

Battle of Midway, 7 June 1942, Eye-Witness account by pilot Ensign George Gay of the United States Navy, in an interview TEXT

**Lt. Gay:**

Well, as you know Torpedo [Squadron] 8 was organized in Norfolk [Virginia] and I think you know the history of the [aircraft carrier USS] *Hornet* [CV-8] and where we went and what we did. I won't go into that but I will say a little bit about Torpedo 8 and the things that they did before the Battle of Midway and before we lost the half of it that was in that battle, stationed aboard ship.

One thing we'd like to clear up right to begin with, Lt. Larson and his half of Torpedo 8 stayed in Norfolk when we left there in order to get TBF's [single-engine 'Avenger' torpedo bombers] and get the bugs out of them and get them fixed up for combat and they were to bring them out and join us aboard ship. However, it happened that we were in the Battle of Midway, he came out on the [aircraft carrier USS] *Saratoga* [CV-3] and they requested six planes from him to go to the Island of Midway and they participated in the battle that day, however, the bulk of the TBF's attached to Torpedo 8 at that time were in Honolulu [Hawaii] and missed the Battle of Midway. They later went to Guadalcanal and I came home on sick leave.

I might just as well start down. Well, Torpedo 8 had a difficult problem, we had old planes and we were new in the organization. We had a dual job of not only training a squadron of boot [inexperienced] Ensigns, of which I was one of course, we also had to fight the war at the same time, and when we finally got up to the Battle of Midway it was the first time I had ever carried a torpedo on an aircraft and was the first time I had ever had taken a torpedo off of a ship, had never even seen it done. None of the other Ensigns in the squadron had either.

Quite a few of us were a little bit skeptical and leery but we'd seen [Lieutenant Colonel James H.] Doolittle [USA] and his boys when they hadn't even seen a carrier before and they took the B-25s [twin-engine 'Mitchell' bombers] off, we figured by golly if they could do it, well we could too. It turned out the TBD [Douglas 'Devastator' Torpedo Bomber] could pick up the weight, so it was easy. We learned everything that we knew about Japanese tactics and our own tactics from Commander Waldron and Lt. Moore and Lieutenant Owens as they gave it to us on the blackboards and in talks and lectures. We had school everyday and although we didn't like it at the time, it turned out that was the only way in the world we could learn the things we had to know, and we exercised on the flight deck, did all kinds of things that we'd have to do artificially because we couldn't do our flying most of the time.

In the Coral Sea Battle we tried to get there and missed out on most of it but we were able along about that time to get in some bombing practice and to do some submarine patrol. However, the squadron didn't get to fly near as much as we should have. In the actual battle do you want me to say anything about the actual Battle at Midway and what we had there?

As I said, we had had no previous combat flying. We'd never been against the enemy, our only scrap with them had been in taking Doolittle to as close to Tokyo as we went and in trying to get into the Coral Sea Battle, but when we finally got into the air on the morning of June the 4th, we had our tactics down cold and we knew organization and what we should do. We could almost look at the back of Comdr. [Commander] Waldron's head and know what he was thinking, because he had told us so many times over and over just what we should do under all conditions.

I didn't get much sleep the night of June the 3rd, the stories of the battle were coming in, midnight torpedo attack by the PBY's [twin-engine patrol bomber seaplane, known as 'Catalina] and all kinds of things, and we were a little bit nervous, kind of, like before a football game. We knew that the Japs were trying to come in and take something away from us and we also knew that we were at a disadvantage because we had old aircraft and could not climb the altitude with the dive bombers or fighters and we expected to be on our own. We didn't expect to run into the trouble that we found of course, but we knew that if we had any trouble we'd probably have to fight our way out of it ourselves.

Before we left the ship, Lt. Comdr. Waldron told us that he thought the Japanese Task Forces would swing together when they found out that our Navy was there and that they would either make a retirement in just far enough so that they could again retrieve their planes that went in on the attack and he did not think that they'd go on into the Island of Midway as most of the Squadron commanders, and air group commanders, figured and he told us when he left not to worry about our navigation but to follow him as he knew where he was going. And it turned out just exactly

that way. He went just as straight to the Jap Fleet as if he'd had a string tied to them and we thought that morning, at least I did when I first saw the Japanese carriers, one of them that was afire and another ship that had a fire aboard and I thought that there was a battle in progress and we were late.

I was a little bit impatient that we didn't get right on in there then and when it finally turned out that we got close enough in that we could make a contact report and describe what we could see the Zeros [Japanese fighter-bomber planes] jumped on us and it was too late. They turned out against us in full strength and I figured that there was about 35 of them, I understand, that is I found out later that they operated Fighter Squadrons in numbers of about 32 and I guess it was one of those 32-plane squadrons that got us. Its been a very general opinion that the anti-aircraft fire shot our boys down and that's not true. I don't think that any of our planes were damaged, even touched by anti-aircraft fire, the fighters, the Zeros, shot down everyone of them, and by the time we got in to where the anti-aircraft fire began to get hot, the fighters all left us and I was the only one close enough to get any real hot anti-aircraft fire, and I don't think it even touched me and I went right through it, right over the ship.

I think we made a couple of grave mistakes. In the first place, if we'd only had one fighter with us I think our troubles would have been very much less. We picked up on the way in a cruiser plane, a Japanese scout from one of their cruisers, and it fell in behind us and tracked us and I know gave away our position and course, and speed. We changed after he left but then I know that they knew we were coming. If we'd had one fighter to go back and knock that guy down, catch him before he could have gotten that report off, I believe the Japs might have been fooled some, quite sometime longer on the fact that our fleet was there. I think that might have been one of their first contacts warning them that we had a fleet in the vicinity and that got us into trouble, I'm sure.

Also, we went in to a scouting line out there when we were still trying to find them and didn't and the skipper [commanding officer] put us in a long scouting line which I thought was a mistake at the time. I didn't ever question Comdr. Waldron, of course, he had his reason for it and I know that he expected to find them but he wanted to be sure that we did and that is the reason that we were well trained, and when he gave the join-up signal we joined up immediately. I was only afraid that in the scouting line in those old planes we would be caught by Zeros spread out and it would be much worse. As it turned out, it didn't make a whole lot of difference anyway, but we joined up quickly and we got organized to make our attack, the Zeros got after us.

I remember the first one that came down got one of the airplanes that was over to the left. Comdr. Waldron on his air phone asked Dobbs and came out over the air if that was a Zero or if it was one of our planes and I didn't know whether Dobbs answered him or not, but I came out on the air and told him that it was a TBD. He also called Stanholpe Ring from 'John E. One, answer' and we received no answer from the air groups. I don't know whether they even heard us or not, but I've always had a feeling that they did hear us and that was one of the things that caused them to turn north as I think the squadron deserves quite a bit of credit for the work that they did.

Personally, I was just lucky. I've never understood why I was the only one that came back, but it turned out that way, and I want to be sure that the men that didn't come back get the credit for the work that they did. They followed Comdr. Waldron without batting an eye and I don't feel like a lot of people have felt that we made mistakes and that Comdr. Waldron got us into trouble. I don't feel that way at all. I know that if I had it all to do over again, even knowing that the odds were going to be like they were, knowing him like I did know him, I'd follow him again through exactly the same thing because I trusted him very well. We did things that he wanted us to do not because he was our boss, but because we felt that if we did the things he wanted us to do then it was the right thing to do.

The Zeros that day just caught us off balance. We were at a disadvantage all the way around.

**Interviewer:**

All right. Don't you think those Zeros would have been up there even if they hadn't run into that cruiser plane?

**Lt. Gay:**

I do, yes, but in our particular case I think they would have been at that altitude after the dive bombers, which I think also was one thing Torpedo 8 and the other Torpedo Squadrons should be credited for, I mean given credit for doing. They sucked those fighters down so that when the dive bombers did get there, as I was in the water, I watched them and if they didn't like to dive they were able to pull out and circle around a little bit and come on down later and if they felt like kind of individual bombing practice it was, it turned out to be beautiful bombing, because the

fighters were not--I don't say that there weren't any fighters up there to get after them, there weren't nearly as many as there would have been if they hadn't come down to get us. So I think that is one thing that helped save the day as far as the battle was concerned. It was pretty rugged on the Torpedo Squadrons, there were two other ones out there that day, Three and Six, and they were shot up, one of them almost as bad as Torpedo 8, only they just didn't get the publicity, but they do deserve the credit.

**Interviewer:**

Year, well, it's in the O.N.I. [Office of Naval Intelligence] report. Of course wasn't one of the very bad breaks, the fact that the dive bombers didn't get there about the same time you did?

**Lt. Gay:**

Well, yes, of course. If it could have been a co-ordinated attack the fact that the fighters wouldn't have come down against us in strength, of course, there would have been just that many more airplanes around for them to take care of and they couldn't have concentrated on us as well as they did. Naturally, a concentrated, I mean an organized raid, if we'd been able to all get there and co-ordinate the thing we'd have come out a whole lot better. Definitely that's a fact that we, well, it's just known that co-ordinated attacks, torpedo planes always come out better if you've got that much help. It's the same way with anti-aircraft fire. The more planes you have to shoot at the better chance each one has.

**Interviewer:**

Do you think that the attack would have been any more successful if they planes had been more or less spread out. Wasn't Torpedo 8 rather close together as they went into the attack?

**Lt. Gay:**

Well, that might be true had it been that we were being shot down by anti-aircraft fire, but being jumped, as we were, by a squadron of Zeros, our beliefs were, and I think they were very well founded, that our only protection would be to stick together and let each plane's gun try and help the other plane.

In other words, in a TBD, with as few guns as they've got, the idea was to let, to stay together as a formation and fight them off as a pack rather than to try and spread out. We could have spread out all right, but they could have spread out too, and it would have been just that much worse on us.

I never have understood why it's been the general opinion in designing torpedo planes that it is not an offensive weapon. They don't seem to feel like they ought to put guns in it, and I disagree with that very thoroughly, and I can give my reasons for that.

When the Zeros attacked us that day, I was able, with my one fixed gun, to hit one; I know because I saw the tracers going into him. Of course, it couldn't hurt him with one 30 caliber [machine gun], but in fighting us since in the TBF's, I've seen them get in front of me and I've wanted in the worst way to be able to have something to shoot at them with, and I had nothing to shoot at them with. In other words, we go out and get in trouble and we have to just hope that there'll be fighters around to take care of us; whereas, if we had a way of fighting our way out, we not only would go out with a little more of an aggressive spirit, we'd get the job done a little better.

That day, I got a chance to shoot at other airplanes that just got in my way. It wouldn't have been that I would go out of my way to try and act as a fighter plane, it was just that the targets were there and they will be there every time a torpedo plane makes an attack, those targets will get in his way and he ought to have something to shoot at them with.

I had to fly right over destroyers that were shooting at me. If I had machine guns forward and plenty of them, I'd have been able to give them a little trouble. Then as I got in close enough to drop my torpedo, I could see everything on the port side shooting at me. If I had had some machine guns to shoot back them, I might not have been able to silence those guns, but I could have made the gunners a little nervous. As it was, they were just sitting there shooting at me and I wasn't shooting back at them. Then after I pulled up over the ship and did a flipper turn, I dove down right at the fantail of this big carriers where they were rearming and regassing the planes. Gas hoses were scattered all over the place out there, and I know they were full of gasoline. If I'd had forward guns, I could have set that ship afire right there myself.

I had no guns to shoot with except that one little pea shooter, the 30 caliber putt-putt and by the time I got there it jammed, it either jammed or was shot up. Then after I went out, I flew over another destroyer and every time there was a target and every time I had no guns to work on it. They seem to feel that they don't put the guns in the torpedo planes because we'll go off and fool around and get ourselves in trouble. I don't think they'll have that trouble with the pilots because I do think that they should have fire power forward and also aft to take care of themselves so that when the targets get in the way you can at least have the self satisfaction, if nothing else, of shooting at them. I really strongly recommend them forward. I find a lot of people who disagree with that, but that's my personal opinion on it.

I found out a couple of things about the Battle of Midway in talking to a few people that were aboard the ship other than some of the pilots that I've known. Of course, I talked to the pilots that came into the hospital at Midway and I was very much worried and wondered why, when I was in the water there and there were so many ships around me that were dead in the water, either damaged or picking up personnel, I've wondered why they didn't come in for a clean up. I mean our forces, why they didn't and I found out that unfortunate events had taken place. The torpedo squadron hadn't come back to the *Hornet*, of course, the fighter pilots were unfortunate and ran out of gas before they got back and I think most of them landed in the water, and the dive bombers went to the Island of Midway, to land, so the ship was back there with no aircraft whatever, except their combat patrol of which there were just a few fighters, and they were worried sick and I know, I've talked to them about that afternoon, and I can imagine a ship sitting there with her air group gone and way overdue to return and nobody's come back yet. That's one of the reasons why the Task Force was leery about coming on into clean up and I think the [aircraft carrier USS] *Enterprise* [CV-6] and the [aircraft carrier USS] *Yorktown* [CV-5] probably had the same trouble and that's one way [reason] that the 60 ships that were there got away from us because we sure could have gotten some more of them. Any other questions?

**Interviewer:**

What happened to your torpedo when you launched it?

**Lt. Gay:**

Well, I was very lucky. Of course, I said it was the first one I'd ever carried and naturally the first one I've ever dropped. I had learned from Commander Waldron in his lectures that ships, especially large ships of that kind when they commit themselves to a turn, full rudder or something, it's quite some time even if they apply full reverse rudder it will be some time before they are able to straighten down and usually he told us from reports and things the Japs would nearly always commit themselves when subject to torpedo attack, they will maneuver. So I came in with, of course, with the rest of the Squadron, I keep saying 'I, I shouldn't do it. We came in to make attack on this ship on her starboard side. When the Squadron was finally wiped out and I got in close enough to the ack ack [anti-aircraft fire] to pick me up, she was in a hard turn to starboard, evidently going to circle, but at least took all my torpedoes if we'd have gotten in. Well, when I got in close enough to think about dropping a torpedo, I saw that she was in this hard turn and I pulled out to the right and swung back and gave her a lead and it was a perfect set up. I couldn't have missed it if I'd wanted to because all I had to do was to give her about a ship's length lead and then instead of the ship turning away from me, buy the time the torpedo got to her she was broadside and when I shot at her she was coming to me and turning hard, so I just veered off to the left a bit and, I was to her port by this time see, and she was in the turn to starboard and I laid off left and she just turned right around into it. It was easy.

That right there, by the way, brings up a point that I'd like to mention--Torpedo Director. Somebody asked me if I had a Torpedo Director in the plane, and I did, but I was so 'gol darn' busy I'd forgotten all about it and I never used it. I think they're a very nice instrument and very handy for training, but I believe you'll nearly always find, at least I always have, that when I got in close enough to think about dropping the torpedo, I was so doggone busy, and had been up to that time, I didn't have time to fool with that thing. You'll find that you make an attack, you use your evasive action that you're so busy that you have to determine right out between 1500 and 1000 yards from the ship what you're going to do and you can't set up torpedo director in that length of time. you have to fly into your dropping point and it can't be a set angle either. You've just got to fly up to the ship and then take whatever you get when you get there and make up your mind what you're going to do about it in the split seconds and drop and then go on. Now that's an attack against the large fleet that way where you got anti-aircraft fire all around.

Of course, if you've got a transport or something that's sitting pigeon or something that you figure will go straight, you got time to use your director, that's something else.

**Interviewer:**

Right after that, as I understand it, you flew directly over the ship and circled about and finally was downed by a Zero. Do you want to go on from there please?

**Lt. Gay:**

Well, yes, I dropped the torpedo and was fortunate enough to get away from the anti-aircraft fire although everything was shooting at me. I flew right down the gun barrel on one of these big pom poms up forward. I think it must have been about 20 mm. [anti-aircraft guns] stuff. I looked in the sights and tried to get a shot at that fellow but my gun was jammed by then and I figured the only way that I could evade all that anti-aircraft fire was not to throw my belly up in a turn away from the ship, but was just to go right straight to her and offer as small a target as I could. So I flew right down the gun barrels, pulled up on the port side, did a flipper turn right by the island, I could see the little Jap captain up there jumping up and down raising heel, and I thought about wishing that I had a .45 [US Pistol, caliber .45, M-1911A1] so that I could take a pot shot at him. I couldn't hit him, but, if nothing else, thrown the gun at him, just something, but I then dropped right back down on the deck and flew aft looking at these airplanes.

By the way, I had a thought right in a split second there to crash into those planes. That I don't feel is any suicidal instinct at all. I know that if I had been shot up to the extent where I felt that I'd only go over those planes and fall in the ocean on the other side, feeling that I was pretty near gone, just a matter of seconds, that I would have crashed right into those planes, because I could have started a beautiful fire and I figured that's the way the Japs do it when they crash into a ship. It's when a fellow is just gone and knows it, it is just crash into the ship or crash into the sea, and you have enough control to do a little bit more damage, why you crash into the ship.

I dropped down after going over these ships, I didn't feel very badly, I had a left leg that was burned and a left arm that was gone, the plane was still flying and I felt pretty good and I didn't see any sense in crashing into those planes. I thought maybe I'd get a chance to go back and hit them again someday and as long as there's life there's hope, so I pulled up and went over them, dropped back down next to the water, just after I passed over the fantail and then I heard the torpedo go off. Just a little bit after that then anti-aircraft fire hadn't picked up anymore, but the Zeros jumped on me and I was trying to get out of the fleet. Before I got away from them though, the five Zeros dived right down on me in a line and about the second or third one shot my rudder control and ailerons out and I pancaked into the ocean. The hood slammed shut, I couldn't keep the right wing up. It had hit the water first and snapped the plane in, and bent it all up and broke it up and the hood slammed shut and it was in the sprained fuselage. I couldn't hardly get it open. That's when I got scared. I was afraid I was going to drown in the plane.

I got out of there and thought about my rear gunner, made a dive to try and pick him up, but I couldn't get to him. The first thing I saw after I came to the surface was the other of those two large carriers headed right straight for me and she was landing planes.

By the way, that was an interesting operation. The Zeros were coming aboard and they'd circle way back behind the ship, have 1500 or 1000 feet altitude above her and coming straight in on their low gliding approach coming in straight and they weren't landing planes nearly as fast as we do. It seemed to be a slow operation. I don't know what kind of arresting gear they had aboard ships, it seemed to stop them pretty well as soon as they hit the deck, must have had a number of wires because when they landed in all kinds of different places it would stop right off, but I was a little bit interested in watching that, but I didn't care to do it at such close hand. They went right by me about 500 yards to the west of me and the cruiser that was with her was only a thousand yards, screen and I presume, went by about 500 yards to the east of me headed north and they circled back.

After the [US Navy] dive bombers came in and beat those carriers up and got them burning good and they lost control of them and they stopped pretty close to me, there was another [Japanese] cruiser that patrolled up and down on the north and south line that came by me first to the east, I guess about two miles away, and turned to me, and I thought they saw me and were coming over, but instead of that she just ran a 180 degree reversal and went back to the south. The next time she came up, she went by me much closer, but still to the east, went up and make her turn, and in her turn she got to the west of me and came back down by me on the other side. And then the third time that she came up, she came almost to me and made her 180 degree turn and went back, and on her way back that time, a

patrol plane came by over to the west and she circled around the [Japanese aircraft carrier] *Kaga* to get on the other side and help throw up a screen against the patrol planes. They were trying to knock her down and she didn't come back anymore.

Then during the afternoon, there was a [Japanese] destroyer came pretty close to running me down. It came closer to me than any other ship. If there had been anybody aboard that I knew I could have recognized them as they went by. Of course, I was hiding under this cushion and instead of having my head above and out of the water, I presented the side of this little black cushion to him and hoped that they'd figure out that I was a piece of the wreckage. Pretty fair estimate about that time anyway, so I managed to not to be picked up by them somehow.

My main troubles in the water, outside of my leg burning very badly in the salt water, I didn't know exactly what was the matter with it until after I got into the hospital the next day. My hand was bleeding and I thought about sharks and then I remembered the concussions of the bombs and things and I knew that the sharks didn't like those things and I figured that they would be run off and I think that this is the case, but I swallowed an awful lot of salt water, I lost an awful lot of weight and my main difficulty was keeping my eyes open. The salt water finally got in my eyes to such an extent that I could only with very great difficulty open my eyes and I would open them and scan the horizon 360 degrees and then shut them again and leave them that way unless I heard something or unless I figured it was maybe a ship might have gotten close since I looked the last time and I'd force them open and look again. I got better on that score, much better after I got out of the water and was able to kind of clean my eyes out and get the salt water out of them.

I had no provisions aboard in this lifeboat and I was very lucky in even having the boat because it had been in the plane fastened down with a safety belt and the only way in the world that I know of that it could have been gotten out of the plane was that one of the bullets had punctured the boat, knocked the safety catch on the belt loose and it floated out. Just a piece of my luck, that's all and the emergency rations had a great big sack full of water and all kinds of things and it had SBC4 [Curtis single-engine Navy scout bomber] tail wheel inner tubes in it and it was fixed to float. I know it would float. I had it sitting on top of the lifeboat so that it would float out or so that I could take it and throw it out in case I was able to work with the boat. I never did see it, I didn't know whether it came out of the plane or not.

**Interviewer:**

How about this cushion? Did you break that out or did that float out too?

**Lt. Gay:**

No. The cushion just came floating out and Comdr. Waldron had always told us that he insisted that we have knives on our belts and everything else and he always told us that if we ever got in a spot like that never to throw anything away. I saw this cushion and at first I had no idea what I'd do with it but I figured I'd keep it. It turned out that it, I think, saved my life. I am very sorry that we didn't have time when Pappy Cole came along in his P boat [PBY seaplane?] and picked me up, I would like to have, rather, gotten that life boat, the cushion and all that stuff brought back, but he asked me if I'd seen any planes that day and I told him I'd seen a couple of Jap cruiser planes, so he didn't stay there very long. I was so tickled to be picked up along about that time that I wasn't worried very much about souvenirs anyway.

**Interviewer:**

How about those heavy explosions you heard at night, didn't you experience some heavy explosions?

**Lt. Gay:**

Well, not too many at night. The carriers during the day resembled a very large oil field fire, if you've ever seen one. The fire coming out of the forward and aft end of the ship looked like a blow torch, just roaring white flame and the oil burning, the crude oil, boil up, I don't know how high and just billowing big red flames belch out of this black smoke. The dive bombers told me they saw this smoke at 18,000 feet that day and really did make a nice fire and they'd burn for awhile and blow up for awhile and I was sitting in the water hollering 'Hooray, Hooray.'

I was in a funny position to be cheering for the thing, but I was really tickled to see the dive bombers really pasting them even though they were in pretty bad shape. But during the afternoon after they pretty well burned themselves up, the larger one close to me there, the [Japanese aircraft carrier] *Akagi*, sank just after dark, the [Japanese] cruisers

raked her with fire finished her off, and the other two, the [Japanese aircraft carriers] *Kaga* and the *Soryu*, burned all night, but they didn't necessarily explode. As a matter of fact, the Japs were there trying to put the fires out. I could seem them playing around, searchlights, picking up people and trying, I think they were trying to salvage these two ships; but the explosions that I heard the next morning turned out to be our submarines putting torpedoes into these things and they finished them off. That was early the next morning just as dawn was cracking.

I think the submarines, of course I know they knew they were there, and as soon as they could get a bead on them, why they let them have it and got out of the way again, cause they weren't sure what was around. That's where the explosions were.

**Interviewer:**

Like they did to us a little bit later on the *Yorktown*. What time of morning was it that you got rescued Mr. Gay?

**Lt. Gay:**

Well, P-boat came along, he told me later, about 6:20 and circled me. I knew immediately when I saw it what it was, of course. I never had cared much for P-boats before; I was sure glad to see that one. Since then I always thought them a very beautiful airplane and by the way, they do marvelous work. They picked up an awful lot of people there, but he came over and he circled. One of the kids in the rear blister waved his handkerchief at me and I knew that they had seen me. I didn't expect them to stop, as a matter of fact I would have been surprised if they had, because I knew they had a job to do and I knew that they had just come out from Midway that morning fully loaded and on their mission to find the Japs, so he went off and was gone until in the afternoon about 2:30 he came back and decided that I was too far out. They already had dispatched a PT [high-speed wooden motor torpedo] boat to come out and pick me up from Pappy's message, he radioed back, but he said that he thought maybe they might not find me and I was too far away, so he landed in the open sea and made a beautiful landing, came in, headed right for me and before he even lost all of his speed in the landing, he came by me with the fuselage of the airplane almost on one side and wing float on the other, rocked me around, got me all wet again, but I was so tickled to see him that it didn't make a bit of difference. He circled back and picked me up.

**Interviewer:**

This burn you talk about, was it a flash burn from anti-aircraft fire?

**Lt. Gay:**

Yes, a 20 mm. [anti-aircraft shell] exploded right by my left rudder pedal and the flash backed. I had wrapped my pants' leg in my sox, which pilots do quite often, and I think they ought to always do it to protect against such things. my right leg, I don't think would have received any of that anyway, but it evidently was still wrapped and my left, leg, the pants leg had come out of the sock and it was just the flash. I mean the flash burn will get you and you don't need to think, just because you wrap your pants leg down and pull your sock up over it, that you're not protecting yourself, because you are. A flash like that, even just a flare back in the plane, if it catches fire, you can't ward off a continuous fire, of course, but you can get a nasty burn from flash that will be saved if you will only have just some light piece of material between you, you know, just to protect your flesh, skin.

**Interviewer:**

These two injuries you have from anti-aircraft, from plane fire, or anti-aircraft fire.

**Lt. Gay:**

Well, as I said before, the anti-aircraft fire didn't come anywheres close to me, at least I don't think it even hit the plane. The slug that I had in my hand and the one that had been in my arm, were both machine gun bullets from Zeros. I think both of those pieces had been ripping through the plane and were very well spent by the time they hit me, cause they just went under the skin and stopped. A machine gun bullet, if it had caught me with any force, it would have gone right on by, but both of those things were pretty well spent, when they got me and knocked me around a little bit, I felt it when they hit, of course, but they were able to take them out and no injuries, only scars, show for it. They didn't hurt my hand at all.

**Interviewer:**

Did you have a shoulder holster when you were in the water?

**Lt. Gay:**

I did, yes. I had my .45 in the shoulder holster and I took it out, it lasted pretty well. I expected to be able to get some material out of the emergency rations, to take care of a thing like that, I didn't have anything to keep it from getting rusty. The next day when they picked me up, one of the Ordnance boys aboard the plane told me that he'd fix my .45 up for me and bring it to me the next morning early, but the Doctors, of course, the hospital at Midway was blown up and with my hand in the condition it was in they decided to fly me to Pearl Harbor as soon as possible, so the next morning before daylight why they put me aboard a PB2Y [four-engine 'Coronado' seaplane patrol bomber] and I was flown back, so I didn't get my .45.

I don't know what the kid did with it, but I do know that coming in that day after they picked me up there were a couple of our fighters saw us and came over to investigate and, of course, the crew aboard ship weren't sure what they were right at first and they began to limber up their guns and get ready to repel Jap fighters and I know that everybody in the crew pulled out all kinds of guns from everywhere. They pulled out rifles, army rifles, and one kid had an old western .45 with big old cock back hammer and so I figured that if my .45 would be put to such use as that, I could do without it.

**Interviewer:**

Well, getting back to this holster. Were you the first man of Torpedo 8 to have a shoulder holster?

**Lt. Gay:**

Well, I kind of think that I am. I feel that I was the person that started the shoulder holster business. I came into the Ready Room one day, I'd been worrying about carrying my gun. I always wanted to have it with me in the air, and in the old armor plate bucket seat in the TBD it was very uncomfortable to carry side arms in a holster. So I went into the parachute loft and had the boy make me a shoulder holster, and I came into the ready room wearing that thing and everybody in Torpedo 8 immediately took a liking to it, and we got some leather out of the store room and began making leather shoulder holsters for everybody. So the whole squadron had them, everybody else on the ship called us, 'Circus' and a bunch of 'Mexican Panchos' running around with knives and shoulder holsters and everything else, and then when we finally got down into the Coral Sea and began losing pilots and the boys were going into the Islands without their knives and things, they came around to ask us if we didn't have some spare equipment, but we had, thanks to Commander Waldron, we'd gotten all that stuff way back in San Diego when it could be had.

But I think since then, as a matter of fact I know that nearly all the boys that fly planes that will offer difficulty in carrying a pistol as a side arm, use shoulder holsters and there's quite a few of them in the Southwest Pacific now, and nearly every time I see one, I kind of feel like personally I started that. I don't know whether its true or not.

**Interviewer:**

Another thing in which Torpedo 8 more or less pioneered was this business of exercising?

**Lt. Gay:**

Well, yes. Commander Waldron had us out on the flight deck every morning taking our exercise. He figured that we needed it and we didn't get to fly much and we'd go up on the flight deck and run around the deck and also do regular physical drill. It didn't hurt us at all. As a matter of fact, it did us a lot of good; but the rest of the squadrons on the ship would stand around and 'haw' at us and laugh about it; but I found out later though that after Torpedo 8 was gone, that the whole ship was doing it and it's a good idea.

**Interviewer:**

One thing more before we leave Midway. How did Commander Waldron know exactly where to fly? From previous contact reports that had come in?

**Lt. Gay:**

Well, yes, that and his old foxy brain. He was a tactician from way back. He studied those kind of things. He thought about them all the time. We'd be sitting in the Ready Room and it'd be just a general bull session going on, everybody would be laughing and talking, and he'd be sitting there looking up in the ceiling thinking about tactics and Japanese, what they might do on certain occasions and things, and he'd stand up and call the place to attention and go into an hour and a half or so lecture. I don't mean to say that he wasn't a good sport, because when it came to



throwing a party or having a good time on the beach, why we had a devil of a time keeping up with him. Boy, he was a party man. But he had his parties when he had his parties, and when he got aboard ship it was business. And I think that he just figured that thing out himself. Of course, he had all the contact reports at his disposal, and from that he just figured his strategy and when he took off to go, he told us where he thought they'd be. By golly, that's where they were.

**Interviewer:**

He figured it out perfectly.

**Lt. Gay:**

Um hum.

**Interviewer:**

Allright. Do you want to tell us something about your further combat experiences?

**Lt. Gay:**

Well, after Midway, I came back to the States for a period of 30 days' leave, and I began my combat experience with the United States Public Relations and Incentives Division in going around talking to all of those war industries and what not, and I was in the [United] States for a little over three months, of last year; then I joined Torpedo Squadron 11. The Air Group Commander at that time was Commander Ramsey, my squadron Commander was Lt. Comdr. F.L. Ainsworth, and he came to the Squadron from the Bureau and previous to that time, he'd been a patrol plane pilot. He had a very difficult job of learning torpedo tactics and torpedo work, and he did a very marvelous job. He was a great skipper, and I've admired him as a friend and also as a squadron Commander. A great man.

We were supposed to go back aboard the *Hornet*. I had asked Admiral Nimitz and later Admiral Mason if it would be arranged so that I could come back and go aboard the *Hornet* and Air Group 11 was supposed to go to the *Hornet*, but before we could get back out there, she was sunk and we stayed in Pearl Harbor for some time training. Went from there to the Fiji's [large island group in Polynesia] and trained a little while there and then went on up to Guadalcanal where we did quite a bit of night work on what we call prowling hops. Strike Command would send us up 300 miles from Henderson Field into the Bougainville-Kahili [Solomon Islands] area looking for shipping at night. We would drop flares and skip bomb them and were fairly fortunate in quite a few ships. The squadron was told before we left down there, that we had been able to wreak more havoc on the enemy with less casualties to ourselves than any other unit that had been at Guadalcanal, which I thought was a pretty good record.

We had one thing that happened that was a distinct blow to the whole squadron. After having worked there for a period of about, well, it was nearly three months, they told us we could have a blow and go to Sidney, Australia. We were given four SCAT [Service Command Air Transportation] planes, one to leave each day with our pilots and our crews. One of those planes crashed in Tontouta, killing our then Air Group Commander, Lt. Commander Hamilton, and his crew. He was a TBF flier, of course, and also killed other pilots, Lieutenant Lindsey, and an NAP [Naval Aviation Pilot] by the name of Quick, Ensign Paul Bable, and Ensign Weise and Ensign Burke, and their ground crews and another very marvelous man, by the name of Mike Flynn, Lieutenant, A-V(S) [US Naval Reserve aviation officer qualified for specialist duties] officer.

He was our Operations Officer and left a job that we later found out we couldn't get three men to fill. He really was a good man and he didn't know about the Navy when he got into it, and didn't know much about airplanes and flying them, but he really took over his job out there and really went to town. He did a beautiful job and I like Mike very much. He had a habit in his civilian life of being able to make money without any trouble and he was a good poker player, and he came out pretty well on his poker winnings, and he also had a lot of money. He bought a \$100 bond for everybody in the squadron. He put it up in his will, and I'll probably see it some day. I never did think Mike would get it. He just made up his mind that he wanted to go with us when we went to Australia, and he got on this transport and got killed. I think that was about the second or third hop he'd taken since he'd been with the squadron.

But to the enemy we didn't lose very many people. One radio man was killed in the plane with Ensign Weise on a daylight raid to Bougainville and, of course, the next day Weise was killed in this Tontouta crash in a DC-3 [twin-engine Douglas 'Dakota' transport], but we lost on a night mine laying hop an Ensign who had joined the squadron

in the Fiji Islands by the name of Sweitzer, and on a daylight raid we lost an Ensign by the name of Snell. Of course, we lose their crews with each of the pilots. Unfortunately, I don't get to know the crews very well.

On this publicity business, it's unfortunate to me that I can't tell their story and give them the credit that they deserve. They never get the credit that they really have coming to them. That's another story. That's all we had lost to the Japs. We had another kid lost in the fog one night, by the name of Harry Brown. He and his crew. We were very lucky and had a wonderful squadron. We were in on the initial softening up [pre-invasion bombardment] of Munda [peninsula on the island of New Georgia, Solomon Islands] and then came back to the States. I've been back here about weeks.

**Interviewer:**

Can you tell us anything more about that initial softening up of Munda?

**Lt. Gay:**

Well, yes. Munda had been pounded long before we ever got to Guadalcanal [easternmost large island in the Solomons]. As a matter of fact, the palm trees and everything up there were pretty well beat up and we'd go up on an average of about twice a day with some 48 TBFs, loaded with either four 500-pound bombs, demolitions or 2,000-pound instantaneous or daisy cutters, and we'd have some 40 or 50 SBDs [Douglas 'Dauntless' dive-bombers] with thousand pound bombs, and a number of fighters, and we'd go up there and just move the dirty over a couple of hundred yards, and then the next afternoon we'd come back again; and we did that nearly every day. Just kept right on pounding them, but it happened that although we thought that it would be easy for the ground forces to walk in there and take the place, the first thing they started crying for when they got there was more air support. The Japs were dug in, they were all underground, and I think that although you beat on them from the air like the devil, they are going to be hard to take whenever you hit them on the ground. Of course, I am not much of a ground tactician, I don't know much about the ground fighting out there, except that we all though thought Munda was beat down to such a state that it would be easy. It turned out that it wasn't. It took them longer than we thought it would. We had to go back up and do it some more.

The question's been asked if I saw any of our rear gunners in the TBDs shoot down any of the Zeros in the action at Midway. My answer to that is 'Yes.' I saw five Zeros shot down. Of course, now that has been my answer to that question has been interpreted that my rear gunner shot down five planes. That's not true. That was the combined action of the squadron, the boys were working on them with everything they had, trying to keep them off us and we may have gotten more than that. As a matter of fact, I would be inclined to think that we did, but I know positively that we got five. Because I saw them hit the water.

**Interviewer:**

Another question. Going back to your rescue at Midway, how did you identify yourself to your rescuing planes?

**Lt. Gay:**

Well, I was sitting up in the middle of this battle area and there was all kinds of things around, oil slick and barrels and lumber and the Japanese life rafts were black. I was in a big four man yellow rubber life raft and I am sure he knew, as soon as he saw that yellow boat, that I was an American. Of course, I waved to him and had my regular Navy T-shirt, took my khaki shirt off and just figured if he saw that Navy T-shirt, me in that yellow boat, that he'd know it was one of his buddies.

**Interviewer:**

You said you did some mine laying. Where did you do that and what type of work is that?

**Lt. Gay:**

Well we did that up in the Kahili area up around Bougainville [largest of the Solomon Islands] in Shortland Harbor. To me, outside of daylight skip bombing in TBFs, that's about as rugged a thing a flight command can dream up. It's aerial mines. They've got to be dropped from about 800 feet altitude. You've got to go into the harbor, pick out a landmark and fly on a steady compass course for a period of seconds, depending upon where your mine belongs in the field. You come in, pick up your point, and fly right straight along, and if the Japs happen to see you out there, they kind of make it hot for you. They can pretty well figure out what you are doing right off the bat. It calls for some tricky flying, 'cause you've got, in our particular places, we had some 50 TBFs that had to get into the harbor

and get out in some 15-20 minutes. We had the Army supporting us in bombing these ground installations along the beach, trying to keep their searchlights out and the anti-aircraft fire from eating us up, and they did beautiful work. The lights would come on and they' put them out.

Of course, in that night work also, no one has any lights on and you lean your mixture back to where the plane's just gasping for gasoline and that dampens down the exhaust. I never have seen the difficulty in getting out an exhaust dampener. I would think if you'd stick a plate over it somewhere where it don't show, that's all you need; but that work is tricky and it's got to be planned and well executed.

It seems to me, in speaking of night flying, especially in a harbor that way, the general tendency of nearly all pilots when they get under that kind of fire, is to get down next to the water, which is a good idea; but at night, anytime, flying over the water, you can't judge your distance, and my tendency, my feeling was always to pull back on the stick rather than go down, because I'm sure that some of the boys that we lost up there in that stuff just flew into the water. That's all there was to it. And so, I think that it should be borne in mind that radar altimeters should always be used in planes doing that work, because, when that red light flashes on, you are getting too close. I think it should be remembered in all cases that that equipment be required for such work.

**Interviewer:**

What types of mines were you laying there, and how heavy were they, and how many could you carry with your plane?

**Lt. Gay:**

In the TBF we were able to carry one. It was a big 1000 pound Mark 2. We had some Mark 2's and Mark 3's, aerial mines. They had parachute attachments and we could drop them as high as eleven, twelve hundred feet. They'd parachute down and they were magnetic mines. They had devices in the exploder mechanism fixed so that they would, if a minesweeper or a ship would pass over them, they would click. In other words, click, off a section; and they could be set for any number of notches that you wanted to put on them, I think up to 12. And we managed to harass them a bit as we set all of them at different intervals, and we know that they were sweeping the place all the time, and they'd sweep over one of those things three or four times and they'd think the place was clear and maybe on the fifth click she'd go off. You understand those things. I didn't know much about mines. Haven't done a whole lot of that kind of work, but it was interesting, and it was tricky and I was very glad to have that experience.

**Interviewer:**

How successful was it?

**Lt. Gay:**

Well, we were told that it was fairly successful. It's hard to determine how many ships you sink in a case like that, because you can't be on the spot when the ship's sunk. They sneak in on you there at night and it's liable to be sunk and you'd never know about it. We were given credit for a number of ships being sunk, two or three, I am sure, but the main thing that a field like that will do will be to make them mine-conscious, keep them constantly working on sweeping the fields and make them bring their ships into their harbors by a definite route each time, which helps us when we want to go in and make a raid you see. We know where the ships ought to go, what lanes they'll use. They'll make a definite effort to sweep one place, make an entrance, so that they can get in. Well, we can find out where that is and when we go up there hunting ships, we know what lanes they should be in. It makes them worry a lot and although we were kind of leery about it, at the time, we felt that we were doing a job that wasn't of much importance. Since then, I found out that it was, and did a good deal of damage and accomplished its purpose very well.