Larry Brown wrote, “With no reflections against any other officer in the navy, I considered Jack the finest officer and friend I had. He was in charge of our group of Night Fighters (VFN-77C) aboard the USS Wasp CV-18. Because of the secrecy and nature of our mission, we reported directly to Admiral McCain, not to the ship’s Captain. As the war progressed, Ned Biros, the skipper of VF-14 (the Fighter Squadron) was shot down over Guam, and Jack was placed in charge of all the Fighters. I considered him an excellent Commander, as well as a good friend. His decisions were always sensible. He had a good sense of humor under difficult circumstances and was a kind respected skipper.”

One of Dad’s pilots was Chuck Soderlund. Chuck was Dad’s ‘wingman’. “If he went, I went with him.”
Here’s Aircraft Action Report-VF 14 No.131. October 12, 1944-Night Combat Air Patrol
Two night fighters were launched on a night combat air patrol. Their individual statement of interceptions follows:
Lt. John H. Boyum.

“While on routine (Chuck Soderlund laughs at his use of ‘routine’. Night operations never were, and this one sure wasn’t) night Combat Air Patrol, I was vectored after a bogie at about 2100 (9:00 PM). When I was placed in a position (by the ships radar) about 4 miles astern of the bogie, I was notified that there were two other bogies close behind me. My speed at the time was 240kn and I was reported closing very rapidly. I closed in to about 750 feet and slowed down to the bogies speed, which was about 205 knots. The enemy was not taking any evasive action at this time. I lined up my sights

on him, directly astern at about 100 feet below, fired a 1 and a half to 2 second burst, using only my four inboard guns, which had the flash-hiders and no tracer load. Immediately the enemy was enveloped in a great number of very brilliant flashes from my incendiaries. A few red, glowing pieces of his plane flew off and drifted back past me. He started down and to the right, in what looked like a steep spiral. I attempted to follow him down and get in another burst but he exploded in the ocean. My attention turned to the bogie's behind me."
Ensign Charles A. Soderlund: His side comments are in brackets( ).
I had been catapulted, in the dark, with Jack Boyum. We were stationed some distance apart, in likely areas that enemy planes might try to penetrate, as well as for safety's sake. (We didn't want night fighter planes to run into each other, not having our navigation lights on).... The ship vectored me in the general direction of the bogies track and I started to chase the bogie from behind. I had faster speed, so I began to overtake the intruding aircraft. Almost immediately, a new complication occurred: the bogie and my plane had gotten so close together (on the ship's radar) that it couldn't tell one plane from the other. This was a bad situation for me because of the danger of collision, and I didn't wait for further instructions. I 'whacked' off most of my throttle to drop back from the enemy plane. I made radar contact with the plane and I was given permission to take over the intercept and shoot down the plane unless it was identified as 'friendly'. (are they kidding? At night and without lights?) .... The enemy plane released a flare. The flare floated down through the clouds, evidently directly above the task force. I then vectored upon

the tail of the bogie. His speed was at first 95 knots, so I had to drop my flaps to pace him. Later he increased his speed to 130 knots. Finally, when I was about 300 yards behind him, the bogie straightened out and I promptly closed in until I obtained visual contact at about 600 feet. I pulled up at this range, fired a one second burst with my four inboard guns (10-15 rounds per gun) and the bogie burst into flame.

After watching the plane go down at a steep angle, aflame all the way, it hit the water and the fire spread out into a large oval shape...
Lt. John Boyum the other airborne Wasp night fighter, observed this splash from somewhere in the vicinity. We both were getting very low on gas and several attempts were made to land us but which were thwarted by continued bogie activity. Finally, with bogies still in the immediate vicinity, a last desperate attempt succeeded in getting us aboard at 11:15 PM. Our remaining fuel was 20 gallons." (Basically fumes for a 2,000 hp engine)

Comments after wrote, that both pilots are to be highly commended for their excellent performance. They are most appreciative that Commander Task Group 38.1 (Admiral McCain) and the Commanding Officer of the ship, made it possible for them to come aboard with bogies still present in the area.

Chuck Soderlunds memories in 1997 wrote, "The Wasp's radar performed the functions of locating potential threat aircraft and sending out night fighter aircraft to intercept them. Then

when the night fighter gets within two miles of the target, and has picked up the bogie on his night fighter radar, the pilot takes over and tries to use his radar to close in to minimum range on his radar, at which time the pilots sets up a side to side scanning with his eyes to pick up the bogie with his night vision. Sometimes the exhaust flame from the bogie can be seen at a greater distance, which can be a big help if one didn't mistake it for a bright star. Now we also had a radar gun sight mode that could shoot down a plane without seeing it, but it was so jittery, that I never heard of any one using it for the final interception. Jack and I always used moonlight rather than the gun sight mode. Even on the darkest nights, we could call upon our night's vision to see a silhouette of an aircraft, and shoot it down."

Night Take Offs—You'd be waiting in the ready room with special red lights to preserve your night vision. When you heard the call to man your plane you'd go into the passage way leading to the flight deck that was also lighted with red lights. When you arrived on the flight deck your plane captain met you and led you to your plane and helped you get in. The deck crew would put the plane in the catapult. The pilot would go over his check off list to make sure the plane was working properly. The pilot would give the catapult officer the signal he was ready, turn his engine up to full speed, and shortly be launched (catapulted). Flying was immediately on instrument and then went under the direction of the Night Fighter Director Officer.

After a 'normal' night fighter intercept, it was time to return to the carrier. A night recovery on a carrier's flight deck

was a serious matter to a Task Force Commander, who must weigh the risks and consequences of a plane crash, followed by a fire. A fire at night could be seen a long distance away by enemy aircraft, ships or submarines and they would be eager to attack any ships that were illuminated by fire. Night landings caused a bit of nervousness on the part of the brass.

Daytime landings had many cues that helped a pilot land on a carrier deck: ship's perspective for setting up the landing pattern, depth perception for holding altitude, a visible horizon for adjusting flight attitudes, good visibility for seeing the Landing Signal Officer (LSO) and no need to fly on instruments through most of the landing pattern (part visual and part instrument flying is generally more difficult, and inherently more dangerous).

Night Fighters had special ways of making carrier landings at night. The type we used on the Wasp in 1944 went like this: Three narrow beam Aldis lamps were used on the fight deck to set up a perspective of the ship. If more than one plane was waiting to land, only one plane would be selected at a time. The selected plane would turn on its navigation lights and the Aldis lamps would be turned on and aimed at him. Two Aldis lamps were placed in each corner of the flight deck aft and one on the starboard side forward. As the selected plane flew its pattern, the Aldis lamps would give the pilot a good perspective for flying in the pattern and setting up his turns. In the event that there were any enemy planes, ships or submarines in the area, it was highly unlikely that they would see the lamps but they might see the navigation lights of the plane. The pilot making the landing, would enter an imaginary rectangular traffic pattern, spaced out from the ship's Aldis

lamp outline and make his approach as he sees fit. Somewhere in his final approach, the carrier would turn on its deck edge, recessed lights and also turn on the luminescent lights that made the day glow like material of the LSO visible to the pilot as he turned into the 'groove' and received his final 'cut'. Upon landing, the pilot turns off his lights, the ship turns off the deck edge recessed lights and the LSO lights are doused. People have asked me if this procedure was science or art. I don't know what it was. I was just always glad to make it."

LIFE ON THE WASP

These Night Fighter pilots reported that it wasn't all fighting and dying up there. "We saw some beautiful sights. Catapulting into the dark in the early morning hours before dawn had the best of both worlds, a dark launch and a daytime return. We would roam around a star filled sky testing operational methods but there was time to look around and work on our 'night vision'. As dawn broke, there were dark rainsqualls followed by breathtaking rainbows. One could see why Japan was called 'the land of the rising sun' when witnessing the beautiful deep red-hued sky as the sun rose on the eastern horizon. About this time, the first rays of dawning light showed on the horizon and the Wasp began to launch aircraft for the morning's missions. After they launched, they had me and Jack land."

One of the day fighter pilots reported that, "you know when I see newsreels about the war or a segment of "Victory at Sea" or "Navy Log", it's always in black and white. I got to tell you,

our world was brilliant color. The weather for the most part, was fantastic. Getting up to high altitude also gave us relief from the tremendous heat on board ship, although once we started to mix it up, it didn't seem cold anymore. We felt excited to launch into a beautiful blue sky, white cumulus clouds, with our blue fighter planes. There was red also. The Jap 'meatball' on their planes was red and of course the blood."

Life on the carriers was mostly monotonous, punctuated by intense moments. The large part of their area of operation was in the Philippine Sea, where typhoons generate faster that anywhere in the world. Typhoons would toss a carrier around violently. The planes on deck had to be well secured. Most of the men had not experienced rough weather at sea. It was disconcerting for many to see what they had thought to be huge ships seem to become so small in a violent ocean. When it calmed, they would play cards and waited till they found the Jap fleet. It was educated guess work, aided by sightings of scout planes and submarines. Still, the enemy was always on the move. They could never be sure whether they were attacking or retreating. Once contact was made there was intense anticipation as they heard radio chatter from other carriers air groups that had pilots making contact with the enemy. There was a very competitive spirit between the carrier air groups. One group didn't want the other to 'get all the action'. Finally the call would come into the pilot ready room, "Pilots, man your planes", and off they would go. The 'cat walk' around the flight deck was filled with the ships company for every take off. It was the apex of their mission. The take offs were filled with high hopes of victory. The

landings also had the catwalks full. Most missions in 1944 were successful, but there were still crash landings. Some pilots, just about to make it in, would run out of fuel. Their glide path had them intersect with the front of the flight deck. Or pilots would be wounded from combat and lose control at the last moment. Crashes on the flight deck meant other planes would have to be waved off until the crash was cleared, sometimes resulting in more planes running out of gas. Even take offs were not immune from disaster. The catapult could malfunction and the plane would take off without sufficient speed and drop into the 'drink'. A radioman in the back seat of a mislaunched torpedo bomber sank with the plane. His helmet was stuck. He finally threw off the helmet and swam to the surface. The rescuers figured he'd been under ten minutes. When they had him back aboard, they laid him out, trying to get the water out of his lungs to no effect. One of the pilots came over and said to him, "Angelo, you don't have to kill yourself to avoid paying me the three bucks you owe me. Forget about it. Keep the money." Angelo began laughing so hard he cleared his lungs of all the seawater he swallowed. It was said this pilot could get a laugh out of a corpse. So there was tremendous humor in the face of tough situations. But checking and double-checking became a matter of life and death. The stress and strain weighed heavily on the men.

LIFE AT NIGHT

The Night Fighters were called the 'owls'. They had to get some sleep during the day, which was hard with all the noise of daytime operations, which included the firing of the ship's guns or the catapult explosion to launch daytime flights. Sleep was

achieved by utter exhaustion and then only for a short time. Other than that they drank coffee. Night Fighters got to see some strange things at night. My father told me of vast schools of iridescent squid around the hull of the ship at night. (One of the few things he ever told me. He also told me about the stars.)

Larry Brown, the Squadron radar officer, saw a desperate Jap pilot try to land on the Wasp in the dark. "I was on the cat walk of the ship when I swung my lantern up to get a good look at the meatball on his wing as he flew over my head. Then someone on the island saw it and all the lights on the ship went out." The Jap pilot finally gave up and flew on to Saipan, landed and was captured by our troops.

VALUES AND MISTAKES

Pilots were valued over planes. "Many times pilots from other carriers would have to land on the Wasp because they were low on fuel, and our carrier (or theirs) would be the only possible safe landing. It was an ever-present problem. Some carriers had so many planes aboard, that they just had no room for more, so they just pushed good planes over the side in order to land pilots. All carrier pilots had been briefed on water landings during their training at Quonset Point R.I., but no one wanted to ever have to do it. There were too many variables to go wrong. Drowning in the ocean was a constant fear. But 'splashes' happened often throughout the carrier fleet, mostly from running out of gas. Many times, pilots compared it to a hard carrier landing. They had about one and a half to two minutes to get out before the plane sank. Most had life rafts to keep them from the elements and sharks... The wait time

varied between two minutes and two days. The first allied soldiers on Iwo Jima were two downed Navy pilots. They hid and survived the war. Pilots carried signaling mirrors and flares. Lookouts on all ships were constantly on the watch for downed pilots. They tried to land near friendly ships of their fleet and usually got back to their carriers within a few days. Trades were made like, "we'll give you back your pilot for a gallon of chocolate ice cream."

Aside from the danger of enemy fire, 'friendly fire' caused many Navy planes and pilots to be destroyed. Nervous young gunners had little time to discern whether planes were theirs or ours. The air was filled with smoke, the action fast and furious. Kamikaze attacks were common and successful. Once any plane was near the ship, they were fair game. Many mistakes were made, from gunners' mates to Admirals in their command decisions. After the Battle of Leyte Gulf, most pilots were aware that the war would end soon. Their eagerness changed to trying to insure their survival of the war.
After the war, Dad went on to train pilots in night fighting operations after the war and into the Korean War where they used them again. Following that, he went into test pilot training, sea command, and ended his career with the development of the AWACS plane, the most advanced technology of radar evolution. It became a centerpiece of the air action in the war in Vietnam.

THE WAR ENDS

The Air Group returned to San Diego after their year in the war zone, for a much needed leave. They had changed from cocky

pilots to war weary vets. In June of 1945 these seasoned pilots were sent back to the war zone on the carrier, USS Intrepid. On the way there, they anchored in Kahului, Maui, where Dad was raised. They enjoyed it immensely. At NAS Kahului they traded in their trusty F6 Hellcats, for the new F4U 'Gull Wing' Corsairs. It was more powerful and promised to be a good solution to the kamikaze attacks that were plaguing the ships. They ended up staying two months practicing their carrier landings with the new planes. (For many years one of these WWII fighters was in the weeds at the Kanaha Park side of the runway.) Some of the pilots also partied hard on the beach, where Kanaha Beach Park is now and where I teach windsurfing. The war ended while they were still in Kahului, on August 15, 1945. The celebrations lasted for days.
Our father and mother celebrated the war's end by driving up the new road Wilson Cannon had written about, to the top of Haleakala. They gazed down at what would become a different world than the one he had grown up in.

INFORMATION
I've learned of this chapter of my father's life only now at the age of 55. He certainly didn't share any of it, for whatever reasons he had. This is common among many combat veterans. The memories are, many times, too painful. Good friends that didn't survive the war, weigh heavy on their hearts. As their lives are near their end, some begin to feel comfortable enough to share some of those memories. My father died long before he got to that stage. 'Bluejackets' wrote most of the combat accounts. They were enlisted sailors whose training hadn't included the drill not to keep

diaries. The pilots were strickly forbidden to keep diaries and for the most part, never did. Spies and secrecy were a constant issue and my father's night fighter squadron's activities especially so. As a result there has been little written or pictorial history of this moment in time. Only now as these men enter their eighties and the pain has dulled, somewhat, do they begin to put down memories. Their memories are still very clear of what happened then, as if it were carved into stone. The combination of action reports and personal memories creates a vivid picture of the life of a fighter pilot.