

ENSIGN: JOHN C. BUTLER

“For extraordinary heroism and distinguished service as pilot of an airplane of Bombing Squadron Three in action against enemy Japanese forces in the Battle of Midway during the period June 4-6, 1942. Defying the extreme danger from a concentrated barrage of anti-aircraft fire and fierce fighter opposition, Ensign Butler, with utter disregard for his own personal safety, participated in persistent and vigorous attacks against the Japanese Invasion Fleet. His gallant intrepidity and loyal devotion to the accomplishment of a vastly important objective contributed in large measure to the success achieved by our forces and were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.”

Ensign John C. Butler’s Navy Cross Citation

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 nearly destroyed the Pacific Fleet. Fortunately the American carriers were not in port and were spared to fight another day, and fight they did. The following April Colonel James Doolittle’s Army B-25 Bombers launched from a Navy carrier in a retaliatory attack on Tokyo. Then on May 4-8, 1942 the American Navy fought the Japanese to a standoff at the Battle of the Coral Sea. The Japanese advance on Australia was halted and the aura of invincibility had been shattered.

Undaunted, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, who conceived and planned the successful attack on Pearl Harbor, planned to lure what was left of the American fleet to their doom and end their hopes of winning the war in the Pacific. It was a daring gamble; he would send a diversionary force to attack the Aleutian Islands and while the Americans were focused on Alaska he would attack Midway Island, landing 5,000 troops to occupy the island. Midway was located just 1,500 miles west-northwest of Hawaii and he knew the Americans would never tolerate a Japanese base so close so they would rush their warships to the area where he would annihilate them with his superior naval force. He also knew that without the Navy carriers, the Americans couldn’t launch another air raid on Japan.

Success for the Japanese depended on the striking power of his four mighty carriers, the *Hiryu*, *Agayi*, *Soryu*, and *Kaga*. All four had participated in the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Yamamoto’s plan was sound but it depended on his counterpart, Admiral Chester Nimitz reacting to his diversion attack by turning his attention to Alaska. It was like a giant chess game, a move by one side called for a counter-move by the other. Other events, however, can sometimes alter the best-laid plans. Unknown to Yamamoto, the Americans had broken the Japanese code and Nimitz couldn’t have been more privy to their strategy if he’d been sitting in their planning room.

The Battle of Midway would pit a smaller American task force strengthened with superior military intelligence against one of the most potent naval forces ever assembled. The odds were overwhelming in favor of the Japanese. Numbers tell the story: The Americans had some 100 planes against 650 Japanese carrier planes; they had 3 carriers to the Japanese 8; the Japanese had 20 cruisers to the Americans 8; and the Americans had 14 destroyers against 60 for the Japanese. The Japanese had 11 battleships and the

Americans had none available. All six, including the *Arizona* had been either lost or damaged at Pearl Harbor.

Throughout history when battle is joined all the best-laid plans can and usually do go awry. It always boils down to the courage, bravery, and extraordinary self-sacrifice of the men firing the guns that makes the difference between victory and defeat. At Midway, the determined American's wouldn't be denied. Seldom in the history of naval warfare has this been so evident.

Among the brave Navy pilots who fought in that crucial battle was John C. Butler of Buckeye, Arizona.

John C. Butler was born in Liberty, Arizona on February 3rd, 1921. At an early age he demonstrated those qualities that make a young man rise above the crowd. He was a handsome, well-rounded, natural leader, playing in all major sports at Buckeye High School. He played center on the State Championship football team and was selected Hawk King for his extra-curricular activities which included along with sports, drama, glee club and orchestra. He also had a fondness for machines, working in his father's Ford dealership during the summers. He was a quick study in mechanics and could out perform most of the hired hands in the shop. He seriously considered becoming a race car driver.

Following his graduation from high school Butler attended UCLA for a semester then transferred to San Diego State where he played on the freshman football team. He also enlisted in a government program to train new pilots. War clouds were gathering and the government realized there was a severe shortage of pilots. The Navy offered Naval Flight Training and a commission upon graduation and he signed on. He earned his gold Navy wings at Pensacola, Florida in June 1941 and was stationed in San Diego.

That fall Butler was assigned to Dive-Bomber Squadron 3 and had just completed his five qualifying landings in the new Douglas SBD-3 when the Japanese Attacked Pearl Harbor. Within twenty-four hours his squadron shipped out on the carrier, *Saratoga*.

The Douglas SBD-Dauntless Dive-Bomber, model 1941, was one of the great carrier planes of all time. It was easy to fly, rugged, bulldog-tough, carried a payload of 1,200 pounds of bombs and had a maximum speed of 276 mph, making it slightly faster than its deadly Japanese counterpart, the Aichi D3A1.

During the next few months the pilots of the *Saratoga* flew combat patrols between Wake Island and Hawaii and also saw combat in the Gilbert and Marcus Islands. On January 11, 1942 she was hit from a torpedo fired from a Japanese submarine. The crippled carrier returned to Pearl Harbor and then stateside for repairs. Ensign John Butler and the rest of Squadron 3 were transferred to the carrier *Yorktown*.

During his tour with the *Yorktown*, Ensign Butler played a prominent role in Jimmy Doolittle's daring raid on Tokyo, one of the most spectacular events of the war. It was a payback mission for the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor.

On April 18, 1942 Colonel Jimmy Doolittle's Raiders, an Army Air Force group, set out with 16 land-based twin-engine B-25's atop the deck of the carrier *Hornet*. Ensign Butler's Squadron 3, under the command of Lieutenant Commander Max Leslie, a 20 year veteran, was assigned to the *Enterprise* whose aircraft were flying cover for the mission.

Since the carriers couldn't get close enough to Japan for carrier planes they would launch long-range bombers instead. The Japanese knew the American carriers were out

there but they were waiting until they came closer before attacking. When the carriers were 620 miles from Tokyo, still out of range of the Japanese patrol's normal radius, the B-25's were launched and Doolittle's Raiders flew into the pages of history.

One of the flyers with Doolittle's Raiders was Melvin Gardner of Linden, Arizona. He survived that one but was killed later in the war.

The bombing raid didn't do a whole lot of damage but the psychological effects were devastating. The Japanese militarists had declared the homeland would never come under attack yet just six months after Pearl Harbor enemy bombs rained down on the capital city. It was a harbinger of what was to come in the years ahead.

During the mission Squadron 3 bombed and strafed Japanese patrol boats. Butler sank one and damaged another.

While Squadron 3 was on duty with the *Enterprise*, the *Yorktown* had been engaged at the Battle of the Coral Sea where it had been badly damaged. She limped into Pearl Harbor just as preparations were underway to head for Midway Island. Her skipper believed it would take 90 days to have her ready for battle. Admiral Nimitz gave them 72 hours. Workmen swarmed all over her and through superhuman efforts the carrier was ready for battle on schedule.

On May 30 Ensign Butler and the men of the *Yorktown* set sail to join the *Enterprise* and *Hornet* at a place 325 miles northeast of Midway Island called "Point Luck," for a rendezvous with destiny.

When Admiral Yamamoto's fleet approached Midway in early June he had no idea there were any American carriers in the area. Japanese intelligence reported the *Yorktown* and *Lexington* sunk at the Battle of the Coral Sea and the *Hornet* and *Enterprise* were supposed to be in the Solomon Islands.

On the morning of June 4 the approaching Japanese carriers were spotted right where American Intelligence said they'd be and the planes at Midway took to the air. They shot down three enemy bombers before they were swarmed upon by Japanese Zeros. Losses were heavy; seventeen American planes were downed and seven more were damaged.

Meanwhile, more than a hundred Japanese bombers got through American anti-aircraft fire and unleashed their bombs on Midway. Movie director John Ford was on the island and filmed the action. When the smoke lifted, however, the anti-aircraft guns and the airfield were still operable.

While the Japanese bombers were pounding Midway, American planes from the island continued attacking the Japanese fleet. They made five separate runs and their losses were astounding. Seven of ten torpedo planes and eight dive-bombers were shot down without scoring a hit on the Japanese warships. Still, most of the planes survived the withering naval gunfire. This caused Admiral Chuichi Nagumo to call for another air strike and destroy the airfield on Midway. Unaware the American Navy was so close he had his planes fitted with bombs instead of torpedoes.

Suddenly, a spotter located "American surface ships" approaching. One turned out to be a carrier. Nagumo knew his carriers would come under attack from the air and he ordered his planes to change back to torpedoes. In their haste to reload the bombs were left on the deck. It turned out to be a fatal error, as they would be detonated later in the day by American dive-bombers.

At 7:02 a.m. Admiral Raymond Spruance who led Task Force 16 ordered carriers *Hornet* and *Enterprise* to launch all their fighters, dive-bombers and torpedo planes, and attack the Japanese fleet. Again the results were disastrous. The Japanese Zeros and anti-aircraft fire downed nearly 150 American planes. The *Hornet's* Torpedo 8 squadron was virtually wiped out. All 15 planes were lost and 29 of the 30 crewmen were killed. Thus far the Japanese had withstood eight attacks and none of their ships had been hit.

Two hours later Ensign Butler's Squadron 3, with Max Leslie in the lead took off from the carrier *Yorktown*. Each of the 17 planes carried a 1,000 bomb. They circled the carrier for a few minutes then headed off in search of the Japanese fleet. On the way a new electrical arming device accidentally released the bomb on four planes including Leslie's. Now only 13 bombers were actually carrying bombs. Leslie could have picked someone else to lead the charge but chose to make his bombing run anyway. The maneuver required precision and Squadron 3 was used to the way he led. He would lead the way on a dry run and do what damage he could with his machine guns.

They were flying at 15,000 feet at about 10:15 when they spotted the carrier *Taga*. Painted on the deck was a huge red circle, a perfect target. As the carrier began launching its fighter planes Squadron 3 went into a dive. At 10,000 feet Leslie opened up with machine guns. He could see what looked like tiny sparklers from the periphery of the ship. The anti-aircraft guns had opened up on the intruders. Some of the planes were hit by flying shrapnel. One after another the dive-bombers of Squadron 3 screamed towards the carrier. At 2,500 feet each pilot pressed his electrical bomb release button, then pulled the manual release for good measure.

By the time it was Ensign Butler's turn to make a pass the carrier was in flames. He and the rest of the squadron decided to go after other targets. Butler dove on a battleship. He released his bomb and looking back, saw smoke and flames rising.

At that same time other dive-bombers from the *Yorktown* and *Enterprise* were delivering their payloads on the *Akagi* and *Soryu*. Within minutes all three carriers were going down.

For the American pilots, revenge was sweet. Lt. Earl Gallaher, of the *Enterprise* was at Pearl Harbor on December 7 and saw the *USS Arizona* explode. He watched from his Dauntless Dive-Bomber as the 1000 lb. bombs plunge into the deck of the *Akagi*. As the Japanese carrier blew up he exhaled, "*Arizona*, I remember you."

Bent on revenge Japanese planes rumbled off the *Hiryu's* deck and headed for the *Yorktown*. They broke through the defense screen and attacked just as Squadron 3 was coming in for a landing. Butler and the others were waved off just before the enemy dive-bombers made their run. Squadron 3 landed on the *Enterprise* to refuel and resume the battle.

The Japanese attack scored three major hits on the *Yorktown* and soon after torpedo planes came and put her out of the fight for good. At 3:00 just before a Japanese Torpedo Bomber gave the carrier its death knell, word came from one of its patrol planes the last Japanese carrier, the *Hiryu*, had been located.

Now it was the American's turn to seek vengeance. At 3:30 Ensign Butler, along with the other refugee pilots from the *Yorktown*, joined the pilots from the *Enterprise*, and sped off in pursuit of the fourth Japanese carrier. At about 4:45, they spotted the *Hiryu*. They maneuvered around so they could make their dive from out of the setting sun when they were jumped by several Zeros desperately trying to save their last carrier.

Despite the withering fire the dive-bombers continued their high-speed run in. Three dive-bombers, including Ensign Butler were shot down. Other pilots later reported they'd seen him come under attack from a Zero.

Butler had always said he wanted to be a fighter pilot and tangle with a Zero. Unfortunately his Douglas Dauntless dive-bomber was no match against the speedy, quick-turning Japanese fighter plane.

Other dive-bombers fought through the swarm of Zeros. Four 1,000-ton bombs found their mark. The planes on deck blew up spreading flames across a third of her flight deck. The crew fought desperately to put out the fires but around midnight an explosion ripped through the carrier and Admiral Tamon Yamaguchi ordered his men to abandon ship. He remained at his post and ordered his screening destroyers to torpedo the vessel.

The stubborn *Yorktown* refused to sink and was being towed home by a destroyer when a Japanese submarine administered the *coup de grace* with torpedoes. On the morning of June 7, the mighty *Yorktown* went down. She sank, according to one report, "like a tired colossus, hurt beyond pain."

By dawn on the morning of June 5 all four in the Japanese main striking force, the *Akagi*, *Kaga*, *Soryu*, and *Hiryu* had been sunk. The tide of battle had turned and faced with devastating losses, Admiral Yamamoto ordered what was left of his fleet to retreat from battle. He was heard to say, "The price is too high."

The American victory was decisive and complete. The Japanese lost 3,500 men, many irreplaceable pilots, four carriers, one cruiser, and 322 planes. The American losses were set at one carrier, one destroyer, a cruiser, 150 planes and 307 men.

The Battle of Midway stopped the Japanese Navy in their tracks and allowed the Americans to take the offensive. Against overwhelming odds, the daring Navy and Marine pilots had sent the pride of the Japanese navy to the bottom. The SBD Dauntless Dive-Bomber had won its spurs and became famous as the plane that helped alter the course of the Pacific war.

For his heroism Butler and six other members of his squadron were awarded the Navy Cross, second only to the Medal of Honor for bravery.

Historically, U.S. Navy battleships are named after states; cruisers are named after cities while destroyers and destroyer escorts are named after Navy and Marine heroes. Out of the many pilots lost that day only two pilots, one of them, Ensign John C. Butler, were recommended to have destroyers named in their honor. The *USS John C Butler* was launched in December 11, 1943. His mother Irene had the honor of christening the new destroyer. Like her namesake, the destroyer was a hero. The destroyer participated in six major campaigns including Iwo Jima and Okinawa. She won a Presidential Unit Citation for her part in the Battle of Samar in the Philippines, October 25, 1944. It was the only destroyer-type ship out of some 900 ships to receive the citation and Naval Commendation.

On May 20, 1945 the destroyer came under attack by Japanese kamikaze planes. One suicide plane crashed on the starboard side showering her decks with pieces of wreckage. The *USS Butler* shot down five or her six attackers before the fight was over.

In San Diego, stands a monument honoring eight Navy fighting ships including the *USS John C. Butler*. The ships won glory for their role in the crucial Battle of Leyte Gulf in 1945. For Ensign Butler's family the monument also serves as his tombstone.

They never recovered his body. He lies there in the deep with other brave young warriors who gave their lives in battle at sea. They're in good company. They share a watery grave with legendary warships with names like *Lexington*, *Yorktown*, *Hornet* and the *Wasp*.

I would like to give a special thanks to Ensign Butler's brother Bill for providing me with much of the information needed to write this story.

Marshall Trimble

Official Arizona State Historian.