starboard gun, and found his leader close to his line of fire, so discontinued. Lt. Reinhardt continued to fire. Bullets were observed to strike the fuselage near the cockpit, and also the starboard wing. The tip of the wing blew off, and the engine commenced to burn. The Judy steepened its dive to 60°, and continued diving until it struck the water and exploded simultaneously.

No return fire was encountered, and the pilots believe there was no rear seat gunner in the Japanese plane.

One pilot distinctly observed the Japanese pilot lying dead on the water, blown from the plane, with a parachute streamed out behind him. The same pilot commented on bullets seen to ricochet from the area of the cockpit, which he attributed to armor plate. Ensigns Kellenbeck and Hurley confirm the destruction of the aircraft.

At no time during either interception was airborne radar gear used. Both were effected during daylight, essentially as day-time interceptions, although it was becoming dusk at the time of the second. Neither enemy plane in these instances took advantage of available cloud cover.

All of the fourteen pilots of this squadron who were airborne during the attack were ultimately recovered without serious injury. The fact that the YE on USS SARATOGA had been put out of commission by shrapnel, unknown to SARATOGA C.I.C., and the fact that USS SARATOGA was unable to land planes until 2040 because of battle damage, complicated recovery of planes. Lt. W. C. Reinhardt, Lt.(jg) J. W. Cole, Ens. J. F. Sower and Ens. V. A. Kellenbeck landed without mishap on USS RUDYARD BAY between 2020 and 2057. Lt. C. Denby-Wilkes, Lt.(jg) C. W. Horne, Ens. Skreba, Ens. Wall and Ens. Hurley all landed on USS MAKIN ISLAND. These landings were without mishap until the last, by Ens. Wall. Unable to lower his tail hook, he made an emergency landing, crashed, and destroyed his own plane and one of the other F6F-5Ns, and damaged a third. He did not sustain serious injuries.

The remaining five pilots, Lt.(jg) C. A. Knight, Lt.(jg) C. R. Durban, Lt.(jg) W. L. Stokes, Ens. H. C. Palmatier and Ens. W. D. Cochran, were landed aboard USS SARATOGA without mishap between 2042 and 2102.

These fourteen VF(N) were launched so shortly before the impact of the initial enemy attack that they were wholly ineffectual to intercept it or break it up. A major immediate concern was to get them outside of the gunfire range of their own base. Thereafter, battle damage to their base both directly impeded fighter director control over them, and led to confusion which rendered control less effective. Had the same number of planes been launched in time to permit their attaining station under fighter director control, it is believed they might have broken up the enemy attack or reduced substantially its effectiveness.

The initial enemy attack was well conceived, well executed, and whether by chance or design, well timed to arrive at the exact moment most awkward from the viewpoint of friendly forces. Cloud cover was used by the enemy to good advantage, and interception by one of the two sections of day-fighters airborne was missed on one vector by reason of this cloud cover (see USS SARATOGA action report). Although use of VF(N) for dusk CAP is presumably dictated primarily by the fact that a portion of the flight, including landing, is in darkness, it is interesting to speculate whether under cloud conditions encountered in this instance VF(N), properly stationed in time, might not have been more effective in achieving contact.

In several instances, particularly after dark, planes inadvertently approached too near to or actually flew over friendly forces, and were taken under fire. Fortunately no casualties occurred.

Lt. Reinhardt, Lt. Denby-Wilkes, Ensign Hurley and Ensign Kellenbeck have been returned to this squadron, and together with the five pilots who pancaked on USS SARATOGA have been interrogated at length. Lt.(jg) Cole, Lt.(jg) Horne, Ensign Skreba, Ensign Sower and Ensign Wall have not been returned to the squadron and it is now understood that they may be re-assigned in the forward area without return.

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No extensive interrogation of them has been possible, although a transcription of a brief interrogation of two of the five officers has been made available. This report is believed to be substantially complete, but the foregoing limitation upon information must be considered. Should further interrogation of these officers become possible and reveal further or different information, an amendatory report will be filed.

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XIII. MATERIAL DATA. (Comment freely on performance or suitability, following check list at left.
Use additional sheets if necessary).

ARMAMENT

- Guns, Gunsights
- Turrets
- Ammunition
- Bombs, Torpedoes
- Bomb Sights
- Bomb Releases

COMMUNICATIONS

- Radio, Radar
- Homing Devices
- Visual Signals
- Codes, Ciphers

RECOGNITION

- IFF
- Signals
- Battle Lights
- Procedures

PROTECTION

- Armor; Points and Angles
of Fire Needing Further
Protection
- Leak Proofing

EMERGENCY EQUIPMENT

- Parachutes
- Life Belts, Life Rafts
- Safety Belts
- Emergency Kits
- Rations, First Aid

NAVIGATIONAL EQUIPMENT

- Compasses
- Driftsights
- Octants
- Automatic Pilots
- Charts
- Field Lighting

INSTRUMENTS

- Flight
- Power Plant

OXYGEN SYSTEM

**CAMOUFLAGE AND
DECEPTION DEVICES**

STRUCTURE

- Airframe
- Control Surfaces
- Control System
- Dive Flaps
- Landing Gear
- Heating System
- Flight Characteristics
At Various Loadings

POWER PLANT

- Engines
- Engine Accessories
- Propellers
- Lubricating System
- Starters
- Exhaust Dampers

HYDRAULIC SYSTEM

ELECTRICAL SYSTEM

- Auxiliary Plant
- Lights

FUEL SYSTEM

FLIGHT CLOTHING

MAINTENANCE

BASE FACILITIES

- Plane Servicing Equipment
- Personnel Facilities

The YE on USS SARATOGA was rendered inoperative by shrapnel during the attack, although this was not ascertained by SARATOGA C.I.C. until some time later. Fortunately one of the Escort Carriers nearby was energizing its YE on the same channel. Experience has indicated that the YE will be received on AN/APS-6A radar with anything approaching reasonable dependability only when the plane is flying a heading within 10° or less of the bearing of the ship from the plane. C.I.C. can usually locate lost planes if some distance out from base, and give them a vector in, but is unable to identify or control them when close inboard or overhead, and is seriously handicapped in sorting out a large number of planes in the same area and assisting in their orientation. It would be highly desirable to develop better procedures or devices for the following objectives:

- (a) To ascertain continuously that hoing equipment is functioning properly, and afford standby facilities.
- (b) To establish and instruct in doctrine for the better correlated use of YE, YN and control by C.I.C. in achieving actual pancake on base of a sizeable group of night planes which for one reason or another have become scattered or mis-orientated.

The limited experience of this squadron to date indicates that these problems, fundamental to night carrier operation, are far from solved.

REPORT PREPARED BY:

APPROVED BY:

SIGNATURE

W. J. STUBBS, Jr.,

lt. (ig) AGI

RANK AND DUTY

SIGNATURE

A. N. MAIN,

Lieut., Commanding.

RANK AND DUTY

10 March 1945

DATE