

Naval Aviation in WW II

Invasion! Fortress

Naval Aviation
Summer 1944



Europe in France,

By Steven D. Hill

During the Second World War, the skies over France and Germany were the responsibility of the United States Army Air Forces and Britain's Royal Air Force (RAF). Naval Aviation had only limited opportunities to engage Hitler's armed forces. Although a fast carrier task force was not present to support the landings at Normandy on 6 June 1944, Naval Aviators did, in fact, participate in the greatest amphibious invasion in history. Later, in August, when southern France was invaded, Naval Aviators again took part. Cruiser Scouting Squadrons (VCS) 7 and 8 and Observation Fighting Squadron (VOF) 1 each fought against "the wily

Hun" during the summer of 1944.

The P-51 *Mustangs* that grace these two pages belong to the 361st Fighter Group of the Eighth Army Air Force Fighter Command in England. Credit for the lack of strong Luftwaffe opposition to the amphibious landings in France must be given to Army Air Force fighter groups like the 361st. Their strategic operations forced the Luftwaffe to deploy its fighter assets in Germany for defense of the homeland, where they would have little effect on the battle ground in France.

This photo was taken during Summer 1944, a month or so after D day. On August 12, the lead aircraft, "Lou IV," being flown by 361st Group CO,



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Colonel Thomas Christian, was destroyed, killing Col. Christian. Invading Hitler's Fortress Europe was not easy, nor was it without cost.

VCS-7, Seagulls to Spitfires

Naval Aviation's mission on 6 June was to provide air spotting support for the cruisers and battleships bombarding targets along the Normandy beachhead.

For this purpose, each vessel normally carried several aviators and two or three floatplanes, either SOC *Seagulls* or OS2U *Kingfishers*. Both aircraft performed the spotting mission quite well. Operations in the Mediterranean during 1943 had shown, however, that against strong enemy aerial opposition, the SOCs and OS2Us were far too vulnerable. They lacked the speed and maneuverability to escape attacks made by Focke-Wulf 190s and Messerschmitt 109s. In the Mediterranean, efforts were being made to train VCS pilots in the handling of fighters such as the P-40 *Warhawk* and P-51 *Mustang*. Flying fighters, the air spotting pilots stood a much better chance of eluding enemy air attacks.

Perhaps because of the high demand on P-51s for strategic bomber escort duties, it was decided that 17 VCS and Battleship Observation (VO) pilots aboard the cruisers *Quincy* (CA

71), *Tuscaloosa* (CA 37) and *Augusta* (CA 31) and the battleships *Nevada* (BB 36), *Arkansas* (BB 33) and *Texas* (BB 35) would be checked out in RAF *Spitfire* Mk Vbs.

The 67th Tactical Reconnaissance Group, Ninth Air Force, under the command of Colonel George W. Peck, was assigned the task of checking out the VCS-7 aviators in *Spitfires*. Training was conducted at the 67th's base in Middle Wallop, Hampshire. The training syllabus consisted of defensive fighter tactics, aerobatics, navigation, formation flying and spotting procedures.

On 8 May, Lieutenant Robert W. Calland, senior aviator aboard *Nevada*, assumed command of the squadron. He was relieved by Lieutenant Commander William Denton, Jr., senior aviator aboard *Quincy*, on the 28th. That same day, the squadron became fully operational and moved to Royal Naval Air Station (RNAS) Lee-on-Solent.

Ten squadrons, five RAF, four Royal Navy FAA (Fleet Air Arm) and VCS-7, were brought together at Lee-on-Solent to provide air spotting for the fire support ships of the Western and Eastern Naval Task Forces. The Western Naval Task Force, Rear Admiral Alan G. Kirk commanding, would land the U.S. First Army on beaches Utah and Omaha. The Eastern Naval Task Force would land the

80-G-302115



Arkansas (BB 33) aviator Lt. Harris Hammersmith, Jr., nearest the camera in full flight gear, receives instruction for his next spotting sortie. Seated to his right are Maj. Neel East of British Air Intelligence and *Augusta* (CA 31) aviator Ens. Robert J. Adams.

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Following a successful air spotting mission, Ltjg. Robert E. Doyle congratulates his wingman, Ens. John F. Mudge. The *Spitfire* on which Ens. Mudge is standing carries black and white identification bands, or invasion stripes, around its fuselage and wings.

British Second Army on beaches Gold, Juno and Sword. Two of the RAF squadrons, Nos. 26 and 63, flew *Spitfires*. The other three, Nos. 2, 268 and 414, flew *Mustang* Is and Ias. The four FAA squadrons, Nos. 808, 897, 885 and 886, were assigned *Seafire* IIIs, basically navalized *Spitfire* Mk Vbs.

On D day, all aircraft were pooled. This meant that VCS-7 flew whatever type was available, either *Seafire* or *Spitfire*. Although *Mustangs* were present, they were not flown by any VCS-7 aviators—the reason being that they had not been checked out in the type.

At noon on D day, the RAF *Mustangs* were withdrawn for tactical reconnaissance duties. This left some 95 aircraft available for air spotting support at RNAS Lee-on-Solent.

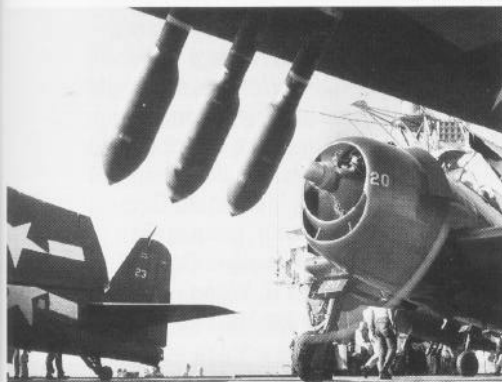
Typical spotting missions utilized two aircraft. The lead plane functioned as the spotter. The wingman, or "weaver," provided escort and protected the flight against enemy aerial attack. The clocking, or ship control, method was utilized on the majority of spotting sorties. Standard altitude for spotting missions was 6,000 feet,



According to one caption, this P-51C *Mustang* is being flown by a Naval Aviator who was forced to land in southern France by a loose canopy. In August 1944, the 111th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron took delivery of 10 brand-new P-51C *Mustangs* for use by the Naval Aviators of VCS-8. It is possible that this aircraft, Val Gal II, was one of those *Mustangs*.



Two SOC Seagulls and an OS2U Kingfisher sit at RNAS Lee-on-Solent while their pilots fly Spitfires during Operation Neptune-Overlord, the amphibious invasion of Normandy.



Crewmen aboard Tulagi (CVE 72) prepare VOF-1 Hellcats for combat during the invasion of southern France.

but poor weather forced the spotter to operate between 1,500 and 2,000 feet. Occasionally, missions were flown at even lower altitudes. Drop tanks were used to increase range. A typical spotting sortie lasted close to two hours. This provided 45 minutes on station and 1 hour in transit.

The Luftwaffe was rarely encountered, although six of the station's aircraft were shot down by German fighters. Four VCS-7 pilots were attacked by Me-109s and Fw-190s, putting the fine defensive capabilities of the *Spitfire* to the test. All four aviators successfully avoided being shot down.

Flak, however, was common and accounted for the squadron's only loss, Lieutenant Richard M. Barclay, senior aviator aboard *Tuscaloosa*. Lt. Barclay's wingman, Lieutenant (jg) Charles S. Zinn, also from *Tuscaloosa*, managed to return home despite severe damage to his right wing and aileron.

The exact number of aircraft lost by VCS-7 during the Normandy campaign



The European Theater of Operations during World War II.

cannot be verified as of this writing. VCS-7's action report mentions only the loss of Lt. Barclay's aircraft. Author David Brown in his book, *The Seafire, the Spitfire that went to sea*, claims VCS-7 lost 7 aircraft to enemy action and 1 operationally in 209 sorties flown. Unfortunately, Mr. Brown fails to cite the source of his information. According to VCS-7's action report, the squadron flew a total of 191 sorties between 6 and 25 June. The busiest days were the 6th, 7th and 8th. During those three days, a total of 94 sorties were flown.

Following the bombardment of Cherbourg on 26 June, naval gunfire support operations ceased. The fighting had moved inland out of the range of the ships' big guns. VCS-7 was, therefore, disbanded by order of RAdm. Kirk, and all personnel returned to their ships.

During 20 days of combat operations, the aviators of VCS-7 were awarded 9 Distinguished Flying Crosses, 6 Air Medals and 5 Gold Stars in lieu of additional Air Medals. Ten VCS-7 aviators went on to partici-

pate in the invasion of southern France and three others took part in the invasions of Iwo Jima and Okinawa in the Pacific during 1945.

VCS-8, Seagulls to Mustangs

As mentioned earlier, operations in the Mediterranean had shown that SOCs and OS2Us were too vulnerable to operate effectively in skies infested with German fighters. An alternative to their use had to be found. Vice Admiral H. Kent Hewitt, Commander, Western Naval Task Force, convened a conference in January of 1944. Representatives of the RAF, FAA, U.S. Navy and staff gunnery officers attended. The purpose of the meeting was to decide which available aircraft would be the most suitable for the air spotting mission. The aircraft chosen was the P-51 *Mustang*. Time did not permit training Navy VCS/VO pilots to fly the P-51 in time for Operation Shingle, the amphibious invasion of Anzio, so the Navy trained Army Air Forces fighter pilots to perform the spotting mission.

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Ideally, the Navy needed to train fighter pilots in handling the air spotting mission, and in December the first steps toward this goal were being made. The problem was the urgent demand for fighter-observation pilots in theater.

On 5 January 1944, Commander, Cruiser Division Eight, requested that Commander in Chief, Mediterranean, arrange for the training of four Naval Aviators from *Brooklyn* (CL 40) in high-speed aircraft. The request was approved, and on 15 January the commanding officer of VCS-8, Lieutenant Delwine A. Liane, reported to Berteaux, Algeria, with three other VCS-8 aviators from *Brooklyn* to commence training in P-40 *Warhawks*. In February, aviators from *Philadelphia's* (CL 41) aviation unit joined those from *Brooklyn*. Fighter training for both vessels' aviation units continued through spring, and in April the Naval Aviators began checking out in P-51 *Mustangs*.

On 21 April, Commander, U.S. Naval Forces, Northwest African Waters, approved the assignment of nine Naval Aviators to the 111th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron, flying F-6A *Mustangs* (the F-6A was the camera-carrying reconnaissance version of the Allison-engined P-51 *Mustang*). This was the beginning of a four-month association between the 111th and VCS-8. The Naval Aviators continued training in P-51s and soon began flying operational missions in support of the campaign in Italy.

On 15 June, Lieutenant (jg) Harold J. Eckardt of *Brooklyn's* aviation unit was flying an F-6A on a reconnaissance mission when his leader was shot down by anti-aircraft fire. He circled his downed comrade until homing stations could get a fix on his location. Eckardt then continued the mission alone. Poor weather forced him to fly within the effective range of German flak positions and his aircraft was badly damaged. The 111th's war diary recorded Ltjg. Eckardt's return:

"LT. (jg) Eckhardt [sic], a Navy pilot, came back from his mission with holes in the scope [scoop] of his plane. Gas and oil were pouring out making LT. Eckhardt a very lucky guy to be back."

For his actions Ltjg. Eckardt was

awarded an Army Air Medal.

Late in July, 10 brand-new P-51C *Mustangs* were delivered to the 111th for use exclusively by VCS-8 aviators.

The invasion of southern France began on 15 August, and by 30 August, Commander, Task Force 86, requested that all Naval Aviators assigned to the 111th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron return to their ships. In all, 11 flyers from VCS-8 participated in combat operations from the cockpits of 111th P-51 *Mustangs*.

VOF-1, Hellcats over France

On 15 December 1943, VOF-1 was established at Naval Air Station, Atlantic City, N.J., Lieutenant Commander William F. "Bush" Bringle commanding. Equipped with Chance Vought F4U *Corsairs*, and later Grumman F6F *Hellcats*, this squadron was the first of its kind in the Navy—a fighter unit trained specifically to perform the air spotting mission in Navy fighter aircraft.

Reporting to the Field Artillery School at Fort Sill, Lawton, Okla., on 6 April 1944, VOF-1 was given extensive training in artillery spotting. The squadron employed an air spotting system in which the aviator instructed the gun crew when and where to fire. He also made the adjustments on the target. The Naval Aviators first tested this system from the back seat of Army L-4 *Grasshoppers* (Piper *Cubs*) and then began using the system from the cockpits of their *Hellcats*. The system worked and was utilized in operations over southern France.

VOF-1 began trading in its F6F-3s for new F6F-5s on 16 June. Twenty-eight of the new *Hellcats* were received, and on the 29th the squadron embarked aboard *Tulagi* (CVE 72) bound for the Mediterranean Sea.

Plans for Operation Anvil-Dragoon, the invasion of southern France, called for two Navy escort carriers, *Tulagi* and *Kasaan Bay* (CVE 69), to form Task Group 88.2 under command of Rear Admiral Calvin T. Durgin. *Tulagi* and *Kasaan Bay* joined seven Royal Navy baby flattops, forming Task Force 88. The carriers would supply aircraft for close air support and air spotting for naval bombard-

ment during the amphibious landings which were to commence at 0800 on August 15.

VOF-1 officially entered the war on 15 August at 0602 when *Tulagi* launched several of the squadron's *Hellcats* on a spotting mission for *Philadelphia*. Six more spotting missions were flown during the day before *Tulagi's* deck was secured after the last flight returned at 1708 hours.

Much to the chagrin of VOF-1's aviators, the Luftwaffe did not vigorously contest the landings. Opportunities to engage in air combat were few, but did occur.

On the 19th at 1701, *Tulagi* launched four VOF-1 *Hellcats* on a tactical reconnaissance mission to the Rhone River, between the cities of Valence and Lyon. The flight consisted of the XO, Lieutenant Commander John H. Sandor, Lieutenant Rene E. Poucel and Ensigns David E. Robinson and Archie R. Wood.

At 1815, two Heinkel He-111 tactical bombers were sighted north of Vienne, heading south at low altitude. Realizing they had been seen, the Heinkels split, one heading north, the other heading south. Lt. Poucel and Ens. Wood bracketed the northbound plane, with Poucel making the first run. The He-111 began to smoke. Ens. Wood then dove in from six o'clock high and continued firing until the aircraft burst into flames and crashed.

LCdr. Sandor and Ens. Robinson, meanwhile, jumped the southbound plane. Commencing a modified



Nazi swastikas appear in an area normally reserved for Japanese rising suns. Ltjg. Edward W. Olszewski, left, and Ens. Archie R. Wood kneel on the wing of the *Hellcat* they flew to account for four of six German aircraft destroyed by VOF-1 during Operation Anvil-Dragoon.

high-side run from the three o'clock position, Robinson scored hits along the He-111's fuselage and starboard engine. The stricken aircraft started down and crashed into a field.

The flight reformed and continued its reconnaissance of the area, heading south. Another He-111 was sighted south of Vienne, heading north at low altitude. Ens. Wood peeled off at 2,000 feet and rolled into a firing run, attacking the Heinkel from above and behind. Both engines were set on fire. The aircraft exploded and crashed.

On the way home, the four *Hellcats* swooped over an aerodrome near Montelimar, and Lt. Poucel strafed a Junkers Ju-88 parked in a revetment. Before the marauding *Hellcats* were finished, they managed to locate a locomotive and engaged in the sport of train busting, a favorite past time of Army Air Forces *Mustang* and *Thunderbolt* pilots. In the attack, the locomotive was claimed as destroyed and 10 boxcars were left burning.

Two days later, on the 21st, three Junkers Ju-52 transports were shot down during a fighter-bomber attack on a retreating transport convoy near La Capella. Lieutenant (jg) Edward W. Olszewski accounted for two and Ensign Richard Yentzer claimed the third.

Flak was encountered on nearly every mission and accounted for VOF-1's three losses. Lieutenant David S. Crockett was shot down while spotting over Toulon Harbor on 20 August. He bailed out and was taken prisoner by German troops. He was released on the night of the 23rd when the fort in which he was being held surrendered. He returned to *Tulagi* on the 26th. Lieutenant James M. Alston was shot down on 20 August while attacking a transport convoy five miles north of Carassonne. Lt. Alston successfully evaded capture and was waiting on the docks at Quonset Point, R.I., when VOF-1 returned to the States in September. Lieutenant (jg) John H. Coyne was reported missing in action after he failed to return from an attack on a transport convoy northwest of Nimes on 21 August. He managed to bail out, and his parachute was seen opening at extremely

May 4: A board headed by RAdm. A. W. Radford and known by his name, submitted a report that had a direct effect on aviation planning during the latter part of the war and, with modifications to fit the needs of peacetime, extended its influence long after the war. The Integrated Aeronautic Program for Maintenance, Material and Supply, which evolved from its recommendations, was essentially a plan involving the assignment of new planes to combat units; return of aircraft to the United States for reconditioning and reassignment after specified combat tours; the retirement of second tour aircraft before maintenance became costly; and the support of the aeronautical organization through the use of factors and allowances for pools, pipelines and reconditioning kept realistic by frequent appraisal.

May 13: To distinguish between fixed and rotary wing heavier-than-aircraft, the helicopter class designation VH plus a mission letter (i.e., VHO for observation and VHN for training) was abolished and helicopters were established as a separate type designated H. The previous mission letters, thus, became classes designated O, N and R for observation, training and transport, respectively.

May 17: *Saratoga* participated in the carrier air strike of the British Eastern Fleet on the Japanese base at Soerabaja, Java.

May 29: The only U.S. carrier lost in the Atlantic, *Block Island* (CVE 21), was

torpedoed and sunk by a German U-boat while engaged in hunter-killer operations in the Azores area.

Jun 1: Airships of ZP-14, assigned to antisubmarine operations around Gibraltar, completed the first crossing of the Atlantic by nonrigid airships.

Jun 4: Off Cape Blanco, Africa, a hunter-killer group (Capt. D. V. Gallery), composed of the escort carrier *Guadalcanal*, with VC-8 aboard, and five destroyer escorts, carried out a determined attack on the German submarine U-505, forcing it to surface. Boats from the destroyer escort *Pillsbury* and the carrier reached the submarine before scuttling charges could accomplish their purpose and the U.S. Navy found itself with a prize of war.

Jun 6: Allied Invasion of Normandy—Cruiser-Scouting Squadron 7, made up of 17 Naval Aviators from aviation units on battleships and cruisers assigned to bombardment duty, operated with units of the British Fleet Air Arm and Royal Air Force, flying gunfire spotting missions in RAF *Spitfires* over the Normandy beaches from D day until D+4.

Jun 29: Carrier Air Groups were standardized for all commands under the following designations: CVBG, large carrier air group; CVG, medium carrier air group; CVLG, light carrier air group; CVEG, escort carrier air group (*Sangamon* class); and VC, escort carrier air group (*Long Island*, *Charger*, *Bogue* and *Casablanca* classes).

low altitude; however, he did not survive his fall.

During operations in support of Anvil-Dragoon, VOF-1 aviators flew a total of 122 missions, consisting of 74 combat air patrol sorties, 96 air spotting sorties and 238 fighter-bomber/armed reconnaissance sorties. Six German aircraft were shot down in air combat, 23 locomotives were either damaged or destroyed and 601 motor vehicles were claimed destroyed or damaged. Anvil-Dragoon officially ended on 15 September when the southern invasion force became the U.S. Sixth Army Group.

Today, as preparations are being made to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Allied invasion of Normandy, let us not forget any squadrons or units that participated. No matter how small or seemingly insignificant their contributions may have been, each had a role to play in achieving final victory. ■

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